

Kan Zaman's mission is to keep Arab musical heritage alive

By Pat McDonnell Twair
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LOS ANGELES -- A phenomenon of the past decade is the growing popularity of Middle Eastern music among Southern Californians. Ten years ago, about the only means of hearing this exotic music was a rare performance on a university campus or dropping into a nightclub where bellydancing was performed.

Traditionally, Southern Californian fans of Arab music looked forward to the annual spring concert offered by Prof. Jihad Racy at UCLA. In the past four years, they could drive to Santa Barbara for concerts offered each quarter by Prof. Scott Marcus' University of California Middle East Ensemble.

The latest innovation, however, is the Kan Zaman classical and folkloric ensemble organized in 1994 by Jordanian-American Wael Kakish.

When asked how the ensemble acquired its name, Kakish said: "Kan Zaman translates as 'once upon a time' -- when Arabs hear the name, they automatically think of something from the past."

Kan Zaman concerts almost always follow a three-part format opening with the *muwashshahat* music of 10th century Arab courts in Andalusia, Spain, which underwent modifications by Egyptian musicians early in this century. The second portion is devoted to classics of Sayyid Darwish, Mohammed Abdul Wahhab and Um Khalthum. The final section offers *sha'bi* (folk) music associated with Bedouins and country folk.

"I think our greatest reward is when people come up and tell us our music made

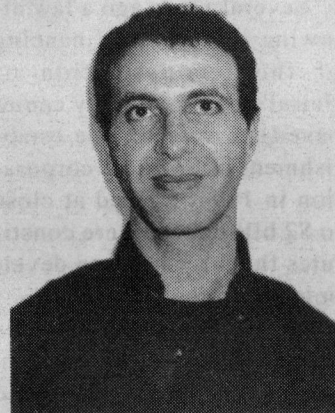
them weep or transported them back to their childhood," Kakish commented.

Heading a 34-person musical ensemble is something this Amman-born 'ud player dreamed of but never thought would happen.

As a child he played the drum and accompanied his father who performed on the 'ud at weddings, but when it came time to enter Yarmuk University, his parents insisted that he major in something that would earn him a living.

"I made them happy, I received a bachelor's degree in English and American literature, but," he smiled, "I minored in classical western music."

He traveled to the United



Kan Zaman founder and conductor Wael Kakish.

hooked," he recalled. For the next three years, Kakish performed every Tuesday night with the Santa Barbara ensemble.

It was one year after he was making his lengthy

Zaman came about accidentally in 1993 when he and six other musicians were asked to perform Arab folkloric music at a Los Angeles concert.

"When asked if we were Jihad Racy's group, we replied no, that we weren't UCLA students -- that we were playing *sha'bi* music.

"We weren't a class, we weren't performing for a degree and I realized our core represented an ensemble. We had a 70-year old *qanun* artist -- this was treasure in itself. Believe me, it's not everyday you can find someone who plays the *qanun* (a plucked instrument with 73 strings). We had as well the 'ud, nay, violin and the *riqq* -- all the instruments needed for a *takht* ensemble."

have one singer and our chorus sings simultaneously as one voice."

Kan Zaman rehearses each Wednesday at the Druze Center in Eagle Rock and performs at least three concerts a year.

When asked to make a statement about Kan Zaman, composer/conductor Dr. Nabil Azzam commented: "Kan Zaman is doing something different. It is trying to accurately present Arab music in the U.S. It's doing a great service by performing at international festivals. I congratulate it for working with traditional instruments instead of relying on the synthesizer, piano and accordion."

An insightful comment came from a member of the ensemble who said "We see Wael's mission."

That mission, as he puts it, is to bring about a consciousness of respecting Arab music as well as keeping the Arab musical heritage alive.

"When we first began to perform, people chattered, kids made noise -- then they came to know they had to respect the music or we

I waited for 10 minutes," he grimaced. "Today, when we play, you can hear a pin drop."

Kakish had intended to start graduate studies in ethnomusicology this fall, but directing Kan Zaman has become a fulltime preoccupation. "I'm researching folk music and trying to develop a *rababa* solo to be presented with the full ensemble," he noted.

If you would like to sample the music of Kan Zaman, orders for a videotape can be made by calling 818/ 432-8235.



Kan Zaman Classical and Folkloric Ensemble in concert.

States in October 1985 with intentions of studying for a master's degree. In Los Angeles, he earned a living at the typical menial jobs open to new immigrants and on weekends, he performed at weddings and club functions with four other musicians.

In 1992, a friend informed him of Marcus' Middle East ensemble at UCSB and he made the 100-mile drive up the coast to hear the group.

"It was my introduction to classical Arabic music. I was

round trips to Santa Barbara that he learned a similar musical group was meeting every Thursday -- a few miles away -- at UCLA under the direction of Racy.

"So from then on Tuesdays were for UCSB and Thursdays were for UCLA," he said.

The UCLA and UCSB groups, however, are largely composed of students whose dedication and talents range from excellent to earning credit. Kakish said Kan

Takht, he explained, is just as identifiable with Arabic music as the *galabiyeh* or *kafiyeh* is to Arabic dress. It was developed early in this century and relies on improvisation.

Kan Zaman has expanded into three 'uds, six violins, one cello, four percussions, one *nay* and the *qanun*. Added to this are 18 choral singers.

"This doesn't damage the concept of *takht*," he explained, "because *takht* does