

## **Traditional Arts in King County: *Oud* Music of the Arabic World**

In many forms of music, one instrument is often the “star.” In a lot of popular and contemporary music this may be the guitar, in western classical music often the violin, and in Arab music the star instrument is the form of lute known as the *oud*. All of these are string instruments that can be played to great effect in the hands of a virtuoso.

### **What does the *oud* look like?**

The *oud* (or ‘*ud*) is a pear-shaped plucked instrument with a deep belly or rounded back, unlike the flat back of many guitars. Its name is from the Arabic word for wood, referring to its wooden belly. Compared to a guitar, the neck is shorter and is bent back where the strings are wound around the tuning pegs. A large round sound hole in the body of the instrument has a thin wooden cover pierced in an intricate circular Arabic design.

The *oud* is made in a few slightly different sizes. The strings are actually pairs of strings played simultaneously (also known as double courses). Traditionally it had gut strings, but now uses nylon or other synthetic strings, like the guitar.

### **How is it played?**

*Oud* players sit with the instrument in their lap to perform, and use a *plectrum* to pluck the strings. Usually a plastic pick is used, replacing the older method of plucking with the quill of a feather. Musicians press the strings to the fingerboard (or “stop the strings”) with the finger tips or nails of their left hand, and pluck the strings with the right hand. *Oud* players play intricate melodies and rhythms using a lot of finger work, but unlike guitarists, do not strum chords.

Most *ouds* have four pairs of strings, but some have five pairs and a few have an additional sixth string. The tunings of the strings vary, especially between Turkish and Arab musicians—in other words, not all *oud* players tune the strings to standard pitches. *Oud* players produce very slightly higher or lower variations on a pitch, depending on what mode or composition they are performing. They are able to play with fine discrimination in pitch in part because there are no frets (raised bars) along the neck of the instrument. In this sense, the *oud* is more like a violin than a guitar; as a violinist must stop the string precisely to produce the pitch they want, while the frets of a guitar divide the string into a series of half-step intervals.

### **History and Relatives of the *Oud***

The Arab world extended into North Africa in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, to the east, into Iraq, and then into Southern and Eastern Europe. After centuries of cultural contact and exchange, Arabic music incorporated some elements of Persian, Turkish and North African music. The *oud* travelled to these areas as part of the Arab world, and so has relatives in many of these areas.

The earliest known form of the *oud* was a Persian instrument in the 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E. After Arabs moved through North Africa in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the empire expanded into Southern Spain and Sicily.

The *oud* was picked up in these areas, and from Spain and Sicily, moved into other parts of Europe where it evolved into the lute.

## Modes and Rhythms in Arabic Music

Traditional Arab music does not include harmony, but has much more variety melodically and rhythmically than most western music. Sometimes musicians will improvise in free rhythm (without a downbeat, or regularly accented beat) first, and then play a composition in the same melodic mode. Arabic music is also known for its great variety of intricate rhythmic cycles that vary from three to 48 beats in length. While western classical music is played primarily in meters of 2, 3 or 4 beats per measure (duple meter or triple meter), there are several Arabic rhythmic cycles of 10 beats, for example, that each string together a different pattern of twos and threes. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, longer cycles of more than 24 beats are not used as much as they were in the past.

Arabic rhythmic cycles and patterns are made up of a pattern of strong, soft, and silent beats. Drummers learn to play these patterns both on the drum and by reciting them, using the syllable ‘dum’ for the lower, more resonant sound in the center of the drum and ‘tek’ for the higher sound on the side of the drum. You can tap your hand on your desk to make these rhythmic patterns, using the flat of your fingers for ‘dum’ and then curl your fingers to hit with your nails for ‘tek.’ Try this common four beat rhythm:

DUM tek -- tek DUM --- tek -- Dashes are silent beats.

ONE and [two] and THREE [and] four [and] [Silent beats are in brackets.]

[See searchable database [Folk & Traditional Artists of Washington State](#) for information about **Maurice Rouman**. He and his daughter are accomplished *oud* performers who live in King County, and perform locally and internationally]

### Listening opportunities:

Compare lute music of Renaissance Europe with music of the oud:

*Classical Detour: The Lute and the Oud (Performance Today*, National Public Radio, July 14, 2006; length 8’23”) Hopkinson Smith performs lute music of 16<sup>th</sup> century France (Bransle de Poitou), followed by discussion and a performance by oud player Ramiro Amusatogui, improvising on a traditional Moroccan tune. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5557666>

“Le Trio Joubran,” Global Hit feature, *The World*, Public Radio International, June 19, 2006. Three brothers play *oud* together as an ensemble, discuss instrument making, and how the sound of the *oud* is different from the guitar <http://www.theworld.org/?q=node/2028>

### Listening and viewing opportunity:

Compare short videos of *oud* music of Iraq with *oud* music of Somalia, on the Smithsonian Global Sounds website: Iraqi-American oud player Rahim AlHaj with percussionist Souhail Kaspar. [http://www.smithsonianglobalsound.org/sgs\\_live\\_alhaj.aspx](http://www.smithsonianglobalsound.org/sgs_live_alhaj.aspx)

Rahim AlHaj talks about music and plays the oud.  
[http://www.smithsonianglobalsound.org/sgslive\\_me\\_rahim\\_2.aspx](http://www.smithsonianglobalsound.org/sgslive_me_rahim_2.aspx)

Somali-American Hasan Gure sings and plays the *oud* at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

### **Other Resources:**

Sabah, Zaid. "Amid War's Chaos, the Fine Art of *Oud*-making Continues," USA Today,  
[http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2006-05-11-iraq-week-oud\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2006-05-11-iraq-week-oud_x.htm)

*Global Music Series: Music in Egypt: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture*. Book Includes CD. by [Scott L. Marcus](#) (Author). Designed for use by undergraduates who are not music specialists.

Swedenburg, Ted. "From East to West: Arab Music," *Seattle Times*, February , 2008. An article for classroom use, as part of the Newspapers in Education program.

"*ud*." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2008. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 7 Feb. 2008  
<<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9074077>>.

*The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, volume 6, The Middle East

Video: *Umm Kulthūm: a voice like Egypt*. Filmmakers Collaborative; produced, directed and written by Michael Goldman, Seattle, WA: Arab Film Distribution, 1996. Call # VHS 781.65 UMM KUL

### **Music CDs available from the King County Library:**

**Escalay The water wheel : oud music.** *El Din, Hamza*. New York, N.Y. : Nonesuch, [2002]  
Call number: CD PFA ELD E02 AFRICA

**Malik al-‘ūd** *Atrash, Farīd*. Beirut, Lebanon : Voice of Lebanon, p1990.  
Call number: CD PFM ATR M31 MIDDLE EAST

**Randana Trio Joubran**. Montreuil, France : Fairplay, p2005. .  
Call number: CD PFM TRI R00 MIDDLE EAST

**Blue flame Shaheen, Simon**. Sherman Oaks, Calif.: Ark21 Records, p2001.  
Call number: CD PFM SHA B22 MIDDLE EAST

**Songs of the Sudan** *Al Sunni, Mustafa*. Wyastone Leys, Monmouth : Nimbus, p1999.  
Call number: CD PFA ALS S83 AFRICA

**Shakl tani Falestine** *‘Abd al-Wahhāb, Muḥammad*. Dubai, U.A.E. : EMI Arabia, p1996.  
Call number: CD PFM ABD S26 MIDDLE EAST