Learning
from the April 12, 2005 edition

WARM UP: Richard Nawfel (far right) strums an oud, and Ghaleb Daouk (far left) plays a nay with Harvard University's Middle Eastern Music Ensemble.
PHOTOS BY MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN - STAFF

An unusual campus love story

By Robert Tuttle | *Contributor to The Christian Science Monitor*

CAMBRIDGE, MASS. — In a crowded room in a Harvard University dormitory, a man sits in a chair playing a violin like a cello, the base of the instrument resting in his lap and the neck held near his shoulder. This style of performance, he explains, is common in Turkey and Morocco.

Nearby a woman strums on a *qanun*, a harp-shaped instrument that lies flat like a table, even as other musicians use its tones to tune their own instruments.

Standing at the head of the group is Lebanese-born conductor Bassam Saba. With a violin perched on his chin, he calls the musicians to order. "Let's make it full," he yells out. "Bum, brum, bum, brum, eight, nine, and...."

Harvard University's Middle Eastern Music Ensemble is just getting warmed up for a three-hour rehearsal.

Even as war in Iraq and threats from Al Qaeda have sparked interest among university students in Middle Eastern affairs and prompted record numbers of them to sign up for Arabic language classes, a mini-Middle Eastern musical renaissance has been occurring on college campuses.

Middle East ensembles are active at the University of California at Los Angeles, the University of California at Santa Barbara, Cornell University, the College of William and Mary, the University of Chicago and, of course, Harvard. New ensembles are being organized almost every year.

Recently, one was started at Brown University in Rhode Island, and Mr. Saba says he is trying to start an ensemble at Columbia University in New York.

The Middle East, participants point out, is not simply a place of war and conflict. It is a region that cannot be fully understood without an appreciation of its rich cultural and artistic traditions - including its music.

"I think music is the heartbeat of the Arab world," says Kay Campbell, a member of the Harvard ensemble who began playing the oud, a pear-shaped instrument with a long neck that is similar in appearance to a lute, in the early 1990s. "If you don't get the music and art, you don't get the full picture."

Most Middle Eastern ensembles are affiliated with university ethnomusicology departments, but they often incorporate musicians from the surrounding community.

"I really see it as a teaching forum," says Anne Rasmussen, who founded the College of William and Mary's Middle East Ensemble in the early 1990s. "It is a flexible way, as a teacher, to convey information about the Middle East. It is an area that everyone is curious about [but] nobody knows enough about."

The music these ensembles focus on is played from Iran to Turkey, Israel to the Arabic-speaking countries of the Levant, North Africa, and the Arabian Gulf. Each region has its own musical traditions, but they share common instruments, tones, and rhythms that are distinct from those found in the Western musical tradition.

Besides the *qanun*, oud, and violin, musicians play the *nay*, a flute made out of a reed; and the *riq*, or Egyptian tambourine.

Mastering some of these instruments is challenging enough, but Western musical performers must also accustom themselves to distinct tones - like half-flats and half-sharps - that have no real parallel in the Western musical tradition.

"As a classically trained musician, you don't even hear those notes and you are trained to avoid them," says Kathryn Flinn, a violinist and graduate student studying ecology and evolutionary biology at Cornell University. Ms. Flynn started playing Middle Eastern music in 1998 as an undergraduate at the College of William and Mary.

The unique tonal structures pose difficulties even for experienced musicians, says Ali Jihad Racy, an ethnomusicologist at UCLA.

The qanun strikes a note that other musicians use to tune their own instruments.
MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN - STAFF

Dr. Racy, who is widely credited as a pioneer in teaching Middle Eastern music in the United States, is a native of Lebanon who came to the US to study ethnomusicology in 1968. He founded UCLA's Middle Eastern ensemble 10 years later and many of his protégés, including Dr. Rasmussen, went on to form ensembles of their own.

Five years ago, Racy and renowned Palestinian- American artist Simon Shaheen joined with Sting to perform the hit song "Desert Rose" at the Grammy Awards. As the popularity of Middle Eastern music has grown, some Western artists, such as Miles Copeland, have incorporated the sounds into their own works.

The music has also seeped into the background of films, television documentaries, and radio programs.

"People are tuning into the frequency of the Middle East lots more," says Ms. Campbell. "It's everywhere. That's all I can say."

In 1997, Campbell and Shaheen began hosting an annual week-long Arabic Music Retreat at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. Twenty students attended in 1997. By last year, that number had expanded to more than 70.

A quarter to a third of retreat participants are Arab-Americans interested in learning about their musical heritage, says Campbell.

But many are simply musicians seeking new inspiration or students who want to broaden their understanding of the region.

A similar retreat held each year in Mendocino, Calif., includes instruction in both music and dance.

Most of the music has been transcribed on paper for only about a century, says Johnny Farraj, a New Yorker born in Lebanon and founder of a popular Arabic-music website called maqamworld.com.

But some of the most famous compositions, the *Mawashahat*, are thought to have originated nearly 1,000 years ago in Moorish Spain, then called Andalusia, and were passed down from generation to generation through memorization.

Music and poetry can correct many of the common misperceptions that Americans have developed of the Middle East, insists Mr. Farraj. "Thank God, it's not just about war and terror," he says. "The rich music, the poetry and the food, a lot of good stuff comes out of there."