



WILLIAMS COLLEGE

The Nile Project unites a river in music

Performers from 11 countries will gather in the Berkshires

By Madeline Vuong
Special to Berkshires Week
& Shires of Vermont

WILLIAMSTOWN » Sounds of the Rwandan inanga, a zither, dance underneath the high notes of the kawala, an end-blown cane flute from Egypt, punctuated with daff and riqq, Middle Eastern tambourines.

In the music of the Nile Project, a group of performers, instruments and musical styles from each of the 11 Nile basin nations make original music about their shared river.

A group of 27 standout musicians — including Sophie Nzayisenga, the first female inanga player in the world, and Kasiva Mutua, the only professional female percussionist in Kenya — make music about their understandings of the Nile. The group began touring in Africa, and now the Nile Project is touring in America — and will come to Williams College at 8 p.m. Saturday in Chapin Hall.

By giving each country a voice through its music, the Nile Project hopes to create a model for conversations about the use and distribution of the Nile, reminding people to listen to one another and showing that, though they come from different nations, they are all ultimately connected as citizens of the Nile.

The Nile Project began in 2011, when an Egyptian ethnomusicologist, Mina Girgis, got together with his old friend, Ethiopian-American singer Meklit Hadero.

With two full-length solo albums, Hadero became TED global fellow in 2009 for music that connects Ethiopian artists in diaspora to their homeland. Girgis focuses on creating environments that lead to learning, making and experiencing music, which have led him to innovation fellowships in the UK and in the U.S.

“Mina and I ran into each other at a concert in Oakland,” Hadero said. “We danced the night away, and afterward we were sharing a beer and talking about our recent trips to Egypt and Ethiopia, respectively. I’d been in Ethiopia for the summer with my band. I told him about playing a song called, ‘From Across the Blue Nile,’ and how it had ended up inspiring audience members to talk to me about the Nile and its importance in Ethiopia.”

They began to talk about the Nile, she said, musing that while the river connects their nations, Egyptian and Ethiopian citizens have little sense of shared community, and the two of them might not have been friends if they had not met in diaspora, she said.

Rather than bringing their nations together, sharing the Nile has often pushed them apart through water rights conflicts, Hadero said. At that time, Ethiopia had just begun a massive damming project, the Grand Renaissance Dam, to create hydroelectric power. Egypt had responded with demands that the construction cease, worried that Egypt would no longer get its fair share of water, she said.

“Then Mina was like, ‘What if we brought the Nile musicians together to make music?’” Hadero continued. “And we realized here was an opportunity for music to have an impact beyond the cultural sphere. An opportunity to replace conflict with collaboration and mutual understanding.”

Part of the problem of sharing the Nile, Hadero said, stems from a legacy of geographic separation that made it difficult for the people of the Nile basin nations to get to know one another’s cultures. Massive changes in elevation, impassible swamps and desert terrain have kept people from exploring and engaging with one another, she said, fostering a sense that each nation was separate and different, rather than part of a community.

“Times are different now,” she

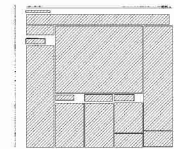
said. “With advent of the technological era, we have more opportunities to connect, but using those tools still requires intent, and people have been separated for so long that the intent to understand difference, that curiosity about others, isn’t always there. But playing music, sharing something together, can inspire that curiosity.”

Following their discussion, Girgis and Hadero went on a five-week scouting trip, meeting different musicians they knew and asking them to recommend others, or finding musicians through cultural organizations and even YouTube. They took care to find musicians from each country with different musical specialties, Hadero said, and to keep the group balanced in gender, to reflect their vision that conversations about the Nile include everyone’s interests.

They also wanted to make music in a spirit of equality and collaboration, so they decided that each member of the group would serve as both student and teacher in workshops, and each would take turns being the primary composer or soloist, giving everyone an equal voice in the music.

“The Nile Project is different from an ensemble that’s played together forever,” said Corinna Campbell, professor of music at Williams College, who invited the group to perform there. “Most band members were unfamiliar with the different music traditions of one another’s home countries before joining, but they were willing to learn from one another. The resulting fusion of different melodies, modal systems and rhythms fostered unexpected connections, both musically and politically.”

While the Nile Project has been making music together, Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia have begun negotiating the principles of the Grand Renaissance Dam, and, in March all three nations signed a preliminary accord. This agreement is the first time they have had a formal framework for peaceful dialogue and conflict resolution, Hadero said, which is leaps and bounds forward from



the tense silence that used to come between the nations.

“It doesn’t mean it’s all worked out,” she said, “But we’re getting there. And I think success will only come from a sense that we are one Nile family, rather than nations divided.”

IF YOU GO...

What: The Nile Project

When: 8 p.m. Saturday, April 11 at Williams College

Where: Chapin Hall, Route 2, Williamstown

Admission: Free

Info: music.williams.edu



PETER STANLEY — COURTESY OF THE NILE PROJECT

Musicians from the 11 nations along the Nile River basin come together in the Nile Project.