15/10/2024

Cypriot Music Unites NYC: A Genuine Display of Cultural Harmony by Sounds of Cyprus at the New York Public Library



New York City – October 4th, 2024 – The highly anticipated presentation of traditional Cypriot folk music and dances by the group Sounds of Cyprus at the New York Public Library – Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library, brought together diverse audiences for an unforgettable evening of authentically Cypriot music.

The renowned ensemble Sounds of Cyprus, created by Peter Douskalis and Elena Chris, having just come off of a tour in Cyprus sponsored by the Deputy Ministry of Culture for the Cultural Decentralization Program 2024, put on an evening that both presented old folk songs from Cyprus as well as new compositions by the two, displaying the groups activities in promoting, preserving, and continuing the Cypriot tradition. The Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library hosted the event as part of the "7 Stories Up" series funded by the Foundation. The ambiance of the room was elevated with the inclusion of dress forms in both male and female traditional Cypriot dance costumes, and a stage full of traditional instruments, giving the essence of both concert and museum presentation. The event was highly attended, with the organizers needing to set extra chairs out for the eager audience.

The evening began with opening remarks from librarian Aspasia Katerinis, followed

by the Consul General of the Republic of Cyprus in New York, Mr. Michalis Firillas, who delivered a moving introductory speech about the history of Cyprus, its multicultural and multifaceted diversity, intercultural perseverance, and unique culture and influence in the Mediterranean region. He expressed his pride in supporting Sounds of Cyprus under the auspices of the consulate and highlighted the group's high quality and care for the authenticity and continuation of Cypriot traditions and music.

When interviewed post-performance, Consul Firillas said "Sounds of Cyprus are a proud expression of all that is good and rich in Cypriot culture. The team are professional about their craft, loyal to their tradition and innovative, able to showcase the evolution and potential of Cypriot traditional sounds and songs. They are a joy to listen to and genuine ambassadors of Cyprus in the United States. Bravo." He then called for more Cypriots, Cypriot-Americans, and Cypriot organizations from the community to support Sounds of Cyprus in their mission of promoting and preserving traditional Cypriot music.

The band, comprised of Alex Tasopoulos – viola, Peter Douskalis – laouto, Elena Chris – voice, Erikos Vlesmas – bass, Mark Katsaounis – percussion, and Murat Keyder – oud, then began their performance. The opening portion included six original songs in the traditional styles – three of those with lyrics by Chris, the other three with lyrics from notable traditional Cypriot music persona Michalis Hatzimichail, and all music by both Douskalis and Chris or just Douskalis.

The program then turned to the presentation of traditional Cypriot dances. It was here that the tone of the event took a pause, as Douskalis had to emotionally explain to the audience why a dance troupe slated to be part of the performance, only hours before the show, decided not to attend. In addressing the absence, Sounds of Cyprus reiterated their mission of being an inclusive group that does not engage political divisiveness in their music and aims to holistically promote Cypriot culture, in a historically-accurate way.

Committed to their craft and dedicated to following through on their word of dance being presented, Douskalis and Chris lead by example and decided to dance themselves. In a wholehearted moment, Douskalis put down his laouto and Chris left her microphone, and went in front of the stage, where Chris, a Cypriot from Cyprus, demonstrated the female variations of the Cypriot Zeimpekiko for Douskalis, a Cypriot from the diaspora, who learned the male variations of the dance.

The group then shifted back to the performance aspect of their program, which

included guest vocalist Gizem Gokoglu. Gokoglou and Chris sang several duets together, displaying their multilingual talent, with each singing in both the Greek and Turkish Cypriot dialects. The band's arrangements of the songs and contemporary harmonies brought a unique and progressive element to the music. The duets also included more traditional Cypriot dancing, performed by friends and collaborators of Sounds of Cyprus. Before wrapping up, the singers held each other in a warm embrace, as Gizem left the stage. The group rounded out the evening performing one final number as the core ensemble which highlighted the preservation effort of the moribund dialect of Arabic, Maronite Cypriot, of which Douskalis provided more context and information.

The group received a long applause at the conclusion of the event, including a standing ovation, as Douskalis and Chris embraced each other in pride for their work, which uniquely celebrated Cyprus in a positive light.

This Sounds of Cyprus performance was made possible by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature. Sounds of Cyprus is fiscally sponsored by the New York Foundation for the Arts. The 7 Stories Up series is funded by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. The event was video and audio recorded for the New York Public Library archives which can be found at www.youtube.com/newyorkpubliclibrary. For more information visit www.soundsofcyprus.com.

Photo: Grace Copeland.

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