

just Festival: Manchester International Roots Orchestra

✘ 'It was like paradise coming to the RNCM' – that's how **Michael Cretu** describes the start of the **Manchester International Roots Orchestra (MIRO)** of which he is Musical Director. Michael came to the **RNCM** (Royal Northern College of Music) in 1992 as a double bassist and later also studied composition. He always wanted to bring people from different cultures together to make music: at **St John's Church** on Saturday evening an exhilarating concert showed just how successful he has been in fulfilling that dream.

From traditional West African songs to new compositions, from a haunting Kurdish solo to a fast rap about dragon taming, the diversity of the material and the talents of every member of the orchestra were stunning. MIRO counts refugees, RNCM students and local and international musicians from all traditions amongst its numbers. Michael himself is Romanian and much of his playing is inspired by gypsy tunes, although he can clearly turn his bow to anything, from African music to jazz. He likes to bring together folk music, Arabic music, classical music, jazz, gypsy music: music – and perhaps even more importantly musicians – from all around the world.

Saturday's line-up consisted of **Holly** on kora (a traditional 21-string West African instrument), **Pat** on drums, **Mina** on oud and ney, **Farshid** on santour, **Zorro** on guitar, **Tshepe** on piano and **Michael** on bass, joined by solo singers **Kazem** and **Dana** and rappers **Remi** and **MNIB**.

Michael began the evening by leading the orchestra in his own composition *Balkan Connection*, a tune that moved from a slow double bass and guitar melody, picking up to a fast flamenco-

esque rhythm as other instrumentalists came in. Drums, kora and oud all added to the crescendo of sound, then faded away leaving the bass and guitar alone once more to wind the piece down. Next came *Banilay*; bass, kora, guitar, drums and ney backed Holly's singing which, together with MNIB and Remy's powerful rap, reinterpreted a traditional song telling wealthy men to 'be loyal', to consider the poor and not to abuse their power.

☒ Perhaps one of the most beautiful and haunting performances of the concert came from Dana, who sang *Karass Zarda*, 'a song of love about a lady who wears a yellow dress', in his native Kurdish. The real message of the song is the struggle for Kurdistan's freedom. Dana's wonderful voice conveyed a depth of feeling so great that it was almost hypnotic and very moving.

Dana was followed by Kazem, with *Iryligh*, an Iranian song about 'being away from where you belong', an experience shared by many of MIRO's members. Kazem's pure strong voice drew the audience in immediately. His second piece, *The Sultan of Hearts* was preceded by a simple but arresting introduction on santour; bass, drums, ney and oud then combined as Kazem sang his way to an exuberant, uplifting close.

The return of the migrating birds from Africa inspired Holly's composition *Mystic Bird*, which speaks of hope and kindness as the kora and bass meet in an increasingly frenetic rhythm. Tshepe then calmed the mood with a dream-like, wistful piano solo, beautifully played, before Holly, MNIB and Remi performed *Salia*. The djembe is a traditional African drum: legend has it that Salia, a renowned djembefola in Guinea, played so well that his music tamed a dragon and persuaded him to dance. MNIB and Remi's energetic and exhilarating rap had even an Edinburgh audience tapping its feet. (And that's quite adventurous for us...)

The finale, *Time for Change*, an outstanding composition by MNIB, brought the whole orchestra – and indeed the audience too – together in an immensely uplifting and engaging performance. Zorro and Holly sang, Remy and MNIB rapped, and Pat's impressive drumming providing an exciting close to a wonderful evening. Music is a language that everyone can understand: the Manchester International Roots Orchestra brings that shared language to the world in a unique and inspirational way – or, in MNIB's own words,

'It's like the whole world is here in one room, and you don't need no flight tickets to see it.'

MIRO is based at RNCM and supported by **Community Arts Northwest**. You can find out more about MIRO [here](#).

This concert was part of the **just Festival**, which continues until 25th August 2014 with a great programme of performances, family events, talks, exhibitions and films: The Edinburgh Reporter's article [here](#) has more details.