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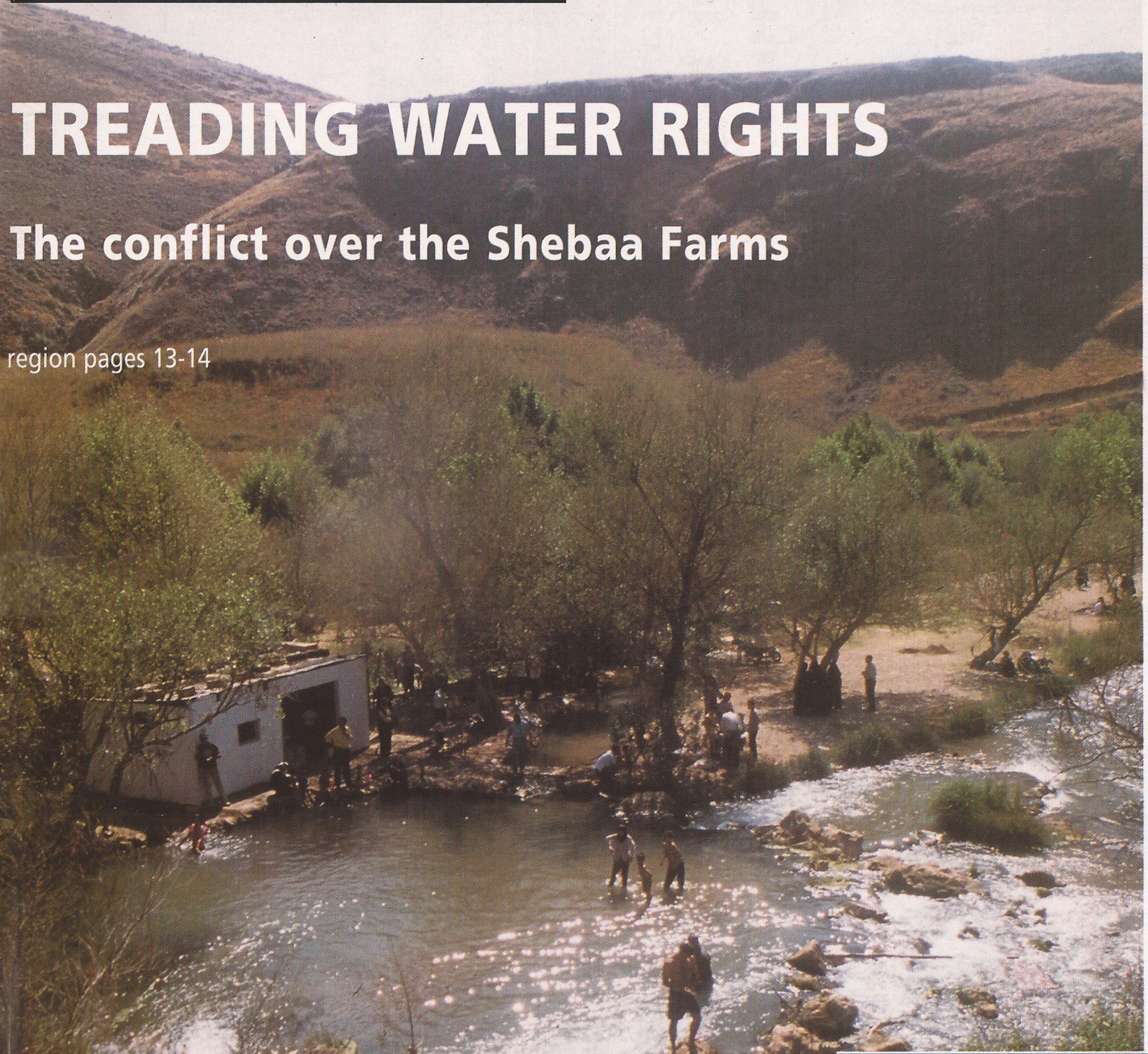

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Harmonious relations

An orchestral venture attempts to brings Americans and Egyptians together through music

WILLIAM CONROY

Musicians at rehearsal

A discordant cacophony emerges out of the small rehearsal room at the Giza Conservatory of Music. Slowly, as the musicians tune their instruments, the noise becomes a note, the chaos becomes order. "That's good," says violinist and quartet leader Timothy Schwarz. "We can work with that." He turns to pianist, composer and vocalist Joseph Goodrich. "Do you want to start with *Simple Gifts*?" Goodrich, who's been warming up his voice, acquiesces with a nod.

Although they say that they rarely play American compositions such as Copland's music, they don't find it terribly difficult to keep up

Goodrich and Schwarz just arrived from New York the day before, and in three days they'll be playing, among other things, the world premiere of one of Goodrich's compositions. They have never met the musicians they are working with, and are about to play with them for the first time. Yet, as they start to play *Simple Gifts*, a melancholy American folk song reworked by Aaron Copland, the music seems to flow seamlessly, and Goodrich's tenor voice begins to rise above the string quartet.

Violinist Shadi Abdel Salam Eid, violist Rasha Yehya and cellist Hassan Mo'tazz Al Molla concentrate on Schwarz playing and try to keep up tempo with Goodrich. They barely seem intimidated by what's expected of them—to be ready to play about ten pieces of music with these American musicians at Alexandria's Museum of Fine Arts within a few days. Although they say that they rarely play American compositions such as Copland's music, they don't find it terribly difficult to keep up.

The showcase of the concert the American and Egyptian musicians are putting together will be a new composition by Goodrich, commissioned by American Center in Alexandria director Juliet Wurr. The piece, *Harmonious Relations*, is a tribute to American-Egyptian friendship. In addition to being played by musicians from both countries, it is also based on well-known tunes from Egypt and America. Goodrich has arranged *Shenandoah*, a traditional nineteenth-century American folk song, to Egyptian composer Sayyed Darwish's *Zurouni Koll Sana Mara* (Just Visit Me Once A Year), an Arab world favorite sung over the years by Fairuz and countless other performers.

Over the next few hours of rehearsals, the musicians fine-tune their performance, adding a little pause here, changing the tempo of a refrain there, talking in the technical language of music about how they could improve their playing. Although Goodrich, standing behind a lectern, seems to be conducting the ensemble, it is Schwarz, a professor of violin at the University of Delaware and alumni of some of America's finest music schools, who takes charge of the group. A clean-cut, composed and meticulous man, he goes around the room, annotating the other musicians' partitions, suggesting new ways of doing things.

Goodrich, who with his longish hair cuts a more typical artistic figure, seems more willing to go along with what everyone else is doing. Unlike Schwarz, his training is much less formal. After two years of studying music, Goodrich quit university to follow his mentor Chuck Israel, bassist with the famous bebop band The Bill Evans Trio, to Philadelphia. There, he focused on jazz playing and composition until he moved to New York a few years ago and

"When there's areas of disagreement, you look for areas where there is harmony"

began to work more on classical music and opera singing. "This is my first time conducting," he says. "I'm usually a singer. Singers, you know, just come and do what people tell them to do."

Their Egyptian counterparts are bound to have a much different musical history. About ten years younger than Goodrich and Schwartz, they are young musicians at the beginning of their career. For some of them it has been a prestigious beginning—playing with the Cairo Symphony Orchestra and traveling to perform abroad. Two of them, Yehya and Mo'tazz, have just returned from an international youth music festival in Spain where they won first place. They seem excited about the opportunity to play with Goodrich and Schwartz and prepared for weeks with the partitions the American musicians sent them.

"I'm really happy they're so young," says Schwarz, who has taught music students in Egypt and in other Middle Eastern countries in the past. "They're willing to put in the hours—older people tend to be not quite so open." Recalling his first trip to Egypt a few years ago to give a master class lesson to Egyptian violinists, Schwartz says he knew Yehya, Mo'tazz and Eid would be good.

"The first time I came here I was completely blown away by the level of playing," he says. "It's much higher than in many other countries." He also finds that Egyptian students, perhaps because of the Russian influence in Egyptian music teaching, have their specific quirks. "Egyptian students play pretty aggressively," he comments. "By US standards, they play too aggressively for Mozart and Bach. But they blow away most US musicians on Stravinsky, Prokofiev or Shostakovich. And I'm amazed that they find an audience for these composers. I guess US audiences are much more mainstream."

Schwartz put together a program of music mainly focusing on American composers, who are generally much less well known here than the classical European composers. "I wanted to show the diversity of America," he explains. Among some lesser known works are included several American folk songs put to orchestral music by Aaron Copland, often referred to as "the dean of American classical music." Copland shares an interest in folklore music with early twentieth-century Egyptian composer Darwish.

Darwish revolutionized Egyptian perceptions of "high" music by putting traditional folkloric songs to orchestral music. Drawing on his own humble background—he worked as a bricklayer in Alexandria before being discovered by the manager of a theatrical troupe—he introduced indigenous sounds and themes into a mostly Turkish-dominated classical music for the elite.

"In the modern Arab historiography of music," writes music historian Frederic Lagrange, "Sayyed Darwish has become an icon symbolizing progress, modernity, and the shift from 'Oriental music,' an elitist music made for Pachas and still bathing in the original Ottoman matrix, to 'Egyptian music,' the first figuralist expression of a people's soul and their nationalist demands." Like Darwish, Copland turned to low-culture American songs to create a distinct American classical music steeped in its own culture rather than copying the European great masters.

Goodrich, who was born in Seattle, chose *Shenandoah* because it reminded him of his own family history. An amateur genealogist, he traced back his family history and believes that some of his ancestors were among those who migrated West from the Shenandoah valley. "I traced my family back 12 generations," he says. "I don't know whether that means much by Egyptian standards, but it's a lot by American standards...When I hear that song, I have a relationship to my past that I never had before."

Goodrich matched *Shenandoah* with *Zurouni* after listening to several Darwish compositions on tape and seeing their partitions. Although when he chose the song he did not know the meaning of its lyrics, the match turned out to be quite appropriate. Much like the American song, *Zurouni* tells a promise of return after an all-too-long separation. "How I fear those who made you forget and hurt you/I'd never forget you/It's a shame for you to forget me." Shenandoah's pioneer sings, "For seven years I've been a rover/But I'll return to be your love/Cross the wide Missouri."

This is the second time that Goodrich has arranged Arabic music in an American classical composition. Three years ago, in October 1998, he composed the Juliet Quartet, mixing a traditional Syrian melody with his own music. The composition was a smash hit in Damascus, where the audience instantly recognized the Syrian tune woven into Goodrich's piece. Ironically, the concert took place during a low in Syrian-US relations. Only two months after the concert, Syrians protesting the US bombing of Iraq raided the residency of the American ambassador.

Wurr uses the anecdote to explain that tense political relations do not mean that cultural exchanges cannot take place. "Particularly when there's tension between governments, it's important to see what people have in common" she says. "When there's areas of disagreement, you look for areas where there is harmony." Cynics might nevertheless harp that, after 25 years of close US-Egyptian cooperation, the relations between the two states are these days less than harmonious. Egypt is now being scrutinized by US lawmakers who doubt whether they are getting their money's worth from the relationship. Similarly, Egyptian public and occasionally official opinion has increasingly blamed the US for its role in regional affairs from Iraq to Israel.

Wurr recalls another anecdote. "Young people were boycotting the American Center in Alexandria in November, at the height of the Al Aqsa Intifada," she says. "We invited two artists from the US to talk about their work and people loved them. About 350 young people participated in their workshops. They wanted to talk about being an artist, they no longer cared about political differences."

Goodrich concurs. "As an artist," he says, "what interests me are not the differences, which are obvious, but the similarities. *Zurouni Koll Sana Mara* and *Shenandoah* are both songs about love and longing, human emotions which transcend cultures, countries, or political differences."

WILLIAM CONROY

Joseph Goodrich (left) with violinist Shadi Abdel Salam Eid

Issandr Elamrani

In Cairo, you can hear "Harmonious Relations" at Beit Al Harawi on 30 April at 8pm.