

Performing Arts of Asia

Presented by The Seattle Times and the University of Washington Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies outreach centers in partnership with the UW World Series and the UW Ethnic Cultural Center & Theater. For more information please visit online at jsis.washington.edu/eacenter/exploringasia

1 Every Wednesday, our in-paper series **Performing Arts of Asia** focuses on one style of performance art in a specific region of Asia, exploring the cultural context that continues to shape it. A complement to the *Exploring Asia: Performing Arts* project, our series runs through March 5.

From West to East: Arab Music

by professor Ted Swedenburg,
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The city of Baghdad, far from its current troubles, has often been a great center of world civilization. Many people, for instance, consider the era of the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid (A.D. 786-809) to be one of the high points of Arab civilization. The caliph's court was renowned as a gathering place for scientists and scholars, artists, entertainers and dancers from throughout the Abbasid Empire. Harun's legendary court in Baghdad is depicted in many of the tales of "The One Thousand and One Nights," a famous collection of stories, mostly of Indian, Persian and Arab origin. One such tale deals with Harun's friend, the celebrated oud player Ishaq al-Mausili, who instructed the caliph's slave-girls in singing and playing of the oud. One girl, the subject of the tale, had a singing voice the likes of which Ishaq "had never heard in the world, for it was soft as the breeze and richer than almond oil."

Next to the human voice, which sang the poetry so beloved in the entire Arab-Islamic world, the most important instrument was the oud, originally a four-stringed

instrument made of wood ("oud" means "wood"). The oud was brought to then-Islamic Southern Spain, where it was developed further and a fifth string added. From Spain and from Islamic Sicily the oud migrated into Christian Europe, where it was known as the lute (from "al-oud") and was a predecessor of the guitar. (Europe also borrowed coffee, chemistry, algebra, lemons and sherbet from the Arabs; all these words in English come originally from the Arabic language.) The names given to the four strings of the oud, two of them Arabic, two Persian, reflect the fact that the music of the greater Islamic civilization was the product of cultural fusion. The place of the oud in the Islamic Middle East was like that of the piano in the West. Musicians experimented and composed on it, and it is still regarded as a symbol of the splendors of Arab urban culture.

Islamic thinkers considered music one of the four major sciences, a central subject of study for philosophers, scientists and physicians, and a required subject of learning for educated persons (technically, they weren't citizens, but "subjects"). Many leading philosophers argued that music was a key part of medical treatments that aimed at maintaining the harmony of the body and soul. Some doctors and philosophers

advocated the use of music in hospitals in order, in the words of the Ikhwan al-Safa, to lighten "the pain of disease and sickness from the afflicted."

Wealthy families patronized the arts, hiring court singers, the most famous of whom had committed to memory thousands of songs.

Arab music has continued to develop and evolve since the eighth century, remaining open, as in the past, to outside influences. During the early years of the Islamic Empire, music from Persia was very fashionable. Later, when the Ottoman Empire ruled much of the Arab world (16th through 19th centuries), Turkish music was quite influential. Since the 19th century, Arab music has been greatly affected by musical trends — from classical to jazz, from waltzes to rap — from the Western world. But it also continues to incorporate influences from the East, such as rhythms from South Asia. In fact, a rhythm known as "karachi" (the name of the capital of Pakistan) is an important part of the repertoire of today's traditional Arab music ensembles. But while remaining open to change, the basic core of the tradition (including the distinctive use of quarter tones and the central importance of the voice and the oud) has essentially remained intact.



Simon Shabeen (photo: courtesy of the artist).
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(Some Western musicians also use quarter tones; for example, blues guitarists like B.B. King when he "bends" notes.) Arab singers and oud players who perform in the traditional styles rooted in the past but also constantly adapting and changing, are still loved and celebrated throughout the region.

Expand Your World

- * How did the oud develop over time as the instrument we know today? What was the role of music in the Arab-Islamic world?
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