

Girl Power goes Oriental

A new Syrian oriental female music group is set to take the world by storm. Interview by Peter Hall

Not since The Go-Go's in the 1980s and the Spice Girls a decade later has a quintet (or I should say quintette) of women created such a buzz among Syria's music aficionados.

Lebanese 'habibi' pop may have invaded the mainstream and spread its catchy jingles through Syrian restaurants, bars and clubs, but traditional Arabic music is by no means dead. And at the vanguard of this revival are five glamorous musicians who are more likely to be spotted practicing at Damascus' Higher Institute of Music than cavorting around the coast in

skimpy dresses. Their selling point: they are Syria's first modern female classical music group and they peddle music, not sex.

The Syrian Female Oriental Group was the brainchild of Nabeil Allaow, the director of al-Assad House of Culture and Arts, who wanted to breathe new life into the local music scene. When he met the ensemble of five young, professionally-trained women in 2003 he spotted the perfect opportunity.

"Originally it was our idea to form a group, but Nabeil



helped us to go to Holland for our first concert and he helped create a buzz around us," says Maya Youssef, 22, who plays the Qanun - a kind of dulcimer, which descends from the old Egyptian harp and means 'rule' or 'law.'

It was a fortuitous encounter. In their four years together they have entertained President Bashar al-Assad and Queen Rania of Jordan and travelled to China, Germany, Holland and Greece. Their next mission is to wow the Italian cognoscenti during five 90-minute performances as part of a four-day European music festival in March.

"All over the world people appreciate our music because it is so different and interesting," says Khisab Khaled, 26, who plays the Riq - a special tambourine. "We are a celebration of several factors because we play this oriental music, which is forgotten, and secondly we are all women. There is a negative idea about women in the Middle East - that we are all repressed. We show people this view is wrong and that we can do things that are traditionally for men."

While the group enjoy the honour of entertaining royalty and dignitaries, they are



quick to stress their girl power credentials over the persisting image of the qiyah - a group of female singers and servants who had to amuse the existing Caliph. But, thankfully, we do not have to fear an incursion of ginger hair, karate kicks and pouting into the Syrian social fabric. "There is no problem comparing us to the Spice Girls, but as soon as you talk about details I think people will realise we're not very similar," says Maya, laughing.

When I meet the group at the Higher Institute for Music and Theatre next to the Opera House in Damascus I am

treated to a preview of their Italian programme, including a rhapsodic Umm Kulthum song that leaves me trembling in awe. Classical Oriental Music is widespread throughout the Middle East, but only a handful of similar female groups exist in countries like Tunisia and Egypt.

Wafaa Safar, 39, who plays the Nai - a single reed pipe which has six holes in the front for the fingers to play and one hole underneath for the thumb - says the lack of financial support restricts groups like them. "We have a big problem with funding in Syria. People who earn their

living through art are a new concept. When you graduate from the music schools the common question is 'what will you become?'" she says.

Wafaa teaches music outside the group; while Wa'ad Bouhassoun, 27, who plays the Oud - a wooden pear-shaped, stringed instrument similar to a guitar - is also a teacher and a singer; Khisab plays in the symphony orchestra and a separate female orchestra along with Razan Kassab, 24, who is a violinist; and Maya combines teaching with finishing her studies. In the end they admit they are doing what they love

and they know it will not earn them a fortune.

So where did they learn to play Oriental music? The women say there are no instruments for children in schools; instead students learn the basic notes and how to sing. "My father taught me music when I was nine years old," says Wa'ad, and Wafaa's father was a famous soloist nai player, so music runs deep in her family.

But the idea that children are restricted from learning this type of music or that the instruments are the preserve of the wealthy is quickly shot down. "That is not the case!" says Khisab. "If you want to learn a musical instrument you have to go to the institutes but they are not expensive. You can borrow the instruments."

Part of the women's appeal is that they dispel the perception of elitism in this traditional musical arena. They cite hard work for getting them where they are (they meet three times a week and practice together everyday in the run up to a concert) and drumming up enthusiasm among the young and women, in particular, is their central goal. "Yes, it is great to be the only band like us, but we have worked hard to prove ourselves," says Razan. "We want to encourage more women to join groups and the young are also beginning to show interest in this type of music. We hope this is part of our message."

As our interview comes to an end Maya explains the appeal of classical oriental music, saying: "lots of other music is about using your hips, but this music is played from your head and heart." Judging by the group's determination, they will spread their message far and wide.