

Sonia M'barek

A Universal Language

Interview by Brigitte Kaquet

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As a woman who has become an artist, how are you perceived by your family, your environment, and in Tunisia?

I started singing at a very young age and I came from a passionately musical family, all of which helps, even if the conservative environment of which I am a part can appear to contradict the preconceived idea we all have of the artistic domain. There have been female poets and singers in the history of Arab/Islamic civilisation. I don't think this conflicts with religion, because the fact of communicating strong emotions without physical demonstration does not make a woman a sinner. Tradition is my point of departure, it marks my affinity with a certain culture, it is a means of identification, of reference. Starting from this tradition I feel I can create songs with which I identify, and most of all music through which I can communicate with the audience.

Does the audience react differently when you sing in your own country, in other countries of the Middle East, or in other continents? Is there a disparity between your culture and the Western culture?

It still surprises me to observe the interest that my music awakens in the people who come to my concerts, whether they take place in the Arab world or in Europe. From European reactions in particular, I realise that music really is a language with a universal meaning. People are always moved, perhaps because of my voice. I feel I am able to convey my feelings to audiences and I am proud of this. From this point of view, Western and Eastern culture can join emotionally despite the differences of tonality, instrumentation and rhythm.

The word disparity is inappropriate, because it implies that one culture is superior to the other. I think that Eastern culture is as rich as Western culture. The two, together, can allow certain human mentalities to evolve. It is with this

perspective that a Greek classical music group plays my music, my songs and other Tunisian musical inheritance. In fact the meeting of different and apparently contrasting music is an experience I love. For example, I would like to sing Eastern musical themes accompanied by a European philharmonic orchestra. Soon I will be working with the Swiss musician and flute player, Conrad Steinmann, for an East/ West musical collaboration. This kind of meeting allows me to be myself and at the same time to have a great openness towards the Other, it gives me the possibility of developing myself as a human being at the same time as advancing musically. This enrichment manifests itself when I give concerts throughout the world, meeting a public different in nationality, but always sensitive to my music. I love to travel and meet people in this way. Singing allows me to make a journey through cultures, sometimes performing in French, other times in a completely different language.

Is singing a means of travel or is travel necessary in order to sing? Are there anecdotes from your tours that you would like to talk about?

There are always stories to tell from my tours. I remember in 1989, when I took part in the Festival of Mediterranean Song at Palma de Mayorca in the Balearic Islands. The stage was in the middle of a small lake in front of an immense cathedral. My musicians and I wondered where the audience would be. We were told that the spectators would be on the other side of the water and that we could only reach the stage by using some small boats. This is one of the most

beautiful concerts I remember.

What are your hopes for the future?

Parallel to my artistic career I maintain a University career and I am preparing a thesis in political science. These two worlds are different, but both are my passions. My university studies have allowed me to have a different perspective, a more rational one than that of the artistic world. This has made me open to others, and helps me not to judge people in a categorical and definitive way. It is obvious that the alliance between music and political science is not a small question, but this is where I find myself. Concerning the future, I will continue to do music research in the context of the universality of music, and in pursuit of intercultural communication beyond the obstacle of language.

Translated from French by Julia Varley

SONIA M'BAREK (Tunisia) was born in 1969 and studied at the National Conservatory of Music in Tunis. In 1987 she was named best voice of the year at the festival of Tunisian song. Her first performance was entitled *Music without Borders*. In 2001 she collaborated with Théâtre Wakan for a theatre production at Clermont Ferrand in France.

BRIGITTE KAQUET (Belgium) is a founding director of Cirque Divers in Liege and the artistic director of the Women's Voices Festival. She is also a writer and theatre director.