

MUSIC REVIEW
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World Harmony Vibrates in the Air

Cellist Joan Jeanrenaud and oud player Hamza El Din meet in music.

--By Josef Woodard, Special to The Times

Although they come from disparate musical worlds, cellist Joan Jeanrenaud, from Western classical tradition, and oud player Hamza El Din, from Egyptian-Nubian roots, have crossed paths on many occasions. They've even scored a bona fide crossover hit together, with the 1992 album "Pieces of Africa" by Kronos Quartet, of which Jeanrenaud was a vital member for many years. And both have played key roles in cross-cultural experiments and alliances.

So finding the pair together on a concert bill, at the Skirball Cultural Center on Thursday, was less than surprising. The program offered them a chance to show their wares apart and, finally, together, in an extended version of El Din's "The Waterwheel." The piece was his contribution to "Pieces of Africa," but it had a fresh and hypnotic appeal in the stripped-down setting of oud and cello, shifting in and out of unison parts and with cello singing bittersweetly over El Din's rhythmic tolling.

Since leaving Kronos Quartet in 1999, Jeanrenaud has intriguingly explored the possibilities of cello, essentially going solo but often relying on the sonic "collaboration" of electronics. In her solo section Thursday, Jeanrenaud engaged in organic interactions of performer and digitally aided accompaniment.

Japanese-born composer Karen Tanaka's "Song of Songs" supplies a contemplative prerecorded mix of drones and bell tones, laid like a gentle tapestry beneath cello lines of languid melancholy and subtle dissonance. In Jeanrenaud's own "Vermont Rules" (Vermont referring to a dog, not the state), she layered parts and mutated musical time with a looping device, while remaining in a plaintive language that resonated sympathetically with El Din's traditional Nubian music.

Roger Kleier's "What Is the Price of Iron?" was ink-still-wet new, having been premiered five days earlier in New York. The title, taken from an anti-Nazi poem by Bertolt Brecht but reportedly updated for the Iraq situation, is a three-movement work. Jeanrenaud played scored and improvised parts over a sonic bed made of sampled and altered sounds created by the cellist, among other ingredients. A mournful air is counterbalanced by electro-acoustic craftiness and the composer's techno-phantom "collaborator" role.

El Din's set was ultra-spare, by comparison. Here the veteran musician and his oud improvised modal materials of his tradition. He sang a song about love's "ups and downs," inspired by the legendary Sufi poet Rumi, with a soft, weathered and wise voice carrying its own compelling expressive force alongside the oud's ancient sonority.

As veterans of different vintages, the pair made a persuasive case for the continuing dialogue between musical worlds, while respecting traditions.