

Arabian winds

Mid-East meets Mid-West



By Niko Banac

Conversation ends, and after a brief moment of silence, the musicians begin to produce a steady drone on their instruments, first with the softness of a murmur, until it increases into a sound that fills all the surrounding corridors. The instruments come from all over the Middle East and the Levant: 'ud, baglama, bouzouki, dumbek, bendir, nay, qanun, as well as violin and cello. As the musicians rehearse the first piece, a voice begins to sing: "Ya Zarif at-Tul." Behind the musicians, some people talk while others just relax in their seats after a long day of work in and around Chicago. Outside, a passerby walks into the room where the musicians are practicing and recognizes that the scales and melodies have a slightly different intonation, one distinct from the major and minor scales to which most Westerners are accustomed. But the curious onlooker is not an American tourist in Izmir, Aleppo or Cairo, and he is not listening to itinerant musicians wandering around the Middle East, like Greek refugees from Smirna in the Piraeus of the 1920s and Turks forced to flee Thessalonica, or the Rahbani brothers in pre-war Beirut. Instead, this observer is on the second floor of Goodspeed Hall or on the ground floor of Pick, listening to the sounds of the Middle East Music Ensemble, whose diverse musicians and voices encompass a musical tradition that stretches from the mountains of Bosnia to the banks of the Nile.

The Middle East Music Ensemble was founded in 1997 at the UofC and is aimed at providing an outlet for musicians experienced in Middle Eastern musical genres from both the University and the wider community. Right now, there are about thirty members, half of whom are instrumentalists, and half of whom are vocalists. The music department, which sponsors the Ensemble, has several ethnomusicologists who specialize in Middle Eastern musical traditions, the most prominent of whom is Martin Stokes, who did years of field work in Turkey. Ensemble gives both specialists like Stokes and students with little musical education the opportunity to experience Middle Eastern music in an open environment that is just as scholarly as it is informal.

Issa Boulos, the director of the Ensemble, once explained to the musicians that their emotional connection to the piece mattered more than their actual syncopa-

tion. In video recordings of the Egyptian diva Umm Kulthum, Boulos pointed out that the violinists' bow strokes do not match. Instead, they stay within a specific pattern that tolerates a wide range of variation, with each musician adding his own interpretation to the piece. This philosophy, rooted in the concept of ma'qam in Middle Eastern music, can be summarized in Boulos' oft-repeated imperative to his musicians: "Make it wavy!" Ma'qam, the rough equivalent of the Western scale, contains tones that were lost in the West with the introduction of well-tempered instruments and the major and minor scales in the mid-eighteenth century, such as quarter and ninth tones absent from the piano. There are thousands of ma'qams, many of them specific to region. Aside from their musical qualities, some traditions, such as Sufi Islam in Turkey, maintain that some ma'qams embody spiritual powers capable of curing illness or depression.

Issa Boulos, a Palestinian Christian from the city of Ramallah in Palestine, is the director of the Ensemble and has a long and accomplished career behind him. Issa describes his hopes for the Middle East Music Ensemble as molding it into a place where "people come together to celebrate their diverse music and embrace their traditions." When one looks at the languages of its vocal repertoire, one finds it difficult to find a common bond that ties such vast geographical regions. The answer lies in the intrinsic melodic spaces of ma'qam, which made inroads throughout the world with the expansion of Islamic civilization. But ma'qam itself has a quality that recognizes variation within itself. As Boulos notes, a musician can go beyond a first set of boundaries in a given ma'qam, experimenting on its outer reaches, while still remaining part of it. A sense of center remains though, and this distinct sense of belonging to one another unites the diverse members of the UofC's Middle East Music Ensemble. Hopefully, Boulos' vision will come to fruition. The overflowing audience at April 30's annual Middle East Music Ensemble concert certainly spoke of a significant interest for music from areas of the world whose cultural achievements are often overlooked in the face of violence and instability.

Niko Banac is a member of the Middle East Music Ensemble.