

In Istanbul, Vitrin Showcase Part of a Growing Trend in Programming

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Bring the world's arts presenters to your country for live music, and they'll take your country's music to the world. At least, that's the hope behind myriad music showcases across the globe.

The Istanbul Jazz Festival joined the growing showcase trend in 2017 with its [Vitrin Contemporary Turkish Music Showcase](http://bit.ly/2L7y8Xa) (<http://bit.ly/2L7y8Xa>).

"The basic idea with Vitrin is to give Turkish artists broader international visibility," said Istanbul festival director Harun Izer, "and perhaps also help the professionals in the scene to get a bit more international experience."

Vitrin's third edition, held July 3-6, involved 30 international culture-makers hearing about the same number of Turkish bands in Istanbul's continent-spanning, postcard-ready settings. Showcases like Bremen, Germany's jazzhead!, for example, are well-established sites of jazz business in Europe; Vitrin is part of a newer showcase presence reaching into other continents. [North Sea Jazz Festival](http://bit.ly/2P08x4y) (<http://bit.ly/2P08x4y>) Music Program Manager Frank Bolder, who attended Vitrin in 2019, said he now makes it to a dozen or so showcases a year.

"In the last 10 years, I've seen the number of showcases increasing a lot," he began. "And actually a couple weeks ago in Rotterdam at the inJazz showcase, I met someone from Cairo, and he said, 'This is great. I'm going to do exactly the same in Egypt.'"

As a model, Vitrin's organizers looked to Nutshell in Bergen, Norway, a showcase beloved by programmers for its combination of fresh live music, area fjord excursions and devoted time with colleagues. Showcases often comp professionals' travel costs and offer a short, intense immersion in music and culture. Appropriately, Vitrin was a Turkish bath kind of experience—decadent, invigorating and social. In just four days, attendees visited landmark buildings like The Blue Mosque on an Old Town tour, sampled traditional and contemporary Turkish cuisine and headed across the Bosphorus Strait for some cutting-edge contemporary music in the Asia-side hipster neighborhood of Kadıköy.

Showcase participants often are referred to as "delegates," setting the tone for not only camaraderie over shared music and meals, but for substantive intercultural exchanges, too.

Above all, showcases are a chance to experience music in a native setting. In an afternoon Vitrin concert by the Microtonal Guitar Duo, Turkish audience members spoke up with unsolicited questions between tunes. “It’s different than in Switzerland,” said Sebastian Brunner, who programs Jazzclub Moods in Zurich, where the population is five percent Turkish. “People dared to ask questions, which was a surprise. Showcases are not just seeing music—they’re seeing what music represents to an audience, and how a culture interacts and views its own role at an event.”



For all the showcases’ cultural immersion benefits, they still function as performance markets, with programmers in the role of buyers, evaluating live shows for potential purchase. In previous years, Vitrin artists like electro-acoustic act Islandman have landed spots at venerable festivals like Montreux. Yet, programmers said even the most exciting discovery might not spark an immediate booking.

“I’m really happy when I leave a showcase festival and have one or two bands that I really like, that I want to tell my colleagues about,” said North Sea’s Bolder. At Vitrin, for example, Istanbul jazz-funk troupe The Kites impressed Bolder, who downloaded their album and began following their social media feeds. “I think it’s quite quick to immediately make a programming decision after one showcase. We’re all in this for the long term. I tell bands and managers and agents that we need to get to know each other.”

Jazzahead! (<http://bit.ly/2GZpoI9>) Artistic Director Peter Schultze noted that he attended his first showcase festival, the Dutch Jazz & World Meeting, in 1998, and went several times before he was able to book a band.

Vitrin’s Izer said his event is less about scoring bookings than establishing cultural context for Turkish music: “Maybe in the next year one of the programmers will come across some music by a band from Kadıköy, where we featured our 20 Night Out artists. Now, the programmer can place the band in this vibrant Istanbul neighborhood, so there’s a foundation for interest. That’s what we are working for, actually.”

When it comes to what exactly makes a country’s improvised music appealing, delegates have a range of views on the value of native folk inflections.

“At a couple of showcases, I’ve seen young cats trying to to copy their American heroes,” Bolder said. “They all want to sound like Keith Jarrett or Joshua Redman (<http://bit.ly/2WniX0C>), but they come from a different background. For me, it becomes more interesting if they fuse the music that they like so much with their own folk roots. Then it becomes something special, a new kind of music.”

Schultze noted the precedent of Dave Brubeck’s jazz hit “Blue Rondo A La Turk,” which was richly inspired by Turkish time signatures, but argues it’s best to avoid essentializing Turkish or any other musicians into the keepers of their folk traditions. “Any fusion of native and other musical traditions has to happen organically,” he said.

To become truly export-ready, bands from countries less established in the global jazz market might need something more than a unique style or sharp performance skills. Tour funding can be key. To that end, Vitrin offers the SOCAR Turkey Silk Road Tour Support Award, a \$2,500 EUR stipend for two acts voted best in showcase. Some European programmers at Vitrin said travel support is not critical to their bookings. But Jae-Jin In, director of South Korea’s Jarasum Jazz Festival, said that for international competitiveness, the Turkish government should provide musicians with substantial tour support. “The musicians who perform at Jarasum, sometimes their airfare to Seoul is higher than their fee,” he said. “Besides a few famous musicians, we have to put priority on the musicians who have some support for airfare.”

With the Vitrin showcase attracting dozens of preeminent programmers during the past three years, it’s safe to expect more Turkish music soon on a stage near you. And on the global recording market, too. Smithsonian Folkways label director Huib Schippers said he’s not only planning some label business with Vitrin musicians, but also might spend a few months working on a book in Istanbul during his next sabbatical.

Bring the world’s culture-makers to Istanbul, and they’ll not only take Istanbul to the world—they’ll probably be back again. **DB**