

2005 Middle Eastern Music Summer Institute

Tarab in the Classroom

It is a crisp autumn day in mid October and I'm standing before 26 undergraduate students in a music appreciation class at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois where I am a professor of music. I'm delighting in watching their faces as they listen to music which is likely foreign to all of them. They look alternately intrigued, delighted, perplexed, perhaps occasionally annoyed. The music they are listening to is not their normal fare, not hip-hop or rap or even one of the current pop artists who fill the radio waves in an endless loop. The music I am introducing my students to is Umm Kulthum's 1964 classic *Inta Omri*.



After listening, I take my students on a journey through the delights of Middle Eastern music. We explore some general concepts of maqam and I introduce them to the instruments of the takht, showing Power Point slides of the oud, kanun, ney flute, and various percussion instruments such as the riq and dumbek. We hear Qu'ranic recitation and discuss some of the tensions that exist between Islam and music. Finally, we discuss some trends in current pop music of the Middle East, listening to Rai music of Algeria and a Palestinian hip-hop artist. By the end of the extensive class, although by no means exhaustive, these 26 students have been introduced to some of the overarching concepts and sounds that make up the vast subject that is Middle Eastern music.

Though I am a trained clarinetist and composer in the Western sense, I feel pretty at home with Middle Eastern music. Much of my comfort in holding a class-length discussion with students on the music is directly tied to my experience of attending the first Middle Eastern Music Institute, sponsored by the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Chicago in August of 2005.

Over one week, a dozen or so professional musicians, educators, and students from around the Midwest gathered to investigate this great music. Our time together was broken into several components: theoretical and historical work, performance, and cultural activity, with particular focus to how we might take this music and teach it in public schools, colleges, and universities.

In the mornings we gathered with Institute director Dr. Martin Stokes to discuss some of the finer points of Middle Eastern music theory and history. We explored aspects of maqam, modulation, and form, comparing and contrasting Middle Eastern music to Western classical

practice, a helpful comparison for those of us teaching students in music schools and conservatories. In addition to this theoretical work, Dr. Stokes engaged with us in insightful discussions on the cultural context of the music. For me, one of the most delightful moments was an impromptu discussion on what engenders tarab - I understand musical ecstasy in a Beethoven Symphony, but to see it develop because of an oud player's modulation between certain maqamat was another concept altogether. It showed the transcendence of certain musical aspirations between music across time and around the globe. These were discussions of great significance and gave many of us involved fuel to investigate further and take this information into our teaching contexts as we work with students and/or perform this music ourselves.

In the afternoons we would gather as an ensemble under the leadership of master oud player Issa Boulos, director of the University of Chicago Middle Eastern Music Ensemble and another great performer of the music, Palestinian oud player and singer George Ziadeh from New York City. Under the leadership of these two great musicians, we assembled a program of seven pieces including Umm Kulthum's *Inta Omri* with George as vocalist. For many of us, the experience of putting this music together for a performance was the culmination of the work done in the classroom - putting flesh on the concepts studied in theory. The Institute culminated Friday night with our performance in the University's Oriental Institute with *Inta Omri* as a centerpiece. I was delighted to watch audience members of Middle Eastern descent mouth words along with George and experience what I think was tarab from our performance.

Back at North Central College, as my class finishes up, a student approaches me with an almost embarrassed look on her face. "Where can I find more of that Umm lady?" she asks. "It really moved me to hear her sing like that." I tell her where to find some CDs and as she walks away, humming a melodic phrase from *Inta Omri*, I think to myself, "There is the continuation of the 2005 Middle Eastern Music Summer Institute."

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