

# Arabesque

Music Ensemble



Presents...

## Al-Fursan at-Talatha The Three Musketeers

Zakariyya Ahmad - Muhammad al-Qasabji - Riyad al-Sumbati  
(1892-1962) - (1892-1966) - (1906-1981)

## الفرسان الثلاثة

زكريا أحمد - محمد القصبجي - رياض السنباطي  
(1982-1906) (1966-1892) (1966-1892)

For information:  
[www.arabesquemusicensemble.com](http://www.arabesquemusicensemble.com)

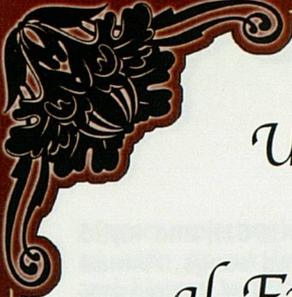
# Program

Sama'i Bayyati<sup>1</sup>  
'Ala Balad il-Mahbub<sup>2</sup>  
Ana f-Intizarak<sup>3</sup>  
Introduction to "Ya Nasini"<sup>4</sup>  
Madam Teheb Betenker leh<sup>5</sup>  
Nourek Ya Sit il-Kul<sup>6</sup>

## Intermission

Habib Yis'ed Awqatu<sup>7</sup>  
Leh Tilaw'ini<sup>8</sup>  
Ya Salat ez-Zine<sup>9</sup>  
Ha Ablu Bukrah<sup>10</sup>  
Ghannili Shewayya Shewayya<sup>11</sup>

- 1 composed, transcribed & arranged by Youssef Kassab  
2, 4, 10 composed by Riyad al-Sunbati  
3, 7, 9, 11 composed by Zakariyya Ahmad  
5, 6, 8 composed by Muhammad al-Qasabji  
2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10 transcribed & arranged by Kareem Roustom  
3, 11 transcribed & arranged by Youssef Kassab

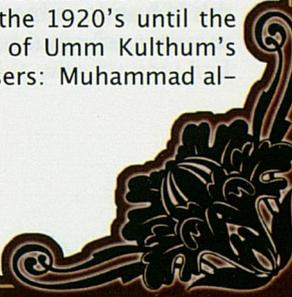
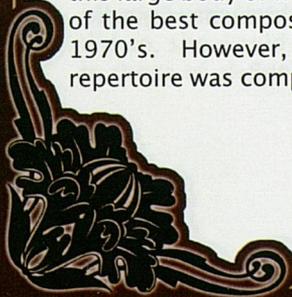


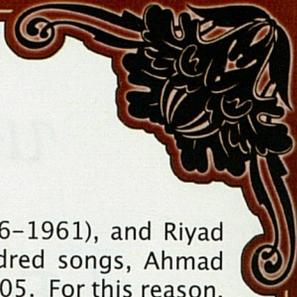
# Umm Kulthum & *al-Fursan at-Talatha*

The great Egyptian vocalist, Umm Kulthum (1902–1975) was arguably the most important musician and musical persona of the Arab world in the twentieth century. Umm Kulthum's songs were (and still are) a rich thread in the varied and colorful Arab cultural tapestry. In Egypt and throughout the Arab world, it seemed that everyone stopped to listen when Umm Kulthum presented a new song in her monthly radio, and in later years, television broadcasts. After her death, Umm Kulthum came to be seen as a national treasure as important and valued as one of the great pyramids. She was one of those rare people whose talents and persona reached well beyond her cultural and temporal locale. Numerous Western newspapers, magazines, and journals, including *Life* magazine, wrote about her, and she earned the respect and admiration of musicians worldwide, including such icons as Bob Dylan.

Yet Umm Kulthum was more than just a rare vocal talent. She was a no-nonsense businesswoman with a formidable personality who masterfully navigated her way through the Egyptian music and film industries and rose from humble rural origins to the pinnacle of Egyptian and Arab society. Her profound talents lay not only in her vocal abilities but also in sensing great talents and in surrounding herself with such people. This was particularly true when it came to choosing a composer from whom she sought new compositions.

Umm Kulthum left behind a large recorded catalogue of over three hundred songs that were composed specifically for her. To produce this large body of work, Umm Kulthum sought the talents of thirteen of the best composers that were active from the 1920's until the 1970's. However, more than three quarters of Umm Kulthum's repertoire was composed by only three composers: Muhammad al-



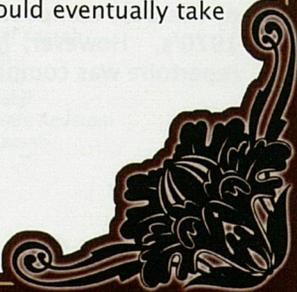
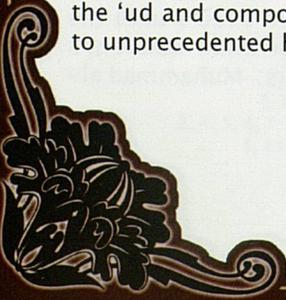


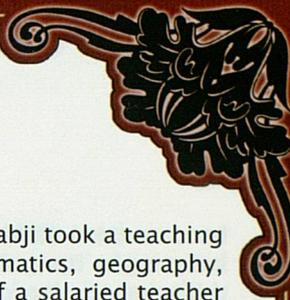
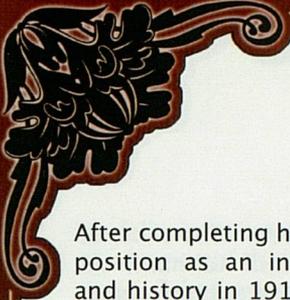
Qasabji (1892–1966), Zakariyya Ahmad (1896–1961), and Riyadh al-Sunbati (1906–1981). Of the three hundred songs, Ahmad composed 57, al-Qasabji 69, and al-Sunbati 105. For this reason, the Lebanese musicologist and journalist Victor Sahaab referred to these three composers as al-fursan al-talatha (the three knights or musketeers) to Umm Kulthum.

This concert program and CD recording by the Arabesque Music Ensemble takes its inspiration from Sahaab's observation and draws its repertoire from Umm Kulthum's greatest period: the 1930's and 1940's. This was an era when the film, radio, and recording industries in Egypt were very active in the Arab world's cultural and artistic center: Cairo. It was an era when Umm Kulthum was one of the leading cinema and radio stars and commanded a large following. It was also a time when the artistic outputs of al-Qasabji, Ahmad, and al-Sunbati intersected while all three of them were actively composing what would become some of Umm Kulthum's most memorable songs.

### **Muhammad al-Qasabji (1892 - 1966)**

Born into a musical household, his father was a respected 'ud player and composer whose songs were performed by some of the top performers of his day, including Ahmad al-Sunbati, father of Riyadh al-Sunbati. The passion for music was instilled early in the young al-Qasabji, but both his parents insisted on a formal education for their son. While his mother wished her son to learn French and English, his father insisted on the traditional Qur'an-based primary education. As a reward for memorizing the Qur'an, al-Qasabji's father took him to musical performances and, eventually, began teaching him the 'ud and music theory. Following in his father's footsteps, Muhammad al-Qasabji pursued the 'ud and composition, both of which he would eventually take to unprecedented heights.

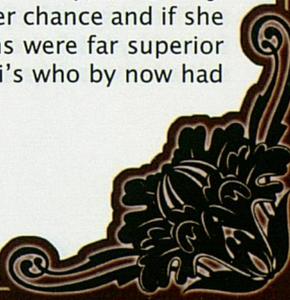
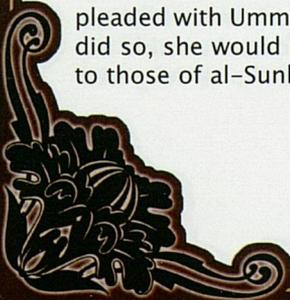


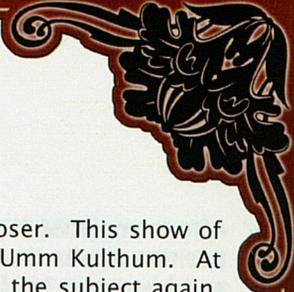
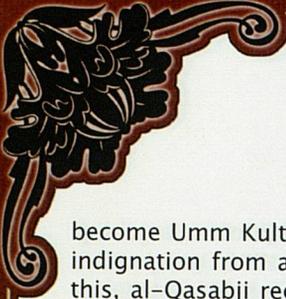


After completing his formal education, al-Qasabji took a teaching position as an instructor of Arabic, mathematics, geography, and history in 1915. Having found the life of a salaried teacher unfulfilling, he left this position to pursue music full-time. In Cairo, he became an in-demand composer and teacher of music. Some of his students were highly talented musicians such as Muhammad Abdel Wahab, Asmahan, Leila Murad, Su'ad Mohammed, and others who would become some of the most accomplished Arab performers of the 20th century. However, his most famous student by far was Umm Kulthum. In the 1920's, he began a working relationship with her that lasted until his death in 1966.

The collaboration between al-Qasabji and Umm Kulthum was a very fruitful one. He wrote a number of hits for her between the 1920's and 1948, including the 1927 song "In Kunt Asameh wa Ansa al-asiya," which sold 250,000 copies. He is credited with having introduced new metric cycles to Arabic music, virtuosic melodic lines, and innovative orchestration which at times included harmony and polyphony. He is also credited with introducing the concept of a fixed melodic line, moving away from the older and more extemporaneous style of singing. His music had a romantic sentiment to it; and the demands that his innovations placed on musicians aided in raising the level of musicianship during his lifetime. His overall output neared 400 songs and a handful of instrumental compositions.

Although al-Qasabji played 'ud in Umm Kulthum's orchestra from the 1920's until his death, she stopped singing his music after her 1948 film Fatma. Despite her waning interest in his songs, she still encouraged him to present her with new material. Al-Qasabji's frustration came to a head in 1955, when on tour with Umm Kulthum in Beirut and Damascus. Apparently, al-Qasabji pleaded with Umm Kulthum to give him another chance and if she did so, she would realize that his compositions were far superior to those of al-Sunbati, a protégé of al-Qasabji's who by now had

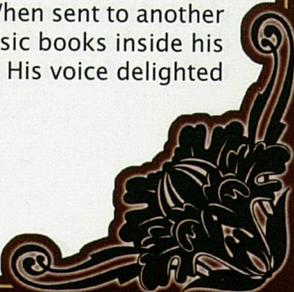
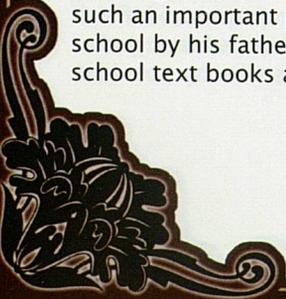


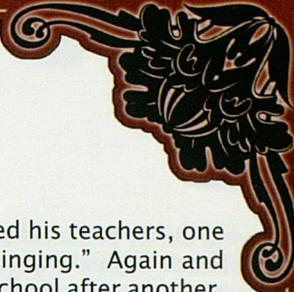
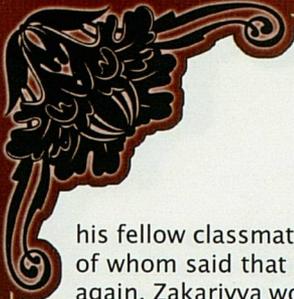


become Umm Kulthum's most favored composer. This show of indignation from al-Qasabji greatly angered Umm Kulthum. At this, al-Qasabji recanted and never broached the subject again. Despite this tension, al-Qasabji remained Umm Kulthum's 'ud player for the remainder of his life and continued to perform songs by other composers, including those of al-Sunbati. As a testament to her fondness of and respect for al-Qasabji, Umm Kulthum did not fill the vacant 'ud seat he left behind after his death. She remained without an 'ud player in her orchestra for four years. During this period, the orchestra appeared on stage behind the great singer with an empty chair placed where al-Qasabji sat for nearly forty years. Near the end of her life, Umm Kulthum stated that al-Qasabji was "a musician who was ahead of his time."

#### **Zakariyya Ahmad (1896 - 1961)**

Although not a musician, Zakariyya's father, Ahmad Saqr, was a great admirer of traditional Arabic music, and his mother sang Turkish songs. Like al-Qasabji and al-Sunbati and most children of their generation, Zakariyya Ahmad began his formal education at the age of four at the kuttab (the traditional elementary school with roots in the Medieval Islamic educational system and whose foundation was religious in nature and basis). Although young Zakariyya was a capable student, he was eventually expelled from the kuttab after biting a sheikh (religious teacher) who hit him. Zakariyya was then sent to Al-Azhar, where he studied for a further seven years until he was expelled at the age of thirteen for hitting a sheikh in an act of rebellion. So Zakariyya spent his time seeking out and listening with great zeal to the finest Qur'anic reciters of his day, and also spent his time attending and listening to the music at the Mawalid (religious festivals) that were such an important part of Cairo's social life. When sent to another school by his father, Zakariyya would hide music books inside his school text books and would constantly sing. His voice delighted



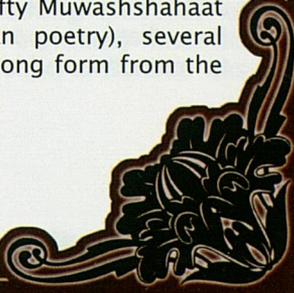
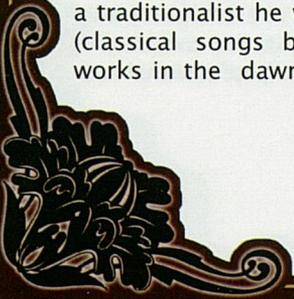


his fellow classmates but irritated and dismayed his teachers, one of whom said that Zakariyya was “crazed for singing.” Again and again, Zakariyya would be expelled from one school after another. His passion for music was so great that he shirked his studies and eventually caused a serious rift with his strict and somewhat harsh father.

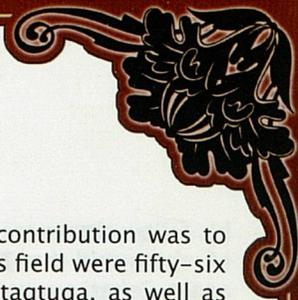
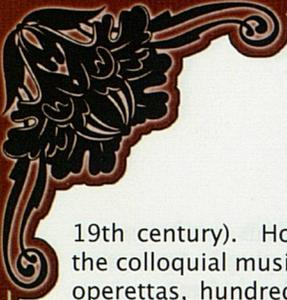
Having left the path of religious studies, Zakariyya found fulfillment in the musical education he received from Sheikh Darwish al-Hariri, one of the most knowledgeable and sought-after music teachers of his era. So hungry was Zakariyya to learn from al-Hariri that he married the Sheikh’s sister. Under al-Hariri’s tutelage, Zakariyya began honing his craft as a vocalist and studied theory and composition as well as the Qur’an. To study the ‘ud, Zakariyya sought out none other than Muhammad al-Qasabji.

Zakariyya’s first musical performances were singing religious songs at informal or private gatherings. He often traveled throughout Egypt and the Middle East to perform and to seek out other master performers to learn from, especially the turath al-falihin (the traditional rural music). On one of his trips to the Nile Delta, Zakariyya heard a young woman with exceptional musical talent: Umm Kulthum. In her honor, he composed two songs for her and eventually convinced her father to send her to Cairo.

Zakariyya found work in musical theater and began his life as a composer, singer, and actor in Cairo’s lively theater district of the 1910’s and 1920’s. Zakariyya’s stature rose when he contributed to the 1919 Egyptian revolution by composing nationalistic songs that echoed and in turn heightened popular patriotic sentiments.



An examination of Ahmad’s body of work reveals how much of a traditionalist he was. He composed over fifty Muwashshaat (classical songs based on Arabo-Andalucian poetry), several works in the dawr genre (a multi-sectional song form from the

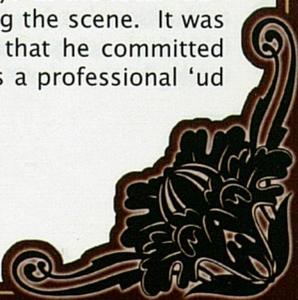
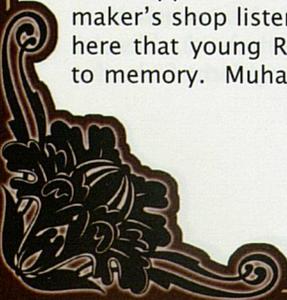


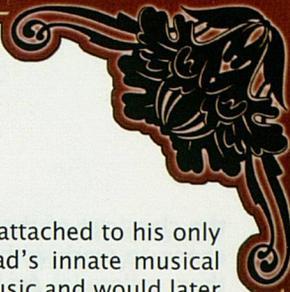
19th century). However, Ahmad's greatest contribution was to the colloquial musical genre. His works in this field were fifty-six operettas, hundreds of the light song form taqtuqa, as well as over ninety songs for thirty-seven films, all totaling almost 1,070 individual works. His music embodied Egyptian-ness, and Dr. Virginia Danielson wrote that he was "the greatest composer of colloquial Egyptian music that Umm Kulthum worked with." Of the three men, Zakariyya Ahmad's music exhibited the least traces of Western music. Despite his inclination toward traditional forms, Ahmad's music was as innovative as it was replete with tarab (the ecstasy that an initiated listener derives from listening to Arabic music). His lighter songs were very catchy and many of them, such as Ghanili Shwaya, remain as popular as ever.

#### **Riyad al-Sunbati (1906 - 1981)**

In a culture that prizes male offspring, the patriarch of the al-Sunbati family, Muhammad al-Sunbati, must have been a somewhat frustrated father. Al-Sunbati and his wife were the parents of eight girls, and his resignation to his lot in fatherhood is demonstrated by the name given to the eighth daughter: Radayna, or 'we have accepted [God's will]'. However, al-Sunbati's luck changed after this moment of resignation: his ninth and last child was a boy. His long wait ended with the birth of Muhammad Riyad Muhammad al-Sunbati in November 1906. Eventually, the child's name would be shortened to Riyad al-Sunbati.

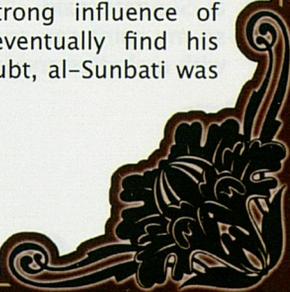
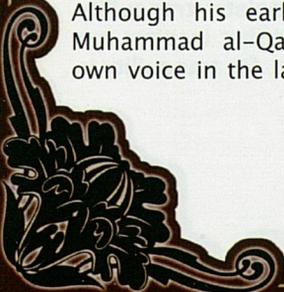
Schooling began at the kuttab which, given the typically harsh discipline imposed on the students, Riyad "hated." Unlike the capricious Zakariyya Ahmad, Riyad did not fight back against his teachers; rather, he chose a less confrontational approach and skipped school. He would spend his days at the local 'ud-maker's shop listening to music and observing the scene. It was here that young Riyad began hearing songs that he committed to memory. Muhammad al-Sunbati, who was a professional 'ud



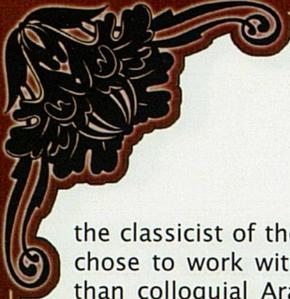


player, composer, and singer, already greatly attached to his only son, was overjoyed when he discovered Riyad's innate musical talents. The father began teaching his son music and would later provide him with lessons to further his education. When Riyad came of age, his father began taking him on professional musical engagements. Riyad was now a member of the band, and word of his sweet voice spread in their home town of al-Mansura. Soon after, Riyad earned the title of bulbul al-mansura (the nightingale of al-Mansura). In 1927, Riyad was sent to Cairo, where he enrolled in the Arabic Music Conservatory. So impressed were his teachers at his audition that not only was he accepted as a student, but was also hired as a teacher of voice.

Riyad's reputation as an 'ud player *par excellence* and a strong vocalist began to spread throughout Cairo. Riyad's first professional break came in 1930, when he was contracted as the artistic director to the Odeon record company. This post required him to compose songs for its artists and to perform in the record company's contracted group. From 1930 until approximately 1934, al-Sunbati would compose a large number of songs for various singers on the Odeon roster. Word of al-Sunbati's work and talent spread through Odeon and eventually led to his association with the entrepreneurial singer and stage actress Munira al-Mahdiya (d. 1965). Around 1934, he composed three operettas for her; all three were well-received and successful. Through these commissions, al-Sunbati made his first contact with the poet Ahmad Rami (1892-1971), who was an admirer and ardent supporter of Umm Kulthum. In the years to come, al-Sunbati would set many of Rami's poems to music to be performed by Umm Kulthum. The Sunbati-Rami collaboration would produce some of her most important and memorable songs.



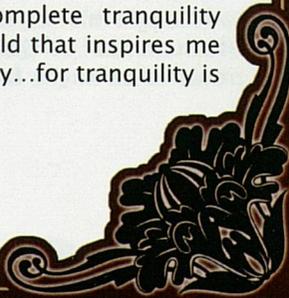
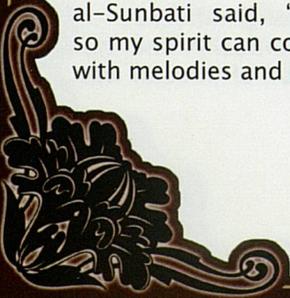
Although his earlier songs displayed a strong influence of Muhammad al-Qasabji, al-Sunbati would eventually find his own voice in the late 1940's. Without a doubt, al-Sunbati was

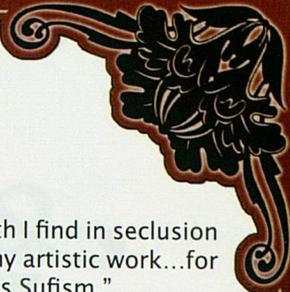
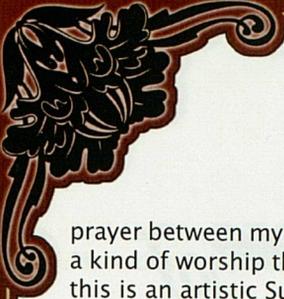


the classicist of the three composers on this program. He often chose to work with complex and rich poetry in classical rather than colloquial Arabic. For this reason, Umm Kulthum would commission dozens of such works from al-Sunbati. Through this collaboration that lasted forty years, al-Sunbati single-handedly revived the art of the qasida ("a poem, generally translated as 'ode' and characterized by a monorhythm and monorhyme." The qasida is also a musical setting of the poetic genre). The al-Sunbati qasida would become a staple of Umm Kulthum's repertoire, and she often remarked that his compositions were those of a "genius."

Al-Sunbati's total repertoire numbers around six hundred songs of varying forms and almost fifty instrumental compositions. Although his work was influenced by Western music (he often listened to works by Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Haydn, Schumann, and Respighi), al-Sunbati's style was deeply rooted in Arabic music. His use of non-traditional instrumentation such as the piano, synthesizer, oboe, flute, and Western brass instruments had much less to do with being new or modern; rather, al-Sunbati sought these colors that he felt were necessary to express the underlying emotion of the text. Of orchestration, he said, "with all certainty if the composer [wrote his own orchestration] for his composition this would be the most preferred, and deepest, and most beautiful, and most affective thing upon the listener."

He was a master of the maqam (Arabic scalar system) and seemingly never wasted a syllable of poetry, placing every one in its proper place. He was a deeply spiritual man who sought quiet and avoided the public spotlight. His interest in Sufism is reflected in the many religious and spiritually-themed poems that he set to music. Of the connection between spirituality and music, al-Sunbati said, "Tranquility...tranquility...complete tranquility so my spirit can commune with the spirit world that inspires me with melodies and in which I can go into deeply...for tranquility is





prayer between myself and the creator... in truth I find in seclusion a kind of worship that allows me to drown in my artistic work...for this is an artistic Sufism much like the religious Sufism."

At the end of their lives, all three men were recognized by the Egyptian state with awards for their contribution to Egyptian art and culture. In 1977, al-Sunbati was also awarded the UNESCO International Music Council Music Prize (that same year, Benny Goodman was awarded the same prize).

--Kareem Roustom, Boston





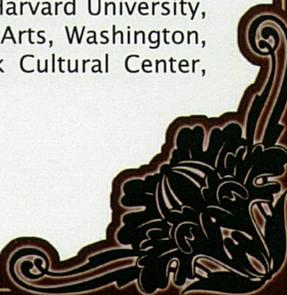
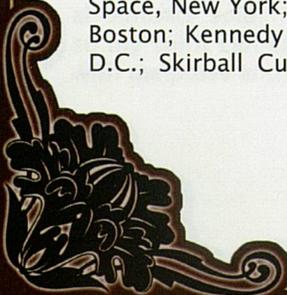
# *Arabesque*

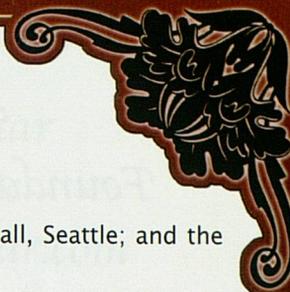
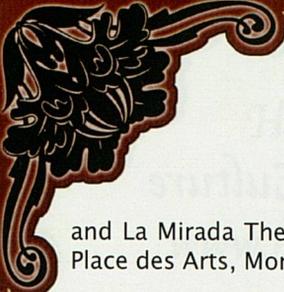
## *Music Ensemble*

The Arabesque Music Ensemble (formerly the Chicago Classical Oriental Ensemble) consists of professional musicians from several countries in North America, Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa who perform classical music from the Arabic traditions. Eastern instruments such as 'ud, qanun, buzuq, nay, and riqq are complemented by Western orchestral instruments (violin, viola, cello, and flute). Members of the AME are also accomplished arrangers, composers, conductors, and educators, serving as faculty for the annual Heartland Seminar on Arabic Music.

The AME presented its debut performance in 2003 at the Oriental Institute in Chicago and has since conducted three nationwide tours. The full 20-member ensemble performed with the And-El East West Orchestra during a U.S. tour showcasing Andalusian music in 2004. The AME's 2005 tour highlighted contemporary compositions by Middle Eastern composers and included the entire 20-member orchestra with guest artists Yair Dalal and Naser Musa. The Sheikh Sayyed Darweesh CD release tour in 2006 featured the five-member takht version of the AME along with guest vocalists Youssef Kassab and Aboud Agha.

Venues hosting the AME have included: Oriental Institute, Chicago; Chicago Cultural Center; Miller Stage, Milwaukee; University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; United Nations and Symphony Space, New York; Brooklyn Museum of Art; Harvard University, Boston; Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C.; Skirball Cultural Center, Eretz-Siamak Cultural Center,





and La Mirada Theatre, Los Angeles; Town Hall, Seattle; and the Place des Arts, Montreal.

The Arabesque Music Ensemble represents a unique experience of classical Oriental music in the United States. In 2005, the ensemble was added to the prestigious Artstour roster of the Illinois Arts Council. The AME has enjoyed critical acclaim from the American press; the Washington Post cited the blending of the vocalists' "amazingly smooth sound with the ensemble's precise rhythms and perfect intonation." The Los Angeles Times wrote of the AME's "rich textures and roving counter-melodies" and "considerable musical versatility, alternating lush ensemble playing with bursts of individual improvisation." From the Harvard Crimson: "All of the musicians delivered virtuosic performances. The vocal performances were outstanding." The Chicago Reader noted, "This group brings a historical authenticity to the material and plays it with crackling precision"; the Seattle Post-Intelligencer praised the AME's "polished performance."

## *Musicians*

### **Riqq**

Michel Merhej Baklouk

### **Qanun**

Hicham Chami

### **Violin**

Hanna Khoury

### **'Ud**

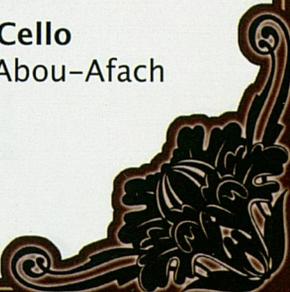
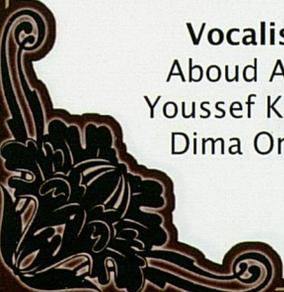
Walid Zairi

### **Vocalists**

Aboud Agha  
Youssef Kassab  
Dima Orsho

### **Cello**

Kinan Abou-Afach





# *The Arabesque Foundation for Arab Culture*

The Chicago-based Arabesque Foundation is dedicated to preserving the heritage of classical Oriental music from the Arab, Turkish, and Armenian traditions through producing concerts and tours, offering educational seminars, and participating in intercultural exchange throughout North America. AFAC sponsors the annual Heartland Seminar on Arabic Music and provides artistic support for the Arabesque Music Ensemble.

A major component of the Arabesque Foundation's educational program is the presentation of lecture/workshops on Arabic music and culture to young people. Developed since 2002 for audiences ranging from primary grades to college, the "Arabesque" presentation combines live music with a multimedia historical overview of Arab arts and culture. It has been utilized at over 200 schools, colleges, and libraries in the Midwest and on the East Coast.

*Arabesque*  
Foundation for  
*Arab Culture* آفاق



*Heartland Seminar  
on Arabic Music  
[www.heartlandseminar.com](http://www.heartlandseminar.com)*

The 2008 Heartland Seminar on Arabic Music will be held March 15–21 in Racine, Wisconsin. The seminar offers a six-day residential program focusing on classical Arabic music. The program is designed both for people who wish to begin their study as well as those who seek to improve their skills.

The Heartland Seminar features internationally-recognized academics and performers who will offer individualized instruction in nay, qanun, violin, voice, 'ud, and percussion in addition to ensembles, lectures, and workshops. Instructors are members of the Arabesque Music Ensemble ([www.arabesquemusicensemble.com](http://www.arabesquemusicensemble.com)) along with visiting scholars/musicians. All instructors have extensive background in education and workshop-conducting in addition to being recording artists and performers.

The location is the DeKoven Center in Racine, Wisconsin, a conference center on Lake Michigan. DeKoven is convenient to Mitchell Airport in Milwaukee, yet offers a secluded setting conducive to the seminar.

**Seminar dates:**  
March 15–21

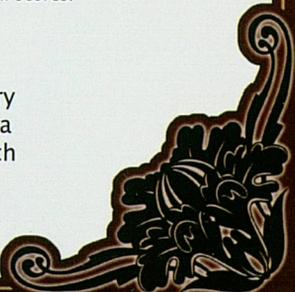
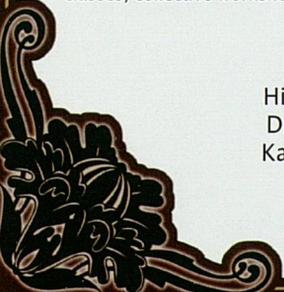
**Application deadline:**  
Friday, March 07, 2008

**Tuition and fees\*:**  
Residential: \$645 for the 6 days Non-Residential: \$550.

Tuition covers lodging in double rooms, 3 meals a day, attendance at all one-on-one classes, collective workshops and lectures, written booklet of all scores.

**Faculty**

Hicham Chami – Hanna Khoury  
Dr. Scott Marcus – Naser Musa  
Karim Nagi – Kinan Abou Afach



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