

Rahim AlHaj A Voice for the Voiceless

Virtuoso *oud* player and composer Rahim AlHaj, born in Baghdad, Iraq, has found in his ancient instrument, whose written history spans some 5,000 years, a unique voice that speaks passionately to contemporary listeners of every musical background. Deftly combining traditional Iraqi *maqamat* with contemporary stylings and influences, AlHaj seeks to translate into music the suffering, joy, anxiety, and determination that he has experienced and witnessed in his lifelong struggle against injustice—as an Iraqi, a political refugee, and today as an American citizen. Communicating with a compelling immediacy that bypasses cultural obstacles, his music speaks irresistibly to the heart in a universal language of compassion.

AlHaj's musical journey began in his second-grade classroom, where he first wrapped his arms around an *oud*. He exhibited such an astonishing affinity for the *oud* that his teacher was moved to give him the instrument. For AlHaj, the *oud* quickly became his closest confidant and constant companion, sharing every waking and sleeping hour.

Despite his father's strong misgivings but with the support of his mother, AlHaj dedicated himself to music, and by the time he was thirteen, he was already making his name in Baghdad as both a musician and a composer. After high school, he applied to the Institute of Music in Baghdad to study under Munir Bashir, considered by many to be the greatest *oud* player of all time, and Salim Abdul Kareem.

AlHaj earned one of the five available positions out of a field of some 2,000 applicants. In 1982, he began a course of study that included two years of Western music, two of Arabic music, and two devoted to composition and solo performance.

At the same time, his awareness of injustice in Iraqi society under the repressive Ba'athist regime, which had embroiled the country in a devastating war of attrition with Iran, was quickened by wider reading and new acquaintances, and he soon became active in the underground revolutionary movement. Indeed, AlHaj gave that movement its anthem, setting to music a poem written by a friend. The song, titled "Why?" gave voice to ordinary people's dissatisfaction with the regime and was sung with seditious relish across the country.

AlHaj's political activities drew the attention of the government, which imprisoned him twice, in 1986 and 1988. Incarcerated for two years altogether, he was tortured in an unsuccessful attempt to extract information about the movement.

Released from prison, he graduated from the institute in 1990 with a degree in composition, winning various honors. AlHaj also holds a degree in Arabic literature from Mustunsariya University in Baghdad—a degree that his father insisted he pursue as a condition for entering the conservatory.

Recognizing AlHaj's talents, Bashir, an extremely influential cultural figure, invited his student to travel and perform with him internationally. Typically, such travel required membership in the Ba'ath party, which AlHaj refused to join. Nevertheless, Bashir's

influence prevailed, and AlHaj credits their work together as an important factor in the development of his confidence and skill as a performer, and his personal style on the *oud*.

By 1991, in the midst of the Gulf War between Iraq and coalition forces, growing pressure from the regime forced AlHaj to flee Iraq in fear for his life. Using false papers procured with the help of his mother, who raised the extravagant funds required by selling her possessions, he escaped to Jordan. However, in what he calls the saddest moment of his life, his instrument was confiscated at the border.

From Jordan, where he lived for 18 months supporting himself as a music teacher, he moved to Syria to evade Iraqi threats. There, he met his wife, Nada, and made a comfortable life as a composer and musician, performing throughout the country and Europe. However, after eight years, with relations between Syria and Iraq improving, AlHaj once again found himself at risk.

In 2000, speaking no English, he relocated to the United States as a political refugee, starting a new chapter of his life in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he still lives. Catholic Charities found him a job at McDonald's, which AlHaj rejected as an inappropriate venue for his music. The job, however, was washing dishes. He soon found more suitable employment as a night watchman, but this job ended prematurely when a supervisor found him practicing his *oud* while on duty.

Determined to focus on his music, AlHaj rented a hall on the campus of the University of New Mexico for a solo performance. The concert ignited an overwhelming response, and he was soon finding receptive audiences across the United States and internationally, playing to full houses in some of the world's most prestigious halls.

In 2004, AlHaj returned to Iraq to visit with family and friends and to bear witness to the terrible destruction inflicted by the war with the United States, a war that, despite his experiences with the Ba'athist regime, he opposed. His continual efforts to promote peaceful understanding between the two countries and to speak on behalf of the oppressed have earned him recognition of politicians, religious leaders, veterans, and activists worldwide.

Since coming to the United States, AlHaj has released several recordings that have earned high praise, including three Grammy nominations. His compositions embrace a broad spectrum of musical genres, routinely and seamlessly marrying Eastern and Western traditions. In addition to solo recordings and performances, he works with a variety of musical companions, from jazz artists and classical Indian maestros to string quartets.

In 2008, AlHaj became a citizen of the United States and immediately filled out a voter registration card. In November 2008, for the first time in his life, he cast his vote—in the U.S. general election—an act that filled him with an almost giddy satisfaction and pride.

Today, AlHaj continues his journey of determined optimism, seeking to bring the world to a compassionate understanding of our shared destiny and to give the oppressed a voice for justice.