

A Community *of* Arab

Written by Piney Kesting Photographed by Robert Azzi



Music

Last summer, music director and professional musician Neal Clarke packed up his courage and his ‘ud and drove east for two days from Edmond, Oklahoma to the week-long Arabic Music Retreat at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts. “I had never done anything like that before in my life. I didn’t know much about the music, or the instrument, or the culture, but I thought I would give it a try,” says Clarke. This summer, he came back for more.



Left: Keeping time to a new beat, students start the morning with rhythm and ear training in Mount Holyoke College’s Pratt Auditorium. Above: Yaron Klein, chamber-music violinist (and doctoral student in medieval Arabic literature and history), listens to his instructor, Bassam Saba, a multi-instrument virtuoso who, like many of the faculty, has extensive training in both Arab and western traditions.

“I learned that traditional, classical Arab music is as deep and wide and rich as western music, if not more so. I have been a musician my whole life and I felt I needed something fresh, something with horizons. Arab music fills that need for me. Combining traditional Arab music with what I already know from the West has been a tremendously fruitful endeavor.”

Clarke was one of 75 musicians who came from all corners of the United States and several other countries to attend the Arabic Music Retreat in August. Ethnomusicologists, professional and amateur musicians, composers, singers, dancers, budding virtuosos and a lone college-age beginner together transformed the otherwise quiet campus into a vibrant symphony of *‘uds*, *qanuns*, *buzuqs*, *nays*, *riqqs*, *tablabs*, *tars* and an array of other percussion and stringed instruments.

Now in its sixth year, the retreat was founded in 1997 by composer, conductor and virtuoso Simon Shaheen, together with Kay Campbell, a vice president at Fleet National Bank in Boston and a dedicated amateur *‘ud* player and ethnomusicologist. Shaheen, trained in both Arab and western classics and widely regarded as the most dynamic link between Arab and western music today, explains that when he first came to the United States in 1980,



there was no traditional Arab music to be found. “This retreat is part of my educational mission to teach participants about Arab music in its truest, most sincere form,” he says.

Campbell adds that the retreat is the result of a “huge collaborative effort. For years, we discussed the need for a place that offered a strong, intensive immersion program in the theory and performance practice of classical Arab music.” The first retreat attracted 21 partici-

pants, and it established a core faculty of top musicians and scholars from the US, Canada and the Middle East, many of whom now come back each year.

This year, the retreat attracted the largest, most diverse group in its history—a reflection, Campbell says, of the growing interest in Arab music in the West. Fifty-two of this year’s 75



Above and right: Music theory is the subject of classes taught by George Sawa, a specialist in early Arab music and director of the Centre for Studies in Middle Eastern Music in Toronto.

Left: "This retreat is part of my mission to teach people about Arab music in its truest, most sincere form," says Simon Shaheen, co-founder and executive director of the Arabic Music Retreat. Shaheen has also founded an Arab arts festival in New York City that includes brief music seminars. A frequent speaker at colleges, a composer and a tireless performer, he is arguably the best-known classical Arab musician in the United States.

participants were returnees, and half of the 75 were westerners without Arab heritage. The seven days of classical Arab music performance, history, theory, rhythm and ear training were taught by a 12-person faculty.

As the number of musicians attending the retreat and the quality of their respective talents have increased, the format has grown with them. Chamber group rehearsals of seven to 10 musicians each were introduced in 1999. A year later, Arabic diction classes appeared on the syllabus in response to the increasing number of non-Arabic-speaking vocalists. Last year, Shaheen introduced a workshop on *taqasim* (improvisations) as part of the advanced daily theory course.

Sunday through Friday, participants attended three hours of morning lectures. After lunch came private instrument instruction and group classes, followed by coached ensemble rehearsals. Evenings allowed time for two more hours of ensemble rehearsals and special performances, such as a recital by Lebanese vocalist Youssef Kassab, a lecture by poet and musician Mansour Ajami and two late-night "open mike" sessions. The week concluded with a chamber-music recital

by all participants, as well as a performance by the instructors' ensemble.

"I think the word 'retreat' might be confusing," laughs ethnomusicologist and composer Ali Jihad Racy of the University of California at Los Angeles, who is associate director of the event and a founding faculty member. "It is a week filled with hard work and, as such, is unique in terms of focusing on a specific musical genre and teaching it intensely." And it's not only rewarding for the students, he explains. "The participants are people from all different backgrounds who love to play music and who come to the retreat with their own musical concepts. I learn a great deal from the interaction with them, as well as from their interaction with one another."

Racy also teaches and performs his own compositions during the week; one had its debut this year at the final

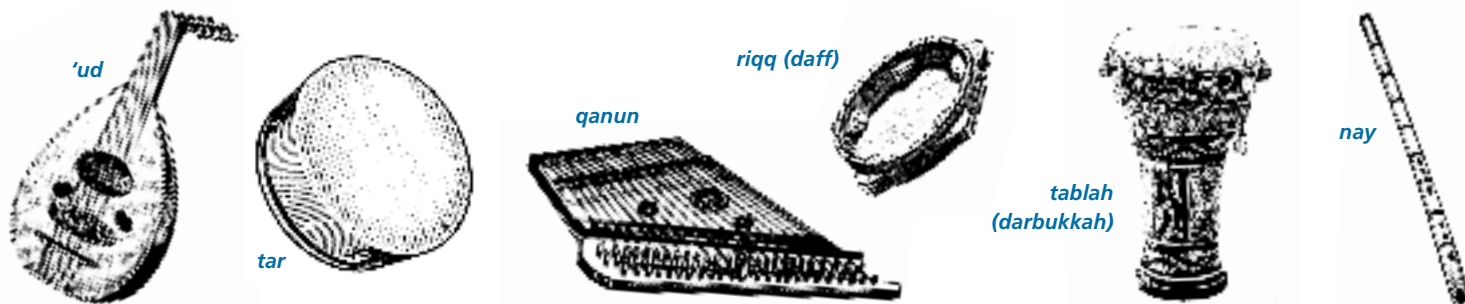
concert. "Directing a large ensemble has given me a chance to exercise some of the techniques and skills I have developed over 25 years," he says. "It is immensely satisfying after one week to end up with a marvelous group of musicians playing well and enjoying themselves."

"Jihad Racy and Simon Shaheen have single-handedly effected a return to traditional, classical Arab music," comments Anne Rasmussen, associate professor of music and ethnomusicology at William and Mary College in Williamsburg, Virginia. She is a former doctoral student of Racy's and first attended the retreat in 1998.

"It's a very stimulating environment," continues Rasmussen, who plays the *'ud* and *qanun*. "I come because I know I am going to learn new repertoire. I've been studying this music for 15 years, and every year I try to work on new



Left: Retreat student Kathleen Kajioka of Toronto specializes in western classical and baroque as well as Arab music. She has performed with several intercultural ensembles. Above: Nikolai Ruskin, founder of Cornell University's Middle Eastern Music Ensemble, takes instruction in the *nay* from the retreat's associate director and cofounder, Ali Jihad Racy. Like Shaheen, Racy has done much over the past two decades to promote the recognition and appreciation of Arab music in the United States. He is a professor of ethnomusicology at the University of California at Los Angeles.



music to keep myself and my chamber-music ensemble challenged.” As an outsider to the tradition, she finds the retreat is also a valuable reality check. “I often end up teaching people of Middle Eastern heritage about their own music, and it’s good for me to see that there are other people like myself doing the same thing,” she says.

Rasmussen adds that the retreat fosters a strong sense of community, one that participants build upon after they leave. “It’s exciting to have a larger connection to other people who are doing this kind of music,” she explains. “People come to learn, but I think they also come just to be together.”

Clarke agrees. “In all my years of doing western music, I don’t think I have ever received as much support and help as I have in my one year of doing Arab fusion. The retreat is like a community: You go once and you want to come back,” says Clarke. It was at the

retreat last year that he met Yoel Ben Simhon and Hicham Chami, and the three are now at work on a recording called “Verses,” an East-West fusion of Mediterranean, Arab and jazz.

“My life has also taken a different path since I came to the retreat last year,” explains Chami, a 24-year-old Moroccan musician who received classical western training in Morocco and has also played the *qanun* since the age of eight. “I never paid attention to Lebanese, Egyptian or Syrian music,” he notes. Currently studying for his MBA in Chicago, Chami is working on a CD, and he has performed with such other musicians as Al Gardner, an Armenian-American whose Alan Shavarsh Bardezbanian Middle Eastern Ensemble is based in Bath, Maine.

“The retreat is a good place to make a lot of connections,” says Chami. “I recently started a music-publishing business that will focus on oriental, Arab, Turkish and Armenian music. I would never have done that before!”

Campbell explains that this sense of community and cross-pollinating collaboration is an essential part of the retreat’s vision. Former student Alexander Vretos flew in this year from Athens; he is collaborating with Shaheen to host a similar retreat in Greece in 2003 that will target European and Middle Eastern participants.

“We are planting seeds,” says Campbell. “It’s up to the participants to take this knowledge and move on with it. I am always excited when I hear about the new ensembles and compositions that are started once everyone goes home.” For example, she says, early “graduates” of the retreats have started Arab-music ensembles in Boston, Minneapolis and New York.

A newcomer to the retreat, Nikolai Ruskin directs the Middle Eastern Music Ensemble, which he founded this spring at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. “This retreat is the most concentrated educational opportunity available in the country,” comments Ruskin, who focuses on Arab, Persian and Turkish traditions. Primarily self-taught on a variety of



Above: After the day’s classes, an impromptu percussion session becomes part of “open mike night.” Top: These six traditional Arab instruments, together with violin and voice, are the basic instruments of instruction at the retreat. Right and opposite: Ali Jihad Racy conducts the retreat orchestra in preparation for a concert on the closing night of the workshop.

Arab instruments, Ruskin spent the week studying the *nay* with Racy, and working on *taqasim* and *maqamaat* (scales) with Shaheen. His experience, he says, will be passed on to benefit his Cornell ensemble.

For the Arab and Arab-American participants, the week is a chance to look more closely at their own heritage, says Campbell. Yousif Sheronick, a former student who returned as a percussion instructor this year, says one of the best things about the retreat is “the sense of community, of getting back to my heritage and roots.” A professional musician who studied classical percussion at Yale, Sheronick combines influences from North Africa, West Africa and Brazil.

Christiane Karam, a singer and percussionist from Beirut who is now a student at Boston’s Berklee School of Music, returned from last year’s retreat to form a Middle Eastern band that mixes traditional Arab music with jazz.

“I never thought I could sing Arab music,” she says, citing its complexity

even for many native speakers. “When I sang western music, a lot of the vocal qualities and improvisation I did were very oriental, and that’s when I realized it was something inherent in me. Participating in the retreat for the past two years has strengthened my identity personally and as a musician.” Ironically, her instructor at the retreat this year was from Karam’s home city: Rima Khcheich is instructor of classical Arabic song at the National Superior Conservatory of Music in Beirut.

By the end of the week, participants and faculty alike had been immersed in what Racy describes as a “total cultural, musical and human experience.” Of all the participants, the immersion was perhaps most intense for 18-year-old Iman Azzi, the only beginning musician there. “I didn’t expect any of this!” she says. “We have an ‘ud at home that belonged to my grandfather, and I have always wanted to be able to play it. So I thought I would come here, learn to play the ‘ud, and that would be it.” In a week of private instruction,

Azzi learned some basic scales and techniques, and she plans to continue, she says, and possibly return next year.

“It brought music back into my life,” she says. 🌐



Piney Kesting (pmkhandly@hotmail.com) is a free-lance writer living in Boston. **Robert Azzi** (ibnbatuta@aol.com) has photographed worldwide for major publi-

cations, including *Aramco World*, for more than 30 years, specializing in Middle Eastern cultural subjects. He is proud that his daughter Iman has taken up the family ‘ud that he himself never learned to play.



📖 **Related articles** have appeared in these past issues of *Aramco World* and *Saudi Aramco World*:

Simon Shaheen: M/J 96, M/A 00, N/D 01

Ali Jihad Racy: S/O 95

🌐 www.simonshaheen.com
www.turath.org/Articles/KaySimon.htm
www.maqamworld.com

