

Arabic-music ensemble makes its NW debut at Town Hall

BY R.M. CAMPBELL
P-I music critic

Non-Western music, with the notable exception of that from India, has not enjoyed a large presence in Seattle.

Among the least represented, in general, has been the Islamic world of the Middle East, with only the occasional concert by luminaries such as Simon Shaheen, the Palestinian master of the ud, the Arabic forerunner to the European lute, and Dariush Dolat-Shahi, who improvises on Persian lutes called the setar and tar.

However, during the past few years Town Hall has sought to remedy the situation in its Global Rhythms Series, which presents musicians who represent a good share of the world. In partnership with the Arab Center of Washington, Global Rhythms opens its new season in a gesture toward the Arabic world with the Northwest debut tomorrow night of Kan Zaman, an Arab American instrumental and vocal ensemble from Los Angeles.

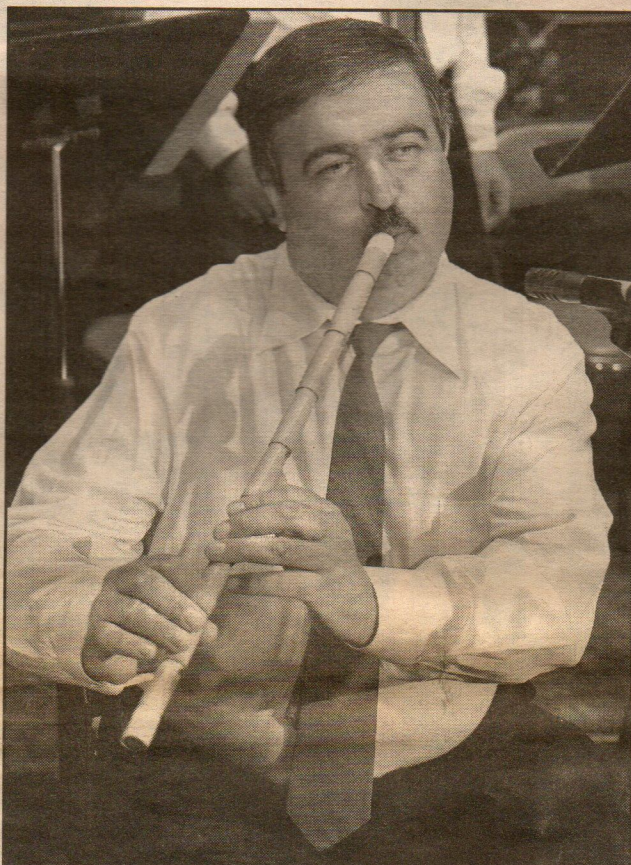
The 17 musicians will perform music from the Eastern Arab world of Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. The group also performs "Muwashshah," a song form that originated in Muslim Spain in the ninth century, enjoyed great popularity two centuries later and eventually spread to the Arab world.

The traditions of North Africa – Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria – are substantially different and were less exposed to the Persian and Turkish influences that had a significant impact in the east.

Kan Zaman was founded in 1994 in Los Angeles by Arab Americans in the hopes of preserving Arabic music in the New World and educating audiences unaware of the riches of this ancient musical heritage. The instruments are traditional: nay (reed flute); ud; darabukka (hand drum); kaman (violin), among others.

Born in Amman, the capital of Jordan, Wael Kakish is one of Kan Zaman's founders. He began his music training by accompanying his father, an ud player and singer, on the drums. Currently he teaches Arabic music at the Barnsdall Arts Center and Cal Poly Pomona in the Los Angeles area.

"I was born in a family of musicians – my father and brothers," Kakish said in a telephone interview. "It is not possible to make a



LEE VARIS

Nay (reed flute) player Nabih Esmeirat will perform with Kan Zaman tomorrow night. Kan Zaman hopes to educate audiences unaware of the riches of Arabic music.

COMING UP

KAN ZAMAN

WHEN: Tomorrow night at 8

WHERE: Town Hall, 1119 Eighth Ave.

TICKETS: \$20-\$22, with student/senior discounts; only at www.ticketweb.com

living as a musician in Jordan, so it is done on the side." He came to the United States when he was 21, first to New York and then Los Angeles, where his sister lived.

In doing so he joined a large Arab community spread throughout Southern California.

"I don't know the numbers because Arab Americans are so scattered, but I know there are many." There is also a large Iranian community in Los Angeles but a small Turkish one.

"When we started Kan Zaman 10 years ago there were only five or six people, all hobbyists. In about two years, it grew to a 40-piece ensemble. Our mission was to inform people about this music outside the club scene. Our target has been primarily schools. Many of us were born in the Middle East, and most of the music we play was composed from about the 1850s to 1960s."

Although some of the music Kan Zaman plays can be described as both art and folk music, there is considerable emphasis on improvisation, which is very important in Arab music, said Kakish. "It is the spine of our music, what musicians have to achieve to be good. In that sense, Arab music bears a relation to American jazz and Indian ragas."

The center of Arab music, as so much of Arab culture and intellectual life, is Egypt, he said. That is where artists go to record. At one time Iraq was important.

Because members of Kan Zaman don't make their living by playing in the ensemble, it doesn't tour, Kakish said. "We generally haven't traveled farther than San Diego or San Francisco. This is our first tour out-of-the-state."

Seattle's MB Orchestra, featuring Egyptian ud player Maurice Rouman, will be the opening act for Kan Zaman. A free pre-concert lecture on Arab music will be given by Hossein al-Khafaifi, a member of the University of Washington faculty, at 7:15, with a reception to meet the artists following the concert. ☐

P-I music critic R.M. Campbell can be reached at 206-448-8396 or rmccampbell@seattlepi.com.

Finnish pianist makes his local debut with Seattle Symphony

Finland may be small, but in terms of the music and musicians it develops the country is mighty.

The pianist Olli Mustonen is one of them. He makes his local debut with the Seattle



Philharmonic, whose music director is another Finn, Esa-Pekka Salonen. He is the founder of the Helsinki Festival Or-

chestra, currently music director of the Northwest Chamber Orchestra. Mustonen studied composition with Einojuhani Rautavaara, one of Finland's most important composers. ☐