

THE JEWISH CONTRIBUTION TO IRAQI MUSIC

YEHESKEL KOJAMAN

The Jewish community in Iraq liked instrumentalists and treated them with respect for their skills and artistic talents. During the first half of the 20th Century, Jews were virtually the only instrumental players in Iraq. In 1932, for example, all the instrumentalists who attended the first Arabic music congress in Cairo were Jews, while the singer, Mohammed Al-Qebbantchi was Muslim. When Iraq Radio was established in 1936, the entire instrumental ensemble, apart from the percussion player, was Jewish. On Yom Kippur and Tisha Be'Av, the two most solemn days in the Jewish calendar, no live music was broadcast.

Almost all instrumentalists in the nightclubs of Baghdad were Jews. During the late 1920s an instrumental ensemble at a nightclub consisted of violin, qanun (plucked trapezoid zither), oud (middle-eastern lute) and two percussion players. Only in the broadcasting station were cello and nay (flute) introduced.

Singers were Muslims, Jews and Christians. The most famous woman singer from the early 1930s was a Jewish vocalist called Salima Murad. No respectable family would allow their daughter to become a professional singer so women singers were recruited from local brothels. Despite this, Salima Murad was loved and respected. She was asked to sing at numerous private parties where she earned a high fee. She is known to have helped many people financially, and by interceding on their behalf at Government level.

In 1936, an institute was founded for the teaching of instruments, singing and acting, but most of its instrumental classes were for western instruments. However, the school for blind Jewish children, started in the late 1920s to teach skills such as weaving, and the



The band of Baghdad Broadcasting House 1938. Sitting (from right to left): Ibrahim Taqu (cello); Daoud al-Kuwaiti (lute); Mohammed al-Qebbantchi (vocalist); Yousef Za'arour (zither); Husain Abdallah (percussion). Standing: Yacoub Murad al-Emari (flute); Saleh al-Kuwaiti (violin).

making of brushes and cane seats, also provided instrumental lessons and many students became musicians. Later part of the Arabic Music Ensemble Qol Yisrael (Israel Radio) was formed from these blind musicians.

Music which has a known composer, as distinct from folk music, is known as 'Art Music'. In Iraq, there are two traditions of art music. The 'Modern Music' tradition is identical with music sung and played in all other Arab countries. In Iraq the first well-known composer was Ezra Aharon, an oud player. He later became famous as the director of the Arabic Music Ensemble for Israel Radio.

During the 1920s, Salih and Dawud el-Kuwaiti, who played the violin and oud, began to perform and to compose new songs for Salima Murad. It was due to Salih that the cello and nay (flute) were introduced into the Iraq Radio instrumental music ensemble.

The second tradition of 'Art Music' is Iraqi maqam, a composed repertoire of about 60 songs performed by a solo singer accompanied by an instrumental ensemble. They are composed according to a strict set of rules and are usually formed of three sections – the tahrir (introduction), the matan (the text of the poem) and the taslim (conclusion). These songs are transmitted orally and on the whole are sung as the original

composer composed and performed them.

The maqam ensemble, called the chalghi, consists of a santur (struck dulcimer), a kamana-joza (a four-string spike fiddle; body constructed from a coconut shell) and two percussion instruments, the daff (frame drum, with metal discs) and dumbuk (goblet-shaped drum; also known as 'tabla' in Egypt). Maqamat were sometimes sung in

coffee houses but traditionally were performed at family celebrations. At such performances each maqam is followed by a 'pasta'. There are many pastat in the same melodic mode, and the singer may choose any one of them. The pasta gives the audience an interval of light music during which they can clap, accompany the singer and even dance, changing the atmosphere from the very serious attention needed during the singing of the maqam.

Nearly all the Jewish musicians emigrated during 1950-51. In Iraq there were insufficient musicians. The gap was filled initially by graduates of the Institute of Fine Arts and musicians from other Arab countries. Later, many musicians and composers in modern music appeared, and the Institute opened a special branch for teaching maqam.

In Israel, the situation for the Iraqi musicians was difficult. In Iraq they had played for the millions of Iraqi people, but in Israel they found themselves limited to an audience of only tens of thousands – and an audience that is diminishing day by day, because the old are dying and the young are now accustomed to Israeli music. n

An abridged version of the article that appeared in the September 1999 edition of *The Scribe*, courtesy of Mr Naim Dangoor.