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Arts

MUSIC

Playing for the Planet unites activist musicians

Activist musicians sound a note of caution

By **Andrew Gilbert** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 11, 2011



Mehmet Ali Sanlikol is one of the musicians performing at the Playing for the Planet concert.

Warren Senders figures that a global crisis requires an international response.

Looking to take up arms in the fight against global warming, the New England Conservatory faculty member decided to put his expansive network of musical connections to use. Since presenting the first Playing for the Planet concert in October of 2009, Senders has produced a series of stylistically expansive, instrumentally thematic fund-raisers for 350.org, an organization on the frontlines in the struggle to

limit greenhouse emissions.

Billed as “World Strings Against Climate Change,” the fifth Playing for the Planet concert takes place tonight at Emmanuel Church, and features a triple bill of Mehmet Ali Sanlikol and the Dünya Ensemble, the South Indian veena master Durga Krishnan, and the celebrated classical guitarists Eliot Fisk and Zaira Meneses.

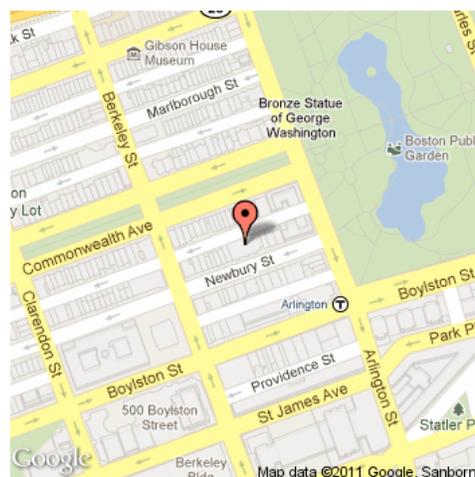
“The premise behind all of this is that climate change doesn’t know any national boundaries,” says Senders, an expert in North Indian Hindustani music. “These are musicians who work in traditional idioms. When you perform music like that you’re establishing a link with someone who lived centuries ago. And you have to imagine that people 600 years from now will interact with that same tradition. You could say addressing climate change is artistically selfish. We have an investment in the future.”

Founded by author Bill McKibben, 350.org is an environmental activist organization that takes its name from the upper limit of atmospheric carbon dioxide deemed safe by scientists (current levels exceed 388 parts per million). However one evaluates the threat of global warming, there’s no denying that Senders possesses a gift for assembling



JESSE WEINER

Zaira Meneses & Eliot Fisk.



Larger map / directions →

**PLAYING FOR THE
PLANET: World Strings
Against Climate Change,
Mehmet Ali Sanlikol and
the Dünya Ensemble,
Eliot Fisk, Zaira Meneses,**

fascinating programs.

Friday's concert brings together an array of artists committed to cross-cultural musical exchanges, though they'll perform three separate sets. In his exploration of music from the Ottoman era, Turkish-born composer and string expert Sanlikol has devoted the past decade to explicating the connections between the various peoples who lived for centuries under Ottoman dominion. He's performing on oud with a distilled version of his Dünya Ensemble featuring Robert Labaree on çeng, or Middle Eastern harp, and Cem Mutlu on percussion (with all three musicians contributing vocals).

Trained as a pianist in the European classical tradition and originally drawn to Boston in 1993 by a scholarship to Berklee, Sanlikol spent the early part of his career focusing on composition and jazz. A few years after graduating from NEC with a master's degree in jazz composition, he experienced an epiphany playing the board game Risk while listening repeatedly to a recording of Ottoman Janissary music. The melodies became lodged in his ear, provoking an investigation into his musical birthright (Isis Press recently published his book on Janissary bands, "The Musician Mehters").

Sanlikol released his latest project on Tuesday, an extraordinary double album "A Story of the City: Constantinople, Istanbul" that finds continuities across a millennium, from Byzantium and the Crusades through the Ottoman reign and the flourishing Jewish, Greek, and Armenian communities of the Near East. Featuring a cast of some three-dozen musicians, that project showcases the Dünya Ensemble at its most expansive. Friday's concert presents Dünya stripped down, though with a similarly encompassing sensibility.

"Crossover is not even what we're doing," says Sanlikol, who teaches at Emerson College and Brown University. "I am crossover. I am a bridge. With this trio we're able to play Ottoman classical music, folk music, and even take some pop songs, pare them down and play them unplugged."

Durga Krishnan

Emmanuel Church, 15 Newbury St.,
Boston MA 781-396-0734.

<http://www.warrenders.com>

Date of concert: tonight at 7

Ticket price: Tickets: \$20

Durga Krishnan, another tireless educator who has collaborated widely with jazz musicians, is also committed to working across genres. Performing in a duo with Gaurishankar Chandrashekar, an expert on mridangam (a two-headed drum), she's presenting a set of heavily improvised Carnatic music on the veena, a plucked lute that plays an essential role in the classical South Indian tradition. Eager to participate in *Playing for the Planet*, she feels that environmental consciousness is inextricably linked to her music.

"I belong to the Hindu religion where we worship the five elements of nature as god," Krishnan says. "One of the pieces we'll be performing is from a group of compositions that are prayers to these five elements. There's a deep connection between the kind of music that I perform and nature. It's very important to do whatever we can."

While not necessarily flowing from religious practice, the eminent classical guitarists Eliot Fisk and Zaira Meneses also find powerful resonances between music and nature, connections they'll draw upon specifically at Friday's recital.

"Zaira plays this Leo Brouwer piece, 'Cuban Landscape With Bells,' a very nature-oriented composition," notes Fisk, a longtime NEC professor who has greatly expanded the repertoire for the guitar. "And any time you play something by Bach you feel in touch with the order and detail and structure of the natural universe. Music really does have relevance when experiencing the miracle that is our planet and seeing what might be done to save it."

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