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American musicologist working to promote Kuwait's cultural heritage

AUK to open new Heritage Center in November

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KUWAIT: Music has always been a prominent aspect of Arab culture, with the oud being recognized as a symbol of this tradition. However, the musical tradition of certain Arab countries such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia has not been given much prominence and has not received enough exposure.

It is this cultural gap that Dr. Lisa Urkevich, Professor of Musicology and Director of the Humanities and Arts Division at the American University of Kuwait (AUK), wishes to fill. Dr. Urkevich is leading an initiative to open a Heritage Center at AUK which will focus on creating greater awareness of Kuwait's heritage and cultural traditions and will be open to the public.

AlWatan Daily spoke exclusively to Dr. Urkevich about her work on opening the center as well as her undivided commitment to Arab music.

"They say that you just know that you'll be involved in music ... music chooses you," Dr. Urkevich said, explaining that she has been interested in music since the early age of five.

"I think I own over 100 instruments, I was a conductor at one time in my life, I play the piano, teach the guitar here in Kuwait and played the French horn for 20 years, I also play a lot of drums," the professor stated.

She travelled to the Middle East on a research grant from the U.S. and became interested in the music of the region. After living in Saudi Arabia for four years and writing a PhD on Saudi Arabian music, Dr. Urkevich decided to move to Kuwait where she joined the staff at AUK.

Her ties to Saudi Arabia are still very much evident and she recently took a group of Kuwaiti students to Saudi to study the country's music.

Dr. Urkevich believes that Arab music is unique because of its diversity: "There are three different types of Arabic music connected to the sea, city and desert... The music of the Arabian peninsula is fantastic, it's a music people don't really know about," the professor explained.

Although Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are closely related in their culture and traditions, Dr. Urkevich sees a clear difference between the musical traditions of both countries. "We're people of the sea," she said. "Kuwait has fascinating sea music (translated as Bahri music) ... and has totally readapted the music of Saudi Arabia."

Her favorite singer is Awad Dokhi, an old male traditional singer, but she also enjoys the work of contemporary singers such as Abdullah Ruwaished. Not only does Dr Urkevich love Arabian music, she is also in love with Kuwait itself. "I love everything about Kuwait, I've been here for five years and Kuwaitis are the nicest people I've met ... I can't say that about any other country," she stated.

Dr. Urkevich is working on increasing awareness about the music of the region through her work as a professor of Musicology at AUK and describes the experience of teaching at AUK as "wonderful."

"I teach a class called 'Music of the Arabian Peninsula' and the students are so eager to learn and participate ... Not only are they learning about Western music but they get a taste of their own traditional music. Other music classes are very successful too." With her love for music always on the forefront, Dr. Urkevich is also leading an initiative to open the AUK Heritage Center which will be located on campus and is expected to be launched on Nov. 18.

"This is a new center and our goal is to preserve and increase awareness of the culture of Arabian music, to make people aware of this rich culture and to give them a flavor of this rich heritage," the professor explained.

However, the center will not only focus on the past and display the old traditions of the Arabian Peninsula.

It will also focus on what students feel is the future of Kuwait's heritage and traditions, such as how the daraa will be worn in the future and how music will change.

"Our aim is to make the center a combination of all the traditional places in Kuwait, such as Sadu House and the Kuwait national museum," Dr. Urkevich explained.



Professor of Musicology and Director of the Humanities and Arts Division at the American University of Kuwait Dr. Lisa Urkevich. (Al Watan)

"We're really excited about this center. It's the first time we will have something like this in Kuwait," she added. "We are trying to preserve the Arabian culture."

It's really cutting edge what we're doing especially since everyone is involved in it so it has becomes more than just an academic project," Dr. Urkevich concluded.