

AIUla, 18 January 2024

Press release

Villa Hegra invites the Opéra national de Paris to AIUla for an exceptional artistic performance.

As part of the launch of the preopening program of Villa Hegra, artists from around the world, trained at the Académie de l'Opéra national de Paris, performed for the first time in AIUla, in the Northwest of Saudi Arabia. The unique event was made possible by the collaboration of the two cultural institutions. Combining opera and ballet, the performance was thought as a dialogue between artists from all backgrounds, and saw the participation of Étoile dancer Alice Renavand, soprano Marianne Croux, mezzo-soprano Farrah El Dibany, tenor Yu Shao, baritone Vladimir Kapshuk, and pianist Benjamin Laurent, joined by the singer Sawsan Albahiti, the first Saudi soprano.

An exceptional evening of lyrical and choreographic art in AIUla

On 17 January, for one evening, the performance hall of Maraya, in AIUla – the world's largest mirrored building – took on the appearance of the Palais Garnier, resonating with masterpieces of the lyrical heritage.

Celebrating artistic creation and dialogue between cultures, the evening offered some of the most beautiful pages of the lyrical repertoire to the Saudi and international audience who attended the performance in the heart of the desert canyon of the Ashar Valley.

In the first part of the concert, the audience heard the great arias from operas such as Jules Massenet's "Manon" or Camille Saint-Saëns's "Samson and Delilah", as well as the beautiful duet from Georges Bizet's "The Pearl Fishers". In the second part, the show continued with an original choreographic creation by Étoile dancer Alice Renavand on Ludwig van Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata", interpreted on the piano by Benjamin Laurent. The last part highlighted arias from the world's most famous and performed opera, Georges Bizet's "Carmen".

The evening concluded with the famous Barcarolle from Jacques Offenbach's "The Tales of Hoffmann", performed in chorus by all the artists.

To immerse the audience in the atmosphere of the opera, an exhibition of twelve costumes, created by the workshops of the Opéra national de Paris took place in the Maraya lobby. Selected and staged by the Opera's Costume Department, the costumes from major classical ballets - such as Rudolf Nureyev's "The Sleeping Beauty" designed by Franca Squarciarino, or Balanchine's Jewels designed by Christian Lacroix - engaged in a dialogue with the impressive opera costumes, from Marc-André Dalbavie's "The Satin Slipper" designed by Raoul Fernandez, and Mozart's "The Clemency of Titus" designed by John McFarlane.

The Opéra national de Paris and Villa Hegra, committed to cultural exchange and dialogue

The visit of artists from the Opéra national de Paris to AIUla marks a significant first step in a long-term partnership between the prestigious French institution and Villa Hegra, with the aim of stimulating creation through artistic and cultural dialogue.

Thus, an exchange between the French artists of the Opéra national de Paris and Saudi student artists, training at the Music Hub in AIUla, was set up after the performance, taking the form of an introduction to music, singing, and dance, followed by a presentation of the history and activities of the Opéra national de Paris – enriched by inspiring testimonials from the guest artists.

Press Contacts

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Opéra national de Paris: presse@operadeparis.fr

According to Fériel Fodil, General Director of Villa Hegra stated: *"At Villa Hegra, we are committed to showcasing the performing arts and highlighting the creative energy of French, Saudi, and international talents. Our partnership represents a unique opportunity to offer a diverse audience a culture that is experienced with eyes and ears wide open in an exceptional setting and to contribute significantly to intercultural dialogue between Saudi Arabia and France, and more broadly between the Arab world and Europe."*

Alexander Neef, General Director of the Opéra national de Paris stated: *"We are very proud to put our values, expertise, and commitment to artistic excellence at the service of intercultural dialogue and exchange between artists from all backgrounds. This new partnership confirms the openness of the Opéra national de Paris to the world and its desire to promote French creation internationally."* **Myriam Mazouzi, Director of the Académie de l'Opéra national de Paris added:** *"Transmission is a dialogue between generations that builds the future. This is the challenge of the partnership between Villa Hegra and the Opéra national de Paris."*

About Villa Hegra: Villa Hegra is a Franco-Saudi institution dedicated to arts and culture, born out of a bilateral cooperation agreement. Conceived as a space for artistic, cultural, and creative dialogue between France and Saudi Arabia, it is also the foundation for dialogue between local communities and international artists. Villa Hegra will open its doors in 2026 in AlUla, Saudi Arabia, and will house artist residencies and a cultural center. A dense preopening program is planned ahead of the official opening, including cultural workshops for teenagers, cine-concerts, music and dance performances, conferences, and artist retreats.

About the Opéra national de Paris: With a history of over 350 years, the Opéra national de Paris is recognized for the quality and diversity of its programming at the Palais Garnier and the Opéra Bastille, and the unique architecture of its two theaters. With more than 400 curtain raises per year, the Opéra national de Paris offers a program of ballets, operas, and concerts as well as programming dedicated to young audiences. It welcomes approximately 900,000 spectators annually. The Opéra national de Paris also trains the new generations of artists, dancers, singers, and musicians through the Academy and the Dance School.

[LINK TO VIDEOS AND PICTURES OF THE EVENT](#)

PROGRAMME – « A NIGHT WITH THE OPÉRA NATIONAL DE PARIS », MARAYA, 17 JANUARY 2024

- I -

Youkali - Kurt Weill

From Marie Galante
Marianne Croux — soprano
Sawsan Al Bahiti — mezzo-soprano
Farrah El Dibany — mezzo-soprano
Yu Shao — tenor
Volodymyr Kapshuk — baritone
Benjamin Laurent — piano

Je marche sur tous les chemins - Jules Massenet

From Manon
Marianne Croux — Manon
Benjamin Laurent — piano

Ton cœur n'a pas compris le mien - Georges Bizet

From Les Pêcheurs de perles
Marianne Croux — Leïla
Yu Shao — Nadir
Benjamin Laurent — piano

Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix - Camille Saint-Saens

From Samson et Dalila
Farrah El Dibany — Dalila
Benjamin Laurent — piano

Heure exquise - Franz Lehár

From La Veuve joyeuse
Sawsan Al Bahiti — Hanna
Volodymyr Kapshuk — Danillo
Benjamin Laurent — piano

- II -

Sonate au clair de lune - Ludwig Von Beethoven

Alice Renavand — Étoile dancer
Benjamin Laurent — piano

- III -

Carmen - Georges Bizet

Je dis que rien ne m'épouvante

Marianne Croux — Micaëla
Benjamin Laurent — piano

L'amour est un oiseau rebelle

Sawsan Al Bahiti — Carmen
Benjamin Laurent — piano

Votre toast

Volodymyr Kapshuk — Escamillo
Benjamin Laurent — piano

Final duet

Farrah El Dibany — Carmen
Yu Shao — Don José

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VILLA HEGRA

فيلد الحجر

Benjamin Laurent — piano

Les Contes d'Hoffmann - Jacques Offenbach

Barcarolle

Marianne Croux — soprano

Sawsan Al Bahiti — mezzo-soprano

Farah El Dibany — mezzo-soprano

Yu Shao — tenor

Volodymyr Kapshuk — baritone

Benjamin Laurent — piano



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ARTISTS' BIOGRAPHY



Alice Renavand – Danseuse Étoile of the Opéra national de Paris Ballet

Born in Paris to a Vietnamese mother and a French father, Alice Renavand enrolled at the age of 8 at the Saint-Cloud Conservatoire de Danse. The teacher and choreographer Attilio Labis noticed the potential of the little girl during a dance workshop and encouraged her parents to enter her in the entrance competition for the Opéra national de Paris Ballet School. She joined the dance school in 1990 and became a member of the Opéra national de Paris Ballet in 1997 at the age of 17. She was promoted to Coryphée in 2004, Sujet in 2005, and First Dancer in 2012, focusing particularly on the contemporary repertoire of the ballet company. She received the AROP Prize in 2008.

Alice Renavand was appointed Danseuse Étoile on December 20, 2013, after a performance of Angelin Preljocaj's "Parc" During the "Black City Parade" tour of the band Indochine, she danced in the video for the song "Wuppertal", which was projected on a large screen during concerts, and she performed on the stage of the Stade de France during the two concerts organized by the band. She bid farewell to the Opéra national de Paris on May 28, 2023, in Maurice Béjart's "Boléro" but continues to perform on international stages or at events such as the opening ceremony of the Rugby World Cup alongside actor Jean Dujardin.

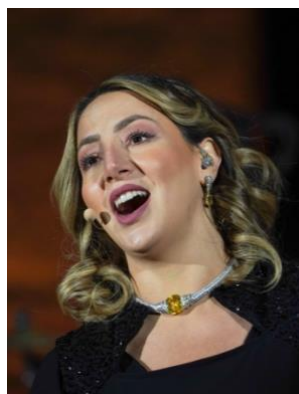


Marianne Croux - Soprano

Marianne Croux, a Franco-Belgian soprano trained at the CNSM in Paris, is a rising opera star. Consecrated Révélation lyrique by ADAMI in 2017, she has joined the Opéra national de Paris Academy until 2019. Awarded the Queen Elisabeth Competition in 2018, she was honored in Belgium as an Officier du mérite wallon. Marianne also shone at the Académie d'Aix-en-Provence in 2021 and at the Belvedere Hans Gabor Competition in 2022.

Renowned for her performances at the Opéra national de Paris, she has appeared in Stravinsky's "Noces", Ravel's "L'enfant et les Sortilèges" and Strauss's "Elektra". Her debut at the Rome Opera as Zerlina and her Micaëla at the Capitole were acclaimed. Passionate about contemporary music, she has sung in works by Betsy

Jolas and Gilbert Amy, and was Damien Lehman's muse for "Hansel and Gretel". Recently, she excelled at the Dijon Opera in "The Turn of the Screw", and has appeared in concert in Munich and Bordeaux.



Sawsan Albahiti – Soprano

Sawsan Albahiti, an artist, a coach and a pioneer. Referred to as the first Saudi opera singer, she performed on various stages globally and locally in London, Berlin, Riyadh, AlUla, and more. She founded her vocal coaching institute, The Soulful Voice, that specializes in training professional and amateur singers in Saudi Arabia. Also, she worked as an arts manager at the Saudi Music Commission in the Ministry of Culture and established the Saudi National Orchestra & Choir. She is currently enrolled at a specialized opera program at the Conservatorio di Milano while continuing her professional artist career.



Farrah El Dibany – Mezzo-soprano

Farrah El Dibany, born in 1989 in Alexandria, Egypt, is a renowned mezzo-soprano. She began studying the piano at the age of 10 before turning to singing. Trained in Egypt and then at the Hanns-Eisler Academy of Music in Berlin, she obtained a Bachelor's and Master's degree in opera singing. She also holds a Bachelor's degree in architecture from Berlin's Technische Universität. She has distinguished herself in solo viola roles in classical works such as Pergolesi's "Stabat Mater" and Mozart's "Requiem".

Farrah took part in the recording of "The Book of the Dead" by Sherif Mohie El Dins, sung in hieroglyphics. Since 2011, she has studied with renowned singers and participated in numerous masterclasses. She has sung in various European opera houses, interpreting roles ranging from Handel to Strauss. Her performance of Carmen in Berlin earned her Opernwelt Magazine's award for Best Emerging Opera Artist. Since 2016, she has been in residence at the Opéra national de Paris Academy, performing a variety of roles. She has been awarded several prizes, including the "Prix Lyrique de l'AROP" and was named Chevalier de l'ordre des arts et des lettres by France. Farrah is also active on the international scene, singing in prestigious venues and collaborating with major institutions.

She has performed at major events such as the Beiteddine Art Festival and interpreted the Marseillaise at historic moments, including the FIFA 2022 final match.



Yu Shao - tenor

After four years at the Shanghai Conservatory in Wu Bo's class, Yu Shao obtained his Bachelor of Music degree in 2008. That same year, he decided to move to France to continue his studies. He worked on his vocal technique with Eléonore Jost and Leontina Vaduva, and later at the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel in Belgium under the direction of Jose Van Dam. Winner of the Queen Elisabeth Competition in 2014, he joined the Opéra national de Paris Academy, performing roles in "Iphigénie en Tauride" and "Cosi fan tutte." Yu Shao stood out at the Opéra Bastille in "Aida" and "Lucia di Lammermoor," as well as in recitals at the Amphithéâtre Bastille. He sang in "Tristan et Isolde" in Montpellier and "Der Fliegende Holländer" at several French operas. In 2021, he reprised the role of Ferrando in "Cosi fan tutte." Recently, he performed in "L'Elisir D'Amore" in Bordeaux and in "Stiffelio" and "Manon" in Aachen. In 2023, he made his debut at the Aix-en-Provence Festival. In the near future, he will portray Don Jose in "Carmen," and in 2024, he will sing in Israel under the direction of Jérémie Rhorer.



Vladimir Kapshuk, baryton

A graduate of the Kiev National Academy of Music and a Franco-Ukrainian baritone, Volodymyr Kapshuk continued his training at the Atelier Lyrique de l'Opéra National de Paris and then at the Salzburg Festival's Young Singers Project. He has won several international prizes, including L'Art du XXIe siècle, the Prix Lyrique du Cercle Carpeaux and the Prix Lyrique de l'Association pour le Rayonnement de l'Opéra national de Paris. He performs in recital and opera in France and abroad (Italy, Spain, Austria, Germany, USA, China...).

Roles in his repertoire include Eugène Onéguine, Prince Eletsy ("La Dame de Pique"), Malatesta ("Don Pasquale"), Testa ("Le Combat de Tancredi et Clorinde"), Orestes (Iphigénie en Tauride), Tarquinius (Le Viol de Lucrece), Guglielmo (Cosi fan tutte) and the title role in Don Giovanni. More recently, he sang Don Carlos ("Les Fiançailles au Couvent"), conducted by Tugan Sokhiev at the Capitole de Toulouse, and made his debut at the Berlin Philharmonic with the title role in Sergei Rachmaninov's Aleko and Robert in Tchaikovsky's "Iolanta". At the Opéra national de Paris, Volodymyr Kapshuk sings in numerous productions and works closely with the Opéra national de Paris Academy, notably in the cycle of "Récitals récités" given at the Bastille Amphitheatre in 2022.



Benjamin Laurent, pianist

Benjamin Laurent, a versatile French artist, is recognized as a pianist, vocalist, conductor, arranger, composer and actor. A graduate of the Paris and Lyon Conservatoires, he worked at the Académie de l'Opéra de Paris and has performed in prestigious opera houses internationally, collaborating with renowned conductors and stage directors. Since 2018, he has been frequently called upon by the Académie de l'Opéra de Paris for musical direction and arrangements for various shows.

The 2021/2022 season saw him create the "recitals récités" at the Opéra national de Paris, where he performs as a pianist, actor and lecturer. A theater enthusiast, he collaborates with the Idiomecanic Théâtre company and distinguished himself as an actor at the Avignon Festival in 2022. As a composer, Benjamin Laurent has created music for documentaries, short films, a children's opera and numerous vocal pieces. He is also active on the radio, participating in the program "Les actualités chantées" on France Musique. Holder of the Certificat d'Aptitude, he teaches musical accompaniment.