

The Spirit of the East from North Africa

A Short preview on the Music of Tunisia

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Arab music is made of an astonishing variety of folk, classical, and popular musical traditions. Many of these have survived for centuries via oral traditions reflecting the musical sensibilities of the ancient world as well as the Middle Ages. While each region within the Arab World has its distinct styles, commonalities of instrumentation, modal structure, rhythmic patterns, performance techniques, and lyric content extend across the area, forming a fascinating weaving of artistic tradition that changes and evolves while remaining true to its ancient heritage.

Arab music covers a vast geographical area ranging from the Atlas Mountains and parts of the Sahara in Africa to the Arabian Gulf region and the banks of the Euphrates. Whether from Morocco, Egypt, Syria or Oman, Arabs are able to identify today with a multi-faceted musical heritage that originated in antiquity, but that gained sophistication and momentum during the height of the Islamic Empire between the eighth and the thirteenth centuries. Since the spread of Islam from the Arabian Peninsula towards the middle of the seventh century until the present century, Arab music has been shaped by some principal processes, some purely intellectual and cultural, others political.

Musical instruments in Tunisian music are similar to those used in the rest of the Arab world and all are linked to Oriental roots. The ensemble uses a number of stringed instruments such as the *oud* (lute), *qanun* (zither), *Kaman* (violin) in addition to wind instrument such as the *nay* (reed flute). The percussion instruments used are *darabukka* (goblet shape drum), *riqq* (fish-skin tambourine) and *Bandir* (frame drum).

Most common **repertoire** in traditional Arabic music consists of number of *waslat* (suites, sing.: *wasla*) using different *maqamat* (modes). The *wasla* (suite or medley) starts with an instrumental introduction such as a *Sama'i* or a *dulab* (short instrumental prelude) followed by a *taqsim* (solo instrumental improvisation), a *mawwal* (vocal improvisation) and eventually followed by a "*qasida*" or poem called *muwashshah* (or sung poetry in the tradition of Arab-Spain); it is performed by either a soloist and/or a chorus. *Muwashshahat* (pl.) are set on few poetry lines similar to the "Rondo" form (sometimes called the "refrain", alternates with one or more contrasting themes, generally called "episodes, ex. AABA).

This form of muwashshahat is different from the Nuba and the Ma'luf of North Africa. For example, in Tunisia with a predominantly Arabic-speaking population, the country is best known for *malouf*, a kind of music imported from Andalusia after the Spanish conquest in the 15th century. Though in its modern form, malouf is likely very dissimilar to any music played more than four centuries ago, it does have its roots in Arab-Spain and is closely related to genres with a similar history throughout

North Africa, including Libyan's *malouf*, Algerian *gharnati* and Moroccan '*ala* or Andalusí.

Tunisian folk music seems richer than classical music in terms of musical formulas. Most of these folk songs are somehow linked to various daily life activities such work, harvest, travel and other songs of a religious character as well as children's songs and patriotic songs etc. The other kind of singing style represents an mix of popular and classical music in what so-called " Fondo" and "Araobi", this in addition to folk dance songs composed in the most popular *maqam* (scale) in Arab music, which is "*al Hssein*" a very folksy mode similar to the *Bayati* mode, using such strong and tight rhythms such as " al mudawwar". During the performance, one can hear few improvisational vocal and instrumental solos showing the proficiency and innovation musical sentences creating magnificent sounds and feeling.

Modern Arabic music, including Tunisian, started to develop and progress during the mid-twenty century till this day, the modernity of the Tunisian song (whether it was performed in classical or folk dialect) had an important role in spreading it across the Arab world from Morocco threw the Levantine all the way to Arabian Gulf countries. There were so many artists, composers and singers working on presenting a variety of selected and complicated forms such as '*malouf* and *nuba*', *muwashshah* or *qasida*, romantic and folk songs. Most famous artists among those were Khmayiss Turnan , Hedi Jouini , Ali Riahi , Saliha , Oulayya, Sheikh Elafreet, Saleh al-Mahdi and many others who mastered performing and recording the most beautiful melodies and songs. In this day, we still witness an extension of these early pioneers and artists who still carry with them such beautiful voices with wide vocal range, selecting their repertoire carefully to perform an outstanding songs.

The Royal Opera Tonight will be presenting two distinguished Tunisian artists: Leila Hejaiej and Lutfi Bushnaq presenting classical, folk and contemporary songs from Arabic and Tunisian music repertoire. They will be accompanied by "firqat lil Musiqa Al Arabiyeh" Arabic music orchestra. The first wasla (medley) will be presented by Leila Hejaiej singing a medley in *maqam nahawand*, which starts with a Sama'i musical form and followed by "Kafa Hajran" a muwashshah in *maqam nahawand*. Hejaiej will also present a number of Tunisian songs composed by Mohammed al Magri and another by Al Hadi Jouini, famous for composing "Lamuni elli gharou minni", which had a high resonance throughout the Arab world for being composed in the tradition of flamenco music which is linked to Arabic music roots. We will also hear two compositions performed by Hejaiej for two important Egyptian composers M. Abdel Wahab and Mohammad al Qasabji in two songs, one was sung originally by Umm Kalthum "Anta Omri" and the other by Asmahan "Emta ha-Ti'raf".

The songs composed and performed by artist Lutfi Bushnaq are a testament of distinction and creativity of the artist not as a singer only but as a composer of such sophisticated style of strophic poetry called "muwashshah". We will hear tonight a few of Bushnaq's own composition of *muwashshahat* medley in the beginning of the second half.

Tonight's concert by Leila Hejaiej and Lutfi Bouchnak will present a fascinating mix of various styles, traditions and genres. The performance is evidence of the rich cultural and musical heritage of the Islamic civilization from Mesopotamia to the mountains of Atlas in North Africa mixed with the beauty of Andalucian flavor.

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