



PERFORMER CORNER

Laura Harada: Classical Arabic Violin

by Colleen Bertsch

In the traditional music of Middle Eastern lands, specifically a swath from Syria to Egypt, tones are broken into not only whole steps and half steps, but also quarter steps. Not an exact quarter fraction, but rather a nuanced distance, higher or lower depending on which of the over forty most common scale types the musician is performing. It proves a daunting task for Western musicians unaccustomed to the vast number of pitch, accent, and tonal possibilities of Arabic music. Laura Harada of Minneapolis is a violinist who has been steadily working to decode these foreign musical possibilities.

Born in Easton, Pennsylvania, Laura began her violin studies in the public school system as a fourth grader and soon after, enrolled in private lessons. Her teachers were energetic and encouraging, and provided excellent orchestral training through youth orchestras and summer camps in Kinhaven, Vermont. Some years later, Laura graduated from Oberlin College and Conservatory as a violin student of Marilyn McDonald and Kathleen Winkler.

Laura recently performed on a U.S. tour with the Grammy Award-Winner Youssou N'Dour from Senegal, West Africa. N'Dour specifically needed Arabic musicians in order to perform the music of his new CD *Egypt* which was a collaboration project with the Egyptian composer, Fathy Salama. A collection of musicians from across the country, the orchestra was required to form a tight-knit group in a two day period after individually preparing at home from a recording with no, or virtually unusable, sheet music. The successful venture began its tour at Carnegie Hall in New York City.

The bridge connecting Laura's graduation from western classical Oberlin to the eastern-styling N'Dour tour was her musical curiosity and adventurous spirit. After moving to Minneapolis, Laura performed with various ensembles including a rock string quartet with an instrumentation of guitar, electric bass, cello and violin. She eventually joined the Ethnic Dance Theatre

where she met her future husband, percussionist Tim O'Keefe. It was O'Keefe who introduced her to classical Arabic music by inviting her to the first of several (and one-of-a-kind in the United States) Arabic music retreats held annually in Massachusetts. Taught by a Palestinian violinist well versed in both Western and Arabic classical styles, Laura would hone her listening and playing skills for the many different scales, quarter-steps, three-quarter-steps and rhythmic challenges.

The Arabic word for "scale" is *maqam* (pl. *maqamat*). "Some notes that are used in maqamat are 'grey keys,' those notes in-between," Laura explains. "So all those notes you hit as a kid that you weren't supposed to might be legitimate notes in another tonal language! Because of this variety of pitches available you have so many more varieties of scales, each one with a different name." One maqam example is *rast* where the 3rd and 7th tones are lowered, but only by a quarter-step.

Example: C D E^b F G A B^b C

In similar idea to the Western melodic minor scale, this *rast* example (*rast-rast* maqam) is played going up the scale while on the way down the B is lowered to a full flat making it *rast-nahawamd* (*nahawamd* meaning minor) maqam.

How much of a quarter-step is used is determined by each scale. The tonal shades are endless. As a string player, imagine how your listening and fine motor skills would be engaged on a deeper level. This has been Laura's work for the past eight years.

There is also a very well developed rhythmic system in classical Arabic music where each rhythm has its own feel or sense of completion and therefore its own name. The Arabic rhythmic system is called *iq'at* (sing. *iq'a*). As in Western music, there are

strong beats (*doum*) and weak beats (*tek*). A standard classical *iq'at*, *Sama'i thaqil*, is a 10/8 rhythmic structure, which looks like this in its basic form:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
D t t t t D D t t t

Ornaments are filled in around these basic melodic (scale) and rhythmic patterns in both composed tunes and improvised performances. The quality of the musician is decided on by his or her agility at improvising and modulating to different keys.

Ensemble playing in classical Arabic music is based on *heterophony*, or multiple instruments playing the same melody at the same time. Although playing the same tune, the picture painted is quite complex due to each instrument's character. Tone color, ornamentation and rhythmic variation are expressed as suited for each individual instrument.

Laura is now involved with multiple ethnic ensembles in the Minneapolis/St.

Paul area. Her band Amwaj is the local Arabic ensemble of choice playing at all the hip urban hotspots, sometimes with belly dancers. The group Music Mundial is a sort of "world music tour" that encompasses Brazilian, African, Central American, European, Turkish and Middle Eastern music. In this group, Laura plays rabeca, a Brazilian fiddle, along with her classical violin. Both groups offer educational programs in their respective styles to schools and other community organizations.

Contact information for:

Music Mundial: Offers educational programs exploring music of the world, starting in Brazil, journeying through the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. E-mail: musicmundial@aol.com. Contact: David Burk at 612.521.5574

Amwaj: Offers educational programs



in traditional and classical Arabic music. Website: www.amwaajmusic.com. Contact: Laura Harada 612-721-1661.

As a side note, Laura also plays oud, the Arabic lute which defines the classical Arabic sound, and also percussion with Barucada do Norte, a Brazilian percussion ensemble. These experiences help to give her different perspectives on music and

contribute to her overall musical development and continued education.

One excellent resource on classical Arabic music is the website www.maqamworld.com. Detailed information with sound samples is available on maqamat (scales), iqa'at (rhythms), song forms and traditional instruments.

A former public school string educator in the Twin Cities area, Colleen Bertsch now maintains a private violin studio in Minneapolis. She performs with the Ethnic Dance Theatre and Orkestar Bez Ime, an international folkdance band that specializes in Balkan and eastern European music. You can visit their website at www.rogaria.com. ↗