



Simon Shaheen, Arab Aswat Orchestra and vocalists meld sounds for a joyous concert

Posted by Susan Isaacs Nisbett, News Special Writer March 13, 2009 11:15AM

It's the same, only different.

While the American movie musical was turning heads and making toes tap across the U.S. from the 1930s through the 1950s, the Arab world was also enjoying a golden age on the silver screen.

Its films were dominated by singers and composers like the diva Um Kulthoum and Mohammad Abdel Wahhab of Egypt; Farid and Asmahan Al Atrash of Syria; and Wadi' Al Safi and Fairuz of Lebanon.

That Arab golden age enjoyed a platinum encore Thursday evening at Hill Auditorium in "Aswat" - "Voices" - a multimedia evocation of the songs and films of the era by violinist Simon Shaheen, his traditional Arab Aswat Orchestra and four riveting and distinctive vocalists: Ibrahim Azzam, Sonia M'barek, Khalil Abonula and Rima Khcheich. University Musical Society presented the event.

While there were a few glitches with the Big Screen set up on Hill's stage to show film excerpts and while the show ran long (just like the Oscars!), no one seemed to mind, especially since the show picked up steam as it went along.

By the time Azzam, a whiz on the oud as well as the smoothest of singers, closed with Farid Al Atrash's "Ya 'Awathil Falfilu," it was as much fun to watch the audience - hands twirling to the beat, shoulders swiveling with the melody - as it was to listen. No one got up to dance, but you couldn't help but want to.

It's seductive, this music, rhythmically hypnotic, incredibly rich in its modes, scales and microtones and astounding in its melismatic nuance. The orchestra was a band of virtuosi - from Shaheen, leading on his violin, to the other string players and the masters of various Arab instruments. Qanun player Jamal Sinno could make more notes faster on his zither than anyone I've heard.

The orchestra's exchange with the singers was like a conversation, and the singers themselves were great communicators: They reached you, and their music touched you, whether you spoke Arabic or not.

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