

**Ensemble Fawaz Baker
Alep-Brest**

Hirustica (51 mins)



A delicate reminder of the precious traditions of Syria



Aleppo in northern Syria has lived through tragedy. Its name now resonates with the pain of a brutal war,

which makes the grace and beauty of its artistic traditions all the more vital, precious and important. Many of those traditions are now being preserved outside the country. Here is one such delicate piece of cultural preservation from an exiled *oud* player in France.

Fawaz Baker was once the head of the Aleppo Conservatory of Music. Today, he travels from France to the refugee camps of Lebanon to keep the music of his home town alive among its diaspora. His four-piece ensemble bring together a meditative collection of pieces in the Middle Eastern *maqam* modal tradition, mostly traditional with arrangements by Baker.

In this ensemble, Baker is joined by Syrian percussionist Samir Homsî, guitarist Manon Courtin and double bassist Helena Récalde. Aleppo is one of the great cosmopolitan centres of the Islamic world, and these Arabic, Syrian, Armenian, Turkish and Kurdish tunes – including a languid tango by the great Aleppan Omar al-Batsh – illustrate its richness. This album echoes a soundscape, the influences of which stretch from Morocco and Spain all the way into Central Asia. It's a hypnotic journey.

NATHANIEL HANDY

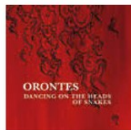
TRACK TO TRY *Karte*

**Orontes
Dancing on the Heads of Snakes**

Worlds Within Worlds (28 mins)



Varied album of oud fusion



Orontes began as a Syrian-Spanish project in the city of Homs, but ceased to function when the catastrophic

civil war made further collaboration impossible. Now they have re-emerged, led by *oud* player Michel Gasco, with an all-Spanish line-up. The musicians are from diverse backgrounds and the songs on this album – all Gasco originals – have a non-specific Middle Eastern style, without referring specifically to any one country or genre.

Across the six tracks, the varied and tasteful percussion carries the music along with just the right amount of propulsion. However, the compositions mostly consist of short melodic fragments repeated endlessly by the *oud*, sometimes with other instruments playing in unison. The result is a feeling of listening to lengthy introductions for songs that never happen. The flute and violin are mostly used to add some atmospheric, but the sound balance puts the *oud* way out in front and there is little sense of creative interplay. Along with the conspicuously short playing time, this gives the whole album a half-baked feel. Orontes are clearly adventurous musicians and maybe some new collaborations will stimulate them to greater things.

JO SETTERS

TRACK TO TRY *Khorasan's Secret*

**Al Qahwa
Cairo Moon**

Al Qahwa (73 mins)



Evoking Cairo's coffee houses: a stimulating listen



This exciting album is rooted in a rich Middle Eastern soundscape.

It's performed by a Canada-based quartet of musicians hailing from Egypt, Greece, Iran and Canada, who capture the passionate hustle and bustle of Egyptian coffee house culture – indeed, Al Qahwa translates as 'The Coffee House.' They draw from a diverse repertoire including originals, Sufi devotional pieces and songs from the golden age of Egyptian cinema.

Lead vocalist Maryem Tollar sings in both Arabic and English. A surprising track is 'Little Lamb', in which she sings William Blake's 'The Lamb' accompanied by Arabic instruments. While such daring experiments can risk sounding superficial and crass, Tollar has the cultural grounding and rare talent to experiment in a tasteful manner. Al Qahwa make use of diverse instruments such as *ney*, *qanun*, *oud*, saxophone, violin and *daf*, culminating in busy, urgent harmonies; and along with Tollar's melismatic vocals the quartet evoke the yearning, ecstatic *tarab* of Oum Kalthoum. Al Qahwa's virtuosity shines through on 'Sama'i Blues', which incorporates subtle jazz flavours and benefits greatly from the presence of guest violinist Dr Alfred Gamil. It is a thrilling listen.

SHUKRI HABIB ALI

TRACK TO TRY *Blood (Live)*



Dunia Opalko

TOP OF THE WORLD



BUY NOW

**El Khat
Saadia Jefferson**

Batav Records (57 mins)



Updating Yemeni traditions – this album is the Khat's meow

On first impressions this sounds like a Middle Eastern Manu Chao.

Or maybe DIY Ethio-jazz. Or then again, it could be desert-scorched Balkan beats.

It is, first and foremost, the story of Tel-Aviv-based Eyal El Wahab's search for his Yemeni roots. With his international group El Khat he uses an orchestra of traditional, modern and home-made instruments. There are powerful horn riffs, razor-sharp electric-guitar breaks, shimmering organ contours and driving basslines, underpinned by a relentless clatter and crazy dance of percussion.

The whole thing is shot through with a deep sense of longing and melancholy, reflecting the leader's search for a distant homeland – the echo of Yemeni folk songs never far away.

The album has a naive, home-made sound to it, but there is clearly a sophisticated, creative mind guiding the project. In fact, El Wahab was lead cellist in the Jerusalem Andalusian Orchestra before he left in order to focus on this new work. In the end, this glorious cacophony is an amalgam of all the above elements and the result is one of the most original albums of the year in any genre.

JO SETTERS

TRACK TO TRY *Ya Raiyat*