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Global Music With a New York Edge

Niyaz Brings the Persian Party to Drom

by delarue

"It sounds like there are 14,000 people here!" [Niyaz](#) frontwoman [Azam Ali](#) told the audience at Drom Sunday night, and she wasn't being sarcastic: the club was packed, and the crowd responded ecstatically. Playing swirling, hypnotic original arrangements of classic melodies from Iran, Afghanistan and across the Middle East, Niyaz elevated those tunes with an orchestral majesty and an intoxicating, hypnotic beat. What was most impressive is how organic the music was. Although there was a laptop onstage, with [Carmen Rizzo](#) reaching from his keyboard to a series of mixers with split-second precision, it was clear from the first resonant booms from [Habib Meftah Boushehri](#)'s drumkit that this wasn't going to be karaoke. While a supplementary lute track or wash of ambience would occasionally waft into the mix, this was definitely live. Both Ali and her husband [Loga Ramin Torkian](#) have put out excellent albums under their own names over the last year or so; this time out, their set included most of the tracks on the new Niyaz album Sumud (Arabic for "resilience"). Torkian played tersely incisive, often haunting quartertone melodies, switching between jangly Turkish saz lute and his own invention, the kaman – a hybrid cello and kamancheh fiddle with a guitar-like body – while Ali took a turn on frame drum as well as electric santoor. Her two elegantly rippling, eerily reverberating solos on that Iranian instrument – her first love, even before she became a singer, as she reminded the crowd – were among the night's most mesmerizing

moments.

“Habib comes from Bushehr, in the south of Iran where people really know how to party!” Ali remarked as the drummer came out from behind the kit and added his powerful baritone to an animated duet, Rizzo running a loop of his beats so that the undulating rhythmic waves wouldn’t waver: the crowd loved it. Yet as much as this concert was a dance party, the music was serious. Ali stood immobile and waiflike as the show began, stark and atmospheric, but then began to sway and then loosened as the songs picked up. In the studio, whether singing in Farsi, Arabic, Turkish or an Afghan dialect, her vocals have a minutely nuanced microtonal intensity; onstage, she relied on the understated power of her lower registers, mingling hypnotically and occasionally soaring over frequently ominous, shifting sheets of melody. Rizzo, as it turns out, is an agile keyboardist, his echoey, oscillating chords contrasting with eerily pinging righthand motifs. The songs on Sumud, notably the bouncy title track, follow a common theme of resistance and survival under duress. Ali took care to explain that what she was trying to communicate is that peace begins at home: who are we to criticize other nations or cultures for the strife that’s occurring within their borders when we don’t have equality here? She emphasized that everywhere on the globe, it’s always the religious and ethnic minorities who get the short end of the stick.

After almost an hour and a half onstage, they ended the concert by encoring with the same song twice. Despite the high-tech sonics, improvisation is what this band is all about, so it was no surprise that both versions were just as intriguing. The first featured Torkian playing tensely insistent riffs on his kaman; the second time around, he switched to saz and the song relaxed, taking on an irresistible sway over the pulsing drums, enveloping keyboard swirl and Torkian’s understatedly fiery crescendos. Niyaz are currently on national tour: [the schedule is here](#).