

Thursday
SEP 30
7:30 pm

Amir ElSaffar and the Two Rivers Ensemble

A fusion of jazz and music of the Middle East



This performance is funded, in part, by:

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**There will be no intermission during this performance.
Selections will be announced from the stage.**

Amir ElSaffar – trumpet, santur, vocals

Ole Mathisen – tenor saxophone

Zafer Tawil – oud, percussion

George Ziadeh – oud

Carlo DeRosa – bass

Nasheet Waits – drums

The Two Rivers Ensemble, a sextet of jazz and Middle Eastern musicians, has made innovative strides in using the maqam modal system with the American jazz idiom. Deeply rooted in musical forms of Iraq and nearby regions, the music still speaks the language of swing, improvisation and group interaction, and the resulting sound is distinct from other contemporary cross-cultural musical fusions. After 14 years of extensive performing and touring as well as the release of three critically acclaimed albums on Pi Recordings—*Two Rivers* (2007), *Inana* (2011) and *Crisis* (2015)—the Two Rivers Ensemble has developed an instinctive ease with ElSaffar’s highly complex music, enabling the band to play with a creativity that transcends pure technical challenge in a style that is rooted in tradition, while creating an entirely new aesthetic. Amir ElSaffar’s work *Crisis* was commissioned by the Newport Jazz Festival, where it premiered in August 2013. *Downbeat Magazine* raved, “certainly the first Middle Eastern-imbued jazz combo at Newport to win a standing ovation for its first song.”

Amir ElSaffar, composer, trumpeter, santur player and vocalist, is one of the artists taking part in the Lied Center project entitled “Utilizing the Performing Arts to Enhance DEIB Initiatives.” Funded by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the project aims to create an adaptable Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) curriculum that integrates those concepts, centering on the work of the participating visiting performing artists. The curriculum framework is created through collaboration with each visiting artist as well as faculty and staff at the University of Kansas, working to ensure the arts-centered program encourages critical thought and engagement for students.

ElSaffar has been described as “uniquely poised to reconcile jazz and Arabic music,” (*The Wire*) and “one of the most promising figures in jazz today” (*Chicago Tribune*). A recipient of the Doris Duke Performing Artist Award and a 2018 U.S. Artist Fellow, ElSaffar is an expert trumpeter with a classical background, conversant not only in the language of contemporary jazz, but he has also created techniques to play microtones and ornaments idiomatic

to Arabic music that are not typically heard on the trumpet. Additionally, he is a purveyor of the centuries old, now endangered Iraqi maqam tradition, which he performs actively as a vocalist and santur player. As a composer, ElSaffar has used the subtle microtones found in Iraqi maqam music to create an innovative approach to harmony and melody and has received commissions to compose for large and small jazz ensembles, traditional Middle Eastern ensembles, chamber orchestras, string quartets and contemporary music ensembles as well as dance troupes.

Described as “an imaginative bandleader, expanding the vocabulary of the trumpet and, at the same time, the modern jazz ensemble,” (*All About Jazz*), ElSaffar is an important voice in an age of cross-cultural music making. ElSaffar has received commissions from the MAP Fund, Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC), Newport Jazz Festival, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Chamber Music America and Jazz Institute of Chicago, and he was composer-in-residence at the Royaumont Foundation in France from 2017 to 2019.

ElSaffar’s most recent release, *Rivers of Sound: Not Two* (2017, New Amsterdam Records), features his 17-piece Rivers of Sound Orchestra consisting of musicians from a variety of musical backgrounds. Using resonance as its governing principle, the music incorporates elements of maqam modal music of the Middle East with jazz and other contemporary musical practices to create a unique microtonal musical environment that moves beyond the notions of style and tradition into a realm of uninhibited musical communication. Each musician of the orchestra interacts with the group through the combination of improvisation and composition, the merging of musical languages, maqam and polyphony, toward the goal of reaching a collective state of Tarab, or musical ecstasy.

The Rivers of Sound Orchestra is an expansion of ElSaffar’s six-piece Two Rivers Ensemble. Active since 2006, this sextet explores the juncture between jazz and music of the Middle East. Their 2015 release, *Crisis* (Pi Recordings) is a reflection on a region in turmoil and strife: revolution, civil war and sectarian violence—a culture’s struggle for survival. The music is passionate and visceral, a cry from the heart. *Crisis* was commissioned by the Newport Jazz Festival, where at the 2013 premiere, it made a clear emotional connection to the audience, receiving a rousing standing ovation after just the first piece.

In recent years, ElSaffar has turned his attention to composition, working with a variety of different ensembles and musical formats. In November 2017, he premiered a new work, *Maqam/Brass Resonance*, for seven winds and percussion at the Berlin Jazz Festival. Two months prior to that, his work

Interstices for octet plus one performed by the renowned Belgian contemporary ensemble Ictus premiered at the Royaumont Foundation in France. He has also composed the score for Ragamala Dance's acclaimed new work, *Written in Water*, which has been touring in the U.S. since 2016. In 2014, his work *Ashwaaq* for string quartet, voice and santur, based on Sufi poetry of Ibn Arabi, was performed at the Aix and Avignon festivals in 2014.

This year, ElSaffar is working on a composition for flamenco musicians and dance, with Arabic musicians and electronics, commissioned by the Royaumont Foundation, which will premiere at the Flamenco Biennale in the Netherlands. He will also compose a chamber work for strings and clarinet for the Jazztopad Festival in Poland and an orchestral work for the Eastern Sierra Symphony.

His quintet release, *Alchemy* (2013, Pi Recordings), received significant acclaim, including from veteran jazz writer Howard Mandel, who dubbed ElSaffar an "exquisite alchemist" and noted his ability to surmount the difficulties of bringing jazz and maqam together "a challenge that he's accomplished with aplomb." The album was described as a "milestone session" in *Point of Departure* and "radically contemporary in its sound even as it connects with music's most ancient roots" by the *Irish Times*.

Born near Chicago in 1977 to an Iraqi immigrant father and an American mother, ElSaffar was drawn to music at a young age, listening incessantly to LPs from his father's collection, which included Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald and the *Blues Brothers* soundtrack (but interestingly, no Iraqi music). His first musical training was at the age of five, singing in a Lutheran church choir at the school he attended. His mother, an avid lover of music, introduced him to the music of Bach and Haydn and taught him to sing and play American folk songs on ukulele and guitar. ElSaffar eventually found his calling with the trumpet in his early teens.

Chicago offered many opportunities for the young trumpeter: he attended DePaul University and earned a degree in classical trumpet, and he also had the opportunity to study with the legendary principal trumpeter of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Bud Herseth. As a trumpeter of the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, ElSaffar worked with esteemed conductors such as Pierre Boulez, Mstislav Rostropovich and Daniel Barenboim, and he recorded on the latter's 1999 Teldec release, *Tribute to Ellington*, with members of the Chicago Symphony and Don Byron. Additionally, ElSaffar gained experience playing regularly in Chicago's blues, jazz and salsa clubs.

He moved to New York at the turn of the century, where he performed in the ensembles of jazz legend Cecil Taylor. He also performed with Vijay Iyer and Rudresh Mahanthappa, who were in the early stages of their careers, making forays drawing upon their ancestral background toward forging a new sound.

ElSaffar gradually found himself drawn to the musical heritage of his father's native country, Iraq. In 2001, after winning the Carmine Caruso Jazz Trumpet Competition, he funded a trip to Baghdad to find and study with the few surviving masters of the Iraqi Maqam. Some were still in Baghdad, but he discovered that most had left the country. ElSaffar spent the next five years pursuing these masters across the Middle East and Europe, learning everything he could about the tradition. During this period, he learned to speak Arabic, sing maqam and play the santoor. His main teacher during this period was vocalist Hamid Al-Saadi, currently the only living person who has mastered the entire Baghdadi Maqam tradition.

In 2006, ElSaffar founded Safaafir, the only ensemble in the U.S. performing Iraqi Maqam in its traditional format. Later the same year, ElSaffar received commissions from the Painted Bride Arts Center in Philadelphia and from the Festival of New Trumpet Music (FONT) to compose *Two Rivers*, a suite invoking Iraqi musical traditions framed in a modern jazz setting. ElSaffar has since received commissions from the Jazz Institute of Chicago (2008), Jerome Foundation (2009), Chamber Music America (2009), Present Music (2010), Metropolitan Museum of Art (2013), Newport Jazz Festival (2013), Morgenland Festival (2013) and Royaumont Foundation (2014), creating works integrating Middle Eastern tonalities and rhythms into contemporary contexts.

He currently leads four critically acclaimed ensembles: The 17-piece Rivers of Sound Orchestra; Two Rivers, which combines the musical languages and instrumentation of Iraqi Maqam and contemporary jazz; the Amir ElSaffar Quintet, performing ElSaffar's microtonal compositions with standard jazz instrumentation; Safaafir, the only ensemble in the U.S. performing and preserving the Iraqi Maqam in its traditional format; and The Alwan Ensemble, the resident ensemble of Alwan for the Arts, specializing in classical music from Egypt, the Levant and Iraq. In addition, he has worked with jazz legend Cecil Taylor and other prominent jazz musicians, such as Mark Dresser, Gerry Hemingway, Marc Ribot, Henry Grimes and Oliver Lake. ElSaffar has appeared on numerous recordings and released seven under his own name: *Maqams of Baghdad* (2005), *Two Rivers* (2007), *Radif Suite* (2010), *Inana* (2011), *Alchemy* (2013), *Crisis* (2015) and *Rivers of Sound: Not Two* (2017).