BOSTON UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY'S WEEKLY NEWSPAPER
B.U. Bridge
Week of 21 March 2003· Vol. VI, No. 25 www.bu.edu/bridge

DON'T MISS
The Colonel John W. Pershing Annual Military History Lecture, Wednesday, March 26, 4 p.m., SMG Auditorium

Arts

The beat of a different drum

By Tim Stoddard

Astride a camel in Taif, in the highlands of Saudi Arabia, Urkevich could feel the syncopated rhythm of the camel's gait.

To western ears, the diverse musical traditions of the Arab world are often lumped together under a single category. But to **Lisa Urkevich**, a CFA assistant professor of ethnomusicology, Arabic music from different regions is as distinctive as bluegrass and Bach. On March 18, Urkevich gave a talk at the Food for Thought luncheon series in Marsh Chapel that focused on the rhythmic and tonal differences in music from different parts of the Arab world. "Gulf music is very different from what you'll hear in Egypt," she said. "In the Gulf, music was traditionally communal, with big group performances, while choral and group singing never really caught on in northern countries. And the Gulf really uses unique polyrhythms — they emphasize the camel beat, more so than you'll hear in the north."

Indeed, Arab rhythms are intimately linked to dromedary camels. When Urkevich was living in Saudi Arabia, it dawned on her that the unfamiliar rhythms she was hearing in the music and feeling in the dances closely matched the asymmetrical gait of the camels. "A lot of the rhythm, I believe, is based around the camel," she said. "The pattern of a camel's gait is a little bit irregular. Some people say it drags its front foot, and so the rhythmic structure is somewhat asymmetrical, whereas here in the West it's much more symmetrical." There are also legends, she said, that a camel can go for days with no food or water as long as someone sits on its back playing a drum to the irregular beat of the animal's gait.

Urkevich also discussed the different melodic structures of Arabic music. Since the Baroque era, she said, western ears have grown accustomed to a "well-tempered" 12-tone scale. "Our music uses whole and half steps, while Arabic music uses quarter steps and even smaller intervals," she said. "It's microtonal, which often sounds out of tune to western ears when actually it's not. That's the way our music used to be at one time."

While living in Saudi Arabia, Lisa Urkevich heard the camel's irregular hoofbeats in the rhythms of traditional music and dance. Veiled in abaya, the cloak and head scarf worn by most Saudi women, Urkevich stands before several ambling camels. Photo by Steven Skaggs

Studying ethnomusicology in Saudi Arabia was a challenge for Urkevich, because music is officially considered haram, or forbidden, to women in that country. "When I was in Saudi Arabia," she said, "women couldn't really enter record or CD shops. There was a little hole in the window where you could sometimes try to go up and quickly buy your cassette. Music wasn't something that people talked about freely or regularly." Even so, women often perform in musical ensembles at weddings, and in other settings. "There was a lot of music making going on," she said, "just sort of behind the scenes."

CFA seminars tune in to musicality