



FES FESTIVAL OF SACRED MUSIC

Simon Broughton visits Morocco's atmospheric sacred music festival, which is about to celebrate its 20th anniversary

There are two good reasons to go to Fes. First the city itself, one of the best preserved in the Arab world and the cultural and spiritual heart of Morocco. And second the festival, which draws on the city's spiritual traditions and presents spiritual music from all around the world in imposing and exquisite locations. The music this year ranges from Indian *tabla* player Zakir Hussain, in Morocco for the first time, to Chicago blues legend Buddy Guy. The definition of sacred music is refreshingly loose. When Angélique Kidjo performed, she simply said, "for me all music is sacred," and launched into her regular set. It's also worth noting that the quality of the sound reproduction is extremely high, which isn't always the case at festivals around the world.

The Fes Festival was started in 1994 by Moroccan writer and anthropologist Faouzi

Skali – it was a deliberate response to the polarisation between the Western and Arab world after the first Gulf War in 1991. "Muslims had a stereotypical view of the West and vice versa," he says. "I wanted to create a place where people could meet and discover the beauty of each religion and culture. So in Fes people could see another image of Islam." Skali is a practicing Sufi and this mystical side of Islam has a wide following in Morocco.

The idea of creating an encounter like this is a very Sufi one, but can a music festival and the Fes Forum, which brings speakers from all over the world, have any impact on the fraught politics of the Middle East?

"The fact that there is now this place in the Islamic world where everyone can come together is already something," he counters. "And it's not new. In the eighth century Andalusia had this diversity of cultures

and religions in a creative civilisation with poetry, art, music, science and spirituality. We need that now in our time."

The headline concerts take place at the Bab Makina, a former gate into the royal palace. With a keyhole-like arch in the sandstone walls of the city, it's become an iconic

location where up to 5,000 people can hear, this year, artists like Roberto Alagna, Youssou N'Dour with a homage to Nelson Mandela, and Iraqi star Kazem Al Saher. It's also the setting for the specially commissioned opening concert, a theatrical and musical presentation based on the Persian poem, *The Conference of the Birds*.

But for me, the best concerts take place on a much smaller stage in the shade of a spreading Barbary oak in the garden courtyard of the Batha Museum. Performances there include flamenco guitarist Tomatito, Irish band Altan, sacred music of the Provençal Gypsies, and Malian singer Rokia Traoré. With the music and birdsong beneath the tree, the courtyard's tiled floor and walls, it really feels like a holy place. Having heard so much about the atmosphere, Prince Charles, with his spiritual interests, was keen to experience it. For security reasons he



Main image: performance on the main Bab Makina stage
 Clockwise from left: Coumbane Mint Ely Warakane under the Batha oak tree; Nights in the Medina concert in Dar Mokri; Algerian group El Gusto; Hamadsha Sufis at the Sufi Night; musical instruments in the *medina*



Suzanne Lecomte

couldn't come to a public concert during the festival, but got himself a private one arranged.

The festival's artistic programmer is Alain Weber. When he took over in 2010, he initiated the Nights in the Medina concerts. These are held in palatial *riad*s in the labyrinthine old city as well as the Batha courtyard.

"Hearing appropriate music in these venues is magic," Weber says, "and people come and see music they might never hear at home, just because of the location." It certainly gets music into the heart of this beautiful city. Wandering through the alleyways from one venue to another or heading home in the cool night air is unforgettable. This year, *medina* performances include the sung poetry of Moroccan *melhoun*, Sephardic singer Mor Kabasi and a Palestinian ensemble. It's politically impossible to get an Israeli-born artist and Palestinians to perform together in the same festival, but it happens in Fes.



All these concerts are ticketed events. The prices are reasonable by European standards, but are expensive for the locals – a pass for the whole ten days is around €300. They seem to be pitched at well-to-do Fassis (the inhabitants of Fes) coming back to the city for a break from their jobs in Casablanca. But each night there's a free concert in the vast Bab Boujeloud, on the edge of the medina. It's a wonderful atmosphere with thousands of enthusiastic spectators and tasty food stalls.

Fes is a glorious city – a UNESCO Heritage Site – and much more relaxed than Marrakech and less touristy. The highlight is the medina, a maze of lanes and alleys heading up and down over several kilometres. One of the best surviving medieval cities in the world, it can only be negotiated on foot, or donkey. It's endlessly fascinating with palaces and tea houses, bazaars and *souks* and crafts

workshops of every kind. There are exquisite *madrasas* (old religious schools), which you can visit, and mosques and shrines, which thanks to French colonial rules, are only open to Muslims. And if you've got a half-decent sense of direction, it's also not difficult to get to know your way around. Over the past decade or so, a large number of beautiful *riad* hotels have opened in the medina. If you have the money, these are the best places to stay. And there are cheaper options too, of course, in the old and new city.

The place to end the evenings is in the Dar Tazi gardens where there's a Sufi Night – also free – and locals and visitors mix. There are dozens of Sufi brotherhoods in Morocco, each with their own style of music. The Aissawa, Hamadsha and Gnawa are wild and flamboyant with drums, trumpets, oboes and plucked *gimbri*, while the Tijaniyya, Skali and Derkaouia are more restrained with sober chanting and subdued percussion. Other groups worship with music of a distinctly Arab-Andalusian flavour, which also permeates the architecture. The city and the festival fit each other perfectly. ♦

✦ **DATES** The 20th edition of the Fes Festival of Sacred Music takes place June 13-21
 ✦ **ONLINE** www.fesfestival.com

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