

Fulcrum Point mixes Jewish, Arab music at Ravinia

By Michael Cameron
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When events such as the London subway and bus suicide bombings rattle the nerves of urban dwellers, artists of all stripes hope their work can serve as more than a temporary diversion. Daniel Barenboim's controversial visit to Ramallah next month is but one attempt to maintain a dialogue as tensions heat up over the pending Israeli pullout from Gaza.

Conductor Stephen Burns has long showed a fondness for programs with sociopolitical relevance, and for his first appearance at the Ravinia Festival with the Fulcrum Point New Music Project, he assembled a broad sampling of works portraying the human condition as experienced through Jewish and Arab cultures, minus overt political subtext or adherence to a strict aesthetic dogma.

The program, "Bridging Cultures: Building Peace," was preceded by a panel discussion with Burns, James Conlon, Rabbi Steven Stark Lowenstein and Dr. Esmail Koushanpour. Parallels were drawn between compositional devices (counterpoint, dissonance versus consonance) and cultural conflict spawned by a "strain of intolerance and hubris in all of our religions," in the words of Conlon.

The finest work was the opener, Osvaldo Golijov's "Lullaby and Doina," an amalgamation of Yiddish motifs with a dark, languid Gypsy-inflected theme. The composer effortlessly taps into the essence of these idioms without the awkward seams that often mar fusions of the vernacular with Western classical forms.

Palestinian oud virtuoso Issa Boulos seemed a bit uncomfortable on the Martin Theater stage, and his improvisation had some awkward moments of hesitation. Nevertheless, when his meanderings caught fire, the rapid runs over open strings were riveting.

Reza Vali's "Folk Songs, Sets #11B and 15" were the sole works on the program to take risks, many of which paid off. The opening Lament cast a spotlight on Paula Kosower's solo cello, with soulful outbursts that called to mind the plaints of Ernest Bloch. The scherzando was an unapologetically buffoonish romp in waltz time, with the unlikely blend of congas with strings and bass clarinet.

David Schiff's "Consolation," a movement from his clarinet concerto "Canti di Davide," was a nostalgia-tinged elegy, played with expressive warmth by Dileep Gangoli.

The closer was "Open Secret" by Behzad Ranjbaran, Iranian born and currently a member of the Juilliard faculty. Scored for chorus and ensemble, the vocal lines scrupulously follow the contours of the text by the Sufi mystic Rumi. Ultimately, the music is hampered by a paint-by-numbers approach to instrumentation and harmony.

The Chicago Chamber Choir sang with style and conviction.

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