

INTERNATIONAL THE NEWS

Monday, November 27, 2006, Zeeqaad 5, 1427 A.H.

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Music of another kind

By Anil Datta

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So many age-old values, time-honoured concepts and definitions today are capitulating to the onslaught of what is perceived as rationality or realism. Often it is just an innate urge to come up with things unconventional not for any reason other than that they are unconventional.

The most sublime and glorious sphere of activity known to man, the most beautiful thing decidedly in the infinite universe, music, is no exception. New kinds of experimentation and innovation are the hallmarks of today's music. Two of its ageless components, melody and harmony, are fast being replaced by the level of din and the antics of the artiste, no matter how revolting to the conventional music fan. The very definition of music is undergoing a metamorphosis. For better or for worse, well that is a matter of personal likes and dislikes.

It was one such performance recently at the Alliance Française, which catered to the tastes of a certain genre of music buffs, those with unconventional tastes.

The evening featured a jazz performance by Tunisian-turned-French artiste, Mamdouh Bahri. The music, he produced was rather conservative in style as compared to the present-day ear-splitting noise aired by modern audio and visual media. Even though in quick time, the variety was very different from the New Orleans School of Jazz. As we all know, this innovation originated in New Orleans around 1917.

What was most impressive was the deft performance at the guitar by Bahri. His astute finger work and fluency were simply remarkable. What was pleasantly unique about the performance was the tempo of the nature of the tunes. It was an interesting mix of western and oriental music. Oriental, with the Middle Eastern flavour it carried. Mamdou's Bahri's jazz was a genre by itself. While jazz by all accounts, it was a unique confluence of the orient and the occident.

His performance catered to all tastes, those with a flair for eastern music and those who are Western-orientated. Despite it being jazz, there was no discord in between notes.

The maiden number was Tabarka. Paradoxically enough, it was a jazzy yet sedate tune, in quick time, of course. Quite different from Tabarka was Pablo, a tribute to the revolutionary Chilean poet, novelist, and a staunch advocate of socio-economic justice and human equality, Pablo Neruda. As Bahri later told this correspondent, the inspiration for this number came from one of his visits to Chile where he witnessed for himself the excruciating social disparity and the classed society, a system where the rich punish the poor for their misfortunes, a system where the rulers are absolutely oblivious to the privations of the less fortunate, a system where the rich are the parasites to society, a system commonly referred to as capitalism. This was US-backed dictator Augusto Pinochet's Chile.

The number had a marked Latin American flavour, the kind one would normally associate with the Flamenco dancers. It was a lively rendition made all the more so by Bahri's deft handling of the guitar.

Then there was another number in quick time, again carrying a characteristically Middle Eastern touch, 'Salim-June', dedicated to his son, Salim, who was born in June. The quick beat was, of course, reflective of the joy and affection a father feels and the sight, at the presence of his minor son. The beat, somehow, conveyed this feeling.

Another way the performance was unconventional was the audience response, surely much to the annoyance of the more conservative and sedate music lovers. Each number was followed by loud screams (bordering on catcalls) and whistles, mostly by young men with shoulder-length hair tied into thick, lustrous ponytails. Whether this was applause or booing could be anybody's guess.

However, Bahri has to share the laurels with three others, Francis Balzamo, the bass guitarist, Jacky Da Costa, the drummer, and Arif, the Tabalchi. All three of them put up a deft performance on their instruments.

What was most laudable about the performance was the spirit behind it. Nino Ciccarone, the Director, and his Alliance Française have taken pains to see to it that they frequently cater to the needs of an otherwise entertainment-starved citizenry. They are also keeping us abreast of all the new innovations and changes taking place in the performing arts.

Keep up the good works, Alliance Française!