

Transmission

COVERING CHICAGO MUSIC

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REVIEW MON NOV 24 2008

Middle East Music Ensemble: *Jerusalem: A World of Music*



The University of Chicago's Middle East Music Ensemble gives a free performance at 6pm on Saturday, November 29th at the UofC's International House. The performance is free, and well worth even a trip down to Hyde Park, for all of you living north of Madison St. (Come on, when was the last time you made it that far south?) If you're not familiar with the music of the Levant, this is an excellent place to start. (If you are, then you probably don't need my amateur musicological analysis, so.) The Ensemble numbers about 20 musicians on a diverse range of instruments. Some (flute, viola, clarinet) are common in Western arrangements, but many aren't, particularly the kaleidoscopic variety of stringed instruments that provide much of the sonic heart of the music. I dropped in for a rehearsal last Thursday and heard several gorgeous pieces, rich with rhythm and counterpoint. The interplay between the melodies carried by the bowed strings and wind instruments, and those on the ouds and other plucked strings was particularly enjoyable. The rhythms are realized in lush percussion, full of deep bass tones and ringing, tambourine-like sounds, and had my foot tapping the whole time. (I was hoping no one heard me picking out the rhythms by drumming my pen on my notebook. I didn't even realize I was doing it at first.)

An obligatory note: It feels a little funny describing this as musical tourism, as if you're going to "see" the world by exposing yourself to unfamiliar music, but it would be silly not to acknowledge that this is the experience for lot of people with music that has little exposure in our insular listening practices. And no doubt, part of the Ensemble's project is to convey some culture along with the tunes. More importantly, the connection between the music and the culture of the area isn't specious: as with any traditional music, there really is something idiosyncratic preserved in the rhythmic, melodic and harmonic patterns. You can learn all the factual history you want. Like food or literature, music can convey something about what it is like, on a raw sensory level, to be there - and in this case, being there is good.

The Ensemble is directed by world-renowned Palestimian composer and oud master Issa Boulos. www.issaboulos.com

Erik Cameron

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BY DAN MORGRIDGE