



Belly Dance

New England

Berklee's 3rd Annual Middle Eastern Festival

by *Aslaban*

It was a rainy night when I headed out to Berklee College of Music to attend their 3rd Annual Middle Eastern Festival, featuring Simon Shaheen. I wasn't certain just what this show would consist of, and I got little idea from the sparse printed program I received on arrival. It listed the name and composer of each piece, but no additional information. The turnout was varied, filling up about two-thirds of the Performance Center as we waited for the concert to begin.

The show was divided into two parts, the first with several pieces performed by the Berklee Middle Eastern All-Stars Ensemble (which I later found out is an extension of the Berklee Middle Eastern Fusion Ensemble), and the second with some more traditional numbers and chamber music performed by smaller groups.

The first number, "Solo Quiero Caminar", surprised me. It was a flamenco piece, sung with strong vocals by Marina Satti. She had a good stage presence and a lovely voice, but a flamenco number seemed like an odd choice to lead off a Middle Eastern Festival.

Nonetheless, it was lively and entertaining, and certainly showed off the connection between flamenco and Arabic music.

The second piece settled in more traditionally with a Lebanese number, "Habbaytak Ta Nseet El Naoum". The rhythmless oud intro led into a piece dominated by string instruments, with a bouncy feel and that "ticky-tick" percussion style I associate with Lebanese music. It made me want to get up and dance.

Next up, the Turkish piece "Kavaklar" was a slow, mournful 6/8. Vocalist Satti explained that the lyrics were about a man separated from family and friends, and then the violin and drum led into her gorgeous singing, this time dark with the heavy sound of traditional Middle-Eastern vocal technique. In fact, I wished the vocals had been mixed a bit louder to better showcase her talents.

For "Ianinku", three male and six female vocalists filed onto the stage, the women wearing heavily embroidered aprons for this Bulgarian folksong. The arrangement, however, was anything but traditional - it was done by a group called Folk Scat, and the jazz scat style was evident as they began singing acapella, joined eventually by various percussion but no melodic instruments.

And then! Simon Shaheen entered the stage to join the ensemble in playing his composition "Breeze of Bissaan". Without a word, he gave us a violin intro that was fluttery, sweet, and wistful, leading into a high-energy malfuf. Shaheen's back-and-forth with the riqq player crackled with energy. The piano solo seemed a bit out of place (the jazz influence was very

evident to my ears), but the cello solo was lovely, low, and introspective, and the qanun solo was just gorgeous.

Shaheen switched to oud for "Blue Flame", a medium-tempo piece that was smooth, bright, and sunny, with strong jazz influences in evidence. Accordingly, clarinetist Felix Peikli gave us a very jazzy sounding solo in mid-number.

After intermission came, to me, the highlight of the show - Shaheen, alone on stage playing oud taxim. There's something magic about an oud taxim that makes you feel as though a breathing space has opened up in your heart. For ten minutes Shaheen took us out of ourselves, making us long for some unknown place, moving from urgent to contemplative to calm and balanced, before bringing us to rest back within ourselves as his playing came to a close.

He was then joined on stage by the riq player, and by Christiane Karam, whose sweet vocals are in contrast to the warm, full ones of Marina Satti, but are no less lovely. Karam and Shaheen both sang in this gorgeous, traditional piece.

The Arabic Chamber Ensemble came up next to play two numbers with Shaheen - a samai of his own composition, followed by second piece from Egypt that reminded me of the classic "Aziza" in both its bright mood and the way it slid between maqsoum and wahda kebir. Shaheen himself described it as a "very slick piece...it swings".

The Middle Eastern All-Stars Ensemble came back for the high-energy finale - Shaheen's "Waving Sands". This began with Shaheen playing violin with a technique I'd never seen before: steady even bowing, with the rhythm coming from his fingerwork. The result was multi-layered and eerie, reminiscent of bagpipes, and quite beautiful.

This flowed into a bright and Latin-jazzy number with the full ensemble again. Bongos and a flute solo gave it an "island" touch. This piece was fun, but a bit long, with each of the remaining students getting at least a small solo. It gave the performance a jam session-y feel, as though it were as much for the musicians as the audience.

Overall, this show was much more jazz infused than expected. Not bad, but for a "Middle-Eastern festival" I would have liked to hear more traditional music, and from a greater variety of Middle-Eastern cultures, rather than pull so much jazz into it. I would also have liked to see more information on the printed programs; they included the name and city of origin of each student musician, but not the country of origin of the musical numbers - we were given those verbally. In the second half of the show there was a section listed merely as "Selections for the Arabic Traditional Repertoire". I came away unsure if the purpose of the show was entertainment, education, or recital opportunity.

For all that, I enjoyed it very much, and I look forward to seeing the event continue to grow annually. It was evident from the first moment that the students love this music and are serious about learning to understand and perform it well. It was a delight to see them both honor the music's roots and make it their own. I can't wait to see what next year brings.

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