

## Culture

## Ibn Battuta – A musical odyssey

Ati Metwaly

Muscat

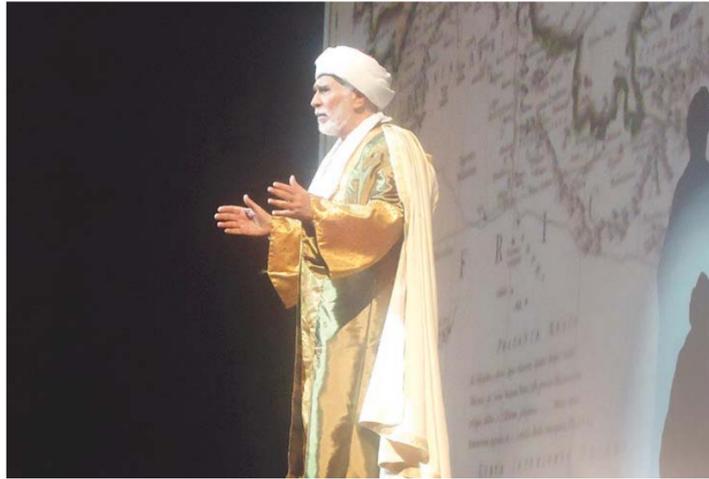
“Fasten your seat belts and get ready for a journey alongside Ibn Battuta,” read the programme notes for *Ibn Battuta: A Musical Journey through Arabia* at the Royal Opera House in Muscat.

The curtain rises inside the grand hall of this state-of-the-art building, the pride of Oman, and the audience is invited to follow in the footsteps of one of the world’s most notable travellers - the 14th-century Moroccan scholar Abu Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Abdullah al-Lawati al-Tanji Ibn Battuta.

“Travel abroad, search for the highest bounty, seek knowledge even as far as China,” Ibn Battuta wrote in his account of the 75,000 miles he travelled during 30 years crossing the kaleidoscopic Muslim world, recounting his encounters with kings and sultans, holy men and mystics, dervishes and warriors and magicians and fire-eaters.

**Ibn Battuta: A Musical Journey presents one of the greatest journeys of all time**

Bringing together 180 artists from the Arab world and Europe, *Ibn Battuta: A Musical Journey* presents one of the greatest journeys of all time. It begins in modern times with passengers at an airport in a hurry to find their departure gates. A girl (played by Heba Raslan) finds an old book and is joined by Ibn Battuta in old age, played by Egyptian actor Abdel-Rahman Abou Zahra, who walks her through his life story, presented in captivating



Egyptian actor Abdel-Rahman Abou Zahra



(Photos courtesy of Arabesque International)

music, choreography and sets.

Ibn Battuta lived in the golden age of Muslim travel, encountering many different peoples and customs. Drawing on this idea, *Ibn Battuta: A Musical Journey* unites the artistic forces of many countries. The music was composed and conducted by Hisham Gabr (Egypt), and the dancing was choreographed by Walid Aouni (Lebanon). The piece was performed by the Orchestra I Pomeriggi Musicali (Italy), the Conservatory of the Lebanon Choir, the Sofia Ballet Company (Bulgaria), and soloists and actors from Egypt, Lebanon and Oman. Lighting was by Karoly Ferenczy (Hungary), and costumes were by Dina Nadeem (Egypt).

The audience is taken to the city of Tangiers in Morocco, where Ibn Battuta was born, and then to Egypt, the Levant and the Gulf. Through a mix of colours, striking sets and splendid costumes, the piece represents the uniqueness of each country. The captivating blend of Western music with oriental nuances adds particular splen-

dour to the show, and Gabr’s score is rich in harmonies from both modern and historical music and features a skilful mixture of Western and oriental scales.

From the beat-driven music that reflects commotion at the airport, the audience is taken to a second scene where the ambiance of the Muslim world is felt for the first time. Captivating projections are used, along with percussive, dance-like music featuring colourful orchestration. The following scene, presenting Egypt, moves the audience from the country’s pharaonic to Islamic eras. Again, projections are used to transport the audience to ancient Egypt with the composer choosing glorious colours and unusual rhythms and scales to suggest the music of the period.

The Islamic part of the piece is a showcase for Gabr’s harmonisation of the Western and oriental musical scales, the latter not lacking characteristic quarter tones.

The audience follows the older Ibn Battuta’s memories, while his younger self, played by Ezz el Os-

tool, interacts with the girl. The orchestra is joined by the choir and soloists who lead the audience further into the Levant. The music becomes soothing and melodious, delivering an oriental feel.

**Ibn Battuta lived in the golden age of Muslim travel**

The scene set in Oman is a skilful mixture of rhythmically complex segments and symphonic orchestration as Omani traditional musicians take to the stage. In the finale, breathtaking, rondo-like music is used that incorporates the previous themes. Wrapped in an extravaganza of colours and movement, dancers fill the stage to celebrate Ibn Battuta’s years of journeys and discoveries.

The historical Ibn Battuta travelled further to South and East Asia, but the musical ends in Oman. Though the piece was also performed in Bahrain in 2012 in a smaller version, producer Ahmed

Abouzahra considers its staging at the Royal Opera House in Oman to be its world premiere. In July, it is to be performed at the Expo 2015 in Milan, and Abouzahra has promised to take it yet further afield.

Leaving the hall after the performance and inspired by this tale of distant times and places, the audience cannot fail to be aware of the show’s importance for regional musical history. The Arab world has seen successful projects marrying music with theatre before, among them the operettas of Egyptian composer Sayed Darwish and pieces performed by the famous Caracalla Dance Theatre in Lebanon, but *Ibn Battuta: A Musical Journey* is the first contemporary piece that unites a full-size orchestra with a choir, soloists, dancers and actors.

*Ibn Battuta: A Musical Journey through Arabia* was performed May 30th and 31st at the Royal Opera House in Muscat.

Ati Metwaly is a journalist and music critic based in Cairo.

## The Bridge: A ground-breaking interfaith exhibition

Dunia El-Zobaidi

London

As sectarian conflict and proxy wars engulf the Middle East, building understanding between the faiths must at some point become part of efforts to make peace and achieve eventual reconciliation.

Nearly four dozen visual artists, representing a range of religions, contributed works for *The Bridge*, a travelling exhibition meant to improve dialogue between faiths.

After opening in Paris in February, the exhibition is now showing at St Martin-in-the-Fields church in London till July 31st. It then has stops planned for elsewhere in Europe, Egypt and the United States.

The title of the exhibition – *The Bridge* – was chosen, not because it is a means to bring two things closer to each other, but as a means to get from one thing to the other. Each side is able to retain its distinctiveness and yet can be approached from the other side and understood.

Muslim, Christian and Jewish contemporary and emerging artists submitted art interpreting what they think bridges people. Whether on canvas, wood or paper, both male and female artists emphasised what religions have in common and encouraged unity.

“Art can imitate reconciliation as it is a common language around the world,” Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby told the exhibition opening in London last week.

The programme is curated by CARAVAN, which describes itself as “an interreligious and intercultural peacebuilding” non-governmental



organisation.

Insecurity is based on ignorance, said the Reverend Sam Wells, vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields. He suggested if people enter the world of their neighbour, they may realise things never imagined and also find what is interesting about themselves.

The exhibition displays what religions hold in common, which could determine the foundation of the future, said Reverend Paul-Gordon Chandler, co-curator of the exhibition. Art can bring people together who would normally never come together, he said.

Art can also educate children, as each work relays an unbelievable story in a thousand words, said co-curator and artist Lilianne

Milgrom. She said she hopes the artworks reach every school and every corner of the world, where children will understand the artists’ vision that we should all love each other.

**Muslim, Christian and Jewish contemporary and emerging artists submitted art**

“Our religion is a religion of acceptance. Let artists be an instrument of peace. Where there is hate, let us show love,” she said.

Welby spoke of the importance of reconciliation through accepting diversity. He said reconciliation is

a huge challenge at a time people find better ways of making their voices heard and fewer ways of being able to listen to each other.

“One of the aspects of reconciliation is not that it abolishes diversity with an incredibly boring mono-praying unanimity, but that it maintains diversity and in that diversity we find understanding,” the archbishop said.

Referring to the growth of Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq, and Boko Haram in Nigeria, Welby said the more people are able to communicate with each other, the less they seem able to deal with the diversity they find.

Some reject anyone they do not like and demonise anyone they cannot understand. People have

never felt closer to each other in terms of what they say to each other and they have never felt so unable to deal with that closeness, Welby said.

Art subverts the lack of understanding, he said. It affects the conscious mind where barriers exist and allows for space for interpretation.

Organised by CARAVAN, *The Bridge* runs through July 31st at St Martin-in-the-Fields church, London. A full schedule of the exhibition tour can be found at: [http://media.wix.com/ugd/3d5d0c\\_8e3e5d229eea4ec1bad4729469ad5608.pdf](http://media.wix.com/ugd/3d5d0c_8e3e5d229eea4ec1bad4729469ad5608.pdf).

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