

In The Press

"A committed, euphoric
international coalition"

The New York Times

"Producing harmony in
a divided world"



"a collaborative spirit flow"

The Washington Post

"a multinational intensity"



More press coverage at
www.nileproject.org/press



Photo by Karsten Moran for the New York Times

2015 US TOUR

"The Nile Project performed one of the most exciting and impactful residencies that we've done at Hancher. They captured the imaginations of college students, school kids, and a large part of our community through a wide range of discussions and activities. They were extremely generous with our audiences and performed fascinating music with the highest energy."

Jacob Yarrow, University of Iowa – Iowa City, IA

"We LOVED the Nile Project!! LOVED it!! Everyone who was here had a TREMENDOUS experience!"

Michele Roberge, California State University – Long Beach, CA

"In addition to delivering a terrific concert, The Nile Project offered exceptional outreach and educational activities geared towards students across the entire learning spectrum. I thought their discussions of Nile conservation issues were particularly relevant to California's drought, but the highlight of their sold out visit was the K-12 student matinee with students listening, learning, and participating."

Jordan Peimer, University of California – San Diego, CA

"This has been one of the most rewarding projects I have ever been involved in in 20 years in the business. Just an amazing, giving, brilliant group of people. I've learned something new every single day! (And I'm having so much fun...)"

Natalie Neuert, University of Vermont – Burlington, VT

"I apologize to everyone in the rest of New England, but we have had such a great week here with The Nile Project that we have decided to keep them! In all seriousness, I am in deNile (get it) that our residency is nearly over. Not only is the music ridiculously amazing, these people are truly beautiful! I can only hope that things go as well for you all as they have for us here."

Ty Furman, Boston University – Boston, MA

"This was a very rewarding and exciting event. The musicianship was so strong – and the collective was warm, inclusive, and engaging. They personified the idea of cultural collaboration. We were very proud to have presented this."

Liza Sacheli, Middlebury College – Middlebury, VT

"What an amazing adventure they have had. We've already begun talking about having them back in the spring of '17. They are special people, we planned an incredible engagement, and we are eager to do it again. One of the best engagements we have ever done."

Amy Vashaw, Penn State University – State College, PA

"We so enjoyed the Nile Project in every way...wonderful preparation and support going into the visit, willingness to roll with some of the engagement activities that were not so defined, willingness to engage one-on-one with patrons/faculty/students, terrific performance even though one of the group was ill, great enthusiasm. I think their favorite activity during the visit was interaction with Urbana's Wiley Elementary School...the kids were psyched up, knew every African country bordering the Nile and were really into the dialogue. We were very pleased with the impact of The Nile Project. Thanks for working with us on this great event."

Tammey Kikta, Karnnert Center for the Performing Arts – Urbana, IL

"Artistic and student development home run!"

Dan Dahl, University of Akron/EJ Thomas Hall – Akron, OH

River of song

Nile Project shares music and message in BU residency

By Siddhartha Mitter

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

The Nile River connects humanity's most exalted sites, one branch leading from East Africa's Great Lakes, one from the Abyssinian highlands, linking the terrain where the first humans walked to the Egyptian cradle of modern civilization, cutting a fertile swathe through the desert as it flows to the sea.

Today, however, the countries of the Nile basin look inward, each with its own concerns: Ethiopia's push for investment, Sudan and South Sudan's civil wars, Egypt's revolution and reaction, Rwanda's rebirth after genocide.

Culture, too, tends to obey borders. The sound of the Addis jazz clubs is an Ethiopian sound. Conversation in Cairo cafés engages Egypt alone. And when artists travel, it's not to neighboring countries, but to Europe and North America, with their more lucrative opportunities and their busy immigrant diasporas.

This makes the Nile Project, a collective of musicians from 11 Nile basin countries — from Egypt to Burundi — that visits Boston University all next week, more than a fusion project. It's an intervention, aimed not just at making music, but also at driving concrete work on shared issues like water rights, food security, education, social empowerment, and climate change.

A tall order for mere artists, maybe. But Egyptian ethnomusicologist Mina Girgis, who founded the project in 2011 with Ethiopian-American singer Meklit Hadero, sees a natural fit. "We're finding ways to use music to solve challenges beyond music," Girgis says. "Music can play a role in the sus-

tainability of the basin."

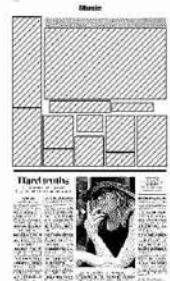
The team has held three "Nile Gatherings" of musicians, in Egypt and Uganda, building a repertoire of original music. They've released an album, "Aswan," to critical raves. They've held workshops on music, water, and social issues at universities in Cairo, Nairobi, and Kampala. They've met with NGOs, foundations, and governments.

Now the Nile Project is touring the United States for the first time, with a band featuring 13 of the collective's 27 members. The four-month journey is organized around college residencies. At BU, they will hold campus and community events all week, culminating in a concert at the Tsai Center on Friday night.

"With residencies, we go beyond the artistic context of the work, and get students engaged in all aspects surrounding water conflict," Girgis says. "It takes a bit more than just a concert to do that." They've also held activities for high-school students, and met with members of East and North African immigrant communities in the cities they visit.

The Nile Project's music-making is an equally deliberate process. The traditions of the region share instruments — flutes, lyres, percussion — that are related but used in very different systems of scales, rhythms, and song. At the Nile Gatherings, musicians find themselves on turf at once familiar and foreign. "We are so close, as African neighbors, and yet there is not much sharing," says Ethiopian saxophonist Jorga Mesfin.

Using a modified version of Theory U, a group collaboration model devised by MIT professor Otto Scharmer,



Girgis says the gatherings begin by putting musicians in small groups, then gradually merging their ideas through composition and arrangement. Most of the artists are bandleaders themselves; here, they must check their egos.

"We start by learning new things about each other's culture: dance,

rhythm, or children's games," says Mesfin. "And everyone has a musical response." Before long, he says, one Egyptian colleague was playing Ethiopian scales like a local. "You would think that he was Ethiopian himself," Mesfin says. "It's a good way to start a relationship."

In a measure of the project's success, all this methodology seems to vanish into seamless performance. "The sound is exhilarating," says BU professor Marié Abe, who planned the week's events. "It's so organic that listeners might not know what goes into the collaboration." (She urges those curious to attend the group's lecture-demonstration, "Musics of the Nile," on Tuesday; a full schedule is at www.bu.edu/arts/nile-project.)

While Hadero, the other cofounder, has pursued her own singer-songwriter career alongside the Nile Project, Girgis is running the venture as a full-time job. The logistics of gathering a dozen or more busy musicians from many countries for a creative retreat, let alone a four-month American tour, are daunting. "The lawyer who works on our visas told me he could not think of a more complex project," he says.

But Girgis finds fulfilment in how the project allows him to use the vantage point of diaspora (raised in Egypt, he moved to California) to mobilize artists and contribute back home. "It took going far away to zoom out and see the connections," he says. "But the

project took off because we were connected locally."

As they cross the country, the project team is also meeting university faculty and recruiting students to take part in their projects. The Nile Project has ambitious initiatives to support university students and young entrepreneurs and innovators in the countries it covers — as well as to build opportunities for local musicians.

Sudanese singer AlSarah, a veteran of all three Nile Gatherings and one of the few musicians on the team to be based in the diaspora (she lives in Brooklyn), says the project is a rare mix of musicians who are socially like-minded.

"We're connecting according to a more natural system than a political system," she says. "We're flowing together pretty well."

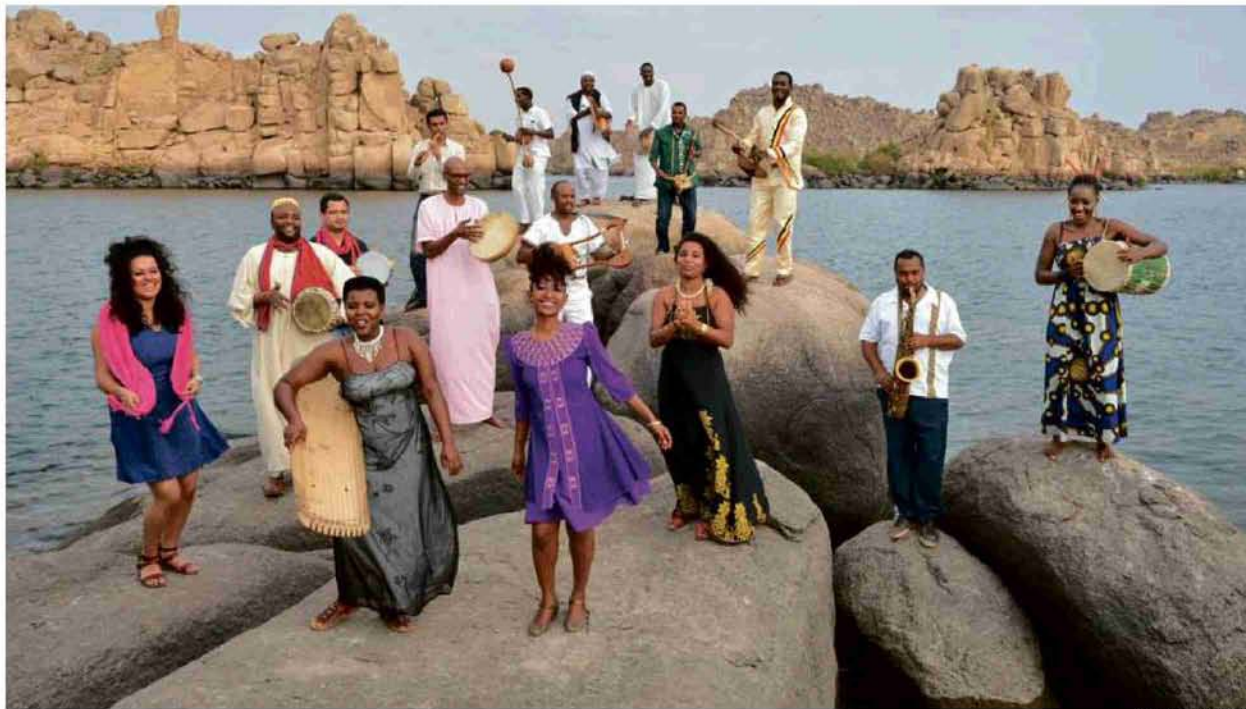
Siddhartha Mitter can be reached at siddharthamitter@gmail.com.

THE NILE PROJECT

At: Tsai Performance Center,
March 27 at 8 p.m.

Tickets \$28. 617-876-4275,
www.worldmusic.org

Residency at Boston University,
March 23-27
bu.edu/arts/nile-project/



MATJAZ KACICNIK

The Nile Project brings together musicians
from the many countries along the river's banks,
spreading cultural and environmental awareness

WORDS SIMON BROUGHTON

WATER MUSIC

One of the surprising things about the Nile in Aswan is how clean it is. The water is gloriously clear; you can swim in it and, they say, you can even drink it. You'd never guess that this river has already travelled 5,000km from its two sources in Ethiopia and Burundi before arriving here in Aswan. The reason is the Aswan High Dam: the vast reservoir of Lake Nasser behind it acts as a giant filter. The ancient Egyptians knew full well that the river came from far away, but it was useful for the priests of the Philae temple to pretend they could control it. Control of the river was power. That remains true today.

Just across the water from Philae temple a colourful tent has been erected – the sort of thing used for weddings and celebrations in Egypt which, with a sound system and coloured lights, creates an instant party atmosphere. The location is the Fekra Cultural Centre, a sort of retreat outside Aswan where the Nile Project residency is taking place. It's an ambitious project bringing together musicians from many of the ten countries through which the river passes. The tent is their rehearsal and performance space.

"Although we all share the same river, most of these countries know very little about each other," says Ethiopian-American singer Meklit Hadero, one of the instigators of the Nile Project. She explains how she was at an Ethiopian concert in Oakland, California and met Egyptian-born ethnomusicologist Mina Girgis. "After the concert we were asking: 'Why do we have to go to San Francisco? Why do we have to be in diaspora to hear the music of our neighbours? How can we bring the music of our neighbours to our neighbourhood?'"

Working at Fekra on a two-week residency are 18 musicians from five countries – Egypt, North and South Sudan, Uganda and Ethiopia – introducing each other to their traditions and then creating new music for a public concert in Aswan and Cairo. "The revolution two years ago was a transformative point in the way us young Egyptians saw the cultures that surround us," explains co-founder Mina Girgis. "Egyptians have been looking north, east and west to the Arab world and the Mediterranean. But we haven't looked south to our Nile neighbours. Yet it is the most ancient connection we have and without the Nile that comes from south, Egypt would not be the civilisation it has been." »



“We came in as separate musicians but we’re now creating an orchestra with a new sound – a Nile sound...”

At an open-mic session in the tent, the musicians run through potential repertoire for the concert. There are vigorous Ethiopian work-outs featuring *masengo* fiddle (Endris Hassen), *kebero* drums (Asrat Ayalew), cool tenor sax (Jorga Mesfin) and the irrepressible Mekuanet Melese, dancing as if electric shocks are rippling through his shoulders. There’s the sublime stillness of Sudanese singer Ahmed Said Abuamna in a duo with Egyptian *ney* flute player Mohamed Fouda. And there’s a lengthy creation by Egyptian *oud* (lute) player Hazem Shahin involving all the instrumentalists in a long composition, almost symphonic in scale, which requires everybody to tune to some approximation of the Egyptian *bayati* scale. It’s as treacherous as the vast, swampy Sudd, where the White Nile loses over 50 percent of its water to evaporation as it meanders sluggishly through South Sudan. The *adungu* harps from Uganda have to retune to an Egyptian scale that makes the players Lawrence Okello and Michael Bazibu wince when they first try it, as to them it sounds so out of tune.

“On the practical level, each scale has its own nature and tonal gravity and that’s what everybody needs to learn,” explains Miles Jay, who has the formidable job of Music Director for the residency and concert. “On the more conceptual level, we’re tone painting with concepts of the Nile as a whole. We are using the colours of one tradition and painting the shapes of another. We’re bringing in musicians with songs of their own and giving them the opportunity to work together with their thoughts of the Nile.”

It’s easy to think of some musical cultures as being more sophisticated than others – the refined classical tradition of Egypt, for example, as being more developed than the ‘folk traditions’ of the south. But what was obviously a seminal moment Jay was the Ugandans demonstrating their polyrhythms to the rest of the group who’d never encountered anything like that before. “When people understood the sophistication and complexity of

those polyrhythms, it was an inspirational moment,” he said.

Although from California, Jay has worked a lot in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean and oversees the rehearsals in English and Arabic – as well as occasionally playing an amazing double-bass *gimbri*, which he designed and built himself. He’s an accomplished musician, organiser and diplomat, reconciling the tensions between these very different cultures and personalities. “Many of us don’t speak the same language,” says Meklit Hadero, “but we do have this musical language that we can communicate with. It’s not hard, it’s soft. It’s not linear but circular and so there’s a lot of space for people to be themselves – and it’s all love.”

There are aspects of the Nile Project that seem very Californian – it did have its original moment of inception in San Francisco, after all – and this includes its ideas of participatory leadership. Although he admits he has the final say, Miles Jay doesn’t behave that way. “Everything comes from what I am learning from them,” he says. “My decision-making power is influenced by what comes from the group as a whole.”

One of the other diaspora musicians involved is Alsarah, born in Khartoum, Sudan but now living in Brooklyn where she performs what she calls ‘East African retro-pop’ with the Nubatones. “In New York, I am performing the Sudanese music that speaks to me – from my perspective as a woman, as a traveller and immigrant. Sudanese culture is a fusion culture, particularly in Khartoum where all the tribes meet. The music is still very traditional, though then you wonder how it can be a fusion and traditional at the same time.”

Alsarah has a powerful voice with a compelling touch of desert grit and is relishing taking traditional music, originally performed with voice, handclaps and drums, and transforming it for this unique ensemble. “One of the things that comes out of this collaborative process is getting to see the similarities in our music,” she explains. “We can all hear the differences quite easily – the

tunings, the shapes of the instruments – as musicians we notice those immediately. But part of the learning process is seeing the similarities and where we can fit in. We came in as separate musicians but we’re now creating a little orchestra with a new sound – a Nile sound.”

Clearly linking the music along the Nile is the lyre that can be found in various types from one end of the river to the other. These include the *simsimiyya* in Egypt, the *kissar* in Nubia, the *tanbura* (amongst others) in Sudan and the *krar* in Ethiopia. Ahmed Said Abuamna, from Port Sudan, is one of the great singers and lyre players of the Beja people. The one he plays is called the *masankop*, which has five strings tuned pentatonically – one for each finger. This is the sort of thing that can be seen in Egyptian tomb paintings and temple carvings and there’s a surviving ancient example in Cairo’s Egyptian museum. “The Beja people have been in Sudan for 5,000 years,” he says “and the masankop has been played by the Beja for all that time, for both its rhythmic and melodic possibilities.” The instrument may look simple, but it conjures up a rich glow around Abuamna’s voice, and you can understand its power in traditional societies.

The other Nile Project lyre player is Mohsen el Ashry from Egypt’s El Tanbura group, who plays the *simsimiyya*. In its traditional five-string version very similar to Ahmed Said’s masankop, but El Ashry has created his own instrument of 23 strings with which he can play in all the Arabic *maqam* (scales). Both these players show the Nile Project’s aim to bring together musicians who relish going outside their comfort zone to create a mixture of tradition and innovation. For the concert, El Ashry adapted a traditional Port Said song to celebrate all the people and traditions feeding into the Nile Project.

Taking a front-line role in the project and the concert are four powerful female vocalists: Meklit Hadero from Ethiopia; Alsarah from North Sudan; Nyaruauch, sister of rapper Emmanuel Jal from South Sudan, now living in

Nairobi; and Dina El Wedidi from Cairo, Egypt, who’s currently working with Gilberto Gil on the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative (see issue #87). When the latter walked to the mic in the packed-out Aswan concert, she was greeted as the local star – a young voice making an impression on the new, post-revolution independent music scene. Her song, specially written for the Nile project, is called ‘El Ganoib’ (The South), and is about the north/south divide in Egypt – something which we can all relate to, although in Egypt it’s the north that’s richer than the poorer Upper Egypt, in the south. She feels her fellow Cairo residents almost ignore the Nile, or just see it as a honeymoon cruise excursion, whereas the people in the south are more connected to it.

The Nile Project is about more than music. Mina Girgis organised a meeting of 35 specialists from 13 countries to talk about the current issues around the river – water supply, conservation and conflict. “There is a question over whose Nile it is and who decides on who gets what,” he says. “There are many discourses that are not really helpful over how we divide up the water. If you speak with politicians who’ve been involved it’s exasperating. So we’re trying a new way – music – and surprisingly enough they think we stand a chance. It’s great to hear that from politicians.”

This is just the first stage of the Nile Project – there will be other musical residencies along the river, an event in New York’s Lincoln Centre this year, a possible London event next year and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington in 2016. West Africa has some of the limelight in African music. So it’s a refreshing change to see and hear East Africa flexing its powerful musical muscle along the river Nile. **N**

RADIO Hear Simon Broughton present two World Routes programmes on The Nile Project on BBC Radio 3, www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/worldroutes
ONLINE www.nileproject.org

Top (left-right):
Sudanese-American
singer Alsarah
performs at the
open-mic session;
Egyptian singer
Dina El Wedidi

Bottom (left-right):
Sudanese *masankop*
lyre player Ahmed
Said Abuamna;
Ethiopian-American
singer Meklit
Hadero; Egyptian
oud player Hazem
Shahin (centre) in
rehearsal



April/May 2013



www.songlines.co.uk



Songlines 49

MINA GIRGIS: MAKING A MUSICAL CONNECTION

By Yasmine Nazmy

For decades interconnection among the communities that live on the continent of Africa has not been at its foremost. Girgis decided to change all that through music



When ethnomusicologist Mina Girgis returned to San Francisco after spending months protesting in Tahrir Square in early 2011, he was excited at the prospect of a new Egypt. He was still exploring what it means to be Egyptian when he attended a concert for Ethiopian music in San Francisco—something he had done many times before. This time, his experience was different; he realized that, although African and Middle Eastern music had become essential genres in world music production, they were still largely unexposed to one another.

“There are so many cultural traditions and instruments that have gone down the Nile for thousands of years. So even though these people don’t really know each other anymore, they have so much in common,” says Girgis.

Rising concerns about water scarcity and simmering hostility between the Nile Basin countries encouraged Girgis to pursue the potential for cultural exchange in East Africa; he partnered up with Ethiopian-

American singer Meklit Hadero to create The Nile Project and began reaching out to musicians in the Nile Basin countries.

“We need a paradigm shift in the way that we think about the Nile and the way that we regard our river neighbors before we can begin fostering any sustainability,” stresses Girgis. “At the same time, the level of music awareness needs to be stretched.”

Seizing on this moment of introspection in Egypt’s history, Girgis and Hadero developed a series of programs to explore connections between the Nile Basin communities and how they can collaborate to improve their collective livelihoods. Unlike other projects striving to build environmental sustainability between the Nile Basin countries, the Nile Project triumphs culture and shared experiences rather than geopolitical issues.

“We want to develop cultural empathy and create a space for cross-cultural dialogue,” says Girgis.



"We'd like to transcend the geopolitical conflict and make them realize that it is in fact an environmental conflict."

According to Girgis, fostering a culture of cooperation is key to ensuring that the diverse communities that share the Nile Basin can communicate and survive. The Nile is the only river in the world that passes through 11 countries, making the challenge unique to the region. While musicians from Congo DRC, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan, Sudan and Egypt may share many instruments, sounds and traditions there, is no perception of a communal culture among them.

SEIZING ON THIS MOMENT OF INTROSPECTION IN EGYPT'S HISTORY, GIRGIS AND HADERO DEVELOPED A SERIES OF PROGRAMS TO EXPLORE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE NILE BASIN COMMUNITIES AND HOW THEY CAN COLLABORATE TO IMPROVE THEIR COLLECTIVE LIVELIHOODS.

THE HARMONY OF THE NILE

In January, Girgis and the Nile Project team kicked off with two workshops, a residency and performances in Cairo and Aswan that brought musicians from the Nile basin countries together.

"The experience was really deep musically," says Girgis. "They're all pretty complex musical beings in their cultures, and this allowed them to discover each other and find out who



they are and what they do. Everyone was humbled by everyone who was there."

The residency allowed the musicians to co-compose, to learn about other musical traditions and instruments, and to explore their interpretations of the Nile.

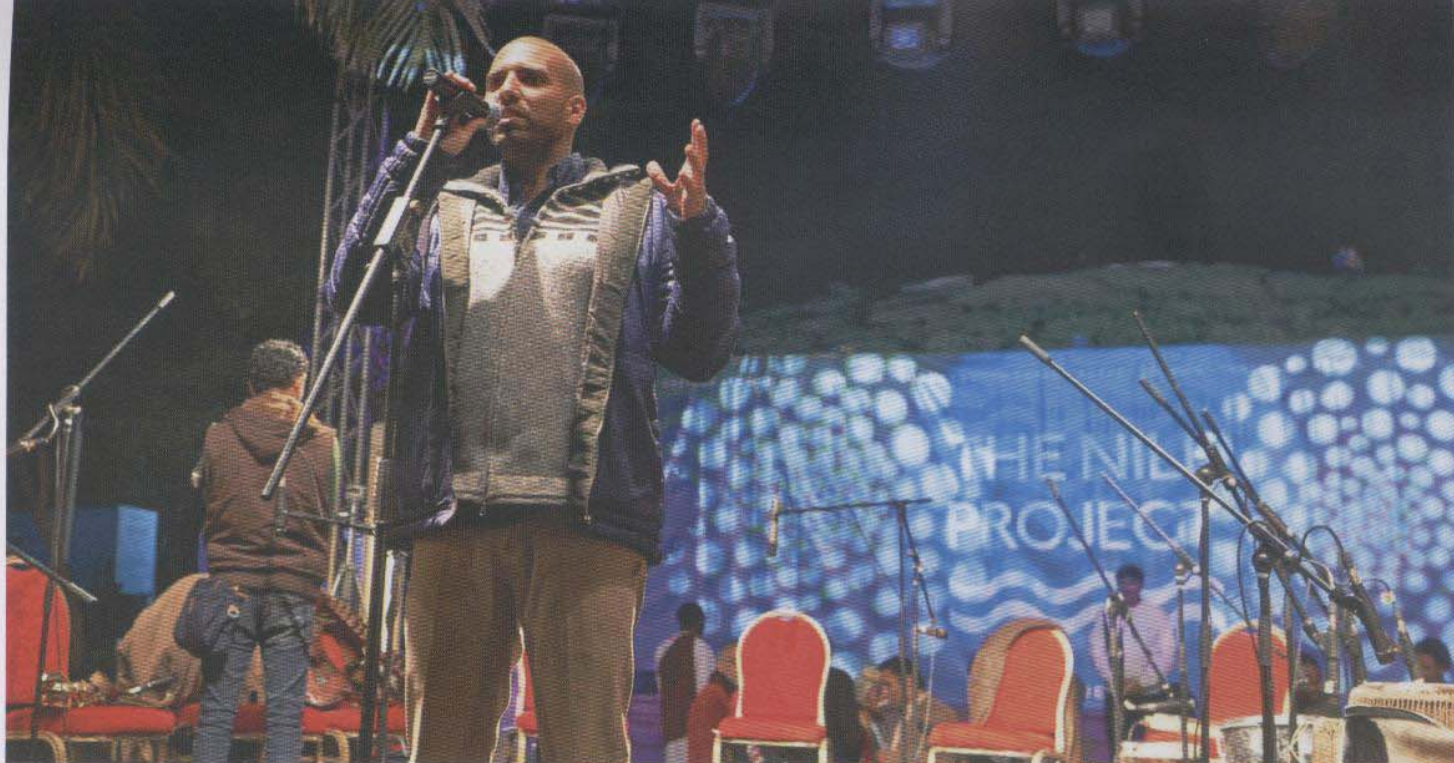
"By empowering these musicians and giving them ownership over their sound, we realized that we can make something new – a new Nile sound from this workshop," says Girgis. "It connected all of these sounds that are very different and that people don't normally connect with one another."

"Some days the music was happy, some

days it was sad. It took us through all of these emotions that emulate the sounds of the Nile, from sad to somber to happy, going through a whole spectrum of emotions," says Girgis.

But as the concert neared, violent events erupted around Egypt, making the musicians question whether a concert was appropriate; as a storm brewed in Aswan, the team stopped and reflected about the purpose of the project.

"When it came time to perform, many of the musicians had concerns about it being incongruent with the events that were unfolding around the country," he says.



A few days later, the musicians traveled to Cairo for the concert; after a moment of silence for those who died in clashes across the country, they proceeded with the show.

"The incubator is like a vaccination," says Girgis. "You need space to weather small things in order to weather bigger things. It is politically charged even though it's not political."

The music from Aswan will be available online within the next few months, and at least two films about the residency are currently in post-production. Nile Project musicians will be performing at the Lincoln Center in Washington DC in July; the group is also planning a tour of East Africa in October.

BUILDING MEMES

While the musical component has been the forerunner of the project, the Nile Project's social and cultural programs invite educators and social entrepreneurs to participate in changing preconceived notions about the Nile Basin countries.

"Talking about music is sometimes a distraction from what the Nile Project is trying to do," says Girgis. "The mission is to inspire and educate and empower Nile citizens to work together and foster the sustainability of the Nile River Basin. We want the Nile Project to be a catalyst of change."

Girgis stresses that an interdisciplinary holistic approach to the program is the key to the project's vision. It is the marriage of themes in education, music and enterprise that makes the Nile Project unique. And for those who

are not musically inclined, the Nile Project's other platforms may hit the right note.

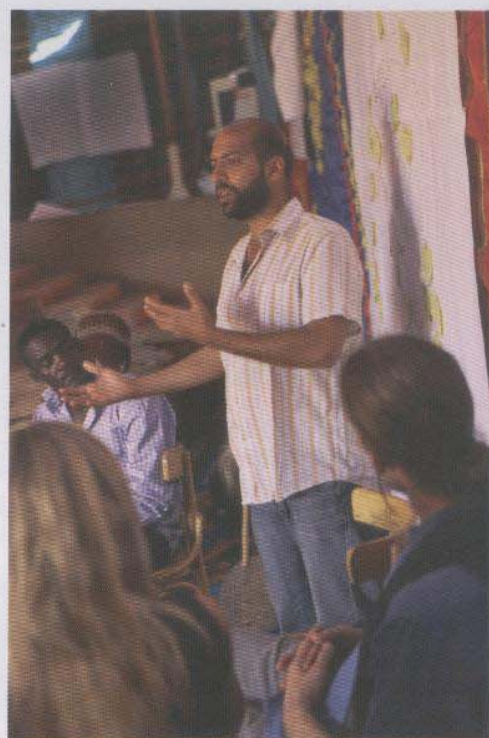
Through a series of educational programs to raise awareness about the Nile and its ecosystem, Girgis hopes to target young musicians in a summer camp that will combine music with dialogue and environmental education.

"BY EMPOWERING THESE MUSICIANS AND GIVING THEM OWNERSHIP OVER THEIR SOUND, WE REALIZED THAT WE CAN MAKE SOMETHING NEW – A NEW NILE SOUND FROM THIS WORKSHOP," SAYS GIRGIS.

Social enterprise is another key component of the project; by creating a network of East African countries, the Project will enable social entrepreneurs to share knowledge about systemic solutions to challenges that they all share.

According to Girgis, the paradigm shift is not an immediate result, though. The strategy entails empowering groups who directly experience the impact of the Nile Project to become advocates of this culture. Musically, ideologically and culturally, Girgis hopes to see the effect of the Nile Project trickle down, spreading from musicians, educators and entrepreneurs to others who may have misconceptions about their neighbors.

The group's iconic project is a traveling concert on the river; the musicians will travel down the Nile on dahabeyas



(old sailboats) and a boat made of recycled bottles, stopping for regular performances at each village. Due to unreliable river conditions further south, the boat tour will be limited to Egypt.

"There are always the pioneers that take on a new sound, or fashion or idea before it reaches a threshold and becomes mainstream," explains Girgis. "It is like a meme, it depends on how contagious it is. But the change in paradigm has nothing to do with music, music just happens to be the best means that we have to do this because we believe that good education starts with the heart." □

The Nile Project debuts with a cross-cultural bang

Maha ElNabawi | Sunday 02-March-2013



"My southerners, my southerners," sang Egyptian musician Dina El Wedidi during the closing set of The Nile Project's concert in Al Azhar Park Thursday evening. The song — an ode to her southern neighbors along the Nile basin — kicked off with fellow Egyptian Hazem Shaheen hypnotically plucking his oud in the traditional Arabic maqam scale.

Within moments, they were joined by a riveting onset of percussions spreading from Nubian riqq players to tablah players from Sudan. The song culminated with a magnificent saxophone solo by Ethiopian musician Jorga Mesfin — his ability to play off the percussions caused an energy-filled, uproar of rhythmic clapping and dancing from the audience. And for a short evening in time, nothing else existed but the beautiful sounds of perfectly collaborated music from the various countries along the Nile basin.

Co-founded by Egyptian ethnomusicologist Mina Girgis and Ethiopian musician and activist, Meklit Hadero, The Nile Project is a cross-cultural musical collaboration initiative that seeks to address cultural and environmental issues rooted in the Nile basin. By using an innovative approach that combines music, informal education, and an enterprise platform, the project's mission is to inspire, educate, and empower Nile citizens to work together in hopes of fostering a more sustainable river system.

"You know, there are 400 million people who share the Nile," says Girgis, "It has a complex cultural landscape to navigate, and so the idea is really to develop qualitative measures that allow us to better understand each other. We are in a time of transition in Egypt, and we must begin cultivating our relationship with our southern neighbors. After all, we are African."

According to Girgis, the cross-cultural collaborations features a diverse collection of musicians, styles, and instruments from the eleven Nile countries including Congo DRC, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan, Sudan, and Egypt. One of its main goals is to expose local audiences to the cultures of their neighbors — through storytelling, the songs are meant to humanize relevant social and environmental challenges experienced by the various cultures along the river.

Living between San Francisco and Cairo, Girgis has been working in the field of ethnomusicology and art entrepreneurship for nearly 10 years. He has participated in the organization of several multicultural events including the Smithsonian Silk Road Festival in Washington, DC and the Farah El Bahr Euro-Mediterranean Festival in Alexandria. In 2009, he also founded the Zambaleta Institute in San Francisco, which he describes as a nonprofit community and school for world music and dance.

"Much of the inspiration for The Nile Project was based off the work I did with the Smithsonian Silk Road Festival," explains Girgis. "The Silk Road project is basically a performing arts nonprofit initiative with cultural and educational missions that promote innovation and exchanges between cultures who traversed the historical Silk Road trade routes [which connected East, South, and Western Asia with the Mediterranean and European worlds, in addition to parts of North and East Africa]."

"But the idea only really came about after I attended an Ethiopian music concert with Meklit in San Francisco. I had just returned from Cairo and it seemed ridiculous to me that I had to go all the way to California just to regularly hear Ethiopian music. Especially because Ethiopia and Egypt are so close geographically," says Girgis.

After speaking with Meklit about the idea, the two decided to move forward with developing a cross-cultural exchange project that would spread through both their native countries and the surrounding cultures within the Nile basin.

"This concept was especially relevant because it had a lot of value that went beyond musical exposure," he says. "We have had twenty years of unhelpful dialogue that has done little to help us figure out all the challenges and issues we have when trying to cooperate around the Nile basin. It became clear that there was a real need for a healthier cultural dialogue between those cultures."

He goes on to mention that many of the Nile basin challenges are not only environmental, but the root of the problems is actually based in the lack of human understanding between cultures. They soon realized that through music, they could help cultivate a new path for intercultural learning.

"By building platforms for musical exchanges and experiences, we can foster cultural empathy and hopefully inspire environmental curiosity to shift the Nile from a divisive geo-political argument to a uniting cultural and environmental conversation," he says.

The project officially launched its activities this past January with a four-day workshop that brought together members from environmental organizations, in addition to entrepreneurs, innovators, and leaders working in the fields of relevance to the Nile Project. Together they engaged in a series of dialogue sessions to learn about the diverse cultural perspectives within the Nile basin — they also worked to engage with Aswan's community, addressing the local concerns while also learning about the local river ecosystem.

Earlier this year, The Nile Project also kicked off its inaugural music residency program called the "Nile Gathering." For two-weeks, the program brought together 18 musicians to form an ensemble of Nile basin musicians in order to compose, record, and perform new music aimed at inspiring cultural and environmental curiosity.



The musicians were scouted and selected by Girgis, Hadero and the project's renowned music director, Miles Jay.

"Miles is also an ethnomusicologist who lived in and out of Egypt for six years. His role is to help create the creative space in the residencies, which allows for the musicians to teach each other, collaborate, and co-create songs. He makes sure all the right components are there to properly produce and collaborate," says Girgis.

For local percussionist and music activist, Hany Bedair, the residency was "one of his best collaborative experiences to date."

"It was a very full circle program," says Bedair. "Every day would start with a lecture about each of the Nile basin countries — one day it would be Uganda, the next it would be Rwanda and so on. After the lectures, we would create small groups for organized jam sessions — in the end we produced and recorded nearly 22 tracks. That is pretty remarkable to do in only 14 days," he adds.

For Wedidi, one of the best parts of the program was the time spent in Aswan and the knowledge she gained about a culture within her own country. She says, "Prior to this trip my knowledge of the Nile was so minimal — in Cairo we use the Nile for social gatherings, weddings or to march alongside while we are protesting. But in Aswan, they live with the Nile — they eat and drink from it, it is their main source of income. It was eye-opening."

Following the residency program, the musicians performed a set of 18 tracks at the Aswan Culture Center, where the concert was extremely well received by the local audience. This past Thursday, the first round of the project reached its culmination with a high-energy performance at Al Azhar Park in front of nearly 1,500 audience members made up of cultural aficionados, artists, musicians, and activists.

"In the end, it is all about learning to listen. I think that is what we all took away from this, whether it is the participants, the instructors, or the audience. Listening is the basis for understanding," says Wedidi.

*The Nile Project is an ongoing series of workshops, performances, and collaborations.
The tracks produced by the musicians will be available for download on the project's website.*

Correction: This article has been corrected to reflect that the idea of the Nile Project came to Girgis after he attended an Ethiopian concert with Meklit in San Francisco rather than a concert of Meklit's music. It has also been corrected to reflect that Miles Jay has lived in and out of Egypt for the past six years.

A RIVER OF MUSIC

The diverse cultures of the Nile tackle cultural and environmental issues with the help of music and workshops

The Nile is the world's longest river and flows through ten countries – from Egypt to Ethiopia, Uganda and Burundi. "Although we all share the same river," says Ethiopian born singer Meklit Hadero, "most of these countries know very little about each other." Together with Egyptian ethnomusicologist Mina Girgis, Hadero has set up The Nile Project, a four-year plan to address the Nile basin's cultural and environmental challenges through education, enterprise initiatives and music.

The first Nile Gathering has just taken place in Aswan – famous, of course, for its High Dam, completed in 1970, creating one of the largest reservoirs in the world. There was a meeting of experts in water, energy, agriculture, ecology and conflict resolution followed by a two-week musical workshop in

which nearly 20 musicians from the entire length of the river collaborated on music about the cultural and environmental issues of the area. There will be a Nile Gathering each year in a different location on the river, international tours to Europe and the US (including the Smithsonian Nile Festival in June 2016), recordings of traditional music for Smithsonian Folkways and an album and documentary film of the new music created by The Nile Project.

The first chance to hear music from The Nile Project will be on two *World Routes* programmes, presented by Simon Broughton, on BBC Radio 3 on February 10 and 17.

.....
ONLINE www.nileproject.org
www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/worldroutes

EGYPT



KARINA AL PIAKO

STAFF BENDA BILILI News just in that the band have cancelled forthcoming dates following the departure of two members. Look out for a future blog with more info

Three year Nile Project calls for participants

The first event will take place at the Fekra Cultural Centre in Aswan, from 10 to 29 January

The same people who brought you Nawaya and Mashrou' Mareekh, are bringing you the Nile Project, set to launch this January and last until 2016. Nahdet El Mahrousa's Nile Project will launch its first major event from Aswan on 10 January.

The project was founded by Egyptian ethnomusicologist Mina Girgis and Ethiopian-American singer Meklit Hadero and is currently being incubated by Nahdet El Mahrousa.

"The idea came from getting exposed to Ethiopian music in San Francisco, which had me thinking that I had to go all the way to San Francisco from Egypt to hear it," said Girgis, cofounder and executive director of the Nile Project and cofounder of Nahdet El-Mahrousa.

"We need to first develop cultural empathy and avenues of dialogue and expose the people who live on the same river. We do this through music in order to humanise and simplify realities that are complex," he said.

The first event, titled the Nile Gathering, takes place at the Fekra Cultural Centre in Aswan, from 10 to 29 January. The Nile Gathering will encompass a four-day strategic planning workshop from 10 to 14 January followed by a two-week music residency from 15 to 29 January.

Other programmes include Nile Tour, Nile Stories, TEDxNile, Nile Curriculum and the Nile Enterprise Platform. The Nile tour is a trip from the Mediterranean to Aswan in 35 days by select artists who will engage local communities along the way, with workshops and concerts.

"The project starts with music but then goes on to include educational and cultural initiatives. If interest is piqued, the conversation flows from geopolitics to the environment and culture, and it becomes something that not just politicians discuss but that directly affects our lives," said Girgis.

Nile Stories will be a web-based dialogue platform where citizens from the 11 Nile basin countries can share points of views on the river and how it connects them. Nile Camps are annual summer camps for young musicians from the 11 countries, while Nile Curriculum is the project's educational initiative, which focuses on the Nile river ecology and explores the histories, cultures and ecosystems of the Nile basin area.

The famous TEDx initiative is coming to the Nile project with a conference that features scientists and artists focusing on issues that affect the Nile basin.

Finally, the Nile Enterprise Platform and Fellowship Programme will aim to divert everything that has been gathered into tangible actions. The project will partner with social enterprise organisations in this phase to train African youth to develop solutions to the problems present in the Nile basin area today.

The project has been calling for participants for their first event, with application submissions ending today. The project will go on until 2016 and more specific dates of further events will be announced as they near.

