

NOV 27

Jerusalem Jive: The Middle East Music Ensemble brings the Old City to the Windy City

Written by: Ellis Calvin



Listening to the University of Chicago's Middle East Music Ensemble, it's hard to believe not all of the members have a lifetime of experience in Middle Eastern music. In fact, many have only recently begun playing it. Students at the UofC make up most of the group. No experience with Middle Eastern instruments—as long as they can play an instrument—is necessary to join the ensemble, which auditions new members in September of each school year. Guitar, piano, and clarinet players, among many others, can use their skills to learn the 'ud (similar to a lute), qanun (a box zither), or baglama (also similar to a lute). The ensemble also uses Western string instruments and even accordion on certain songs. Although the singers are native Arabic speakers for authenticity's sake, the rest of the ensemble is as diverse as any student orchestra. The Middle East Music Ensemble is led by renowned Palestinian-born composer and 'ud player Issa Boulos. He believes that the group's diversity improves their performance, and even makes it competitive with similar ensembles in the Middle East.

The ensemble plays a wide range of Middle Eastern music, from traditional to contemporary. Boulos says that when people think of Middle Eastern music, they often think it's all traditional. "In Jerusalem, in Egypt... people still live there and are still writing music," he points out. This Saturday's performance even includes a couple of premieres. Authenticity in instrumentation is a priority for the group—Boulos doesn't want anything to get in the way of the sound of the pieces.

In the Western tradition, a minor scale usually connotes sadness and a major scale, happiness. Middle Eastern music uses maqams, a much more complex modal structure than Western music. The use of untempered quartertones (imagine them as notes between the white and black keys of a piano) allows for greater variation. While Western music has only seven modes on any given tone, there are dozens of maqams, each imparting different emotions. Different regions and circles of society are identified with different maqams. Music in the Middle East is traditionally melodic, but many composers in the last century have begun to include some harmony. Written notation is only a guide, and improvisation is a substantial part of playing a Middle Eastern repertoire. As a result, performing Middle Eastern music is a very personal experience; the musician has to connect on a personal level with the music in order to understand the subtleties inherent in each piece. The members of the ensemble must love this alternative tradition of music, as they keep coming back. They tend to "get the Middle Eastern bug—they get hooked," as Boulos puts it. Some of the performers continue to play with the ensemble for years after graduation.

The ensemble typically plays a concert of primarily Arab music in November to celebrate Chicago's Arab Heritage Month, followed by a program of Turkish music in February, and Persian music in April. This year, the ensemble decided to take the themes even further, exploring iconic Middle Eastern cities through their repertoire. The city of Izmir, Turkey will inspire their February concert and either Shiraz or Tehran in Iran will be the focus of the April performance. Up first, however, is Jerusalem, a city with a millennia-long history of diversity. The city, where the radios ring out with everything from traditional Armenian tunes to contemporary Israeli music to 1940s Turkish pop songs, has produced a rich variety of compositions. "We are going there, capturing it and putting it on stage," Boulos enthusiastically explains. The Middle East Music Ensemble will portray the spirit of the ancient city in performance on Saturday at the International House. It's a bug worth catching.