

Martinez couple shares music of the Arab world at library concert series

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MARTINEZ -- Wednesday evenings are music nights at the Martinez home of Yosifah Rose and Nathan Craver.

It's a time when their longhair black cat, Sophia, situates herself in the middle of the living room to listen to a private concert by Rose, who plays the qanun, a Turkish string instrument, as her husband plays the oud.

"(The cat) really enjoys listening to the music," said Craver.

The couple recalls that when they met through the San Francisco Folk Music Club, it was a magical, musical moment in time.

It was 1987 and Rose and Craver bonded over their passion for music -- he with his folk-rock background and she with her lifelong study of Arabic music. Together, the couple, who married in 1989, explored several musical styles through the years.

Then when Craver embraced his wife's passion for Arabic music and learned how to play the oud, a pear-shaped string instrument, the couple formed Al 'Azifoon in 2005 with other students of their Arabic music teacher, Elias Lammam. Their mission is to play the repertoire they were learning in his classes and to share Arabic music with the public.

As part of the Contra Costa County Library Summer Reading Festival's theme of "One World, Many Stories," the Orinda Library presents "Al 'Azifoon, Eastern Strings" on July 27, featuring music of the Arab world. This is the second concert of the Orinda Library Summer Music Series.

The group will also perform on Aug. 16, at the Pleasant Hill Library.

Rose and Craver, former Concord residents, said the library is an ideal venue to introduce Arabic music to the public because the concert is free and the repertoire is suitable for all generations.

"As an educator, my goal is to share Arabic culture and music with the public through collaborating with the library," Rose said. "This concert series is such a gift to our community."

The couple will be taking questions from the audience about the history of Arabic music as well as facts about the differences between Western and Arabic musical styles and the instruments.

Percussionist Cynthia Rutherford will join Rose and Craver at the concert. The musicians will share the history and legend of the oud, qanun, riqq, tabula and joura.

Rose and Craver said their trip to southern Spain -- a region which has a rich, cultural Arab history -- enriched their interest in Arabic music.

Craver bought his oud during a trip to Egypt. Rose, who learned to play by ear, said she's very passionate about playing the qanun, an instrument she has recently learned how to play.

"I love playing the qanun and will be a student of this instrument for the rest of my life," she said.

The songs the group will play have universal themes most people can relate to, Rose said.

"One song is about homesickness and how the breeze of love will take you back home," she said. "It's very nostalgic."

People can relate to love songs."

The couple said that perhaps after the concert, audience members who are curious to know more about Arab music may check out books and CDs at the library. They also added that the library provides an intimate venue which gives the audience a chance to see the instruments up close as well as have a chance to meet the musicians.

Al'Azifoon, which also includes musicians Paul Ohanesian and Zaid Ali, regularly performs at El Morocco Restaurant in Pleasant Hill.

"The library is a window to worlds that aren't part of our daily life. You can go through stacks of books and a new world opens up," Rose said. "Presenting music is a natural extension of that. Music is such a universal language. You don't have to speak a language to appreciate the music from another part of the world."

IF YOU GO

WHO: Al 'Azifoon Arabic Music group

WHAT: Summer Reading Festival Music Series

WHEN: 6:45 p.m., July 27 at Orinda; Aug. 16 at Pleasant Hill

WHERE: July 27, at Orinda Library, 26 Orinda Way; Aug. 16 at Pleasant Hill Library, 1750 Oak Park Blvd.

INFORMATION: Visit

www.alazifoon.com