PROGRAM NOTES

An Introduction to Arab Art Music
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From the Arab Andalusian classical music of North Africa to the classical Ottoman musical suite (fasıl) to the Central Asian genre of Shashmaqam, the modal musical traditions of the Islamicate world knit together a sweeping tapestry of cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions spanning some 5,000 miles from Morocco to Uzbekistan. At the center of this tapestry, though, is the “great tradition” of art music that coalesced in medieval Abbasid courts such as Baghdad, where arts and sciences flourished over a thousand years ago (Shiloah 1995). Its warp and weft are the melodic (maqamat) and rhythmic (iqa’) systems that emerged out of a mix of classical Greek music theoretical traditions cultivated by Muslim scholars, folk music of the Arabian peninsula, and Persian and Byzantine musical traditions. The modal system of maqam establishes rules for pitch organization in composition and improvisatory performance, while the rhythmic modes of iqa’ organize musical time into recurring cycles. Together, these systems form the basis of a tradition at once highly codified yet shot through with an improvisational ethos, integral to sacred devotional practices, but equally central to secular modes of sociability and artistry. Indeed, this afternoon’s concert, too, forms a link in this thousand-year long tradition.

At the heart of this musical tradition is the oud, the fretless, plucked short-necked lute with pear-shaped body featured in this afternoon’s performance. Known as the “sultan of musical instruments,” the oud’s central place in Arab musical traditions can be likened to that of the piano in Western classical music (Touma 1996). Like the piano for Western harmony, the oud is the primary instrument used for theorizing various melodic aspects of the maqam system. It is in performance, though, and especially in the introductory improvisation known as taksim, that the oud’s centrality to Arab music traditions is traditionally experienced. In a taksim, the oud player carefully and methodically constructs the sonic world of a given maqam (you might think of this as a sort of scale, but one with built-in melodic ideas or phrases) through unmetered improvisation (the melodic ideas of the maqam are first expressed without the use of recurring rhythmic cycles). Starting in the maqam’s lower register and slowly, tantalizingly building to its tonic, or central pitch, while incorporating the maqam’s characteristic phrases and cadences, the oud player is responsible for whetting the audience’s appetite for the performance to follow. If they are successful, the oud player lays the foundations for the audience to experience tarab, or “musical ecstasy,” over the course of an evening’s performance. May this afternoon’s performance by Rahim AlHaj carry you, too, to a state of musical ecstasy.
The Musical Lineage and Style of Rahim AlHaj

Rahim AlHaj began playing the oud at the age of 9, and during his formative years as a musician, he studied the instrument with world-renowned oud performer Munir Bashir. Bashir was born into an Assyrian Christian family around 1930 in the city of Mosul in northern Iraq. As such, his musical style was influenced by local musical traditions of Assyrian Christians and Kurds, as well as by larger traditions such as those long established within Arab, Turkish, and Persian musics. As he developed his own musical style, Bashir began incorporating elements of Western classical music and north Indian (Hindustani) music into his elaborate performances of maqam. At the same time, he demonstrated a unique commitment to preserving the historical tradition of Iraqi maqam performance. The earliest decades of Bashir’s life were characterized by political instability within his home country of Iraq, and he began performing abroad as early as 1953, when he traveled to Beirut to accompany the Lebanese star songstress Fairuz. In subsequent decades, Bashir became instrumental in introducing solo oud music to a worldwide audience, earning the title “the King of Oud.” Bashir was thus an influential figure both in creating a global market for oud music, and in paving the way for others to continue imbuing traditional Arab music with global musical influences.

Before his own political exodus from Iraq in 1991, AlHaj graduated from the Institute of Music in his hometown of Baghdad in 1990, having continued his studies with acclaimed oud performer, composer, and conductor Salim Abdul Kareem, whose philharmonic symphony orchestra (SAKO) often pairs solo oud performance with traditional Western symphonic orchestration. With such outstanding teachers, AlHaj’s musical lineage seems to have paved the way for his own unique contributions to oud performance. He has performed alongside world-renowned guitar, accordion, and Indian sarod players, each time dazzling audiences with his ability to re-interpret oud performance in such a way as to render his music understandable to audiences spanning the globe, and yet familiar to those longing for a taste of musical tradition. In short, AlHaj’s pieces “establish new concepts without altering the foundation of the traditional ‘Iraqi School of Oud’” (“Biography”).
Notes on this afternoon’s concert

The inspiration for this afternoon’s concert is AlHaj’s 2017 album \textit{Letters from Iraq: Oud and String Quintet}, produced by Smithsonian Folkways Recording. The album’s eight pieces are based on real letters from individuals dealing with the devastation and loss of war in post-2003 Iraq. The music itself is designed to convey the intense emotions of those who were left to deal with the effects of the invasion: political and social instability, separation from loved ones, sectarian violence, and far too many occurrences of mutilation and death. The pieces are not without occasional hints of joy, however, just as humans often find a way to cling to hope and feelings of relief even in the darkest moments. Throughout the entire album, all of these emotions seem to hover just near the surface; even Western audiences unfamiliar with traditional elements of Arab musical imagery will find in the accompaniment of the string quartet familiar expressions of intense feeling, tension, and release. For those more accustomed to AlHaj’s style of oud performance, every level of detail throughout the album works to support the overall message of each piece – from the symbolic conversations between violin and oud in “Forbidden Attraction,” to the tender strains of an Iraqi lullaby at the beginning of “Unspoken Word,” to the hopeful appearance of the chobi dance rhythm in “Voices to Remember.”

In “Eastern Love,” the first track on the album, AlHaj reflects on the story of two young lovers separated by fears of sectarian violence, fears that were exacerbated after the invasion of 2003, when decades of peaceful coexistence crumbled nearly overnight. Although the passing of time did not reconcile the teenage lovers, still the young man remembers his love every time he passes her former home. His tears continue to speak both to his grief and his resolve to go on. At the beginning of the piece, the slow and steady rhythms of the string quartet call to mind the boy’s sighs and heavy steps. When AlHaj enters on the oud, the string players fade away into a sort of drone, highlighting the oud’s melody while also providing a firm basis from which educated listeners can gauge the melodic contour of the maqam. Nearly three minutes into the piece, the percussionist enters on the \textit{riqq}, a popular Middle Eastern percussion instrument reminiscent of a tambourine. According to the album’s liner notes, AlHaj chose to use the \textit{riqq} rather than the Persian-derived \textit{dumbek} (goblet drum) in order to avoid the traditional Iraqi association of \textit{dumbek} with joy and dancing. The percussionist plays a 10/8 rhythm called \textit{sama’i}, popular in the Middle Eastern (and originally Andalusian) vocal genre \textit{Muwashah} and in the \textit{Sama’i} instrumental form of Ottoman/Turkish music. The emphasis in \textit{sama’i} is found on beats 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7, with the subdivisions of each measure as follows: 3+2+2+3. The uplifting feel of the rhythm, which continues through the end of the piece, serves as a powerful reminder that life continues even after lost love. In a way, this valuable lesson continues to resonate through each of the remaining tracks in subtle ways that will no doubt resonate with each and every listener.
Sources and Further Reading/Listening:


