

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.

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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.

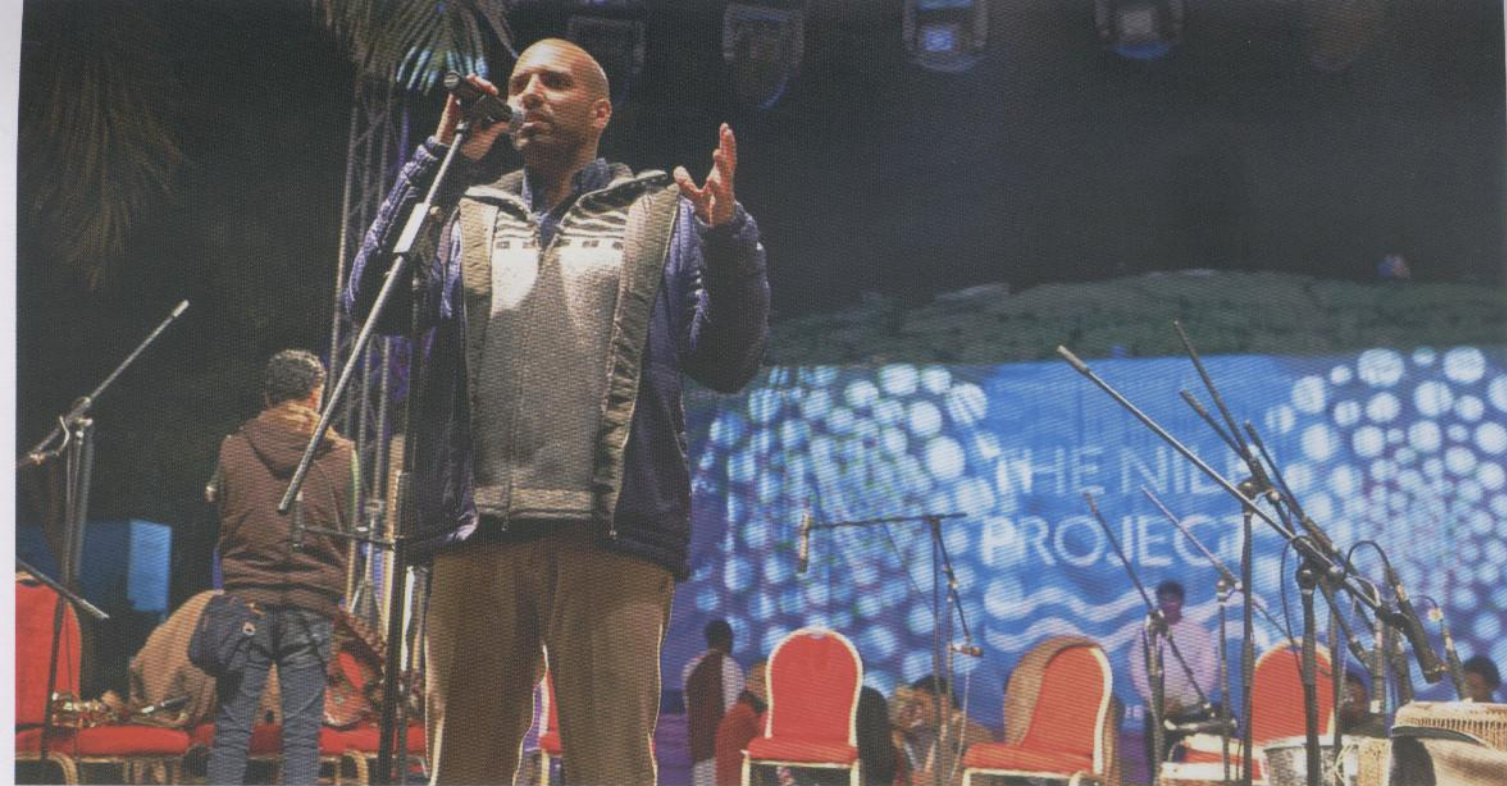
"By empowering these musicians and giving them ownership over their sound, we realized that we can make something new – a new Nile sound from this workshop," says Girgis. "It connected all of these sounds that are very different and that people don't normally connect with one another."

"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.

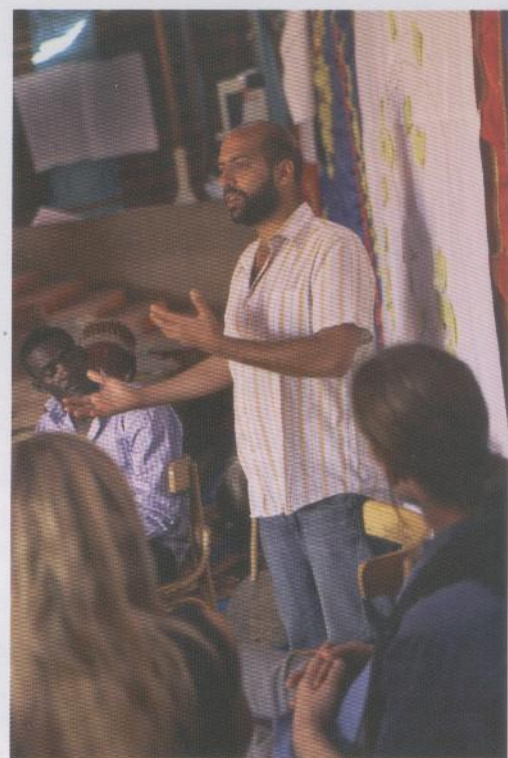
Through a series of educational programs to raise awareness about the Nile and its ecosystem, Girgis hopes to target young musicians in a summer camp that will combine music with dialogue and environmental education.

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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." □