

Rahim AlHaj

and the Kontras Quartet
with Christopher Polen (bass)
Letters From Iraq

Saturday, February 16, 2019
7:30 pm



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RAHIM ALHAJ

Oud Musician and Composer

and

KONTRAS QUARTET

FRANÇOIS HENKINS

Violin

HENRY ZHENG

Violin

BEN WEBER

Viola

JEAN HATMAKER

Cello

with

CHRISTOPHER POLEN

Bass

Saturday, February 16, 2019, at 7:30 pm
Hancher Auditorium, The University of Iowa

LETTERS FROM IRAQ

Last Time We Will Fly Bird

Eastern Love

Unspoken Word

Fly Home

Forbidden Attraction

Friendships

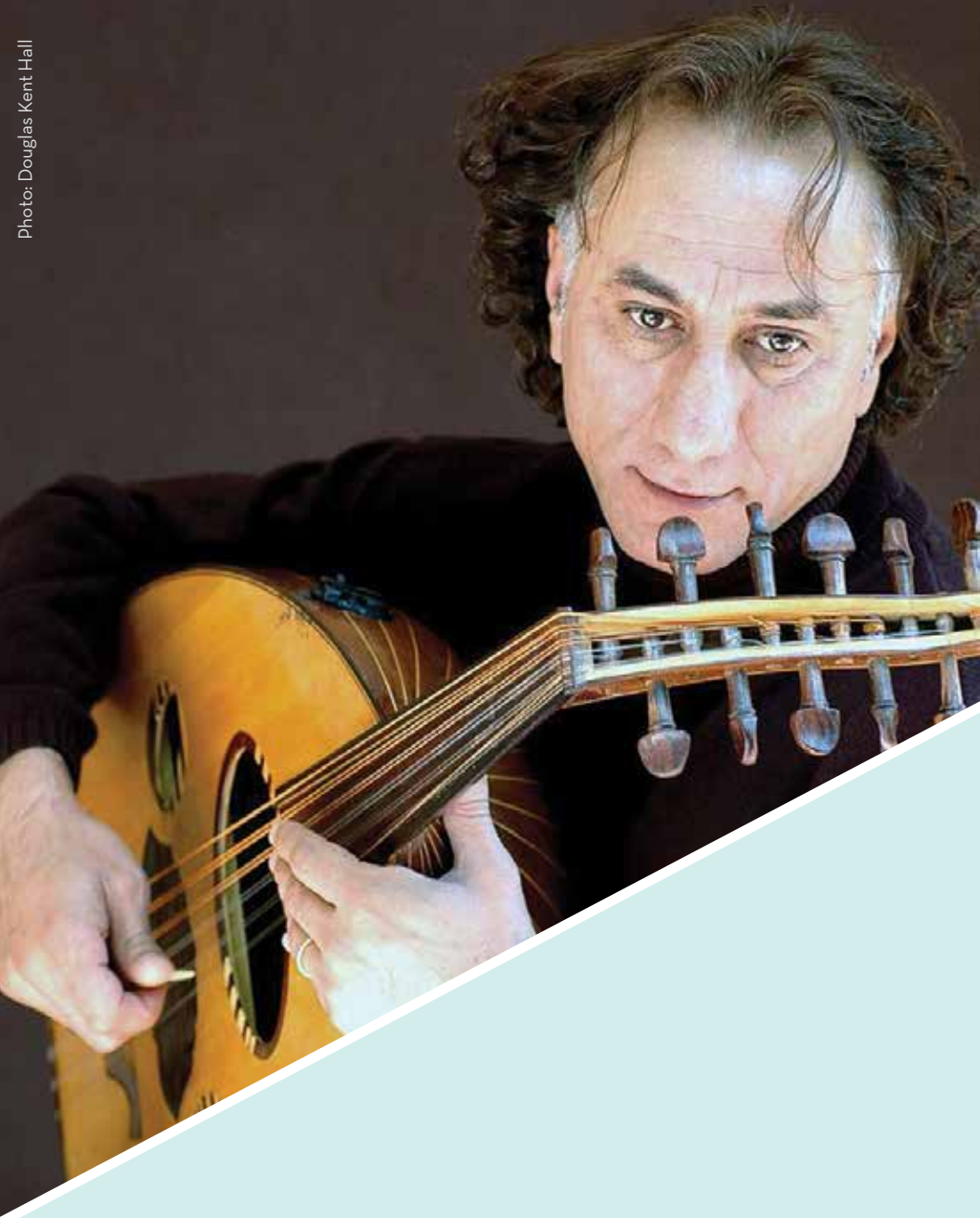
Going Home

Running Boy

Warm Voice

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THE PROGRAM

LETTERS FROM IRAQ

LAST TIME WE WILL FLY BIRD

Many teenage boys kept and flew homing pigeons before the war. The birds lived in coops atop the flat roofs of typical Baghdadi houses. While a boy was traveling to a release point on a hill a few miles from his home, a car bomb exploded and blew his house up, leaving only a pile of rubble. His girlfriend next door was at home. She heard the blast and ran outside. Her alibi for the time they spent together was always that she had to hang laundry to dry, while he would say he was going to the roof to take care of his birds. Now he had two sorrows: the rooftop of his house was the only place where he could meet his girlfriend, and the pigeons circled above not knowing where to land. The oud line paints the realization of their loss, while the violin's high figure describes the birds flying, the essence of their wing movements, their circling high above the spot where the only home they knew was no more. The feelings of loss circle, too.

EASTERN LOVE

The teenage boy and girl fell in love at first sight. Their families lived near each other in what had long been a peaceful, predominantly Shi'ite neighborhood of Baghdad, but the boy and girl could only meet in secret and never for long. After Saddam's dictatorship fell, streets and markets became unsafe, and the days and nights alike filled with fear. The girl's Sunni family had to flee: there were bombings, gunfire was heard daily, and former Sunni homes in the neighborhood were arson-gutted. Her parents had no real choice; their only alternative was death. Several years have passed, but still, every time the boy passes the house where she lived, his tears flow uncontrollably. They had both known all along that their dream of marriage was impossible. This is not an imagined tale, it really happened.

UNSPOKEN WORD

It opens sweetly with an Iraqi lullaby. Within its lyrical line a little boy walks close beside his mother in the open-air marketplace. An explosion occurs, and suddenly his mother is nowhere to be seen. The boy only wants his mom, his lullaby. AlHaj captures this moment as the boy searches everywhere for his mom. He looks around in all directions, he becomes more and more frantic. He does not know yet that his mother is dead. All he knows is that he cannot find her.

FLY HOME

Some days are good. Sometimes a week's quiet is undisturbed. Life settles to some degree, and the people can see a better day coming. After terrible times, people want very much to do things that are more hopeful, more joyful. The streets come alive. Iraqi children, men, and women, whole families enjoy a moment together, sitting in a café, eating in a restaurant. These moments of normalcy are gratefully received. There are countless stories of a kind of relief: "...the car blew up right in front of me, and I felt the heat." And "I was almost..." is heard from everyone. "The explosion happened, I was so lucky." Living is solely a moment without destruction, death, or injury. It may not be possible to imagine how Iraqis live their everyday lives: day-by-day, minute-by-minute. It is not one day at a time, but one moment at a time. Normalcy and hope will certainly return.



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THE PROGRAM

FORBIDDEN ATTRACTION

During the sectarian violence, a Shi'ite man and his Sunni love could no longer see one another. They had to live in separate districts, each bristling with weapons and fear. The man muses, "How can I say aloud that I love this Sunni woman after all this violence, brutality, these car-bombings and ugliness? How can I tell my family, my tribe? But I cannot! We will not give up our love just because this destruction is happening all around us!" Everywhere in the world there are stories like this. The bass viola and cello, representing society, play low, disturbed patterns, and the violin wails in sorrow. The oud responds with the same feeling. Finally, they remember together how they began.

FRIENDSHIPS

Composed by Rahim AlHaj for his friend Nazar Jaber, formerly the first chair violinist for the Iraqi National Symphony. Selecting a maqam (mode) that Jaber liked, AlHaj created a very playful composition utilizing call and response patterns throughout the piece, between the various strings in the quintet and oud. When AlHaj returned to Iraq in 2004 after the war had begun, he went to visit Jaber and found he looked very different, with a long white beard; almost unrecognizable from earlier years when he knew him. He was no longer playing music. Nazar said, "When my son Ahmed was born, we struggled in very hard times. We had no heat, and the baby was very cold and shaking as we had no heat or electricity. I was so desperate that I broke apart my violin and burned it for some heat, and never played again."

GOING HOME

Rahim AlHaj returned to Iraq in 2014 after a decade. Riyadh Neama tells of returning to Baghdad from exile after the U.S. invasion because he had suffered a constant yearning to go home: "I am far from it still, but I am going home. I will touch the ground of home again. I am filled with beautiful and horrible memories alike." AlHaj was back in his childhood home. But, what was once home does not feel at all like home now. Heavily armed American soldiers are in the streets; tanks guard principal intersections. He realized that Baghdad, was no longer his home and Albuquerque, New Mexico, was. "Until that moment, I had missed the Baghdad of memory, but never since then," he recalls.

RUNNING BOY

AlHaj's nephew was born prematurely, and his legs never fully developed. One day around 2005, then-teenaged Fuad was having a haircut in a barbershop when an car bomb exploded very close by, followed immediately by automatic weapon fire. Everyone around him ran for shelter. He tried to run, too, but could not. He fell and couldn't stand up. There were sounds of crackling fire, bullets whizzing by, people screaming in anguish. He was sure he was going to die, and his life flashed before him—friends, brothers, sisters, parents—he was in a state of complete chaos and shock.

WARM VOICE

AlHaj often taught oud students in Baghdad, and this composition was written for one of those students. Often frustrated about students who were not taking their studies seriously, he worried that none of them would become musicians. He wrote this piece for them to have fun and be playful with their music. The melody moves from instrument to instrument, starting with the cello, then moving to viola and violins. Each of the instruments represent a different student, and AlHaj's oud interacts and has a dialog with each of them.



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ABOUT THE ARTISTS

RAHIM ALHAJ

LOUD MUSICIAN AND COMPOSER

Virtuoso oud musician and composer Rahim AlHaj was born in Baghdad, Iraq, and began playing the oud (the grandfather of all stringed instruments) at age nine. Early on, it was evident that he had a remarkable talent for playing the oud. AlHaj studied under the renowned Munir Bashir, considered by many to be the greatest oud player ever, and Salem Abdul-Kareem, at the Institute of Music in Baghdad, Iraq. AlHaj won various awards at the Conservatory and graduated in 1990 with a diploma in composition. He holds a degree in Arabic Literature from Mustansiriyah University in Baghdad.



Photo: Douglas Kent Hall

In 1991, after the first Gulf War, AlHaj was forced to leave Iraq due to his activism against the Saddam Hussein regime and began his life in Jordan and Syria. He moved to the U.S. in 2000 as a political refugee and has resided in Albuquerque, NM, ever since. In 2015, AlHaj was awarded the National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship, the highest honor for traditional arts in the USA.

AlHaj has performed around the globe (including Europe, China, India, Russia, Australia, and New Zealand) and is considered one of the finest oud players in the world. He has won many accolades and awards including two Grammy nominations. AlHaj has recorded and performed with other master musicians of varied backgrounds and styles including genre-busting American guitarist Bill Frisell, modern accordion innovator Guy Klucevsek, Indian sarod maestro Amjad Ali Khan and indy-rock pioneers REM. He has composed pieces for solo oud, string quartet, symphony, and beyond. Rahim's music delicately combines traditional Iraqi maqams with contemporary styling and influence. His compositions evoke the experience of exile from his homeland and of new beginnings in his adopted country. His pieces establish new concepts without altering the foundation of the traditional "Iraqi School of Oud."

AlHaj has released 12 CDs. His latest album, *One Sky* (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings), released in April 2018 is a call for friendship and features Iranian santour maestro Sourena Sefati. *Letters From Iraq* (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings) is a powerful musical meditation on consequences in a postwar reality, featuring oud, percussion, and string quintet. *Infinite Hope* (2015), with Indian sarod maestro Amjad Ali Khan, is a follow-up to their 2010 Grammy-nominated collaboration, *Ancient Sounds*, while *Journey* (2014) is a retrospective of AlHaj's music up to 2014, including a new track. *Little Earth* was released in 2010 to remarkable reviews. The two-CD project features AlHaj's original composition in collaboration with the likes of Frisell, Klucevsek, Peter Buck (REM), Maria de Barros, Liu Fang, Robert Mirabal, Hossein Omoumi, Santa Fe Guitar Quartet, Yacouba Sissoko, Stephen Kent, and many more including Little Earth Orchestra. Other releases include *Under The Rose* (2009) with Ottmar Liebert, Jon Gagan, and Barrett Martin, with all net proceeds benefitting Direct Aid Iraq; *Home Again* (2008), a tour de force of touching and evocative original compositions portraying his trip to Iraq after 13 years in exile; *When the Soul Is Settled: Music of Iraq* (2007) nominated for a Grammy in 2008; and earlier recordings include *Friendship: Oud and Sadaqa String Quartet* (2005), *The Second Baghdad* (2002), and the live CD *Iraqi Music in a Time of War* (2003).

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

KONTRAS QUARTET

The Kontras Quartet has been described as “a tightly crafted and beautiful instrument” (*CVNC Arts Journal*) and has been commended by *Gramophone* magazine for their “scrupulous shading and control” and “enjoyable musical personality” (*Fanfare* magazine). Kontras means “contrasts” in the Afrikaans language—fitting for a string ensemble whose colorful repertoire spans centuries, genres, and continents. The quartet's recent engagements include tours of South Africa and Switzerland; broadcasts on NPR's *Performance Today* and a three-month residency with Chicago's WFMT 98.7 FM; appearances on NBC and PBS; and sold-out performances in San Diego, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Telluride, Salt Lake City, Raleigh, and Arizona. The Kontras Quartet records for MSR Classics and DoubleTime Music, and have released three critically acclaimed albums, including the premiere recording of Dan Visconti's *Ramshackle Songs*. Kontras enjoys educational work of all kinds, and is in its fourth year as the professional quartet-in-residence at Western Michigan University.

FRANÇOIS HENKINS

VIOLIN

Having grown up in a highly musical family, violinist François Henkins distinguished himself at an early age by winning national chamber music and solo competitions in his native South Africa, and performing as guest soloist with the Johannesburg and Free State symphonies. He came to the United States with a full scholarship to the Interlochen Arts Academy, and continued his studies under Chicago Symphony Orchestra concertmaster Robert Chen, Los Angeles Philharmonic associate concertmaster Nathan Cole, and Renata Artman Knific. François has since traveled the world to appear at chamber music festivals such as the Musicorda Chamber Music Festival; the Stellenbosch National Chamber Music Competition, at which he was awarded a prize for his notable performance; and the Cleveland Orchestra's Kent/Blossom Music Festival, where he was awarded the Josef Gingold Award for his distinguished performance in chamber music. An experienced orchestral performer, François has worked under renowned conductors such as Bernard Haitink and Pierre Boulez in the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, the Chicago Sinfonietta, and the Johannesburg Philharmonic. François has a deep love of teaching and is currently on the faculty at Elmhurst College. He is also a founding member of the critically acclaimed Kontras Quartet.

HENRY ZHENG

VIOLIN

Violinist Henry Zheng celebrates a varied career as a recitalist, chamber musician, and orchestral player. His primary teachers include Janet Sung and Raymond B. Sidoti. Henry has also studied with Desirée Ruhstrat, Mathias Tacke, Robert Hanford, and Anne Shih, and has performed in master classes for Almita Vamos, Midori Gotō, Charles Rex, and the Parker Quartet. He has appeared on stage with many internationally acclaimed artists including Andrea Bocelli, Il Divo, Pete Townshend, Eddie Vedder, Billy Idol, Game of Thrones composer Ramin Djawadi, Amanda Palmer, and the Grand Theft Orchestra, Hanson the band, and has collaborated closely with the rock band King 810 (Flint, Michigan). As a chamber musician, Henry has made appearances at the Bowdoin Music Festival and Casalmaggiore Music Festival, and is a full-time member of Chicago-based ensemble Lakeshore Rush. An in-demand

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

orchestral musician, he has performed with the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra, Ars Viva Symphony Orchestra, Quad City Symphony Orchestra, Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra, Chicago Arts Orchestra, Oistrakh Symphony of Chicago, and many more. Henry has also served as concertmaster for the Chicago Classical Symphony Orchestra, DePaul Symphony and Chamber orchestras, and the Dakota Academy of Performing Arts Orchestra. He resides in Chicago with his girlfriend and their beloved cat, Tommy.

BEN WEBER

VIOLA

Violist Benjamin Weber has previously served as Principal Viola with the Rockford Symphony Orchestra and has performed with many of the orchestras around the Chicago area. He has performed recently with Barbra Streisand, Todd Rundgren, and Howard Levy. An avid chamber musician, he was a founding member of Crossing Borders Music and has often appeared with the ACM Palomar Ensemble as a guest. As a string educator, he is on the faculty at the Merit School of Music and has led guest clinics at high schools around the Chicago area. He received a bachelor's in music education from Illinois Wesleyan University in 2004 studying violin and viola with Michael Hining, and in 2008 he received a master's degree in viola performance from the Eastman School of Music where he studied with John Graham and Melissa Matson. He and his wife are proud parents of their young daughter, Mara.

JEAN HATMAKER

CELLO

Jean Hatmaker is a founding member of the Kontras Quartet, the internationally acclaimed quartet-in-residence at Western Michigan University, and former artists-in-residence with Chicago classical radio station WFMT. Known for their well-crafted performances, diverse programming, and accessible audience relations, Kontras Quartet has brought their message of inclusivity to concerts across the U.S., Europe, and Africa. In addition to classical concerts, KQ performs with bluegrass trio the Kruger Brothers, with whom they have appeared at festivals including Telluride, MerleFest, and IBMA Wide Open Bluegrass, as well as the *Late Show with David Letterman*. Kontras Quartet has released three commercial albums: *Lucid Dreamer* and *Roan Mountain Suite* with the Kruger Brothers on DoubleTime Records; and *Origins* on MSR Records.

Ms. Hatmaker is a passionate teacher, holding faculty positions at Oak Park String Academy, Lake Forest College, and Elmhurst College, where she also founded the Elmhurst College Cello Choir. With Kontras Quartet, she is in-residence at Western Michigan University as a chamber ensemble coach and performance lecturer. Combining her passions for music and dance, Ms. Hatmaker has worked on numerous collaborations with dance companies, including Hubbard Street Dance Company, Youth Empowerment Performance Project, the DuPage Dance Academy, and the NewArt School of Ballet, for which she arranged and performed original productions of *The Nutcracker* and *Alice In Wonderland*, with the Kontras Quartet.

Ms. Hatmaker has an extensive background of orchestral playing, having been principal cellist of the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, Western Piedmont Symphony, and other regional orchestras throughout the Midwest. She received both a bachelor (with high distinction) and master of music degrees in

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

cello performance from Indiana University, in the studios of Helga Winold and János Starker. She plays on a European cello of unknown provenance, circa 1880.

CHRISTOPHER POLEN

BASS

Bassist Christopher Polen performs regularly with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, and Chicago Philharmonic. He currently holds positions with the Quad City Symphony Orchestra, Rockford Symphony Orchestra, and has been appointed Principal Bass in the Dubuque Symphony Orchestra for the 2018–2019 season. As a chamber musician, he has performed with many artists including the Argus Quartet, Chai Collaborative Ensemble, and Leon Fleisher. Equally comfortable outside the traditional symphonic setting, Polen has collaborated with CSO's MusicNOW series, the Chicago Composer's Orchestra, and has also been a part of multiple Grammy-nominated R&B recordings.

Polen has been based in Chicago since 2011, when he joined the Civic Orchestra of Chicago as Assistant Principal Bass. Prior to moving to Chicago, he earned his master of music from Indiana University and his bachelor of music from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, near his hometown of Hickory, North Carolina. He has spent summers studying and performing at multiple festivals including Aspen Music Festival, Chautauqua Music Festival, and Brevard Music Festival. His most influential teachers and mentors include Bruce Bransby, Lawrence Hurst, Craig Brown, Andrew Raciti, and Alexander Hanna.

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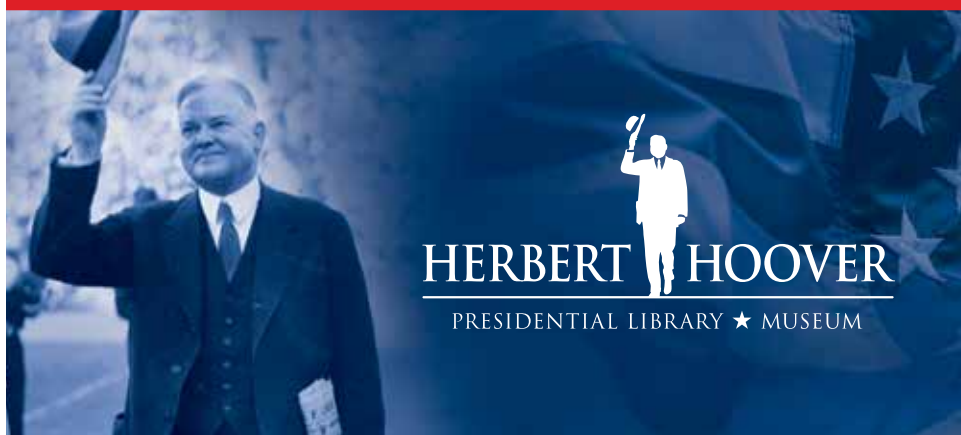


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