

Concert review (Boston Early Music News, Volume XVII, No.2)

Al Qantarah: "Abbalati, abballati! Sounds & Songs of Medieval Sicily."

Farzaneh Joorabchi, mezzo-soprano, setar; Roberto Bolelli, tenor; Fabio Accursio, ud (lute) +; Donato Sansone, friscalettu +; Fabio Tricomi, various instruments; Nico Staiti, tamburo & misc. percussion.

Sept., 30, 1999, Houghton Chapel, Wellesley College.

In 652AD the first Arabs arrived in Sicily. In 827 they launched a full-scale invasion, and by 902 Sicily was completely under Arab control. Though their reign was over by 1091 when Sicily fell to the Normans, Middle Eastern cultural influence proved to be long-lasting. Arabic was used as the official language in Sicily for 100 years after the Norman conquest, and the Sicilian language today still contains many Arabic-derived words and phrases. Likewise, Sicilian music, instruments and performance practice was/is strongly influenced by Middle Eastern music. Thus begins - and ends - my knowledge of Sicilian music history.

Al Qantarah rose from the ashes of the Italian medieval ensemble **Musica Enchiriadis** which dissolved some ten years ago. As their name implies, their focus is on Middle Eastern music, as well as Middle East-influenced Mediterranean repertoire.

If nothing else, **Al Qantarah's** concert was an aural compendium of Middle Eastern instruments. One could not help but be impressed by the fact that between the four instrumentalists (most of whom sang, as well), no fewer than **15** different instruments were used; some of them by more than one person. All in all some three dozen instruments were spread across the stage, making it look like a showroom at an ethnomusicology convention. **Fabio Tricomi** alone played 7 instruments ranging from the tar and zarb (Persian plucked instruments) to vielle, mouth-harp, percussion, and several instruments I had never even heard of ("Ciarameddu," anyone?). Though not listed as a singer in the program (out of modesty?), he also sang on at least a third of the pieces...and quite nicely, at that.

Though two of the 22 (!) pieces on the concert were Persian folk songs, the rest of the program was divided equally between traditional Sicilian folk music and sacred pieces from the 12th century collection *Tropari di Catania*. The single exception was *Dolce lo mio drudo* from the 15th century (beautifully performed, but a slightly incongruous addition to the program).

As a general rule **Al Qantarah's** approach is to perform even sacred music with a Middle Eastern flare, usually using instruments and percussion. Though by no means an expert in the field, I do know that this practice is questioned by some scholars and has been hotly debated. In the very least it has the effect of minimizing the differences between the secular folk music and sacred works, which were most certainly originally conceived as purely vocal music. It was odd to hear such pieces as *In hoc anni circulo* and the well-known *Benedicamus Domino* in this context.

After ten or so pieces performed in a similar fashion - drums banging away, more often than not drowning out the poor mezzo-soprano - one's interest and ability to discern between selections began to wane. Fortunately they broke up the second half of the program with much more textural diversity, performing some works *a cappella*, some tutti, and featuring a couple of highly virtuosic solo pieces.

One of the highlights was *Richiami*, performed by **Sansone** on the friscalettu (similar to a recorder). A curious but beautiful piece, it was filled with twisting melismas and chromatic inflections, and was performed with real musicality. Equally lovely was the haunting Persian song *Dastgah Shur*, performed by mezzo **Joorabchi** accompanied by a simple, repetitive percussion part and her own setar playing. Tenor **Bolelli** was featured on several pieces, but none more successfully than *A la Viddanisca*, a Sicilian folk song dedicated to a country girl.

The fireworks of the evening were provided by (surprise) the aforementioned **Tricomi**, who in addition to playing a plethora of instruments is apparently the Jimi Hendrix of mouth harp. *Tarantella per marranzanu*

("Tarantella for mouth harp") had the audience whooping and whistling in awe. I'll never look at a mouth harp the same way again.

An example of just how deeply Sicilian and Middle Eastern folk music is intertwined is *Chiovu Abballati*. Though Sicilians feel this is one of the "most Sicilian" of all folk songs and claim it as their own, the exact same tune is called *Parandoush* in Iran, where it is cherished as a wholly "Persian" song!

Throughout the program **Sansone** stood and offered explanations, translations and humorous anecdotes to the audience in halting English with an accent thicker than two stacked deep-dish pizzas. Though barely discernable, this was nevertheless quite appreciated by audience members; most of whom were neophytes to this repertoire (including yours truly). The audience was invited to join them onstage after the concert, where they fielded questions about the various instruments.

While in no position to critique the "HIP-ness" of their performance or their interpretations of this repertoire, I can say this: I doubt Houghton Chapel often rings with this kind of vigor, energy and rhythm. Tamburos, darabukkas, riqqs and tammureddus were dancing in my head the entire way home.

Lansing McLoskey