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Qanun player Khalil Khoury, of Ramallah, Palestine, at an orchestra rehearsal at the 2010 Arabic Music Retreat



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Meets the Mainstream

Middle Eastern music has long kept a low profile in the U.S. But today, Arabic and Turkish musical forms—akin to American jazz in their major emphasis on improvisation—are capturing the attention of a new generation of Western-trained instrumentalists.

BY Kay Hardy Campbell

By the time cellist Eric Alterman, 23, arrived at the Arabic Music Retreat at Massachusetts' Mount Holyoke College in August, 2010, he'd already been introduced to Middle Eastern music. While an undergraduate in music at Brandeis, he'd played Middle Eastern fusion with Mohammad Kundos, a fellow student who hailed from Jaffa, in Israel. On Kundos's recommendation, Alterman signed up for the retreat, and took private lessons with violinist and oud master Simon Shaheen.

By the end of the week, Alterman says, "The retreat gave me a new way to look at music theory, musical phrasing, and melodic ideas. I began thinking about the connection between solo improvisation in Arabic music and the ways melodies are constructed, and connected that to solo Bach performance."

Alterman's experience echoes what many Western musicians find in the music of the Middle East; complex but accessible ideas that add something pivotal to their musicianship.

Middle Eastern culture encompasses a wide variety of music styles; pop, folk, rap, sacred, large orchestras, and chamber music. Its core instruments are the oud

(fretless lute), violin, *qanun* (plucked lap zither), *nay* (end-blown reed flute), as well as voice, and an array of hand percussion instruments.

At first, Western listeners typically notice that Middle Eastern music doesn't use a lot of harmony, and makes obvious use of microtones. Deeper listening reveals rich, voice-like melodies that dance over compelling rhythms. One Western-trained violinist thinks of it as a complexity that is more horizontal than vertical.

Middle Eastern chamber ensembles from Morocco to Turkey perform suites that weave *taqasim*, improvisation, with vocal and instrumental pieces. They explore a common *maqam*, mode, as well as modulations into related *maqamat*, using an elaborate but accessible aesthetic framework. For centuries, this repertoire was passed down orally, so when transcribed, it's often done in simple, one-line scores. This forces performers to develop their own arrangements, a key skill of any Middle Eastern player and ensemble.

The chamber music style of the Eastern Arab world and Turkey, played by a small ensemble known as a *takht*, is gaining popularity among adventurous Western musicians who sometimes call this tradition *maqam* music.

A notated *sama'i*, a classical instrumental form developed during the Ottoman period



Born in a village in northern Finland, Jussi Reijonen, 30, first heard the scales and rhythms of the Middle East as a child, because his family lived in Lebanon, Oman, and Jordan. A self-taught guitarist, he bought an oud while traveling in Morocco, began to explore Middle Eastern music, and later joined a Middle East fusion ensemble at Boston's Berklee College of Music. He, too, studied at the Arabic Music Retreat.

Violinist Sami Abu Shumays, 35, was a composition and music major at Harvard in the late 1990s. He remembers his frustration with the limitations of contemporary classical music. "I thought that improvisation and ornamentation might be the way out." Looking for sympathetic faculty, Abu Shumays first approached Robert Levin, known for his Mozart completions and improvisations on Mozart cadenzas. Levin suggested he study the ornamentations in Mozart's piano sonatas. "I took his advice, and spent much of the summer between my junior and senior years playing Mozart sonatas, and some Chopin, and I learned a lot from that."

traveled to Egypt and Syria, where he immersed himself for several years in the *maqam* tradition. He returned to New York, founded the popular Arab music ensemble *Zikrayat*, and began teaching. He teaches entirely by ear, a practice he learned in the Middle East, and currently leads a newly formed student Middle Eastern ensemble at Wesleyan University.

To date, Middle Eastern music ensembles have sprung up at 15 college campuses across the U.S., following a trend started in 1979 by Professor A. J. Racy of UCLA. A multi-instrumentalist, composer and ethnomusicologist who grew up in Lebanon, Racy has trained generations of performers and scholars in his lectures and seminars, as well as in his Near East Music ensemble, which has been meeting every Thursday night for decades.

Members of Racy's ensemble have in turn started groups of their own, including highly successful ensembles at University of California at Santa Barbara, William and Mary, and Tufts. The UC Santa Barbara group has blossomed into an orchestra, led by principal *ney* player and ethnomusicologist Scott Marcus. His group, which performs sold-out concerts each year, boasts a full chorus and a traditional dance troupe. In 2010, they went on a concert tour to Egypt.

Berklee College hosts an annual Middle Eastern music festival centering on a guest-artist residency. The school's two Middle Eastern ensembles experiment with fusion; but students play on their own instruments, rather than learning traditional instruments of the region.

Western musicians also study at world music camps and retreats. The Middle East Camp and the Lark World Music Camp in Mendocino, as well as the Middle East Music Camp (now held in West Milford, New Jersey) by Folk Tours, span several Middle Eastern traditions and include traditional dance, with nightly *taverna*-style performances by teachers and students.

The Arabic Music Retreat at Mount Holyoke focuses on music of the eastern Arab world and is structured like most summer chamber music programs in the U.S. Each day starts with ear training, theory and history classes. After lunch, participants take private lessons, practice with a coached chamber group and orchestra, followed by late-night salon concerts and jam sessions.

"At the retreat, we balance musicianship, complexity and quality," says executive and artistic director Simon Shaheen. "One must be open mentally, to want to learn about other cultures as if one is learning a new

**Simon Shaheen—
oud master, violin-
ist, and founder of
the Mount Holyoke
retreat--sings as
he works with an
ensemble.**



Then, in his senior year, Abu Shumays took an ethnomusicology course on Middle Eastern music taught by Virginia Danielson. When Simon Shaheen visited the class and improvised on violin and oud, Abu Shumays realized this might be the music he was searching for.

After studying with Shaheen privately, Shumays



Bassam Saba, a *nay* virtuoso and multi-instrumentalist, instructs student Daniel Khoum at the 2009 retreat.

language. The keys are attention, concentration, and the will to hear.”

Although violinist Yaron Klein grew up in Haifa, Israel, playing chamber music, he was never exposed to traditional Middle Eastern music there. He heard about the retreat while researching medieval Arabic music at Harvard. “The retreat was a unique opportunity,” he says. “I was an experienced musician, but a beginner in Arab music. It was a little bit like going to a classical music camp as a beginner and finding that your instructors are Rubinstein, Heifetz and Piatigorsky.”

Eric Alterman, who just completed his Master’s in Music at Boston University, recalls his private cello lessons with Simon Shaheen. “He was pretty hard on me about intonation, because I was just getting to know the quarter tones and the Arab tuning. He also worked with me on *taqasim*. In a very short time, I started judging myself to a higher standard.”

Beth Cohen is one of New England’s leading world-music violinists. She teaches privately and is a popular instructor at world music camps. Growing up in a Syrian-Jewish home, she always heard Arabic music, but never learned to play it. After being trained in classical Western violin, Cohen turned to the folk music of the Mediterranean, becoming proficient in Balkan, Greek, and Turkish styles. In addition to violin, she learned the *yayli tambur*, the classical Ottoman upright bowed lute.

Cohen attended the Arabic Music Retreat in 2000. For her it was like coming full circle. “I loved it so much. I was like a plug sitting on the floor next to an outlet. After the retreat I felt like my plug had been plugged in. It had been sitting there all this time, and it reconnected me.”

The faculty and participants in all these ensembles, retreats and camps have gone on to form new groups, and to share knowledge and repertoire in their academic and professional careers.

Yaron Klein is now a professor of Arabic in the Middle Eastern languages department at Carleton College in Minnesota. He recently invited Bassam Saba—a faculty member of the Mount Holyoke retreat and conductor of the New York Arab Orchestra—to Carleton for a residency and concert. Klein was

Jamal Sinno, *qanun* faculty at the Arabic Music Retreat, is a member of Sharq, a U.S.-based ensemble.



delighted by the positive reaction on campus.

“I think people want to open their minds to different musical traditions, but there is another dimension. People are interested in the Middle East in general, and music provides a wonderful opportunity to experience the human dimension of the Middle East in a way that transcends the boundaries of language.”

“It’s definitely a counterpoint to what you have in the *New York Times*,” says Anne Rasmussen, leader of the William and Mary ensemble, alluding to U.S. news coverage of the region, which focuses almost exclusively on conflict.

What about the music itself? “A lot of people come into class thinking that Middle Eastern music is just an augmented second and a little twirl in the throat,” reflects Berklee voice instructor Christiane Karam, originally from Lebanon. She directs the annual Middle East Festival at Berklee and leads an ensemble there. “The students are always fascinated to see that there is so much more to it.”

Craig Macrae, a guitar and oud player who also teaches at Berklee, says his students enjoy the Middle Eastern approach to improvisation. It allows them to focus on creating melodic expression within the modal tradition instead of worrying about constant chord changes.

“There’s a real focus on developing powerful expression without harmony. You concentrate on the essence of each note and working with each note. It distills some of the most fundamental things; the emphasis on the quality of the timbre, the quality of your intonation, and the emotional expression right out front, without all the harmonic complexities.”

Robert Labaree has been teaching a course in Turkish *maqam* music at New England Conservatory since 1984. An ethnomusicologist and accomplished player of the *çeng*, the Ottoman Turkish harp, Labaree has written about, performed and recorded Turkish

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Ensemble participants at the 2009 retreat.



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availability of free digital content cuts into revenue. "When you disseminate content, it actually drives people to come," she says. Arts consultant Joe Kruger, a principal at the promotional consultancy Wolf-Brown, cites streaming as a latter-day equivalent of the Metropolitan Opera's Saturday matinee radio broadcasts, or the New York Philharmonic's televised Young People's Concert telecasts—uses of technology that help define and nourish major musical organizations.

"In 1935, baseball teams were afraid to let their games be broadcast on radio," notes Yale's Jaffe. "And it *made* the sport."

A particular advantage of streaming is that while it allows consumers to sample music, it doesn't let them *own* it. "These things are impermanent," says Norma Hurlburt, executive director of Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, about her organization's live-streamed concerts. "Once it happens, it's gone." She contrasts the streaming concerts with other CMSLC offerings, like the mp3 downloads produced by Deutsche Grammophon. "My own concern," she says, "is that while we're doing this, we don't lose track of putting out beautiful, carefully edited recordings and filmed performances."

CMSLC's streaming endeavor is part of a concentration on digital media, which include iPhone and Android apps, and videos on its website of masterclasses and lectures. The organization is currently thriving, with ticket sales on the upswing. Hurlburt is loath to attribute this any one factor; for one thing, CMSLC has a high-profile new venue in the rebuilt Alice Tully Hall. "There's a rule in advertising that it takes eleven different exposures before they buy a ticket," she says.

But she is nonetheless adamant on the



Lincoln Center's
Norma Hurlburt

necessity of CMSLC's digital efforts. "The whole world has shifted so thoroughly that if you don't have [digital media] available, you're going to find yourself behind the eight ball," Hurlburt says. "I don't think any of us know what the net benefit is. We're assuming, 'If we do it, they will come.' But I felt that we just *had* to do it."

For Ben Roe, WGBH's managing director of classical services, the station's webcasts are all

part of an effort to survive as a nonprofit organization. "We have to keep the lights on here," he says. "How do we engage with our audience to create a sustainable, viable service? The nonprofit world is all about circles of engagement: how do you move someone from a casual listener to a \$25-dollar-a-year supporter to a \$100 dollars a year and on up?"

Eventually, more organizations may look to digital vehicles like streaming media as survival tools. "The traditional model for arts organizations, where you rely on wealthy sponsors, or a single big grant, is no longer sustainable," says InstantEncore's Drakos. "How are you merging technologies together? How do you change people from passive to active users? How are they motivated to become part of your community? How are they recruited to become *ambassadors*? It's not a question of organizations being valuable, but of whether they can adapt to the rate of change and *thrive*."

"It's the future of the relationship between arts organizations and their audiences," says Dennis Scholl. "This is where it's going. This is where the audiences are traveling to. If you don't travel with your audience, you risk being left behind."

Fred Cohn is Chamber Music's consulting editor. He is also a frequent contributor to Opera News, writing reviews of concerts, opera performances and recordings, as well as profiles of musicians and singers.

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music for decades. Right from the start, he offered his *maqam* music course the NEC music history department and not as ethnomusicology; it's meant to be taken by mainstream students. He also holds an annual Intercultural Institute, featuring world-music artists in residencies, workshops and concerts.

"In *maqam* music," Labaree reflects, "The relationship between the player and the tradition is very different than in Western classical music. There are composed pieces by known composers. You can put dates on those composers, and yet nobody ever plays them the same way. The pieces are respected and taught and argued over. At the same time, the players are empowered to deal with a piece in a way that they are not empowered to do with Mozart.

"The Arab and Turkish model is much closer to what European music was before 1825. The European model radically evolved away from that model, and now we have a severe split between composer and performer. In *maqam* music, every player is a composer and every composer is a player. You are empowered both ways. Every musician is expected to cover a wide array of skills which are both composer and performer. You are considered half a musician if you can't improvise. I find that it's very useful for young professionals to deal with this. It opens their eyes to what they're not permitted to do in their own tradition. It makes them ask questions and think carefully about their own traditions. It helps them understand who they are, and where their tradition stands in relationship to the world traditions. I think this globalism is actually going to help us revisit what was lost and reclaim it."

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