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CULTURE »

Sacred Fusion: Jewish and Muslim Melodies Mingle Easily at Moroccan Music Festival

By David R. Adler

June 26, 2008

Earlier in the life of this historic city, it wouldn't have been odd to hear a Sephardic Jewish melody and the Muslim call to prayer ring out and interweave simultaneously. Fes, widely considered Morocco's spiritual and intellectual capital, was once home to Maimonides himself. One still can walk through the Mellah, or Jewish section, of the ancient walled city and see synagogue facades, a Jewish cemetery, doorways with diagonal slots that once held mezuzas. Yet, today's Fassi Jews number between 150 and 200 and dwell in the Ville Nouvelle, a French colonial creation with sidewalk cafés; cell phone ads; modern, tree-lined avenues, and even a McDonald's. Roughly 5,000 Jews remain in the country as a whole. Here and elsewhere, it has become hard to imagine Muslims and Jews building a common civic culture, thriving despite differences, as in the Arabo-Andalusian world prior to the expulsions of the late 15th century.

But strange and striking things tend to happen during the annual Fes Festival of World Sacred Music. Having marked its 14th year last month, the festival included everything from Sufi chants to Malian Tuareg music, from flamenco to Balinese gamelan and Christian-themed works of Haydn and Bach. And in the midst of it all, as in years past, was a Jewish component. Toward the end of the weeklong festival, in the charming sunlit courtyard of the Batha Museum, the five-piece Belgian ensemble La Roza Enflorese played Sephardic melodies in a loosely interpretive style, fusing medieval and Baroque instrumentation with percussive elements from the Balkans, the Maghreb and beyond. Edith Saint-Mard, singing in Ladino, was just finishing "A la nana y a la buba," a soothing minor-key melody with lute obbligato, when a muezzin sounded the late-afternoon call to prayer.

A coincidence, and yet so much more. This was an echo of a lost civilization, and an unplanned illustration of how the festival tries to forge links "between the sharing of sacred musical traditions and the search for a new mode of political dialogue," as music critic Larry Blumenfeld has written.

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Not that the endeavor isn't fraught in today's climate. The Bukharian Jewish musician Ilyas Malayev, based in New York until his death this past May, played Fes soon after the vicious Casablanca suicide bombings in 2003, on the condition that his group receive enhanced security and not be publicly identified as Jewish. Despite a repeat bombing in 2007, no such concern seemed to hang over La Roza Enflorese, although certain ironies were hard to miss. Authorities recently arrested 11 Moroccans for allegedly plotting attacks in Brussels, La Roza's home base. Some of the arrests were made in Fes. Just days before the festival, The New York Times carried a story on Malika El Aroud, a Moroccan-born jihadi propagandist who does her influential Web-based work in, of course, Brussels.

Like Egypt, Pakistan and other American anti-terror allies, Morocco struggles to root out homegrown extremists while maintaining some semblance of a democratic order. There's often a dark side to this. The Committee To Protect Journalists has reported significant backsliding on Moroccan press freedom. Lawyers for Guantanamo detainee Binyam Mohamed allege that in 2002 he was rendered to Morocco and tortured there. So the Fes Festival, held "under the high patronage of his majesty King Mohammed VI," is in part image-management for the Moroccan state. Fes-born Princess Lalla Salma, the king's wife, arrived fashionably late for some of the events at Bab El Makina, the idyllic open-air site of the pricier evening concerts. On her entrance the crowd would applaud and rise to its feet. When one colleague snapped a photo, he immediately had security personnel demanding to see the shot.

Of course, the festival deserves enormous credit for promoting pluralism and cross-cultural fellowship. It also highlights Fes's role as a major outpost of Sufism, the mystical strain of Islam that arcs from South Asia through Turkey and all the way to Senegal. Music is often the first target of Islamist wrath, but when Fes's own Aïssawa Sufi Brotherhood led a nighttime procession through the courtyard at Dar Tazi, men and women swayed and jumped together in a circle, to rollicking drums and wailing double-reed horns. Tartit, a superb Mali-based unit that played the Batha Museum, featured covered men and uncovered women, as is customary for the Tuareg (or, more accurately, Tamasheq) people. The women played hand drums, ululated and often stepped to the front for alluring dances. Here were faces of Islam hardly ever seen by most Westerners.

This year's program also featured American opera legend Jessye Norman in an evening of sacred song; traditional Vietnamese music by vocalist Huong Thanh; Indian Bhakti chanting from Madhup Mudgal; a gospel/qawwali collaboration involving Craig Adams and the Voices of New Orleans, with Pakistani master Faiz Ali Faiz, and a heart-stopping free concert at nearby Bab Boujloud by Nass El Ghiwane, local stars whose stirring mix of Gnawa music and raw groove brought out everyone from small children to old women. Teens and 20-somethings sang every Arabic lyric and threw each other in the air.

To hear the sparsely orchestrated Jewish themes of La Roza Enflorese in this context was all the more remarkable. The group's members — Edith Saint-Mard on vocal, Bernard Mouton on flûtes à bec, Thomas Baeté on viola da gamba and medieval fiddle, Jan Van Outryve on lute and vihuela, and Vincent Libert on percussion — came to this material via backgrounds in early music performance. Their third and latest CD, "Sekretos de Mi Alma: Kantes Djudeo Espanyoles" (Pavane), is a curious hybrid, grounded in Western classical tradition but evocative of the East in its winding scalar vocabulary and taut, syncopated percussion.

Like other exiled peoples, the Jews fashioned a portable musical repertoire, infusing it with sounds from other regions and cultures, including Morocco's. "The melodies and text are all that's left," remarked Outryve, and yet La Roza Enflorese isn't merely in the business of preservation. Since these monodic songs come from oral tradition and lack written instrumental parts, the project virtually requires creative license. Saint-Mard sings in a clear, mellow, largely unornamented style while the group plays treatments that are essentially original, leaving space for improvisation, as well. "It's not a historical performance," Outryve insisted, and thus the use of period instruments can be deceiving. By remaking the source material in their own way, these musicians prove a point about not only the longevity but also the adaptability of ancient Jewish music. And that's the soundest historical approach of all.

David R. Adler writes about music, culture and politics for numerous publications.

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Author

David R. Adler

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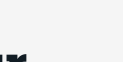
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