

Group tries to keep lively Arabic melodies alive

"For many years I was away from my roots. When I found Kan Zaman, I felt like I was home."

That's how Lana Khalaf remembers finding the Arabic music ensemble, Kan Zaman, for which she now is the lead singer. Meaning literally "once upon a time," Kan Zaman focuses on classical and folkloric Arab music.

I had the pleasure of listening to the group perform at Cal Poly Pomona on a recent Tuesday. Students and faculty poured into the quad to hear the stirring tunes.

Cal Poly offers a class in Arabic music, and the majority of the audience members at this particular performance were students who had been enrolled in the class for a few weeks.

The entrancing music of the Middle East is almost hypnotic. The melodies transport you to a world you might have never entered before: crowded markets in Alexandria, cedar hilltops of Lebanon, the hot desert sun.

The music calls out to you. Alden Lea, majoring in theater and ethnic and women's studies, plays the darabukka, which is a clay goblet-shaped drum made with a fish skin covering.

"We've been learning about the culture," he told me. "The class is a lot of fun. Everybody works together as a unit."

The instructor, Wael Kakish, has been teaching the class for two years. The



Mariah Ashraf Jamal
ALL THE DIFFERENCE

music adds a bit of Middle East spice to the atmosphere of the Southern California campus.

"The idea to have Arabic music is all about diversity," he said. "My interest in educating about music and Arabic culture is a mutual thing. It brings about a better understanding."

And his idea is working. "One of my students has used some Arabic scales in some of his jazz music," he said.

Kakish's music comes from throughout the Middle East, including Egypt and Morocco, and he has performed it all over California. The group started five years ago with five students from UCLA. The band plays out of love instead of for money.

"We're a nonprofit organization," Khalaf said. "We are all volunteers who love Arabic music and want to keep it alive."

Khalaf, who was born in Kuwait to a Syrian mother and Palestinian father, grew up in a musical family. Her grandmother used to play the ud — an ancestor to the guitar — and would sing in fami-

ly gatherings. Growing up, she said, she didn't always understand the full meaning of some of the Arabic words, but she always understood the melodies.

"The melodies were more captivating," she said. "The quality of music in this generation is not as good as the past. If nobody performs it, it will disappear."

When Kan Zaman needed singers, she was a perfect fit because she could speak Arabic and knew the melodies.

Arabic music is greatly influenced by the Persians and the Greeks, Kakish said. The most classical of the Arab music styles is called muwashshah — Arabic poetry that is sung in the tradition of Arab Spain. It began in the 8th century, Kakish said.

The style is still prevalent in North Africa under the name Nuba, and in the Middle East, where it is referred to by its classical name.

"Our group mostly does the muwashshah," Kakish said. "It's the first thing we do and it's what Arab music is about."

The traditional Arab music ensemble came about from the late 17th century and included five instruments.

The riqq, a kind of tambourine covered with fish skin, is the main percussion instrument.

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The ud, which means "wood" in Arabic, is played like a guitar and looks like a pear cut in half.

Europeans copied it, Kakish said, calling it the "al-lute" in Spain and the "lute" elsewhere in Europe. It evolved into the guitar.

The qanun, which means "law" in Arabic, can be compared to the zither and has from 73 to 78 strings. The kamanja is the Roman name for the spike fiddle, he said, and in the west evolved into the violin.

The last instrument is called the nay, a reed or cane flute, very much associated with Arab music.

"It is said that it was a shepherd's instrument," Kakish told me. "People feel nostalgic when they hear it."

Traditionally, there was a vocalist — usually a woman

— who sang and played an instrument. According to Kakish, men have dominated Arab singing since the 1920s, with the exception of one female singer named Umm Kalthum who was the era's most famous Arab female vocalist.

Kakish and his orchestra play much of her music.

"We want to bring back old songs we inherited and learned from our [ancestors]," he said. "That is why the focus on the last 19th century and early 20th century (to) us is so important."

"That was the best music ever performed in the Arab world. We don't have musicians like that anymore."

Kan Zaman's ud player, Maurice Mitri, started performing when he was 13. Mitri, now 55, said, "Music is my blood. If I am tired or if I can't sleep, I still play my music."

Thalia Goldsworthy was once a dancer and an accor-

dion player. She now plays the qanun for the group.

"I enjoy being able to play with an Arabic ensemble with authentic music and sounds," she said.

Kan Zaman's popularity extends beyond the Middle East community. The group has performed at sold-out concerts throughout California and has also been to New York and Washington. The latest performance was at UCLA's Royce Hall, where 90% of the audience was non-Arab, Kakish recalled.

At 8 p.m. May 27, Kan Zaman will perform at Cal Poly's University Theater. To order tickets call 862-8579.

"When you hear this music, your heart is open," Kakish said. "It's the most beautiful thing."

• **MARIAH ASHRAF JAMAL** writes a weekly column about the cultural diversity of the Inland Valley. She can be reached at MariahJamal@aol.com.

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