

I, ME, MYSELF

When Philipp Maier speaks, his words lilt in rhythmic triplets, his sentences run on like arpeggios on a piano. His rich Bavarian accent seems befitting of a composer who follows in the footsteps of music greats like Bach, Chopin and Mozart. Maier is a maestro in his own right.

Based in the UAE, his interest in music ranges from western classical to the music that has emerged from the Middle East. Whether he is conducting, playing the piano or working in his digital production studio, the CEO of the UAE Philharmonic Orchestra (UAEPO) is completely committed to his art.

Tall and thin – reminding one of a conductor's baton – his hand movements are fluid when he speaks, caressing the air in the same way as when he conducts the orchestra.

Maier has been a keynote in the UAE's classical music scene in recent years. His firm belief in the need for homegrown musicians in the region is inspiring hope and motivation in trained musicians who are now stepping forward to work towards this goal. His dream is to see an orchestra comprised entirely of Emiratis perform at a professional level.

If only for a short while, Maier has put down his baton and allowed us a brief glimpse into his life.

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I chose to become a conductor while I was doing instrumental studies in piano and cello. You can't become a music director or conductor overnight, as there is a long process of studying involved. For me, conducting is the perfect way to make music because I can concentrate on many areas of music rather than simply concentrating on musical technicality. Compared to a concert pianist I approach a music piece in a very different way.

I took over the direction of a choir at the age of 18. The average age of the choir members was around 45 to 50 years old and as the youngest of the lot, I had to adjust to the fact that these older, more musically experienced people had to listen to me, their music director. It was quite challenging, but I just



A musical journey

CEO OF THE UAE PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA, CONCERT PIANIST AND CONDUCTOR Philipp Maier has a mission to form the first Emirati orchestra in the UAE. **Precchi Janice D'Sa** finds out how music breaks boundaries, and how an orchestra can be a model for cross-cultural harmony.

jumped into the deep end and got on with it.

I love Bavarian food. I think that Bavaria is the most beautiful part of Germany, especially in the summer months. The castles, lakes and mountains are so breathtaking. When I return to Germany for vacation, I always put on weight because I just cannot resist the food. When I'm back in Dubai, I try to remake my mother's potato salad, as I constantly crave this dish.

I am open to all sorts of music, as long as it is good music. As a result I am inspired by various genres. My German heritage and the area of the country

that I grew up in are closely linked to composers like Wagner, Bruckner, Richard Strauss and, of course, Beethoven. I also love the Russian romantic composers like Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov.

People are usually surprised when I say that I am an avid fan of rock music. If you look at the history of music, the styles evolved from one another. If there had been no Beethoven, rock music probably would have never been. Like many other musical styles, rock and orchestra are a couple. This kind of 'crossover' work is an important element in musical education and professional performances all over the world.

I take my children to classical music concerts. Like all kids, my 11-year-old daughter Elena prefers singers such as Ashley Tisdale and Kelly Clarkson over Mozart or Beethoven. My 8-year-old son Gabriel sometimes complains that concerts are a bit long and boring. Nevertheless, both enjoy listening to orchestra concerts when I am conducting, which gives me great joy. It is important to impart to children what classical music is all about so that they too can continue an appreciation for this genre in the future.

I moved to the UAE because I saw great opportunity to develop music on different levels. The UAE is an

inspiring place to be because of its unique mix of international cultures, which is hard to find anywhere else in the world. I wanted to develop a resident orchestra in the UAE. Every major city in the world has an orchestra and starting one in the UAE was my primary motivation for moving to Dubai.

I am proud of the way the UAEPO has become a mix of nationalities working in harmony. The UAEPO has the potential to represent how different nationalities and cultures can work together to create something utterly unique. While the basis of orchestral education is traditional classical music,

we also add various cultural influences to our scores in order to produce a style that is one of a kind. A piece that we perform regularly as part of our repertoire is one by an English composer who has lived in Oman for years. He has written a lot of pieces with a strong Arabic influence, but he composed it so that it could be performed by a full orchestra. This is a really inspiring achievement for me.

I love using modern technology in order to produce music digitally. Sometimes when I have to compose a piece that is to be performed by an orchestra, I can digitally produce the piece in the studio first and find out how it sounds before I meet with the orchestra to rehearse the score.

I am completely against technology being used to train children to press a button on a keyboard to emulate strings or drums. A child should learn to understand the fundamentals of music first. Children should be given a basic music education and skills before they can enhance their creativity with modern technology.

I want to use the UAEPO as a way of creating careers in the music arena for trained musicians in the Middle East. I am hopeful that many Emirati musicians will become a part of the orchestra. It is important to expose the younger generation to music by encouraging them to learn an instrument. Music appreciation is a tradition we must encourage.

My goal is to find the funding to allow me to employ a core of musicians as professionals. I would ideally like to see the western model used, where orchestras are generally funded by the government so the members can earn a living through their music.

I fondly remember the natural synergy that was formed between the Dubai Chamber Choir and the UAEPO for the Mozart requiem performance. The Dubai Chamber Choir was well prepared under their choir master Stuart Squire. As a conductor, I benefited from the excellent preparation of the choir. My job as a conductor was to combine the music of the choir and orchestra.

SUPPLIED PHOTOS

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Right: Maier has an eclectic approach to music

Below: Philipp Maier with his wife Nicole and two children Elena and Gabriel in Venice, Italy

Far right: A conductor, composer and pianist, Maier grew up listening to classical music

Without Stuart's expertise in delivering a powerful choir, the collaboration would have been far more difficult, if not impossible.

We proved that even with limited means available, showcasing local cultural entities was possible. These efforts culminated in a well attended concert and a wonderful response from the audience.

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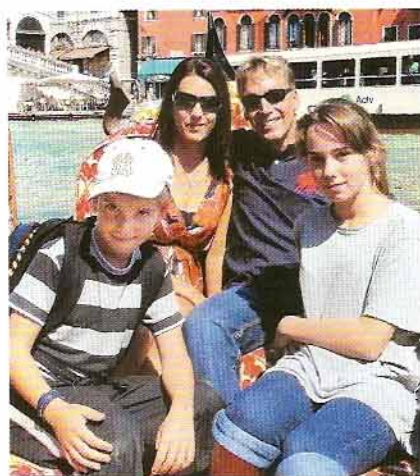
Me and early memories of music

My father was a musician and a conductor. He used to play the traditional organ and performed many orchestral masses written by Mozart, Schubert and Bruckner. My mum played two musical instruments.

My younger brother is a French hornist in the Orchestra of the German Opera in Berlin. Even though we're apart, my brother and I regularly exchange news and information, as he sits in the centre of one of the three best opera houses in the world.

I was lucky enough to be exposed to music quite early in life. I recall sitting in the swing that my father built for me, listening to Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto*. I was three then. By the age of five, I learnt to sing all of them from memory. When I was seven years old, my father bought our first television. That was 40 years ago, around the same time that the Americans landed the first man on the moon. In those days, television programmes would only start after seven in the evening.

So we used to have regular musical evenings at my home. My parents would invite friends and we would have a nice supper together. My father and other musicians would then play beautiful music, either string quartets or piano quintets. The social aspect of chamber music should not be dismissed, because this is where you learn to collaborate with other



musicians in an ensemble. There is great pleasure to be had from making music together.

Me and my career as a pilot

Flying aeroplanes was another passion of mine. Luckily when I started flying I still had enough time to pursue my musical career. In my first year with Lufthansa as a pilot I recorded Tchaikowsky's first and Rachmaninov's second piano concertos. The flight schedules left me enough time to continue with musical activities, sometimes even supported by Lufthansa.

Being a pilot nowadays is not as glamorous as many people might think. The increasing frequency of routes and more nights (rather than days) spent in

the cockpit make it a very exhausting job. Gone were the days when I could spend two days in New York attending concerts. It became exhausting and not conducive to a close family life. It got to the point that I found myself with very little time to make music. So I gave up flying and returned to music full time.

Me and my muse

My muse and partner is Nicole, who is one of the violinists in the UAEPO. She is a very beautiful woman. As a conductor, I rarely get personal responses from orchestra members. But Nicole will quite openly discuss my conducting. She inspires me with her thoughts and ideas when we drive home from a rehearsal. We have discussions about how the orchestra adapted to certain sections of the piece or how the rehearsal went as a whole. I am amused by the fact that she never lets me listen to her practising!

Me and the challenges ahead for the UAEPO

In order for the UAEPO to be taken seriously we need to get official recognition and financial support. Times are tough and fists are tight, and while we had a couple of corporate engagements every month in the 2007-08 season, these have now stopped completely. This has sadly deprived the orchestra not only of an income, but also of performance opportunities.



We get enquiries from musicians all over the world who want to move to the UAE to be part of this orchestra. I have no choice but to decline them because there is no funding available, and as a result there is no room for the orchestra to grow. But I will remain positive. Just recently our problem of finding a new rehearsal venue has been solved. UAEPO now has a new home at the Dubai Men's College in Academic City.

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Tell us about the kind of musicals you've worked on and if you intend to have them performed here in the UAE.

Some of the musicals I either wrote the music for, conducted or was a musical director of include *My Fair Lady*, *West Side Story*, *Mercury Rising* (based on the music of Queen), *Alice in Wonderland* and *Queen at the Opera*.

It would be a challenge to compile a new musical that has relevance to this region, but I think that the audience would greatly appreciate a locally produced musical production. One possibility would be to produce a musical along with one of the local TV stations.

The best way to do this would be to compile a production team experienced in musical theatre production and start putting an ensemble together to work on it.

You are known for blending western classical music with other non-classical music styles. What inspires you to do so?

The world is shrinking. Cultures around the world are moving closer every day thanks to globalisation and the new media. People from different cultural backgrounds are able to interact easier than ever before. The UAE is culturally diverse, so what better way to combine heritage than through music?

Also, if you consider the last 50 years, classical music is more accessible than ever before. There is a recording of virtually every classical piece ever composed and it is readily available online or in stores. Classical music used to be confined to live concerts, but now it can be heard through radio, on CDs and MP3s, and over the internet too.

The UAEPO adapts very well to new performance situations and guest artists. When we performed alongside famous visiting Irish musicians at the first Dubai Irish Festival two years ago, we pulled the programme together after only three rehearsals. The UAEPO was exposed to a style they had never tried before, but they came out with a fantastic performance. The same could be said for our Jazz meets Mozart project in 2008. I like to think I have taught the orchestra to accept all styles of good music and to be open to all sorts of musical journeys.

Are there any opportunities for a UAEPO music school?

Musical education and music appreciation need to be improved and adapted to a worldwide standard in the UAE. We have some fantastic musicians in the orchestra, which in itself is a pool of musical knowledge.

I would love to be able to offer this pool of knowledge in the form of a UAE Philharmonic School of Music and include courses in composition, arranging, mixing or how to approach modern technology in music. Nowadays, music and technology constantly work in tandem, and this requires a thorough knowledge of different instruments and musical history. A music school would I believe be a huge step in furthering musical education in this country.

You promoted an amalgamation of art forms when you invited ARTE to display their work during the Mozart requiem. What made you want to coordinate this project?

I love art! All forms of artistic activities should be interlinked with each other as much as possible. I think it's important to incorporate as many art forms as you can in creative projects. We need to pool resources to promote all forms of creativity in the UAE.

For more information visit www.uaephilharmonic.com.

– Preethi Janice D'Sa, a Dubai-based freelancer