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Tarab! Allah!, Sonia!

by JUDY GELMAN MYERS on Mar 28, 2012 • 2:47 pm

M'Barek's All-Worlds Music

For five hundred years, Jews, Muslims, and Christians created an immensely rich, multicultural society in Andalusia, bursting with fresh ideas in math, science, and the arts. This cultural fusion is epitomized in the music of the time, a unique form blending court music from Baghdad, medieval chant, synagogue hymns, and local Iberian folk tunes. Religious persecution ended this golden age when Ferdinand and Isabella expelled the Muslims and Jews in 1492, but the music lived on as the exiles carried it with them to Turkey, North Africa, the New World. It has endured to this day; indeed, it's being created anew by such exponents as Sonia M'Barek, whose March 23 concert at the CUNY Graduate Center attested to its continuing vitality.

Backed by a superb musical ensemble of violin, oud, kanoun, cello, double bass, and Arabic percussion, as well as the engaging Keystone Boys Choir, M'Barek presented a far-ranging selection of nine works by 20th-century Tunisian composers. "The Rain that Falls Upon You" (Jadakal Ghaythu) took as its text a 14th-century poem, while "Nights of Seville" (Layali Ishbilya) hails from a recent project honoring Spanish poet Federica Garcia Lorca.



Presenter Alwan for the Arts dubbed the concert "an evening of Tunisian tarab." Tarab refers to the emotional effect of music on its listener, a state of expanded consciousness; Arabs experiencing tarab cry, "Allah!" It is the Ole! moment in flamenco, or the moment in jazz when your head drops back, your eyes drift shut, and you murmur, "Oh my God" under your breath without even knowing you're saying it. With her honeyed voice and inspired vitalization of a long-lasting tradition, M'Barek coalesced past and present, Europe and Africa, Muslims, Christians, and Jews, into one evening of transcendent tarab. Surely we need more of those.

Tags: jadakal ghaythu, Judy Gelman Myers, keystone boys choir Tunisia, Nights of Seville, sonia m'barek, the rain that falls upon you

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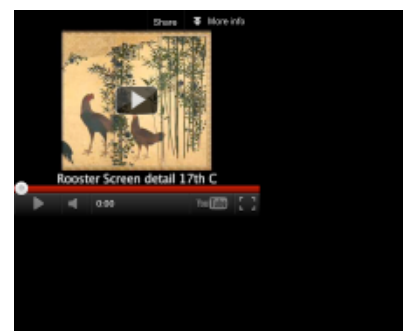
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