



tunes

Nile Project a confluence of cultures

By Jason Klose
For the CDT

As part of its first U.S. tour, the Nile Project will take up residency at Penn State next week, highlighted with performances by a collection of musicians from 11 northeast African countries.

The Nile Project, which uses music to raise awareness of the cultural and environmental challenges along Africa's mighty Nile River, comes to Penn State for a special performance at 7:30 p.m. Thursday at Eisenhower Auditorium.

The project seeks to educate and empower Nile citizens to work cooperatively to boost the sustainability of their ecosystem in a region that forms a complex system wrought with political, environmental, economic and social challenges.

Instruments and musical traditions that aren't historically connected come together, uniting artists from each country in the Nile basin who learn from one another and compose music together.

The project's orchestra features percussion from Kenya, Uganda and Egypt, plus other instruments such as the masenko (single-stringed bowed lute), ney (end-blown flute), simsimiyya (plucked lyre), tanbura (long-necked stringed instrument) and adungu (arched harp).

During the four-month tour, which took about two years to plan, the Nile Project will perform at more than 35 universities, taking part in residencies, concerts and outreach activities.

President and chief executive officer Mina Girgis, who co-founded the project in 2011, was born in Paris and raised in Cairo. At age 22, he enrolled at Florida State

University, where he studied hospitality and ethnomusicology before going on to graduate school in California.

"For me it's really about how creating music together and learning to play music together can be a way to create a sense of community, and how that sense of community can facilitate becoming a better musician," Girgis said. "My work has been primarily on creating cross-cultural musical collaborations among artists from a diversity of regions and backgrounds."

The Nile Project consists of musicians from the 11 countries that the Nile runs through, but the group is always looking to grow and expand the representation, which encompasses the musical styles of the different countries, including Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Burundi, Rwanda, Kenya and Uganda.

"The Nile Project is designed as a way to use this music to inspire audiences from different countries to become more culturally aware where that river goes," Girgis said. "It's about using that musical inspiration to drive learning and drive dialogue and allow university students who are attending our concerts to better understand how their studies and their interests fit into making the Nile a more sustainable ecosystem."

He said part of the mission is to inspire, educate and empower university students to foster the sustainability of their shared ecosystem.

"We chose to focus on university students because we feel that they are at an interesting crossroads where they have infrastructure at the universities that allow them to engage in dialogue and engage in the learning experi-

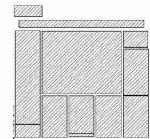
ences," Girgis said. "They have open minds and they feel they are defining what they would like to do in life."

The sustainability of the Nile is not only in the realm of water, but in the realm of food, agriculture, economics, business, politics, anthropology and sociology. Essentially, the Nile Project is shedding a unique light on the Nile through the diversity of the players and actors in that ecosystem.

"Our role in the Nile Project is to allow every person who may not be an expert on the Nile, who may not think they are relevant, to discover that relevance — to find their respective Nile Project," Girgis said. "Every person can be a Nile citizen and can find their respective Nile Project, if they have the educational infrastructure that will allow them to see that. We hope this work is not only unique to the Nile, but we hope that this approach will allow students in other watersheds to find the relevance of their work to their ecosystem."

Many people attend the Nile Project shows not knowing what to expect. They arrive thinking it might be more of a variety show with different songs from different countries. But they see 13 musicians playing a diversity of instruments, some familiar, like the saxophone and electric bass, but some they have never seen.

"Even though they come from different countries and play different styles, they find that these musicians are performing like a band," Girgis said. "And what is usually striking is not just the virtuosity in every individual on stage, but the relationships that are happening on stage, and the way that these very distinct people are playing together. Managing





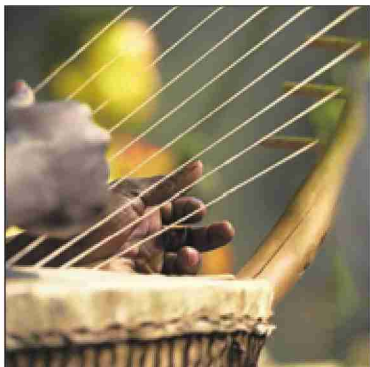
that space and that diversity and whatever they have in common is what is really interesting to people. People usually connect to different musicians.”

Girgis sees the project as sort of a musical roulette, where, with every song, a member of the band becomes the leader or two or three become the leaders of a particular piece, bringing a unique vision to each performance.

“Every musical presentation takes you in a completely different direction, and it may not be a direction or location in the Nile basin — it could be just one take on bringing these musicians together,” Girgis said. “So the palette in this concert is always changing, and that itself is kind of rejuvenating to both the audience and to the musicians on stage.”

IF YOU GO

WHAT: The Nile Project
WHEN: 7:30 p.m. April 23
WHERE: Eisenhower Auditorium,
University Park
INFO: 800-ARTS-TIX, www.cpa.psu.edu, www.nileproject.org



Photos provided/Matjaz Kacicnik

The Nile Project performs in Azhar Park, Cairo, in 2013. The Nile Project was founded in August 2011 by Egyptian ethnomusicologist Mina Girgis and Ethiopian-American singer Meklit Hadero to address the Nile basin's cultural and environmental challenges using music, education and an enterprise platform.