

An Interview with CAPMT 2016 Commissioned Composer Winner Saad Haddad

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Editor's note:

At the request of the author and composer, this interview has only been truncated and not changed. It reflects the original conversation between Craig Richey and Saad Haddad and is therefore a direct transcription with minimal edits.



Saad Haddad and Craig Richey

On a blisteringly hot day in July, Saad Haddad and I escaped the heat in a Toluca Lake diner to talk about his career, his creative process, and the piece he is writing to be premiered at the CAPMT Conference in October.

Craig Richey: Tell me a bit about where you are from and your background.

Saad Haddad: I am originally born in Augusta, GA actually, but then we moved here when I was about four, so I am basically raised in California. My dad is from Amman, Jordan and my mom is from Beirut, Lebanon, and they immigrated here when they were pretty young. As a first generation American, I went to public school and then to USC, and then straight to Juilliard right after.

CR: What was your musical training as a child, your instrument of focus?

SH: When I was seven years old and I was in the second grade, I had a teacher who had us do these typewriting reports. Each month they had a different category, so one is science, one is literature, one is music ... for music we had all these picture books in the library, and I saw the book about Mozart and thought 'this guy is five years old and he wrote his first piece, and I'm already seven ... so I should get moving!'

CR: (laughing) And you hadn't been studying an instrument?

SH: No no, I didn't even know! But by the time I was seven, I knew I wanted to be a composer and after that I started taking piano lessons — after begging my parents for months!

CR: Interesting, because a two-part question I had for you was one: when did you decide to become a composer, which you just answered, and two: do you feel

compelled to write music and if so, what compels you, how do you describe that for yourself?

SH: In the beginning I wanted to do something different, I do remember that. I'm not sure why it was music. I still don't know that. In my house we didn't really listen to classical music particularly. I mean we listened to a lot of Bee Gees and 80s music and Michael Jackson, which I still love. I've listened to that 'til now, but in terms of classical music, I don't really know why I got into it. Maybe because of film music, like a lot of other composers.

CR: You mean listening to music in film when you're a kid, paying attention to that?

SH: Right. You know, like Star Wars or any of those iconic film scores. But, I wanted to have my own voice as I was going forward.

CR: And so your first venture into composing, when thinking of a career path, it was more towards film composing?

SH: Yeah, early on. I mean actually I didn't even know it was a real career.

CR: Film composing?

SH: Or any kind of composing! I thought all composers were dead! (we laugh). It wasn't really until high school in my freshman, sophomore year where I realized it could be a career. I got accepted to this program with the LA Philharmonic. I don't know if you know about it, but they've been doing it for about ten years now and I was in the first class of those four ... they picked four high school composers.

CR: And what's the name of the program?

SH: It's called LA Philharmonic Composer Fellowship Program, so it's part of the umbrella of YOLO, the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles. I was doing high school and that at the same time. It was every other Saturday and we had lessons with Steven Stucky and A. J. McCaffrey, who was a doctorate student at USC at the time. That's when I first realized it could be a real thing — the lessons every other week with top composers, and every other month we would have a reading of one of our pieces by members of the LA Philharmonic and at the end of each year we had a piece played by the LA Philharmonic in Disney Hall.

CR: How wonderful for them to know, as I hope they do, that something like that can be that important and influential that's the hope of creating something like that right?

SH: Yes! And now the four of us that were in my class are graduating, getting out of school and doing it for real, and it almost feels like a big responsibility not to fail them.

CR: So I also had a question about your composing process. Would you talk about from where you draw inspiration?

SH: Recently I've been kind of doing this Arabic music thing a lot of it was based out of trying to meet in the middle between my interests and my family, especially the older generations, who don't even know what it means to have a career

in music. And so I was talking to a lot of these people, especially the older folks, and they're telling me about these really old generation singers: Oum Kalthoum and Farid al-Atrash, for example. I knew about this music, but I didn't know in depth because I didn't listen to it all the time. So I start watching and listening to these things on YouTube and I thought 'there is a lot of stuff in here that I don't really hear in the classical world at all' and they use classical, you know, traditional western instruments: they use strings, they use percussion, they use winds. I mean it's very similar actually, and they have a singer in front of them like an opera star, like a Maria Callas type figure and I'm thinking 'this is classical music.' After that I asked myself 'how do you notate this kind of music and how do you transmit it?', and that's how I start working with individual players. So for example, the last orchestral piece I wrote, the Milwaukee Symphony played it and it's all about the strings basically: how do I make a string section sound like one of those Arabic string sections? And I know there are a couple things they did that western orchestras don't do. Number one the bowing is not completely the same when they play. Number two, the gestures — so they would play the same kind of melodic line, but each one of them is doing it a little differently, and the end result is, I mean you know what the melody is, it's very clear, but you hear these little gradations of change — it's not perfectly in sync. And so that's number one 'how do I do that?'

CR: That must give it a very organic textural feel...

SH: I mean to me it sounds more human. When you hear these great composers, when you hear Mahler, late nineteenth century figures, it sounds like the work of a genius...

CR: Yeah...

SH: because it sounds so perfect. It's intentional like that. But with this kind of traditional Arabic music, to me it feels like they're really trying to reach out and grab your heart — the audience — when you watch these YouTube videos, every couple of minutes, people are yelling and screaming to repeat the verse so a ten-minute song can become a two-hour song! And I think that's part of that human connection. You know, pop music obviously has that kind of way of doing it, by merging that with dance music, you can bop your head to it. I get that part of it, and Arabic music has a lot of that too, it has a lot of dance music, but the other part of it that I'm really interested in, at least right now, is how to create that kind of musical ecstasy kind of feeling without reverting to minimalism.

CR: Another thing I wanted us to discuss a bit is the importance of form in your compositions.

SH: You have to guide the listener ... most of the time they are going to listen to it once, and that's it. You gotta get them there first and then if they like it, they'll listen to it again and see all the gradations. And I think that's where form comes in.

CR: When I listen to your music it is clear to me that these broader inspirational ideas are very well organized, with a real craft and understanding of form, which gives it more strength, more accessibility, and a more powerful delivery.

SH: Honestly I didn't really buy it until I went to Juilliard to study with John Corigliano.

CR: You didn't buy...?

SH: The whole idea of form, especially in this culture where everything is so instantaneous, but when I started studying with John he had me do these ... I don't know if you know about the graphs that he does — he sketches out the whole piece before he even writes a note. If it's a forty-five-minute symphony and he has a year to write it, the first three months he just spends drawing it out. He uses colors, he indicates texture and energy, he has a time line, he has the minutes down, he writes down the events that he wants. So he has all this mapped out before he starts writing anything. So I started adopting that idea and said, what if the beginning of this orchestral piece is extremely, for lack of a better term, modal, Arabic modal, using mostly middle-eastern scales and showcasing the strings throughout the first couple of minutes, and then the last couple of minutes it is using more western triadic harmonies, moving towards a climax that is cacophonous and by the end you are back to the Arabic world of harmonies, and that's how I did it my way. And this was a complete change because it expanded the

ideas I wanted to deal with compared to when I was just writing down on paper.

CR: Say a few words about the piece you are writing for the CAPMT Commission.

SH: So the name of this piece is Dohree. It means — (pause) — I feel like a lot of my work up to this point has been super serious (laughing) so I wanted to do something lighter. It's basically a Debussy trio and with this instrumentation (Flute, Viola, Harp) feels a bit more on the lighter side and in Arabic it means 'My Turn'. Basically it's very simple. Three movements. Actually none of my major works have been in movements so far, so I wanted to do something longer, about fifteen minutes. Each movement is a different instrument's turn. The first movement is the flute's turn, then viola's, then harp's — and each one is a feature and then the other two are backing it up. And it's similar to how you would have a singer in front of an ensemble except that it's always their turn! But what if it's a more intimate setting and each player had their own turn? So it starts with this simple idea

and then I have to layer it, figure out what I want the flute to do soloistically, and then how is that different than being a 'back-up' player in the other two movements? Same thing with the viola and the harp. What is a harp when it is a solo versus a background? These are the questions I have to answer. And not only how it is a background instrument but it has to do that *twice*, two different movements, and it can't be the same. I think I have it figured out with the flute. The viola is a little trickier. There are certain things you can do on the viola that are obvious, like pizzicato versus arco. But the harp is a little less obvious, because the only thing it can really do is pluck, unless you start getting into bows, bowing strings, or knocking on the harp, things like that.

CR: It will be so wonderful to hear it after hearing you describe it.

— We look forward to hearing more
from Saad Haddad
in a future issue of **CAPMT Connect**.