

Musicians from Nile River Basin collaborate for first U.S. tour

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Nile Project concert in Al Azhar Park, Cairo, Egypt, 31 January, 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 an innovative approach that combines music, education and an enterprise platform.

www.nileproject.org MATJAZ KACICNIK / NILE PROJECT

The idea that music brings people together is an appealing one, but it can seem inadequate in the face of the differences that wrack the world. Among the most intractable regions is the Nile Basin, lined by 11 countries divided by a host of conflicts, from fights over access to the Nile River to violent internal strife in Egypt and Sudan.

And yet The Nile Project, a musical collective with members from nine Nile Basin countries who play a

wild array of styles and instruments, is bridging those divisions. They believe their musical collaboration (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bA6PTGzpgg>) offers a model for cooperation around the region's most crucial problem: preserving and sharing the Nile River, which is essential for life in the countries around it and is threatened by global warming, pollution, dams, population growth and other massive problems.

After taking the Nile Project (<http://www.nileproject.org/>) to Egypt and Africa, organizers are now expanding their idea of musical cooperation in their first tour (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/13/arts/music/worlds-and-rhythms-meet-in-euphoric-result.html?emc=eta1&r=1>) of the United States, which brings them to the North Beach Bandshell in Miami Beach on Saturday. MDC Live (<http://mdclivearts.org/performances/>) is presenting the show, as well as music and environmental workshops with Miami Dade College faculty and students, hoping to inspire new efforts to confront water issues like sea level rise in South Florida.

"We are working to model the kinds of relationships that we would like to see in the Nile Basin on many levels," says Meklit Hadero (<http://www.nileproject.org/team/meklit-hadero-cofounder-3/>), an Ethiopian-American singer who is one of the project's two founders. "You can not just see it onstage but you can hear it. ... And those concepts move through the whole project. In the 21st century we're gonna have all kinds of questions about managing natural resources, and that will be mitigated or made worse by our relationships with each other."

Hadero and Mina Girgis (<http://www.nileproject.org/team/mina-girgis/>), an Egyptian ethnomusicologist, came up with the project while sharing a beer after a raucous 2011 concert by an Ethiopian band in the San Francisco Bay Area, where both live. Tumult in Egypt, where protesters had just overthrown the country's military government, and Ethiopia's proposed Renaissance Dam, which could limit the Nile's flow in Egypt, were on their minds.

"He had just come from Egypt, I had just come from Ethiopia," Hadero says. "So Mina said, 'What if we created a project bringing the Nile countries together?' Silence – we felt the hugeness of this concept – and then we were like, 'We have to do this.'"

Each is an immigrant with a cross-cultural background. Hadero, 34, and her family fled violence in Ethiopia for the United States when she was 2, and she grew up with Ethiopian traditions in the home and American pop culture outside it (including attending high school in Gainesville).

Girgis, 38, came from Egypt in 1998 to attend Florida State University in Tallahassee and later worked on two major cross-cultural music projects: *Latcho Drom*, a tour of music groups tracing the history of the gypsies based on a cult documentary film (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latcho_Drom), and a

festival celebrating Yo-Yo Ma's Silkroad (<http://www.silkroadproject.org/>) project.

Still, their new effort was a daunting one (<http://futuresdirections.org.au/publications/food-and-water-crises/1452-conflict-on-the-nile-the-future-of-transhttp://futuresdirections.org.au/publications/food-and-water-crises/1452-conflict-on-the-nile-the-future-of-transboundary-water-disputes-over-the-wo>). The Nile River is the longest in the world, passing through 11 countries, from Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the south, flowing north through Kenya, Uganda, Eritrea, South Sudan, Sudan and Ethiopia to end in Egypt, where it empties into the Eastern Mediterranean. Some of the northern countries are among the driest on earth, particularly Egypt, which has dominated use of the Nile. But in recent years Egypt's control has been threatened by other countries pushing for a greater share of the river, as with Ethiopia's proposal for the Renaissance Dam. Meanwhile, global warming, expected to bring more drought; a ballooning population needing more water and food; and increasing development promise still greater demand and environmental stress on the river.

"Everyone is freaked out about survival and water resources," says Girgis. "We wanted to find a way outside of the water sphere and see what they share culturally along this river. ... What we were trying to do was contribute to the way people feel about each other and channel this change into a conversation about actual issues."

Despite the strife inside some of these countries and the tension between them, Girgis believes the hostility is not yet insurmountable.

"After you kill my cousin, music is not going to change the way I relate to you," he says. "But in the case of the Nile this music could play an important role because the relationship had not reached that kind of conflict. ... Once there is trust and empathy you can start to put your heads together and solve your difficulties."

Girgis and Hadero spent more than a year researching the Nile Basin and its vast range of musical styles, most of them little known outside their area. Different countries and regions have different tuning and scales, different rhythms, languages and instruments. Some are more influenced by Arabic music; others are more African. They looked for musicians with strong traditional skills but open minds. To ensure a cooperative spirit and avoid accusations of one country dominating, there was no leader — all the music was created communally.

"There's no song that isn't touched by more than one hand," says Hadero. "Even if there's a particular person spearheading a song, other people's ideas are all over it."

In one early session, 18 musicians paired up repeatedly in what Girgis calls musical speed dating, experimenting and improvising with several partners.

“Musically it’s very difficult,” says Girgis. “It takes a lot of time and work in order to find a sound, to where you almost can’t tell where the song is from anymore. It’s what the Nile Basin would sound like if it were one country.”

The group made its debut in Aswan, Egypt, in the beginning of 2013 and has performed around Egypt and in five other African countries. An album, *Aswan* (<http://www.nileproject.org/music/aswan/>), has been featured on “best of” lists on NPR and the world music magazine *Songlines* (<http://songlines.co.uk/>). Members have changed in the two years since their launch; the 13 singers and musicians visiting Miami come from Egypt, Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda and Burundi.

Saturday’s event will include a performance on the beach by Miami choreographer Dale Andree, director of the National Water Dance project (<http://www.miamiherald.com/entertainment/ent-columns-blogs/jordan-levin/article1962557.html>), which uses dance to focus attention on water scarcity, and fellow choreographers Delma Iles and Michelle Grant-Murray. Andree’s efforts are among the few local arts projects focused on water issues; the next is Fundarte’s Climakaze Miami (http://www.fundarte.us/fundarte_event.php?id=203), a creative conference slated for April 10-12.

Andree is inspired by the way the Nile Project has combined musical creativity with activism. “I still believe there’s value in awareness through art,” she says. “But I am trying to find how to expand that meaning through more action.”

Just as important as the music are the Nile Project’s educational programs, in which they work with schools and community groups to inspire them to do their own environmental work. That aspect of the group – and the connection between water issues on the Nile and in Florida – attracted MDC Live executive director Kathryn Garcia.

“I was drawn to this as an opportunity for our students and the community to understand water sustainability as a global issue,” Garcia says. “I find the cross border collaboration this project embodies really inspiring ... to take it beyond music and brainstorm together to come up with solutions. With problems this complex, there’s no one answer.”

The group will give presentations to music, international relations and social environment classes. They’ll also take part in a dinner and brainstorming session with MDC faculty and students. It’s organized by Colleen Ahern-Hettich, head of the college’s Earth Ethics Institute (<http://www.earthethicsinstitute.org/>), which does environmental programs and trains faculty to

incorporate environmental and sustainability issues into MDC courses.

Some of the water problems facing South Florida, such as sea level rise and Everglades restoration, are different from those confronting the Nile region. But Ahern-Hettich says we can learn from the Nile Project's tenacity and cooperative approach.

"We need to solve these massive problems with creativity and hope," she says. "We really don't know how to create a sustainable future. No one knows. It will take everyone bringing their ideas to the table. That's the key to bringing the students to people like the Nile Project, they may have an inspiration or idea. You have to be actively engaged."

IF YOU GO

What: The Nile Project

When: 8 p.m. Saturday Jan. 24

Where: North Beach Bandshell, 7275 Collins Ave., Miami Beach


Info: \$25 at 305-237-3010 or mdclivearts.org (<http://mdclivearts.org/performances/>)

What: National Water Dance

When: 5 p.m. Saturday

Where: The beach behind the North Beach Bandshell

Info: free, nationalwaterdance.org (<http://se.nationalwaterdance.org/>)

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