

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with Arts and Africa. For most people, the combination of Egypt and opera would mean something like this.

MUSIC - extract from 'Aida' by Verdi

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, that was an extract from the opera 'Aida' by the Italian composer Verdi, which has its setting in ancient Egypt. The work was originally commissioned by the Khedive Ismail of Egypt in 1869 to coincide with the opening of the Suez Canal, but in fact the first performance was not until two years later in the Cairo Opera House. Well, since then the Cairo Opera House has played host to opera companies from all over the world - until it was destroyed by fire sixteen years ago. Now with the help of a 30 million dollar grant from Japan a new one is being built, due for completion early next year. Someone intimately involved with the planning of the new opera house is Professor Yusef el Sisi, who's Under Secretary of State for Music and Opera in Egypt as well as Principal Conductor for the Cairo Symphony Orchestra. He's in England at the moment to look at the way in which modern opera houses are administered and to discuss training possibilities. Rick Wells caught up with him and asked him what sort of place the new Cairo Opera House would be.

PROFESSOR YUSEF EL SISI

Nowadays, there are many new buildings incorporating opera houses - they are not even called opera houses as before. In Germany, they don't call them 'Stadtstheater' any more and in Japan they call them 'multi-purpose cultural centres'. But, it includes in it an opera house. For us, the word 'opera' is really important because we had one of the most famous opera houses in the world - the Cairo Opera House for which 'Aida' was written. When we lost this house in 1971, we still kept our artistic troupe, but we are now performing in a small theatre, until the day comes when we get our new opera house. And now it's not so far off - fourteen months. That's why it's very important to see how to train the people, how to work with the whole world - that's why I'm here to see how I can profit from my visit and what I can get from England which will be of use for Egypt.

RICK WELLS

Who is it who actually comes to watch opera in Egypt?

PROFESSOR YUSEF EL SISI

Similar to the people who come to watch opera in England. In Egypt, we have a full house for all our opera performances and symphony concerts. But still it is a minority who visit opera and serious music concerts. But we are trying to draw more people, especially the younger people to come to attend these concerts and performances. So that's why in this multi-purpose new building we have a range of different activities. We also have the Arabic Music Classical troupe which draws such an audience. Those who come to that, for example, might be tempted to attend an opera performance. Also there are translations of operas into Arabic. This is something completely new for us and we have done some experiments in this field for 20 years, but not so many as the case here in England for instance. Here you perform all Italian operas in the English language. This helps to encourage people to come because they will be following the text, not fully perhaps, but to a great extent this will be a sort of attraction.

RICK WELLS

Have any Arabic operas been performed yet?

PROFESSOR YUSEF EL SISI

Not yet. We have some written, but we have performed only a few scenes from each. But with the new Opera House, we will perform one Arabic opera, one international, one translated into Arabic. By the way, we are shortly having an international recording for 'Cosi Fan Tutte', Mozart's 'Cosi Fan Tutte' in the Arabic language. We will perhaps record it with the London Philharmonic.

MUSIC - extract from 'Cosi Fan Tutte' by Mozart

ALFY TETTEH-LARTEY

A short extract from Mozart's 'Cosi Fan Tutte' due to be performed in Arabic with the London Philharmonic Orchestra - sounds like it has fascinating potential. But as Professor el Sisi said there is already an indigenous Egyptian opera in Arabic in the making. It's called 'Layla' and is described as popular opera by its composer, Mohamed Noah. He too was here in London recently to record the overture to the work with the London Symphony Orchestra.

MUSIC - 'Layla' - London Symphony Orchestra

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That of course was just an extract from the overture with none of the singing in Arabic that will make the work in a sense unique. But how difficult was that to achieve? Just what are the practical difficulties of writing an opera in Arabic? Well, Rick Wells put these questions to the composer, Mohamed Noah.

MOHAMED NOAH

You know that we write from right to left and the whole concept of writing music is from left to right. So we have to put every letter on the same note. It doesn't work with Arabic, as it does with Latin letters. So I am making some experiments to have this kind of relationship between our letters and our phonetics and the international, the European phonetics. So anybody can sing it. Like any opera, you can sing in English and you can sing in German for Wagner and you can sing in Italian for Verdi.

RICK WELLS

But it will be the first opera to have been performed in Arabic.

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MOHAMED NOAH

Yes, it will be the first opera. We have operettas - small operas - but this is the first opera in Arabic.

RICK WELLS

It's called, I believe, 'Layla'. Who is Layla?

MOHAMED NOAH

Layla is a girl in Egypt living during this age we are living in and she falls in love with her cousin - we usually marry our cousins in Egypt. So they marry and the circumstances weren't so good, so they separated. And the whole concept centres on their problems, how the community affects their love and how politics, culture itself, the inheritance, the traditions come into it.

RICK WELLS

It's a story of modern-day Egypt in some ways.

MOHAMED NOAH

Yes, it goes through this area but it can go up to the Pharoahs also. It's nowadays and it's human.

RICK WELLS

Why did you decide to write such a work?

MOHAMED NOAH

I was a singer, I was a famous rock star or Egyptian pop star singer for fifteen years. And I became fat and old and so I decided to study music - it's my extreme love. I like to study music. Then I went to the States - to the University of California and began to study music from the beginning to have this kind of link between what is being there in our countries. Because we have a problem in the Middle East, in our nations we have a problem that we want to be modern, and we also want to stop our own culture from being ruined or spoiled. So the question is how can you mix this science with soul without spoiling one or the other?

RICK WELLS

I think some people might think it's quite a big leap from pop to opera.

MOHAMED NOAH

Yes, but it's a pop opera.

RICK WELLS

How is this going to fit in with the Egyptian tastes do you think? I mean, are you going to have the first night at the Cairo Opera House?

MOHAMED NOAH

Yes, it's supposed to. Because they took it already to have some rehearsing so I hope they will take it but I shall put it on a tape - I shall make a movie with it.

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RICK WELLS

I see, first of all it's going to be a film.

MOHAMED NOAH

Yes, it will be a film.

RICK WELLS

So it's going to be a truly popular work.

MOHAMED NOAH

Yes it must be because it will provide our people with a link to the fine arts. You have to give them something which means they won't be afraid of the word 'orchestra', or the word 'symphony', or 'harmonic' - these are just words. They have to deal with it. I did the same during the Seventies. I put the organ, and the bass and lead guitar on the streets - this was a struggle between the new method of singing and the traditional way. But I succeeded. Now it's a wave all over the Arab world. You have to be careful to remain Egyptian and still deal with a foreign science or civilisation.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was the Egyptian composer Mohamed Noah talking to Rick Wells. And I'm now going to leave you with some more music from his forthcoming opera 'Layla'. So, until the next edition of Arts and Africa, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC - 'Layla' - London Symphony Orchestra