

# What's On

## Dar Al Athar

### Traces musical traditions and popular instruments

# Dr Urkevich explores Soundscapes of the Hijaz

**By Chaitali B. Roy**

Special to the Arab Times

On Monday, Dec 12, Dar Al Athar Al Islamiyyah presented a much awaited speaker of their 17th Cultural Season, Dr Lisa Urkevich at the Al Maidan Cultural Centre at 7 pm. The lecture was moderated by Bader Ahmed al-Baijan, chairman of the Friends of the Dar Committee.

Dr Urkevich is a popular speaker Her presentations are not just dry scholarly observations, but a large slice of life liberally topped with music and dance, reflecting the scholar's close association and appreciation of the people and culture she has lived with and researched since 1994.

On Monday evening Dr Lisa Urkevich gave an informative presentation on the Traditional Music of Western Saudi Arabia in a lecture titled 'Soundscapes of the Hijaz'.

#### Preserving

An associate professor of musicology/ethnomusicology at the American University of Kuwait, Dr Urkevich is the founder and former Director of the Arabian Heritage Project, a research and outreach center dedicated to promoting and preserving the folk traditions of the Peninsula.

She holds four US degrees, and before coming to Kuwait, she was a

professor at Boston University where she taught music in the Islamic world. Currently, she is with the Museum of Musical Instruments in Arizona as their Peninsula research specialist and is working on a comprehensive book on the music of Arabia.

Dr Urkevich spent many years in various regions of Saudi Arabia including Taif, Khamis Mushayt, Riyadh, Najran, Baha, Wadi da Wasir, Jizan, and Jeddah to advance her research. She also has extensive experience in the Gulf States and has interviewed and recorded traditional groups in Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates.

She is highly involved with the investigation and analysis of the musical heritage of Kuwait, a country which owes her a lot for her research into the seafaring musical traditions of the Gulf, an art form dying a slow death. "She has also proved that sawt was a particular musical form that was indigenous to Kuwait," added Bader Al Baijan in his introduction.

"The Hijaz, which means "barrier", is the northwestern mountain range of Saudi Arabia that spans an extensive area along the Red Sea coast, from Jordan to the southern Asir. This dissected highland separates the narrow Red Sea lowland from the interior desert region of Riyadh, that is, the Najd.

The Hijaz is the home of Makkah and

Medina, the birthplace of Islam, but even in pre-Islamic times, the region was important as a pilgrimage and trade center. The major port city of Jeddah, which is the traditional entry point for Hajji pilgrims and the primary shipping harbor of the region, plays a dominant role in the Hijaz, as do the economically substantial cities of Ta'if and Yenba.

Taif, an important ancient mountain municipality and market is well known for its cool temperature and "refreshing air and gardens". It was the summer home of the first Saudi King, Abdulaziz, ibn Saud. Yanba, the main port of Medinah along the Red Sea with a well-protected deep harbor, is now a major petrochemical city," said Dr Urkevich when questioned about the area that comes within the Hijaz. Despite the absence of her trademark live performances which take the form of lecture demonstrations, her presentation on Monday explored musically and historically the variety of musical forms in Western Saudi Arabia, putting them all in perspective.

#### Influences

The folk music of Saudi Arabia has been shaped by the nomadic Bedouins and the pilgrims who brought musical influences from around the world. The music varies from region to region - for example, in the Hijaz, the music of al-sihba combines poetry and songs of



Dr Lisa Urkevich

Arab Andalusia, while the folk music of Makkah and Madinah reflects these two cities' influences from throughout the Islamic world.

The western port cities of Saudi Arabia was a melting pot of cultures, due to its proximity to the sea and to the pilgrim sites of Makkah and Medina. "Apart from trading in commodities, these cities were also known for slave trade." The music of the Hijaz therefore saw many influences. "The Hijaz is a huge, ancient area, so the music is very

diverse and colorful. It is some of the richest music in all of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," observed Dr Urkevich. "It is believed that the Hijaz scale is named after the Hijaz region. Therefore, many think it came from there. It is a very famous scale found throughout all Middle Eastern Music. Variations of it are also popular in Western Music."

In her introductory observations, Dr Urkevich made reference to the Ottoman Mehter, the oldest military music band in the world used as an element of the shock troop treatment by the Janissary soldiers. "All military bands around the world come from this concept of Ottoman Mehter." Many elements of Mehter music influenced the music of the region against a backdrop of political tumult that involved the Wahabis, Ottomans and the Saudis.

"Because the Hijaz is so old, it is difficult to say whether some other culture influenced the Hijaz or whether the Hijaz influenced other cultures. But indeed, one can find musical elements or characteristics that are shared between Hijazi music and other music," noted Dr Urkevich.

#### Performance

Her presentation was interspersed with music bites that helped emphasize her points and made up for the live performance her audience is used to. She

took the audience through Al Bahaa, Jiddah, Yanbu, Taif pointing out the different musical traditions and popular instruments and their use. The simsimyah, noted Dr Urkevich is popular in the western sea coast town of Yanbu. It is a harp like lyre also common in coastal areas of East Africa and Egypt. It was inevitable that neighboring cultures shared musical traditions.

The surnai, a double reed wind instrument and other types of African drums found their way into Saudi and Gulf music. Interestingly the surnai is also similar in name and structure to the Indian instrument 'shehnai' which is used in classical music.

Dana, a popular musical form in Saudi Arabia has its counterpart in Kuwait. The dances she showed were different from that of the Gulf not only in their costumes but also in the movements. She ended the presentation with a reference to women musical in the Hijaz. "Women in the Hijaz have long been active in music and many of them like men are often descendants of long ago travelers. The great singer Ibtisam Lotfi who sang in the 1980s is the only singer to have her voice professionally recorded in Saudi Arabia. Her ancestors are from the Berq people of Central Asia." She also mentioned Tuha one of Jeddah's most famous wedding singers and ud players whom she interviewed in the course of her research.