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Multimedia performance celebrates medieval manuscript

By Briana Zamora | November 18, 2014

Undergoing a 600-year odyssey as rich as the content of the book itself, the “Sarajevo Haggadah”, a medieval illuminated manuscript and Jewish prayer book, has withstood near destruction at several points. A multimedia concert, “The Sarajevo Haggadah: Music of the Book,” will take the stage Wednesday and Thursday at the McCullough Theatre.



Merima Ključo, a Bosnian-born composer and internationally acclaimed concert accordionist, wrote the 12-movement composition for the concert after reading “People of the Book” — a novel written by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Geraldine Brooks. The Schusterman Center for Jewish Studies and Texas Performing Arts collaborated to present this performance, which also incorporates video art by Bart Woodstrup.

“Being inspired by this amazing book, I became obsessed with the idea of the project that would musically and visually follow the Haggadah’s journey,” Ključo said.

Ključo was raised in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, while it was still a republic in the former Yugoslavia, and also lived through part of the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s before fleeing the country in 1993. Ključo had to leave her country because of violence caused by ethnic and cultural divisions.

“The ‘Sarajevo Haggadah’ reminds me of my own life and the exodus I had to experience,” Ključo said. “I was forced to leave my own country, under the strangest and heaviest circumstances.”

Ključo views life’s challenges as inspiration for her development as a person and an artist.

“With every journey, I get a new scar — positive or negative — but I keep my dignity and get richer by travelling through different circumstances and sharing culture with others through my music,” Ključo said.

Seth Knopp — Ključo’s friend, classical pianist and founding member of the Naumburg Award-winning Peabody Trio — is the pianist for the concert and helped write the composition. “Merima is a beautiful player, and, when she plays the accordion, it has a very personal voice, and my role in the composition is to fill out the texture of that voice — to accentuate it,” Knopp said.

The concert's musical journey of the book is accompanied by Woodstrup's video imagery, which is projected on the wall behind Ključo and Knopp while they perform. "I took inspiration from the aesthetic quality — the textures — of the illuminated manuscript and the book's actual journey through history and combined them," Woodstrup said.

The concert is one of a number of collaborations between the Schusterman Center for Jewish Studies and Texas Performing Arts. Robert Abzug, director of the Schusterman Center for Jewish Studies, said it is a great idea for people to be exposed to Ključo's concert.

"Ključo's performance celebrates the continued relevance of the artifact," Abzug said. "The book is not only a symbol of the survival of the Jewish people, but also of the possibility of harmony among the Abrahamic religions, and that is a very important hope to hold out today."