

Saving the Oud

The Sultan of Instruments

Of controversial origins, the Oud is the most widely used string instrument in the Arab world. Its pre-Islamic origins have yet to be discerned. Some scholars believe it was adopted from the Egyptians 3500 years ago. Others attribute its invention to the Persians and date its roots to biblical times with "Lamech" of the Genesis as the father. However, all theories seem to concede that by the sixth century, the wooden-bellied instrument of four strings found its way into Mecca from the vast deserts of Al-Hira, the capital of the Lakhmid dynasty. Its effect surpassed Arabic music and permeated into Europe. Came to be known as the lute, the Oud was introduced by roaming Andalusian minstrels into Western Mediaeval Europe at a time when the Arabs were at their pinnacle in arts and intellectuality. The Oud slowly evolved from an exclusive Arab instrument into inspiring world composers like Bach who wrote several timeless pieces.

The Oud developed over the years and its five strings account for producing vocal and instrumental melodies. It is constituted of the: convex back or *zahr*, the finger-board or *unq* the nut or *anf*, the sound-hole or *'uyun* the strings or *awtar*, the turning pegs or *malawi* with its sound board usually made of wall-nut wood.

Mystery has always engulfed this instrument's techniques of manufacture which Nazih Ghadban unveils in his new book appropriately entitled "The Secrets of the Oud." The fruit of twenty years of research, the book is a "compensation for its decadence during the past years," Ghadban says. A manual for professionals, the work traces the Oud's history and evolution in an effort "to preserve for future generations" and protect it from falling into oblivion according to Ghadban. Fearing the effect of mass production, the manual attempts at divulging the secret potion for manufacturing a "good Oud" as Ghadban terms it. His efforts are consecrated at standardizing the process of manufacture in the Arab world. "What is important is not to produce any Oud, but one which harmoniously combines between its sound and shape," he says.

An artisan with a "new vision", Ghadban is considered to be one of the first Oud manufacturer in Lebanon. His atelier in Ras Baalbeck, northern Bekaa is a lab for his innovations where he discloses his new brainchild: four prototypes for the Oud instrument which are still under trial.

Yet the recipe of success in producing a

unique Oud, Ghadban says, is the profound knowledge of the three pillars: Musicology and the science of sound and aesthetics. Another ingredient for an-almost perfect Oud is his three-year

cooperation with prominent Lebanese artists and musicians such as Charbel Rouhana and Waleed Ghulmieh, an unprecedented in the world of Oud manufacturing, Ghadban combines his experience with that of composers, musicians and even singers, since "the Oud is their companion." He also managed, with the help of the archival material which include notes and commentary of every Oud he manufactured over 25 years, to learn and rectify past embellishments in Oud production.

Ghadban laments the lack of professionalism in teaching the correct methods of Oud-playing in most Arab countries since the essential element, for teaching "is through combining theory and practice."

According to Ghadban, the survival of the Oud is due to the secrecy that engulfs its techniques but justifies his reasons for divulging them "so that the artist can find a perfect companion."

In Lebanon, other Oud workshops are located in Tripoli and Anjar.

A resurrection of Arabic music and heritage cannot happen without a development in Oud production, but can this mythical instrument survive the times?

To experience the mystical sounds of the Oud, the internationally renowned artist of Lebanese descent Rabih Abu-Khalil will stage a performance on the 20 and 21st August in the Bacchus temple of Baalbeck. Various recordings of the artist along with those of Charbel Rouhana can be found in most record shops around Beirut. For an Egyptian-Oud experience, the recordings of the late Mounir Bachir are highly recommended.

