

# Middle East

## Taner Akyol Trio Dance to the Sun

Enja (55 mins)

★★★★

The old joanna proves it can do Turkish music too



Turkey has no shortage of *baglama* (lute) masters working on new forms of expression, and Europe has no shortage of transnational groups using Oriental instruments. But this album, from *saz* player Taner Akyol, wins you over with its integrity of purpose, originality and strikingly dramatic intensity of the music. Here the Turkish material – compositions and instrumental sounds – are in deep and meaningful dialogue with the piano, that most symbolic instrument of European music, played by Greek pianist Anthonis Anissegos, with the percussion instruments of David Kuckhermann acting as catalyst.

The improvisations are frequent and fearless, but the traditional melodies in this well-balanced repertoire are treated with respect. The original pieces by Akyol are oriented towards dancing rhythms, and the traditional pieces range from the Aegean to Azerbaijan, including a *deyis*, or mystical song, composed by Arif Sağ on a poem by the 15th-century poet Şah Hatay (with lyrics included and bravely translated). In the first track, the trio plays a composition by piano virtuoso and political polemicist Fazıl Say, based on a song by famous bard Aşık Veysel.

Rarely have the various fusion experiments between European and Turkish music in the fields of classical composition or jazz achieved such a degree of success, without even a shade of postcard Orientalism.

Francesco Martinelli

## Hossein & Raha Alizadeh with the Hamavayan Ensemble If Like Birds and Angels I Could Fly

Traditional Crossroads (63 mins)

★★★★

Iran's next generation of maestros get a chance to shine



Perhaps the most striking aspect of this recent album by Hossein Alizadeh & the Hamavayan Ensemble is its showcasing of emerging young talent from Iran, including female vocalist Raha and Alizadeh's twin sons, Saba and Nima. Alizadeh is one of Iran's most prolific and well-respected classical musicians. His recorded work outside Iran for the last several years has tended to be with high-profile musicians, such as legendary vocalist Mohammad Reza Shajarian.

Vocalist Raha brings a breath of fresh air to a tradition which has been dominated in recent years by a small number of established and well-known vocalists – mainly male, due to official restrictions on solo female singers in Iran itself.

For my taste, the musical material itself is less interesting than some other recent releases of Iranian classical music, and doesn't really do justice to the wonderful musicians. There's a little too much of Alizadeh's *tar* and not enough of the other artists. The tracks are mainly slow *tasnifs* (songs with ensemble accompaniment), for which much of the poetic interest – so important to the listening experience of this music – will be lost on non-Persian speaking audiences. Still, translations of the texts are provided in the liner notes, and these give some idea of the mystical and spiritual ambience of the music. There are a few places, however, where the younger musicians come into their own: there's the beautiful instrumental trio of Alizadeh and his two sons and the magical sound of Pasha Hanjani's *ney* accompanying Raha. Virtuoso percussionist Pejman Hadadi, however, doesn't get a look in. There is so much more that could have been done with these amazing musicians.

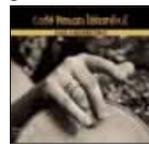
Laudan Nooshin

## Café Aman Istanbul Fasl-ı Rembetiko

Kalan (48 mins)

★★★★

Classic old Greek chestnuts given a new lease of life



Deep currents are crossing the blue Aegean – the Greek economic crisis and the Turkish ascent are altering old balances, and for the first time in decades the Greek community in Istanbul is increasing its numbers, simply because the chance of a job is much better. Stelyo Berber is an Istanbul-based Greek deeply steeped in this complex culture; he's also a well-known musician and researcher, who has worked with luminaries such as Muammer Ketenoğlu and coordinated the masterful *Songs of Pontus* compilation, also on Kalan. This CD benefits fully from Berber's rich background and is the result of several years of work with his Café Aman Istanbul band. These performances and arrangements are heartfelt and energetic, giving new life to classic songs – despite the fact that these are famous songs that almost any musician in Istanbul can trot out at will. 'Telegrafın Tellerine', for instance, (Birds on the Telegraph Wires) was recently sung by the Galatasaray fans after winning the championship to taunt arch rivals Fenerbahçe, the 'Canaries'.

Every song has its own groove and

special attention has been given to the precise rendition of the different rhythms, *hasapikos* and *zeybekikos*. The group are true to the *makam* (melodic modes) considered essential by Vamvakaris to true *rebetika* music. A standout track in this respect is the rendition of the classic song of exile, 'San Apokliros Girizo'. Berber and his wife Pelin alternate vocals in Turkish and Greek, while Erdem Şentürk and Serkan Halili provide imaginative solos on *oud* and *kanun* and Neyzen Özseri gives a jazzy drive on the bass. This is already global music – tango rhythms mix with Arabic influences in 'Gülbahar' – brought to life by a group of dedicated, creative musicians.

Francesco Martinelli

## Samy El Maghribi Jewish-Arab Song Treasures

Buda Musique (75 mins)

★★★★

Post-war celeb of Jewish North Africa



Here's another exemplary piece of music history from Buda Musique, its liner notes adorned with a weighty chunk of scholarship by the Institut du Monde Arabe's musicologist Rabah Mezouane. Samy El Maghribi was one of the important modernisers of Jewish Algerian music of the mid-20th century, a singer and lutenist born in Morocco, and later resident in France and Canada. Like his Algerian and Tunisian colleagues, El Maghribi combined elements of Egyptian popular styles which dominated the Arab world in the 1950s with aspects of North African folklore, in his case particularly the Andalusian styles of Tlemcen and northern Morocco, and touches of the jazz introduced by US troops arriving at the end of World War II. Running his own Samyphone label, El Maghribi achieved international fame with his fluid melodious voice, guttural lute, and matinee idol looks, before giving up a large part of his career on becoming a rabbi in 1967: his last performance took place in Casablanca shortly before his death in 2008. This CD is an excellent introduction to his work, and a memorial of sorts.

Phil Sweeney

## Yaron Levy Soundshades

Magda Records (60 mins)

★★★★

Lute looper with a curate's egg of a debut



This is an intriguing album with moments of genuine excitement, beauty and ingenuity.

Soundshades is the

first recording from Yaron Levy, an Israeli composer and *oud* (lute) player with a gloriously sumptuous tone and the musical bravery to extend an improvisation beyond the obvious. He offers his fellow musicians – playing violin, cello, *kanun* (zither), woodwind and percussion – equal space to shine. Levy's style is rooted in the traditions of the Near East, with noticeable influences from medieval Europe and elements of contemporary studio technology – which could be considered either very effective or just puzzling. The title-track is a prime example of this: one of the most successful uses of oud-looping you'll hear is overburdened by a reverb-soaked 'atmospheric' opening and rogue voice samples; similarly, the aching, slow-burn crescendo of 'Wellsprings' climaxes with alarmingly histrionic vocals. However, these slips of judgement cannot detract from some excellent performances: Levy's percussive oud is perfectly balanced by the dark sonority of Eyal Seya's Turkish clarinet and Mahran Moreb delivers an edgy *kanun* solo over the mesmeric ostinato of 'Kol Kohvey Boker', which lends a real sense of excitement and risk. The weary cliché 'repays repeated listening' really is true of *Soundshades*. Not least of all because then you'll know when to reach for the fast-forward button.

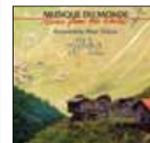
Bill Badley

## Ensemble Mze Shina Ushba: Georgian Harmonies

Buda Musique (66 mins)

★★★★

French mini-ensemble prove that less can be more



The group Mze Shina (Inner Sun) is actually a French quartet – three men and one woman – specialising in Georgian vocal polyphony. And they do it extremely well. While the vocal power of the big Georgian choirs, who normally sing this music, is obviously much greater, these one-to-a-part recordings have a special clarity and intimacy. The angular and idiosyncratic vocal lines come across more clearly and the female solo and male drones in the final 'Orvela' is gorgeous.

The group perform 24 songs from all over Georgia, several of them accompanied by *panduri* and *chonguri* lutes. Highlights include 'Romelni Kerubimta', a liturgical song with gorgeous vocal suspensions; 'Varado', a lament from Abkhazia with a tragic Caucasus mountain story behind it; and even 'Tchakrulo', a classic song from Kakheti, usually rendered by a mass of voices, sounds very powerful in this quartet formation with male and female vocals in harmony.

Simon Broughton

## Mahsa & Marjan Vahdat Twinklings of Hope

KKV (66 mins)

★★★★

Songs from a Persian mansion



I first heard Iranian sisters Mahsa & Marjan Vahdat in Istanbul in 2006. The power in their voices, so perfectly matched and intertwining around each other was a revelation. We were all there for a Freemuse meeting about music censorship. Sadly, solo (or duo) women singers are not permitted to perform in Iran except for all-female audiences. The Vahdat sisters have released several albums on the Norwegian KKV label, most of them fusion projects, and have contributed a track to KKV's *Lullabies from the Axis of Evil* album in 2004. But this is the first recording where the power and beauty of their voices really comes across. It was recorded with three instrumentalists on *ney* flute (Pasha Hanjani), plucked *setar* (Atabak Elyasi) and percussion (Ali Rahimi) in an Qajar period Persian mansion in Tehran belonging to the Italian embassy. It's a beautiful location for a traditional ensemble. Some of the words are by the great Persian poets Hafez and Rumi, others are contemporary, but the music is timeless. The breathiness of the *ney*, the tingling delicacy of the *setar*, the punctuation of drums and the overlapping voices in 'Garden of Visions' are magical. A soft *ney* introduction leads to the drama of 'Crane', a powerful song yearning for freedom. The words are intensely poetic and often hard to interpret (despite translations), but the effect of the songs is transformative.

Simon Broughton

## Ali Akbar Moradi & Bahar Movahed Goblet of Eternal Light

Traditional Crossroads (42 mins)

★★★★

Ancient poetry from the People of the Truth



Ali Akbar Moradi is a master of the Kurdish *tanbur* (long-necked lute) and one of the great traditional musicians of Iran. He has a deep knowledge of the sacred repertoire of the Yarsan or 'People of the Truth', a mystical faith in the Kurdish region. He featured in *Songlines* when we did a piece around *In the Mirror of the Sky*, his powerful collaboration with Kayhan Kalhor (a Top of the World in #26). On this album Moradi is working with Bahar Movahed, a singer who has had vocal training with Shahram Nazeri and Shajarian, two of Iran's greatest

vocalists. There are just three named musicians involved: Movahed, with her warm, clarinet-like voice; Moradi on *tanbur*; and Ali Rahimi on *daf* (frame drum). There are also unidentified backing vocals. Moradi and Movahed's relationship is much more than a vocalist and accompaniment. It is a true partnership, and Moradi's *tanbur* has a ferocious power at certain moments and a feather-like delicacy at others.

The repertoire comes from both Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan and the seven poems have a mystic quality, with lyrics mostly by poets of the 19th century. Three of them are by Sayyed Abdolrahim (1806-1882), known as Mowlavi-e Kurd (The Kurdish Rumi). The accompanying booklet isn't up to 'Traditional Crossroads' usual high standards, with dodgy English and a messy layout, but the music is excellent. It's a rare insight into a remarkable and little-known repertoire.

Simon Broughton



## VARIOUS ARTISTS

### Radio Beirut: Sounds from the 21st Century

Galileo (58 mins)

★★★★

Whistle-stop tour of the sounds of young Beirut



There's an inevitable overlap between *Radio Beirut*, compiled by the German journalist Dagmar Golle, and last year's *Golden Beirut* CD on Out Here. But it's a testament to the strength of the emerging new music scene in Beirut that its music warrants two such collections in such a short space of time. Golle has cast her net somewhat wider than *Golden Beirut*, which concentrated rather too heavily on the city's alt-rock scene. The best of Lebanese indie is still here, with tracks by Soap Kills, New Government, Zeid & the Wings and The

Incompetents, none of whom are innovative enough to persuade the average Snow Patrol fan to switch allegiance. But there's plenty of more interesting stuff with deeper roots in Lebanese tradition, including band of the moment Mashrou' Leila, whose potent fusion of Middle-Eastern melodies, classical Oriental violin and Western electronica is showcased with three tracks. The larger-than-life Lebanese composer, producer and label owner Michel Eleftheriades is represented by two of his multifarious projects, the trad-based *oud* explorations of the Chehade Brothers and the Cuban-Arabic fusions of Hanine Y Son Cubano. The diva-like Soumaya Baalbaki fuses tango with Arabic forms, while the litting Arabic folk-rock of Youmna Saba suggests a Lebanese Laura Marling. Unlike Beirut's rather derivative indie bands, each one of the aforementioned offers something new and original. And for that diversity alone, this collection pips to the post last year's *Golden Beirut* comp.

Nigel Williamson

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