

SCALING NEW HEIGHTS WITH ARAB MUSIC

The Marasi ensemble at Qatar Music Academy has been formed to breathe new life into traditional Arab music in Qatar. The Foundation learns about the efforts being made to generate interest and develop talent.



IT'S BEEN A LITTLE OVER A YEAR SINCE QATAR MUSIC

Academy (QMA) opened its doors to the public and, in turn, launched itself as a leader in the renaissance of music within Qatar and the Gulf region.

Armed with a faculty comprising some of the world's music elite, handpicked to impart their genius in both play and performance, the academy continually educates and equips a new generation of musical talent through tailored music programs for children and adults alike.

In the depths of Katara Cultural Village, QMA's state-of-the-art facilities also serve as a home to the fusion of Arab and Western music and, through the establishment of a traditional Arab ensemble, the Marasi ensemble, duly lends itself to an environment where Arab music can be revitalized.



The Marasi ensemble performs its musical repertoire.

Issa Boulos is Head of Arab Music at QMA. He believes there is at present a skewed view of traditional Arab music within the Arab world. One of his and QMA's primary objectives is to rectify this misconception.

"Our main goal at QMA is to highlight and raise awareness of traditional Arab music in Qatar," Boulos says. "Art music in the Arab world is marginalized due to the power structure of the media. If you are in London, New York or any major city around the world, you can open a door to any studio along an art strip and you'll find a string quartet playing Mozart. Next door you will find an Indian percussionist performing with a sitar player, or a blues group alongside a jazz group.

"To a Western person, music comes in variety. You can pick and choose what you want to listen to, or participate in. There are schools and music centers which have a diversity of sound. In the Arab world, choice is limited due to the sole issue of having a cultural policy that is controlled by certain media outlets or power centers with little understanding of Arab art music. Our mission, through QMA and the Marasi ensemble, is not only to inform the institutions and organizations about traditional Arab music, but to also establish an infrastructure of Arab music, accessible to all."

The mission of which Boulos speaks is an on-going process that is being built from grassroots level. A composer and instrumentalist of Arab and Western music, he has a vision to deliver cultural meaning and

association of Arab art music to children. In the short period of time since the Marasi ensemble was formed in mid-2012, much has already been done to achieve this goal.

The foresight of Boulos and his colleagues at QMA is dynamic and somewhat ground-breaking. Offering custom-made, Arab musical instruments to children is a first and ranks highly among the Academy's accomplishments.

"Arab music is in my blood," Boulos says. "I grew up living and breathing music. Playing instruments, composing my own music – it was an everyday way of life for me and for my siblings.

"I was fortunate to learn about music from an early age and to have the opportunity to play traditional instruments. I cited making appropriately sized instruments available to students as one of the important components in bringing music into the lives of the youth here in Qatar. After I joined QMA, I set about commissioning the manufacture of some traditional Arab musical instruments suitable for children. For example, the production of a shorter *nay* with smaller holes for a child's small fingertips to fully cover, and various sized *ouds* for children of different ages.

"When we visit schools or welcome children to QMA to learn about Marasi, we talk about each instrument, perform some of our repertoire for the children and also show them the basics of each instrument," Boulos explains. "Aside from working with children, we



A member of the ensemble plays the *qanun*.

“At QMA, we’re fortunate to have the support of Qatar Foundation. They want us to promote and explore Arab music.”

collaborate with other music groups, such as Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra. We try to expand a chamber setting with other instruments and experiment with other music genres, such as jazz and other Western influences.

“We exchange musical ideas and tastes during rehearsals and performances and also look to include the element of improvisation.”

THE TRADITIONAL ARAB ensemble, or *takht*, normally comprises five musicians playing five different musical instruments, typically the *kaman*, a Western violin with altered tuning and playing technique; the *oud*, a fretless, six-stringed ancestor of the guitar; the *qanun*, a flat, plucking instrument with 26 strings; the *nay*, an open-ended, obliquely brown flute made from reed; and traditional Arab drums such as the *riq* or the *tabla*.

The Marasi ensemble comprises five music teachers from QMA. While Boulos himself plays the *oud* and performs vocals, Yassine Ayari, a QMA music teacher, plays the *nay*.

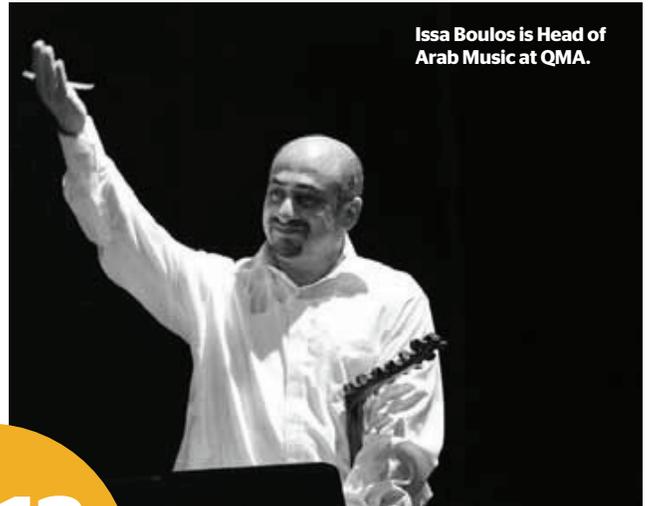
“First and foremost, we are here to teach,” Ayari says. “However, there are many ways of teaching music to students, and one of those ways is through performing with the Marasi ensemble. As a group, we enjoy playing and performing to send a message to those interested in traditional Arab music.”

“We need to show the student that there are opportunities available to learn how to perform and compose Arab music.”

“At QMA, we’re fortunate to have the support of Qatar Foundation. They want us to promote and explore Arab music and deliver it to the masses, in particular to the youth.”

“Marasi has many projects in line for the future, including a concert series that will incorporate other music genres, and it will be exciting to perform in those concerts once they get under way.”

“The chance to create something original with other musicians from many different backgrounds is the true



Issa Boulos is Head of Arab Music at QMA.

2012

The year the Marasi ensemble was formed.

essence of musicology, and I’m thrilled to be in a position that allows me to engage in this way.”

Changing the way Arab art music is perceived is a process that will take time and patience. Says Boulos: “I believe we can achieve great things through understanding and participating in Arab art music.”

“The process of developing interest and opening minds is tedious at times, however, it will prosper if schools and teachers play their part in nourishing schoolchildren with the rich Arab culture of music.”

“At QMA, we are about to establish a full curriculum for each traditional Arab musical instrument, with eight levels to pass through and a textbook for repertoire and scales. The theory element will be included to complete the necessary ingredients to provide a student with the best possible format for learning and specializing in one instrument.”

“As an entity, we have immersed ourselves in building a music infrastructure that will, hopefully, begin to sustain and grow as the years roll on.”