

Grieving for Iraq

The suffering of modern-day Iraqis gives new context and content to Bach's Passions

BACH would have turned in his grave. Then he'd have stepped out, dusted himself and paid attention. Such is the jazz-like energy of parts of *An Arabian Passion*, a new arrangement of Johann Sebastian Bach's original *Passions* that brings together a modern string quartet with two saxophones, classical Arab instruments, and a vocalist steeped in both the Western and Lebanese musical traditions.

Yet for the most part, the songs are deeply grieving, and even at their lightest moods, sad.

According to composer Vladimir Ivanoff, *An Arabian Passion* was written to connect the suffering of Christ over 2000 years ago — as expressed by excerpts of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* and *St John Passion* on which it is based — with the suffering of modern-day Iraqis.

A large screen behind the musicians displays photographs of Iraq, taken after the US invaded the country in 2003. They are taken by unembedded photojournalists — photographers who gave up the safety of being embedded with

the US military and entered Iraq of their own accord in order to discover images from the Iraqi, and not only the American, point of view.

The images are surprisingly subtle, with no direct display of violence. A man stands in a pool of light in the middle of a bombed-out house, as kids poke their heads in from the outside. A woman runs towards the viewer with her arms outstretched; at the corner of the photograph are men bearing a coffin.

They lend context to the music, but also politicise it. The listener asks himself what he is meant to feel. The music is no longer mere entertainment, it takes on another, ancient, role — that of expressing emotion, sorrow, encouragement.

The musicians played 11 songs, including arias, chorales, and instrumental arrangements.

Thanks to the introduction of Arabic musical traditions — in which the musician is given leeway to ornament the basic melody, a technique that Western classical musicians gave up — the music sheds the strict structure and symmetry that one associates with Bach.

In addition, the use of Arabic instruments, such



IDANA BLUEMI

as the zither-like kanun and the flute-like nai, give the sound a different quality.

For example, *Jesum von Nazareth* is wonderfully jaunty, with an extended showcase of the bright, fast kanun. In a later aria, translated as "If the tears on my cheeks achieve nothing", the violin and nai

mourn. In another instance, while a picture of a girl carried into hospital is displayed, the organ somehow lightens the music and steers it away from overwhelming grief, and back towards resilience.

The songs were most haunting when vocalist Fadia El-Hage — one of the

Arab world's major singers, who grew up in Lebanon and trained in Germany — reverted to Arabic. She did so only twice, but at those times, perhaps, Bach also wept.

With passion: A modern string quartet performs Vladimir Ivanoff's arrangement with two saxophones, classical Arab instruments and a vocalist