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Ambassadors from Zanzibar: Culture Musical Club pays call with mosaic of traditions.
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Sep. 20--Of all the exotic bands to land in Chicago during the ongoing World Music Festival, one stands apart from the rest. But it's not just geographical distance that distinguished the appearance of the Culture Musical Club of Zanzibar, nor the sweet fact that the ensemble was making its North American debut here. More important, this remarkable organization obliterated stylistic barriers that traditionally separate cultures. Or, to put it in other terms, the Culture Musical Club embraced seemingly opposed musical traditions in utterly seamless ways. The band--which played a mesmerizing performance Monday evening in Millennium Park (after a noontime show at Daley Plaza)--gives voice to the "taarab music" of its homeland. Taarab has been translated to mean "to be moved" or "agitated," a reference, perhaps, to the undulating dance rhythms and trance-like incantations at its core. In Zanzibar, few taarab ensembles match the popularity of the Culture Musical Club, which makes it an ideal ambassador for an artistic tradition little known in the United States. Listen closely, and it's not difficult to detect the roots of this music. If the violins and accordions represent the musical influences of the West, the African percussion and Middle Eastern oud articulate the sounds of another hemisphere. Add to the mix elements of Indian, Cuban and even Japanese musical culture, and you have one of the least likely--and most alluring--large ensembles to play this year's festival. The music that the band performed in the Pritzker Pavilion proved seductive, with multiple strands of melody unfolding in sequence. As vocal soloists and female choir articulated melodic lines, the larger instrumental ensemble answered and amplified them. Yet the unusual chord progressions and unorthodox stop-start phrasings defied notions of melody and harmony that long have defined European-based music. While the cross-cultural nature of this band helps explain its popularity around the world, so does its level of musicianship, which was expressed in the intricacies of its vocal work and the unanimity of its strings. The Culture Musical Club of Zanzibar performs at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday in Hamilton Park, 513 W. 72nd St.; free; 312-742-1938. hreich@tribune.com

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