

Constantinople

November 9, 2019 | by Morgan Luethe

The exciting sounds of Constantinople and Ghalia Benali were both a welcome and engaging foray into a perfumed world of Middle Eastern rhapsody. November 9th's third concert of the ECMS' 2019/20 season saw a presentation of this group's latest program, *In the Footsteps of Rumi* - an experience that was both transporting and entrancing. Musicians of the group brought to our attention instruments that were largely unfamiliar to our eyes and ears, while the singing and storytelling of Ghalia Benali (at times joined by the voice of the group's director, Kiya Tabassian), immersed the audience in the deeply rapturous poems of the enduringly popular 13th-century Persian poet, Rumi, set to music composed by musicians of the group. The concert was unique detour for a presentation of the ECMS from the well-trod path of its regular Western fare. The experience itself, so immediately different in its tone, visual aspects and sound world made for an evening of music that is sure to have been a highlight of this season.

An evening of music that departed from the predictable format of a traditional concert program, Constantinople's *In the Footsteps of Rumi* was a thrilling demonstration of how the poet's work might have been performed at the medieval Islamic court. Due, notably, in part, to the considerable talent and expertise of Benali (who shouldered the considerable task of being the night's principal vocal soloist) and Tabassian (who plotted and led the program as the Constantinople's musical director), the decadence and sensuality of this art and its original atmosphere came to life through a combination of narrative gesticulation, dance and rapturous, quasi-improvisatory music-making. Played without a formal break between halves, the texts of the evening, sourced chiefly from Rumi, but featuring selections by Ibn Arabi and Zein also, passed around common themes of love, death, and motion framed in a highly improvisatory and florid performance style. No doubt, Rumi's poetry, while very beautiful, demands serious reflection; Benali's exquisite gestures in performance provided a sort of secondary narrative element to the sung verse in which she instilled undeniable and varying character by way of vocal inflection. Sung in both Farsi and Arabic, the two languages in which Rumi composed, Benali's performance wasn't so much an act of sober presentation as it was an act of passionate storytelling and acting; this was especially clear in passages which saw her accompany the group's playing with spirited traditional dance. The innate lushness of traditional Middle Eastern music is very much the sum of its parts, relying as much on the sensuousness of its texts, as on the spontaneity and seductiveness of its instrumental sound-world. Instrumental highlights included a hypnotic and vigorously rhythmical episode from Constantinople's two percussionists, dashes of improvisational commentary on the kanun, throughout, and deeply lyrical, soaring lines on the kemenche and Persian fiddle.

Kiya Tabassian has a deep love for both literary and musical world of the ancient Middle East, and he conveys it to otherwise unfamiliar eyes and ears in ways that are immediately relatable and appreciable. The music to which he and Benali set such florid, perfumed verse is highly engaging, both rhythmically and melodically; the traditional instruments on which this music is played were singled out and explained to a curious and interested audience. This combination of attractive art and an honest effort made to engage and educate made the performance more accessible to newcomers and it opened ears. There was enthusiastic cheering over the applause between numbers on a few occasions; this group's international stature and popularity is understandable. Constantinople homage to Rumi's great and poetic voice was a powerful and memorable glimpse into the effect and history of a musical tradition that grows parallel and distinct to that which the ECMS more typical season fare illuminates. As a listener without much background knowledge of the texts or musical conventions of this genre, I was kept deeply invested and keen on the evening's music and wish Constantinople many happy return visits to the Edmonton stage.