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**Ensemble Tartit opens window on a desert culture**

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Imagine being in the desert, and ahead seeing a line of tall nomads, robed in white and brown, walk single file, then sit cross-legged in a semicircle against a tent wall and the blue-gray backdrop of a dusk sky.

Watching Ensemble Tartit perform at Meany Theater Saturday night, all that was missing was camels and a fire, the scene was so evocative of what most of us have seen only in the pages of National Geographic.

The nine -- Tuaregs from the Timbuktu and Goundam area of northern Mali -- brought three-stringed lutes they plucked, a bowed one-string fiddle and hand drums, plus a guitar, but the music was essentially vocal. It was largely antiphonal, with one person singing a line, and the rest repeating it. The melody was repetitive in the best way: never boring, but rising and falling hypnotically in a fairly small range of notes

The women, wearing beautiful headbands sewn with button-size metal and glass pieces, sang with a nasal tone, clear, penetrating and expressive with no vibrato, and sometimes ornamenting notes in the back of the throat. The men were less nasal, but created a much more ornamental line, particularly a youth whose voice seemed not to have broken yet (given their voluminous coverings, it was hard to guess ages).

The performers announced and explained their songs in French, but had an interpreter at the side. This was enlightening, because song topics ranged from age-old love songs and ones of life in the encampment to songs on democracy, against war and on AIDS.

One came from a Sufi ancestor.

Often the singing was accompanied by shrill, short ululations, and by rhythmic hand clapping in which the audience was encouraged to join; and also by dancing, mostly from a seated position, swaying with arms and head. Sometimes two of them stood and danced with a foot shuffle, their bodies moving gracefully. It was subtle and understated dancing, so when one man actually hopped and jumped, the effect was quite startling.

The whole was an enthralling glimpse of a culture few of us have had a chance to experience.

Next season's World Music and Theatre Series is announced: Emil Zrihan, Moroccan-born cantor, Oct. 11; Burhan Ocal, Turkish percussionist, Nov. 1; Gypsy Spirit: Journey of the Roma, singers, dancers and musicians, Feb. 13-14; Shoghaken Ensemble, Armenian folk singers, musicians and dancers, April 3; TaikoProject: (Re)Generation, multimedia event with taiko drummers, April 30-May 1, 2004. Subscription tickets \$60-\$107, 543- 4880.

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