

Historical performance practice of Arabic Music

MUSE 1186 Voix d'Esprit

Gary Seighman, instructor

For the Mellon Initiative Could Revision Grant, I chose to modify MUSE 1186 "Voix d'Esprit," a female vocal ensemble comprised of 20 students. This course is not a requirement for any major, however, the students all possess strong musical skills and a dedication to quality choral performance. This ensemble typically explores a wide variety of repertoire encompassing musical styles from numerous world cultures. I wished to have the students perform Arabic choral music that semester and, as a genre that is still relatively unexplored in Western classrooms, the Mellon Initiative provided a good framework to begin the discovery process.

In addition to in-class rehearsal preparation for an Arabic choral piece that I selected (*Hal Asmar*), I came up with several topics surrounding the Arabic musical tradition and related performance aspects. These included:

- (1) women's historical role in Arabic music-making
- (2) pronunciation of the Arabic
- (3) background information on the text, including source, symbolism, contextual usage,
- (4) determining musical embellishments appropriate to the style
- (5) simple choreographing of body movements to the song based on Arabic dance forms,
- (6) finding excerpts of other related Arabic poetic texts that will be interpolated during the performance.

The students were instructed to select a topic and divide into groups of 3-4 with each devoted to a single topic. Each group had to present their research for the rest of the class. For some of the performance-related topics (pronunciation, etc.), these presentations necessarily had to occur earlier in the semester as the class prepared the song. Others were presented later in the rehearsal process to offer additional context for the class. I provided several of the research materials which included both online and book sources from the library. Students had to find their own sources as well. The overarching goal was for the class to gain a better general understanding of Arabic musical traditions and experience first-hand the preparatory research required to make effective and historically accurate performance decisions.

In the end, the historical/background topics provided a very effective means for understanding these musical traditions. Presented toward the end of the semester and our rehearsal preparation, it gave the students further motivation to perform these works publicly. The more performance-related topics (pronunciation, choreography, musical embellishments) varied in their presentation effectiveness within our rehearsal setting. Because these are more skill-based and required modelling on behalf of the student presenters, the challenge was consistency of how these performance elements were effectively passed on to the rest of the class. At times, it became easier for just one of the students in these groups to present. That is fine, however, the contributions of the rest of the group would become unclear. In the future, I could further delineate the responsibilities of each student within these performance-related topics – giving them each a more specific task within the topic. The topic of finding Arabic poetic texts was highly effective in both the classroom presentation and the concert performance. For all of the

topics, I continue to be surprised with the level of ingenuity of our Trinity students and their ability to contextualize information in a way that further enhances their experience with the musical components.