

# Rediscovering Sheikh Youssef Al-Manyalawy (1847-1911)

Amira Noshokaty, Wednesday 19 Oct 2011

Al-Manyalawy: Icon of Egyptian musical renaissance, master of the spiritual art of Inshad chants



This week Egypt marks the centennial of Sheikh Youssef Al-Manyalawy's (1847-1911) death with a three-day event that includes seminars, music workshops, a concert as well as CDs and books to commemorate this musical icon.

The celebration is the brainchild of the Foundation for Arab Music Archiving and Research (AMAR) in collaboration with the National Centre for Theatre Music and Folk Arts, as well as the foreign relations bureau of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture.

A key voice in the Egyptian musical renaissance, (Mohammed Ali's reign - 1930), Sheikh Youssef Al-Manyalawy's brilliant voice was among the few that chanted in the Khedival courts, the famous Azbakeya theatres, and called the dawn prayers at Al-Manyal mosques.

According to AMAR's book titled *Youssef Al-Manyalawy, Singer of the Arabic Renaissance, His Artworks and Era* (Dar Al-Saqi, 2011) by Frederic Lagrange, Mohsen Sowa and Mustapha Saeed, Al-Manyalawy is one of the great Arabic singers of the nineteenth century. He was a friend and competitor of music icon Abdou Al-Hamouly and was often referred to by record companies as the 'Caruso of the Orient' (Enrico Caruso (1873-1921) was a grand opera singer at the time).

Born in Upper Egypt and raised in Cairo on Manyal El-Roda Island, he studied religion at Al-Azhar, and learnt the foundations of Inshad (religious chants) first hand from the masters of the spiritual art, such as Sheikh Khalil Moharam.

Soon Al-Manyalawy fell under the spell of Sufism and became a devotee of Al-Leithe Sufi path before he was twenty years old. However, it was his magnificent voice while chanting the dawn call to prayer and the religious chants that followed that made him popular with his Manyal neighbours and many families would invite him to private Inshad parties in which he would star, especially in the holy month of Ramadan.

During the reign of Khedive Ismail, he was among the Egyptian artists who led an art delegation to Istanbul to exhibit the grandness of Egyptian music to the Sultan.

“Despite being a famous singer, he never took off his sheikh attire nor did he ever deviate from his Sufi chants,” explained writer/journalist Youssef Al-Manyalawy, one of the great grandsons of Al-Manyalawy.

“He was a merchant by trade who valued his art, sang for his own merit, and whose concerts cost 100 golden Egyptian pounds at the time,” he added.

However, wealth did not isolate him from his social responsibilities and he built a shelter for his underprivileged fellow monshideen (religious chanters), right next to his house that is still there in Al-Manyalawy Street in Hadayek Al-Quba district, noted Al-Manyalawy.

Yet despite his fame, Al-Manyalawy's songs slowly but surely slipped away from the Egyptian national radio by 1931 and his music became among the rare classic collections that were preserved through individual efforts. Like many key figures of the renaissance era, time washed away his glamour, which was imprisoned in either old outdated records or stagnant representation that removed much of its essence.

Hence, the efforts of AMAR to document and digitalise dozens of musical treasures of the renaissance era to revive and rediscover their brilliance, and it started out with Al-Manyalawy's CDs and books.

This attempt might succeed in bringing classic Arabic music back into the limelight, however one problem must be taken into consideration.

According to Kamal Kassar, founder of AMAR, the problem is the misrepresentation of Arabic classical music. “Classical Arabic music beholds a vast room for improvisation,” Kassar explained, adding that unlike Western classical music, Arabic music beholds what scientists call heterophony (the simultaneous variation of a single melodic line). “Heterophony cannot be manifested in big orchestras, it's only achievable through a takht (small musical ensemble or orchestra) like the case of Om Kalthoum who had a large orchestra with her but always depended on a small takht group within the orchestra, such as Abdu Saleh on the qanun for the heterophony effect.”

Al-Manyalawy was also active in politics. “During the Orabi revolt (1879- 1882) he hid famous revolutionary writer and activist Abdallah Al-Nadim in his house,” explained Mustapha Saeed, researcher/music composer and director of AMAR.

One of Al-Manyalawy's famous songs titled ‘El-Bolbol Gani wa Qali’ (The nightingale came and told me) spoke about those patriotic icons that were forced into exile during the British occupation of Egypt, added Saeed

What makes Al-Manyalawy unique is his powerful and limitless vocal capabilities that could waltz between 21 musical maqams (musical modes) from the highest pitch to the deepest voice. He recorded some 83 records starting in 1903. “Despite his death in 1911, his records remained number one bestsellers and topped the legendary Om Kalthoum until 1930,” concluded Kassar.

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