

Malhūn Rings Out at Rockin' Lecture

By Nina Milligan, October 2011

For the first time in 17 years the Malhūn was performed in Seattle. Laila Lamrini, acclaimed Malhūn performer of Morocco, sang several Malhūn poems and lectured in her native tongue. Moroccan nationals, Arabic scholars and curious students attended the two-hour long lecture and recital, which played more like a pop concert than a studious event.

Dr. Phillip Schuyler, Associate Professor of Music in the Division of Ethnomusicology at the University of Washington opened the lecture/recital, held on Monday evening at the School of Music Brechemin Auditorium on the University of Washington campus. Schuyler was introduced as the first person to write about the Malhūn in English. Hearty applause thanked Schuyler for his contribution to bridging English and Arabic cultures through his work.

After a brief lecture session, Lamrini was introduced and glided onto stage with the poise of an opera diva. She was dressed in classic western attire with a Middle Eastern flair: black slacks, high heels and a black blouse adorned with golden brocade. Her brown hair swooped down over her shoulders as she stood. Her stature confirmed her introduction as the Malhūn's most famous contemporary singer.

Lamrini took control of the evening's proceedings, alternating between performance and instruction. Spelled Melhun and Malhoun, Malhūn is a poetic construct used to tell a variety of stories: those of love, nature, devotion to the deity, even political satire. The art of the Malhūn developed centuries ago along the trade routes of Morocco and is the most popular music form in Morocco, one that defines the Moroccan culture. It is composed of verses sung by a soloist with refrains that can be sung by a chorus.

Several in the audience responded to Lamrini's lecture segments with nods or chuckles, even before translation. One such attendee was Susan Benson, Lecturer in Near Eastern Languages and Civilization at the University of Washington. She relished the opportunity saying, "It's a rare opportunity [to hear Lamrini]." Benson further explained that "In Arabic this art form is like what Classical music is to Europe."

"In my opinion, I see it as the voice of the heart," says Lamrini through her translator. And with enthusiastic speaking and performance, she poured her heart out to the receptive audience.

The first Malhūn was a ballad, and sounded strangely like a Welsh folk song. Arabic words and the English translation were projected on the screen. Lamrini welcomed her knowledgeable audience to sing the choral refrains while she conducted them by clapping or waving her hands.

The performance progressed through a selection of poems that became increasingly energetic. Lamrini did not dance but added a bounce in her step. The Arabic yodel, ululation, rang out from the rear-left corner of the auditorium, further immersing the audience in the experience.

Unusual for a class-credit lecture, there were cries for an encore, which Lamrini happily delivered to a standing, participatory crowd. It was Morocco without the lengthy flight: A travelogue of Moroccan culture, through songs and stories. If you missed it, just cross your fingers that it won't take another 17 years for this opportunity to come again.