

PHOTO BY MICHAEL CROMMETT



AMIR ELSAFFAR'S RIVERS OF SOUND ORCHESTRA

Tuesday, April 19, 2022, at 7:30pm

Tryon Festival Theatre

PROGRAM

AMIR ELSAFFAR'S RIVER OF SOUND ORCHESTRA

Amir ElSaffar, trumpet/santur

Carlo DeRosa, acoustic bass

Craig Taborn, piano

Dena ElSaffar, violin/jowza

Fabrizio Cassol, alto saxophone

George Ziadeh, oud/vocals

Jason Adasiewicz, vibraphone

JD Parran, bass saxophone/clarinet

Miles Okazaki, guitar

Mohammed Saleh, oboe/English horn

Naseem AlAtrash, cello

Nasheet Waits, drums

Ole Mathisen, tenor saxophone/soprano saxophone

Rajna Swaminathan, mridangam

Tareq Abboushi, buzuq

Tim Moore, percussion/dumbek/frame drum

Zafer Tawil, percussion/oud

Amir ElSaffar

(b. 1977)

Emergence, parts I-VI

Lightning Flash

March

This performance will be presented with no intermission.

Amir ElSaffar's Rivers of Sound Orchestra appears by arrangement with:

Opus3 Artists

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PROGRAM NOTES

I formed the Rivers of Sound Orchestra in 2015 as a musical, cultural, and social project. The idea was to discover new ways of organizing sound without the hierarchy found in Western European art music (composer -> conductor -> players), without the burden of precedence found in non-Western folk or traditional forms (repetition of what has been done in the past), but still maintaining a sense of structure and cohesion. I was interested in blurring the spaces between improvisation and composition, between composer and players. The process relies on spontaneous group interaction, where each musician has agency as part of the creative process. The idea is to have multiple points of origin emanating simultaneously from the present.

The ensemble includes musicians from a broad spectrum of musical backgrounds and from different parts of the world. My desire is to expand beyond the notion of cultural boundaries, in the sense of one style of music "belonging" to a particular group of people or a society. Rivers of Sound proposes an alternative musical model by genuinely embracing a multitude of musical expressions and by focusing on the interactions between individual musicians. When we begin with an inherent sense of unity and interconnectedness, and musicians as individuals, not representatives of a culture, there is no need to "build bridges."

All of the members of Rivers of Sound are extraordinary musicians with extensive biographies and experiences across a wide array of musical contexts. They are also very close friends of mine. Over the years, Rivers of Sound has become a family, making it one of the most joyful musical experiences of which I have ever been a part. It is my great pleasure to share that experience with the audience this evening.

EMERGENCE

The word *Maqam* in Arabic means the position of the feet, where one stands, a place. In music, *Maqam* refers to modes, or collections of pitches that unfold through melodies, invoking a particular mood or spirit. The pitches of the *Maqam* are microtonal and the distances between the pitches, the spaces, are what define the character of the *Maqam*. And the *Maqam* creates a kind of standing wave that resonates throughout the space.

The work that we will perform tonight, *Emergence*, is about space. The musicians will not be on stage, but on the perimeter of the theater, far apart from one another and surrounding the audience.

Each performance of the work will be unique, due to the semi-improvised nature of the composition, as well as the particulars of each space. The hall's dimensions, the materials it is made of, and the number of people in the room, among other factors, will contribute to a particular sound quality that will influence what the musicians play and how they interact each night.

Each audience member will have a unique experience, as will the musicians, depending on where they are in the hall and their proximity to the instruments.

As we perform this work, I invite the listener to find a place of quiet and calm, eyes open or closed, and direct their attention both inward and to the surrounding sound as it moves through the space. There is no need to look for or see the musicians; they will become visible during the course of the piece. The main activity that we will all be engaged in, musicians and audiences alike, is listening.

—Amir ElSaffar

PROFILE

An expansion of *Two Rivers*, a six piece ensemble started by ElSaffar in 2006, **RIVERS OF SOUND ORCHESTRA** presents 17 musicians from a broad spectrum of traditions playing on a range of instruments, including the Middle Eastern oud, buzuq, santur (hammered dulcimer), jowza (spike fiddle), and percussion. This is arrayed with the piano, bass, and drums of the American jazz tradition, along with trumpet, saxophones, oboe, strings, and voice. The modal language of the maqam combines with the aesthetics of contemporary music and jazz to create a new musical vocabulary. The unifying principle of this composition, exploration of pure resonance, allows the assembled musicians to explore and experiment together along a continuum of sound encompassing timbre, harmony, pitch, and rhythm.

The transcendence of the tonal traditions is achieved by music composed within a microtonal realm where pitch is flexible, neither beholden to western equal temperament, nor to the tonal centers of eastern modes, toward a sound that is unprecedented yet timeless. Pitches are relocated into a unique harmonic language where overtones, undertones, and difference tones can interact while maintaining discernable aspects

of the cultural DNA from which they arise. The ensemble's broad spectrum of instruments provides a distinct palate of overtones and timbres, allowing for the emergence of unique sonorities and encouraging nuanced interactions among the musicians. Each individual sound rises to meet its neighbors, blending to form a novel sovereign harmonic plurality. Concurrently, traditional and contemporary rhythmic languages are pared down to basic elements and reconstructed, interlocking in shared pulses and creating a communion among players and audience.

The highest ideal in maqam music is to reach a state of tarab, or "musical ecstasy," which results from the melting away of borders between a notion of self and other, as performers and audience revel together in the music. As pitches and rhythms become fluid, so do cultural boundaries: elements that traditionally divide musicians and genre specific modes are re-contextualized in a fresh transcultural soundscape.

A new composition for large ensemble, *Rivers of Sound: Not Two*, was underwritten by the MAP Fund and the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC).