

## World music

### El Gusto

Barbican, London

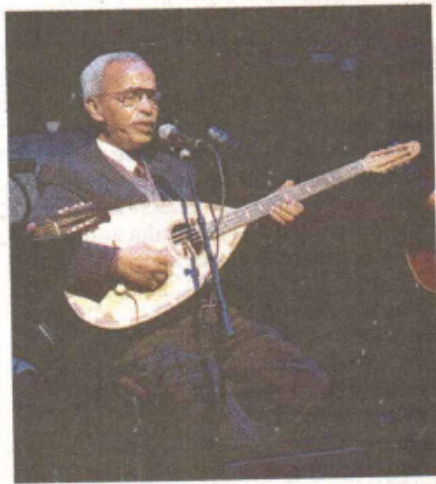
★★★★★

The economics may be daunting, but big band music is sneaking back into fashion. In Brazil, people are dancing to the samba of Orquestra Imperial, while in Europe this summer there have been rousing concerts from El Gusto, whose mission is to revive the *chaabi* songs that flourished in the 1940s and 50s, in the years before Algerian independence in 1962.

Their London debut was something of a challenge. Their songs are far less well-known here than in France, say, and they were without their musical director, pianist Abdel Hali Halo, who was ill. The orchestra responded by simply enjoying themselves and, at their best – as on *Assima*, a hymn to Algiers, or the inevitable finale, *Ya Rayah* – they were exhilarating. These 39 men, mostly elderly and soberly dressed in suits, were seated across the stage, and seemed to be playing for each other as much as for the audience, as they swapped lead vocals and embellished the songs with a full-tilt backing of violins, ouds (lute), guitars, accordion, *qanoun* (a descendant of the Egyptian harp), piano and hand-drums. Many of the songs had sturdy, sing-along melodies that at times echoed French *chanson* or even a dash of American R&B (Algeria was a musical melting pot in the 1950s) but dressed up with a rousing north African edge.

This is a project with religious and political implications, for the Algerian players were joined by French-based Jewish musicians, including celebrated pianist Maurice el Médioni, who was brought up in Algeria but left at independence. It was an inspired move to invite a French rabbi and Algerian imam to sing together in *chaabi* style, and equally encouraging to find Algerians cheering an emotional song about a *piéd-noir*, a European settler in Algeria. The evening would have been even more enjoyable had they offered the great El Médioni more than one solo.

**Robin Denselow**



Rousing north African edge ... El Gusto