



Breton musician Alan Stivell performing at this year's Au Fil des Voix festival

Didier Brun

Au Fil des Voix

A chance meeting with classical maestro Yehudi Menuhin provided the inspiration and impetus behind creating a festival that champions the great voices of the world in the centre of Paris. **Pierre Cuny** reports

When considering the Au Fil des Voix festival, one can forget about any ideas of rolling green fields and marquee tents. The festival takes place in one of the most densely populated districts of central Paris, where the festival crew recently moved into their brand new headquarters. It's hardly surprising that this area has been chosen – situated in the heart of the Goutte-d'Or neighbourhood just east of Montmartre in the 18th *arrondissement* where Indian, Central African, Sub-Saharan and Maghreb communities gather together to talk and do their shopping. It's an area pulsating with life, with colourful street markets, music and loud joyful exchanges. When I visit, the team are busy arranging their new offices and preparing for their forthcoming two-week event starting next January.

I meet with festival founder, Saïd Assadi, a passionate enthusiast of civilisations and theatre, who is also the head of Accords

Croisés, a record label and booking agency. Assadi proudly shows me around the new building, which is situated on the corner of Rue Léon and Rue Myrha. Built across five floors, this ambitious new location is called the 360 Paris Music Factory and it's a cultural and associative centre, with offices for the festival and other music companies, a concert hall on the first floor with a capacity of 200 seating or 300 standing, as well as rehearsal areas and a restaurant. The top floor will be used for artist residences and there is a fabulous roof garden overlooking the Sacré-Coeur.

"From 1993, when I arrived in France, I started to work with refugee musicians helping them find recording labels and organising their concerts," says Assadi. A political refugee himself, and previously a civil engineer in Iran, it was Assadi's meeting in 1995 with Yehudi Menuhin, one of the greatest violinists of the 20th century, that proved to be a revelation. The American

maestro's humanistic outlook has always been a source of inspiration for Assadi. "Menuhin was in France with his foundation forming an advisory body at the European Commission comprised of representatives of cultural minorities in Europe. I was fortunate enough to be a part of this adventure and spending time with Menuhin provoked a sort of vision for me. This great artist saw the importance of establishing a link between cultures and social cohesion. He had the profound conviction that music could save mankind."

After a few years of booking and producing, Assadi and his team decided to launch a music festival in 2008, which they called Au Fil des Voix (meaning something like 'As Voices Go By'). Now it's about to launch its 13th edition – a winter rendezvous of singers and instrumentalists from all over the world. Initially Assadi's idea was to invite other independent labels and producers to be a part of the festival, giving artists a wider visibility.

Each year around 100 professionals, including programmers, discover new acts at concerts open to everyone. Well-known musicians gather together alongside emerging talents from multiple horizons and many transcultural projects are inspired by these encounters. At previous editions, the most memorable of these have included the delightful melding together of *griot* music from Senegalese *kora* master Ablaye Cissoko with Middle Eastern and European medieval sounds performed by the trio Constantinople, and the groovy performance of Ethio-jazz band Arat Kilo, who were joined onstage by Malian diva Mamani Keita and the infectious Boston slammer, Mike Ladd. "We aim to give individual artists their rightful cultural space while creating conditions where they can share their different musical roots with each other," explains Assadi. "Apparently these creations generate a lot of emotion as we discovered in feedback from the public."

The newly appointed festival director, Céline Benezeth, offers a preview of the programme for the forthcoming edition. The opening and closing nights will be held at La Cigale and Le Trianon – two legendary 'Belle Epoque' Parisian music halls. Kicking off at La Cigale theatre, a *fado* celebration is planned with a number of well-known *fadistas*, including Mísia. This will be warmly welcomed by *fado* aficionados, many of whom come from the Portuguese population in the Paris region. In total contrast in terms of ambience, the festival plans to close with a party atmosphere at Le Trianon with African hip-hop and breakdance on stage. Pongo, the queen of Angolan *kuduro* and veterans of the Senegalese scene, Daara J, will host the evening. Concerts are individually ticketed.

All other concerts take place in the more intimate new concert hall venue at the 360 Paris Music Factory where there looks set to be



The festival team at their new base, 360 Paris Music Factory



Arat Kilo playing in Le Trianon



Sophie Capron, Hicham Ismaili, Fiaoui

a great line-up. To name just three acts who are likely to get people up on their feet and dancing: Kanazoé Orkestra, the energising Burkinabé Mande septet; Philo et les Voix du Tambour, with their tremendous percussive beats based on traditional Guadeloupean *gwo ka* and Martinican *bélé*; and the pulsating big band ¿Who's the Cuban? will resonate through the narrow streets. On the quieter side of things there will be the Tunisian brothers Amine & Hamza respectively on *oud* and *qanun*, pianist Macha Gharibian and a marvellous new project by Nicola Són, who pays a Brazilian-inspired tribute to the French icon, Édith Piaf.

Benezeth trained as a classical violinist before moving into music production. "In my previous post I set up a lot of social and educational programmes," she says. "Now raising funds to do similar actions with Au Fil des Voix, I realise, however, just how

different it is to find sponsors in the classical music sphere. Everything is beautiful and prestigious, one touches a certain social class and doors open easily. In world music it is not so," she adds. Nevertheless, Benezeth intends to pursue a number of projects in the neighbourhood around the 360 Paris Music Factory where so many different communities and cultures cohabit. "With the team we propose to invite families to participate in rehearsals and create a sort of joyful festival village specifically for children where they will be welcomed to discover musical instruments, listen to storytelling and participate in other activities."

"Refugee artists are surprised by the wide public interest in their music," Benezeth continues. "Our role is to broadcast their material." She concludes by revealing that the American soprano singer Barbara Hendricks, who has been involved in the Refugee Education Trust for almost 20 years, will be the festival's patron. ♦

+ **DATES** Au Fil des Voix takes place at various venues in Paris, January 20-February 7 2020
+ **ONLINE** www.aufildesvoix.com



Jupiter & Okwess, who performed in 2017

Yasmine Meddeb Hamrouni