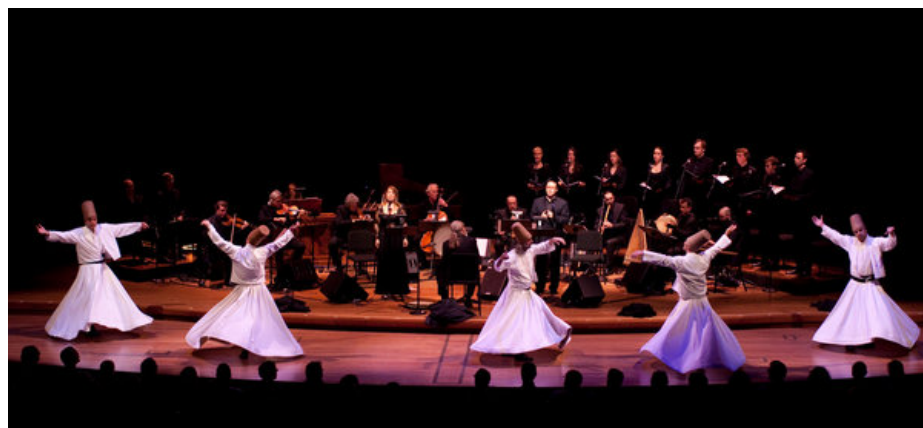


MUSIC REVIEW

# Wresting Bach's Music From Its Western Moorings



Brian Harkin for The New York Times

Passio-Compassio Whirling Mevlevi dervishes joining the Modern String Quartet, Vocanima Köln and Ensemble Sarband at Alice Tully Hall.

By ALLAN KOZINN

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Lincoln Center has been exploring the idea of transcendence in its [White Light Festival](#) this year by way of early and modern works from the classical music canon, as well as several theatrical offerings in which music was a central component. Whether each performance proved a portal to transcendence is a matter for individual listeners to decide; the ones I heard succeeded more often than not. And you could hardly have hoped for a finale better suited to the theme than "Passio-Compassio," the [Ensemble Sarband](#) concert that closed the festival on Saturday evening at Alice Tully Hall.

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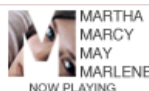
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Ensemble Sarband is a German group in which European and Middle Eastern musicians collaborate, using the music, instruments and vocal styles of both worlds to perform sacred and secular music from the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. The Jewish part of its repertory was addressed on Friday evening; not the most thoughtful scheduling, since observant Jews could not attend because of the Sabbath.

For the Saturday evening program, the ensemble was joined by the [Modern String Quartet](#), Vocanima Köln and five [whirling Mevlevi dervishes](#) for arias and choruses from

Bach's sacred music, along with Syrian Orthodox and Byzantine (Christian) chant and Sufi meditations from the mystical side of Islam.

The Sarband approach is elegant, though not timid in its wresting of Bach's music from its Western moorings, but Vladimir Ivanoff, the group's director and arranger, has an unflinching instinct for finding musical ground where his transformations seem natural.

"Können Tränen meiner Wangen nichts erlangen" ("If the tears on my cheeks achieve nothing"), from Bach's "St. Matthew Passion," for example, begins with a repeating figure in which ascending melodic leaps and dotted rhythms are set against a descending chord

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progression to create a tension that magnifies the text. But when played by the strange combination of an Arabic fiddle, saxophone, frame drums, zithers, cello and harpsichord, Bach’s melody sounds decidedly Turkish.

[Fadia el-Hage](#)’s ornamented vocal line, sung in Arabic with a throaty timbre, pushed the piece further eastward, as did the free-spirited instrumental improvisations that followed. Yet if you knew the Bach original, you heard it clearly within the virtuosic filigree.

In other “St. Matthew” excerpts later in the program — in “Wenn ich einmal soll scheiden” (“When once I must depart”) and “Erbarme dich” (“Have mercy”) — Ms. el-Hage began in a Western style, singing in the upper range of her contralto voice, with a touch of vibrato, and in German. As the arrangements unfolded, she switched to Arabic, and her earthier style, using a combination of Baroque and Arabic embellishments.

Mustafa Dogan Dikmen, the male vocalist, did not venture into Western style but was a powerful interpreter in both Bach and Middle Eastern pieces. The ensembles collaborating with Sarband made decisive contributions as well. When Mr. Ivanoff wanted to pull the Bach pieces back into the Western world, the Modern String Quartet provided the right sounds, but its players also offered inventively jazz-tinged solos, as did Sarband’s two saxophonists, Tim Martin and Hugo Siegmeth.

The ecstatic whirling of the dervishes — white-robed initiates into Sufism who dance with their heads inclined to one side and their arms extended as a form of devotion — was an enlightening touch during a pair of Turkish traditional pieces and the program’s finale, [Ms. el-Hage’s moving account of Bach’s “Erbarme Dich.”](#)

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