

# San Francisco World Music Festival

The young and vibrant mix of cultures found in the San Francisco Bay area is reflected in the city's world music festival. Jeff Kaliss reports

As much as it is an opportunity to attract composers and performers from far and wide, the San Francisco World Music Festival functions as a showcase for the variety of virtuosos living in and around the city. This synergy was in evidence at last year's fifth annual festival, from the opening reunion on September 17, in the acoustically and spiritually resonant Grace Cathedral, of North Indian *bansuri* flautist GS Sachdev and *tabla* master Zakir Hussain, both now based in the Bay area.

San Francisco's own musical circumnavigators, the Kronos Quartet, served as hosts the following week at the upmarket Herbst Theatre in the city's civic centre. They began their evening's exploration with a piece composed for the group by Franghiz Ali-Zadeh, born in Soviet Azerbaijan, and continued with an 800-year-old Azeri *mugham* (classical form) and the world premiere of a commission by Azeri accordionist Rahman Asadollahi, who joined in the performance.

There followed another premiere, teaming Kronos with Chinese immigrant Zhang Hai Yue. The audience, reflective of the Bay area in its hip multi-ethnicity, chuckled like children when Zhang literally picked his instrument, a green leaf, from an onstage tree. The vibrating leaf's small, plaintive sound was set nicely against the strings. After the intermission there was a Chinese collaboration with the quartet on a much grander scale – a brightly-costumed, athletic presentation in traditional Beijing Opera style, dubbed 'The Female Generals'. And that was just one of the festival's ten days of celebration.



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"It's a basis of the festival that we want to alleviate the tension and adversity in the world by bringing elements of cultures we can share together and can enrich ourselves with," says Kutay Derin Kugay, the event's programme director and a local world music radio DJ. More than most other world festivals, San Francisco's is conscientious about building the sorts of bridges which, among other things, have allowed the Western classically-trained Kronos to cross over to the very different structures of Persian and Chinese music.

"The Azeri accordion is made to play the mugham [and] it's not based on a tempered scale," notes Kugay. "So the violin tuning was different. But they found a common tone they could go to," aided by a specialised transcription of the Azeri material.

As for the Beijing Opera piece, "the challenge was the timing, because [the musical accompaniment] is so precise and it follows the action. Kronos was not familiar with this, but they rehearsed it real well."

Continuing in this spirit, the festival this year (September 26-October 16) will showcase the commissioned Nowruz Project, described as 'an international music experiment and artistic statement for global peace' and incorporating music, poetry, film and verbal presentations from Azeri, Afghani, Persian and Kurdish traditions.

Kugay's view towards the East reflects his origins in north-eastern Turkey as a member of the Laz Muslim minority. Curiously, it was his later exposure to jazz saxophonist John Coltrane, playing live in New York, which propelled him to explore the music of his ethnic ancestors and their neighbours. "The creativity of the improvisation was so powerful that it kind of split open my perception of what music is," Kugay recalls.

Studying filmmaking in northern California, Kugay began composing soundtracks, and went on to found his own world music record label, 7/8 Music Productions, named after a musical rhythm from the Black Sea region. He also founded Door Dog Productions with Asian music master Michael Santoro, to co-ordinate the annual festival and to facilitate outreach to the local community and schools.

For the past couple of years, the festival has incorporated an afternoon Youth World Music Showcase at the Asian Art Museum. Last year saw performances by teenagers from the Alice Fong Yu Chinese Youth Percussion Troupe and Orchestra. The sounds echoed those of the annual Chinese New Year's Parade in this city, which harbours a sizeable Asian population and the Clarion Music Center. Bearing different costumes and instruments were the Nejad Persian Youth Ensemble and Drum Circle, from the South Bay, a rare entity outside of Iran. And there was a solo turn by elegantly virtuosic

13-year-old East Indian vocalist Gaayatri Kaundinya, a student at the Ali Akbar School of Music on the other side of the Golden Gate Bridge. With many kids and proud parents among the onlookers, it was a charming and delightful experience, which will figure again in this year's festival.

Even more than in the past, the sixth annual festival will spread itself over a fascinating variety of venues throughout the Bay area. Ross Daly, a composer and instrumentalist (*lyra, saz, rebab*) in Cretan music, will appear at the modern, beautifully designed Yerba Buena Center, south of downtown San Francisco.

A gathering of female soloists from Portugal, Kurdistan, Armenia, Chile, the Ukraine and Azerbaijan will sing at the historic Brava Theater, and a couple of the women will appear separately at the Ashkenaz folk club in Berkeley. Turkish brothers who bill themselves as Cemali will present their unique version of alternative pop at the congenial Croatian American Cultural Center.

Kugay and Santoro have been adamant about educating festival-goers through lecture demonstrations, some of them free to the public. In 2004 they encouraged Asadollahi, who as Kugay notes "is a Muslim from a country which has been called part of the 'Axis of Evil'", to talk about "his ideas about peace and his culture, to dissipate some of the fear that's being pushed upon us by certain forces."

This year, at the intimate Community Music Center in San Francisco's Mission district, Nowruz Project personnel will host a presentation about Zoroastrian culture, and Ross Daly will teach and play Cretan music. Kurdish cultural and music perspectives will be presented at the Asian Art Museum. Pointing to last year's discovery by the Kronos Quartet as a paradigm, Kugay hopes that worldly Bay area music lovers and their visitors will continue to find a 'common tone' of cultural sharing. ■



TOP LEFT: Azeri accordionist Rahman Asadollahi with the Kronos Quartet

TOP RIGHT: Chinese leaf player Zhang Hai Yue with the Kronos Quartet

ABOVE: Rahman Asadollahi

(All photos on this page: Jim Block)

For more information on this year's festival see [www.sfworldmusicfestival.org](http://www.sfworldmusicfestival.org) or call +1 415 561 6571