

Middle East and Central Asia Music Forum 24 November - will now be held at Canterbury Hall, Cartwright Gardens - map

Wednesday November 24th, 2010

PROGRAMME

Registration from 9.15am

9.30am - Welcome

Session 1:

Chair: Laudan Nooshin (City University London)

Focus on 'No One Knows about Persian Cats', by Bahman Ghobadi (2009)

9.30am - 11.15am Film screening

Short break, tea/coffee

11.35am – 1pm

Theresa Steward (University of Edinburgh)

Do All Persian Cats Sound the Same?: Bahman Ghobadi's Representation of the Iranian Underground Music Scene

Followed by questions and panel discussion

Discussants: Bronwen Robertson (University of Melbourne), Kaveh (from the band 'Font')

1pm – 2.15pm Lunch break

Session 2: 2.15pm – 4pm

Chair: Janet Topp Fargion (British Library Sound Archive)

Alexander Knapp (SOAS)

Learning to Chant the Bible in the Bukharan-Jewish Tradition

Samir Mokrani (French Centre for Archaeology and Social Sciences, Sanaa)

Unesco/Japanese Fund in Trust Action Plan 'Safeguarding of the Song of Sanaa (Yemen)': Challenges and Issues Faced by the Implementing Team

4pm - 4.20pm Tea/Coffee

Session 3: 4.20pm – 5.10pm

Chair: John Baily (Goldsmiths University of London)

Hasan Hejairi (University of Exeter)

What if it were a Corpse? Recreating an Imaginary Oud

Short break

5.30pm – 6.30pm

Amir Eslami (nei) and Hooshyar Khayam (piano) (Art University, Tehran, Iran)

Lecture presentation: 'New Improvisation in Iranian Music'; followed by recital

Advance booking is requested via Valerie James at music@sas.ac.uk; a contribution to costs of £10 is requested on the door. Attendance for students and the unwaged is free.

Abstracts

Theresa Steward (University of Edinburgh)

Do All Persian Cats Sound the Same?: Bahman Ghobadi's Representation of the Iranian Underground Music Scene

This paper will explore the debate surrounding Bahman Ghobadi's 2009 film, *No One Knows About Persian Cats*, examining praise and criticism it has received from both Western and Iranian audiences, and Ghobadi's attempt to 'unveil' Iranian underground music. Although the underground music scene in Iran consists of many different voices, Ghobadi chooses to frame his film around one main voice – that of musicians who desire to leave Iran or have already left. This discussion will address the film's effort to attract Western audiences by the globalisation of the underground music scene, and will acknowledge the important points that Ghobadi neglects to mention, such as the use of the internet, the practice and status of legal musicians, and the complexities of exile, which is not a quick fix to the problem of censorship. This paper hopes to open up doors for discussion regarding the current media frenzy over Iranian underground music which has increased since the release of this film and the 2009 election. Is all of this media attention beneficial to Iranian musicians or is it creating a one-sided view of them and their music?

Alexander Knapp (SOAS)

Learning to Chant the Bible in the Bukharan-Jewish Tradition

Cantillation – the didactic and non-improvised system used by Jews throughout the world for chanting the Old Testament of the Bible – has a history stretching back some 2,500 years. Although, in modern times, its multiplicity of musical renderings has been disseminated with the aid of textbooks, sheet music and recordings produced by expert practitioners, cantillation remains primarily an oral tradition, passed on from teacher to pupil across the generations. Students learn to interpret the non-diastematic 'accents of biblical recitation' (*ta'amei hammiqra*) according to an extensive repertoire of motifs prevalent in, and sometimes specific to, their respective communities. The training can begin as early as the age of five, and pupils follow a rigorous programme of study. Following a few introductory comments, I shall begin my paper by placing cantillation in its religious and social context. Vivid documentary evidence dating from the early twentieth century will then be produced to illustrate the teaching method as practised among the Bukharan Jews. Finally, the chant itself will be demonstrated by means of a biblical extract, chanted in the 1990s by Hazzan Yahub Meer Ochildiev, Cantor at one of Tashkent's two functioning synagogues, who would have learned his art in the early twentieth century.

Samir Mokrani (French Centre for Archaeology and Social Sciences, Sanaa)

Unesco/ Japanese Fund in Trust Action Plan 'Safeguarding of the Song of Sanaa (Yemen)': Challenges and Issues Faced by the Implementing Team

This presentation will comprise two main parts:

The first will consist of a short presentation on the Song of Sanaa, a traditional urban music related to the capital of Yemen and which is today the most popular secular musical style of the country. The various appellations of this tradition will be mentioned, followed by an explanation of several changes to have affected the Song of Sanaa during the last century (notably the migration of northern musicians to Aden during the first half of the 20th century). I will then briefly show its principal characteristics from both anthropological and musical perspectives, with specific focus on the constant changes which this repertory has faced in recent decades.

A second part will consist of a presentation of the Action Plan itself, its main aims (recordings, the setting-up of music and singing skills transmission workshops, etc.) and results, as well as the difficulties and the issues that arose during its implementation. Indeed, it should be noted that this Action Plan represented an unprecedented attempt in the field of music and oral heritage in the history of Yemen and therefore represented a challenge regarding many different aspects, among which the following can be considered the most salient:

1. The diversity and multiplicity of the official stakeholder organisations (UNESCO, Social Fund for Development, French Center for Archeology and Social Sciences, Ministry of Culture, etc.);
2. The still ambiguous status of music in the Yemeni social environment, which rendered the transmission and the recording processes much harder than expected;
3. If some traditional music masters showed great enthusiasm, others expressed more reserve, if not suspicion, towards a project that was mainly led and monitored by foreigners (Dr. Jean Lambert and myself);
4. The competition between several local personalities related to the Yemeni musical scene, as well as the lack of financial support and interest for music in a country which faces priority challenges, notably in the economic and the security fields.

Hasan Hejairi (University of Exeter)

What if it were a Corpse?: Recreating an Imaginary Oud

Seminal manuscripts produced by Islamic scholars, such as Al-Farabi's *Kitab Al-Musiqa Al-Kabir*, provide important insights into musical traditions in parts of the Middle East. A curious aspect of the work in regard to prevalent musical instruments, aside from its detailed analyses of instruments such as the oud, is its inclusion of the 'mythologies' associated with the creation of the instrument. The oldest known archaeological findings of the oud - or an instrument resembling the oud - are said to be close to 5,000 years old. Yet according to

medieval Islamic manuscripts and preserved oral histories of some of the peoples of the Middle East, recurring 'mythologies' related to the oud and its mysterious beginnings suggest the presence of the instrument from a much earlier time.

My discussion will highlight some of the mythologies associated with the instrument, along with aspects of its physical features and performance traditions in order to recreate an instrument reflecting my findings. This somewhat reflects the approach taken by Harry Partch as he explains in his *Genesis of a Music* (1974) over the course of his work in creating instruments, some of which re-imagine 'established' instruments and musical traditions.