Joan Kjaer: Hello, I'm Joan Kjaer. This is WorldCanvass from International Programs at the University of Iowa. Our program tonight is exploring the rich world of Islamic art and culture. Just a slight taste of it. There's not too much we can do in an hour and a half, but we hope to inspire you to learn more and find more. We are in MERGE in downtown Iowa City, and you’re welcome to join us for these live programs if you like. Our guests in this segment of the program are Hancher guests tomorrow night, but tonight they're ours, and they are the Iranian Canadian musical group Niyaz. You see many of the members of the group here in front of you, and just next to me is Azam Ali. Thank you for being here.

Azam Ali: Thank you.

Joan: Azam is a vocalist and composer and two time JUNO award nominee. If you don't know about the JUNOs, they are the Canadian music industry's most prestigious recognition for excellence in recorded music. Also joining us, members of the band, and the guy just in front of me here is Loga Ramin Torkian. He's a multi-instrumentalist and composer, also a JUNO award nominee. And as we get going here, I'll ask you to introduce the other members of the band, but it's so nice to have you all here. I have read a little bit about your group, and of course it's all inspiring, and you have many videos we can watch online, but I have read that some people have called Niyaz part of a 21st century global trance tradition. Does that make sense to you?

Azam: It does.

Joan: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So what does that imply? A sort of a mystical sense to the music you do?

Azam: Well, our music is a sort of bridge between the past and the present. We pretty much draw from a lot of ancient Sufi poetry as well as very old folk music from the Persian Gulf. I was born in Iran and raised in India, and then I moved to the United States in 1985 and then moved to Canada for seven years and then back again to the United States. I'm collecting passports. So if anyone wants to adopt me, I'll take another passport.

A big part of why we got into doing the music that we do is that we wanted to remain connected to our roots and traditions that were precious to us, but at the same time make a home for ourselves in the country we were now living in. It's kind of like creating a new home for ourselves, because once you live outside of your homeland long enough, you can neither go back or you can't go forward. There's a sense of not really belonging anywhere. And the art becomes a platform to create a sort of new architecture, a new home, and that's what this has become for us.

This band is really special to me. They are my family. I love each of them so much. I will just quickly just say who's here. Gabriel Ethier, who is on keyboards, is from Quebec. We met in Montreal when we moved there eight years ago, and he has been performing with us.

Sinon Arodu actually just arrived from Istanbul, Turkey yesterday. He plays two wonderful instruments. He's a virtuoso at his young age. He's really an incredible composer and musician. We met, and it was just an instant bond, so now he's part of our albums, and we try to bring him whenever we travel around the world. It doesn't matter where we are.

Ravinan Peli (?) is on tabla, and he is from Canada. He lives in Toronto, and as you will hear, he's a master on that drum. I don't think I need to introduce the tabla. It's kind of well-known Hindustani instrument.
Here on the kaman, it's a very unique instrument that was designed for Loga Ramin Torkian, and he was born in Iran and also moved to the US as a teenager. This basically is an instrument that was created by an American instrument maker, and it is fretted in a way for him to be able to play eastern scales on it.

So we have these very traditional instruments, and we blend them with a lot of electronic music. So the idea behind blending the electronic music is to be able to reconcile these very opposing concepts of east and west and modern and ancient. And I'm always intrigued by that is can we reconcile them, so it's kind of an ongoing journey.

Also, for us, even though we are not practicing Muslims, none of us on the stage are, we come from Islamic cultures. Not Quebec, of course, or Toronto. But both for Sinan and for Loga and myself, we come from Islamic cultures, and I think one thing that has become very important for us is to be able to travel and speak about the work that we do and to create in the minds of people this distinction between Islam and the culture of Islam.

It always really bothers me when people say Islamic tradition this and Islamic tradition that, so one of the things, we've been here now for a week, and we've been talking non-stop with students and some amazing discussions about feminism in the east, about Sufism and Islam and music and technology, and one of the things that I like to repeat, and I will before we begin performing I would just like to say that, is that the term Islamic tradition or Islamic culture is, for me, a very wrong term because it's so broad.

You cannot paint that region with just one huge brushstroke. You are looking at nations that are very different. You look at Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and each of those countries have histories that are very old. You have these ethnic and religious minority groups that have been thriving within those empires, so to speak, for such a long time, and it's a very, very complex part of the world. Each part of these countries ... Also, you have to consider that what makes them different is their, let's say, class systems, patriarchy, poverty. All of these come into play. You really cannot say this one thing is Islamic culture or this is Islam, and that's one of the very important thing I like to talk about.

For us, for example, we are very much influenced by Sufism, which is the mystical aspect of Islam. Some say it predates Islam, some say it doesn't. I am also greatly influenced by the Turkish Alevi tradition, which is another form of the mystical aspect of Islam, and actually Sinan's family comes from the Alevi tradition in Turkey.

The songs, which will now bring me nicely to the song that we are going to perform right now is a very old Alevi folk song that is basically a devotional love song about a man singing to God and saying that you have put me on this beautiful earth and you have given me all that I could ever desire, but you failed to show me the one thing, and that is the path towards you. So it kind of captures the sentiment of longing and yearning and this need for truth so to speak, which I feel the individual soul is constantly seeking. This aspect of our music, we try to retain even though it's very modern, but we are very much intrigued by the ... when you say trance tradition, I think it comes back to this because Sufism is very much intertwined with the trance tradition, so to speak, because it is through music we are able to communicate on a higher level and experience a kind of innate knowledge and truth that is indescribable in the sort of mundane language of words, let's say.

Joan: Thank you so much, Azam.

Azam: I'm sorry if I made it too long.
Joan: Not at all. Not at all.
Azam: There's so much to cover.
Joan: Thank you so much, and now we're very much looking forward to the performance. I'll just move off the stage.
Azam: Thanks you. So are we gonna do two songs back to back?
Joan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
Azam: So the first song is a Turkish folk song. The second song is going to be actually in Urdu. I grew up in India, and ... Oh, we're gonna do ....Okay. So if we have time, we'll do the Urdu piece, but the second piece is based on a very old folk song from Afghanistan, which is in Farsi or Dari which is a similar dialect in Farsi.
Joan: Wonderful, thank you. So this is Niyaz.
Azam: So, hope you enjoy it. Don't go anywhere. Stay here.
Joan: Okay.
Azam: Thank you.
(singing)
Thank you.
(singing)
Thank you. Thank you.
Joan: Thank you. So tell us about the second song. You told us about the first one, looking for a pathway.
Azam: So, the second one is more of a fun sort of folk song. It's more about the coming of spring and everything will be green again. It's a much more celebratory song.
Joan: Yeah, yeah, yeah. In these minutes we have left, can you tell us something about the Fourth Light project that you'll be performing at Hancher tomorrow.
Azam: Yes. The Fourth Light project is a new, immersive, multimedia project that we have created. When I introduced the musicians, there's one very important person that I need to introduce as well who is pivotal to the Fourth Light project, and now that we're on the subject I can introduce her. Tanya Evanson, who is the whirling dervish, she's a very, very big part of this show. She's hiding. She's really amazing. Actually when we were thinking to start this project, we were throwing around a bunch of ideas about ... Every album that Niyaz does, we focus on one poet, Sufi poet. And even though we do folk songs, we focus at least three or four songs in that project on one particular poet. Our first one was on Rumi. Our second one was on Amir Khusrow Dehlavi. The third one, actually, we kind of went a little all over the place, and then when we were talking about the fourth one, Tanya said let's do it on Rabia Al Basri, and it was like a light just went off.
So Rabia Al Basri is a very important character connected to the Fourth Light project. She was the first Sufi-- female Sufi-- saint and poet, born in the eighth century in what would be considered modern day Iraq today. Back then, we did not have the geographical borders that were created, but it would be considered modern Iraq. She was a very remarkable woman and in many ways. If people are interested, I would highly recommend looking her up on the Internet. We know her in Iran and Turkey and Afghanistan, Central Asia as Rabia Al Basri, but in the Arab world she's known as Rabia Al Adawiyya. So you can look her up, and for me she was the first feminist of the Middle East, as far as I'm concerned. We are very much inspired by her. Unfortunately, most of her poetry was lost in time, but a few that did survive, a few phrases here and there, we kind of took it and wove it into the projects.
So the Fourth Light project kind of loosely goes through the arch of her life. There’s three movements. There’s a black movement, a red movement, and a white movement, and each is marked by Tanya in her robes. The whirling dervish. Black because Rabia Al Basri was born into darkness in a very poor family. They could not afford even oil to light the lamp to see the child that was born. She grew up. Some say she was sold into slavery, some say that’s not the case. We don’t know. Scholars don’t seem to agree on what happened to her. Regardless, at this stage of her life, she ends up marrying, and at one point the husband lets her go because he sees there is something very divine about her. She does go and live the life of a recluse and goes into the desert, and when she comes back, she pretty much achieved enlightenment, and she reveals a lot of poetry, and she comes up with the most important philosophy, which lies at the heart of modern day Sufism, and that is the concept of divine love, that you love for the sake of love itself and not out of the promise of heaven or the fear of hell. So she came back to reveal that.

The red movement is about her struggle for freedom, and then the white is liberation and enlightenment. This kind of loosely follows that. In terms of the show itself, it’s a very, very modern and technical show. It will be what you have heard today, live music with Tanya, and we have incorporated a very cutting edge visual art into this musical performance. So, it’s visual art that is interacting with the music as well as with the movements of Tanya and a few of the musicians. You have what we describe as a digital sonography. It’s an environment. You come in there, and you’re in an environment where music, dance, visual art, they all kind of merge, and hopefully you are taken to a place where ... what is our ultimate goal is where people can get to a state where cultural and religious boundaries just disappear and only thing that is left is humanity.

Joan: Wow. So that’s tomorrow night at Hancher, and hopefully many people will be able to go. Boy, we are so grateful that you’re here this afternoon. Could we talk you into a third song as we leave the program?

Azam: Of course, of course.

Joan: Good, good, good, good.

Azam: Urdu. Ah, we have an Urdu request. Actually, this song is very important for me also because the poetry was written by Kaifi Azmi. He was a very famous Urdu poet, 20th century poet. He belonged to ... he was a leftist in India. He wrote this poem, it’s called Oarat, which means woman, and he wrote it for his wife. It is a really remarkable poem because he wrote this in the ’50s. We’re talking about at time when India had not even achieved independence yet. The poem is long and very beautiful and very powerful, and it’s so potent. I can’t translate the whole thing, but I will just translate the chorus because that’s the most powerful part of it.

Basically what he says in the chorus is [urdu 00:26:50] which means rise, my beloved, you should walk beside me. So he sang this for his wife, and every verse of this poem is about saying that women are so much more than the place that they were given in society. He’s telling his wife that you are my equal, and you should rise and walk alongside me, not behind me. This poem just ... it’s so powerful for me, and that’s the song that we’ll perform next.

Joan: Okay. Wonderful. Wonderful. Because there will be such a high at the end of this performance, let me say my goodbyes now, and then we’ll let Niyaz finish up this part of the program. Thank you all for coming here this afternoon to see WorldCanvass and to hear our guests. The next program is on October 18th in the same room. Reception
ahead of time at 5:00 and the program at 5:30, and it's on journalism and a free press in the age of fake news. So we have a lot of good guests coming for that, and we hope you can join us.

Azam: Can I come back?
Joan: You can come back. Thank you.
Azam: Thank you so much for having us and speaking with us.
Joan: Thank you so much.
Azam: (singing)