

Anouar Brahem: Blue Maqams

with Dave Holland, Django Bates, Nasheet Waits

Start time: 8pm

Running time: 2 hours 20 minutes including interval

8pm Kit Downes and Tom Challenger

8.30pm Interval

8.50pm Anouar Brahem: Blue Maqams

All times are approximate and subject to change

Kevin LeGendre speaks to the Tunisian composer and master of the oud ahead of his performance

How musicians play is closely linked to what they hear. Maintaining focus on every instrument in an ensemble, including one's own, is a skill not to be underestimated, whether they are in the studio or on stage. Anouar Brahem, the Tunisian oud virtuoso who has made a string of sublime albums since the early 90s, has a thought provoking view on 'ear capacity' in relation to the facilities in today's concert halls.

'You know, everybody has monitors now, so that we can hear each other better. Well, you know what? I really don't like that at all', he reveals. 'You have to use them within reason and bear in mind that music, certainly in the case of what I do, is acoustic, and overall listening is what counts most. One of the great qualities of the players I work with is their excellent listening ability, I mean really tuning in.'

Needless to say Brahem takes the greatest care in choosing his accompanists, and his current quartet, heard on 2017's majestic *Blue Maqams*, is one of the finest he has led in his career. Nasheet Waits, depping for Jack Dejohnette, is on drums, Dave Holland, who appeared on Brahem's *Thimar*, is on double bass, and Django Bates on piano.

This is something of an all-star band, given the colossal achievements of each individual as both leader and also sideman to visionary artists whose influence has been immense the world over: for instance, Jason Moran, Miles Davis and Dudu Pukwana respectively.

Based on the age-old Arabic modes, essentially fixed patterns of notes with a highly melodic character, Brahem's songs are marvels of understatement, which nonetheless have far-reaching powers of imagery. *Blue Maquams* conveys fraught, intimate atmospheres where narratives are inspired by time, place, journey and discovery. A bass ostinato acts as a floating cushion on which the shimmering oud themes and glistening piano chords gracefully land. Strings and keyboard, closely entwined, glide through scores with finely measured dynamics. Subtlety enhances strength of feeling.

At the preparatory stage of this latest work Brahem thought clearly about how best to create the required tonal palette. 'The piano was uppermost in my mind from an early stage,' he comments frankly. 'I spent a long time looking for the right pianist. There are lot of very good ones around today but, as you say, the lightness of touch, a very sensitive approach, really had to be there, very subtle. I didn't know Django Bates's work but after very lengthy discussions with Manfred Eicher, producer and founder of the ECM label to which Brahem is signed, and after a lot of listening, Manfred played me something that he'd just recorded with Django, and as soon as I heard that I thought yeah, it would be good if I made the album with him.'

'I felt Django was just right for the music and he brought something special to what we were doing,' Brahem clarifies. 'His touch, his pianissimo, is really good, and that was really important because the music is mostly melodic, so the blend of oud and piano was...it's just as you say, the lightness of touch, a very sensitive approach, really had to be there. He seemed to have the right kind of emphasis and restraint.'

barbican

These characteristics have been a feature of Brahem's recordings for many years, and the desire not to overplay may have also been reinforced by the great rigour he has developed in his longstanding appreciation of the moving image. Trained at the prestigious National Conservatory of Music in Tunis, Brahem spent the early part of his career working with several film directors, and his great passion for cinema and the world of soundtracks further increased when he relocated to Paris in the early 90s. During that period Brahem also played extensively with respected French and Belgian improvisers such as Francois Jeanneau and Jean-Paul Celea, which deepened his interest in bringing spontaneity and a spirit of adventure to his own music. How he now sees himself is interesting. He is an Arab artist who engages with other cultures without necessarily seeking redefinition in the process. 'I've never tried to be a jazz musician and I don't consider myself to be one,' Brahem says frankly. 'But I feel as if I have the mindset of a jazz musician, or that I'm still very connected to the music.'

Opening tonight's concert are pianist Kit Downes and saxophonist Tom Challenger, two excellent musicians who have made an impression on the British scene in the past decade with a wide variety of projects that have touched on anything from free improvisation to experimental electronica to brass bands. They are showcasing brand new material from their highly-anticipated forthcoming cd on ECM records, which, if their work to date is anything to go by, should be something to look forward to.

Performers

Anouar Brahem oud
Dave Holland double bass
Django Bates piano
Nasheet Waits drums

Opening act

Kit Downes piano
Tom Challenger saxophone

Produced by the Barbican in association with Serious



The City of London Corporation is the founder and principal funder of the Barbican Centre