Aga Khan Music Initiative premieres Qyrq Qyz (Forty Girls), pioneering multimedia production based on Central Asian epic tale

Geneva, Switzerland, 28 February 2018 - The Aga Khan Music Initiative (AKMI) breaks new ground as a producer and incubator of cutting-edge artistic work with the multimedia production Qyrq Qyz (Forty Girls), whose world premiere will take place at Dartmouth College’s Hopkins Center for the Arts on 1 March, 2018. Following performances at Dartmouth, Qyrq Qyz will travel to other venues in the northeastern United States before winding up a month-long USA tour at the prestigious Brooklyn Academy of Music on 23-24 March. A full tour schedule appears below.

Conceived and directed by award-winning Uzbek filmmaker Saodat Ismailova, an AKMI collaborator since 2003, with a musical score composed and arranged by Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky, one of Central Asia’ most internationally visible and acclaimed artists, Qyrq Qyz is based on a monumental yet little-known Central Asian epic that celebrates powerful women and women’s power through the exploits of an intrepid young band of “Amazons of the steppe.” The new production brings together film and live music performed by some of the boldest talents in a rising generation of charismatic female bards from Kazakhstan, Karakalpakstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, all of whom have been specially tutored by master musicians in their respective traditions working within the worldwide education programme of the Aga Khan Music Initiative.

Qyrq Qyz tells the story of Gulayim, the 16-year-old daughter of Allayar, ruler of the semi-nomadic Karakalpak, who lives in the fortress of Sarkop. When an enemy troop invades Sarkop and kills Allayar, Gulayim and her 40 companions rise to the challenge, vanquishing the enemy, and liberating their people. Like other iconic female warriors—Tomyris, Artemisia, Joan of Arc, Hua Mulan—Gulayim and her forty girls exemplify the universal fascination with powerful women who upend the conventions of gender power in patriarchal societies.

Shot in the desolate wind-scoured steppe of Karakalpak using nonprofessional actors, the large-screen film component of Qyrq Qyz—by turns dreamily atmospheric, convulsive, and elegaic—meshes with full-throated singing, plangent instrumental music, and quasi-ritualised action on the stage as the bard-Amazons assume the personae of Gulayim and her forty girls. Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky’s score deftly emplaces the bards’ heart-stirring oral-tradition songs and instrumentals in a contemporary musical language enriched by an eerie palette of Eastern and Western percussion—the provenance of Qyrq Qyz’s sole male performer, the Kazakh avant-garde percussionist Alibek Kabdurakhmanov.
Aga Khan Music Initiative Director and Qyrq Qyz co-producer Fairouz Nishanova commented, “Qyrq Qyz reaffirms the Music Initiative’s long-term commitment to seeking out and developing exceptional artistic talent in the nations and communities where we work. Creating this pioneering production has connected us to a new generation of remarkable musicians from Central Asia whose acute musical intelligence and alacrity will surely help shape the region’s musical future.” Music Initiative Senior Consultant and Qyrq Qyz co-producer Theodore Levin added, “The Qyrq Qyz production and its immensely gifted artistic director, composer-arranger, and performers confirm the enduring power of tradition as a source of inspiration and innovation in the arts.” Qyrq Qyz Artistic Director Saodat Ismailova underscored the Music Initiative’s vital role in the production’s genesis and development. “Qyrq Qyz has been a collaborative undertaking at every step, and working within an organisation that marries vision and imagination with practicality and tenacity has been essential to making our collective creation come to life.”

The full performer roster includes Raushan Orazbaeva (music director, qobyz); Alibek Kabdurakhmanov (percussion, chang); Gumisay Berdikhanova (vocal, girjek); Gumshagul Bekturganova (vocal, dutar); Aziza Davronova (vocal); Tokzhan Karatai (vocal, qobyz); Makhabat Kobogonova (vocal, kyl-kiyak, chopo-choor, jaw harp); Arailym Omirbekova (vocal, dombyra); and Saltanat Yersultan (vocal, jetigen).

Qyrq Qyz TOUR SCHEDULE

March 1:
Dartmouth College
Hopkins Center for the Arts
Moore Auditorium
7:00 pm

March 4:
University of Massachusetts, Amherst
Fine Arts Center
Bowker Auditorium, Stockbridge Hall
4:00 pm

March 10:
Spruce Peak Performing Arts Center
Stowe, Vermont
7:00 pm

March 14:
FirstWorks at RISD Auditorium
17 Canal Walkway, Providence, RI
7:30 pm

March 23-24:
Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM)
Harvey Theater
7:30 pm
 ARTIST BIOS

Saodat Ismailova is one of the most internationally visible and accomplished representatives of a new generation of artists from Central Asia who came of age in the post-Soviet era and have established cosmopolitan, artistic lives while remaining deeply engaged with their native region as a source of creative inspiration. Her debut feature film, 40 Days of Silence, a poignant depiction of four generations of Tajik women living in the complete absence of men, was nominated for best debut film at the 2014 Berlin International Film Festival and has been screened in more than two dozen prestigious festivals around the world. Her video installation Zukhra was featured in the Central Asian Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale and her documentary film Aral: Fishing in an Invisible Sea won Best Documentary at the 2004 Turin Film Festival. Among her many other works are nine music documentaries for the CD-DVD anthology Music of Central Asia, co-produced by the Aga Khan Music Initiative and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. Saodat Ismailova resides in Tashkent and Paris, and is affiliated with Le Fresnoy, France’s National Studio of Contemporary Arts.

Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky has produced a distinguished and culturally unique body of work characterised by merging musical influences from his native Central Asia with postmodernist styles from Russia and Eastern Europe. His music has been commissioned and performed by leading musicians and musical organisations including Yo-Yo Ma, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, North Carolina Symphony, Kronos Quartet, soprano Dawn Upshaw, and the New Juilliard Ensemble. Yanov-Yanovsky was a composer-in-residence at Harvard University and also taught music composition at Dartmouth College. His music has been recognised internationally through prizes and awards, recordings, and performances in prestigious concert venues. Yanov-Yanovsky is also a prolific composer of film soundtracks. From 1996—2006, he served as artistic director of the International Contemporary Music Festival Ilkhom, in Tashkent, the only festival of its kind in Central Asia.

NOTE

The Aga Khan Music Initiative (AKMI) is an interregional music and arts education programme with worldwide performance, outreach, mentoring and artistic production activities. Launched by His Highness the Aga Khan to support talented musicians and music educators working to preserve, transmit, and further develop their musical heritage in contemporary forms, the Music Initiative began its work in Central Asia, subsequently expanding its cultural development activities to include artistic communities and audiences in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia.

The Initiative promotes the revitalisation of cultural heritage both as a source of livelihood for musicians and as a means to strengthen pluralism in nations where it is challenged by social, political, and economic constraints. Its projects have included publication of a comprehensive textbook, The Music of Central Asia (Indiana University Press, 2016), a 10-volume CD-DVD anthology, Music of Central Asia, co-produced with Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, a worldwide performance and outreach program that nurtures “East-East” as well as “East-West” musical collaborations, and a network of music schools and centers that develop innovative music curricula and curriculum materials in the Music Initiative’s regions of activity. (http://akdn.org/akmi)
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