



AGA KHAN  
MASTER  
MUSICIANS

ساز و آواز  
nowruz

1. **TASHKENT** (3:05)  
Basel Rajoub/Samaa Lta., SPA

2. **SAMAI** (5:37)  
Jasser Haj Youssef

3. **TEAHOUSE** (5:02)  
Wu Man/Samaa Lta., SPA

4. **MADAD** (2:27)  
Basel Rajoub/Samaa Lta., SPA

5. **AWDEH** (5:52)  
Feras Charestan/Samaa Lta., SPA

6. **MEHAN** (4:47)  
Sirojiddin Juraev/Samaa Lta., SPA

7. **CADENCE** (3:28)  
Jasser Haj Youssef

8. **MASHQ-I DUTAR** (5:33)  
Sirojiddin Juraev/Samaa Lta., SPA

9. **JUL DANCE** (5:11)  
Feras Charestan/Samaa Lta., SPA

10. **AUTUMN FLOWERS  
AND LEAVES** (3:39)  
Wu Man/Samaa Lta., SPA

11. **ILI** (4:21)  
Basel Rajoub/Samaa Lta., SPA

12. **NOWRUZ** (3:48)  
Abbos Kosimov/Samaa Lta., SPA

Produced by Fairouz Nishanova and Theodore Levin

---

SFW 40597 Nowruz  
Aga Khan Master Musicians

© 2023 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings/Aga Khan Music Programme  
© 2023 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

**The Aga Khan Master Musicians**—or, in the spirit of today’s acronymic artist names, AKMM—play new music inspired by old traditions. Their sources of inspiration arise from the eclectic backgrounds and zigzag musical journeys of the group’s six members. *Nowruz* offers a synoptic overview of those journeys, from the musicians’ origins in the Middle East, Central Asia, and China to their convergence in a funky recording studio in Switzerland, where this album—the culmination of a decade of fervent musical experimentation and uninhibited creative search—came together.

Founded in 2013 by the Aga Khan Music Programme, whose mission is to support contemporary expressions of Muslim musical heritage, AKMM inhabits a space of temporal, geographic, and artistic liminality in which East and West, present and past, and folk, jazz, and classical music both Western and non-Western nourish a strikingly original body of work.

AKMM’s creative process is straightforward and democratic: all members contribute pieces they have composed, each piece typically featuring the composer’s own instrument, and these pieces are subsequently arranged by the group. The arrangements evolve through successive performances and offer ample room for spontaneity and improvisation. *Nowruz* presents a selection of these ensemble pieces interspersed with solos and duets that showcase the sound of individual instruments in the hands of master performers. The combination of instruments in the ensemble pieces is surely unique. What other group

features saxophone, *pipa*, *qanun*, *dutar*, frame drum, viola d'amore, and *duclar*—a recently invented hybrid that consists of a clarinet mouthpiece fitted to the body of a *duduk*?

Though such a combo may suggest whimsy or eccentricity, these instruments represent a kind of musical consanguinity that arcs back to antiquity, when the trans-Eurasian trade routes commonly known as the Silk Road stimulated the cultural diffusion of lutes, viols, zithers, shawms, and drums whose origins are in the Middle East and Central Eurasia. The saxophone, of course, came later, patented by the Belgian instrument maker Antoine-Joseph “Adolphe” Sax in 1846. But Basel Rajoub, AKMM’s saxophonist, learned the instrument in Damascus, Syria, where jazz fused with the local *maqam* music performed on oud, violin, and *qanun* to create a new cosmopolitan sound. In this way, the saxophone became, if not a blood relative, then a relative by marriage of the lutes, viols, and zithers long associated with music from the Middle East.

The ancestry of the Chinese *pipa*, another seeming outlier in AKMM’s instrumentarium, has been traced back to Central Asia, from where it was evidently carried to China in ancient times. Thus, the *pipa* is a distant relative of the *dutar*, a long-necked lute with two strings that is a beloved instrument in the sedentary cultures of Central Asia and is represented in AKMM by the virtuosic playing of Tajik musician Sirojiddin Juraev. Similarly, the viola d'amore, an instrument associated with the Italian Baroque, is likely a descendant of the Middle Eastern *rabab*



Left-right, from top row: *pipa*, *qanun*, *tanbur*, *doira*, *viola d'amore*, *duclar*.

brought to medieval Andalusia by Arab conquerors. The gossamer timbre that Tunisian violinist Jasser Haj Youssef coaxes from the viola d'amore evokes a sui generis soundscape in which Baroque music and Arab *maqam* are congenial cohabitants.

Other AKMM members also bridge multiple musical worlds. Feras Charestan, a master performer on the *qanun*, a trapezoidal zither with roots in ancient Mesopotamia, is equally at home performing newly composed orchestral music and accompanying the traditional *muwashshah* singers of his native Syria. Likewise, Wu Man, the celebrated *pipa* maestra, moves seamlessly between the instrument's canonical repertoire of solo pieces and a constellation of contemporary works for *pipa* and orchestra, *pipa* and string quartet, *pipa* and *son jarocho* ensemble, and, in the case of AKMM, *pipa* compositions in a musical language very much her own. On the rhythm side, Abbos Kosimov, who relocated from his native Uzbekistan to Sacramento, California, has put his peerless mastery of frame drums at the disposal of rock and pop icons, jazz musicians, and performers of Hindustani classical music in addition to playing with a wide range of performers from Central Asia.

Though the burnished sound of AKMM's unlikely combination of instruments represents a singular voice in contemporary music, the group's cosmopolitan approach to music making is, thankfully, no longer exceptional. On the contrary, it has become an admired model for younger musicians as well as a social

development tool for the Aga Khan Music Programme's cultural development initiatives. These days, the members of AKMM are much in demand as teachers and workshop leaders around the world. The meridian lines of their work with students and protégés as well as their own musical explorations follow from a fundamental shared belief: that tradition can serve as an invaluable compass for an artistic search into new forms of creativity inspired but not constrained by the past. The music on *Nowruz* is offered in gratitude to all who have helped the group broaden and deepen these explorations, and to the listeners whose enthusiastic response to AKMM's work has encouraged them to continue their journey together.

## THE AGA KHAN MUSIC PROGRAMME

AKMM is a project of the Aga Khan Music Programme, whose mission is to foster the development of living musical heritage in societies across the world where Muslims have a significant presence. The Music Programme disseminates this work internationally through collaborations with exceptionally creative musicians, artists, educators, and arts presenters. The Music Programme's collaboration with Smithsonian Folkways Recordings extends back to 2002 and includes the 10-volume CD-DVD anthology *Music of Central Asia* and the double CD *The Silk Road: A Musical Caravan*.



AGA KHAN  
MASTER MUSICIANS  
(AKMM)

**Wu Man**  
*pipa*

**Basel Rajoub**  
*saxophone, duclar, doholla*

**Feras Charestan**  
*qanun*

**Sirojiddin Juraev**  
*dutar, tanbur*

**Jasser Haj Youssef**  
*viola d'amore*

**Abbos Kosimov**  
*doira, chang qobuz (jaw harp),  
riq, tar (frame drum)*

with

**Levent Yıldırım**  
*doholla*

**Wu Man** is an acclaimed performer on the *pipa*, a four-stringed Chinese lute with ancient roots that, due in large part to her efforts, has become a leading instrument of contemporary music in both East and West. Wu Man performs both traditional and contemporary music on the *pipa*, and many new works have been commissioned specially for her. Educated at Beijing's Central Conservatory of Music, Wu Man is active as an educator in both the USA and China and holds the title of Distinguished Professor at Xi'an and Zhejiang Conservatories. A resident of California, she is a 2023 recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship, the USA's highest honor in folk and traditional arts.

**Basel Rajoub** is a composer and saxophonist who has honed both a distinctive sound and an original musical language for the saxophone inspired by the rich melodic and rhythmic vocabulary of the Middle East. Born in Aleppo, Syria, Rajoub graduated from the Damascus High Institute of Music, where he majored in trumpet. Later, he taught himself to play the saxophone and began composing for the various ensembles in which he has performed. His compositions draw on the characteristic microtonal intervals of Middle Eastern music to illuminate a panoramic emotional world that extends from prayer to dance. A resident of Geneva, Switzerland, Rajoub serves as Artistic Director of the Oriental Orchestra at Haute école de musique Genève.

**Feras Charestan** has devoted his musical career to the art of the *qanun* and developed a unique performance style on this ancient and ubiquitous instrument of the Middle East and Mediterranean Basin. Born in Al-Hasakeh, in the northeast of Syria, Charestan studied *qanun* at the High Institute of Music in Damascus and quickly became a sought-after soloist with symphony orchestras as well as a member of popular bands and contemporary music ensembles. It was only after relocating to Stockholm, Sweden, that Charestan began composing his own music, which blends Middle Eastern melodic modes and genres with elements of a European sensibility in a musical style that is very much his own.

**Sirojiddin Juraev** grew up in the bilingual Tajik-Uzbek cultural milieu of northern Tajikistan, where he learned to play the two-stringed *dutar* at a young age and subsequently, the *tanbur* and *sato*. His music education blended two paths: traditional master-disciple oral transmission and conservatory-style studies rooted in music notation and theory. Juraev began composing while still a student. "One day I played a melody that had just come into my head, as if I'd heard it in a dream," Juraev recalled. "I asked my teacher whether he had heard that melody before, and he said no, he was hearing it for the first time. Later I made up other melodies and people really liked them. They told me that I was a composer."



Wu Man



Basel Rajoub



Feras Charestan



Sirojiddin Juraev

**Jasser Haj Youssef** was born in Monastir, Tunisia, and studied both classical European music and classical Arabic music (*maqām*) from an early age. His first instrument was the violin. Later he began playing the Baroque viola d’amore, which has sympathetic strings that are not bowed, but create a rich, resonant sound. Haj Youssef’s professional career has merged his interests and talents in the improvisatory art of *maqām*, classical chamber and orchestral music, jazz, and world music. He currently resides in Paris, where he is active as a performer, composer, teacher, and jury member for international competitions. He has composed works for the Paris Chamber Orchestra, the early music group Les Musiciens du Louvre, and many others.

**Abbos Kosimov** was born in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, into a musical family. A disciple of the honored Uzbek *doira* player Tuychi Inogomov and winner of the Competition of Percussion Instruments of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, Kosimov established his own *doira* school in 1994 and his ensemble, Abbos, in 1998. Kosimov performs internationally with Zakir Hussain and Randy Gloss’s percussion group Hand’s OnSemble and recorded with Stevie Wonder. Kosimov has composed many works for his Abbos Ensemble and, after joining AKMM, began to expand his compositional oeuvre to other combinations of instruments. “Nowruz,” the title track of the present album, is his first composition for AKMM.

**Levent Yıldırım** (special guest) is a Turkish percussionist known for his mastery of the *doholla*, a bass version of the *darbuka*—a goblet drum with ancient roots in the Middle East and nowadays closely associated with musical traditions of Egypt. Typically used as part of an ensemble, the *doholla* in Levent’s hands became a virtuosic solo instrument. Levent Yıldırım’s extensive travels and experience as a performer with musicians from around the world are reflected in the variety of sounds and techniques that characterize his playing—at once eclectic and distinctively his own.

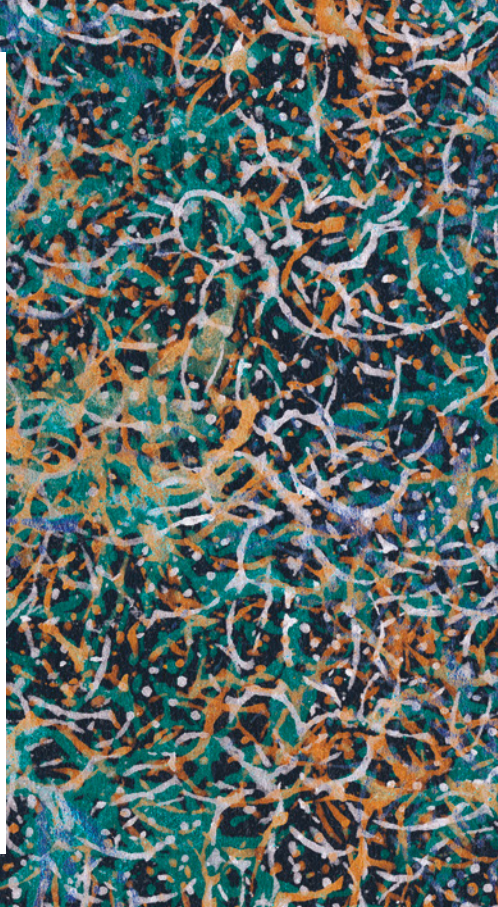




**Jasser Haj Youssef**



**Abbos Kosimov**



**Levent Yıldırım (special guest)**

## TRACK NOTES

### 1. TASHKENT

Composer: **Basel Rajoub** (2017)

**All AKMM artists** (Sirojiddin Juraev, *dutar*; Abbos Kosimov, *doira*)

“Tashkent” was inspired by Basel Rajoub’s first visit to that city, a sprawling metropolis that is the cultural and commercial center of Central Asia. There, Rajoub found “sunshine, peace, and the smell of home.” Said Rajoub, “Tashkent. I walked your streets and found this sound. I salute you.” “Tashkent” has been performed in many different instrumental arrangements, often in the context of workshops and masterclasses in which young musicians perform alongside AKMM.

### 2. SAMAI

Composer: **Jasser Haj Youssef** (1999)

**Jasser Haj Youssef**, viola d’amore; **Feras Charestan**, *qanun*;  
**Basel Rajoub**, *doholla*

*Samai* is one of the earliest and most elaborate instrumental forms that still maintains a strong presence in the repertoire of musicians from the Middle East and North Africa. *Samai* appeared in the 14<sup>th</sup> century among musicians in the lands of the Ottoman Empire and reached a level of formal perfection

toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Samai* holds a venerated place in the classical music traditions of the Middle East and North Africa that might be compared to that of the sonata in European classical music. Jasser Haj Youssef composed this *Samai* in 1999. Since then, it has been arranged for performance by musicians and singers from different cultures and musical traditions ranging from European Baroque to jazz.

### 3. TEAHOUSE

Composer: **Wu Man** (2016)

**Wu Man**, *pipa*; **Feras Charestan**, *qanun*; **Abbos Kosimov**, *riq*

“Teahouse” is an homage to the sound of the traditional silk and bamboo instruments played in teahouses in Wu Man’s hometown area of Zhejiang Province, in China’s southeast. Wu Man taught the quintessentially Chinese pentatonic melody of “Teahouse” to *qanun* player Feras Charestan, who embellished it with his own improvised counterpoint. The beautifully integrated sound of the two instruments seems so natural that a listener could be excused for thinking that *pipa* and *qanun* have always been played together—and indeed, in a sense, they have. The *pipa* traces its ancestry to the Persian *barbat*, the short-necked lute with a bent scroll that may well have also provided the prototype for the Middle Eastern oud, and the melded sound of lutes and zithers is at the very center of traditional music from Iran and the Arab lands.

#### 4. MADAD

Composer: **Basel Rajoub** (2023)

**Basel Rajoub**, *duclar*

Basel describes “Madad” as “an intricate solo melody played on the *duclar* (a one-octave hybrid woodwind instrument),” adding that “the simplicity of the *duclar* and the minimal improvisation in Maqam Segah, which features a prominent ‘neutral’ interval that sounds neither major nor minor, makes ‘Madad’ very spiritual, and also different each time it is performed.”

#### 5. AWDEH

Composer: **Feras Charestan** (2018)

**Feras Charestan**, *qanun*; **Jasser Haj Youssef**, viola d’amore; **Wu Man**, *pipa*; **Basel Rajoub**, saxophone; **Abbos Kosimov**, *tar* (frame drum)

“Awdeh” means “return (home)” and expresses nostalgia and longing for the composer’s homeland. It is inspired by the traditional *maqam* music of the Middle East, a sophisticated form of classical music whose roots go back more than a thousand years and that remains vitally alive today. The scales and modes of the *maqam* system provide an all but inexhaustible resource for composition and improvisation, exemplified in this tradition-based composition.

#### 6. MEHAN

Composer: **Sirojiddin Juraev** (2009)

**Sirojiddin Juraev**, *dutar*; **Abbos Kosimov**, *doira* and *chang qobuz* (jaw harp)

“Mehan” displays the virtuosic potential of the two-stringed *dutar* in the hands of a master as well as the prominent role of *usul*, the metro-rhythmic cycle played on the frame drum (*doira*). “Mehan” juxtaposes two different *usuls*: the first in 4/4 and the second in 7/8, a meter rarely found in Western music but common in the traditional music of Tajikistan.

#### 7. CADENCE

Composer: **Jasser Haj Youssef** (2020)

**Jasser Haj Youssef**, viola d’amore

Jasser Haj Youssef said the following about his composition: “‘Cadence’ is a piece in an improvised form that draws inspiration both from the Arabic *maqam* and from Bach’s Sonata no. 1 for solo violin. Bach was a universal composer, and what I try to do in ‘Cadence’ is join his music to the spirit of *maqam*, which is to say, join two worlds: that of Middle Eastern classical music and that of European classical music.”

## 8. MASHQ-I DUTAR

Composer: **Sirojiddin Juraev** (2010)

**All AKMM artists** (Sirojiddin Juraev, *dutar*; Abbos Kosimov, *doira*)

In music, *mashq* means “practice,” “exercise,” or “training” (it also describes a style of Arabic calligraphy). In this piece, composer Sirojiddin Juraev transforms a simple exercise for the two-stringed *dutar* into a virtuosic composition, arranged by AKMM, in which the *dutar*’s complex strumming patterns and flamenco-like tremolos illustrate a musical vestige of the historical links between Andalusia and the greater Middle East.

## 9. JUL DANCE

Composer: **Feras Charestan** (2018)

**All AKMM artists** (Sirojiddin Juraev, *dutar*; Abbos Kosimov, *tar*) with **Levent Yıldırım**, *doholla*

“Jul Dance” (Jul is pronounced “yule”) was inspired by folk music—specifically, the folk music of Sweden, where Feras Charestan makes his home after leaving his native Syria. He wrote the piece as his contribution to a Christmas concert at the Swedish university where he was studying.

## 10. AUTUMN FLOWERS AND LEAVES

Composer: **Wu Man** (2022)

**Wu Man**, *pipa*

A graduate of Beijing’s prestigious Central Conservatory, Wu Man did not study the art of improvisation as part of her rigorous formal training on the *pipa*. In recent years, however, she has been called upon with increasing frequency to extemporize new music on the spot in a variety of musical contexts including film soundtracks and performances by contemporary music groups like AKMM. Wu Man created “Autumn Flowers and Leaves” during the recording session for *Nowruz*.

## 11. ILI

Composer: **Basel Rajoub** (2018)

**Basel Rajoub**, saxophone; **Jasser Haj Youssef**, viola d’amore; **Feras Charestan**, *qanun*; **Sirojiddin Juraev**, *tanbur*; **Wu Man**, *pipa*

“Ili,” which means “mine” in the Aleppo dialect of Arabic, is written in the scale of Maqam Hejaz. This version of the piece begins with an improvised introduction by Sirojiddin Juraev on the Tajik-Uzbek *tanbur*, creating a seamless bridge between the musical worlds of the Middle East and Central Asia.

## 12. NOWRUZ

Composer: **Abbos Kosimov** (2019)

**All AKMM artists** (Sirojiddin Juraev, *tanbur*; Abbos Kosimov, *doira*)

Nowruz is the traditional Persian New Year, which coincides with the vernal equinox. Nowadays it is celebrated not only in Iran and Iranophone countries, but in the Middle East and throughout Central Asia as the Feast of Spring. In recent years, Nowruz has also been celebrated in many Western countries as a sign of cultural inclusiveness and respect. Nowruz is a time of festivity and hopefulness for the year to come, as expressed in the lively melodies and rhythms of Abbos Kosimov's composition.

### Special thanks to:

Ismaili Centre Lisbon, for generously hosting rehearsals and performances of AKMM; Delegation of the Ismaili Imam in Portugal, for welcoming AKMM to Portugal; Shia Imami Ismaili National Council of Portugal, for hospitality in Lisbon; Mauro Silva, for documenting AKMM's musical journey on film and video; Basel Rajoub and Feras Charestan, for overseeing the editing and mixing of this album.

### Nowruz cover illustration

Birds occupy a central place in the mythology, literature, and art of the Middle East and are also associated with Nowruz, the Persian New Year, celebrated on the spring equinox, when they reappear in temperate zones and are considered symbols of renewal and rebirth. Stylized birds are camouflaged in the cover illustration created by Beirut-based designer Karma Tohme from a wooden block print by the Syrian artist Zena Sabbagh, and only gradually reveal themselves to the viewer. The interplay of abstraction and figuration in the illustration offers an apt metaphor for AKMM's music, in which readily identifiable tunes dissolve into abstract melodic arabesques before reemerging in variations of their original form.



### Zena Sabbagh (cover art)

Originally from the city of Aleppo, in the north of Syria, Zena Sabbagh reinvents ancestral traditions of decorating fabric, from printing to embroidery, in a contemporary way. Working in a private workshop in her house in Beirut after fleeing war-torn Aleppo, she taught the endangered technique of wooden stamping to Lebanese, Syrian, Iraqi, and Palestinian women. In 2021, Zena Sabbagh resettled with her family in France.

**Produced by** Fairouz Nishanova and Theodore Levin/Aga Khan Music Programme

**Recorded by** Yvan Bing

**Recorded at** Studio de la Fonderie, Fribourg, Switzerland, and Kitchen Studio, Geneva, Switzerland, 18-25 May 2022

**Mixed and edited by** Feras Charestan and Gabriel Lundh, The Dome, Stockholm

**Mastered by** Gabriel Lundh, The Dome, Stockholm

**Annotated by** Theodore Levin

**Project coordination by** Kirill Kuzmin and Nathalie de Groot

**Cover art by** Zena Sabbagh

**Photos by** Sebastian Schutyser

**Executive producers:** Maureen Loughran and John Smith

**Production manager:** Mary Monseur

**Production assistant:** Kate Harrington

**Editorial assistance by** Carla Borden

**Art direction, design, and layout by** Karma Tohme

All works except “Samai” and “Cadence” published by Samaa Lta.

**Smithsonian Folkways is:** Paloma Alcalá, sales associate; Cecille Chen, director of business affairs and royalties; Logan Clark, executive assistant; Toby Dodds, director of web and IT; Will Griffin, licensing manager; Kate Harrington, production assistant; Seth Langer, licensing assistant; Helen Lindsay, customer service; Maureen Loughran, director and curator; Mary Monseur, production manager; Sahara Naini, inventory coordinator; Jeff Place, curator and senior archivist; Sophie Sachar, marketing and promotions assistant; Laura Shanahan, social media coordinator; Sayem Sharif, director of financial operations; Ronnie Simpkins, audio specialist; John Smith, associate director; Jonathan Williger, marketing

manager; Brian Zimmerman, mail order manager, sales and marketing specialist.

**Smithsonian Folkways Recordings** is the nonprofit record label of the Smithsonian Institution, the national museum of the United States. Our mission is to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In this way, we continue the legacy of Moses Asch, who founded Folkways Records in 1948. The Smithsonian acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987, and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings has continued the Folkways tradition by supporting the work of traditional artists and expressing a commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding among peoples through the production, documentation, preservation, and dissemination of sound. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, Folkways, Arhoolie, A.R.C.E., Blue Ridge Institute, Bobby Susser Songs for Children, Collector, Cook, Dyer-Bennet, Educational Activities, Fast Folk, Folk Legacy, Mickey Hart Collection, Monitor, M.O.R.E., Paredon, Right on Rhythm, UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music, and Western Jubilee Recording Company recordings are all available through:

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings Mail Order

Washington, DC 20560-0520

Phone: (800) 410-9815 or 888-FOLKWAYS (orders only)

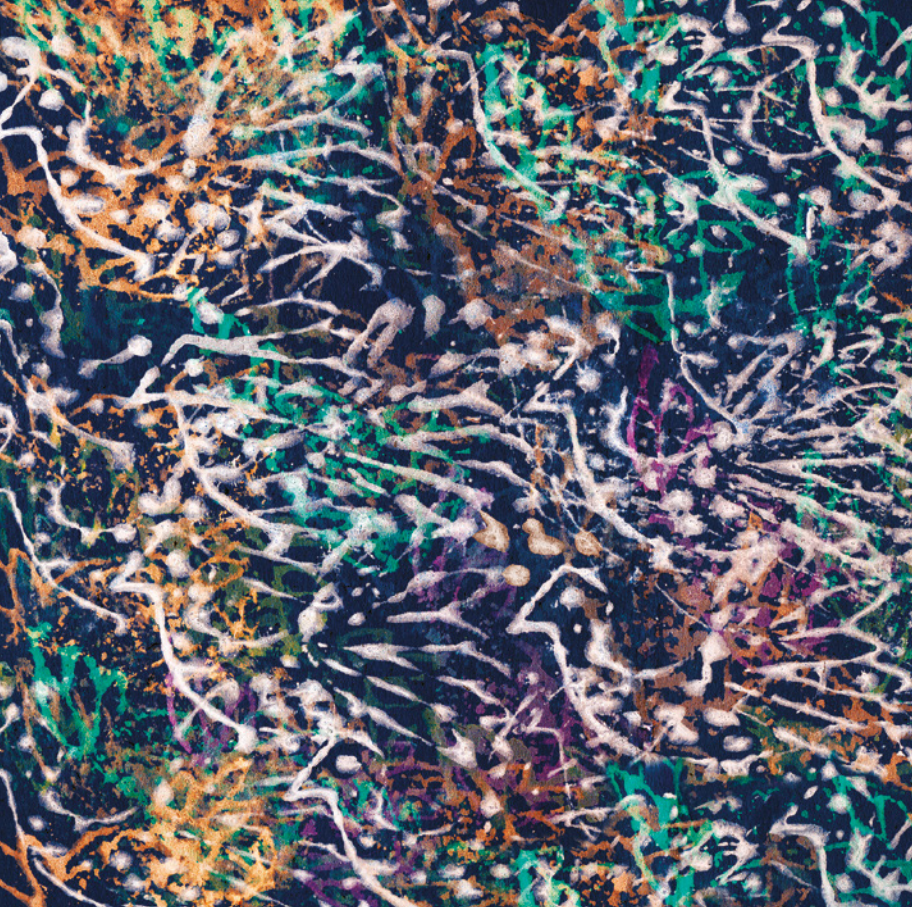
Fax: (800) 853-9511 (orders only)

To purchase online, or for further information about Smithsonian Folkways Recordings go to:

**[www.folkways.si.edu](http://www.folkways.si.edu)**.

Please send comments and questions to:

**[smithsonianfolkways@si.edu](mailto:smithsonianfolkways@si.edu)**.





 NOWRUZ

# AGA KHAN MASTER MUSICIANS

In *Nowruz*, their accomplished debut album, the Aga Khan Master Musicians (AKMM) draw on music from Central Asia, China, the Middle East, and North Africa to create a strikingly original body of work where living musical traditions meet and meld. Acclaimed virtuosos on their respective instruments, the six members of AKMM deftly blend *pipa*, *qanun*, *dutar*, viola d'amore, saxophone, and a panoply of percussion into a soulful new musical language that comes alive in these eloquent performances.

Produced by Fairouz Nishanova and Theodore Levin

01. TASHKENT (3:05)  
Basel Rajoub
02. SAMAI (5:37)  
Jasser Haj Youssef
03. TEAHOUSE (5:02)  
Wu Man
04. MADAD (2:27)  
Basel Rajoub
05. AWDEH (5:52)  
Feras Charestan
06. MEHAN (4:47)  
Sirojiddin Juraev
07. CADENCE (3:28)  
Jasser Haj Youssef
08. MASHQ-I DUTAR (5:33)  
Sirojiddin Juraev
09. JUL DANCE (5:11)  
Feras Charestan
10. AUTUMN FLOWERS AND LEAVES (3:39)  
Wu Man
11. ILI (4:21)  
Basel Rajoub
12. NOWRUZ (3:48)  
Abbos Kosimov



AGA KHAN MUSIC  
PROGRAMME

SMITHSONIAN  
**FOLKWAYS**  
RECORDINGS



Smithsonian

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings | Washington DC 20560-0520  
folkways.si.edu

© 2023 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings/Aga Khan Music Programme  
© 2023 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

