

Persia through the ages

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Freelance

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Hossein Omoumi has the kind of stage presence that demands reverence; just the sight of him sends audiences into a wide-eyed hush, and when he speaks, his voice low and lilting, every word is weighed, considered, softly delivered. He is an architect, an inventor, and one of the greatest living exponents of the Persian ney - a cylindrical reed flute that's blown through the teeth and is exceedingly difficult to master.

On Monday, Omoumi joined Constantinople for a program of music from, and inspired by, his native Iran. Salle Pierre-Mercure's stage had been set with Persian rugs and a pool of soft red light, and Constantinople's founding Tabassian brothers - Ziya on tombak, Kiya on setar - sat on either side of the great man, clearly awestruck.

And for good reason; Omoumi's playing was transparent at times, breathy at others, with an astounding range of dynamics and articulation. His melodies spanned registers, often using two or more notes at once. He also sang - a haunting, melancholy warble that carried all the pathos of his proud tradition. The effect was transfixing.

Also on the program was Claude Vivier's Shiraz, written in 1977 for solo piano and augmented by Constantinople to incorporate traditional Persian instruments. Pianist Jacynthe Riverin approached Vivier's fractured landscape with paradoxical lyricism, breathing colour into his often harsh harmonies and incessant rhythms. It was a whimsical interpretation, and captured Vivier's nostalgia for the city he had visited.

A meandering Quebecer's perspective of revolutionary Iran may seem a far cry from 16th-century Persian chamber music (the concert's first half), but it was an inspired bit of programming. The theme of the evening was "migrant circles," and in many ways Vivier was a migrant all his life. And, adding traditional instruments to his modern score softened the stylistic edges.

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