

...from Kuwait City, Kuwait

This year's Radio 2 Folk Award winner Sam Carter reports from Kuwait on a recent musical project with Bellowhead's Andy Mellon and others

We arrive into Kuwait International Airport in the early hours of February 8. I am travelling as one of a group of five English musicians comprised – myself excluded – of past and present members of the folk big-band Bellowhead. We're participating in a British Council initiative called 'Flavours Of Sound,' a project designed to promote a spirit of collaboration between different forms of traditional music from around the world. After catching up on some sleep, we make our way to the American university of Kuwait in the Salmiya district of Kuwait City, where we'll be rehearsing for the next week. There we meet the other half of our new band, six traditional musicians from around the Arabian Peninsula: four Kuwaiti percussionists, a Bahraini flautist and a Saudi *qanun* (zither) player. Looking around the room at the other musicians – some clutching instruments I've never set eyes on before – I wonder if I'm the only one feeling overwhelmed at the apparent enormity of the task we've been set: to form a band, write an hour's worth of music, and perform our compositions at two public concerts. We have just six days to get it together.

Leading the English contingent as musical director is trumpeter Andy Mellon, who (with the help of our British Council translator) wastes no time in asking the Kuwaiti percussionists to demonstrate some of their traditional sea music. As we soon discover, this ranges from rhythmic work chants to longer ballads, very much like their English counterparts. The rhythms are infectious and hypnotic, and Pete Flood soon sets to work applying these traditional patterns to the drum kit. Meanwhile, something about the melody of the Kuwaiti sea song brings the English hornpipe tune 'Barham Down' to mind, and violinist Giles Lewin and I begin playing it over the Kuwaiti



Top to bottom: the British-Kuwaiti Flavours of Sound group; the Kuwaiti percussionists; musical director and Bellowhead trumpeter Andy Mellon (centre) with Abdul Hamid Al Sager (left) and Hussein Abdul Rahman Al Khalaf



rhythm. Later on Ahmed al Ghanem, our Bahraini flautist, teaches some Arabic modes to our saxophonist Brendan Kelly, who then begins playing in this style. A little over an hour-and-a-half into our first rehearsal, all 12 musicians are playing a piece together. We've combined the English hornpipe with a Kuwaiti sea song rhythm, which is in a different but complimentary time-signature, and the cross-rhythmic effect this creates is stunning.

As the week progresses, music begins to flow very easily, so much so that the problem isn't coming up with ideas but with knocking them into shape and establishing some kind of formal structure. With two concerts a matter of days away, this becomes our top priority.

By the time our first concert at the Al-Maidan Cultural Center arrives, we've made two appearances on Kuwaiti TV and media interest in the project has escalated. We

make our way to the venue to do a pre-show run-through for local journalists and photographers. The Gulf musicians have donned their traditional dress to spectacular effect, and even the English delegation have smartened up a bit. As the evening concert approaches, the sense of anticipation within the band is palpable. This is the first time a project of this kind has taken place in Kuwait, and we don't know what kind of reaction to expect from the audience, any more than they know what kind of music to expect from us. We step out onto the stage to applause, and there is a brief moment of awkwardness and shuffling while various instruments are plugged in and tuned up. As soon as we begin the first tune everything starts to flow, and the tension dissipates. I am buoyed by the thought that a little over a week ago none of us had even met, and yet here we are on stage together for the first time, actually sounding like a band! At the end of the performance the audience of a couple of hundred people rise to give us a standing ovation.

The night before our return flight we hear from our British Council representative that we've been invited to a traditional gathering of Kuwaiti musicians. We find ourselves in a small room crammed with over a hundred people in traditional dress, many kneeling on the floor, some dancing, all transfixed by the group of musicians in the centre of the room: one guy singing and playing the *oud*, a violinist and four percussionists. Augmenting this incredible sound are a hundred pairs of hands clapping on, off, and across the beat with pinpoint accuracy. The atmosphere is incredibly welcoming and it's a real privilege to be a part of this occasion. At this point I think we all feel like we've made important steps towards understanding the role traditional music plays in the lives of people in the Gulf region, and I can't help but see our imminent flight home as a premature end to a fascinating trip. ●

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