

Nourishing Cultures: An Interview with Farangis Nurulla-Khoja

Alimenter les cultures : un entretien avec Farangis Nurulla-Khoja

Terri Hron et Farangis Nurulla-Khoja

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Résumé de l'article

Dans cette entrevue avec Terri Hron, la compositrice Tadjik-Québécoise Farangis Nurulla-Khoja décrit son départ du Tadjikistan pour étudier en Europe et éventuellement pour travailler et vivre au Canada. Elle parle de la composition d'une série d'oeuvres pour ensemble basée sur des poèmes décrivant l'expérience des réfugié-e-s. Elle partage ses réflexions sur son expérience en tant que compositrice immigrante au Québec et au Canada, ainsi que sur les défis et les succès qu'elle a connus, lesquels concernent la création musicale en collaboration avec des instrumentistes orientaux et occidentaux, et la recherche de façons inventives de travailler ensemble et de noter cette musique.

Nourishing Cultures: An Interview with Farangis Nurulla-Khoja

Terri Hron

In September 2022, the Turning Point Ensemble in Vancouver premiered Tajik-Canadian composer Farangis Nurulla-Khoja's piece Daughter of Absence, a work highlighting the refugee experience through poetry, music and sound. This piece for cello and ensemble features a poem by the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. I spoke with Farangis in April 2023, just as the Yarilo Contemporary Music Society, conducted by Leslie Dala and featuring pianist Jane Hayes, was about to premiere Rustle of Memory, another piece of Farangis's dedicated to refugees, inspired by the 2022 novel by Elif Shafak, The Island of Missing Trees.

Farangis Nurulla-Khoja (F. N.-K.): I left Tajikistan because of the civil war, and I went to study in Sweden. It was actually my mother who helped me leave, by taking me with her to a conference in London. From there, I heard about the Academy of Music and Drama, University of Gothenberg.¹ I wrote to them and applied as a pianist. I went for one year and got to know the composition class. This was a big discovery, because in Tajikistan, at the State Institute of Fine Arts and Design of Tajikistan,² we didn't study anything after Shostakovich. My greatest discovery was the music of Luigi Nono. I realized that yes, I wanted to become a composer and study composition. Before that, of course, I had been improvising and writing little pieces, but I really started to study composition in Gothenburg in Ole Lützow-Holm's class. After that, I continued in San Diego, California, and then I went back to Europe and did the Ircam Cursus in Paris, where I met Quasar.³ That was one of the first works I wrote for a Canadian group. I had listened to them play, and they

1. <https://gu.se/en/music-drama> (accessed October 27, 2023).

2. <http://ddstdt.tj/en/home-1-english> (accessed October 27, 2023).

3. www.quasar4.com/fr (accessed August 16, 2023).

commissioned me to write a piece. And that's how I came to Canada and ended up staying here.

Terri Hron (T. H.): What year did you leave Tajikistan? How did the civil war affect your life? What was your mother doing that enabled her to leave and go to the conference in London?

F. N.-K.: Well, my mom works in comparative literature and she was giving lectures around the world. The civil war started in 1990. It continued for quite a while; I left with my mom in 1994. The main reason we left was because, although the civil war was almost over, smaller scale fighting continued to break out all around Tajikistan, and the universities and institutes—really, all the schools—were closed. Nobody could truly pursue their education. Who thinks about education when there's a war? My mom ended up taking me to London, which is where she'd been when the war started. My sister, I remember, had escaped with my father to Samarkand, in the neighbouring country, Uzbekistan. In London, my mom had some friends who took us in. I left from there to study in Sweden. I'm making it sound like everything went smoothly, but it really didn't.

T. H.: You mention Luigi Nono as someone whose music inspired you to become a composer. What does his music represent to you? Why was it so inspiring?

F. N.-K.: Well, he's one of the composers who inspires me to this day. It was his approach to sound, which was very unfamiliar to me back then, and the structure of his compositions, how he treated silence and sound. Mostly, the idea that sound itself has many possibilities that can be accessed through all the different articulations. When I first heard his compositions, in Sweden—I was 21 or 22 years old—I remember thinking how rich the world of composition was—before that, I'd thought there was nothing beyond Shostakovich, because that's what we were taught. There was nothing beyond that in our education. And that's why I wanted to study composition, when I discovered, through Nono, that I could work with different approaches to sound, which is really what still attracts me to composition today.

T. H.: There's a sentence in the bio on your website where you say, "making music is a journey into the unknown, a search for sounds unheard and forms unseen."⁴ That really reminds me of Nono, which is why I wanted to ask you

4. <https://farangis-nurulla.com/biography> (accessed August 23, 2023).

about him. It also sounds like the experience of migration, and I was wondering if music and musicking is a way for you to understand and find beauty in the feeling of landlessness that being a migrant or refugee might bring.

F. N.-K.: That's very interesting. Perhaps yes, you're right. It's interesting that you say that because my recent works are dedicated to refugees, because, of course, we all hear terrible news and it does affect me. I express that in my compositions. And, reading poems and novels by writers who address refugees or migration—I find enormous inspiration for my work there. I also work a lot with silence and sound, and that may come from the fact that refugees don't know what their next move might be.

T. H.: What is the story behind *Daughter of Absence*, the piece you wrote for Turning Point Ensemble?⁵

F. N.-K.: It was inspired by a poem by Mahmoud Darwish, from his book *In the Presence of Absence*.⁶ This piece was a commission from the cellist Isidora Nojkovic, whose background is Serbian; she is Canadian, born here in Canada to immigrant parents. I had worked with Isidora previously, in Vancouver, and she approached me to write a piece for her. So, this piece is written for cello and string quintet. I was looking for inspiration, which usually comes to me from literature. I came across Mahmoud Darwish, a Palestinian poet who emigrated to the United States. He wrote this poem in relation to what's happening in Palestine. I had an immediate and clear reaction; I knew I wanted to use this poem in my piece. It's one of the first pieces where I actually have the musicians recite from the source material, either speaking or in a whisper. I plan to make a trilogy of these concertos, mostly for the musicians of Turning Point or the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra.⁷ I've been working closely with musicians from Vancouver in the last several years, and it's a very interesting journey. It started with Turning Point, in 2015, and is still going. I'm very, very happy that we continue to collaborate. The second piece connected to refugees premiered recently, on March 12, 2023, in Vancouver, with the musicians of Yarilo Contemporary Music Society,⁸ in a concert called "Introitus."⁹ That piece, *Rustle of Memory*, is a concerto for piano; it was performed by pianist Jane Hayes. It was again inspired by the situation of refugees; specifically, by a novel by Elif Shafak, a Turkish-British writer, called *The Island of Missing Trees*. It's about Turkish and Greek immigrants living in Cyprus who later become refugees in London. The story is narrated by a fig tree, which is also an immigrant from Cyprus, living in

5. www.turningpointensemble.ca (accessed August 16, 2023).

6. Mahmoud Darwish (2011), *In the Presence of Absence*, Brooklyn, Archipelago.

7. www.vancouversymphony.ca (accessed August 16, 2023).

8. www.yarilomusic.com (accessed August 16, 2023).

9. <https://yarilomusic.com/concerts-events/introitus> (accessed August 23, 2023).

London. It's a beautiful book. In this piece, I actually went further in my use of text. It is very present, again, whispered and sung by musicians in their natural voices, whatever their vocal range allows. In the piano cadenza, there are phrases from the novel where the fig tree tells the story of her passage from Cyprus to London, her feelings really—it's a female tree. I expressed that through the piano gestures and phrasing.

T. H.: I find it fascinating that so much of your work seems to relate to poetry or literature. You talk about translating phrases from the novel into the cadenza, for example, and I can understand how that works. If the text is being sung or recited in a whisper or a normal speaking voice, that's a very direct way of bringing the words into the music. In other work, you say that poetry or literature as an integral part of it, though it doesn't appear in the music in that way. What is your relationship to literature? How do you work with it when you're composing? How does it come into the compositional process?

F. N.-K.: I actually rarely use a text directly in my music. In these two most recent compositions, I used text without manipulating it in any way. But, sometimes, I've used poems in vocal compositions where I didn't want to make extensive manipulations, because the poem still exists in the world and you have to respect it. I like to refer to its atmosphere or its topic. I often use Tajik poetry in my compositions; I've been hearing this poetry since I was a child; my mom recites poetry all the time, and when she speaks, she is very poetic. So, if I use poems by Rûmî¹⁰ or Bedil¹¹ in my music, again, it's not direct, but rather expressing the atmosphere of the poem, bringing that into the music. I once manipulated a poem from a Persian poet and merged it with a Swedish poem for an experimental piece, where I cut and pasted some phrases, working mostly with the consonants or the vowels. But in my more recent compositions I haven't done that, I mostly just use the atmosphere of the poems.

T. H.: Is there something about Tajik or Persian poetry that's particularly musical?

F. N.-K.: Yes, I think so. It has a great musicality. The language itself is quite musical. Even just day-to-day speech, I find quite easy to set musically; maybe, I can say, like Italian. By atmosphere, I mean what the poem is about, what it evokes. I won't make direct connections with music; usually it's the

10. Djalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Balkhī or Rûmī was a 13th-century poet, theologian and mystic, considered a major Sufi mystic.

11. Abul-Ma'ānī Mīrzā Abdul-Qādir Bēdil, or Bedil Dehlavī (1642-1720) was an Indian Sufi and considered one of the greatest Indo-Persian poets.

general atmosphere of the poem, the feeling it gives me, that I express that in my compositions. I must say, I often compose intuitively: I start intuitively and then I try to follow or structure my intuition.

T. H.: Is the Tajik and Persian poetry a way for you to connect with your family? You say that your mother speaks very much in a kind of poetry—do you think there is a kind of ancestral knowledge at work there?

F. N.-K.: I wish! I don't know. I'm not good at reciting poetry myself: I know one or two poems. But when I read it and it speaks to me, I know I want to use it in my music. It doesn't have to be a Tajik poem. It could be like the Mahmoud Darwish: I used his poem in an English translation. Since I had to get permission to use it, I was corresponding with his wife; she said that this was the only poem that she and her husband had worked on together. She made the translation. And I happened to like this poem in particular. Really, if it speaks to me, then I somehow use its atmosphere or feeling. And as I said, in these recent compositions, I enjoyed working directly with the texts. I think it enriches the composition. It's connected to the problem of refugees, and I want people to understand that message. With music, the message is not always clear, it's more abstract. But when I include the poems or the text, as in my recent work, I find it becomes clearer.

T. H.: This is a series of concertos? Do you have an idea for the third one yet?

F. N.-K.: Right now, I have written two concertos and I'd like to write one more with this connection to refugees. I have an idea already, but I don't have a poem. I would like it to be multidisciplinary, working with a choreographer. I have already talked with the musicians. It will be for trombone, contrabass and string quintet. Or, trombone, contrabass and a small chamber ensemble. I don't have a specific theme, but we have several ideas and we're still searching.

T. H.: How does dance come into your work? Is it also a feeling or an atmosphere?

F. N.-K.: No, I would say it's more concrete. I've had some work set to choreography, though I didn't work directly with the dancers myself. So, it will be interesting to collaborate with dancers in this new piece—I have wanted to try it for some time. I am not sure yet how I will approach it, but the

choreography will be an integral part of the work: I'm envisioning the musicians and the dancers creating the piece together. Maybe the musicians will also do some choreography. We'll have to figure it out. It's definitely not just an atmosphere; it's more concrete, another expression of the piece somehow.

T. H.: Has being a new Canadian or a new "Québécoise" influenced your work as a musician at all? Is there anything particular about the music scene here in Canada that you find interesting?

F. N.-K.: In general, I find Canadian music very intriguing because people come here from so many different places and everyone brings something of their own, which influences their creativity as well, of course. Whether or not they studied here, their own identities are present. This is what attracts me in Canadian contemporary music. We nourish each other with these different cultures. I lived in Sweden for a while and it was very different. Perhaps I choose to be in Canada because of that: different cultures come together here and everybody has their own voice and can find their way. At least for me, I've haven't faced any nationalistic difficulties. But, Quebec has a special quality, I think, in its music scene. For me, it *has* been difficult, honestly, to gain visibility. I always try hard, but performances of my music are rare in Quebec. If I'm being performed, it's usually my older pieces—sometimes I only find out they've been played after the fact! Collaboration is more difficult; I'm not sure why, but it is. I've been approached more frequently by orchestras in Vancouver, Toronto and Victoria. In Europe as well, more is happening for me, though since the pandemic, not as much as before. I have good connections in Germany, for example. But as I say, I find Canadian music quite interesting, because of its different cultures.

T. H.: Do you have connections with musicians and the music scene in Tajikistan?

F. N.-K.: Yes, I have some connections in Tajikistan, mostly with traditional musicians. I took some online courses on an instrument called *tanbur*: it's a stringed instrument that I use to work on sound, because it has a rich resonance. So, that's how I know some musicians there. We are planning a concert with the Vancouver Intercultural Orchestra¹² in Dushanbe because they are going to tour some of the Central Asian states, like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. We'll see how it goes.

12. <https://vi-co.org> (accessed August 16, 2023).

T. H.: You mention on your website that you work with both European and Asian influences, and you've just mentioned the Vancouver Intercultural Orchestra. What is your experience combining European and Asian instruments? How does that work in your compositional process?

F. N.-K.: I have worked with both oriental and occidental instruments. To work with them together is a real challenge. We had a project, "Maqam et Créations" in 2005-2006 where we worked with some extremely talented, gifted, oriental musicians who don't read western notation, and it was amazing! They play mostly from the oral tradition. In our group there were Syrian, Andalusian, Iranian and Tajik musicians, as well as musicians from Paris and Germany. I wrote a piece for the singer Noma Omran, a Syrian singer based in Paris who works with a small group of musicians. One played the Syrian *buzuk*, there was a saxophone player, an Armenian *kamancheh* player, and a viola da gamba player. It was quite challenging, because I had written a score, but most of the notations were not followed. Only the saxophone and viola da gamba played from my score. The singer was singing an ancient Syrian melody that she had proposed; the whole piece was built around the melody. So, there was a lot of talking and negotiation around the piece and how it would develop, because the *buzuk* player, for example, didn't read western notation. I have to say, this is a piece I am very happy about, both in terms of the process and the beautiful sonority I managed to elicit from these extraordinary musicians. This kind of merging is fantastic, but it's not possible if you don't have an enormous amount of time to sit together and discuss, because you can't simply produce a score using western notation. I had another experience with Percussions de Strasbourg,¹³ who had invited me and some oriental musicians from Paris. It was very difficult. The piece we worked on was much longer, and there was a big tour, and it was a great challenge. And then I also wrote a piece for the Vancouver Intercultural Orchestra, but this was unfortunately during the pandemic, so I couldn't be present and there was no workshop. That made it a much more complicated piece. In general, when musicians are open-minded, you can find truly beautiful sonorities, but you really need to give this kind of composition time to develop.

13. www.percussionsdestrasbourg.com
(accessed August 16, 2023).