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When he first began piano lessons as a child, could **Noam Lemish** ever have imagined that he'd one day play to sold-out houses in Israel (where he grew up), the US, Canada, Europe and Bhutan? That he'd do his doctoral studies in Jazz Performance at the University of Toronto? Or that he'd perform with percussionist George Marsh, in a trio with bassist Jim Kerwin and George Marsh, and in a duo with improviser/composer Will Johnson, among others?

And what about writing – and performing – a composition for a king?



Noam Lemish

As a singular highlight of Lemish's already vibrant career, he was commissioned to compose and perform a multi-movement suite for His Majesty, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, King of Bhutan, on the occasion of his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. That composition, ***The People's King: A Musical Tribute to Bhutan***, was originally performed in Bhutan in 2010. It is receiving its much-anticipated Canadian premiere on April 24 at The Music Gallery as a part of the **Small World Music 2<sup>th</sup> Annual Asian Music Series**. SesayArts spoke with Lemish about this event.

**How did the king of Bhutan come to request this special commission from you?**

I arrived in Bhutan in the fall of 2009 to teach music at the only music school in the country (at the time), Kulusuk Music School. Two of my students were daughters of the Press Secretary for the King of Bhutan. A couple of months after my arrival, the press secretary had come to pick up his daughters after their lesson and asked me if I would compose a special birthday piece for the King's 30<sup>th</sup> Birthday which was coming up in February of 2010. Obviously, I was immensely honored and excited by the invitation.

**How did you approach the task of composing something that had been requested? I imagine that most of your composition is self-motivated...**



Chakrasang

Though I had only been in Bhutan for a few months at the time of writing the suite, I was already quite moved and touched by the warmth and generosity of the Bhutanese people, and quite taken with the music, dance and festivals I had witnessed during my time there. From the start, I thought of this piece as a musical offering. Because of the nature of the occasion, I knew that I wanted to compose something that would pay tribute to Bhutan's wonderful people and culture, while also giving something from my own musical background, sharing a piece of myself.

Therefore, quite early in the process I knew I wanted to compose a piece that would feature the four traditional

hutanese instruments (*dramnyen*, *yangchen*, *pchewang* and *lim*) and also myself on piano. I set out to write music that would convey my very preliminary and modest understanding of Bhutanese folk music fused with some jazz and classical music influences that I bring.

I didn't completely know from the start what form or structure the piece was going to take, so to get things rolling, I just started writing melodies. I had already been listening to a fair amount of Bhutanese music, simply because it was in the air, when walking about town, at the school, sometimes coming from a nearby school yard, or radio transistor from a neighbor's house. During December of 2009, for a period of 2 weeks, every morning I would write down some melodies that I was imagining with no "agenda" about what they could lead to.

After those 2 weeks I had enough melodic material for the entire suite (and extra melodies that I would later turn into additional pieces, separate from the suite itself). From here, I started to envision a clear form for the suite. I also had the idea that I wanted to incorporate a blessing for the King's long life and well-being in the form of chant. The Press Secretary arranged for me to record monks from a local Monastery in Thimphu. This was made even more special by the fact that this monastery was one (of many) of the monasteries sponsored and supported by the King and the royal family.



Bhutanese Masked Dancer

**According to [thepeoplesking.com](http://thepeoplesking.com), the initial composition has evolved over time. What difference would someone notice who saw that first performance and now sees the upcoming one?**

Indeed, the original piece was composed for the four traditional Bhutanese instruments and myself on piano. I still hope and plan to present that original version outside of Bhutan but that will require bringing musicians from Bhutan here to Canada (something I look forward to doing in the future). For the time being, since there are no Bhutanese musicians living in North America (to the best of my knowledge) I arranged the piece for a more standard jazz instrumentation. The melodic and harmonic content of the piece remains very much the same, however the different instrumentation obviously directs this present version of the piece more towards the world of jazz. One of the exciting things that comes with this new version is that this also means that there is more room to improvise throughout the suite as one would in a jazz setting.

**You composed this piece in 2010, yet it's only now receiving its Toronto premiere. It's taken a while to bring this here...just wondering if there's a story there...and also where is the project headed from here.**

When I first composed and presented *The People's King* in Bhutan, I didn't imagine future performances or new arrangements of the project back in North America. I returned from my year of music teaching in Bhutan in the summer of 2010 and not long after was invited to perform at the 2011 Healdsburg Jazz Festival in Sonoma County, California. This was going to be a very special homecoming concert for me, as I had lived for close to ten years in Northern California before heading to Bhutan. The community in Sonoma has been tremendous in supporting my music and were also very much a part of my journey to Bhutan, having contributed funds for

urchase of educational materials and instruments that I brought with me to Kilu Music School. When I was invited to perform at the jazz festival in Healdsburg, it dawned on me that I should arrange *The People's King* for a jazz quartet and share this project with all of my dear friends and supporters in California.



Noam Lemish at the Healdsburg Jazz Festival

The new version of the suite premiered on opening night of the festival to a sold-out house of 500 folks, and the response was so overwhelming that I felt I should share this project with more folks around the country and beyond. In subsequent months I also decided that the program include a multimedia presentation on the music and culture of Bhutan with videos and audio captured while I lived there so that audience members can learn more about this amazing place, and see it, hear it with their own eyes and ears!

Since that North American premiere in 2011, the project has been presented on numerous occasions on the West Coast of the US. I had been waiting for the right moment and venue to present the project here in Toronto. That moment is now and the Music Gallery will be a perfect place for this program. I recently launched a website for the project at [www.thepeoplesking.com](http://www.thepeoplesking.com) and a mid-west tour is currently being finalized for Fall 2014.

#### 5. What music is on your iPod right now?

A couple of days ago one of my best friends, singer/songwriter and bassist **Miles Wick**, who lives in NYC, sent me the audio for his soon to be released album. I am loving his new songs. The last couple of days, I have also been enjoying Israeli jazz guitarist and Oud player **Amos Hoffman's** *Evolution* and Indian Classical sitar player **Nikhil Banerjee**, *Live in Berkeley, 1982*. Obviously many other albums, but too many to list here.

#### If you could invite any 3 people to dinner, who would they be? What would you serve?

**Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Dalai Lama.** A simple meal would do. I am vegan, so some lentil daal, and a very large and bountiful salad. Lots of fruit for dessert: berries, pineapple, mango, perhaps some citrus.

#### Tell us one thing that you'd like us to know about you that has nothing to do with music.

As you can probably gather from my above answer, I am deeply committed to non-violence, compassion for all beings and social justice. This is actually still connected to music (it is connected to everything) as I hope that my music and my work as a music educator advances and embodies these values and beliefs.

**What:** *The People's King: A Musical Tribute to Bhutan*

**Who:** Noam Lemish (piano, composition), Sundar Viswanathan (reeds), Justin Gray (bass), Derek Gray (drums)

**When:** Thursday April 24, 2014, 7:30 pm

**Where:** [The Music Gallery](#), 197 John Street, Toronto

yi: [noamlemish.com](http://noamlemish.com)

**heck it out:** the first movement from *The People's King*

Arpita Ghosal, Sesaya, 2014

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