

Dar Al Athar



Bandar Al-Sharif Band

Hijaz source of different forms of Arab music

Dr Urkevich sheds light on music of Makkah

By Chaitali B. Roy

Special to the Arab Times

Few scholars have the understanding and passion for Arab music as Dr Lisa Urkevich, as time, and again she has demonstrated at the various lectures and concerts she has presented. On Monday April 29 at 7 pm, she proved it once more as she treated the audience at Dar Al Athar Al Islamiyyah to a delightful presentation of Hijazi music, shattered certain misconceptions about the relationship between Makkah and music and got the audience clapping to a complicated eight beat Yemeni Al Kaf. The lecture/concert titled "Dana and Art Songs of the Hijaz: Classical Music of Makkah" also featured the Bandar al Sharif Band, a leading ensemble of traditional Hijazi music.

Dr Lisa Urkevich is professor and chair of the Music and Drama Department at the American University of Kuwait and specializes in music of the Arabian Peninsula. Engaged in fieldwork and extensive research, Dr Urkevich is a passionate advocate of Arab music.

Comprehensive

Currently working on completing a book on the music of Saudi Arabia and the Upper Gulf States, which incidentally will be the first comprehensive study on the music of this area, she is one of few scholars who have made it their mission to document and preserve music of a region that saw the birth of Islam. In her lecture on Monday, Dr Urkevich showcased 'dana' and other related art forms with the aim of bringing this important music back into focus.

In her introduction, Dr Urkevich

sought to address misconceptions about Makkah, the great pilgrimage city, as an important centre of music. "There is fantastic music in Makkah," she asserted. "The Hijaz has some of the best and oldest forms of music in the Arab world. Certain places in the Hijaz including Makkah, Medina, Jeddah and Taif have been meeting centers of poetry and music since pre-Islamic times."

In an interview to Arab Times, she explained, "Makkah is historically one of the most musical cities on the planet. It rivals Damascus, Baghdad, and Cairo as being a leader in Arab music. Some ancient sources claim that the Hijaz is the source from which all Arab music flows. Even today, there is a music academy in Makkah, which you will not find in any other Saudi



Dr Lisa Urkevich

city. It is just a misconception that Makkah does not have music."

Makkah is one of the richest cultural centers of the world. For years, pilgrims and travelers have converged on it. From this ancient, vibrant melting pot emerged sophisticated music-poetry of which the most significant category is that of 'danah'.

Authentic

"Performed by both men and women, dana is the predominant art-music category of the Hijaz. It is an original and authentic music of Makkah, from where it spread to other cities, including Ta'if. There are about six types of dana, each with its own rhythmic mode. In this form of music, the drummer plays a tabla on his lap and a small frame drum in his hand. Also, dana uses special Makkah maqamat (melodic modes)."

The Hijaz region of Saudi Arabia boasts an old and rich musical culture based on song traditions with complex melodies such as the 'majrur' and 'mizmar'. Hijazi music like the Kuwaiti sawt uses instruments such as the ud, qanun and the violin. The percussion instruments used include shallow frame drums of different sizes, which is held in the left hand and struck with the right.

'Dana' first appeared almost 1,000 years ago and spread throughout the Hijaz, taking hold in the urban centers of Medinah and Jeddah. 'Dana' is rooted in Yemeni traditions, which is understandable since from the 6th century onwards, Makkah was the stopping place for caravans traveling between the Yemen and Syria.

But, Dr Urkevich avers, the tradition of music took its own special form in the Hijaz and was nourished there as

an art form. "It is like American country music, which though it is rooted in Irish and British traditions, is essentially American." In 1948, Jeddah saw the establishment of the first radio station and in 1950 'dana' started to be performed on radio.

Sharing her observations on the name 'dana', Dr Urkevich said, "There has been much speculation on the meaning of the term 'dana.' The category of course gets its name from the fact that the songs usually include a refrain that features the word 'dana' such as, 'ya layla dan ya la dana (Oh, night dana, Oh, dana...)"

This refrain is also famous in a type of Kuwaiti aut music. In Kuwait and the Gulf where the economies were sustained by pearl diving, dana is a kind of large, beautiful pearl, and many feel that the dana refrain is related to this regional treasure."

There are several types of dana in the Hijaz, each with its own character. "Dana is to a certain extent inspired by the Bedouin and village cultures of the Hijaz, which have a somewhat "mountain" culture that differs from that of desert people, but basically, it is a city music that calls for a skilled musician who understands melodic modes and has a quality voice.

"In earlier times, one would find several of the great muezzins (call to prayer chanters) from Makkah who would perform danah, so some of the greatest voices in the world have sung Hijazi music."

And so it was proved when Bandar al Sharif Band demonstrated their musical talent led by noted qanun player Bandar Al Sharif, who has performed and studied with many of the great masters of Hijazi danah, includ-

ing Mohammed Aman.

"For the past few years, Bandar and his ensemble have made a concentrated effort to share Makkah music with the wider world. They have performed in several countries around the globe and have played a major role in reinvigorating traditional art music in the Hijaz."

The band began with a traditional majaan and followed it up with a Dana, Sanani, Yamani Al Kaf, Majrur and Rudman.

Mohammed Hashem, the lead singer who learned the danah from his grandmother sang beautiful romantic poetry with sensuous overtones. The poetry of Hijaz describes the beloved in glowing terms. "In a loving graceful woman, my feelings flamed/ Falling in passion is to no avail. May Allah requite those who enchanted me with love/ Ever since I was a little boy." Later while singing 'Majrur', the poet sings of his lover and how she walks on feet, "but only steps on rosewater sprinkled for her".

Alive

Like Gulf music, the danah despite its status as one of the most important art forms in the Hijaz is seeing a slow decline. But unlike the music of the Gulf, there is hope yet for this art form. "In Saudi Arabia, group folk traditions with dance are more alive than they are in the Gulf, which is good," assures Dr Urkevich. "They are changing though, becoming more modern, with faster beats, and new kinds of drums being added. Art music like the dana has had more of a struggle, because this was the sophisticated music of the upper class. Because of political and social changes, it began to decline greatly beginning in the late 1980s, but now there is a fresh outlook on culture and it is starting to rise again."