Hussein Janmohamed

The conductor and composer (BMus’96, MMus’98, MMus’14) on mixing choral traditions to challenge stereotypes and foster cultural understanding.
In choral music there are so many layers and choral singing actually shows us what harmony can sound like when all the layers of identities come together."

“We are in a society in which there are a lot of negative representations of Islam, not only from the media but from small minorities within the faith,” he says.

For Janmohamed, challenging these stereotypes starts with combating self-stigma. After graduating from UBC with the first of two Master’s degrees, he founded the Vancouver Ismaili Youth Choir to help Muslim youth understand their dual and often plural identities.

The decision was inspired by his own formative experiences: As a young teen he found that the bridge between his two identities, the Canadian and the Ismaili, was congregational singing. Within the Ismaili community Janmohamed took part in religious devotion through ginan (Indic devotional expressions) and zikr (remembrance of the Divine) — and the experience made him aware of how powerful collective singing can be.

In high school, he found that same feeling through choral singing, an artform traditionally associated with Christian churches. He began to rethink choral music as a more open mode of collective singing and used it to combine the musicality of devotional chants with choral songs.

“In choral music there are so many layers and choral singing actually shows us what harmony can sound like when all the layers of identities come together,” he says. “One of the key elements [of the Ismaili Youth Choir] was to find ways to express cultural diversity of our community because our community is world-wide with members in Syria, Iran, Western China, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, the Indian subcontinent, Africa and the diaspora. Our cultural expression is so diverse, so as a choir we started to explore what that sounded like. There wasn’t a lot of repertoire from that part of the world that spoke to our community, so we started to make arrangements.”

Janmohamed led the compositional work, often combining texts from Ismaili culture with melodic structures from traditional choral songs. Janmohamed had already made a name for himself writing pieces that reflected multicultural perspectives. In 2004, he was asked by the Westcoast Sacred Arts Society in Vancouver to compose a piece with Russell Wallace from the Lil’wat Nation to explore how music from Ismaili and Indigenous cultures could be harmonized.

Janmohamed’s unique focus on multicultural choral singing garnered success early on in his career, and led to high-profile performances and opportunities to found other diverse choirs. The piece he co-wrote with Wallace was performed for His Holiness the Dalai Lama during his visit to Vancouver in 2004. More recently he led two global Ismaili music ensembles to commemorate the 80th birthday and Diamond Jubilee of His Highness the Aga Khan.

Since assembling the Vancouver Ismaili Youth Choir, Janmohamed has gone on to be a founding co-conductor of Cor Flammae, Canada’s first queer professional choir in Vancouver, and the Awaaz Ensemble, a cross-cultural a cappella choral ensemble in Toronto.

Read the whole story on the High Notes blog at www.music.ubc.ca/blog/high-notes-fall-2018.
On Nov. 10th, renowned pianist and Professor Emeritus Robert Silverman performed Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 5 in E flat major, Op. 73 with the UBC Symphony Orchestra to a packed house at the Chan Centre for the Performing Arts.

Silverman, who first studied the Beethoven concerto as a student nearly 50 years ago, brought a lifetime of knowledge and accomplishment — and a continuing sense of wonder — to the legendary work. And it showed.

“I can’t tell you how different the piece is [to me] now,” he says. “Some people who’ve been around for a while, every time they get asked to do something, they just take the music off the shelf, blow the dust off, and play it. Telephone in their last performance. I just can’t do that. I never have. This [concert] gave me the opportunity to relook at this great piece.”

For Silverman, the “Emperor” — as the concerto is popularly known — has lost none of its freshness and excitement. If anything, his appreciation of the concerto has deepened over years of studying, teaching, and performing.

“When one studies a piece for the first time, there are so many notes. Decades later, you just see the whole landscape. When you’re a pensioner, you don’t have the chops that you had when you were younger. But there are other things that are easier. Just understanding the piece, and how this fits in.”

Silverman’s “chops” are still formidable. The pianist pulled off the thunderous chords and virtuosic flourishes of the Beethoven masterwork with brilliant fluency. You can watch the performance online at https://livestream.com/ubcschoolofmusic.

Read the full story, complete with a video highlight, on the High Notes blog.

“Decades later, you see the whole landscape”: Robert Silverman on performing Beethoven and finding your way as a young musician

By Andrew Hung

“Oboist Kristen Cooke experiences UK music life thanks to new scholarship”

Over the summer, Doctor of Musical Arts student Kristen Cooke received an opportunity of a lifetime.

As the first winner of the Royal Over-Seas League UK Scholarship for a BC Emerging Musician, the UBC oboist got a taste of professional music life in the UK, working with British and Commonwealth musicians, and performing at London’s Church of St Martin-in-the-Fields, at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and British Isles Music Festival.

The Royal Over-Seas League (ROSL) has had a long history of supporting and nurturing talent from Commonwealth countries. Along with existing scholarships for aspiring professional musicians from Australia and New Zealand, ROSL has now offered their first musical scholarship in Canada. Each scholarship package includes an incredible itinerary of performing concerts at iconic venues and attending coaching sessions with prominent musicians in London. To top it off, recipients enjoy an all-expenses-paid trip with time to explore.

“We are thrilled and grateful that the Royal Over-Seas League has generously offered this opportunity to a UBC student,” says Richard Kurth, director of the UBC School of Music.

“ROSL provided Kristen with a wealth of artistic experiences that were wonderfully multi-faceted, carefully tailored to her needs, and comprehensively transformative for her professional development. The ROSL Arts programs, under the leadership of Geoff Parkin, are very impressive indeed. And much credit goes to Elizabeth Murray, president of the BC ROSL chapter, and to local members, for creating this wonderful opportunity for UBC Music students!”

In addition, Cooke received complimentary tickets to attend some of the finest concerts of the season, including a BBC Proms concert at Royal Albert Hall, featuring a new work by Mark Simpson.

“It was a reminder that classical music is relevant to our time and appreciated by millions of people around the world,” says Cooke of Simpson’s The Immortal. “The combination of the crowd’s energy, the brilliant performance, and the iconic, massive beauty of the hall is something I will never forget.”

Read the full Q & A with Kristen Cooke on the High Notes blog.

The next ROSL UK scholarship auditions happen on Jan. 20th, 2018. They are open to the public.
IDEAS
Introducing On That Note, the new School of Music podcast

How does music work? Why do we respond to a particular piece of music in a particular way? What can music tell us about ourselves and the world?

These are some of the big questions that the new School of Music podcast grapples with. Now available on iTunes, On That Note is a monthly deep-dive into the music you love — and music you may have never heard of. Join host Graham MacDonald and musicians and scholars from the UBC School of Music as they investigate everything from Beyoncé to Bach to Balinese Gamelan. You can listen at https://music.ubc.ca/on-that-note or subscribe via iTunes by searching for “On That Note” in the podcasts category.

In the debut episode, Graham talks to Prof. David Metzger about his new book, The Ballad in American Popular Music: From Elvis to Beyoncé. They discuss how we define ballads, how they change with the times, and why they continue to grab us. Below are some highlights from the interview.

David, what is a ballad? I feel like I know one when I hear one, but they’re weirdly difficult to pin down: Whitney Houston’s “I Will Always Love You” is a ballad, but so is Mötley Crüe’s “Home Sweet Home.”

A ballad is a genre in the sense that it’s a type of song, one that’s generally set to a slow tempo and deals with themes of love and loss. These songs are then taken up in a larger style like rock, hip hop, or country. The result being a rock ballad, and hip hop ballad, or a country ballad.

A huge number of classic ballads are covers, what kind of musical shifts do we see when ballads cross genres, say from pop to soul?

One of the fascinating things about soul music is that it combines so many different types of music. It has elements of R&B, gospel, jazz and blues, and through this combination it creates this musical energy. Soul artists loved to show off that energy and what it can do by covering songs you might not think of as soulful. A good example of this is Otis Redding or Aretha Franklin’s cover of Try a Little Tenderness. Otis goes the furthest with it by adding a whole bunch of Latin elements; it becomes a completely different song by the end of the ballad.