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Syrian women's group nurtures Arab musical roots

(Reuters)
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DAMASCUS (Reuters) - Centuries ago, Arab servant girls would serenade the caliph, or ruler, a tradition that Syria's only all-woman classical Arab music ensemble is reviving in modern form -- without the servitude.

"Now it's not for the caliph, it's for everybody," smiled 23-year-old Maya Youssef, the youngest member of a talented quintet known as the Syrian Female Oriental Group.

The bare classroom where the women practice at Damascus's Higher Institute of Music is a far cry from a caliph's palace.

But the haunting strains and subtle rhythms they conjure up can make a listener with eyes closed feel like a medieval prince in Andalusia, Spain, where Arab classical music reached its golden age during centuries of Muslim rule from 711 to 1492.

A master musician nicknamed Ziryab, or blackbird, moved to Andalusia in the 9th century and pioneered a school of music combining Arab, Greek and Persian elements that influenced European classical music as well as the Arab tradition.

"Ziryab was the most famous but we also play music by modern composers, as long as it is in the old forms," said Youssef, in red trousers and with her curly black hair tied back as she plucked her qanoun, a stringed instrument resembling a zither.

She and her friends in the close-knit group are out to win hearts, break stereotypes -- and have fun.

"We play this bit together, tutti, tutti frutti," commanded ensemble leader Wafaa Safar, 40, eyes twinkling under her headscarf while she trilled the theme on her reed pipe.

With the rehearsal picking up pace, Youssef needed time out to keep her qanoun in tune. "Hey, I've got 78 strings, they never let me catch up," she wailed in mock despair.

The women, all in their 20s apart from Safar, have performed in Europe, China and Dubai since they got together in 2003. But the initial reaction in their Syrian homeland was negative.

"People underestimated us," Youssef said. "They thought women were only interested in their looks or in cooking, but now after four years we have proved ourselves as musicians."

The group is also keen to dispel Western notions that Syrian women are all heavily veiled, repressed and unhappy.

"When we played in Italy, people were surprised that we look normal, like everyone else," said Khisab Khaled, 27, who plays the riq, a kind of tambourine. "We are still better known in Europe than in Syria. We dream of being more famous here."

The five women are trying to reach new audiences for an ancient Arab art form that often seems swamped by the Lebanese, Egyptian and Western pop music beloved by young Syrians.

"People say it's dull, but there's a lot of beautiful oriental classical music," Youssef said. "We are shedding light on this kind of music and they are loving it, even the young."

Violinist Razan Kassar said the intimacy of the quintet set it apart from the orchestras she also plays in. "It's very small so we can work and get along with each other much better."

Two similar women's ensembles exist in Egypt and Tunisia, but the Syrian group knows of no others in the Arab world.

For want of cash, they have not yet recorded their music. All the group's members

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have other jobs to make ends meet.

"It's very expensive to make a CD and we have been searching for sponsors for a year," said Youssef.

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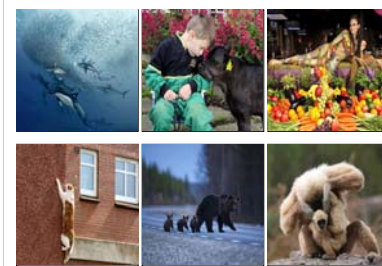
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