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Music for One World: Moroccan Musical Experience of Diversity, Fusion, Happiness, Healing, and Peace

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Abstract

Although steeped in Islamic religion and culture, Morocco is a land of varying influences and histories, including those of the native Berbers, the Moors and Jews driven out of Spain, those who follow the pious Sufi culture of Islamic spiritualism, and the Gnawa slaves who were brought into southern Morocco by Arabs. The music, customs, values, and everyday lives of these disparate peoples continue to not only blend with each other's but also to fuse Moroccan music and culture with those of Europe, Africa, and America. The influence of Moroccan music continues to play a vital role in shaping contemporary music, especially in the study of rhythm. Music that was once heard by voices, flutes, oboes, strings, bagpipes, auxiliary percussion, and drums—symbolic of Moroccan cultural identity—may now be heard on electric guitars, keyboards, and amplified voices in popular and modern music styles that reflect Morocco's continuing efforts to be active players in the international community.

Keywords: Berber music, Andalous music, Gnawa music, Sephardim music, Sufism music, Sha'abi music, and Moroccan fusion music

Introduction

The music of Morocco is a rich and poignant reflection of its political history, diverse culture, and assimilation of world practices. Steeped in the highest reverence for the Islamic faith, the instruments, music, and performance practices of Morocco offer unparalleled insight into the daily lives, both past and present, of its people and, perhaps more importantly, into a spiritual world of color, texture, and purpose that evoke the very core of the human experience. To understand Moroccan music is to understand the world.

Moroccan folk music stems from the importance and profound esteem of poetry in Islamic society. Islamic music was transmitted by ear, opening the music up to interpretation based on a particular region, the influences of religions and cultures, and other permutations over time. Musical training in Morocco was individual, based on a master-pupil relationship that begins on a formal basis, but that eventually turns into an almost paternal relationship. In performance, though, the musician is free to demonstrate his or her creativity and imagination, using ornamentation and variation. [1] Moroccan contemporary music, on the other hand, reflects not only a culturally diverse society but, as important, reverence for the past, engagement in the present, and vision for the future.

Berber Music

Living in the Atlas Mountains, the Berbers incorporate music and poetry into their everyday lives, including bread songs, weaving songs, and roofing or plowing songs. In their village music, an entire community may come together in the open air to sing and dance in a large ring around an ensemble of drums and flutes. [2]

The Aït Bou Guemmez is a Chleuh, or Berber, group who lives in the highest valley of the High Atlas Mountains and performs a whirling dance called A'hidous, led by the double clarinet of the boughanim, an emblematic figure associated with pre-Islam, who also plays the 'awwada, a short flute held obliquely. The vocal music ranges from solo improvisations celebrating the beauty of nature to work songs by female ensembles and mixed choruses playing large frame drums to accompany dances. The Berbers from the Middle Atlas Mountains sing in a powerful voice, sometimes alternating between dialectical Arabic and the Berber language. The music is always accompanied by drums, a reed pipe, the ghaita (oboe, played using circular breathing), and a three- or four-stringed lute, the lotar. [3] Riwals are Berber musicians from the Sous Valley who perform ancient musical theatre involving poetry, fine clothes, and jewels. Haouzia music, sung in Arabic, is from the Marrakesh region, the plain to the north of the Grand Atlas Mountains, and uses violin, not a Berber instrument. Aissawa is a religious sect that originated in Meknes in the 17th century and whose music is heard throughout northern Morocco. Their patron, Sidi Aissa, renders them immune from physical danger; thus, all of the snake charmers in Marrakesh are Aissawa. [4]

Andalous Music

Arab-Andalusian music, with its classical tradition dating back to Spain, can be heard in the Moroccan centers of Rabat and Oujda. [5] Andalous music, unlike Moroccan popular music that is viewed as being low class, [6] is performed on television and is closely connected to old centers of learning, trade, government, and urbanity. [7]

Since the 1800s, the cities of Rabat and Oujda have cultivated another type of Arab-Andalusian repertory, at-tarab al-Gharnâti, as a tribute to the city of Granada that was the last Arab bastion of Andalusia. This Arab-Andalusian music can still be heard in the Moroccan centers of Rabat and Oujda, but it is played primarily in Algeria as part of the Tiemcen tradition, spread by Moroccan Jews who, until the 17th century, were fleeing Spain. [8]

Andalusian music requires memory of poetry and song, providing Moroccans with images with which to play. [9] In the performance of this music, the musical

authority is called a shaykh, and a mūlū' is a devotee of the repertoire. They serve in a master-apprentice relationship that consists only of men. The repertoire requires knowledge of particular works and modes, educated audiences to understand the music, and musicians capable of performing this complex repertoire. [10]

Gnawa Music

Based on Muslim piety and African heritage, Gnawa music is heard in the streets, festivals, cafes, and nightclubs and is used to cleanse a person of bad.na, a Medieval entertainment center in Marrakesh with storytellers, snake charmers, acrobats, animal trainers, magicians, and musicians, Gnawa can be seen leaping high in the air with frenetic head movements and twirling tassel to the accompaniment of metal castanets (qaraqeb) and large drums (tbel) worn over the shoulder.

A shuwafa, or healer, along with musicians performing songs on the sintir, a three-stringed, skin-faced Gnawi lute, and percussion, lead people into a state of trance for spiritual healing. [11] With colorful clothes and incense that identify each group of spirits, the participants gather outside the house where the ceremony is to be held, and the drums and qaraqub announce to the neighbors and spirits that the ritual is about to begin. The participants go back into the house in a candlelight procession lead by the m'allam, or lead musician, and the ensemble, or drari. The m'allam takes up the sintir and plays a series of songs with the group to bless the robes that are to be worn while the rest of the participants share dates and milk. The saints and spirits each have their own tune, and the music summons them. Spices, incense, and dance also help to hasten a state of trance. Dances can include cutting one's arm, drinking boiling water, covering oneself with dripping candle wax, eating raw eggs or meat, or holding a Qur'an using prayer beads and chanting. [12] The complete ceremony can last from 9 or 10 p.m. until well past dawn, at which time the musicians play lighter music to return the participants to the everyday world. [13]

Originating around the Casablanca area, Marsawiyya is a Gnawa style of popular music with upbeat dance songs. Although this music was considered rare, austere, and secretive, today's festivals are loud, public, celebratory, and expensive. They demonstrate tolerance, cooperation, diversity, and fusion while also invoking a sense of nostalgia, and Gnawa musicians can now make a living from their talent and experience. [14]

Sephardim Music

This music refers to the Jews living in Spain and Portugal who were forced to leave Spain in 1492 during the Spanish Inquisition. Many migrated to northern Africa,

and their music can reflect both that of their Spanish homeland and the country in which they settled. [15] Sultan Muhammad V refused to round up Morocco's quarter of a million Jews as demanded by the French government when it was under Nazi occupation, although the Jews lost social standing during this period. [16] After 1947, Morocco's Jews began a large exodus to Israel and the West. The Six-Day War of 1967 drew away most of the remaining Jews, ending the history of Morocco being the most tolerant of Muslim societies. [17]

Sufism Music

Sufism highlights the interaction of music and movement or dance that brings one into the spiritual world and makes present the spiritually powerful ancestors. An integral part of daily life in Morocco, Sufi music is liturgical music, [18] and is played in all celebrations, including birth, circumcision, weddings, and religious feasts. [19] It embraces the thought that life is an engagement with the forces of evil and that how one comes out of this has ramifications on one's future. [20]

Chanting is a transformative, integrative act. The chanter is the master of the ritual process, and there is a clear preference for the male voice to deliver the spiritual message. The zuhd (ascetic) strain of Sufi music consists of deliberate weeping and overt, a personal condemnation that remembers the soul, the situation of the individual, and his or her awareness of the distance from God. Wine is an icon of the Sufis' spiritual endeavor, and wines are ranked according to the stages of the mystical experience. [21]

Diwan repertoire is devotional music, based on poems, that is performed during a ceremony or meeting. In the Islamic Sufi tradition, the diwan is usually a philosophical or musical symposium that can be sacred or secular and allows the performers to add their regional style to make the performance unique. [22]

Dance Music

Guedra, or bowl, comes from the tradition of passing around a large milk bowl, the center of Saharan social gatherings. The bowl is turned over and used as a percussion instrument, representing hospitality and sharing. Women dress in dark, often indigo, robes, and are known for their intricate hand dances and upper forearm motions to portray stories, customs, and daily life. [23] Aachora, of the Haha Tribe, is an Islamic festival celebrating the Muslim New Year and commemorates the final reconciliation of the warring tribes, the Haha and the Chiadma. [24] Jebala music comes from the Jebala Mountains. The toqtoqa Jebalia is a popular form of Jebala music, consists of a song as a prelude, and finishes with a dance that accelerates to the end and changes key. The words are improvised, like scat singing. [25]

L'Asri Music

L'Asri, or modern music, gained popular acceptance in the 20th century and was heard in films and on the radio. It does not fit into the category of classical or folk song, for composers borrow music from the classical and folk repertoires and instruments and from other Middle Eastern countries or the West. [26]

Sha'abi Music

Popular music, called sha'abi, can have a variety of forms and does not belong to a particular group of people. As with modern music, popular music uses modes, quartertones, and poetry in Moroccan Arabic dialect but is usually strophic, lighter, and uses language of the streets. [27] Sha'abi never enjoyed mass appeal with youth, as did raï. [28]

Rai, Rap, Rock, and Festivals

Rai began in Algeria in the 1920s and focused on social issues such as disease and colonial occupation. Typical instruments used are electric guitars, drums, and keyboard instruments. [29] Hip-hop and heavy metal have also become popular, as have Moroccan rap groups. Rap groups and their hits include Lbenj (Anti), 7ari (Amigos), 7liwa feat 3robi (NARI), Amill Leonardo feat Toto (Marocchino), and Shayfeen (For the Love). Popular music festivals in Morocco include Oasis Festival (Marrakesh), Beat Hotel (Marrakesh), Mawazine (Rabat), MOGA Festival (Essaouira), MORE Festival (Marrakesh), Jazzablanca (Casablanca), Gnaoua (Essaouira), and Atlas Electronic (Marrakesh). [30] Clearly, Morocco continues to evolve, reflecting the social issues of the time through popular performance mediums and large-scale venues.

Fusion Music

Fusion music cleverly combines technical artistry and musical styles, such as jazz, rock, popular, and folk, in addressing larger social issues that resonate musically with artists of all styles and within all socio-economic layers of society. Influenced by artists such as Jimi Hendrix, Santana, Dire Straits, and Bob Marley, Moroccan music soon had Western touch when singing of society and politics issues. [31] The band that defined the hopes and thoughts of the Moroccan people after their independence from France in 1956 was Nass el-Ghiwane and its most celebrated founder and song composer, Larbi Batma. Formed in the 1960s by four young men from a working-class shanty area of Casablanca, Nass el-Ghiwane represented a part of Moroccan society that supported trade unions and political parties and demonstrated strong resistance against colonialism, rising up against authority, oppression, and manipulation. [32]

Summary

Although steeped in Islamic religion and culture, Morocco is a land of varying influences and histories, including those of the native Berbers, the Moors and Jews driven out of Spain, those who follow the pious Sufi culture of Islamic spiritualism, and the Gnawa slaves who were brought into southern Morocco by Arabs. The music, customs, values, and everyday lives of these disparate peoples continue to not only blend with each other's but also to fuse Moroccan music and culture with those of Europe, Africa, and America. The influence of Moroccan music continues to play a vital role in shaping contemporary music, especially in the study of rhythm. Music that was once heard by voices, flutes, oboes, strings, bagpipes, auxiliary percussion, and drums—symbolic of Moroccan cultural identity—may now be heard on electric guitars, keyboards, and amplified voices in popular and modern music styles that reflect Morocco's continuing efforts to be active players in the international community.

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