

Festival Focus: Abu Dhabi

With rapid economic growth comes new avenues for culture. **Claire Jackson** reports from the Abu Dhabi Festival

Abu Dhabi gleams. Its skyscrapers, shiny and newly erect, reflect the ever-present sunshine. Hotel complexes carve up the sandy beaches, so inhabitants swim circles in the clear sea, like contained dolphins in marine parks. The Gulf metropolis has undergone rapid development over the last two decades, and the coastal sprawl looks set to continue. The capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is recognised largely for its commercial, rather than cultural activities, with the exception of the recent opening of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, which captured international admiration last year.

However, long before the Louvre's triumph, one organisation set out to develop cultural projects across the city, and throughout the Arab world. At the tender age of 22, the Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation (Admaf) is one of the oldest not-for-profit organisations in the Arabian Gulf. It is supported by Sheikh Nahayan Mubarak Al Nahyan, the UAE minister of tolerance, and bases its objectives on those of the country's founding father, the late Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan: tolerance, respect and enlightenment.

The Admaf is the brain child of philanthropist Huda Alkhamis-Kanoo, who, in 2004 also created the foundation's annual concert series, the Abu Dhabi Festival. Alkhamis-Kanoo is a woman who walks and talks, a multitasker and someone who is passionate to the point of obsessive about bringing classical music to the UAE. Scrape beneath Abu Dhabi's luxurious sheen and there are plenty of groups in need of support: the Admaf reports it reaches nearly 40,000 through its arts-education and community-

outreach programmes. The festival is the largest event of its kind in the region and now includes an awards ceremony, arts exhibition and co-commissioning programme, with other initiatives in the pipeline.

The Abu Dhabi Festival can claim an enormous number of firsts – such as the London Symphony Orchestra's UAE debut – but then, western classical music is still rarely heard here. It would be easy, therefore, to focus on accessible programmes, rather than those that are artistically challenging. But Alkhamis-Kanoo is not one to take an easy route.

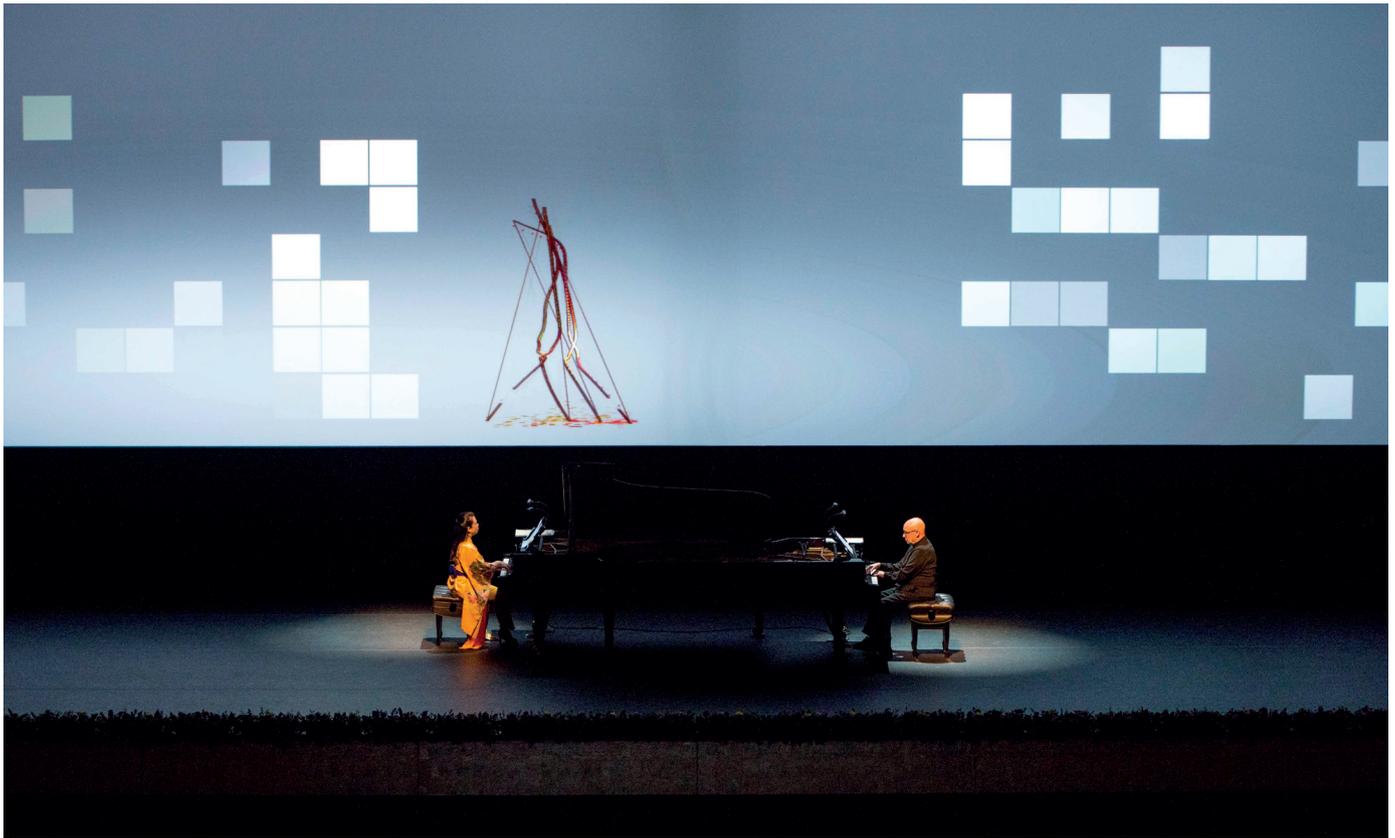
This year's festival included some unusual events, such as *Pianographique*, a special collaborative concert for two pianos and digital imagery, performed by Maki Namekawa and Dennis Russell Davies (pianos), and Cori O'Lan (visualisation). Steve Reich's *Piano Phase*, with its percussive, repetitive – relentless, even – themes is not the obvious gateway to minimalism, and both this work and Philip Glass's *Four Movements for Two Pianos* are little known in UEA. Some audience members in the Emirates Palace auditorium expressed discomfort; others were intrigued.

O'Lan agrees the repertoire and presentation can be divisive: 'Usually you have people who love it or hate it – there is no in-between,' he smiles. 'But we're not adding computers just to see if young people come to the concerts: Glass's music presents an opportunity for experimentation.'

The artist created a visual imagining – in real-time – of Ravel's *Mother Goose* for Los Angeles Philharmonic, which was co-produced with Admaf and premiered in the US. For Abu Dhabi, the concept was translated into an arrangement for two pianos; in the end O'Lan redid the visuals entirely.

◀ The sky's the limit: Abu Dhabi ▶





▲ 'The interaction between visual and aural is very interesting': Pianographique

'There are purists who think that nothing should interfere with the music. But I think the interaction between visual and aural is very interesting,' says O'Lan. 'We are really giving two performances: the pianos that stand alone and the performance between the music and the visuals. In this respect it is completely different from film or video work. The direct connection is key. This has been explored in electronic music for many years but in classical music it is still quite new. I think it gives the audience a chance to listen to the music in a deeper way.'

Unlike some concerts that use videography or stills as a backdrop to support the action on stage, O'Lan, Namekawa and Davies work as equal performers, creating simultaneously. 'We don't use the score or create videos in advance,' explains O'Lan. 'We have the possibility that the computer is really listening – not to the music, but to all the aspects of sound: volume, pitch, frequency, dynamics. I have to teach the computer how to respond to all the different elements in a way that is fitting to the style of the music. In the concert, I am basically the conductor of the computer.'

In programming these unusual events, the Abu Dhabi Festival hopes to develop its fledgling audience. But it's not all 20th and 21st-century esoteric piano music: this year also saw Nicola Benedetti perform with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, and Deborah Voigt and Bechara Moufarrej offered a special

“ We came to Abu Dhabi for music – look how it brings unity ”

evening of 'opera in concert'. Each edition of the concert has a different country focus (previously celebrated countries include France, Poland and the UK) and 2018 marked India.

Like western classical music, Indian classical music is also relatively new in the UEA. There is perhaps no better advocate than Sarod expert and composer Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, who played to a packed-out crowd at the Emirates Palace, with the Sheikh Nahayan Mabararak Al Nahyan in the audience.

'There is an historic connection between Indian and Arab music,' Khan explained over coffee. 'Every region has their own folk music. And there is so much in common between the sarod and the oud.' Khan performs regularly in America and Europe, but only recently started performing in UEA. 'Music festivals like this are rare in the Arab world,' he says. 'But we have started coming here [Abu Dhabi] more. Every human being is born with sound and rhythm: conversation, recitation, heartbeat – it's all part of music. Music is like air, water, flowers, colours, fragrance. We all need music.'

Khan has written a concerto for sarod, *Samaagam*, which was commissioned and recorded by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, and has since been performed around the world. 'I compose in an Indian way, and then I have help to notate it in western tradition,' explains the composer. 'Music transcends cultural differences.' Khan cites his own personal experience: 'I am Muslim and my wife is Hindu but we live peacefully,' he smiles. 'We've been married for 42 years. Music builds bridges; we came to Abu Dhabi for music – look how it brings unity.' 