

# What's On

## High note

### Cezary's Picks

#### Exceptional pianist

## Polish artist Andre's star rises after death

By Cezary Owerkowicz  
Special to the Arab Times

People celebrate the Halloween – a 'Strange Day' – to remember the dead and the fear of passing away. This tradition is neither Polish nor Arab. However, for reasons well-known to many it has become a very popular event.

In my home I have a picture of three young men – one of them squat, 'on the verge of becoming bald' – and a stout boy standing in front of them.

The picture was taken on the stage of the Frederic Chopin Institute in Warsaw which has just been renovated and which recently held a historic concert. The man in the centre of the picture is Sviatoslav Richter. The picture was taken after his first recital in Poland – pictured after his first recital in Poland – a Russian piano star which had just appeared on the horizon.

#### History of the photo

Because of his origin, the Russo-German born in Zhytomir, Ukraine, he was sent to the labor camp during WWII.

Somehow he survived the ordeal inside the camp and returned to play the piano. He soon became a star because of his passion for music, unpredictable temper, originality and capability of his talent. Today, after a legendary career we find him on the pages of encyclopedias and covers of the best CD records.

The young men in the picture were rather very interesting people. Milosz Magin – a pianist and a composer with long hair and sentimental face. He is my elder colleague since both of us studied piano under the same Professor M. Trombini-Kazuro.

After winning a prize in the Chopin competition, he went to Paris, where he became an acknowledged professor. Unfortunately he passed away several years ago but his compositions and the Milosz Magin International Competition which he created in Paris live on.

The other young man with black curly hair wearing an urchin smile is the best promising pianist and composer Andrzej Tchaikovsky (Polish: Czajkowski, just as Peter Tchaikovsky but no relation). The third young man, also short and puny pianist is Joseph Kanski who a few years later went on to become a leading music critic in Poland.

The last person in the picture, the stout boy in short trousers is me. The picture was taken after the concert when I was introduced to Master Richter and upon his request I played for him Chopin's Polonaise. Of all the people in the picture, I am the lone person living... in Kuwait.

(NB. That evening I found out that Richter and my Mom were from the same city, Zhytomir.)

In this article I will introduce to the readers Andrzej Czajkowski/Tchaikovsky. He is a very special person because he was miraculously 'born again'. All people in that picture in some or other way were victims of the WWII – those who were born during the war like me or those growing in the horrible shadow of this war but Andrzej suffered the most.

We can say he was born three times – first when he was born (biologically) in 1935 in Warsaw, second when he was smuggled out of the Nazi camp and third time 30 years after his demise he lives on.

During the war he lost his entire family and that included his parents. As a child he survived the Nazi camp with only his grandma to take care of him.

He was released from the concentration camp in 1945 when he was seven as a homeless orphan. His childhood was not a happy one because his grandmother tried to encourage him to be somebody special 'worthy of survival' following the family genocide.

In Poland he is remembered as an exceptional pianist. He studied at the Chopin Music Academy and won several prizes in 1955 during the most prestigious 5th Int'l Chopin Competition in Warsaw and Queen Elisabeth in Brussels. He returned to Warsaw and in 1957 went to Brussels to study under Prof. S. Ashkenazy.

This was the beginning of his great international career.

#### Exceptionally promising

'I think Andre Tchaikovsky is one of the finest pianists of his generation – he is even better than he is a wonderful musician,' said Arthur Rubinstein. 'He possessed a very individual style of playing, feeling of harmony and logic of composition,' says conductor Christopher Seaman. 'He played very classically, precisely; he never presented as a virtuoso for virtuosity,' – added another conductor Uri Segal.

However for Andre his great passion was composition. He wrote as a child. Later, when he faced some technical problems, he wrote for himself 'Etude'

(study) exactly as what Chopin had done. When he was 15 he applied for membership with the Polish Composers Union.

As his work he submitted 'Suite', 'with striking dramaturgy and expression. Its character was not suitable for the status of a teenager. There was a piece from a different, strange world. Nobody knew it that time, but today ex-post it has become known that it was his real, true, secret, and hidden from the world, a picture – the picture of a traumatized person whose wound never healed. What a composer he would have been if not for the horrendous experience of hell as a child unleashed by the Nazis.

When he settled in Britain for most part of the year he performed as a pianist but during the summer he escaped to a hermitage and composed. A majority of his wider unknown works is songs, piano and chamber pieces; except his Piano Concerto which was premiered by world known pianist, Radu Lupu.

However his output is very limited due to two factors – very high personal auto-demands and very unexpected and early demise in 1982. One of his works which he was composing and elaborated to perfection was completed fifteen years ago.

#### Unusual opera

Last summer Andre was born again – the third time. His work premiered after more than thirty years. Maybe it was worthy to be patient. The premiere was held during one of the most important festivals in Europe, in Bregenz, where every evening two thousand people watch and listen to his work 'The Merchant of Venice', although for a majority the name of the composer means nothing.

Given the debt 'The Merchant of Venice' is an unusual opera. In music you see the bust of 20th century masters Berg, Britten, Stravinsky, Shostakovich and others but it is first of all the individuality of Andre Tchaikovsky. He presents traditional solo arias or duets in his own manner, full of rich ideas and perfect instrumentation.

To recognize his talent it is enough to listen and see how he diversifies two different spheres of music – the portrait of Venice as a city of business and money and Belmont – the country of love, goodness and nobility.

However 'The Merchant of Venice' raises some questions. Did Andre choose the text because of his love for Shakespeare (his Sonnets he was able to recite by heart at random) or was he searching for himself in the title person Shylock: the boy who had survived the onslaught of WWII, the person always strange from birth, origin, orientation, hatred for conventionality and compromises? And because of this the person was condemned by conventions and became a social outcast?

British director Keith Warner and American conductor Erik Nielsen strengthened the composer's ideas, perfectly leading the Vienna Philharmonics. Moving creations were presented by soloists/singers: Austrian baritone Adrian Erod as Shylock, Polish Magdalena Anna Hofmann as Portia and fantastic tenor Charles Workman as Bassanio.

The production at Festspielhouse was co-produced by Warsaw National Opera Theatre. The Bregenz Festival is a lucky place for premieres: many theatres have become interested to present unknown works on their stages.

#### Life after death

Tchaikovsky died of colon cancer at the age of 46 in Oxford. In his will he left his body for medical research and donated his skull to the Royal Shakespeare Company, asking that it be used as a prop on stage.

Tchaikovsky hoped that his skull would be used for the skull of Yorick in productions of Hamlet. For many years, no actor or director felt comfortable using a real skull in performances, although it was occasionally used in rehearsals. In 2008, the skull was finally held by David Tennant in a series of performances of Hamlet at the Courtyard Theatre.

Andre's skull smiles ironically from the stage during the text of his favorite author within his will. For me it is more important that his soul came back to the stage with his music.

Meanwhile, how many times is a person born? Human graves in Europe frequently bear inscriptions of hope such as 'Non Omnis Moriamur' and Andre has confirmed this phenomenon. This is my small tribute to that Young Man in the Picture I knew decades ago. 'Play In Peace'. Just before Halloween or – the Day of Remembrance!

**Editor's Note:** Cezary Owerkowicz is the chairman of the Kuwait Chamber of Philharmonia and talented pianist. He regularly organises concerts by well-known musicians for the benefit of music lovers and to widen the knowledge of music in Kuwait. His e-mail address is: cowerkowicz@yahoo.com and cowerkowicz@hotmail.com



Photo courtesy of 'Failaka Island: the Ikaros of the Arabian Gulf' book by Jehan Sayid Rajab. Mina Al-Zor where traditional means of transport were still used, as cars were still limited. There were a few pick-up lorries on the island.

## Pioneers of Kuwait

### Champion of women's rights, equality

# Isa Al Qatami born adventurer

This article is on Isa Al Qatami, a renowned Kuwaiti scholar. His published works contained a zest for discovery and adventure across the waves. He earned undying respect and admiration from his people. – Editor

By Lidia Qattan

Special to the Arab Times

Isa Abdul-Wahab Abdul-Aziz Al Qatami is a brilliant star in the galaxy of renowned skippers of the old days sailing ships for he was no ordinary mariner he had the mind and spirit of a true intellectual, the prowess of the adventurer, the soul of the poet and the cheerfulness of a happy man.

According to what people remember of him, or on written accounts by Dr Yaqub Yousef Al Haggy in his book "Nuakheda" (Skippers) and by his grand-daughter, Lulua Abdul Wahab Isa Al Qatami in her book "Bint Al Nukheda" (The skipper's daughter), the man appears to have been the true epitome of the old Kuwaiti spirit that has made the country prosperous and renown in the Gulf area and beyond.

Isa Al Qatami comes from a renown family of trader and seafarer whose roots stem from the original settlers, those intrepid people who left Nejd after a severe drought hit the area of Al Aflaj, in Saudi Arabia and after an odyssey that lasted over fifty years they eventually settled in 1717 on the shore of what became known "Al Kuwait".

Isa Al Qatami was born in 1870. At one year of age he lost his father, but in those days of large families the little ones had plenty of adults around who gave them comfort and love enhancing their sense of security, inculcating in them important social traits, besides having many youngsters to play. In such an ideal atmosphere the little orphan grew up healthy in mind and spirit with a high social disposition.

#### Institutions

His schooling began and ended with the Qatateeb which were private institutions that taught the principles of Arabic language, mathematics and memorizing some Quranic verses.

Isa completed his education when he was nine years old; from hence he entered a new phase in life.

The sea and sea-faring had been nurturing his dreams since early childhood, his immediate family and

uncles were all skippers and merchants, so it was not unusual for a child of his age to be aboard of a sailing ship with the purpose of learning the art of navigation.

His first trip at sea was made with his uncle Zaniyan Al Ganim, Isa was then nine years old; for two years he sailed with him along the traditional trade route to India and to Aden. During that time he learned the art of navigation, which included reading nautical charts and calculate the position of the ship at sea.

Those early days at sea were an eye opening experience, his mingling with sailors and with people of different nationalities widened his mental horizon and tempered his spirit.

The Kuwait sailors of those days were like family, among them the little boy was absorbing the special wisdom, the endurance and good-spirit for which the Kuwaitis had become famous in the Gulf. Though most of them were illiterate they all shared an enthusiasm for poetry; indeed it was not unusual to find among them a poet of some merit for the Arabic language is highly musical, the Arabs have become famous for their poetical gift.

#### Contact

Those early seafaring aboard the ship of his uncle and his contact with peoples of many countries flared Isa's enthusiasm for poetry and for learning local dialects, many of which he soon mastered.

Incidentally this predilection for idioms eventually affected his poetry; for when he began to compose verses his main trend was "Al Nabati" and Al "Zahriyat" in which Arabic slang is used.

Isa's preference for dialect was enhanced by the fact that his knowledge of Arabic grammar was superficial, slang came natural to him.

After two years of sailing aboard the ship of his uncle, Zaniyan Al Ganim, Isa had become fairly acquainted with the art of sea-faring, but his ambition was to become a top mariner; so for the next three years he sailed with his uncle Ibrahim Al Ganim learning everything he could from him. He was fourteen years old teenager when he became a recognized "Mua'ilem" (Master), and for the

next two years he got a job aboard the "Bagla" (ocean-sailing ship) of Ahmed Naser, in charge of reading the nautical charts and calculate the position of the ship at sea.

While sailing to India, to Aden, to the East African coast and to the shore of Malabar he was keen to note down every detail in the way: the geography and topography of every port, sea-currents and winds movement and comparing his first-hand knowledge with the writing of previous mariners.

After three years he spent with Ahmed Naser, Isa Al Qatami felt confident to be his own skipper aboard his own ship, "Al Hesan" (The horse) Sailing the traditional trade sailing route he took over the family trade transporting goods and passengers and engaging in commerce as his people had done for generations.

Besides being conspicuous as a skillful skipper, Isa Al Qatami became famous for his poetry, his cheerful disposition, his quick wits and good humor besides for his intrepid spirit, hence he was the most sought after young mariner of his days.

He loved good company, and admired people with broad ideas, all his best friends were among the most renowned intellectuals and poets of his days, among them was the historian, Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Rshied whom he cherished for his modern ideas and uncompromising spirit, especially when he was dealing with recalcitrant religious fanatics who were standing in the way of reforms.

#### Compose

His admiration for the great man sometime made him conscious of his shortcoming in pure Arabic poetry, he expressed his regret in many of his Zahriyat. However in his own medium he was truly gifted, he could cheerfully compose in scores of dialects indigenous to the Arabian peninsula, to Mesopotamia and to other nation with which he had come in contact. Unfortunately many of his Zahriyat and Al Nabati poetry have been lost to posterity.

Besides writing poetry Isa Al Qatami wrote several books, of which "Dalil Al Mohtar fi Elm Al Behar" (Guide to the special knowledge of the sea) is by far the most famous.

Being based on research and first-

hand knowledge the book, published in 1924 was a very useful manual to have aboard a sailing ship.

Indeed many Kuwaiti mariners never sailed without one aboard, for besides giving detailed geographic and topographic descriptions of the coast-line, it gave detail information of marine currents and winds movement. The book also included practical instruction on how to calculate the ship's position at sea according to longitude and latitude and how to use charters and nautical instruments; also included were friendly advises on how to deal with people and how to behave in order to be successful among strangers.

Another important book, though more exclusive, was written on behalf of pearl-divers and pear-merchants in the Gulf, "Al Mokhtasar Al Khas lil-Mosafer, wa al Tawash, wa al Gous" (Special briefing for travellers, pearl-merchants and pearl-divers) published in 1925.

Other books of relative importance are: "Oman WA Al Jebel Al Akhthar" (Oman and the green mountain) in which he discloses the economic, social and political condition of the Sultanate at his time.

His knowledge of dialects led him to write "Kitab All-abajat" (the Book of Dialects) of great interest to scholars.

#### Cheerful

Broad-minded and of cheerful disposition Isa Al Qatami was a man well loved and respected by all who knew him. Like his friend Shaker Al Shebeeb, and the intellectual Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Rshied, he was a man with modern ideas. He held that learning for men as well as for women was a necessity in the development of a dynamic society; hence he fought against the superstition that regarded women inferior to men and championed women's education.

"The mother" He uses to say "has the greatest influence on her offspring, therefore she should be educated for the good of society as a whole".

Like many of his intellectual friends he was against religious fanatics who were insisting that education was wasted on women, for their place was in the home, their job does not require special schooling.

In 1927 Isa Al Qatami left Kuwait, choosing to spend his last days at Masqat, Oman; he left this world in 1929.

Of his two sons – Abdul-Wahab and Yousef, the first became one of the most renowned mariners of his day.



Lidia Qattan