

Young Arab Musicians Celebrate Schumann

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

The great composer Robert Schumann would never have dreamed that July 29, the date of his death in 1856, could be celebrated by a concert of an orchestra made up of young Arab musicians. Yet, such was the case this year on the anniversary of Schumann's death: the Arab Youth Philharmonic Orchestra (AYPO), the first such pan-Arab youth orchestra, held its European debut at Bonn University, with a program including a modern piece of Arab music composed in the Classical style, Schumann's Concerto for cello in A-minor Op. 29, and Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's "Italian" Symphony Nr. 4 in A-major.

The orchestra was founded in July 2006, on the initiative of Prof. Fawzy El-Shamy, former director of the Cairo Conservatory, and Prof. Walter L. Mik, music director of Bonn University. Professor El-Shamy described the project as his "dream": he conceived the idea as a means of uniting the Arab world through a cultural dialogue among its youth. El-Shamy told *EIR* that he had seen many orchestras, like the Cairo Symphony orchestra, which had both Egyptian and foreign musicians. At the same time, he knew of many youth orchestras, like the Bremen International Youth Orchestra, the West-East Divan Youth Orchestra of Daniel Barenboim, and others. Why not, he thought, create a youth orchestra of Arabs?

During 2004, he discussed the idea with several music institutes, which agreed to the approach. Given his experience with young musicians, he was considered the obvious choice to lead the effort. El-Shamy, who directs the conservatory orchestra in Cairo, then contacted Professor Mik, and invited him to come. The two travelled throughout the Arab world, holding auditions at conservatories, and selected a group of 50 musicians, between the ages of 18 and 28. Although initially, they thought they could start out in Egypt, this did not work out. Following discussions with the Culture Minister of Syria, Prof. Dr. Riad Nasan Aga, they decided to hold their first concert in Damascus. The sponsors of the orchestra include the Swedish organization SIDA (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency), the German Academic Exchange Service, Collegium Musicum, and others.

Their first concert, which took place in Damascus last Summer, at the height of the Lebanon War, was described by Professor El-Shamy as an expression of solidarity with the Lebanese people. A second concert also took place soon after in Damascus,

in the beautiful Dar al Asad Opera House. The program there included works by a Lebanese composer Marcel Khalifa, an Egyptian composer Gamal Abdul Rahi, and the 8th Symphony of Antonin Dvorak. In Bonn, the first piece performed was an intriguing composition by a young Algerian composer, Salim Dada, named Ashwaq. It is in the form of the Arab Samai, one of the oldest and most developed Arab musical forms, which was developed from the 16th Century in the Ottoman Empire. Although some composers picked up the form in the 1920s, it was not further developed. Salim Dada's idea is to revive this Classical form, developing it with the Classical European compositional method.

In a brief interview with *EIR*, Salim Dada explained that he had never had formal training in music, and was largely self-taught. He studied intensively counterpoint and harmony, from the European tradition, of the Germans, and also as adapted in Russia and France. Dada said he believed it was important to combine the traditional Arab motifs, with the Classical European compositional method, as a means of promoting cultural understanding between the two.

The two European pieces, by Schumann and Mendelssohn, were presented with great concentration and enthusiasm. Following Mendelssohn's Italian symphony, which concluded the program, the audience delivered a long, standing ovation.

Although there are several youth orchestras, this is the first pan-Arab orchestra, and it includes musicians from 11 Arab countries. The intention, according to El-Shamy, is to promote Arab unity, and to enhance the dialogue between the Arab world and Europe, through the Classical music of both. Upcoming plans include a tour through Arab countries, with a program featuring the works of Ludwig van Beethoven.



Courtesy of Arab Youth Philharmonic Orchestra
The Arab Youth Philharmonic Orchestra, shown here performing in Damascus, Syria, made its European debut in Bonn, Germany; the concert, on the anniversary of Robert Schumann's death, was the highpoint of a two-day Summer festival of the Deutsch-Arabishe Gesellschaft, the leading German-Arab organization.