

SUBJECT: “The Sapphire Trio: American Women in the Arts” Makes Freedom of Expression Real for Bahraini Women

Summary

1. The all-women American chamber ensemble The Sapphire Trio performed American and classical music in Bahrain from May 15th through May 17th, providing Bahraini audiences with a glimpse of the diversity of expression and talent in the American musical arts community. Partially funded by a Performing Arts Initiative grant to Embassy Manama, The Sapphire Trio gave two major concert performances, delivered lectures and demonstrations, gave master classes and workshops with student and professional musicians, participated in joint rehearsals with local artists, and gave print and radio interviews. Perhaps most significantly the three highly successful women musicians and artists provided a model of empowerment for Bahraini women. End Summary.

2. The Sapphire Trio is composed of clarinetist Maxine Ramey, violinist Margaret Baldrige, and pianist Jody Graves. Based in Missoula, Montana, The Sapphire Trio derives its name from a mountain range along the Montana-Washington border. The trio formed in 1998 to explore the newly created and uniquely American concert literature for clarinet, violin, and piano. Their repertoire consists of works by American composers such as James Niblock, Rick Sowash, Peter Schickele, Paul Seiko Chihara, Gerald Krumbholz, and George Gershwin. The artists are active soloists, chamber musicians, and clinicians, and they appear regularly in performances and festivals throughout the United States. They have performed in Germany, Austria, and Japan, and with this tour of the Gulf region, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.

Concert Performances

3. The cornerstone of The Sapphire Trio program was two high profile concert performances. On May 15th the trio performed at the Ibrahim Al Arrayedh Poetry House in the downtown of Bahrain’s capital, Manama, under the sponsorship of Sheikha May bint Khalifa Al Khalifa, Undersecretary for Culture and National Heritage in the Bahrain Ministry of Information. The concert was recorded and broadcast on the Bahrain National Arabic-language television station, Channel 55. Drawing a crowd of about 100 Bahrainis in the music and arts community who are only tangentially acquainted with American musical styles outside of jazz and blues, the Trio entertained and educated with interlaced musical sets and mini-talks in which they described the origins of the music they were performing, the international roots of American music, and vignettes of their personal experiences as woman musicians. Retelling stories such as the origins of the famous clarinet “shmeear” that opens Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue emphasized American ingenuity and improvisation in the musical statements of American artists.

4. The ensemble gave a concert performance on May 16th at the Ambassador's residence for a crowd of 150, drawing from a wide range of government Ministry, private sector, and diplomatic contacts of the Embassy along with members of Bahrain's non-governmental organizations and women's societies including the Bahrain Women's Society, the Supreme Council of Women, the Bahrain Businesswomen's Society, the Awal Women's Society, the Bahrain Women's Development Society, the Society of Women Academic Professionals, and others. The concert provided an opportunity to spotlight American women musicians in a way that strengthened the Embassy's relationship with prominent women's social and advocacy groups. (Comment: Although women have appeared on the scene of popular music in Bahrain and more broadly in the region in recent years, performing instrumental and classical music of a more traditional nature is still considered in the domain of men. As a result, even today there are enormous social barriers preventing women from attaining excellence in musical and artistic expression. End Comment.) Many of the women in attendance commented that it was the first time they had seen professional women musicians together in concert and that they were impressed women in America could become professional musicians.

Joint Rehearsal Produces Arab and American Fusion

5. The Trio engaged in a joint rehearsal with the Bahrain National Orchestra, a chamber orchestra of mixed strings, flute, and piano, which is dedicated to performing traditional and 20th Century Arabic music, along with Arabic transcriptions of western music. With Margaret Baldrige at the center of the violin section, Maxine Ramey in duet with the BNO flutist, and Jody Graves beside pianist Noor Al Qassim, the orchestra rehearsed pieces by Arabic composers Fareed Al Atrash and Fairouz Al Rahabani along with piano features by Frederick Chopin set in Arabic style. The rehearsal periodically paused for discussion of ensemble music technique, similarities and differences in Arabic and western style and performance, and for short selections from the Trio. The rehearsal was recorded and spotlighted as a 20-minute arts feature on Bahrain National Television Channel 55.

Master Class with Police Band Furthers Women's Empowerment with Bahraini Men

6. The Trio conducted a round of master classes with the violin and clarinet sections of the all-male Bahrain Police Band. Musicians in this ensemble spend their entire careers performing military marches for official state functions with no exposure to female colleagues. Despite initial skepticism about being instructed by female musicians, especially among the older, more traditional players, the workshops concluded with resounding approval: a melee of questions from the players about technique, musicianship, and sources for solo and small ensemble sheet music and recordings. One junior clarinetist commented that he learned more in the single day of workshops than in all his years of study. The Trio also conducted master classes in violin, clarinet, and piano for students at the Bahrain Music Institute and a workshop in piano teaching for the Piano faculty at the Bahrain Music Institute and several Bahrain secondary schools.

Media Coverage for Broader Impact

7. The visit and activities were exceptionally well covered by the Bahrain media. In addition to the concert and arts feature broadcast on Bahrain TV's Channel 55, the Trio participated in a round of press interviews with journalists from Arabic daily newspapers, a feature interview with Bahrain's Woman This Month magazine, and a live interview with Radio Bahrain. Infusing their commentary with coverage of the various performances and events produced eleven newspaper articles in Bahrain's five Arabic and two English language dailies.

8. Articles and commentaries following the performances illustrate the transformative impact arts and culture programming can have, even when our audiences are at odds with US policy in the region. For example, conservative columnist Abdulla Al Abbasi praised the Trio in a June 1 commentary in Al Watan, saying they had put a whole new face on America. "These are the types of ambassadors we would like to see America send to our region, its ambassadors of arts and culture, not its Marines and bloodshed."

Follow-on Activities

9. The Sapphire Trio musicians established strong relationships with the Bahraini musicians they met. They plan to send sheet music, recordings, and music accessories to many of the young musicians at the Bahrain Music Institute as well as the Police Band. Maxine Ramey is working with Mubarak Najem, Director of the Bahrain Police Band, on a music exchange to bring a corps of Police Band members to perform at a music festival in the United States. In addition, post is working with Jody Graves and Margaret Baldrige to create a series of music student exchanges by DVC with Bahraini music students and students at Eastern Washington University and the University of Montana.

Comment

10. The impact of this kind of cultural program cannot be overstated. Many of our contacts marveled at this display of American culture and stressed the importance of cultural outreach in winning over skeptics of American society and values. Since September 11, 2001 and the onset of the Global War on Terrorism, cultural programs have steadily declined in Bahrain. We applaud ECA's Performing Arts Initiative for supporting this vital effort to increase mutual understanding in Bahrain and the Gulf region. Now is the time to bring cultural programs back in earnest, to remind the region that America's strength is not just its military and political muscle, but the creativity, free-expression, and leadership qualities of its society. End Comment.

11. Post wishes to thank the Performing Arts Initiative for their generous underwriting of The Sapphire Trio: American Women in the Arts program. Post also wishes to thank

PAS Doha, PAS Dhahran, and PAS Kuwait for their collaboration in programming the ensemble for a 4-country regional tour with regional impact.

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