

Music

Bringing historic Bolivian music to light

By Celia Wren February 27

“Bolivia is a very unique place — in America, and on Earth,” says Piotr Nawrot, a Polish-born musicologist and Catholic priest. Nawrot has helped draw attention to thousands of pages of baroque musical scores that have survived centuries in Bolivia, testifying to the musical culture that flourished at religious missions, primarily Jesuit, during the Spanish colonial era. Bolivia, Nawrot says, is the only place in the world where such historic music was preserved in such quantities.

Some of those vintage scores will be performed in Washington by [Bolivia’s Arakaendar Choir and Orchestra](#), which was established with the country’s Asociación pro Arte y Cultura to interpret the baroque windfall. The March 2 concert at the Inter-American Development Bank will be conducted by Ashley Solomon, director of Britain’s Florilegium (an ensemble involved in Arakaendar’s founding). Arakaendar also will perform March 3 and 4 at the Kennedy Center’s [Iberian Suite festival](#).

Speaking via Skype from Santa Cruz, Bolivia, Nawrot said he began his career as a missionary in Paraguay, where he encountered much evidence of the colonial religious past.

“I could appreciate the ruins of the former Jesuit churches,” he recalled. “In the

museum, I could see some of the sculptures, also sacred vestments and paintings, but the music was missing!”

Nawrot’s readings convinced him that some period music might have survived in Bolivia. After embarking on a course of academic study that eventually earned him a PhD at Catholic University, Nawrot began his investigations in Bolivia in 1991. He found that myriad scores — polyphonic masses, cantatas, passions, vespers and more — had been carefully preserved by indigenous Bolivians, who he said viewed it as “sacred history.” A significant portion of the music, he said, was written or arranged by indigenous composers and musicians. Some of the texts are in Spanish or Latin, but others are in indigenous languages such as Guarani.

Nawrot, who will give a talk before Arakaendar’s March 2 concert — disclaims credit for bringing Bolivia’s baroque scores to light. He said that much of the world’s musical and scholarly establishment may have lost track of the music before his own sleuthing, but not Bolivia’s indigenous people. “The Indians had never forgotten it,” he said.

Poetry by women set to music

Eléonore Dyl and her collaborators set out to buck a trend. When people focus on the culture of the French-speaking world, in Dyl’s view, a disproportionate amount of attention goes to France, Belgium, Quebec and her own homeland, Switzerland.

So when an international Francophone organization put out a call for a play to be mounted at the U.N., the New York-based Dyl and a few other artists, including Belgian actor/director Mathilde Schennen, decided to craft a script that emphasized French-speaking Africa and the Caribbean, with a dollop of material from Europe and elsewhere.

The result is “Voix de Femmes (Voices of Women),” a theatrical anthology of French-language poetry by female writers, interspersed with music by composer-vocalist Awa Sangho, who comes from Mali and now lives in New York. After performances in Guadeloupe, Switzerland and New York, “[Voix de Femmes](#)” will head to Washington as part of the [D.C. Francophonie Festival](#). (An English version of the text will be available.)

Creating the piece has been an adventure, Dyl said by phone from New York. The early version for the U.N. was only 15 minutes, but it turned out so well — everyone was “completely amazed” at how easy the poetry was to follow, Dyl said — that the team decided to expand the script into a full-length work.

The New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture helped them come up with a thematically arranged script that includes work by Haiti’s Elvire Maurouard, Senegal’s Fatou Ndiaye Sow, Cameroon-born Werewere Liking and about 30 others.

“It’s very necessary today to bring together women who have different cultures,” said composer Sangho. “That’s the only way we can build a new world.”

Iranian pop music

Want to party like it’s 1978? (Or 1394, depending on how you look at it.) Drop by the Smithsonian’s Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery on March 7, the first day of the [museums’ annual celebration of Nowruz](#), the Persian New Year. The festivities honoring the dawn of the Persian calendar year 1394 will include performances by Mitra Sumara, a New York-based band dedicated to the pop and funk music that galvanized Iran before the country’s 1979 revolution.

Leading the band — whose instrumentation includes the santur, or Persian

hammered dulcimer, as well as trombone, keyboards and more — is Yvette Perez, who sings in Farsi. Perez, who was adopted, traces her love of Iranian pop music to her quest for her birth father, an Iranian expat. Some years ago, while exploring Iranian-expatriate Web sites, she came across old video of such Iranian pop stars as Googoosh and Hayedeh. “I became totally entranced with this music,” Perez said by phone from New York.

She went on to study both Farsi and that pre-revolutionary sound. Eventually, building on her track record as a musician and composer of experimental pop and jazz music, she formed Mitra Sumara. (The name is a spin on Zoroastrian mythology). Perez said the band, which has played at New York’s (Le) Poisson Rouge, among other venues, has been her way of participating in the Iranian diaspora.

Besides, Perez said, 1960s and ’70s Iranian pop music is irresistible. “I had always missed having a group that was really upbeat and that you could dance to. [Mitra Sumara] really fit the bill.”

Arakaendar Choir and Orchestra March 2 at 6:30 p.m. at Inter-American Development Bank, Enrique V. Iglesias Auditorium, 1330 New York Ave. NW. Free (photo ID required). Pre-concert talk at 6 p.m. 202-623-1410.

www.iadb.org/cultural.

Voix de Femmes March 6 at 7 p.m. at the S. Dillon Ripley Center, 1100 Jefferson Dr. SW. \$20. www.smithsonianassociates.org.

Mitra Sumara March 7 at 1 and 4 p.m. at the Freer Gallery of Art Meyer Auditorium. Free (service charge for advance reservations). www.asia.si.edu.

Wren is a freelance writer.

