The Nile Project brings together musicians from the many countries along the river’s banks, spreading cultural and environmental awareness.

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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 hadn’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.”
At an open-mic session in the town, the musicians run through potential repertoire for the concert. There are vigorous Ethiopian work-outs featuring massyang filfel (Endris Hassen),和谐 drums (Asrat Ayalew), cool tenor sax (Gilberto Gil on the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative (see issue #87). When the latter walked to the mic in the packed-out Avenue 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 Gtringer organized 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 once we divide up the water. If you speak with politicians who’ve been involved it’s exhausting. 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 FolkFest in Washington in 2016. West Africa has most of the livelihood in African music. So it’s a refreshing change to see and hear East Africa flating its powerful musical muscle along the river Nile.

“The Nile Project”

“...we’re now creating an orchestra with a new sound – a Nile sound...”