

## Sonia M'Barek: A Musical Innovator Rooted in Tradition

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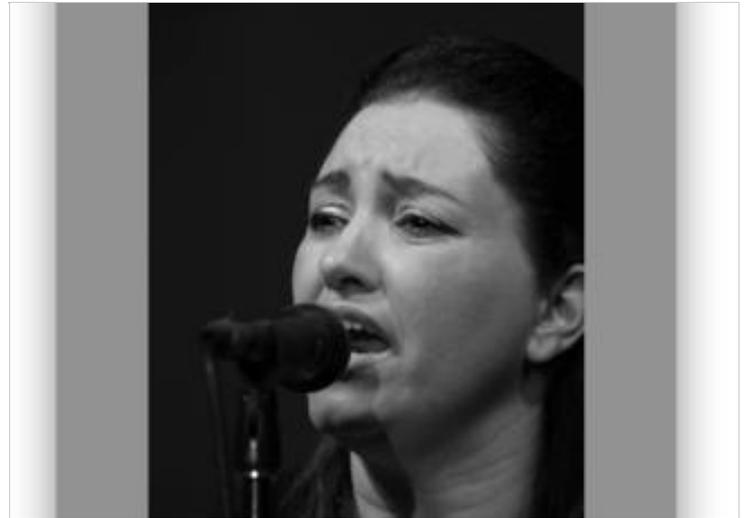
by Johnny Farraj

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 Listen

Sonia M'Barek, Proshansky Auditorium, City University of New York Graduate Center, New York, NY, 23 March 2012.

In traditional Arabic music, a vocalist is not just referred to as a singer, but is instead spoken of as a *mutrib/mutribah*. Literally translated, they are the people who bring *tarab*, or musical ecstasy. As such, the craft of a traditional Arabic vocalist is a demanding one. The singer must possess a pleasing voice, have clear diction, and sing impeccably in tune, all while comfortably navigating the Arabic *maqam* (mode) scales, whose intervals are smaller than the ones in Western music and therefore require particular precision. Additionally, a good singer is expected to be able to perform a *mawwal* (a spontaneous vocal improvisation) when needed, and to be skilled at ornamenting the melodies as they sing. The role requires clout and self-confidence, since he/she is the focal point of the audience: a funnel for the melody, the artistry of the lyrics, and the virtuosity of the musicians backing them.



[Sonia M'Barek performing in New York. Photo by Fouad Salloum.]

I had had the pleasure of seeing Sonia M'Barek perform twice in the past, and so I knew going in to see her performance on 23 March in New York that she was a consummate artist in all of these ways and more. M'Barek, in a concert sponsored by [Alwan for the Arts](#), [Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture](#), and the [Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center of the CUNY Graduate Center](#), presented an evening of contemporary Arabic music with a large majority of Tunisian composers and some songs inspired by the Andalusian *muwashah* tradition.

Aside from being a shining example of a *mutribah*, as well as being a composer and arranger, Sonia M'Barek's career in music is impressive in its length and breadth. She started singing at the age of nine, earning a diploma in Arabic music from Tunisia's National Conservatory of Music. She has released seven albums, has taken part in dozens of festivals in twenty countries, won numerous awards, regularly holds advanced workshops and master classes in Arabic music, and is currently a music educator at the High Institute of Musicology in Tunisia. She is a former board member of the illustrious Rashidiyya Music Institute, and served as the director of the official Tunisian Music Festival for three years.

Although M'Barek's name is often associated with the Tunisian *malouf* genre, singing that traditional genre was not where she began her career; instead she began by singing her own repertoire of music, composed for her mostly by Tunisian musicians. Tunisian *malouf* is the descendant of music that originated and prevailed for centuries in al-Andalus (the present day Iberian Peninsula) while it was part of the Islamic Empire, and which then migrated to North Africa after the Catholic conquests. It is a demanding classical genre, with sets organized in suites of several pieces sharing the same *maqam*, performed back to back, starting with a slow rhythm and progressively shifting to faster and busier rhythms. Until the late twentieth century, the *malouf* was sung exclusively by choirs of men, with suites lasting

an hour or longer.

Sonia M'Barek worked on half a dozen suites and chose just enough pieces to keep them around the twenty-minute mark. She then rearranged them for a *takht* (the traditional Arabic chamber ensemble) and moved them to a range more suited to the female voice. She recorded these suites in her *Takht* and *Tawchih* CDs, released in the late 1990's. The CDs included a combination of *malouf* and contemporary pieces, and earned her a reputation for being the first female *malouf* singer. Sonia's interpretation of the *malouf* repertoire is precise and true to its roots, and yet manages at once to be intimate, direct, and informal.

Aside from *malouf*, M'Barek is well versed in the Egyptian classical *Tarab* tradition, dating from the Golden Age of Arabic music (early to middle twentieth century). In her 2005 New York appearance during *Mahrajan El-Fann* (Festival of Art), she performed a mixed repertoire of *malouf* and Egyptian *Tarab* at Symphony Space, accompanied by the Palestinian violinist, oud player, and composer Simon Shaheen and his Near East Music Ensemble. In 2009, she partnered again with Simon Shaheen during his *Aswat* (Voices) tour and sang three Egyptian *Tarab* pieces by Zakariyyah Ahmad, Fareed el-Atrash, and Muhammad Abd el-Wahhab. She ended her set with a spectacular interpretation of Asmahan's classic "*Layali al-Unsi Fi Vienna*" (Nights of Passion in Vienna), to a standing ovation. That performance offered the New York audience a rare glimpse into what live performances of music from that golden period would have been like in their heyday.

After performing the *malouf* repertoire around the world for over ten years to great acclaim and with wide popularity, M'Barek felt the need to make her mark with a contemporary repertoire composed for her. "I cannot keep repeating other singers' songs. Although there will never be composers like the great Riyad el-Sunbati, Zakariyyah Ahmad, and Khemais Ternane, theirs cannot be the only repertoire that the public knows me by," she explained. M'Barek's approach to diversification and innovation was to experiment without self-imposed boundaries: "Sayyed Darwish and Zakariyyah Ahmad were revolutionaries in their innovation, and we need to do the same thing, to create something new. Music for me is an adventure; it is real freedom!"

And so it was that she embarked on a new direction. For her concert tour "Mediterranean Voyage," she created a dialogue between Tunisian-Andalusian and Arabic *maqam* scales, rhythms, and instruments, and their Mediterranean counterparts from Spain, Italy, and France. Her choice of lyrics was equally diverse, including Jacques Prévert's poem "*Les Feuilles Mortes*" (Autumn Leaves) translated into Arabic; a poem by the Tunisian poet Abou al-Qassem al-Shabi translated into French and Italian; and poems by Federico García Lorca from Spain, Nizar Qabbani from Syria, and Nâzım Hikmet from Turkey. "Music is a means to create conversations between nations, away from economic and political conflicts. Because of my conviction that music is an international language, I used it to create bridges in the Mediterranean region," she explained.

M'Barek continued to diversify her musical output with the release of the album *Wajd II* in 2011, based on a repertoire of Sufi music, some of which she composed herself, inspired by Sufi poems from Andalusia, Tunisia, and Pakistan. As she explained, "I don't like to be confined to one form. What's important for me is to always contribute something new, even if only in my interpretation [of a song]. I like to keep finding new material, as long as every show or recording has a unifying concept behind it."

Despite her exploration of different styles and her continuous innovation, a lot of commonality can be found in her works, and the elements that clearly matter to her are salient behind the diversity. For starters, there is an emphasis on poetry, whether in colloquial Tunisian or classical Arabic, and the lyrics in her songs are carefully chosen. Then there is a commitment to using acoustic instruments in her arrangements, and a deliberate avoidance of electric or electronic instruments like the synthesizer, which she calls a "dissonant instrument." Finally, her songs don't include much harmony and are rooted in Arabic *maqam* scales. Overall, the contemporary repertoire that was composed for her and by her can be considered a more modern version of the classical and traditional Arabic repertoire.

It was this contemporary Arabic repertoire that was presented by M'Barek on 23 March in New York. She was accompanied by an experienced *takht* ensemble of US-based Arabic musicians, including Hanna Khoury (violin and music director), Kinan Idnawi (*oud*), Hicham Chami (*qanun*), Kinan Abou-Afash (cello and arrangements), Jarrell Jackson (double bass), and Hafez Ali Kotain (*riqq*, *tabla*, frame drum, and *Cajon*). The *takht* performed three instrumental pieces, including one composed by cellist Kinan Abou-Afash entitled "*Karnabal*." That piece showcased a short solo by every musician, including a very well received *tabla* solo by Hafez Ali Kotain that stood out for its impeccable technique and creative rhythmic variations and combinations. The ensemble was also accompanied by about twenty singers from the Keystone State Boychoir, who sang the refrain on many of her songs.

M'Barek's repertoire for the evening included three songs written and composed for her, including the two oldies from her *Takht* CD, "*Mihtara Bein Ithnein*" (Torn Between Two Loves) and "*Douroub el-Hayet*" (The Paths of Life), as well as a recent remake of the classical Andalusian *muwashah* "*Jadaka Al-Ghathu*" (The Rain Has Rescued You), which remained within the *muwashah* form. From her own compositions, she included "*Hurriya*" (Freedom), and "*Al-Anado*" (Anatolia), a traditional Turkish tune that she adapted. More works by Tunisian poets and composers were represented with "*Layali Ishbilii*" (Nights of Seville), "*Hubbi Yitbaddel Yitjaded*" (My Love is Ever-Renewing), and "*Illli T'adda W Fat*" (What's Gone is Gone). Finally the repertoire included one cover from the Egyptian Golden Age, Laure Daccache's "*Aminti Billah*" (I Believed In God [when I saw your Beauty], 1939).

A consummate craftswoman, her delivery of the repertoire was majestic and flawless. Her deep and clear alto voice, with its slight smoky quality, filled the hall without being overpowering. Although many of the listeners, including myself, were expecting (or wishing for) more songs from her classical repertoire, the public was very engaged, and when she ended with her final piece, "*Al-Anado*" with the KSB choir, she received a standing ovation and several minutes of applause. Unfortunately the concert ended without enough time for an encore, which would have been the perfect opportunity to include an old *malouf* favorite, or a second Egyptian *Tarab* piece.

The most pleasant surprise of the evening was offered by the choir, when they sang the refrain in "*Aminti Billah*." Although their Arabic diction was not perfect, it was more than acceptable, and their singing of the Arabic scale that the song is based in (the Rast *maqam*) was surprisingly good, given that it is made of smaller intervals than Western music scales. The fact that the boys learned the melodies and lyrics for the entire concert by heart in only six rehearsals, then delivered them without the aid of sheet music, is an impressive feat in and of itself. Through her collaboration with them, Sonia M'Barek indeed proved her vision that music can be a bridge connecting cultures, that it is a universal language. It left both the boy choir who had the opportunity of sharing her stage, and the American audience who had the pleasure of hearing her perform live, with an experience to remember.

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Alwan for the Arts, founded in NYC in 1998, is known for its robust musical programming centered around Middle Eastern music in its diverse forms: folk, traditional, contemporary, experimental, as well as music featuring other cultural and regional influences. Other branches of its programming include literary readings and book signings, film screenings, dance performances, visual arts presentations, and various other events that fall under Alwan's multi-hued umbrella. For more information about Alwan, please click [here](#). To join Alwan's mailing list directly, and to hear about upcoming events, including Alwan's upcoming concert featuring [Marcel Khalife](#), click [here](#).

Based in Philadelphia, [Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture](#) is dedicated to presenting and teaching the Arabic language, arts, and culture. In the fall of 2011, with support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and other funders, Al-Bustan launched an Arab Music Concert Series, presenting a resident music ensemble performing classical Arab music repertoire that features a different guest soloist for each program. Led by Music Director Hanna Khoury, the ensemble brings together musicians of exceptional experience, providing them opportunities to hear exemplary live Arab music on a regular basis in Philadelphia. For more information, please click [here](#).

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