

Dhikra (Remembrance) – World Premiere

for Two Rivers Ensemble, Hamid Al-Saadi, and members of the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra

Iraqi-American trumpeter and composer Amir ElSaffar presents the world premiere of Dhikra (“Remembrance” in Arabic), composed for his six-piece Two Rivers Ensemble, combining Jazz with the classical Maqam tradition of Iraq, and featuring the celebrated Maqam vocalist Hamid Al-Saadi. They will be joined by Louis Langrée and members of the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra, who will be spatialized throughout the hall, surrounding and immersing the audience in a richly textured tapestry of sound. Instrumentation includes strings, woodwinds, oud (lute), buzuq (steel-stringed lute), santur (Iraqi hammered dulcimer), drums, bass, saxophone, and trumpet.

Inscribed on UNESCO’s List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity, the Iraqi Maqam is a centuries old repertory of melodies that are sung in religious and secular contexts. Once ubiquitous in Iraqi cities such as Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk, and Basra, today the Maqam is on the verge of extinction. Hamid Al-Saadi, the only living singer who has mastered the entire Maqam repertoire, recently emigrated from Iraq to the US, where he has been performing and teaching actively.

Amir ElSaffar studied intensively with Al-Saadi during his journey to Iraq in the early 2000s, and in 2006 formed the Two Rivers ensemble, the first group to combine Maqam with American jazz. The ensemble has toured internationally and released three critically acclaimed albums, and in recent years expanded into the 17-piece Rivers of Sound Orchestra.

Dhikra commemorates 20 years since the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, honoring and celebrating Iraqi people and culture by featuring Iraq’s richest musical offering, the Maqam, in dialogue with jazz and Western classical music.

Artist Bios

Amir ElSaffar is a composer, trumpeter, santur player, and vocalist who has been described as “uniquely poised to reconcile jazz and Arabic music,” (the Wire) and “one of the most promising figures in jazz today” (Chicago Tribune). A recipient of the Doris Duke Performing Artist Award (2013) and a US Artist Fellowship (2018), ElSaffar is a classically trained trumpeter conversant in the language of contemporary jazz, who has innovated new techniques to perform microtones and ornaments idiomatic to Arabic music that are not typically heard on the trumpet. He is a purveyor of the centuries old, now endangered, Iraqi maqam tradition, which he performs actively as a vocalist and santur player. In 2006, ElSaffar founded the six-piece Two Rivers, the first ensemble to combine Maqam with American jazz, which expanded to the 17-piece Rivers of Sound Orchestra, described by the New York Times as “full of momentum, but not in the way of a single moving thing. Instead, it seems to flow and spill across bounds.”

ElSaffar was composer-in-residence of the Transcultural Music program at Fondation Royaumont in France from 2016 to 2019, and has received numerous commissions from around the world to compose for Symphony Orchestra (Amarillo Symphony, New Haven Symphony, Festival d'Aix-en-Provence), chamber ensembles (Lutoslawski Quartet, Ictus, Quatuor Tana), as well as theater and dance projects (The Wooster Group, Ragamala Dance), in addition to numerous collaborations with Raga, Flamenco, and North African trance musicians.

Hamid Al-Saadi: Through his powerful and highly ornamented voice, and in his comprehensive knowledge of the intricate details of the music and poetry of Iraq, generations and layers of the maqam tradition resonate through Hamid al-Saadi's magnificent presence on stage. The only person in his generation to have memorized and mastered all 56 *maqamat* from the Baghdadi repertoire, Al-Saadi is one of the few vocalists who is keeping the *maqam* alive today, at a time when so many elements of this profound tradition are in danger of extinction.

Born in Iraq in 1958, Hamid Al-Saadi's artistic, musical and scholarly journey with the Iraqi *maqam* began from childhood, inspired by his avid love of the Iraqi and Baghdadi culture, the Arabic language, music and poetry. He studied, practiced, and performed the *maqam* until he became one of the more renowned and highly acclaimed musicians and scholars in this subject. He learned the art of singing and performing the Iraqi *maqam* from the legendary **Yusuf Omar** (1918-1987), who pronounced Al-Saadi as his successor. **Muhammed Al-Gubbenchi** (1901-1989) who taught Omar and was probably the most influential maqam reciter in history, said that he considered Al-Saadi to be the "ideal link to pass on the maqam to future generations." Al-Saadi emigrated to the United States on an Artist Protection Fund Fellowship, and teaches weekly classes in Iraqi Maqam at Sarah Lawrence College, in addition to performing and touring around the U.S.

Nasheet Waits is a native New Yorker who grew up in the vibrant Westbeth artist's community in Manhattan. Son of legendary drummer Freddie Waits, Nasheet began playing the drums at an early age, and determined in college to pursue a career in music after majoring in psychology and history. He studied with Michael Carvin, and soon joined Max Roach's percussion ensemble M'Boom. He has performed with a stellar galaxy of musicians ranging from Fred Hersch and David Murray to Geri Allen, Antonio Hart and Jason Moran. Waits is also a professor on the faculty at New England Conservatory.

Tareq Abboushi is a Palestinian composer, multi-instrumentalist, bandleader, and educator. An honors graduate from William Paterson University, he decided to pursue the *Buzuq* as a means to delve into Arabic Music. He collaborates with such notable musicians as Simon Shaheen, Omar Farouk Tekbilek, Souad Massi, Abeer Nehme, and Lotfi Bouchnak. An award-winning composer, his diverse background can be heard across multiple genres ranging from classical Arab, to Jazz, Electronic, film scoring, dance projects, radio, television, as well as commissioned soundscape design for art projects. Abboushi's discography includes two albums with his band SHUSMO, and five albums with Amir ElSaffar, among others.

Carlo de Rosa is a veteran of the New York City jazz scene. De Rosa has performed with musical luminaries including Yo-Yo Ma, Ray Barretto, Arturo O’Farrill, Ravi Coltrane, Vijay Iyer, Brian Lynch, Dafnis Prieto, Ed Thigpen, and Gonzalo Rubalcaba.. De Rosa obtained his DMA at Frost School of Music, University of Miami, where he was Graduate Teaching Assistant and Henry Mancini Institute Fellow. He is now professor of Jazz Bass at Western Michigan University.

Ole Mathisen, saxophonist and composer, is the Director of the Louis Armstrong Jazz Performance Program at Columbia University.

In 2009 he was awarded Chamber Music America’s New Jazz Works Grant, which resulted in *Mirage*, a multi movement chamber jazz piece based on illusive rhythmic layers. *Mirage* premiered at Miller Theatre in New York City.

His recordings as a leader or co-leader are: *Floating Points*, 2018; *7 Seconds to Sundown*, 2015; *Trapezoid*, 2013 (Alessa); *Mirage*, 2012 (Jazzheads); *Elastics*, 2011 (Losen); *Periodic Table*, 2010 (Jazzheads); *Chinese Horoscope*, 2007 (Jazzheads)

Zafer Tawil is an accomplished Palestinian musician based in New York City. Zafer is a virtuoso on oud, violin, and qanoun, and is a master of Arabic percussion. He has performed and recorded with numerous musicians, ranging from the pop star Sting to avant-garde composer/performer Elliot Sharpe to masters of Arabic music and jazz such as Amir al Saffar, Simon Shaheen, Cheb Mami, and Bassam Saba among many others. Zafer has composed music for a number of film soundtracks, most recently Jonathan Demme’s *My Favorite American* (not yet released), *Rachel Getting Married*, and the documentary *Until When*.