



BELEDI BEAT



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Note from Cassandra

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Happy New Year!

We are finding so many things to be grateful for: our dancers, our sponsors, our friends, our incredible staff, our tech support crew, our dedicated students, our audience members, and our building management who succeeded in getting all the windows replaced before the snow flew and the temp dropped below zero!

My commitment to Arab dance and music is unwavering, and my appreciation for all our beautiful dancers in Jawaahir has increased exponentially. We look forward to the days when we can rehearse together again, in person; in the meantime, we are planning an excellent Concert, with archival and contemporary footage to be aired, upcoming, and soon - watch for announcements! Cabarets and Dance Parties will continue, as we keep you and ourselves moving and inspired.

We hope you enjoy, and can relate to, these stories of our soulful, virtuosic musicians and how they are coping with the loss of live performing.



photo by Jan Geisen

Falling in Love with Classical Arab Music

Tim O'Keefe



Musician Tim O'Keefe grew up in northern Minnesota playing an array of popular instruments including harmonica, mandolin, guitar, and violin. As a teenager, Tim spent most of his time playing rock, blues, folk, and jazz music with friends. "I was very thirsty for musical knowledge and sought it out constantly."

Tim began working as a musician in the early 70s. In the mid-70s he moved to Minneapolis where he performed fulltime in club bands and college tours while his widespread musical interests continued to develop—in particular his love of traditional music from around the world. Tim was studying world percussion with an emphasis on Afro Latin and Brazilian styles when he picked up the *darbuka*, a small goblet-shaped hand drum prominent in Arab music. "I was struck by how beautiful the music is, how complex it is, the interplay between the instruments, the well-crafted modes, maqam, rhythms, and the roles they play in the music. The aesthetics and well-crafted melodies, the forms and development of melody, and of course the instruments. The more I learned through study the more I appreciated Arabic and music of the Middle East."

In the early 90s Tim began playing as a percussionist with Jawaahir Dance Company. In 1995, Tim played with Palestinian-American oud and violin player Simon Shaheen and the Near Eastern Ensemble when Cassandra brought them to Minneapolis for performances. "All throughout my musical life I have had good fortune to meet and play with very accomplished musicians and learn a great deal from these experiences," says Tim. "I was encouraged by Simon Shaheen to continue my study in classical Arabic music in percussion and theory and also oud, in which I began to learn the *maqamat* (modes). It has also opened up many other doors for me, for which I will be forever indebted."



Laura Harada

Musician Laura Harada began violin at age eight while growing up in Pennsylvania. Private study and orchestral training followed quickly. Laura was attending Oberlin College and Conservatory when she discovered that the classical music life might not really be what she wanted. After graduation, Laura moved to Minneapolis, where she began experimenting with rock music and other forms outside of western European classical music. Her introduction to a variety of folk dance music came when she was recruited to play with Ethnic Dance Theater, featuring rhythms in new meters from countries throughout Eastern Europe. Working with EDT “taught me so much about music’s part in forging community and its importance in cultural expression. The dancers were really incredible, so fast and graceful—this was the first time I played for dancers.”

While playing for EDT, Laura met Tim. “Tim introduced me to Arabic music,” says Laura. “I love the highly developed language of rhythms (*‘iqaat*) and modes (*maqamat*), the ornamentation that is so crucial to the sound, and the style of improvisation. The traditional instruments are so beautiful—I fell in love with the sounds of oud, nay, qanun, riq, and tabla; the vocal styles are gorgeous, and the Arabic violin’s sound so moved me.”

Laura writes viscerally about experiencing Arabic music, “After studying for a little while, it felt like my ears were hearing in ways they never had before—it was revelatory. The *maqamat* have the ability to evoke a sophisticated range of complex emotions, and when artfully practiced, a *taqsim* (improvisation) can take both listener and performer on a journey that can result in that elusive state of tarab, stated by some to be akin to ecstasy.” She also reminds us, “There are so many styles of music within the umbrella label of ‘Arabic music,’ as there are a multitude of cultures that are part of the Arabic speaking world.” This breadth and complexity means Laura and Tim are always learning and never bored.

Since the mid-90s, Laura and Tim have continued to build expertise in multiple musical traditions. In 2004, Laura, Tim, and fellow musicians Salah Fattah, Dawn Doering, Alexis (Vaubel) Hernandez-Abreu, and Nick Chbat formed Amwaaj, a Minneapolis-based ensemble performing classical, folk, and modern music of the Arab world on traditional instruments. “We were all friends and had been playing Arabic music together for a few years,” writes Laura. Says Tim, “Amwaaj grew out of our original group of fellow Arabic Music Retreat participants known as Salamat. We reformed.”

In its 2020 incarnation, Amwaaj includes Dawn, Laura, and Tim, in addition to oud and violin player Yaron Klein (who is also a scholar of premodern Arabic literature and Arab music, on faculty at Carleton College), and accordion player and percussionist Mohamed Lulu. Salah Fattah remains an emeritus member. “The name “*amwaaj*” refers to waves, waves of sound and perhaps waves of grain,” says Laura.



Amwaaj was set to perform with Jawaahir in *Sparkle*³, which continues to be delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



A Year of Challenges

Tim, who has been performing four or more evenings a week for most of his 45-year career, has performed only a handful of times since the COVID-19 pandemic began to sweep the United States. “I’m not used to being so stagnant,” says Tim. “Playing that much kept my groups together and my musical skills up.”

“The pandemic has put a stop to 95% of my public music-making life,” says Laura. “Like every other performer, all of my bookings for the year were canceled.” As a member of the National Arab Orchestra, Laura typically travels a few times a year with NAO, across the country to cities such as Houston and Detroit, as well as across the globe to the Middle East.

“To be honest, the initial psychic toll of venues being shuttered and everything stopping—that was a lot to absorb,” says Laura. Additionally, “the aftermath of the civil unrest sparked by George Floyd’s murder pretty much decimated my creative energy ... So this is not only a reaction to COVID, but really the whole year of upheaval,” says Laura. “Long-term changes in music and performance are bound to come.”

“I don’t see things coming back to the way they were for a long time,” adds Tim, “but I am remaining optimistic.” Online performances have some advantages, but for Laura live performance is meant to be a collaboration with the audience. “It is an entirely different experience to perform for a camera and a couple of people in the same room versus a hall full of people eager to connect with you and your art in the moment,” she says, “We all lose so much without live performance.”

Both musicians have maintained an aggressive practice. “[I] am always working on new things on all the instruments I play, trying to keep up on them and challenging myself. I have been working more on the string instruments because they are quieter around the house. I have invented two new drums and am working on many different musical ideas for pieces I have started,” says Tim.

“Right now I am focusing on skill building, studying in all the styles I play and firming up gray areas in my education. With the miracle of the internet, I can work on jazz improvisation, music theory, Arabic maqam lessons, and Brazilian fiddle styles all in the same week to keep all of those creative fires burning,” says Laura. “The other part of my music life is teaching, and luckily, I was able to pivot to online learning fairly quickly (although not painlessly). Nothing fully replaces the experience of in-person instruction, but it has been a remarkably productive time for my students.”

Tim has been able to collect self-employed Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, but it's not clear what relief will be available to performing artists as we move through 2021. "It is heartening to see that the recent pandemic relief bill includes Save Our Stages," adds Laura, "It is not enough to make up for a catastrophic year for venues, bars, and restaurants, but it is a good step towards helping our arts community." After returning to being a musician full-time ten years ago, Tim imagines he may begin teaching more. "In all my years in the business I had seen many downturns but nothing to compare to COVID-19."

Furthermore, the Arab music community lost Bassam Saba on December 4, 2020 due to COVID-19 related complications. Saba was a Lebanese musician and a great promoter of Arabic music in the west, having lived in the United States for almost 30 years before moving back to Lebanon in 2018 to serve as Director of the Lebanese National Higher Conservatory of Music. Both Tim and Laura had the opportunity to study with Saba as part of the Arabic Music Retreat in Massachusetts, initiated by Simon Shaheen. Saba played with Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble, as a soloist with several orchestras, symphonies, and philharmonics, and served as Director of Harvard University's Middle Eastern Ensemble.

Final Thoughts

Moving forward through the ongoing economic, health, and social justice crisis means we must continue to support local businesses, contribute to artists/arts organizations, locate ourselves within our communities, and connect to our personal stories and the stories of others.

"I have had a long and wonderful career in music, and still hope to experience much more. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have had the opportunities and experiences I have performing and learning, and having an incredible partner like Laura to share much of that with. Of course I am also very thankful to all my great teachers daily and hope I do justice to the gifts they have given me. I will always play and learn, it is who I am and will always be; that will never stop." —Tim O'Keefe

"Music has the power to open up one's perspective and appreciation of being part of a much larger world. Being exposed to art forms from across the globe opens the door to becoming a more engaged global citizen—a little bit of cross cultural understanding can go a very long way." — Laura Harada



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Upcoming Events

Cassandra's Winter Wonderland Cabaret LIVE on Zoom THIS SATURDAY, January 16, 2021 at 6:00pm CT!

For further information on, and to register for, our upcoming events, check out our [Jawaahir website](#) or [The Cassandra School website](#)! You may also call 612-872-6050, or email us at admin@jawaahir.org.