

## WORLD MUSIC

**El Gusto**

Barbican, London

There seems to be no stopping Damon Albarn. Besides rocking with Blur, working on an opera for Manchester's International Festival and travelling to Africa to work with musicians there, he has recently added "record producer" to his portfolio of talents. His maverick tendency is apparent in that, too, in a record of old-style, postwar, pre-independence Algerian *chaabi* songs played by an orchestra of men in their 70s.

To support its release, El Gusto, the 42-strong ensemble of ouds, guitars, strings, piano and percussion players, came to the Barbican's stage last week. The two-hour set was impressive, full of grace and vitality. The array of musical talents – which included award-winning Maurice el Médioni on piano – pulled together rather than individually stealing the spotlight. But as an evening of music it didn't hit the heights it was surely capable of.

The 18-song set was played pretty much at one level, lacking the light and shade required to take the audience on a journey. There was something of a relentless quality to it, which tended to bottle up the musical power clearly latent in the ensemble.

Yet there was no denying the wonderful texture of the sound. Nor the enthusiastic response from the mainly Algerian expat audience, whose women raised their voices in spirited ululation – the traditional screams of appreciation. There was a political point at the heart of this collaboration, too, in that it saw Arab and Jewish musicians reunited and playing together. Such multiculturalism was a common trait in the *chaabi* music that filled the bars and cafés in Algeria. But with the country's independence, musical tastes changed as Jews and Europeans left the country and a taste for classical Arabic music took hold. The 10-year civil war that ended in 2002 almost put an end to the country's music scene altogether.

To signal the renewed embrace, the show opened with a duet between an Algerian imam and a French rabbi, who fused their religious chants with the *chaabi* style. It was powerfully symbolic, but not the musical standout of the show, which reached its peak in the encore with the wonderful "Ya Rayah". The sound of the entire orchestra in full voice while strumming, plucking, bowing and beating their instruments was joyful. If only it could all have been like that.

★★★★☆

Mark Espiner