

NEBRASKA CROSSROADS



MUSIC FESTIVAL

**2025 PROGRAM**



## Welcome from the Artistic Director

The 2025 Festival is finally here and I'm filled with gratitude to be writing these words as we get ready to celebrate a week of transformative music together – music rooted in tradition and transcending those traditions in new and creative ways.

This year has been full of milestones: our first-ever grant from the National Endowment for the Arts was a hard-won endorsement of artistic merit and value to the community. January saw the launch of our blog, bringing you more of the stories and insights that make Crossroads so special. In February we hired Hal France as our first ever Production Director. After a successful residency during last year's festival, our Dream Warriors Project will be debuting at the Museum of Nebraska Art (MONA) next spring, bringing together Indigenous hip-hop and visual imagery, digital wizardry and insightful documentary for an entirely new kind of experience. Our festival family keeps growing, with new partners in Lincoln and Omaha, audience members, supporters and volunteers.

And now, last but not least, we arrive at the 2025 Festival—curated by a dear friend and longtime festival artist, the renowned clarinetist and composer Kinan Azmeh. Kinan has put together a program for us, drawing on the depths of his friendships and musical inspirations, for a week of music unlike any other. As a member of the National Arts Council, the Silkroad Ensemble and an experienced world traveler and soloist, Kinan brings together a unique roster that you will not be able to hear anywhere else.

As a native Nebraskan, it brings me great joy to hear the music I love alongside the cicadas on these lazy, late-summer nights. It is truly the sound of home and I hope you feel the same.

**Erik Higgins**  
**Artistic Director**



## Words from the Guest Curator: Kinan Azmeh

Hello and welcome to your Nebraska Crossroads Music Festival and it is my great honor to be your guest curator for this edition.

This year's festival is inspired by artists who believe that music is a continuum. These are individuals who perform, compose, improvise, experiment with tradition, and—perhaps most importantly—create without being prisoners of the past, nor fearful of the future.



This edition will shine a light on artists who embrace the fluidity of musical identity. These global musicians move effortlessly across genres, cultures, and borders, unbound by convention yet deeply rooted in traditions. In essence, this is music born from a multitude of traditions, but never confined by them.

The stories of laughter, friendship, and profound connections that I share with each artist fill me with immense pride. Thank you Erik Higgins for your trust and friendship and I hope that you will welcome all these artists with the same love you have given me over the past few years.

**Kinan Azmeh**  
**Guest Curator**



Scan the code for more information about the festival, artists, program, feedback and how you can help support the festival.





## FAMILY DAY

## MUSIC AND STORYTELLING FOR ALL AGES

**Sun. July 20 // 2:00–4:00pm**

**Sheldon Museum of Art // 12th & R St, Lincoln**

Join us for Family Day at Sheldon Museum of Art in Lincoln—a joyful celebration of music and storytelling for all ages.

We are proud to partner with the esteemed Sheldon Museum of Art as they embark on a new series – Family Day – for all ages to enjoy the museum’s groundbreaking exhibitions and innovative programming.

For the July edition of Family Day with Nebraska Crossroads, you can enjoy a special children's storytelling concert with Crossroads' artists, an evocative performance by Nordic-folk duo iiS in the Museum's Great Hall, and a hands-on, storytelling-through-poetry-workshop with the former Nebraska State Poet, Matt Mason.

**Co-presented with Sheldon Museum of Art**

Family Day is co-presented with Sheldon Museum of Art, a vital cultural anchor known for its world-class collection and commitment to community engagement. Sheldon inspires creativity and curiosity by making art accessible to people of all ages and backgrounds.

# LINCOLN SHOWCASE

## FESTIVAL STARS

**Sat. July 26 // 7:30–9:30pm**

**Sheldon Sculpture Garden – UNL Downtown Campus // 12th & R St, Lincoln**

Grab your blanket, lawn chair, and favorite drink for our annual Crossroads Showcase—this year in Sheldon Museum of Art’s beautiful Sculpture Garden, the traditional home of Lincoln’s beloved “Jazz in June” series. In its first appearance in this new venue, Crossroads and our co-presenting partner, the Lied Center, are trying something completely new. Come and see!

Enjoy an eclectic evening of music and poetry with festival headliners Dawn of Midi, Layale Chaker and Sarafand, and Kinan Azmeh performing his iconic Suite for Improvisor and Orchestra, along with poetry from the Nebraska State Poet Jewel Rodgers and former Nebraska State Poet, Matt Mason. Round out the full experience with food trucks and family activities with our friends from the Asian Community and Cultural Center. Grab a spot early to hear a special pre-concert performance of Los Mariachies de la Ciudad Estrella under the leadership of Brett Noser, directly preceding the showcase.

### **Co-presented with Lied Center for Performing Arts and Asian Community and Cultural Center**

The Lincoln Showcase is presented in partnership with the Lied Center for Performing Arts and the Asian Community and Cultural Center, two organizations dedicated to enriching Nebraska’s cultural life. The Lied Center brings world-class performances and arts education to communities across the state. The Asian Center uplifts immigrant and refugee voices, strengthening Nebraska through cultural exchange and belonging.







# DINUK WIJERATNE

## THE COMPOSER'S MIND – CREATIVITY INSIGHTS

**Tues. July 29 // 7:00–8:00pm**

**Gallery 1516 // 1516 Leavenworth St, Omaha**

Join internationally acclaimed composer Dinuk Wijeratne for a rare behind-the-scenes look into his creative process. Described as “Exuberantly creative” (New York Times), Wijeratne shares personal insights, stories, and musical excerpts in this intimate conversation about inspiration, collaboration, and invention.

### **Co-presented with Gallery 1516 and Humanities Nebraska**

This presentation by Dinuk Wijeratne is co-presented with Gallery 1516 and Humanities Nebraska, organizations that foster creativity, conversation, and connection.



Read more about Dinuk and  
all the festival artists here:  
[NebraskaMusicFest.org/artists](https://NebraskaMusicFest.org/artists)





## Interview with Guest Curator Kinan Azmeh

Artistic Director Erik Higgins and guest curator Kinan Azmeh sit down for a heartfelt conversation about this year's program:

**Erik:** Do you want to talk at all about your inspiration for putting together these artists and these pieces?

**Kinan:** Honestly, and it sounds weird to tell you this, but for me, friendship is actually at the base of all of this. Because when I got invited by you to be a guest co-curator, the idea is absolutely amazing because it's an incredible sign of trust – another level of trust. Lots of the time when you meet artists in your life and you invite them to play in your festival, you're trusting their art.

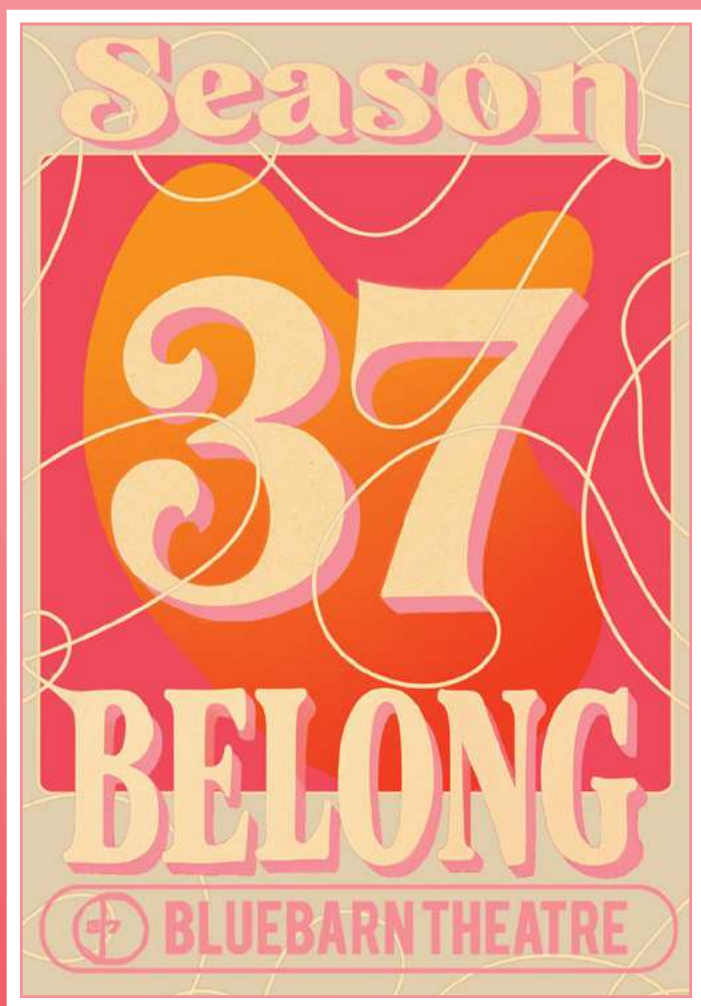
But then when you trust them about their taste, which is like, "OK, would you like to bring other artists to this festival?" You're going to not only trust their artistry, but also their taste and their friendships too. And I think when I thought about artists for the festival, I think the common denominator when I look at the program is friendship. I mean, most artists are really dear friends of mine. And I don't mean that in a way like, "oh, yeah, here's that curator who brought his friends to the festival". It's not that. These are friends also because they are the artists who inspired me to be the musician I am.

And by extension, I know they can inspire so many other people. I want other people to have that luxury of discovering their music, their personalities and their own connections too, especially those who are bringing projects bigger than just themselves. Friendship is really at the heart of all of this.



See the full blog post at  
[NebraskaMusicFest.org/blog](https://NebraskaMusicFest.org/blog)





COMING SOON

[bluebarn.org](http://bluebarn.org)





# LAYALE CHAKER AND SARAFAND

## ARABIC JAZZ FUSION

**Wed. July 30 // 7:00–8:30pm**

**Kimball Hall, UNL Glenn Korff School of Music // 1113 R St, Lincoln**

Back for her fourth Crossroads appearance, Layale Chaker brings her acclaimed ensemble Sarafand to perform their evocative new release, *Radio Afloat*. We are grateful to partner with University of Nebraska–Lincoln’s Glenn Korff School of Music as they unveil the newly-revitalized Kimball Hall, exploiting its state-of-the-art acoustics with Chaker’s rich, distinct musical language.

Blending Arabic microtonality, jazz, and contemporary classical, Chaker’s music reflects on the tides of identity, power, and the natural world, “cherry-picking from cool contemporary classical, simmering jazz, ear-tweaking Arabic microtonality, and gently probing improvisation” – *The Strad*.

### **Co-presented with UNL Glenn Korff School of Music**

This performance by Layale Chaker and Sarafand is co-presented with the University of Nebraska–Lincoln’s Glenn Korff School of Music, a leading force in music education and performance in Nebraska. The school fosters artistic excellence and innovation, supporting students and audiences in exploring diverse musical traditions.





# CELLO SPECTRUM

**FROM RAGA TO REVERB:  
HINDUSTANI ROOTS AND ELECTRIC LOOPS**

**Thurs. July 31 // 9:00–10:00pm**  
**BLUEBARN Theatre // 1106 S 10th St, Omaha**

A double billing of sonic contrasts and cello virtuosity. Experience a solo set of David Downing's mesmerizing loop-based compositions followed by a soulful segment drawing on Jake Charkey's deep roots in Hindustani music on BLUEBARN's outdoor stage on the green. The evening concludes with a collaborative finale—two distinct voices blending into one unforgettable sound. Blankets and chairs are encouraged.

## **Co-presented with BLUEBARN Theatre**

This genre-blurring evening of cello artistry is co-presented with BLUEBARN Theatre, a cornerstone of Omaha's performing arts scene known for bold, boundary-pushing work and unforgettable experiences. With its deep commitment to artistic risk and community connection, BLUEBARN offers the perfect setting for this collaborative musical event.



Read more about David and Jake  
and all the festival artists here:  
[NebraskaMusicFest.org/artists](https://NebraskaMusicFest.org/artists)



## When Art Is No Longer Welcome

On May 1st, we got a letter terminating our first ever – and hard-won – Project Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and we risked losing a significant source of funding for this year’s festival. Although the story ended well – we didn’t lose the funding – our Executive Director Olga Smola shared some deeply personal insights on art and censorship in this must-read post:

Growing up in Russia, I studied the history of censorship under Stalin – how music, literature, and the arts were tightly controlled to serve the ideological goals of the state. After Stalin’s death, the repression lessened but never disappeared. Censorship continued for decades, silencing writers like Solzhenitsyn and countless others whose work didn’t align with official ideology.

It wasn’t until the collapse of the Soviet Union that we were finally able to study this history more openly – the way entire creative lives were erased, and how culture was shaped by the demand to conform. We learned how easily art could be used – or regulated – as a tool of power.

That’s what makes this termination of our grant feel eerily familiar: anonymous reporting systems at universities, repression of discourse, and the withdrawal of government support for artistic work that doesn’t align with newly invented “priorities.”

It is the same logic used to censor art in the Soviet Union during Stalin’s regime:

“Art must serve the state. It must follow the correct ideology.”



See the full blog post at  
[NebraskaMusicFest.org/blog](https://NebraskaMusicFest.org/blog)





*The 4th annual*  
**Good Vibrations and KVNO**

**Musical Instrument Drive!!**

Saturday, August 9

9:00am - Noon

At the Bell Tower,  
University of Nebraska at  
Omaha

62nd and Dodge Streets



*Good Vibrations gets donated instruments of all kinds professionally repaired and distributed to students in need.*





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## Lincoln & Omaha Finale Program

### Kareem Roustom:

*Dabkeh*

### Stan Charkey:

*J/J*, feat. Jake Charkey, solo cello

### Dinuk Wijeratne:

*Gajaga Vannama*, for solo piano and orchestra, feat. Wijeratne, piano

*Intermission*

### Layale Chaker:

*Vigil* for String Quartet and soloist, arr. For string orchestra, Mvmts I & III

*Hints on Memory*, for solo violin and string orchestra, Mvmt. II – both works feat. Layale Chaker, solo violin

### Kinan Azmeh:

*Suite for Improvisor and Orchestra*, feat. Kinan Azmeh, clarinet

*Mvmt. I – Love on 139th Street*

*Mvmt. II – November 22nd*

*Mvmt. III – Wedding*

## Festival Orchestra

### Violin

Layale Chaker

Susanna Perry Gilmore ††

Fiona Hughes

Henry Jenkins †

Véronique Mathieu

Olga Smola

Juliet Yoshida †

### Viola

Alexa Brown †

Kyle Miller

Tyler Sieh †

### Cello

Anna Steinhoff

Jake Charkey

Karen Becker\*

### Double Bass

Sam Beck-Johnson\*

Erik Higgins\*

† Member of Omaha Symphony Orchestra

†† Omaha Symphony Concertmaster

\* Current and former members of Lincoln's Symphony Orchestra





# ART-TASTIC SATURDAY

## MUSIC AND STORYTELLING FOR ALL AGES

**Sat. August 2 // 11am-2pm**  
**The Joslyn // 2200 Dodge St, Omaha**

Crossroads joins forces with the The Joslyn for a day of creativity and connection for the whole family. Enjoy a fun-filled children's concert, two performances by the enchanting Nordic-folk duo ííS, live poetry with Nebraska State Poets, current and former, Jewel Rodgers and Matt Mason, and an interactive storytelling-through-poetry workshop with Matt Mason. It's a perfect way to experience music, stories, and art—together.

### **Co-presented with The Joslyn Art Museum**

We're proud to partner with The Joslyn Art Museum, Nebraska's premier art institution with a commitment to fostering curiosity, creativity, and lifelong learning through the visual arts. The Joslyn offers a welcoming space for all generations to connect with art and with one another. Art-tastic Saturday celebrates that spirit—inviting families to explore, imagine, and make lasting memories together.



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## Keep Listening After the Festival

Did you know that you can get curated playlists delivered straight to your inbox? Check out Artistic Director Erik Higgins' Albums of the Month for inspiration for your own listening after the festival's last notes have been played.

Seldom do I laugh out loud when listening to music, but I can tell you that I did just that multiple times listening to the newest album from Jon Batiste. It can be such a tacky thing to take classical music and make it "jazzy", but this album was a classy and inspired take on Beethoven's most iconic works that I'm sure he would have been just as tickled with as I was.



See all the recommendations and sign up for the mailing list at [NebraskaMusicFest.org/blog](https://NebraskaMusicFest.org/blog)



# SPONSORS

Nebraska Crossroads Music Festival could not bring together its ensemble of musicians from Nebraska and the world without loyal and generous support. Thank you!





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# SPECIAL THANKS

Alan King, MacRae Productions

Bill Stephan, Mark Moore and Matthew Boring,  
Lied Center for the Performing Arts

Brett Noser and Los Mariachies de la Ciudad Estrella

Brian Seifferlein and our dedicated video team

Carrie Jackson, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Dan and Becky Higgins

Deborah Kaplan

Fredrik Serholt, Audio Master

Jaden Hill and Sara Meadows, Gene Leahy Mall

Jay Wise, Omaha Chamber Music Society

Jeremy Aspen, Matt Erb, Morgan Beach, Myra Coveney: Volunteer Coordinators

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Nebraska State Poets, Jewel Rodgers & Matt Mason

Omaha Performing Arts Center

Sherry Brownrigg, KVNO Radio FM 90.7

Steven Williams and Jenn Sheshko Wood, UNO Theatre

The extraordinary work of our Partners, Vendors, and Volunteers

To our co-presenting partners: Sheldon Museum of Art, LIED Center, Asian Community and Cultural Center, The RiverFront, Gallery 1516, UNL Glenn Korff School of Music, Music Box Lincoln, KANEKO, BLUEBARN Theatre, The Joslyn, and UNO.



## The Dream Warriors Project

Want to know the next big thing coming to Crossroads? Get a sneak peek at the Dream Warriors project, which will be featured in a multi-media art exhibition at Museum of Nebraska Art (MONA) in April 2026 and come to the 2026 Crossroads Festival as a fully-fledged stage production.

Inside the black box theatre on 12th street in Lincoln, the Dream Warriors began working with Swedish recording producers Fredrik Serholt and Paulina Delin to create brand new music. Visual Artist Sarah Rowe was there to soak up the vibe and sketch new art.

Sneaking a peek inside the theatre on the first day, one might wonder if the vibe was off; artists were quiet, looking at their phones, the mic stood to the side, no one in front of it. A closer look would reveal thumbs intensely writing and refining lyrics on note-taking apps. Soon the beats would be rolling, hammering the mic with word after word, rhyme after rhyme. In just a handful of days, the Dream Warriors would lay down five fresh tracks.

On August 11, the final day of the festival, a public workshop unveiled those songs to the world for the first time. Attendees were able to hear the songs and witness the journey taken by the group in the previous days. The conversations around the songs revealed initial nerves around the project and the journey toward inspiration and mutual respect.



See the full blog post at  
[NebraskaMusicFest.org/blog](https://NebraskaMusicFest.org/blog)

# ABOUT THE FESTIVAL

Since 2019, the Nebraska Crossroads Music Festival has celebrated the many cultural groups that call Nebraska home, through world-class performances, eye-opening workshops, transcendental jam-sessions and all kinds of other events that celebrate Nebraska's unique cultural environment.

Now in its sixth season, Crossroads has held over 90 concerts with music from numerous cultural groups with hundreds of artists from all over the world. The festival has also become a creative laboratory where exciting new projects are born and go on to be performed all over the world, including most recently in New York and in Finland.

You can expect everything at this unique Nebraska-based festival from classical chamber music to hip-hop, jazz, indie-electronic, Hindustani classical and lots in between. Although you may never know what to expect, you can expect to leave transformed.

## Staff

ERIK HIGGINS // ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

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