



Cultural Modulations

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By Brian Clark

It's no small task to mix past and present, East and West, and produce sweet music from the combination. But making music that bridges cultures is what Tarik and Julia Banzi, of the Portland-based musical group Al-Andalus, do.

The two, whose performances have received adulatory reviews throughout the western United States, took their name from the region of southern Spain that the Arabs controlled for 800 years. From the early eighth century to the late 15th century, dance, art and music and many other cultural forms flourished in al-Andalus in a unique melting-pot of Muslim, Christian, Jewish and even African traditions.

"We are fusing the music of different cultures to create something new," says Tarik, who grew up in Tetuan, Morocco. He performs primarily on the bottle-shaped 'ud, the Arab instrument from which the lute and guitar developed. He is also an accomplished painter who has exhibited at more than 30 shows in Spain, where he completed doctoral work in fine arts at Madrid's Complutense University.

Tarik and Julia met in 1985 during one of Tarik's performances of flamenco jazz. At the time, he was a sought-after composer and performer for major Madrid theater companies and Spanish cinema and television. He had recorded with Paco de Lucia and Enrique Monte, two of the most popular flamenco musicians of all time. Julia was making her mark as one of few world-recognized female flamenco guitarists. A native of Denver who had spent several years studying guitar in San Francisco, she had moved to Spain to follow her attraction to the passion and emotion of flamenco, studying under Spanish teachers.

They married in 1986 and performed together throughout Europe. Now, their joint repertoire of fully two dozen instruments highlights the kamanjah, or Arab violin, the nay, or reed flute and the darabukkah, a ceramic drum.

Leaving Spain, they chose to live in Portland "to reach a broader market and to do more than film scoring," says Julia.

Their response has been overwhelmingly positive. Robert McBride, music director for Oregon Public Broadcasting, was a member of the committee that selected Al-Andalus's "Taktokah" for the 1994 Portland Metropolitan Arts Commission compact disc "The Bridge." He calls their music "something timeless, wonderful and very stimulating." Their original score for a Portland production of *Romeo and Juliet*, he adds, was "particularly outstanding and evocative."

There is still more to the diversity of Al-Andalus performances. "Breaking down cultural barriers with our 'young audience' performances is a delight," says Julia, adding that in October they performed in schools for more than 2,500 children, who danced as well as listened and were also invited to handle the instruments. Over the summer, the Banzis played in New Mexico for AWAIR, and Arab-American educational group, under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Tarik composes most of Al-Andalus's new works, but both husband and wife frequently collaborate in mixing flamenco, classical music and jazz, says Julia. "It's obvious where our music's roots are, but we are not limiting ourselves on where we go."

Although the pair have performed with as many as 20 other musicians, they are returning to a duo format. "We're tracing a new path for Arabic music," says Tarik. "Defining that route is clearer with two performers."

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