

1494

Piero the Unfortunate of the de' Medici family, ruler of Florence, loses his power and flees the state

1799

Napoleon Bonaparte pulls off a coup and becomes the dictator of France under the title of First Consul



1980

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein declares holy war against Iran

1994

Chemical element Darmstadtium discovered at GSI Helmholtz Centre for Heavy Ion Research near Darmstadt, German

The National | Damascus

Maya Youssef had never written a piece of music before when she sat down at her qanun, fighting the tears rolling down her face, and began playing the first notes of what would become 'Syrian Dreams' – the title track of her debut album – an uncontrollable emotional outpouring inspired by watching the images of war ravaging her homeland.

"It was 2012, I was sitting in my apartment in London, watching the news, and there was this moment when I saw a little girl, the same age as my son – about three-and-a-half, four – dead in her bedroom in Damascus," remembers the 33-year-old former UAE resident. "It hit me at that moment that I might never go back, that I might lose my country – it was really dark, I was in tears, I held the instrument and 'Syrian Dreams' just gushed out of me."

"Music became a real outlet for me" Born and raised in Damascus, Youssef had arrived in the British capital earlier that same year, after years living in Dubai and Muscat. Now thousands of miles away, connected to her homeland only through frantic messages and tragic news reports, the music began to flow. "I never felt the need to write before, but music became a real outlet for me to just speak about everything I was feeling," she says. "It was very raw, and it came from a place of sheer vulnerability."

Despite the global unfamiliarity of her 78-string, traditional, Arabian instrument, Youssef's fragile, heartfelt compositions have struck a universal chord. Released late in 2017, 'Syrian Dreams' recently earned Youssef a nomination for Best Artist at the Songlines Music Awards 2018, one of world music's highest-profile events. The only Arab, and the only instrumentalist, to be singled out for the honour, she will compete against established African superstars Vieux Farka Toure, Bou-bacar Traore and Oumou Sangare at the awards show in London later this year.

"I came to understand that there is a massive power in showing how you really feel, and being vulnerable. It's a powerful record because there's a story behind each piece of music," she says. "Also, it's not what you expect from an Arabic qanun player – it challenged what you expect from a woman playing a very traditional instrument – it broke the stereotypes."

Coming from a dark place

After that first, dark night, the music

continued to flow. The exterior chaos she witnessed enveloping her beloved homeland was mirrored in the interior terror of an abusive relationship, an experience relieved in the poignant Bombs Turn into Roses, inspired by waking abruptly from a haunting dream.

"I was going through domestic abuse at the same time as the situation in Syria had been getting really dark, and I had been losing family and friends," she remembers. "I had a nightmare, a vision, that I was looking up to a sky full of bombs – they were falling down in slow motion, and just before they hit me they turned into white rose petals – and I woke up at 3am, half asleep, and wrote the main theme of the piece. I couldn't finish it until 2016 because every time I tried to come back to it was a full circle."

"It was a really dark place from all dimensions – it was the fear of not finding my way, the fear even of dying. When I hit that stage, I heard a voice in my head, saying 'right, there's two choices here – do something about it, or perish!'"

A nostalgic longing for the past

Throughout the record, Youssef's stark, piercing qanun melodies are sympathetically framed by cello, oud and percussion, organic acoustic layers credited in part to Joe Boyd, the legendary rock, folk and world music producer whose credits include early Pink Floyd,

Nick Drake, Eric Clapton and REM.

Not all the material comes from such a sombre place. Youssef warmly describes the nostalgic longing of Seven Gates of Damascus as a 10-minute "sonic journey through my city". Meanwhile the musician's "mischievous side" is displayed in Hi-Jazz – a play on the hijaz mode otherwise known as the phrygian dominant scale – too-often employed to add flourishes of exoticism, from Hollywood movies to western pop songs.

"It's basically me having a bit of a laugh at stereotypes about Arabic music," Youssef says with a giggle. "Whenever you want to evoke 'the exotic east', you just play the scale hijaz – and there's so much more to Arabic music than this."

Such an assuredly playful approach could only come from a certified musi-

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Maya Youssef plays her qanun during a recording

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MAYA YOUSSEF

as part of the Arts Council England's Exceptional Talent scheme, and she is currently pursuing a PhD at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).

Work is also already under way on a second album – which is likely to prove a less sombre affair.

"Right now, I'm full of hope, and in a lovely peaceful space in my life," she added. "Everything I do is intuitive flow – I am not very good at doing stuff from here – everything I do comes from my heart and gut. I am the feely type, so if it doesn't flow naturally, it's not going to work for me."

Introducing the qanun

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Youssef's qanun consists of 78 strings arranged in groups of three. Trapezoid in shape, the instrument's body is typically laid on a musician's knees and plucked with two plectrums. Strings are typically tuned to a given maqam, or scale, and need to be adjusted to play in different keys. In ensembles, other instruments frequently tune to the qanun.

Youssef credits the Turkish masters Goksel Baktagir and Halil Karaduman as her greatest inspirations, the latter serving as her teacher. Traditionally guarded as a men's instrument, she estimates less than five per cent of qanun players today are women.

"The qanun really is the sound of home," she adds. "I hear over and over from audiences that it evokes memories, smells, visions – when they hear it, some people just go into ecstatic states of being – they start dancing or start crying. It's really very visceral, to someone who has grown up with this sound."

MESSAGE

Abou's novel tackles taboo of being bipolar



The novel's message is: "We are all bipolar somehow. It's only normal to go through these extreme ups and extreme downs. So we have to accept our differences and our contradictions and our downfalls and our victories, and accept life as it is and accept others."

pains, the social pressure, the financial pressure. The numbers are multiplying: 300 million people around the world are suffering from depression and manic depression."

In the beginning of her book, *About* uses areas of Jeddah as a metaphor for the illness. "When rain comes, people in the north have better streets, better houses, they're okay. They see it, but their houses are not ruined by the rain and their streets did not flood. Unlike the people who live in the south of Jeddah, who have a very bad infrastructure. They can't withstand it. This is a metaphor for the mental illness. We all go through difficult circumstances, but people shouldn't be blamed."

"For example, if I told you I went through a traumatic love experience, and you would be

"People who are really suffering with all the pressure that's happening and with all the judgments, labelling and media campaigns, the social pressure, the financial pressure. The numbers are multiplying: 300 million people around the world are suffering from depression and manic depression"

GHADA ABOU

able to get through it, those are your circumstances. But not my circumstances, because I have circumstances, my infrastructure, my upbringing as a child, as a teenager, made these outer circumstances, when it hit me, it destroyed me. Why are you blaming me?"

The protagonist in her novel is a therapist who is diagnosed as bipolar. "It's very easy to sit back and lecture people," Abou said. "It's very rare that we can help ourselves and get ourselves out of our own circumstances."

The novel's message is: "We are all bipolar somehow. It's only normal to go through these extreme ups and extreme downs. So we have to accept our differences and our contradictions and our downfalls and our victories, and accept life as it is and accept others."