

ZIRIAB – ARABIC MUSIC IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC¹

Zita Skořepová Honzlová

Abstract: With its four musicians of Syrian, Lebanese and Iraqi origin, Ziriab is the only and very first ensemble in the Czech Republic whose members declare their aim to be to perform “original” Arabic music. This idea of “original” Arabic music is a concept shared by the group, as has been articulated by the musicians. Their intentions have been expressed in relation to the character of the repertoire and its presentation. It is possible to depict four categories of performance – each one of a different context and audience type. The musicians’ choice of the repertoire as well as their behavior during the concert, then, reflect main aspects at each kind of performance. The founding members of the ensemble came from Syria to the former Czechoslovakia as exchange-program students in the ’80s and finally decided to stay in Prague as permanent residents. They mastered the Czech language and have fully integrated into the local society, as have the other two musicians from Lebanon and Iraq who joined the ensemble a few years later. Ziriab members’ opinions reveal the fact that their hobby of “dealing with Arabic music” arose during their several years of uninterrupted stay in the Czech Republic. As young men still living in their homeland, they never performed in public or studied music with a mentor’s guidance. This paper thus outlines specific conditions of the relationship between their long-term stay in a foreign country (and culture) and a need to perform music somehow related to the musicians’ – in this case ethnic and secular – identity.

Keywords: ethnomusicology; Arab minority music in the Czech Republic; music as self-representation

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Subject, Topic and Theoretical Concepts of the Research

Music – defined and regarded as human behavioral activity – is a phenomenon present all around the world. But does “music” mean only intentionally man-made and somehow cultivated “sound”? Since the publication of Merriam’s pivotal book *The Anthropology of Music* there is no doubt that music is strongly rooted *in* the culture, or the culture *is* music itself (Merriam 1977: 202, 204). All attitudes and practices related to musical phenomena represent embodiments of cultural conceptualizations which determine a character of shared status, role and function of musics in the society, their sound design, form of apprenticeship, performance concepts and conditions of acceptance by the audience. This basic fact became a fundamental assumption of every scholar dealing with music from an anthropological rather than just a music-analytic perspective. Merriam’s model was thus innovative in the sense of equilibrium of an anthropological and musicological level of research methods and is admitted as the referred approach.² An endeavor to depict a scientific image which should not only describe, but also seek an explanation and understanding for the incredible variability of musical concepts guiding different cases of “musicking” and their sociocultural impact and implications is the goal of ethnomusicologists and their contemporary inquiries. For that reason ethnomusicology should use not only musical analysis but also methods and research techniques as fieldwork and semistructured interviews, rather typical for anthropology.

My choice of a subject of research was, considering my personal preferences, unsurprising³ – I decided to deal with “Ziriab” – the sole musical ensemble performing Arabic music whose members of Middle-Eastern origin declare devotion to genuine Arabic principles and rejection of European musical influences. At first I was impressed with apparently non-European music performed by foreigners living in the Czech Republic for many years. What motivated them to found such an ensemble? Where are they from and where

² A combination of an anthropological and a musicological approach is mentioned, e.g., by Bruno Nettl (Nettl 2005: 8) as a basic assumption of contemporary ethnomusicology inquiries.

³ In autumn 2003, I attended Ziriab’s performance for the first time and I was impressed with character of the performed music which was especially interesting to me. In addition, the choice of the research topic reflects my sympathy to the Arab world and its culture. This paper is based on my bachelor’s thesis “Ziriab – Arabic Music in the Czech Republic.” fieldwork research realized between autumn 2006 and spring 2009.

is the performed music from? Where and for whom do they perform? Are they professionals or just amateurs? Does any one of them compose his own music? What kind of songs are performed? Questions like these emerged at the beginning of the research. In fact, it is not always possible to create strict formulations of the topic and delimit the area of research in ethnomusicological projects at the beginning. One must attend a certain number of musical or music-related events, become familiar with the researched people and make first introductory interviews to obtain significant data which can help to outline the direction of later research. During the first months of my inquiry – as a beginner bachelor’s student – I was thus not sure *what* exactly should attract my interest and which concrete shape I might give to my research design. Continual progress in the research process then provided a lot of information, but which of it should have been of greater value? I was practicing the strategy which Professor Adelaida Reyes calls “guessing-testing.”

Advance in research nevertheless pointed out key subjects of interest. At first I was occupied with the **topic of music and its presentation in completely different conditions**⁴ – that is, the case of Arabic music played in the Czech Republic. Members of the Ziriab ensemble insisted on the notion that their performances fulfill the criteria of a classical Arabic concept. On the other hand the ensemble performs for Czech audiences on various occasions and at various events, so is this circumstance somehow reflected in the musicians’ intentions and behavior during the performances? Both the fieldwork realized during concerts or rehearsals and semistructured interviews conducted with all the musicians provided a fruitful source of information. However, musical analysis – in my opinion – still represents an important research tool because sound remains a not negligible basis of every musical phenomena. This seemed to be true in my case where musical analysis revealed significant knowledge and supported important presumptions formulated during the analysis of fieldwork notes and transcriptions of interviews.⁵ Systematic participant observation enabled me to identify several types of performance, each one of a different context, repertoire presentation and kind of audience. I found out

⁴ The music which is played by the Ziriab ensemble is based on an Arabic musical concept which significantly differs from concepts existing in the Czech Republic.

⁵ There is a correlation between the musicians’ statements and music-making related behavior with performed music and its sound features. However, an analysis of musical pieces provided deeper knowledge which sometimes differed from the declared principles in certain aspects, especially in the cases of borrowed songs in Ziriab’s repertoire and their comparison with the originals.

that the “classical” Arabic concept as it is described by scholars differs from its presentation by Ziriab in a few key elements.

In addition, I concentrated my interest on the **nexus of music-making practices with the ethnocultural identity of the researched people – foreigners living out of their homeland for a long time**. Why is it so important for Ziriab’s musicians to play “their” music here in a “foreign” country and different culture environment? Especially a notion expressed by the frontman of the Ziriab ensemble during one of our interviews in the first year of the research became a turning point:

“You know, this traditional Arabic music – which we play – has very deep roots in all of us. No one deals with it here. And if someone dealt with it, he would play modern music for dance which doesn’t mean anything... And I think we miss genuine music here a lot especially because here we are living in a foreign country. When listening to this music, a listener immediately remembers old memories...” (Marwan Alsolaiman, 27. 4. 2007.)

Marwan Alsolaiman mentioned a deep relation to his ethno-cultural origin and the fact that all the members have been living in a foreign country and culture for a long time. Similar statements also appeared during continual interviewing with the other members of the ensemble.

Merriam’s concept, works of Bruno Nettl and other ethnomusicologists⁶ provided the necessary theoretical fundament of research design and also contributed as a source of information for comparative purposes. I concentrated my research on music conceived as a three-leveled phenomenon (Merriam 1964: 32-33), so I studied sound area⁷ together with behavior⁸ to discover the conceptualization⁹ of Ziriab’s music making. My research was based on participant

⁶ Particularly of those specialized in regional ethnomusicology of the Middle East such as al Faruqi (1975, 1981), Stephen Blum (2002), Virginia Danielson (1997), Baron Rodolphe d’Erlanger (2001 [1930, 1935, 1938, 1939, 1949, 1959]), Hachlaf (1993), Scott L. Marcus (1992, 2002), C. Poché (2000, 2002), Ali J. Racy (1986, 2000, 2002, 2003), A. Shiloah (1995), Habib H. Touma (1971, 1996) and music of minorities such as Kay Kaufmann Shelemay (1998), R. Qureshi (1972) and A. Reyes (1982, 1999) .

⁷ I concentrated on song repertoire, usage of musical instruments and process of arrangements creation and its melodic and rhythmic character.

⁸ I observed verbal and nonverbal communication of musicians at rehearsals as well at public performances of Ziriab, including behavior during music making, vocal and instrumental technique, postures and gestures, overall visage, chosen clothing, verbal presentation of the musicians themselves and their repertoire – as well as at rehearsals. I found out how they reflect different conditions of each performance, and discern behavior in front of distinct types of public.

⁹ Conceptualization includes verbally and nonverbally articulated attitudes to one’s own music

observation or fieldwork during public or private musical performances which provided both “musical” and “nonmusical”-sociocultural data together with semi-structured interviews and musical analysis. I thus used a combination of methodology applied by anthropology and musicology. The collected data and their analysis in this case study finally supported Nettl’s thesis that musical concepts are continually changing¹⁰ instead of being constant and stable entities (Nettl 2005: 280), but rather they receive various implications when used by musicians in specific conditions of actual, live reality. On the other hand, some elements still tend to remain typical if not emblematic for some musical styles and genres. I was thus interested in which components of the “classical Arabic music” concept are important for members of Ziriab and why. When dealing with the case of the Ziriab ensemble I studied references related to the general problem of **ethnic minority music and its characteristics when performed for the majority public**. Are some features of ethnic minority musicians and their music making, its performance contexts, and types of audience of a similar kind in other parts of the world? At this point it seemed evident that my inquiry should have been enriched with other useful theoretical sources related to this project and its conception. I found relevant information especially in an article dealing with the topic of Lebanese musicians living and performing in Canada by Regula Qureshi (1972), whose conclusions surprisingly coincide with my findings in some points.¹¹ Musical activities tied to a community feeling, the topic of nostalgia and remembrance discussed by Kaufman Shelemay (Kaufman Shelemay 1998) in her remarkable publication about Syrian Jews in America and research of Vietnamese immigrants in the USA by Adelaida Reyes (1999) became inspirational for my work as well.

making. The former presents declared the aims and imaginations of one’s own music making concept; however the latter is expressed in the musicians’ actual behavior related to various levels of music performances.

¹⁰ This thesis was again emphasized at Bruno Nettl’s lecture given in Prague, the 3rd of May 2010, when Nettl mentioned that ethnomusicologists do not study products, but live processes of music-making.

¹¹ There is an apparent coincidence of two kinds of Ziriab concerts with “structured” and “unstructured” types of performances which Qureshi described in Canada. When the former are intended for a non-Arabic audience, the latter are typical for Arab community gatherings. Other conclusions of Qureshi similar to the case of Ziriab are the following: the high prestige of amateur musicians, a simplification of the traditional concept in the sense of usage of basic *maqamat* and *’iqa’at* – rhythmic modes, a shorter duration of the songs as well as less complex improvised passages. Performing borrowed, not new and original songs, is a favorite practice. On the other hand – as is true of the Ziriab ensemble – Arab musicians in Canada also prefer “typical” Arabic instruments like the *’ud*, *darbukka* or *bendir* (Qureshi 1972: 381-393).

“Ziriab – a Concert of Arabic Music”

The 20th of October 2008, 8:12 PM. Eight days earlier I had received an SMS message from Marwan Alsolaiman, the frontman of the Ziriab ensemble. It was a short invitation to their concert: “*Dear friends, the Ziriab band is playing next Tuesday at 8:30 PM in Prague, Atlas cinema, Sokolovská 1.*” There were no posters for the ensemble’s performance; the concert was mentioned only in a small cinema program lying near the cashier’s. Probably I could hardly have found out that today Ziriab is playing here without Marwan’s invitation. The concert took place in one of the downstairs film theaters with a capacity of approximately 150 people. Following an employee’s instructions, I entered there at 8:25 PM. The theater was designed in the “classical” style quite typical for Czech cinemas built 30 years ago – red velvet theater-like seats, a black rug on the stage and a grayish-green curtain. There were three chairs on the stage, three microphones on stands and one big loudspeaker standing on the right side. Every observer could see four “exotic” musical instruments situated near or placed on the three chairs. They were a *darbukka* drum, an Arabic *'ud* lute, a *nay* flute and a *riqq* tambourine. Listeners came during the next thirty minutes till half of the seats were occupied. Most of the people were middle-aged men and women wearing informal clothing. One fifth of the audience was comprised of young students. There were only a few *mashriqi* (Middle East) Arabs, some of them with their Czech wives. Musicians – three middle-aged Arabs wearing black trousers and white “folklore-like” blouses were already on the stage, finishing the rehearsal and discussing the sound equipment installation and settings with employees.

The start of the performance was delayed about thirty minutes due to technical problems. Marwan Alsolaiman, the oldest member and leader of the ensemble, greeted the audience with a few words in informal, but basically correct Czech. He briefly introduced today’s repertoire, mentioning mainly the origin and authors or famous performers of the songs but not giving any further information about the songs’ lyrics except their Arabic dialect characteristics. The performance suddenly started with a sound of the lute breaking the recent silence. Everyone concentrated on the introduction to the song represented by a solo lute motif. It was an improvised, delicately ornamented melody without a stable metric structure. After a while, the *darbukka* drum and the tambourine joined the performance playing *masmudi kabir*, one of the rhythmic modes so typical for different genres of Arabic music. The *Darbukka* player started to

sing the first part of the song alternating with another musician-singer playing the tambourine; the refrain was rendered as a unisono chorus of all three musicians. Voices moved in a tenor and baritone ambitus and followed the “oriental singing” style: their melodies coincided with lute motifs. Sometimes one could hear quarter-tone intervals within a bit complicated, melismatic melodies. The program comprised 12 songs, each one followed by applause of 20-second duration; I recognized a few very famous Arabic songs among them. People were listening carefully; only a few Arabic listeners clapped their hands and sang refrains together with the members of the ensemble.

Repertoire Characteristics

The members of the ensemble declare as their aim to perform “original” Arabic music. What does this notion mean and how is the concept of “genuine” Arabic music articulated in their musical activities and music-related attitudes? First, there are remarkable sonic characteristics of the presented repertoire. The musicians intentionally choose musical instruments “typically” used in the region of their own origin (e.g. Qassim Hassan 2007). Each piece is thus accompanied by one melodic instrument – the *'ud* lute or the *nay* flute – and percussions like the *darbukka* goblet drum or the *bendir* frame drum and the *riqq*¹² tambourine. On the other hand there is a strong rejection of instruments such as keyboards, electric guitars and other instruments considered as typical for modern but nevertheless also “Arabic” genres like the *raï*.¹³ Tonic material, the main melodic line as well as accompanying motifs are based on Arabic musical theory, which means within the system of melodic and rhythmic modes – *maqamat* and *iqā'at* – with strict omitting of the harmony.

The repertoire then consists of popular or folk strophic songs with melismatic melodies sung in a Middle-Eastern Arabic dialect¹⁴ by a soloist or unisono choir with the usage of some amount of vocal and instrumental improvisation. Since its foundation, the ensemble has been performing basically two kinds of songs. On one hand, there are folk songs, the majority of them from various regions of Syria and Lebanon originally played by local amateur musicians.

¹² Sometimes called *daff*.

¹³ The ensemble’s frontman characterizes this music as “imported” (Marwan Alsolaiman – interview, April 27, 2007). From his point of view, many contemporary popular Arab musicians thus do not perform “Arabic music” even if the lyrics are sung in Arabic.

¹⁴ e.g. Syrian, Libanese or Egyptian colloquial Arabic.

The musicians remember them from their own youth when they were still living in their homelands. Listening and memory are also sources for the rest of the repertoire, which encompasses their own adaptations of original interpretations of popular Arabic songs performed by famous singers with relatively large ensembles or orchestra which were broadcasted by various radio stations. These are the most famous songs performed in the whole Arab-speaking world mostly in the '60s, '70s and '80s by stars such as Sabah Fakhri, Fayrouz, Fareed al 'Atrash, Wadi as Safi, Nadhem al Ghazzali and other performers mostly of Middle-Eastern origin.¹⁵ Despite the presence of modern elements and remarkable European influences, these songs are considered by Arab listeners as "classical" Arabic songs in the present day not only because of their arrangements, but especially due to their longer duration and higher complexity in the sense of more complicated melodic line, style of singing, lyrics and their language. All these elements are conceived to be much more sophisticated than creations of the majority of contemporary performers.

However, the choice of songs of both types is not random. When seeking a suitable piece for their own interpretation, the musicians follow certain rules which they have developed as criteria for selection. A song performance shouldn't last more than six minutes,¹⁶ but it must fulfill characteristics of Arabic musical theory. In other words, some of Arabic melodic and rhythmic modes must be present there. Nevertheless, the musicians do not adapt songs with *maqamat* or *'iqa'at*, which are considered too complicated.¹⁷ They also refuse to borrow songs of such stars as *Om Kulthum* because of their extreme requirements. Those songs are not only too difficult for the performers themselves; in addition, they are hardly admissible for Czech audiences from the Ziriab members' point of view. On the other hand, there is an apparent rejection of recent Arabic songs which the musicians obviously evaluate as too simple.¹⁸ The musicians thus tend to an average or medium complexity of their repertoire.

¹⁵ Raï is a genre of popular music of North African, especially Algerian origin. However, Ziriab has in its own repertoire a few of the probably most popular songs of the Algerian contemporary singer Khaled, with the nostalgic song "Ya Rayah" about longing for his homeland among them.

¹⁶ This reflects the musicians' assumption that the European audience is not able to listen to songs of long duration which are perceived by Europeans or Czechs as boring in their opinion.

¹⁷ e.g. melodic modes with several quarter or three-quarter tone intervals such as *maqam rast* or *sika* and their subtypes; the majority of the songs in Ziriab's repertoire are accompanied by the most favorite Arabic rhythmic modes such as *masmudi saghir/baladi*, *maluf*, *masmudi kabir* or *maqsum*.

¹⁸ "This simple, modern music...I can compose it every day...five songs – music and lyrics together. And I can sell it and it will be successful. But that's empty music." (Marwan Alsolaiman, 12. 3. 2009).

According to the musicians' statements, the textual level of songs in Ziriab's repertoire has an inferior significance.¹⁹ However, the character of a chosen text seems to be somehow reflected by the musicians; some themes are preferred while others are avoided. The majority of the songs are based on love poetry with typical motifs of unfulfilled love and emotional struggles. A number of song texts are also devoted to the beauty of the homeland and remembering it when one has lived abroad for ages.²⁰ The authors or famous performers of these songs quite often live in emigration as the Ziriab members do. It is important to notice the absence of religious songs in Ziriab's repertoire. The musicians also strongly reject any pieces with political allusions.

The ensemble's interpretation follows elements typical of the original. In comparison with its "model," the adaptation performed by Ziriab is thus easily recognizable. The main melodic line, its melodic mode²¹ as well as some basic introductory or interlude motifs coincide with the genuine rendition. Nevertheless, there are significant differences. The ensemble's frontman Marwan Alsolaiman sometimes composes short introductions or interludes differing from the original. Also chosen rhythmic modes are often not identical with those used in the originals.²² Musicians also usually perform the first two verses of a song and sometimes omit the long recitative *mawwal* that is present in the original.²³

Finally, there are no original songs in the ensemble's repertoire. The musicians – even the frontman Marwan Alsolaiman who consider himself to be a creative artist – mention a lack of free time for compositional activity. Even other members of the ensemble do not compose their own music. Choosing of "model" folk or popular Arabic songs, their eventual combining with each other and making of their own arrangements, that is the core of the Ziriab members' musical creativity. However, this fact has a significance for later interpretations.

¹⁹ "The song is about....love....you know, these silly things.." (Marwan Alsolaiman during a Ziriab performance at the "Mezi ploty" festival, May 31, 2009)

²⁰ It is remarkable that such songs are often in the repertoire at performances for Arab audiences.

²¹ Or chosen *maqam*.

²² Rhythmic modes performed by Ziriab members sometimes differ from rendition and do not strictly coincide with the mode used in a "model" song. The metric character of the song remains unchanged; however the usage of a certain rhythmic mode often depends on spontaneous and random choice.

²³ On the one hand, a song performed by Ziriab is closer to an "original" Arabic music model as it is perceived by the musicians because of its arrangement without usage of electric instruments and harmonic elements; however there is a simplification in the sense of omitting a part of the lyrics and longer improvised virtuoso passages of the vocal or instrumental soloist.

Four Kinds of Performance

The ensemble performs under diverse circumstances and at various events. Basically, it is possible to depict four categories of performance – each one of a different context, structuration and audience type. The musicians' choice of repertoire as well as their behavior during the concert thus specifically reflect these three aspects in the different types of performance.

Since its foundation, the ensemble has organized its **own concerts**. Performances of this kind are not part of a festival nor do they accompany a cultural or community event. The musicians organize them by themselves or with a help of some friends. There are no limitations of choice of the concert venue and repertoire in this case, so Ziriab members can fully express their intentions.²⁴ Concerts of this type take place in smaller theaters, tearooms or in other public places suitable for music performances, but generally with a non-mainstream or “alternative” program conception.²⁵ A professionally organized advertising campaign informing about a concert of the ensemble does not exist. If a theater or tearoom has its own leaflets with a program, then Ziriab's concert is mentioned there. Occasionally, there are amateur-made leaflets which are available near the entrance of the venue of a concert. Sometimes one can find an allusion to a Ziriab concert on Internet servers informing about various cultural events, but the musicians are usually not responsible for these invitations. Instead of this, the members of the ensemble inform close friends about the concert personally by sending an SMS message or e-mail. An audience of this kind of performance then consists of 60 – 110 people, friends of the ensemble's members – with a few middle-Eastern Arabs²⁶ among them, connoisseurs and lovers of Arabic music, students and other rather intellectuals with some relationship to the Arab world and its culture. The program of these concerts encompasses about 10 – 15 songs of various character. There are “serious” songs of longer duration with meditative parts comprising short vocal or instrumental improvisations as well as shorter songs in a faster tempo and dance-inducing character. People are fully concentrated on music listening at these concerts, clapping their hands only occasionally when a song

²⁴ Except for financial limitations, of course.

²⁵ Smaller theaters – Solidarita (Prague 10), Gong (Prague 8), various Prague “culture centers” – *kulturní domy*, Casa Gelmi (Prague 2), cinemas – Atlas (Prague 8), tearooms – Amana, Rybanaruby (Prague 2), the Dahab (Prague 1) restaurant, clubs – Vagon (Prague 2), Awika (Prague 1).

²⁶ It is remarkable that Arabs of North African origin do not attend Ziriab's concerts.

with a lively rhythm is performed. Marwan Alsolaiman tells a few basic facts about some songs. The other musicians do not usually give comments but they communicate with audience with smiles and gestures. All the members wear formal clothing – dark trousers with blue shirts or white blouses. There is thus apparent unity in the chosen style of clothing.

Because of their Arab origin, the musicians are sometimes invited to give a concert at **benefit events** related to some kind of current political crisis or environmental disaster in the Arab world. This is the case of meetings organized at moments of escalation of the Israel-Palestine conflict (December 1, 2006, March 14, 2009), a performance at the “Benefit Concert for Lebanon” (October 17, 2006), the “Concert for Algeria” (June 23, 2003). These events are organized by official representatives of Arabic countries in the Czech Republic, Arab community organizations (e.g., the “Lebanese Club in the Czech Republic”), from time to time by Czech NGOs such as the “Multicultural Center in Prague” or the “Czech – Arab Society.” Places suitable for public lectures, meetings of organizations, smaller concert halls or theaters are usually chosen by organizers.²⁷ Arab residents represent the majority of the audience. Some Arab women with but most of them without a *hijab* accompany their relatives. The number of Czechs in the audience depends on the publicity and character of the event, but Czechs represent rather the minority of the public. Ziriab usually performs very popular pieces and especially patriotic or nostalgic songs with motifs of longing for an Arabic homeland which is far away. Their performance represents only a part of the program; there are film projections, speeches of Arab or Czech speakers and sometimes symbolic acts, such as a minute of silence for deceased victims of a war or disaster. While avoiding any political motivations, the musicians mention their human and cultural relationship to especially Middle-Eastern Arabic compatriots. They regard this relationship as especially motivating for such performances. There is thus apparent interest in contributing to those events by their own music performance, which is conceived by the musicians as a means of proclamation of their ethno-cultural identity.

Within its more than 10 years of existence, the Ziriab ensemble has performed at various **festivals** in the Czech Republic. One thing they have in common is a preference for “ethnic” or “world,” “alternative” or “traditional” music and the phenomena of “multiculturality” or “polyethnicity” (Etno Brno, Color Meeting, Festival staré hudby Český Krumlov, Etnofest, Multikulturní

²⁷ e.g. hall of the Municipal Library in Prague (Prague 1), Charitas Palace (Prague 1).

Olomouc, Refufest, the program accompanying FebioFest and Jeden Svět film festivals, etc.). Most of these festivals are organized in the summertime; the concerts thus take place on outdoor, strongly amplified stages. People in the audience obviously attend Ziriab's performance for the first time; they prefer dancing rather than careful concentration on each melodic movement. The ensemble's about-one-hour performance consists of rather simple songs in fast tempo, without providing any introduction or information about the repertoire; there is only sporadic communication with the audience. The music performed there has an entertainment or dance-accompanying character and the musicians are conscience of a rather non-attentive audience who watch and listen to Ziriab's performance only occasionally. However, if the atmosphere of a festival is nice and friendly, the musicians enjoy these concerts and do not refuse to participate in them.

Ziriab also performs at **private gatherings**. However, there are two completely different subtypes of these performances. On one hand, there are business companies and other organizations whose managers decide to arrange a private entertainment meeting for employees intended as an "Oriental Evening." Live Arabic music is then a desirable accompaniment for such events. The ensemble then routinely perform simple dance songs without any special effort because very little attention is paid to their performance. As at some festival performances, the musicians do not communicate with the audience, which consist of people sometimes wearing "oriental" costumes, sitting at tables with colleagues and enjoying tasty food and drinks.²⁸

On the other hand, sometimes there are private meetings of Middle-Eastern community members often living in the Czech Republic for decades. The musicians welcome invitations for these performances.²⁹ There is usually an informal, relaxed atmosphere. Members of different Middle-Eastern minorities cordially greet each other. The majority of the people drink beer or wine; occasionally someone serves sweets, tea or one of the typical *mashriqi* dishes. Both Arabs and a few Czech friends of theirs talk about everyday life, their joys and worries during Ziriab's performance. Nevertheless, there is lively communication between musicians and audience. People clap their hands happily, sing together with the performers and some of them ask for a specific song.

²⁸ Entrance to such gatherings for private companies is sometimes strictly restricted. However, I had an opportunity to witness some performances on these occasions.

²⁹ e. g. annual cultural events organized in Prague on the occasion of the anniversary of the death of the famous Syrian poet *Nizar Qabbani*.

Most of the participants thus understand the lyrics and are familiar with the performed songs. Sometimes a few people start to dance a *debka*, a folk dance typical for the region of the Middle East. Generally, the program has no prepared structure. The musicians do not use microphones or other additional technical equipment and they do not arrive at the venue before time needed for even a short rehearsal. Often they wear informal clothing. The Ziriab members often perform songs which never appear at concerts intended for Czech audiences. Instrumental improvisations and vocal *mawwal* are apparently longer and more complex than for Czech audiences. Again, there are songs related to their origin or, on the textual level, to youth and homeland shared by musicians and at least by part of the audience.

“Original” Arabic Music played in the Czech Republic. Creativity or Ethno-Cultural Identity Remembrance?

Although the musicians expressed remarkable notions of music-making as a hobby and desired activity, is it possible to regard creative musicianship as the main motivation impulse for founding such an ensemble with this repertoire and performance-related circumstances? The musicians themselves repeatedly mentioned their common status as Middle Eastern secular Arabs long living abroad – in this case in the Czech Republic. This fact seems to be a key motive for their musical activities with respect to the following reasons which are evident not only in the statements of the musicians, but also in the level of their repertoire and performance characteristics. In addition, it is necessary to outline an aspect of the adaptation of the musicians’ concept of “Arabic” music with respect to performing in front of Czech audiences and at various events mentioned above.

The founding members of the ensemble came from Syria to former Czechoslovakia as exchange-program students in the ’80s and finally decided to stay as permanent residents in Prague, the capital. They learned the Czech language and have fully integrated into the local society as well as the other two musicians from Lebanon and Iraq, who joined the ensemble a decade later. Marwan Alsolaiman together with Haitham Farag, the other founding member of the ensemble, started to perform at meetings of the Association of Arabic Students. Initially, there were no concerts for non-Arabic audiences. After some time various musicians joined the ensemble till 1997, when three members created its stable “core.” Since the end of the ’90s, the range of performance

types together with the number and kind of listeners have enlarged. The idea of performing “Arabic” music has persisted and the musicians have developed an evaluation of a repertoire suitable for each type of performance and audience. The members of the ensemble thus delineated a distinction of Czech versus Arabic audience, a festival performance versus an independent concert. Nevertheless, opinions of the members reflect the fact that the hobby of “dealing with Arabic music” arose *during* their several years of uninterrupted stay in the Czech Republic.³⁰

Let me note that all the members of the ensemble have several features in common. All four musicians were born in three different Arabic countries³¹ but their shared Middle-Eastern Arab (*mashriqi*) origin is a priority here in the Czech Republic. There is also the (non)religious aspect of their personal identity. Three members of the ensemble are Druze and one is Christian, however none of them practice their religion and they rather admit their secular conviction. Because of these circumstances, the musicians choose folk songs from various regions of the Middle East or popular songs originally sung by Middle Eastern performers mentioned above. In addition, their secular orientation is reflected in avoiding songs with any religious allusion. The musicians also have their Middle-Eastern origin together with rather secular attitudes in common with their Arabic listeners who prefer to listen to Arabic “oldies” about love and the beauty of the homeland. There is thus apparent correlation of the musicians’ personal features and the character of the pieces chosen for their own adaptation and performance, which is, in addition, in accordance with Arab audiences’ expectations in the cases of performances in majority for the Arab public.

These stable and clearly defined characteristics of the ensemble’s repertoire, its arrangement and presentation to the audience represent the first level of the musicians’ intentions to follow an “Arabic” music concept which consists of various assumptions expressed and realized during private (at rehearsals) or public (at concerts) music making activities. Another level of following a “classical” Arabic concept is present in the sense of the negative attitude of the ensemble members to professional musicianship. As young men still living in their homeland, they never performed in public or studied music with

³⁰ All the musicians loved music and practiced it as a hobby during their childhood but none of them intended to become even a semi-professional musician as they are in the present day here in the Czech Republic.

³¹ Syria, Lebanon, Iraq.

a mentor's guidance. Music was not considered as something important for life and all of them had to interrupt their small musical hobby efforts in their youth because of study or work. On the other hand, they appreciate a knowledge of musical theory. Marwan Alsolaiman, who has mastered Arabic melodic and rhythmic modes – *maqamat* and *iqā'* at by self-study, is thus the naturally respected leader of the ensemble. Other members of Ziriab have no such advanced knowledge nor the ability to play several musical instruments. They also do not intend their musical performances as commercial activities, with the exception of the youngest Iraqi member. Anas Yunnis is a professional percussionist but his prestige in the Ziriab ensemble is bit lower than the prestige of the other amateur musicians.³²

As we have seen above, there is also apparently little care for promotion of the ensemble and its activities. With the exception of its mention in various reviews of festival or theater programs and also a presentation on the website of Ziriab's CD publisher, their own Internet website or a presentation of the ensemble, e.g., on MySpace or Facebook sites does not exist. For these reasons it is not possible to consider a pure desire of musical creativity as the main motivation motive for membership in the ensemble. The musicians of Ziriab thus adhere to their genuine intention of remaining amateurs, which is a preferred and positively valued kind of Arabic musicianship. In addition, they regard their music making as an activity which can help to promote their own culture in an alternative way.³³

Neither instrumental nor vocal virtuosity³⁴ is a priority. Song arrangements are based on spontaneous ideas presented by various musicians at rehearsals. Marwan Alsolaiman then decides on their appropriateness. Rehearsals, then, rather provide time and an occasion for a friendly gathering. Music-making during rehearsals is thus an enjoyable activity when the participants repeat

³² This is evident from statements of older and founding members of the ensemble.

³³ It was Haitham Farag who aptly expressed this conviction: "We would like to show people here in the Czech Republic that Arabs...you know I don't like to talk about this, I don't want to talk about politics at all, but...we want to show that Arabs are not like those people the newspapers write about, Arabs who are terrorists or criminals." (Haitham Farag, November 3, 2008). Other members of the ensemble also expressed an effort to "promote" Arabic culture by means of their musical activities which represent a positive, unreligious and non-political way of proclamation of their opinion.

³⁴ Only the ensemble's frontman Marwan Alsolaiman intends to improve his musical abilities and is learning to play new instruments such as the *qanun* zither. On the other hand, members of the ensemble, except for Annas Yunnis who is a professional percussionist, do not continually practice playing their instruments or singing at home.

songs they like. Its function is thus not primarily improvement of the musicians' tasks. If a percussionist does not bring his own instrument, it does not matter. Marwan Alsolaiman lends him another although it is an instrument of different type. Creativity in the sense of composing original pieces is also not a priority. Let me remind you that the repertoire of the ensemble consists of borrowed popular and folk songs which are arranged by the musicians themselves, but according to original "model" characteristics. The choice of each song then reflects the musicians' preferences – they seek typically "Arabic" pieces but do not intend to perform too sophisticated creations. A long *mawwal* or other very complex improvisational elements are thus absent, even in performances for Arabic audiences.

We can thus see rejection of an important level of "typically" Arabic creativity³⁵ in this aspect of the musicians' intentions. But this is not only because of a lack of musical abilities – which is not totally out of discussion – but is also due to their performing for Czech audiences and in specific contexts. With respect to the "classical" Arabic model, the members of the ensemble prefer unstructured performances with attentive audiences. "Informal musicking" for a smaller passively or actively participating, mostly Middle-Eastern audience is thus one of the most enjoyable performances for the musicians. They can perform favorite pieces in a preferred way – with a bit longer improvisation and *mawwal* and they intensively reply to reactions of the audience who explicitly express their joy and understanding. During these occasions, the musicians, together with the audience,³⁶ remember through specific songs their commonly missed countries and evoke positive memories of their homeland by singing in local dialects and using the musical system which definitely belongs to Arabic culture. On the contrary, Ziriab musicians do not enjoy performing as even well-paid "Oriental sound decoration." Just for these reasons there are only simpler and usually "dance" songs on a program and improvisational instrumental and vocal elements are often missing in performances intended for Czech and also inattentive audiences of such events.

³⁵ Which is – on the other hand – admired by the musicians.

³⁶ This notion refers to findings of Kaufman Shelemay (1998) that music provides a means of remembrance of shared nostalgia and common memories of a specific community. In the case of Ziriab, it is the community of Middle Eastern Arabs of secular orientation, long living in the Czech Republic. For them, Ziriab concerts given at community gatherings represent an occasion for remembering a part of Self, present and past which is shared by all participants. That is the reason for the absence of, for example, North African Arabs at Ziriab's concerts.

My aim was to demonstrate here an evident continual change of definitions of musical conceptualization; in this case members of Ziriab admit to only a part of a “classical” Arabic musical concept, not only because of their potential talent limitations but also due to reflecting a completely different musical and sociocultural environment. When performing for Czech audiences, members of the ensemble choose pieces “not too difficult for listening” because they are conscious of performing for listeners with different expectations from Arabs. On the other hand, the paper has tried to deal with the phenomenon of musicianship as a means of expressing some levels of the Self. In other words, the case study of the Ziriab ensemble presents aspects of proclamation of the ethno-cultural identity³⁷ of Middle-Eastern Arabs living in the Czech Republic by way of musical activities and their specific character. Musicianship – in the sense of specific musical and lyrics features of chosen songs and their performance – then can provide a mode of remembrance of such parts of the Self-concept which are missed in a different sociocultural area where a person is living. Research thus revealed that Ziriab members’ choice of the repertoire character, attitude toward musical activities and preference of a certain public and performance type is quite firmly related to their personal identity. It is thus possible to consider the activities of the Ziriab members as a reference to the part of the Self which is missed with respect to living in the Czech Republic for a long time. Music-making then represents the possibility for constant remembering of missed language, homeland culture and memories of certain people, situations and atmosphere.

In my opinion, none of the members would have dealt with this kind of music as much as here in the Czech Republic if they had lived in their homelands. And if they had dealt with it, would they have been devoted to “genuine” Arabic music? That is the question.

ZITA SKOŘEPOVÁ HONZLOVÁ (1987) is a graduate student of ethnomusicology and anthropology at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University. She is interested in music as a part of everyday life and its relationship to the self-perception or self-identity of musicians. At present she is dealing with immigrant musicians living in the Czech Republic and their strategies of representation through musical activities. In addition to her student research, she is an active musician specializing in Hebrew and Yiddish songs. www.myspace.com/zitahonzlova

³⁷ In the term of ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino (Turino 2008: 115-116) members of the Ziriab ensemble together with their Arab listeners thus belong to a specific *culture cohort*.

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