

Young composer finds inspiration in Middle East



By Colin Eatock | March 15, 2012 | Updated: March 21, 2012 4:32pm

Composer Mohammed Fairouz Photo: Samantha West / HC

More Information

'Akhnaten, Dweller in Truth'

Foundation for Modern Music presents premiere of work by composer Mohammed Fairouz.

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Hobby Center for the Performing Arts, 800 Bagby

Tickets: \$30-\$50; modernmusic.org

Identity is a big deal - and a complicated issue - with [Mohammed Fairouz](#). The New York composer, whose "Akhnaten, Dweller in Truth" will be premiered Saturday by Houston's [Foundation for Modern Music](#), is careful about how he describes himself. "I'm an American and a life-long [New Yorker](#)," he says.

If any further explanation is called for, he describes himself as an "Arab-American," preferring not to attach himself to any specific country.

Yet, although the composer has never been to the Middle East, his Arabic roots have had a profound influence on his music. Many of his compositions are based on Middle-Eastern literature, history and culture. This is certainly true of his "Akhnaten," which draws its inspiration from an Egyptian pharaoh who lived more than 3,000 years ago.

"'Akhnaten, Dweller in Truth' is a book by Naguib Mafouz, who is a great Egyptian author," Fairouz says. "It tells the story of Akhnaten through the lens of other people. You see Akhnaten through the lens of the High Priest of Amun, or you have a view of him through the lens of Nefertiti."

He recalled the book when he was approached, about a year ago, by the Foundation for Modern Music, to write a new work to celebrate the organization's 25th anniversary.

"I discovered that one of the foundation's directors, [Paul Boyd](#), is a very fine pianist," Fairouz says. "And I also knew a young lady from Houston, Adhaia MacAdam-Somer, who is a wonderful cellist. I said, 'It would be really wonderful if I could craft a double concerto for piano, cello and orchestra.'"

He continues: "The piano became the High Priest, and the cello became Nefertiti. So the novel acted as point of inspiration."

Only 26 years old, Fairouz is a prolific composer and rapidly rising figure on the classical music scene. His music has been described as "warmly sympathetic" and "arresting" by the [New York Times](#), and Britain's [Gramophone magazine](#) dubbed him a "post-millennial Schubert."

Fairouz says the East-meets-West approach to composing he sometimes uses will be apparent in "Akhnaten."

"They are a lot of Arabic modes music in this piece," he notes, "that connect it to the music of the Middle East. But there's also the typically Western form of the concerto."

And, surprisingly, he invokes the late American composer Aaron Copland as an influence. "I was thinking of a Middle-Eastern 'Appalachian Spring' when I was writing 'Akhnaten, Dweller in Truth,' because it reflects the music of a region, and it's very dancelike music."

"Akhnaten" will be one of five works in the Foundation for Modern Music's all-Fairouz concert. They include another double concerto, "States of Fantasy" (for violin and cello, with Adhaia MacAdam-Somer and violinist Batya MacAdam-Somer), as well as a string quartet titled "Chorale Fantasy" and two works for string quartet and baritone: "For Victims" and "The Poet Declares His Renown." Baritone Raúl Orlando Edwards, artistic director of the Foundation for Modern Music, will sing in the last two works. Boyd, the pianist for "Akhnaten," is also a foundation director. He points out that Saturday's performance is one of the few orchestral concerts the organization has staged in 25 years.

For the occasion, a new ensemble, the Houston Composers Orchestra, will make its first appearance, conducted by Clifton Evans. "The orchestra is a group of players who have performed with us on other concerts we've done in the past," says Boyd. "We've put the orchestra together for this concert and for future events." As for "Akhnaten," the pianist describes the work as "very engaging and very rhythmic."

As well, "The piano and cello are very interactive, in a kind of back-and-forth argument - and there are several sections where Mohammed calls on the soloists to improvise, so we'll actually be making the music."

Colin Eatock is a writer who covers classical music. He lives in Toronto.