



American classical music ensemble Cantus who are performing in Dubai this week, March 26, 2013, for a story by Maey El Shoush. Credit: Courtesy Curtis Johnson

Masterpieces on the lighter side: Cantus ahead of their Dubai show

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During their Middle East tour, Cantus will perform hits by artists including Michael Jackson, AR Rahman, John Lennon, Pérotin, Tomás, Luis de Victoria and Franz Schubert while adding a touch of their well-known humour.

This is your first Middle East tour. Why do you feel this is the right time to bring your music to the region?

The interesting thing about touring as a musician is that you get to go where there is demand for your music. The opportunities for a trip to Muscat and Dubai presented themselves and we were happy to take them. The main objective is to share our unique artistic product, share the wonderful sounds of some of the western world's best composers for men's voices and increase our audience base.

What can the audience anticipate from your forthcoming performance?

The concert is called On the Shoulders of Giants. It's inspired by Isaac Newton's quote: "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." We examine pieces that are easily considered masterworks but also younger composers inspired by those masterworks. It all sounds very serious but there are some light-hearted moments. We also address the audience several times throughout the concert to create an interesting narrative.

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How has interest in classical music changed over the years and how will its popularity continue across generations and cultures?

I think we are redefining what "classical music" means in the US. We've had a lot of trouble with the budgets of major orchestras and it's time for us to find a way to reach broader audiences. Classical music cannot be for the elite. It cannot exist in an ivory tower. If we don't reach a broader audience, classical music will not survive. We do a lot of outreach to young singers and this is precisely why.

How have you incorporated your own twist into songs by artists such as Michael Jackson, AR Rahman and John Lennon?

We programme collaboratively with all nine artists in the room, so it's a unique product. If you look at the artists you list, you see they're all "giants" in their own right: the king of pop, the king of Bollywood and the king of rock and roll. When we put this programme together, we knew we had to include something by The Beatles. But you'll see our performance of I Wanna Hold Your Hand is not typical. Instead, we perform the song in about nine different styles, which trace the development of western history. It's informative but also a little goofy.

What about blending Middle Eastern sounds?

The music of the Middle East is something we do not know enough about. The only Middle Eastern music we have performed has been filtered through the western music paradigm. The music of the Middle East has so many scales, the Makam. I learnt about the Makam when I was in Bethlehem teaching at a college for a few weeks in the summer. While I was there I had the opportunity to be a judge on New Star (the Palestinian version of American Idol) and one of the categories we scored the singers on was Makam.

How does having a group full of different personalities help make Cantus stronger or more exciting?

When we audition new singers, the audition does not end with singing. Instead, we all get together and have dinner and get to know each other. You have to be a good musician and a great singer but you also have to be a good guy.

So how does the group agree on a particular harmony for each piece?

As a chamber ensemble, everybody has an equal voice. But in the early stages of rehearsal, each piece is assigned a producer. That producer's job is to get the piece started and then everybody has the chance to contribute.

What are the benefits of exposing communities to different music styles?

It's vital. The US is such a diverse nation that we have an incredible amount of music to draw from just within our own borders. But we also love exploring music from other places. If we understand each other's art, then perhaps we can understand each other better, and then we have a better chance of creating a truly global community. I can't imagine being in a different profession. I do this because it's what I love. For a musician, creating art is like breathing air.

Cantus performs tonight at 8pm. Tickets are free on a first-come, first-served basis and must be collected by 7:50pm. For more information, visit www.cantussings.org

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