Closing Luncheon: Home, Freedom, and Belonging with Kinan Azmeh

Conference 2025

MARTHA GILMER: That was simply extraordinary.

KINAN AZMEH: Thank you so much. Thank you.

MARTHA: One of the things that you refer to as a clarinetist is that you are a single line instrument, and that in order to harmonize, you need another player. I think that also symbolizes how you live your life. So how does that connect?

KINAN: Absolutely, I think — well, first of all, thank you very much for having me, League of American orchestra. Thank you very much for inviting me to be part of this. I have to say how inspired I was to be surrounded by all the passion that you have. We artists, performers on stage, don't get to hang out with all of you in one room. So I feel incredibly privileged and lucky. So thank you very much for having me. And thank you also for Jason, Jason Harding, who actually played with me from the Utah Symphony. Jason, thank you so much. Jason.

Yes, I'm a clarinetist, and it's a single line instrument. But I don't think that was the motivation why I would like to play with people. I think music — it has been said, I think often music is an act of sharing, I feel. You know whether you're a performer versus a listener, or in the case of two performers who are both speaking and listening at the same time. And I love that act of interacting, where actually the highway is in both directions at all times.

So I don't want to be defined by the instrument I play. I try to do that. Yes, I am a clarinetist, and that's the tool that I know how to use more than others. But I think collaboration has always been at the heart of what I want to do. Even sometimes when I'm playing a single line instrument, I like to collaborate also with visual artists, with filmmakers, dancers. And I think also the idea of harmonizing, it really depends on how you build a certain melody, where you think the harmony is built in.

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Last point, actually, in this regard, as somebody who grew up learning western classical music, Bach, Brahms, Mozart and Beethoven, back in Damascus, where I'm from, I was also exposed to another very rich multitude of traditions. Arabic music, ancient Syriac music, Armenian music, Kurdish music, and all of which actually is a single line. But I think the richness of it comes from the art of ornamentation, the art of using macam [?], which is a system of modality, if you want. I don't want to say it actually counter balances the harmony, the lack of harmony, but it's another kind of richness. So I've tried to do that in the music I write and the way I play, and also the way I improvise, to make the clarinets more than just the single line instrument.

MARTHA: I think you reference sometimes that people perform music in order to affect their surroundings or reflect their surroundings, but you — or reflect the world around you. Why do you play music?

KINAN: It's a wonderful question. I guess the larger question can be not only music, why do we do art? Why are we drawn to this room? Why are we putting all the sweat and tears to have a creative, artistic life? I think — I mean, number one, the word pleasure is a very noble one we can use. It just simply pleases us to do so. It gives us pleasure, or some kind of — it moves us. And I think when people look at what art making is about, some people think art is about reflecting on the world around you, kind of documenting of the time if you want. And other people, other philosophies suggest that it's the artist's role to recreate the world in the most ideal way according to them.

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And my personal philosophy has always been that you do music or art to experience emotions that you didn't have the luxury of experiencing in real life. To go to something beyond of what's available. And I think if you look at all the music that we enjoy listening to, it's hard to define whether it's like sad or happy. It's always more complex than that. It combines the familiar, it combines optimism. And so I simply do music because I think it's the best way for me to interact with myself actually. You know, I can understand myself better when I play, and I'm certainly a better player than I speak here. Like, when I play, I feel this is my truest sense of self.

And also I feel incredibly empowered when I play. I feel the world becomes mine. And it's wonderful to do that in collaboration with other people, because you feel you're — I don't want to say conquered the world, but you feel like you're really fully yourself, and it's incredible. I will actually — I'll just give a little example of how empowering it felt at times. I was invited in 2004 for the opening of the opera house in Damascus and, you know, the dictator was there, the long gone dictator now.

And he was sitting in the audience, and I was playing a very contemporary piece, and they left all the lights on in the auditorium for safety reasons. So I was playing, and the concerto starts by just a solo clarinet carenza. And I was playing, and I usually like close my eyes when I play, and then I open my eyes, and I see all the powerful people in the country sitting in front of me. And it was an incredible moment, because I thought to myself, nothing can stop me right now from taking my instrument away from my mouth and just go, “Ah!”, and scream. There's nothing that can stop me at that point.

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And that moment was absolutely addictive, because I felt like this is — it's a piece of wood and metal, but it can be a very powerful thing, and that power, no matter how sometimes you feel, it's relevant in the current atrocities and tragedies we see. However, it gives me a sense of optimism and power, and I think by extension, it can be contagious. I think when people see somebody who's optimistic on stage and proactive, I think it triggers people to do the same.

MARTHA: We talked a little bit about when Renee Fleming was here, and we were talking about this — when you sing, and what it does neurologically, and this powerful Lithuanian choir that occurs every three years, many of you were in the room for that, and how that creates awe. But they sing an anthem that was not their national anthem, but was allowed. They could sing it freely when they were under oppression. And we were talking about the power of music, this ability, if we could only — in some of the protests happening around the world, if we could only sing together something, the power of that.

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KINAN: Absolutely. Actually, if you look at all the protests around the world, music has always been at the heart of it. And I think — and I don't want to limit the role of music in times of tragedies or atrocities to just protest, but I think also it's a wonderful way to reflect on what happens. If you think of art as an act of freedom, I think that freedom allows you to practice it in a dire kind of situation, but also it gives you the freedom to free yourself from the tragedy at times, and to experience that open space away from the tragedy. I think always as art, art cannot be also held hostage by tragedy.

If you look at what Syria, for example, produced artistically in the last 14 years of war, some of the most moving things I saw were not about the political situation or the tragedy or the death toll, but rather a very simple love story, at times. Poems that discuss incredibly abstract stuff, the sunrise and the sunset. When you see that within the context of the tragedy, they become even more powerful.

MARTHA: And I think that you worked in refugee camps with children and asked them to write songs.

KINAN: That's right.

MARTHA: And what kind of songs did they want to write?

KINAN: This was a trip that I took to Zaatari refugee camp maybe 10 years ago. And it was — I was teaching a group of girls, the ages were maybe between 12 and 14, something like that. And I asked them, like, “Let's write songs. What do you want to write about?" The room was silent. I said, "Should we write about home?” Silence. “Should we write about freedom?” Silence. “Shall we write about your cities where you're from?” They had no interest in any of that. And then they started to giggle. And I said, “Okay, like, can you tell me what you want to write about?” And I gave them pieces of paper to write down song titles. All of them, all, I think 15 girls, wrote a name of a boy they loved in the camp. And, of course, I mean, that's why I'm here for and I have to facilitate that.

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So we ended up writing these songs based on their names. And it was some kind of a confession situation, because I don't think they knew who loved who in the camp. So music was a great tool for them to just make it public. And I loved actually being part of that.

MARTHA: And what joy in the midst of —

KINAN: Incredible, incredible, yeah.

MARTAH: Yeah. Your clarinet concerto, you democratize the orchestra and you place percussion throughout. Talk to us now as a composer, talk to us a little bit about that orchestration and placement and how that piece works.

KINAN: Absolutely. This concerto was written, actually it was commissioned by Classical Movements who are sponsoring, co-sponsoring this event, for the Seattle Symphony. And we premiered it 2019, if I'm not mistaken. And the piece, it was a time where I was trying to free myself from all the works that were addressing Syria at the time. So the title was simply “Clarinet Concerto,” and it was simply about a piece that I like to — I want to enjoy playing. And my whole motivation, or the background of the piece was, can I transform the orchestra into the band? Can it become just simply a band?

And I think the main difference between an orchestra and a band is the interaction of the band. You always know whatever everybody else is doing at every single moment, when I'm talking about a small quartet, let's say. And I wanted to have the same with a big orchestra, so I placed the three drummers in the middle of the orchestra so that everybody will be subject to this gravity of this incredible groove that is traditional, actually, in Arabic music, that has a silent, actually, downbeat. So it's a really funky rhythm to use.

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And the concerto was maybe 60 percent — I mean, all the orchestral parts were written, but my part was maybe 50 percent written down, and 50 percent improvised. And when you improvise in this context, everybody, I mean, there is — there was a conductor, but when there's improvisation element, I think what I noticed that in lots of orchestra performers, they switched from playing like that to playing like that. You know, there's that kind of alertness that is absolutely wonderful. And everybody felt part of the band with the three drummers in the middle of the orchestra, and I was improvising at times.

And also this comes from a very strong belief that I have, back to freedom, is improvisation is an incredible tool for expressing that freedom. And I do think it has a wonderful place in the classical music world. Now, all the works that I write have always an element of improvisation, and I try to democratize that even more to give some improvisational parts to the orchestra. But when you have that, the orchestra becomes a community, even more so than with the tradition repertoire, I feel. And this comes from a belief that some of the best written down music for me sound improvised, and some of the best improvisations are pieces that flow so naturally, as if they were really written down, and like, you know, totally thought through. And I love walking that fine line.

MARTHA: You and I have in common a connection to the West Eastern Divan Orchestra, although we didn't know each other at that moment. You were in Chicago in the second year of that. And you went away questioning what it meant, what it was standing for, and so forth. And we also have in common a great man, Edward Said, no longer with us, but you told me just this morning a powerful story of Edward's that I think talks about the call to action and what our role is as you, as a musician and as a citizen, and maybe you could share that with us.

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KINAN: Absolutely. I was very lucky to be part of the West Eastern Divan Orchestra between 2001, one time 2001, then 2005 to 2007. And I was very lucky to meet the incredible Edward Said, and of course, Daniel Barenboim and the wonderful Yo-Yo Ma. Lots of amazing people. I happened to be just making music with them. And the Divan Orchestra actually is an interesting place because it tries to bring people from contrasting views, right? And sometimes even different readings of history to the same table to read music.

And I think the the notion of the orchestra is incredible. However, in practice, you know, some things would work. It really depends on the individual. And I remember, I went to Edward, and I asked him, I told him, “I don't want to go.” And he said, “If you don't want to go because you're boycotting, I think there's something more important you can do is just go. You have to show up.” Showing up actually is more important than just shying away. And because you can challenge your own views on things. And I find that to be incredibly powerful.

And I think Edward also taught me something beautiful about identity. What is identity and who are we, you know? And also the concept of home. What does home mean? And I would like to share this with you too, because it was inspired by a conversation with Edward, of how, you know, when I was a little kid, I was a young clarinetist from Damascus, and then I became a bit older, I became a clarinetist from Damascus. Started to compose, I became the musician from Damascus, started to travel a little bit around the surrounding countries, so I became the Syrian musician.

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And I think the natural next step is to become the musician. You know, it's not that you're dropping identities. I think the opposite is true, is you accumulate more and more identities as you go. And I remember once I was sharing this thought with the wonderful Yo-Yo Ma, and he said, “Kinan, I think there is one more step.” And I said, “What?” He said, “You know, you switch from being the musician to becoming the human, which is, it doesn't matter, actually, what you do, it’s what you do with it.”

And all of these questions about home and identity and being the outsider versus the insider in the classical music world, for example, is something that, actually, I think about a lot. And I love this process of how you start a concept, for example, being total strangers, like we just started now, you know? And then 20 minutes later, I feel you know me a little bit more just because I played for you and I spoke to you a little bit. And so our identity, collective identities, change over time.

And I love this concept, especially given the days we live in, where we're not willing to converse with people most of the time. And it goes back to what you said at the beginning of this. Now it's an

incredible moment for us to really engage and to talk and to dig vertically into people's past and heritage and culture, rather than just keeping expanding horizontally that we usually do.

MARTHA: What I have come to know in the times we've had to speak in the last few months is you are an incredible, generous person, and an optimistic person, and we need that very much today. So thank you.

KINAN: Thank you. Thank you so much.

MARTHA: I know you have the second part of the piece. Would you like to talk about the beginning and the end in terms of music?

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KINAN: Absolutely. The piece, you heard the first. It's a first movement of two movement suite titled “Syrian Imaginary Dances.” It was inspired by Bella Bartok Romanian dances, which is a piece, when I discovered it at age 14, was a huge revelation, as if Bartok gave me a document through which I can enter his heart, you know, and enter his home. So I wanted to do the same with Syrian melodies. But then, when I started to write, I found out that I'm writing my own melodies. So that's why the title included imaginary dances. And there are movements inspired by the rhythm of cities, the pulse of cities.

However, the second movement, I found myself using not an original melody of mine, but a melody that used to be sung during Syrian protests in 2011 and 2012. It’s good to imagine and to remember that, at some point in the Syrian recent history, there were millions of people singing this very simple melody that I'm going to play with Jason in a couple of minutes. And they used to sing the same melody in support of a city that was under assault. And for me, it's very moving to be sharing this melody with all of you and with Jason, and to think that the melody survived and the dictator is gone. It makes me happy.

MARTHA: Thank you.

KINAN: Thank you so much.

MARTHA: Thank you so much.

KINAN: Thank you, thank you.

[APPLAUSE]