



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

Center for
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The Clarinet and Music Education as Vehicles for Social Change in the Middle East

By Jeremy Ruth, DMA

Estrella Mountain Community College

International Studies Partnership Program – University of Arizona Center for Middle Eastern Studies

Project Overview

The goal of this project was to expand the Middle Eastern content in a 100-level Music in World Cultures community college course. Such courses typically provide a survey of as many musical traditions and practices from around the world as can be covered in a semester, but are more limited in how in-depth they can go on any specific topics, due to the broad scope of the course. In previous semesters, two to three class periods have been devoted to the entirety of Middle Eastern music. This project added three new course units (three additional class periods) focusing on Middle Eastern music, allowing the instructor to go far more in-depth on specific contemporary musical and related socio-political issues in multiple Middle Eastern countries.

The idea of focusing on the clarinet and music education as vehicles for social change in the Middle East was chosen for multiple reasons. First, focusing on one particular instrument allowed for deeper discussion of musical practices, along with the ability to compare and contrast musical approaches on the same instrument in different cultural contexts. The clarinet in particular was chosen not only because it is the instructor's particular area of expertise and research as a professional clarinetist, but also because it offers multiple musical and social contexts across the three countries that were the focus of the expanded content (Turkey, Israel, and Syria). Between these three Middle Eastern countries, students were shown examples of the clarinet filling a major role in a unique regional folk music tradition with artists like Hüsni Şenlendirici in Turkey, the clarinet filling a major role in a folk music tradition imported from another part of the world to form a strong regional musical tradition with artists like Giora Feidman in Israel, and the clarinet being used to create a new and unique musical tradition in a country that doesn't historically have a major clarinet tradition with artists like Kinan Azmeh of Syria. While the short section on Şenlendirici focused mainly on the musical content and practices to give intraregional contrast between the artists and styles studied, much more time was devoted to discussing the work of Kinan Azmeh and Giora Feidman, since they both created musical projects that were not only stylistically unique, but were formed with the intention of bringing about larger social change in the region. The final course unit focused on the West-

Eastern Divan Orchestra, which is a larger-scale music education project with underlying goals that fit the theme of music being used to promote social change.

Students were required to read several articles about the artists studied, listen to and/or watch performances, interviews, and documentaries about the artists, and then discuss their thoughts about the content in class. A written reflection was assigned for each unit to encourage the students to consider their own thoughts on whether or not music has the power to achieve the social change being promoted by the artists and groups discussed in these units. Both recall and aural identification questions relating to these units were included on the final exam, as well.

Learning Materials:

(For full citations, see Bibliography – citations have been shortened here for clarity)

1. Listening/Viewing: “Home Within” – Kinan Azmeh and Kevork Mourad Video
2. Listening/Viewing: “Home Within” Interview with Kinan Azmeh and Kevork Mourad – BRIC TV Video
3. Listening/Viewing: “A Trace of Grace” -- Hüsnü Şenlendirici, Alim Qasimov, Rauf Islamov, and Michel Godard Video
4. Listening: “Klezmer for Peace” – Giora Feidman Sextet (Selected Pieces from CD)
5. Listening/Viewing: *Knowledge is the Beginning* – West-Eastern Divan Orchestra Documentary
6. Reading: “The Sad Mornings of Kinan Azmeh” – Brooke Anderson, *McClatchy-Tribune Business News*
7. Reading: “Kinan Azmeh: Syrian Clarinetist Stranded in Beirut Thanks to Trump Ban” – Steve Knopper, *Rolling Stone*.
8. Reading: “Border Crossings: Musical Events” – Alex Ross, *The New Yorker*

Learning Outcomes:

1. Aurally identify the music of Kinan Azmeh, Hüsnü Şenlendirici, and Giora Feidman.
2. Identify and articulate musical elements that are shared and that differ between the three artists.
3. Identify musical elements of the three artists that are characteristic of Middle Eastern music discussed in the class (use of quartertones, maqams, improvisation, ornamentation)
4. Identify the ways in which music functions for these artists and how these fit within our larger discussion of the functions of music throughout this class.
5. Identify how different contemporary Middle Eastern artists attempt to use their music to promote social change.

Summary of Results

After researching the topic and meeting with my faculty resource colleague, Dr. Andrea Shaheen-Espinosa (University of Texas/El Paso, a UA alumna), a basic framework for the expanded course content was established. The first class would be devoted to Kinan Azmeh, the second to Giora Feidman and Hüsnü Şenlendirici, and the third to the West-Eastern Divan

Orchestra. Each class would provide a different example of artists advocating for social change through either the clarinet or music education, and Azmeh, Feidman, and Şenlendirici would provide three contrasting styles of clarinet playing in the Middle East. The student reading, listening/viewing, and writing assignments would focus on critical analysis of not only the purely musical characteristics present in each artist's style, but on the underlying social goals and methods employed by each artist. Students would be encouraged to discuss and write about their own thoughts on whether each type of social advocacy through music is effective.

Most students provided thoughtful and interesting discussions and written reflections for this expanded course content. At the end of the semester, several students also commented without prompting that the expanded content was their favorite part of the class. Overall, the addition of these three course units seemed to be successful. Not only did most students demonstrate that they achieved the basic learning outcomes outlined above through their assignments and final exams, but perhaps more importantly, they demonstrated that they could connect with the course material and give their own unique responses to more complex philosophical questions about music and social change in the Middle East that don't necessarily have clear answers.

I would like to thank Dr. Andrea Shaheen-Espinosa for her invaluable assistance in the formation of these new course units. She was extremely knowledgeable about the subject matter, made numerous suggestions that vastly improved these course units, and was great to work with.

Lecture Notes and Assignments

Unit 1: Kinan Azmeh

Assignment, Part 1 (to be completed before Lecture 1):

Before Class:

- Watch/listen to at least 10 minutes of “Home Within.” Think about what we’ve talked about regarding how music functions and what its possible purposes are, and write a few sentences (this could be a bulleted list) about how you think this piece functions and what its purpose is.
- Watch the interview with Kinan Azmeh and Kevork Mourad on BRIC TV. Have your thoughts about the functions or purpose of this piece changed after watching the interview? Write a few sentences about your thoughts on “Home Within” after watching the interview.
- Be ready to discuss your before-and-after thoughts on this piece in class.

Lecture Notes

Brief Background on Syrian Civil War

- Roots in 2011 protests of Bashar al-Assad government, inspired by the “Arab Spring.” Protesters focused on wanting democracy, more employment, and less corruption.
- Assad responded with deadly force, and conflict and violence escalated into civil war.
- Multiple outside governments became involved, within and outside of the Middle East, including Russia, the United States, Iran, the United Kingdom, France, Israel, and Turkey.
 - This made the conflict highly complex, since different countries supported different factions in the war.¹

¹ “Syrian Civil War” in *Britannica Academic*.

- Death toll as of December 2018: official counts range from between 367,965 and 560,000.²
- Over 5.6 million refugees and 6.6 million people internally displaced (out of a population of 22 million).³

Kinan Azmeh

- Syrian clarinetist and composer.
 - Clarinet is not an instrument that is historically a major part of Syrian musical traditions. It is not very common in Syria and is rarely played outside of military bands.⁴
 - Studied clarinet at the Damascus High Institute of Music, the Juilliard School, and the City University of New York.
 - Musical style draws on Arab musical practices, while incorporating elements of Western classical and jazz music, as well. Good example of musical hybridization. Plays both pre-composed and improvised music drawing on multiple musical traditions.⁵
 - Utilizes quartertones in his playing, often corresponding to the *maqam* being used in a piece. Quartertones are used in some contemporary Western classical clarinet works, but are still far less common than in Arab music utilizing *maqams*.⁶
- During the Syrian Civil War, created a musical/visual art piece with Syrian artist Kevork Mourad to advocate for social change and raise awareness for Syrian refugees through charitable organizations.⁷
 - Functions of music – both concrete and more abstract here.

² Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. “Syria: 560,000 Killed in Seven yrs of War, SOHR.”

³ UNHCR: The United Nations Refugee Agency. “Syria Emergency.”

⁴ Kinan Azmeh, “Arab Music Vocabulary in Syrian Contemporary Clarinet Chamber Works,” 1.

⁵ Kinan Azmeh, “The Biography.”

⁶ Kinan Azmeh, “Arab Music Vocabulary in Syrian Contemporary Clarinet Chamber Works,” 88.

⁷ Kinan Azmeh and Kevork Mourad, “Home Within - Millennium Stage (June 30, 2016).”

- Concrete in seeking tangible monetary aid for refugees, but abstract in the “story” told through the work.
 - In discussing the work, “Home Within,” Azmeh has made various statements, such as:
 - “Making art is an act of freedom”
 - “One can question whether a musical note can stop a bullet and free a political prisoner... maybe not... but we shall keep playing music loudly.”
 - “Art does change societies in ways that are too difficult to measure.”⁸
- In 2017, despite living in New York City for 16 years, Azmeh was stranded in Beirut after a concert when the United States enacted a travel ban that restricted citizens of seven countries, including Syria, from entering the United States.⁹
 - Additional example of how much musicians are tied to political actions – the musicians themselves can advocate for social change and for actions to be taken, but are themselves heavily impacted (in their ability to travel for performances or to exchange musical ideas) by the political actions of different countries.

Assignment, Part 2 (For Submission):

After Class:

- Read the following articles:
 - “The Sad Mornings of Kinan Azmeh” – Brooke Anderson, *McClatchy-Tribune Business News*
 - “Kinan Azmeh: Syrian Clarinetist Stranded in Beirut Thanks to Trump Ban” – Steve Knopper, *Rolling Stone*.

⁸ Névida Nassar, “Excitement and Rapture with Clarinetist-Composer Kinan Azmeh.”

⁹ Steve Knopper, “Kinan Azmeh: Syrian Clarinetist Stranded in Beirut Thanks to Trump Ban,” *Rolling Stone*.

- Consider our discussion of “Home Within” today in class. Think about our discussion of the before-and-after opinions of “Home Within.” Also think about the following quotes from Kinan Azmeh:
 - “Making art is an act of freedom”
 - “One can question whether a musical note can stop a bullet and free a political prisoner... maybe not... but we shall keep playing music loudly.”
 - “Art does change societies in ways that are too difficult to measure.”
- Write a 3-5 paragraph reflection about “Home Within” and the quotes above. What do you think he means in these quotes? Do you agree/disagree? How does “Home Within” fit into these ideas? Does it have a clear purpose? Do you think it achieves that purpose?

Unit 2: Giora Feidman and Hüsnü Şenlendirici

Giora Feidman

- Argentinian-Israeli clarinetist.
 - Long and varied playing career, including a stint with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, but best known for his klezmer playing.¹⁰
 - Klezmer – Not originally a Middle Eastern musical style. Originates in Eastern European Jewish communities. Has been defined as “the traditional instrumental music of Yiddish-speaking Jews of Eastern Europe.”¹¹ Because of its strong cultural connection with Judaism, however, it has become a significant genre in Israel. Klezmer is typically made up of pre-composed music that has highly improvisational ornamentation added by the performers.
 - Feidman has contributed to the further development of klezmer musical practices by combining traditional klezmer techniques with more contemporary practices like singing while playing (or “growling”) and flutter-tonguing, along with incorporating musical elements from Roma music, jazz, and other musical styles.¹²
- “Klezmer for Peace” project.
 - The Giora Feidman Sextet created a project (along with an album by the same title) devoted to bringing together musicians from Turkey and Israel, combining traditional Turkish musical instruments and playing styles with Feidman’s klezmer playing.¹³

¹⁰ Yaakov Mazor, “Feidman, Giora.”

¹¹ Sandra Marie Mosteller, “‘Jewishness’ in Selected Repertoire,” 44.

¹² Joel E. Rubin, “Music Without Borders.”

¹³ Giora Feidman, “Klezmer for Peace.”

- While people from different countries playing together is nothing unusual, the underlying concept of this project was to showcase unity in the face of differences, whether it be country, religion, musical background, etc.
- Musically, the performances by this ensemble demonstrate a wide range of concepts, including:
 - Both traditional and modernized klezmer stylistic traits. (Impact of migration and time on a particular style)
 - Musical hybridization creating something new and unique when instruments and stylistic traits from different cultures come together.
 - An example of an instrument previously examined (the clarinet) being played in a completely different context based on a different musical culture.

Hüsni Şenlendirici

- Turkish clarinetist
 - Provides an example of traditional Turkish folk clarinet playing to compare and contrast with the styles of Feidman and Azmeh.
 - More complicated than just one folk style, however. Mixture of Roma music with other “cosmopolitan” and world music elements – plays with an eye toward an international audience, rather than just a local one in Turkey. Music is still representative of a traditional Turkish and Roma musical styles, however.¹⁴
 - Use of pitch bends, quartertones, improvisation, ornamentation in both unique ways and ways related to the other artists studied.

¹⁴ Koray Değirmenci, ““Local Music from out There,”” 120-122.

- Also frequently plays with musicians from vastly different musical and cultural backgrounds, similar to Feidman.¹⁵

Assignment:

After Class:

- Listen to at least 5 minutes of the selected recordings from class of Giora Feidman and Hüsni Şenlendirici. Think about our in-class discussion of their musical styles and Feidman's stated goal with his "Klezmer for Peace" project.
- Write a 3-5 paragraph reflection comparing and contrasting Feidman's and Şenlendirici's music and possible underlying goals. You may want to talk about any purely musical characteristics that unify or differentiate their playing styles and you may want to discuss their approaches to music for social change, and whether or not you agree that it is possible and/or effective. If you wish, you may use any of the following question prompts to help guide your reflection: Do they both have the same goals? Regardless of goal, do they both achieve the same thing? Does playing music with others from different backgrounds inherently provide unity? Is it possible for music to provide unity across cultural lines?

¹⁵ Ibid., 114.

Unit 3: West-Eastern Divan Orchestra

- Orchestra formed in 1999 by conductor/pianist Daniel Barenboim and literary scholar Edward Said.
 - Orchestra is made up of students of all ages from various Middle Eastern countries, including Egypt, Iran, Israel, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan.
- Entire project is intended to promote peace and unity in the region by having musicians from diverse backgrounds play together in one unified orchestra. Ex. An Israeli and a Palestinian violinist might share the same stand.¹⁶
- Discussion of political issues is often a part of the experience, and was actually encouraged from the start. Barenboim viewed it as a platform for people to meet and disagree/debate with each other without resorting to violence. However, despite political discussions being a part of the project, Barenboim and Said stated multiple times that it is not a political project.
 - Quote from a student participant (regarding discussing the Israeli/Palestinian conflict): “It would be artificial not to talk about politics.”
 - Quote from Edward Said (regarding the overall goal of the project and the power of music): “Music is a bit subversive.”¹⁷
 - Said: “What we are interested in is the power of music and discussion and culture to create a sense of equality and fellowship otherwise unavailable to us in the anguish and tension of polarized life in the Middle East”¹⁸
- Effectiveness of this group is a topic of debate. Some view it very positively for having laudable goals and bringing people together. It has also faced criticism, however, for both socio-political and musical reasons.

¹⁶ David M. Washington and Devin G. Beecher. “Music as Social Medicine,” 131.

¹⁷ Paul Smaczny, dir. *Knowledge is the Beginning*.

¹⁸ Solveig Riiser, “National Identity and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra.”

- Both Israelis and Palestinians have criticized it for different political reasons.
 - Some Israelis have taken offense to Barenboim’s statements about Israel’s “domination over another people,” along with his support for performing Wagner in Israel.
 - Some Palestinians have criticized the orchestra for giving people a “deceptive image of ‘civilized’ coexistence” instead of “the reality of oppression.”
- Some critics have also pointed to the possible colonial undertones of a large, multicultural, mostly non-European orchestra playing primarily Western classical music for a mostly white audience.
- Musically, the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra has been criticized by some for relying too much on the orchestral canon, particularly of Romantic and early 20th century works by European composers.
 - Few contemporary works played and few works by composers from the Middle East.¹⁹
 - These are criticisms that are raised frequently in the art music world, in general – too much reliance on the canon and too little representation or diversity, in addition to not enough contemporary music. It’s particularly notable here because of the inclusive goals of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, but this criticism is not unique to it.

Assignment:

After Class:

- Watch *Knowledge is the Beginning*
- Read:
 - “Border Crossings: Musical Events” – Alex Ross, *The New Yorker* 89, iss. 3 (March 4, 2013)

¹⁹ Alex Ross, “Border Crossings: Musical Events.”

- Consider our in-class discussion, your reading, and the documentary. Write a 3-5 paragraph reflection about whether you think the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra is effective in its goal of using music as a way to bring together people from conflicting regions and promote discussion and understanding. Do you agree or disagree with any of the criticism (musical or socio-political) that has been levied against it? Finally, compare and contrast this group's approach to advocating for social change to the approaches taken by the other artists we've studied. Which approach (if any) do you think is the most effective?

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