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An Iraqi-American Helps to Keep Soulful Music From Baghdad Alive

By ROBIN SHULMAN

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Correction Appended

When Amir ElSaffar sang his sad, lamenting music at an Arab-American arts center in Lower Manhattan earlier this month, people closed their eyes and mouthed the words. When he stopped, they crowded around and said how he had moved them.



Hiroiyuki Ito for The New York Times
Amir ElSaffar, a jazz and classical trumpeter, singing maqam and playing the santur, a type of dulcimer, at the Alwan for the Arts center.

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Hiroiyuki Ito for The New York Times
The audience at an Arab-American arts center in Lower Manhattan

"I smell the Tigris," one woman at the Alwan for the Arts center said. Others said the music made them smell Iraqi fish, feel Iraqi heat and miss Iraqi family. While his songs took the audience of Iraqi-Americans back to a Baghdad that no longer exists, Mr. ElSaffar is fighting to help make sure that the music does.

The Iraqi maqam - maqam (pronounced ma-KAHM) is the name for a musical genre and also the specific pieces in it - has been played for centuries in Baghdad coffeehouses, homes and mosques. It consists of a repertory of melodies, performed by a singer with an instrumental ensemble, that can be used in improvisations according to specific rules.

But since the 1930's Egyptian and Lebanese radio and later television have weaned Iraqis from homegrown traditions. And during the last 60 years of frequent political turmoil and war, some of the greatest maqam masters, along with other artists, have fled the country. Since the American invasion in March 2003, the fear of violence has kept many remaining musicians from performing and teaching. Today, only one person alive is known to have mastered the full repertory of 56 maqam melodies, Yeheskel Kojaman, an Iraqi musicologist, said in a telephone interview from London. Unesco has identified the Iraqi maqam as an "intangible heritage of humanity" and plans to encourage performances and training.

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listening to maqam, a genre that has been played for centuries in Baghdad.

So when Mr. ElSaffar, an Iraqi-American jazz and classical trumpeter who lives in New York, went to Baghdad in 2002 to learn his ancestral musical tradition, he had trouble finding a maestro who

would take him on. For the last two and a half years he has been traveling in Europe, studying with exiled Iraqi masters. Back in New York since May, he has formed an ensemble to perform maqam music and has taught others to play it with him.

Mr. ElSaffar, 27, does not seem like a natural crusader for Iraqi culture. He was raised in Oak Park, Ill., by an American Christian mother, a professor of Spanish literature, and an Iraqi Shiite Muslim father, a physics professor. Mr. ElSaffar, who says he does not subscribe to any particular religion, learned only a smattering of Arabic and while growing up visited Iraq just once, with his father, in 1993.

But when he won a \$10,000 prize for jazz trumpet in an international competition, he said, he decided to use the money to go to Iraq and learn its music. He added that only when he began to weep at the Baghdad airport did he realize he had been starved to connect with his father's country. In Mr. ElSaffar's first weeks in Baghdad in March 2002, as he listened to a maqam and heard the pain in the singer's voice, he felt something break open inside him, he said. "It sounded like crying to me," he said, a sobbing that became singing and drew him in. He said that he had also felt an intellectual fascination for the improvisation. He learned to play a maqam on his trumpet, and soon found a teacher of joza, a fiddle made from a coconut shell and the heart tissue of a water buffalo. The other instruments in a maqam ensemble are usually the santur, a kind of dulcimer; an Arabic tabla, a goblet-shaped drum; and a riqq, a tambourine.

By June 2002, when Mr. ElSaffar returned to New York to play trumpet with Cecil Taylor, maqam music was influencing his jazz performance and he said he knew he had become obsessed. That fall, he went back to Iraq to continue studying the maqam, and stayed until the end of the year.

He said that a man in Baghdad had said to him: "Why did you come here? Are you crazy? Why don't you just go to London? The only maqam singer left who knows the entire repertory is in London. Find him." He did. For the next three years he traveled through Europe pursuing three great musicians of the maqam tradition. He took the train with a suitcase packed with a dozen maqam books, some 50 tapes, perhaps 75 CD's.

To make money, he got out his trumpet for occasional jazz gigs, and also tapped an inheritance from his mother, who had died. In Munich he went to Baher al-Regeb, among the first to notate the Iraqi maqam, and the son of the maqam musician Hajj Hashem al-Regeb. In a small city in the Netherlands he studied with a maqam singer known by her first name, Farida. But in London he found his maestro in Hamid al-Saadi, the man said to be the only one to know the entire repertory.

The teaching of the maqam is an oral tradition passed from master to student. Systems for transliterating the music in Western musical notation are just as approximate as transliterating Arabic words in English letters. Mr. ElSaffar would record his lesson with Mr. al-Saadi and then rehearse for hours from the recording, singing and playing santur on his own.

Brilliant maqam composers last established new pieces in the repertory in the 1920's, Mr. ElSaffar said. At that time, Jews were the main instrumentalists for

maqam music. When most Jews left Iraq in the early 1950's, the government forced two Jewish musicians to stay behind and train two Muslims in their art, Baher al-Ragab said in a telephone interview from Munich. He said his father was one of the Muslims.

In his own search for musical greats, Mr. ElSaffar contacted musicians in Tel Aviv only to find that the old generation of Iraqi performers had died and no new one had risen in their place.

Today, the mosque is the safest repository for maqam music in Iraq, and variations of it are part of the recitation of the Koran - by both Sunnis and Shiites - including the call to prayer, mourning rituals, and celebrations of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. But Mr. ElSaffar said he hoped that by performing, teaching and researching the maqam he can help the secular tradition of the music to thrive.

"Amir," his teacher, Mr. al-Saadi, said in a telephone interview, "is preserving the true essence of this music."

Correction: July 28, 2005, Thursday:

A picture caption in The Arts yesterday with an article about a musician who is trying to keep an ancient Iraqi musical tradition alive omitted part of the photographer's name. The photographer was Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times.

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