

Syrian Refugee Musicians Sell Out Shows in Germany

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BERLIN — At the neoclassical Concert House in Berlin's Gendarmenmarkt, busts of German composers Beethoven, Bach and Handel looked on as the 65 musicians took their seats for a sold-out weekend concert.

The Syrian Expat Philharmonic Orchestra settling in to play represents a much more recent chapter in German history, consisting entirely of professional musicians who fled civil war in their homeland to seek refuge in Europe.

Founded in Germany a year ago by Raed Jazbeh, who plays the double bass and acts as the artistic director, it has since performed concerts across the country and soon plans to tour Sweden.

All the members of the orchestra are classically trained, and most studied for at least five years at the Higher Institute of Music in Damascus. Their recent concert fused together a mix of classical European music, classical Arab music and Arabic folkloric music. It was organized by KulturLeben Berlin, a non-profit that organizes concerts for people with low incomes in the German capital.

The musicians' hope is that their concerts will give the European audience a reference point to understand Syrian music and culture.

"I feel that it is my responsibility as a musician to present our culture, our music and show that we can be together in peace in Europe," said Mohamad Fityan, who plays the Ney, a type of traditional Arabic flute. "I think the best way to do that is through music."

Fityan, an Aleppo native, fled to Germany in 2015 and was quickly granted asylum. Others settled in other countries around Europe, and when the musicians come together for concerts it is often an emotional reunion.

"I never imagined that I would be here in Europe, playing with a whole orchestra of Syrian musicians — and that we are all living in Europe. I never imagined that," said Rasha Rizk, a soprano soloist who now lives in Paris.

More than a million people fleeing war and poverty entered Europe last year. Syrians were the largest single group.

The musicians tire, however, of seeing the images of their country at war — the reason for their flight to Europe — and other negative portrayals of Syrians and hope that the concerts can help show a glimpse of themselves in normal times.

"This is us," said Ghassan Alaboud, who guest directs the orchestra for the Berlin concerts. "This is Syria and these are the Syrian people."