

ONE TO WATCH

Crossing cultures

The Jordanian-Palestinian pianist Iyad Sughayer enchants his audiences with the singing quality of his playing. *Murray McLachlan* is captivated by the charm and enthusiasm of this young artist on the brink of a brilliant international career



JAMES CARDELL-OLIVER

Iyad Sughayer: 'I just cannot get enough Mozart in my life!'

MOZART AND KHACHATURIAN WOULD APPEAR to be odd bedfellows – but not for the Jordanian-Palestinian pianist Iyad Sughayer. Since his arrival in the UK in 2008 as a 14-year-old student at Chetham's School of Music, Sughayer has shown his enthusiasm and authority at the keyboard performing music by both composers.

'I played the Khachaturian *Toccata* when I was 12,' he says, 'and became obsessed with it as a great party piece. This triggered interest in the rest of his music. Coming from Jordan where the classical music scene is not yet as developed or established as it is in the West, the Armenian flavour of Khachaturian instantly struck a deep emotional chord. It seemed so close to my own roots – to my people's folk music. There is an oriental, improvisatory element that I love in Khachaturian and the rhythms and harmonies are especially attractive. You only need to think about the long pedal points and modal scales that permeate so many of his works to hear this. I should also mention the singing quality of Khachaturian as something I especially love.'

as on tour with the Cairo Symphony Orchestra (March 2018). 'It's such a young man's piece!' he says. 'I feel exhilarated, incredibly energised and almost overwhelmingly excited by its effervescence, heroic struggles, profoundly strong emotional message and positivity. What a work – I could play it dozens of times and never feel bored!'

How does Mozart fit next to the music of Armenia's most celebrated composer? Sughayer is currently learning the complete cycle of 18 Mozart sonatas and has already performed most them in recitals. His Mozartian credentials embrace a rare ability to make each phrase come alive with warmth and cantabile. YouTube Mozart performances have generated considerable interest – in particular, check out his highly expansive and expressive rendering of the great B minor Adagio. The pianist's love of singing lines in repertoire that communicates directly seems to link his interest in Russian and Viennese Classical works.

As one of the few pianists of his generation fortunate enough to have been selected for special representation by the Keyboard

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Charitable Trust in London, Sughayer has had opportunities to perform standard repertoire next to his beloved Khachaturian at London's Conway Hall and King's Place, Manchester Cathedral (with Manchester Camerata chamber players) and the Laeiszhalle in Hamburg. As a concerto soloist he has performed Mozart's C minor Concerto K491 (including a performance with Manchester Camerata) though he mentions the lesser known F major K459 as being the concerto that really opened the Mozartian universe for him: 'Though at first I found the technical and interpretive challenges of coping with this piece enormous,' he says, 'I immediately fell in love with the musical clarity and conviction, and gradually felt more and more at home with the style. Nowadays I just cannot get enough Mozart in my life! The perfection and inner joy that every phrase contains is inexhaustibly inspirational. What an extraordinary genius Mozart is!'

It remains a dream of Sughayer to be given the opportunity to perform the complete cycle of Mozart sonatas in a single concert series, emulating Dame Mitsuko Uchida's accomplishment at Wigmore Hall in the early 1980s. The proposition stands out as refreshingly different in today's generation of players for whom barnstorming renderings of Rachmaninov and Prokofiev are the norm.

Meanwhile Sughayer, still in his twenties, has just finished the sessions for his debut recording on BIS that will feature most of the

solo piano music of Khachaturian and is due for release in January 2020. Recorded in Stoller Hall at Chetham's, the album includes not only the large-scale Sonata but also 10 of the *Children's Pieces*, the *Sonatine*, *Poem*, *Two Pieces* and, of course, Iyad's childhood party piece, the *Toccata*.

This year sees Sughayer's debut with the BBC Philharmonic, and on 12 June he will perform the Khachaturian Concerto at the BBC studios in Media City, Manchester. This performance will mark a highpoint in his special year at the RNCM working for his International Artist Diploma. It follows on from a two-year Masters postgrad degree at Trinity Laban where he won the conservatoire's Gold Medal Award. Study in London followed on from a total of eight years in Manchester at Chetham's and the RNCM.

Sughayer is currently involved in the complex process of applying for UK citizenship – something essential for him to fully develop his considerable potential and talent as a performer. Other exciting plans and projects on the horizon for this charismatic young artist, include further research and exploration of Khachaturian's music, tours of the Middle East and recitals in the US and Europe, plus many more concerts around the UK. 🎵

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