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MONDAY, MARCH 12, 2012

Sonia M'barek sings Andalusian Muwashshah

Renowned Tunisian vocalist Sonia M'Barek, is scheduled to appear in a rare New York City concert sponsored by the cultural center *Alwan for the Arts*. She will be joined by the *Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture* resident takht ensemble, led by Musical Director Hanna Khoury. Sonia M'Barek is a mistress of the muwashshah Arab song form, which our readers and listeners will be familiar with from past Afropop Worldwide [radio](#) and [blog](#) pieces. The history of the song form is rich, so we wanted to give you a historical primer! For a musical primer, check out Sonia M'Barek videos below.

For nearly 800 years, Spain under the Islamic empire—Andalusia—was a cosmopolitan civilization made up of Arabs, Africans, Jews, Europeans; peoples from all over the Mediterranean and beyond. One of the innovations of Andalusian culture was the *muwashshah*, a new genre that revolutionized the tone as well as the form of Arabic poetry and song. The *qasidah*, dating to pre-Islamic times in the Arabian peninsula, had been the dominant genre of Arabic poetry, spinning epic tales from the nomadic lives of the Bedouin into double lines with a single rhyme throughout, building a trance-like monotony that could compete with the endlessness of the desert. The *muwashshah* (pl. *muwashshahat*) became its lyric antithesis: short poems of 4 lines, sometimes 5-10 lines, with original rhyme schemes, and themes frequently involving love, or drinking—or both. “Fill the glasses, oh Winebearer!” “Listen to the playing of the lute” “Her walk taught the branches of the trees how to sway,” and “Oh, we long for the days of Andalusia” are typical lines from popular *muwashshahat*.

When the Moors and Jews and others were expelled from Spain in 1492, most crossed the Strait of Gibraltar into (Muslim) North Africa, bringing their culture with them, influencing and blending with the cultures there. Genres like the Moroccan *nawba* and the Tunisian *maluf* sprang from this fertile blend of Andalusian and North African song. Eventually the *muwashshah* made it to the Eastern Arab world, finding a home in Aleppo in northern Syria, a major hub along the Silk Road stretching from Europe and Istanbul through Central Asia and into China. Though the modern-era *muwashshah* retained the 1,000-year-old poetry of Andalusia, the music was Syrian, influenced as much by the odd meters and rhythms of the Ottoman Turks, as by Syria's neighbors in Iraq and Egypt. The Egyptian singer and composer Sayyid Darwish (who you've heard about in our most recent Egypt shows!) in the early 20th Century traveled to Aleppo for four years to study music, and brought the genre back to Egypt, composing some of the most well-known *muwashshahat* still sung today. Starting in the 1950's and 60's, Sabah Fakhri from Aleppo re-popularized the genre and brought it international recognition.

SEARCH

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Afropop Worldwide is an internationally syndicated weekly radio series, online guide to African and world music, and an international music archive, that has introduced American listeners to the music cultures of Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean since 1988.

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Today, the *muwashshah* has once again been given new life in Tunisia, appropriately lying midway between Andalusia and Syria, jutting out from North Africa into the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. For the last several decades, conservatories in Tunisia have made a significant effort in preserving the classical genres of music in the Arab world, including tarab music from Syria and Egypt (which includes the *muwashshah*), and some would argue that contemporary Tunisian musicians have surpassed Syrians and Egyptians in their own genres. Sonia M'barek is the most impressive example of this trend: not only a master of native Tunisian genres like the *maluf* as well as a singer of innovative new contemporary music, Sonia M'barak is also one of the finest singers of *muwashshahat* living anywhere in the world today.

If you are in New York City, her upcoming performance in New York City on March 23rd, at the CUNY Graduate Center, is a rare event not to be missed. Sonia will be joined by a talented group of American-based musicians, under the leadership of violinist Hanna Khoury, music director of the Philadelphia-based Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture; the ensemble also includes percussionist Hafez El Ali Kotain, cellist Kinan Abou-afach; oud player Kinan Idnawi, qanun player Hicham Chami, and bass player Jerell Jackson, all masters of the instruments you've been hearing about so often lately with our coverage of Arabic music through the Egyptian lens. They will be joined by singers from Keystone State Boychoir.

If you are in NYC, tickets are selling fast! Get yours [here](#). To join the Alwan for the Arts mailing list to hear about future events, click [here](#).

- *Sami Abu-Shumays*



1 More

Labels: 2012, Alwan for the Arts, Andalusia, muwashshah, nyc, Sonia M'Barak

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