



Friday Evening, March 13, 2020 at 8:00

Lydia Mendelssohn Theatre
Ann Arbor

TAREK YAMANI TRIO

Tarek Yamani / *Piano*
Sam Minaie / *Bass*
Diego Joaquin Ramirez / *Drums*

79th Performance of the 141st Annual Season
26th Annual Jazz Series
Traditions & Crosscurrents

RENEGHUE

This evening's performance is supported by The Renegade Venture Fund, established by the Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation.

Tonight's performance is funded in part by the JazzNet Endowment Fund, the Commission on Middle Eastern American Affairs, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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Special thanks to Pamela Ruiter-Feenstra, visiting university carillonist, for coordinating this evening's pre-concert music on the Charles Baird Carillon.

In consideration of the artists and the audience, please refrain from the use of electronic devices during the performance.

The photography, sound recording, or videotaping of this performance is prohibited.

PROGRAM

This evening's program will be announced by the artists from the stage and is performed without intermission.

AFRO-ARABIC JAZZ CONCEPTIONS

Tarek Yamani's critically acclaimed album *Lisan Al Tarab: Jazz Conceptions in Classical Arabic* is an exploration of classical Arabic music within the frameworks of African American jazz. The result, a genre often dubbed as "Afro-Tarab," is a performance which will take the audience on a journey from early 1900s Egypt to today's New York. Tonight's repertoire will include reinterpretations of classical Arabic *muwashahat* (an old Arabic musical form), traditional music from Mesopotamia, as well as original compositions based on edgy rhythms and modes from the Levant.

ALONE IN THE JUNGLE FOR DAYS

An Interview with Tarek Yamani by Doyle Armbrust

What's so gripping about the music of Tarek Yamani is how inevitable it sounds — that his rhythms and harmonic language could almost *only* exist within the context of jazz. It requires freedom to thrive, it is exacting, and it swings...hard. Microtonal melodies and rhythmic patterns hailing from the Arab Peninsula are not simply juxtaposed with jazz forms. He instead devises a new idiom, with jazz as its stimulant, and classical Arab music as its native tongue.

Tarek recently moved to Berlin, which prompted us to speak at an...unusual... hour for an interview. Know that what you will read below is merely 1/5 of our entire conversation. It's what happens — and this is somewhat rare — when you have the opportunity to mix it up with an artist as insightful, curious, and purely creative as Tarek Yamani.

I hope you enjoy our conversation as much as I did...despite the hour.

Tarek Yamani: Hello?

Doyle Armbrust: Hey Tarek!

TY: How are you?

DA: Well, it's 5am here.

TY: Oh no. Why would you choose this time?

DA: Time zones. I need to ask for a raise...

Let's dive right in. I dislike the word "fusion." To me it kind of implies a forced marriage. And I feel like the music that you create is really something entirely its own. It's not just slamming two things together... it's like a third path.

TY: You took the words out of my mouth. I dislike the word "fusion" and avoid it. That's why I came up with this word "Afro Tarab" because I didn't want to just call it anything. It's the Africanization of a classical Arabic music.

DA: At least you don't have to call what you play "new music," like I do. It's got to be the most non-specific term that's ever been created.

TY: Or "world music." It's so vague.

DA: I have to disagree with you a little bit on world music. To me that term is pure colonialism. Like, there's European music...and then literally everything else.

TY: Yeah.

DA: Is "jazz" a term that you are comfortable using?

TY: Not when it comes to the music industry. Most of the jazz festivals don't have jazz, or what we as jazz musicians would consider jazz. You know the Montreux Jazz Festival? They brought in Slayer. I don't know if you know Slayer.

DA: It was one of my favorite thrash metal bands, growing up.

TY: I love them, but to see them doing a set at Montreux is absurd. Jazz music is Black American music. When I call myself a “jazz musician,” I’m actually referring to African American music.

DA: Was there a specific record that carved your path into jazz?

TY: I don’t exactly remember. As a teenager, I do remember clearly an episode of Tom and Jerry where Jerry was playing drums in a jazz club and Tom was trying to sleep. They were playing this kind of Miles Davis number. It was something very powerful that really moved me in ways that I could not describe as a child.

DA: It’s funny how influential cartoons can be. I think about American kids getting their first exposure to opera by way of Bugs Bunny.

TY: These people are legends, really. But the record that changed my life was Herbie Hancock’s *The New Standard*. I was really struck by lightning when I heard it. And I said, okay, this is what I want to do.

DA: It’s part of your story that you’re self-taught. Were you transcribing records and figuring things out that way?

TY: Yeah, I was figuring it out by ear and then I found somebody who had the jazz piano book by Mark Levine. I said to him, you’ve got to give me this book, because in 1999 access to information on the internet was limited. The guy told me to photocopy it and give it back to him tomorrow.

That book was really everything.

I started practicing about eight hours a day. I could see progress on a daily basis, which gave me confidence.

DA: I’m glad you bring that up because you’ve done some writing yourself. It seems like pedagogy is important to you. What you’re doing, though, it’s unique. So I find myself asking the question: are you teaching the particular way that you approach jazz? Or are you trying to open the door a bit so that someone can have a similar experience in finding their own voice within the language of jazz?

TY: It’s both, in a way. I’m really pro self-teaching. I think the problem with a lot of artists is that on their path to becoming themselves there is an over-dependence on mentorship, or on their mentor.

Imagine that you’re left alone in the jungle for days. It would be scary, but something in you will be awakened, which is what our ancestors had to cope with. There’s no electricity, there’s no food. There’s nobody around you and you have to protect yourself. Something will be awakened that you will never know unless you experience it yourself.

As long as you’re living in your comfortable city and your comfortable house, you will never experience it. In a lot of music education, when you encounter a problem, there’s this idea that, oh, tomorrow I just go and ask my teacher. That idea to me is destructive to the process of self-inquiry and just finding out what to do if there is nobody to help you with it.

If you are left alone and you know

there's nobody to help you, most likely you will figure it out by yourself.

But once you can play everything so clean and neat, the real question is, What am I saying? This is a question that everybody is struggling with on a spiritual level. You're trapped in your own thoughts, fears, anxieties, and stresses. But once you take the time to actually look inward and ask who you are...then the discoveries are just insane.

DA: You're also describing the crisis for many classical musicians encountering improvisation. The training is so divorced from that approach to music that it becomes almost paralyzing. In your workshops, how do you help musicians past these ingrained hurdles?

TY: Most of the workshops I do are with people who are really starting from scratch, especially in the Arab world. That's actually my priority, which is to bring this education to a place where there's none. I use the example that everybody has the same vocal cords, but nobody sounds like any other. You are already unique. If you're a singer, you already sound like yourself. So, how do you translate that to your instrument? Just that idea alone just sparks something, and it will lead you somewhere.

DA: When you're touring around the US, I'd imagine that your heritage and inclusion of forms, rhythms, and tunings from the Arab peninsula make you an unofficial ambassador of sorts. Do you want your music to exist on its own or are you comfortable with it being tied specifically to a region?

TY: I tell my story the way it exactly is. Without spices. I'm from Lebanon, but I feel more connected to a place where I wasn't raised and had never been until recently, which is the desert. My last name actually suggests that I'm from Yemen.

People from the peninsula don't understand why a Lebanese would play some of these rhythms. And many people outside this area don't know the difference between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, for example.

DA: Unfortunately, I think you're right.

TY: What connects you to the place where you were born is actually the memory of the place and the people in that place. It's not the physical place itself.

DA: When you talk about this connection to the desert that you may or may not have, are you speaking of something spiritual or intangible?

TY: It's as if a certain part of you still remembers. A certain experience. So even if you don't have the DNA test to prove it, maybe there are traces that for some reason are stronger. These traces go all the way back to the beginning of time. Some traces fade, but some traces are strong.

Music is the same because music is vibration and you are a vibration. We vibrate with what vibrates with us. It could also explain certain connections to certain foods. A certain flavor just makes you vibrate in a way, and that translates to a feeling of familiarity. Or you feel chemistry with another person whom

you've never met, but you just feel that click.

DA: Speaking of vibrations, tell me about the microtonal tuning of the electric piano work on your most recent album, *Peninsular*.

TY: In Arabic music, microtones change a lot from country to country. Melodically speaking, my challenge was how to make a chord sound good with these microtones. Recently I tuned a Steinway this way and I was really surprised how great it sounds on an acoustic piano.

DA: Let's talk about the trio that you're bringing to UMS. With your flavor of writing, you can't just go throw a chart in front of somebody and have that be the end of the story, right? What did the early process look like, assembling this particular crew?

TY: I write charts that are really just like charts that any jazz musician is used to reading. For these Arabic rhythms, though, I have them listen to recordings to get the vibe. During rehearsal, I explain more about the vocabulary of certain rhythms.

DA: So you're the catalyst, but you leave space for your collaborators to put their stamp on it?

TY: I really leave a lot of space. I'm always super happy to play with different people and actually wait for how they will interpret it. It's all addition.

DA: Before talking to you, I was trying to think of a word that captures my experience of listening to your music, and I landed on "exuberance." I find something really elevating about it. Is that a conscious priority for you?

TY: I just think that it's my voice. Maybe. I'm definitely into making things that are exciting. And I definitely like aggression...a pleasant aggression. I think this is coming from my heavy metal background, or just the fact that I was born in Beirut.

DA: That's a complicated city to grow up in.

TY: I mean, I grew up in a war zone, but I don't usually include that as part of my story. All the credit goes to my parents and the way they were able to give us such a comfortable environment there. Let's say, a little heaven inside of a big hell. I think that's why I favor a little aggression in music. But it's appealing, you know?

DA: It certainly doesn't sound intentionally off-putting.

TY: It's like when you write a very sad piece, but at the same time it's beautiful.

DA: It sounds like you were protected from some amount of the tumult around growing up in Beirut, but you must have been aware of it on some level. Maybe it's too simplistic a connection to make, but here you are, drawn to American jazz, which is essentially music born out of struggle.

TY: My connection is purely about vibration. I had no idea. I only learned about jazz history much later. I think I just connected to the ternary polyrhythms and sophisticated harmony. So, I think it makes sense that I'm like a magnet to jazz.

DA: I want to ask you a question that I've been wrestling with a lot recently. In this polarized time — here in the US but also around the world — do you feel like music has that capability of helping us find our way back to realizing that we're all just humans?

TY: I find this a little bit too cliché. Yes, of course music brings people together, but so does food or film. When the movie or concert is over, everybody goes back to their own tribe. Is this experience of a couple hours all we're looking for?

No, we're looking for a long-term, natural balance of people feeling that they are connected. I think what really works is people looking inside themselves. We are all humans, we are all equal, and we are all capable of being happy, but it requires a huge amount of self-inquiry.

DA: But is there a possibility that when an audience member with a limited world view sees someone from the Arabic world up there on stage, and they fall in love with their music, that a tiny bit of empathy is built toward the personal inquiry that you're talking about?

TY: Maybe it helps, but it could be only momentary. I can't imagine

anyone who dislikes Arabs wanting to hear a performance by somebody from there, though.

DA: I suppose it's a self-selecting audience. Like, the kind of person that has that kind of creative curiosity perhaps doesn't need that brand of soul-searching.

TY: I don't like the idea of someone changing their judgment based on one person. One person is not a reflection of a whole society or nation. I am not a reflection of the entire Lebanese people. I mean, the idea of a "nation" is a manmade illusion. You know? What you belong to is already inside you.

Doyle Armbrust is a Chicago-based violist and member of the Spektral Quartet. He is a contributing writer for WQXR's Q2 Music, Crain's Chicago Business, Chicago Magazine, Chicago Tribune, and formerly, Time Out Chicago.

ARTISTS

Born and raised in Beirut, **Tarek Yamani** is a Lebanese-American New York-based pianist who taught himself jazz at the age of 19. He has been dedicated to exploring relationships between African American jazz and classical Arabic music which are most evident in his second album *Lisan Al Tarab: Jazz Conceptions in Classical Arabic*, and in his newly released *Peninsular* which fuses jazz with quarter-tones and the rhythms of the Arabian Peninsula.

A recipient of many prestigious awards such as the Thelonious Monk Jazz Composers Competition, the Baryshnikov Artist-in-Residence, the Huygens Scholarship, the Prins Bernhard Culture Fund, and the Abu Dhabi Festival Commission, Mr. Yamani has been part of three editions of the official International Jazz Day all-star concerts and performed in venues such as the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC, Barcelona Cathedral at La Merce, Atrium at New York's Lincoln Center, Berlin's Boulez Saal, MuCEM museum in Marseille, the United Nations Assembly Hall in New York, Aaron Davis Hall, Melbourne Arts Center, Sejong Center for the Arts in Seoul, and Cuba's Gran Teatro de la Habana.

Mr. Yamani is also an educator, author of two self-published music books on rhythm, and a film score composer of films screened in over 100 festivals around the world and broadcasted on the AMC network, BBC, and Sundance TV.

Iranian-American bassist and producer **Sam Minaie** was born and raised in Reno, Nevada where he attended the University of Nevada, Reno. After receiving his undergraduate degree in Reno, he moved to Los Angeles to study with Charlie Haden at California Institute of the Arts

where he received his master's degree. Currently living in New York City, he has enjoyed touring and recording throughout the world with artists including Tigran Hamasyan, Kneebody, Donny McCaslin, Dhafer Youssef, Charlie Haden's Liberation Orchestra (tuba), Peter Epstein, David Ake, Ravi Coltrane, Jeff Ballard, Nate Wood, Mark Guiliana, Melody Gardot, Tootie Heath, Jean-Michel Pilc, Ari Hoenig, and numerous others.

New York City-based drummer **Diego Joaquin Ramirez** was born and raised in Cork, Ireland. He attended Berklee College of Music, the Banff International Jazz Workshop, the Betty Carter Jazz Ahead Program, and his recognition and awards include the Berklee Vater Drum-Set Award, the Cork City Arts Award, the TD Fellowship Award, the ASCAP Herb Alpert Jazz Composition Award, and he was a finalist in the 2017 DC Jazz Prix Competition with his group SULA. He has performed with many notable musicians such as Marc Cary & The Harlem Sessions, Vijay Iyer, Cyrille Aimee, Duane Eubanks, Michael League, Jazzmeia Horn, Alina Engibaryan, and many others.

UMS welcomes the Tarek Yamani Trio as they make their UMS debuts tonight.

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- 4/23 UMS 101: Classical Music – Chineke! Orchestra
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