



# Turkish Arabesk

by Matuya Brand

Arabesk is like American rap music – a controversial, extremely popular art form brewed in the ghetto as a response to issues of social justice. Its popularization, however, says Mehmet Sanlikol, a doctoral student at the New England Conservatory, lacks depth and meaning. Sanlikol directs the 300 Years of Turkish Music series, for which Arabesk will debut on the Boston scene.

Although Arabesk is often used as an umbrella term for Arab music, the political meaning of the music gives it special significance to Turkish culture. What makes Turkish Arabesk of particular interest is that the controversy it inspires stems not from excessive sex and violence, like American rap, but from daring to mention the name of Allah. The singers see religion as a realistic escape from poverty and dreams deferred.

Turkey is a nation whose politics oscillate between two cultures. On one side, Turkey is European – Western ideology promotes a division between church and state, and longs for unbridled European Union membership. The other half is Middle Eastern – various theocracies promote the desired homogeneity on the political and cultural sphere.

Fearing a diversion from European values, the former Turkish government banned Arabesk for the music's first 20 years of existence. "The theme was too far from the Republican wheel," says Sanlikol. But eventually, Arabesk and the people who performed it became a force the government could no longer ignore.

"The poor came up with an identity, and Arabesk was their music and their voice," says Serap Kantarci, Sanlikol's fiancée and the coordinator of the concert series. "The current prime minister

is from an Istanbul ghetto, the same area where Arabesk began."

The music itself is both lively and lamenting, with the use of ample strings, melismatic vocalizations and traditional instruments including the *darbuka*, a clay goblet-shaped drum, and the *saz*, a long-necked lute characteristic in Turkish folk music.

Sanlikol advocates old-school Arabesk, which, like old-school American rap, more accurately reflects the ideals of its creators. "It lost some of its heart with commercial success," Sanlikol says. Many contemporary Turkish musicians look down upon Arabesk as having failed its original potential.

Along with compositions by Arabesk greats including Orhan Gencebay, Erkin Koray and Ibrahim Tatlisles, Sanlikol composed his own Arabesk piece for the concert. The lyrics were written along with Kantarci, whom Sanlikol lovingly mentions is profoundly poetic.

While the Arabesk market is still pending in the United States, Americans can learn from its example: If we sing enough about something, it will become our voice as a people, and when that voice is heard, politics will change. Kinda makes you want to sing less like Brittany and a little more about hating Bush.

Experience Arabesk live at the fifth concert in the 300 Years of Turkish Music series on Monday, April 19, at **Club Passim**, 26 Church St., Harvard Sq., Cambridge. 617.492.7679. 8pm/\$15 (\$13 members)

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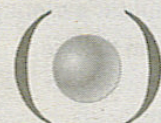
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