

## MUSIC

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# Syrian war triggered my desire to write

IGNORING THE SNEERS, MAYA YOUSSEF HAS BECOME ONE OF THE GREATEST PLAYERS OF A TRADITIONALLY MALE INSTRUMENT. SHE TALKS TO **DAVE FREAK**



Syrian-born Maya Youssef playing the 78-string qanun

**A**LTHOUGH she started on the violin at the age of seven, a chance hearing of an enchanting sound while in the back of a taxi led Syrian musician Maya Youssef to turn her attention to the qanun, and is today acknowledged as one of its best players.

A plucked zither with 78 strings, the qanun (or 'kanun') is traditionally the preserve of male musicians.

"If you go back before, pre-Islam, it was mainly a woman's instrument," says Maya. "There was this tradition of women entertainers basically, they'd perform with traditional Arabic instruments and the qanun was one of them. But then there was a flip, which I can't put my finger on, in society where it became not okay for women to play traditional Arabic instruments. So I think they basically disappeared from the public sphere. They

continued to play in private circles, but no woman played the qanun publicly."

Having faced laughter, sneers and criticism for selecting the qanun, Maya has her own theory as to why it's typically seen as almost exclusively a masculine instrument.

"A qanun player cannot be ignored. Once you play this instrument... you are instantly in the spotlight," she says. "It's really a power instrument. If you translate the word 'qanun' from Arabic to English, literally, it means 'law' or 'principle'. It's the piano of Arabic music, so it is a power instrument, and my own interpretation is that women should not be so obvious, and in a position of power - therefore it was very discouraged for them to play the qanun."

"That's my own theory really," she adds. "Some people might disagree with that..."

Born in the Syrian capital of Damascus, Maya was teaching music and performing in Oman when she relocated to London (thanks to the UK government's Exceptional Talent scheme). She continued to study and perform here, but then, in 2012, partly as a direct response to the Syrian conflict, she began to write her own material, slowly discovering her

own voice.

"It didn't even occur to me to write before," she explains of coming relatively late in life to composition. "I was just studying the works of other people and working more on my technique, there was no emotional need. But once the war started I thought I was going to go insane if I didn't do something that expressed these crazy emotions. You feel a million things in one minute. It's very visceral, very deep... words can't articulate it."

"I am so blessed that I have music and a musical instrument, as without that I would have lost it, really. That (music) was my way out, and thank God I had that."

The resulting album, *Syrian Dreams*, was released at the end of 2017 to widespread acclaim, leading to a German Record Critics' Award and a Songlines Best Newcomer Award 2018. Recorded with Joe Boyd (Fairport Convention, Nick Drake) and Jerry Boys (REM, Buena Vista Social Club), it combines Maya's qanun with cello, (the guitar-like) oud and various percussion instruments, moving away from her traditional roots.

"I am this ancient tradition yet at the same time I am myself. I am the result of my experiences, and I choose to be free, in the context that I can do anything I want, musically speaking... and in life as well, because there are no restrictions!"

she says of her approach to music-making. "I know that for many who play the qanun they say, 'oh you have to be so traditional, so proper,' and I break a lot of rules. I change the scales... the way I compose, it's not really purely traditional Arabic music, it has all of these elements that I used to listen to when I was a kid. I used to listen to a lot of stuff... jazz, classical music, collaborations, everything."

Further (yet to be recorded) new material looks set to be aired at dates on her forthcoming UK tour, and she plans to block off time to write more.

The coming months will also see performances of her new children's project, which combines music with storytelling; online coaching for female musicians; and several (presently secret) collaborations. Having previously performed with string quartets, a flamenco guitarist, kora and tabla players, and even French hip hop artists, she's keen to continue to challenge herself and explore new avenues.

"At the beginning I was just play-play-play, and fine tune, but now I'm always up for those things," she enthuses.

● Maya Youssef is at Warwick Arts Centre, University of Warwick, Coventry, on February 15. For tickets and more details call 024 7652 4524 or see [www.warwickartscentre.co.uk](http://www.warwickartscentre.co.uk)

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Maya Youssef

- One of the biggest events in the calendar for British basketball returns to Arena Birmingham on Sunday, January 27. The 2019 edition of the British Basketball League (BBL) Cup Final will see another thrilling pair of games take place, as well as the 2019 Dunk Contest and the usual courtside fun and entertainment.
- One for the adrenaline junkies, The Arenacross Tour 2019 will be making its way back to Birmingham. Prepare to be thrilled as some of the craziest indoor Motorcross and Freestyle MX stars race, jump and flip their way across the track at Resorts World Arena, NEC, on February 1 and 2. Plus you can also meet some of the fastest stars of the show, as well as enter competitions to win a range of prizes. Tickets are priced between £14.76 and £41.88.
- THE SPAR British Athletics Indoor Championships will bring some of the biggest competitors together under one roof at Arena Birmingham from February 9-10. Now in its 63rd year, a total of 13 events will take place across the weekend, with 26 titles being awarded across the board. The weekend will also serve to decide which athletes go forward to represent Great Britain and Northern Ireland at the European Indoor Championships, which will be held in Glasgow from March 1-3.

● Ranked as the best one-day indoor athletics meeting, the Muller Indoor Grand Prix returns to Arena Birmingham on Saturday, February 16. In previous years athletes including Sir Mo Farah and Greg Rutherford have both competed in the event. Sure to be a sell-out event, tickets are priced from £21.20, plus a £2.25 fulfilment fee.

● Professor Brian Cox OBE is returning to Birmingham with a new show. Giving the audience an insight into the universe and solar system like never before, Professor Cox's will be at Arena Birmingham on Saturday, February 23. His previous sell-out tour won him two Guinness World Records. Tickets are priced between £40.45 and £50.75, including an a min fee and a £2.55 fulfilment fee.

● US comedian and actor Bill Burr has announced a new headline tour that's coming to Birmingham. Many know Bill for starring in the award-winning TV show *Breaking Bad*, as well as lending his voice to his own Netflix original series, *F is For Family*, and hosting the *Monday Morning Podcast*. He's coming to Resorts World Arena, NEC, on Friday, March 1.