

Michigan Philharmonic wins Knight challenge

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The Michigan Philharmonic, a Plymouth-based symphony orchestra, has been awarded a \$50,000 matching grant to pursue its proposed “HAFLAH! Arab Fusion Fest” music project in collaboration with the Michigan Arab Orchestra.

The grant was awarded through the Detroit Knight Arts Challenge, a competition conducted by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to identify and fund the best ideas for engaging and enriching Detroit through the arts.

The Michigan Phil’s proposal was one of only 56 winners awarded from over 1,400 submissions.

The project will bring together the Michigan Philharmonic and the Michigan Arab Orchestra to create a fusion event featuring Western and Middle Eastern traditions. Over a three-year span, the two groups will perform together, sharing musicians and commissioning a piece of music that blends Western classical music with Middle Eastern music and instruments. The culmination will be a Fusion Festival, (proposed for Music Hall in downtown Detroit), including educational workshops on Middle Eastern cultural traditions.

“The purpose of the project is to develop cultural and musical relationships, and to further bring together Detroit’s diverse cultures and communities,” explained Michigan Phil Executive Director Beth Stewart.

Nan Washburn, Music Director and Conductor of the Michigan Phil, noted that “this musical collaboration will be unique due in part to the difference in musical instruments and styles, and will be one of the first of its kind in the U.S. However, with southeastern Michigan being home to the largest Arabic Community in the United States, the time for working together and using music as the cultural ‘glue’ is now.”

The Michigan Arab Orchestra (MAO) was founded in 2009 and was originally a takht, a small chamber music group. The ensemble has grown to become an orchestra under the leadership of its music director, Michael Ibrahim, and is comprised of musicians from both Arab and non-Arab backgrounds.

With its “HAFLAH!” project, the Michigan Phil aims to build on its historically successful model of multi-cultural programming. In 2012, the Michigan Phil worked with the Indian community in the Detroit area to bring “Bollywood in the D” to the Music Hall, a sold-out concert that brought together the Michigan Phil and Indian vocal soloists and instrumentalists performing the great film music of India.

Dennis Scholl, vice president for arts at the Knight Foundation, said that “the arts don’t just inspire, they help build community. We’re excited to help build on the creative momentum in Detroit, and everything that artists and social entrepreneurs are doing to push the city forward.”