

The Glorious Recital

London: Friday, 3rd March

Review by Sarah Waseem

“Irresistible in its recitation... an oral experience... euphony and musicality of the text...”

As I bundle into the stuffy room at the School of Oriental and African Studies, I hear the rules of *tajweed* being explicated. As I manoeuvre around the brothers and squeeze into the heaving room of Muslims – oh, and some non-Muslims – I expect to see a scholar, a suitably aged *qari* or an earnest student of Islamic knowledge. Instead I am greeted by the presence of the speaker who is an American, Caucasian lady reciting *surat-ul Humazah*.

Is it a Muslim? Is it an Orientalist? No, this is something quite different. I look again at the poster that brought me to the room and I do a double-take as I see ‘Organised with the SOAS Music Department... and the SOAS Islamic Society’. A most unholy union? I think not.

Later on that week Dr Kristina Nelson appeared as a guest speaker at The Glorious Recital (a translation of *al-Qur’an al-‘Adheem*) where she gave a short but poignant introduction to her thesis in Arabic Studies and Ethnomusicology which took her to Egypt in the late 1970s seeking the presence of some of the greatest Qur’anic reciters of modern times. Her book, “The Art of Reciting the Qur’an”, is a fascinating study of *tajweed* written by a genuinely interested individual into what is the lifeblood of the Muslim *ummah*.

The nation-wide tour organised by Quranica.com, which germinated from a

unique event at the Edinburgh Festival in 2005, now have showcase events in Glasgow and Edinburgh. They aim to “open the door to exploration of the Qur’an” in a time where interest in the West has probably never been so intense.

Sohaib Saeed, an articulate Master of Ceremonies on the night, provided an excellent introduction to the themes of Revelation, the Prophet (upon him be peace and blessings) and the nature of the Qur’an as an immensely self-aware scripture. The discussion of these themes would be periodically interjected by the focus of the event itself – the rendering of The Recital into the recitation.

Sheikh Muhammad Rif’at, a Turkish reciter; Sheikh Yaqoub Kutkut, an expert in the science of recitation of Jordanian origin; Muhammad Abdul-Rahman and Hammad al-Rahman Fahim all graced the excited audience with their presence reflecting at once the diversity and curious universality of their endeavour.

The simultaneous presentation of the English interpretation of the Qur’an during the recitation itself created a serene atmosphere of reflection and tranquillity. As the ears fed on the recitation, the eyes devoured the meanings, bringing to the mind a most fulfilling intellectual and spiritual harmony.

It’s an experience difficult to do justice to in a few words but is best summed up perhaps, by Dr Kristina Nelson herself, who continues to be enthralled with the fervour of the faithful:

“Enjoy yourselves and expect something beautiful.”