

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.” »



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At an open-mic session in the tent, the musicians run through potential repertoire for the concert. There are vigorous Ethiopian work-outs featuring *masenqo* 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; Nyaruach, 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 Ganoub’ (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 most 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. ■

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

