SPOTLIGHT AMAR FOUNDATION

Nathaniel Handy speaks to founder Kamal Kassar and finds out how one man saved the world’s largest collection of classical Arabic music

Cairo, 2009. The family of the late Egyptian music historian Abd Al-Aziz Anani are clearing out his back room. Some 3,500 78rpm discs from the era of the first musical recordings in the Middle East, between 1903-33, plus magnetic bands, books, monographs and catalogues of recording companies, make it impossible to swing a cat. They decide to sell them. The buyer - Radio Israel - sparks an unsavoury backlash in the Egyptian press, and the family pulls out of the deal. They instead opt to pawn the lot - widely regarded as the finest collection of classical Arabic tarab recordings in existence. That is when Lebanese enthusiast Kamal Kassar steps in. "I had to intervene very quickly," he tells me. "I flew to Egypt before they changed their mind. I got it back to Lebanon in big cases, and then began opening it and discovered that it contained a unique history of the classical Arabic music."

Just how had the finest collection of classical Arabic music in the world come so close to oblivion? Why was it not housed in national archives, treasured by nations? To answer that question, Kassar takes us back to the early 20th century and a time when the extraordinary musical explosion of the Arab nahda (renaissance) was being committed to vinyl for the first time.

"Since the beginning of the 19th century, a new music - still rooted in tradition but developing new structures - had emerged," Kassar explains. "It was in many ways a repertoire evocative of the jazz era, in that improvisation of instruments and particularly the voice were a central component." However, as the 20th century gathered pace, the Middle East experienced the Western cultural tidal wave that was washing every shore on earth.

"The 1930s brought speaking movies, big orchestras, ladies in bourgeois dress, pianos, balalaika, tangos, pasodoble, and all kinds of Western records," says Kassar. "It killed our music and made it forgotten - totally." In the intervening years, Arab governments have done little to reverse this decline. "Our governments are underdeveloped," laments Kassar. "They don't care, they are corrupt."

When Kassar found the Anani collection, he knew that he couldn't keep it to himself. It was not his to keep. So he convened a conference at his home in Beirut, and the Arab Music Archiving and Research (AMAR) Foundation was born.

The foundation's aim is to reach as many people as possible, and breathe new life into the music. To this end, they release a new set of CDs annually, produce a monthly podcast and offer master classes from a group of expert musicians.

For Kassar, the dream is to see the revival of classical Arabic music as a living tradition in global musical culture. "This is why we work with modern musicians on our venture," says Kassar. "We want to open our music up, to give it oxygen. To give it a new dimension and a new way of developing. This is what I want to create."

ONLINE www.amar-foundation.org
ARTISTS Discover Kassar’s top five artists you should know, see p13
ABDEL HAY HILMI: AN ANTHOLOGY
AMAR-HONEST JONS, WEB ONLY

The liner notes to this four-CD set are in English, French, and Arabic, with each song’s maqam mode identified – Bayyati, Sabah, Sikah, or Rast. And while such details are only of interest to musicologists, an important point is made: each mode has its own colour and significance, in ways completely foreign to Western musical thinking.

But these recordings, made at the start of the 20th century by a great singer in the classical Egyptian improvisatory tradition, are fascinating, and the man himself emerges as the magnetic entertainer which by all accounts he was.

MICHAEL CHURCH
Abd Al-Hayy Hilmi
An Anthology (1857-1912)

This is a cross-section of the legacy of Egyptian singer Abd Al-Hayy Hilmi, whose final years of life coincided with the early days of gramophone recording. Hilmi sang for both the poor and the rich – which helped him quench his appetite for Paris suits, baccarat, hash and cocaine. However, his voice and musical charisma made up for it all. Hilmi had some of the greatest composers and instrumentalists at his disposal, such as Daoud Hosni, Ibrahim al Qabbani, Sami al Shawa and Ibrahim Salhoun. It's notable that those involved included Muslim, Jewish and Christian names alike. The text Hilmi sang included poetry by the venerated poet Al-Mutanabbi and the Sufi mystic Ibn al-Farid, even though Hilmi tended to use a text as a pretence for demonstrating dazzling vocal skills. This is the music of Egypt from the time before Oum Kalthoum, Asmahan and Mohammed Abdelwahab, before music had become mass culture.

Yet Hilmi was not a purist. Daoud Hosni incorporated many Turkish and Persian elements and Sami al Shawa's violin was a novelty in the Egyptian practice of Arabic music. And Hilmi embraced the gramophone. His recordings provided him with more income, and he and his musicians audibly revel in the studio – whether or not stimulants were contributing, as some outsiders have conjectured.

KELLY J. VAN DER LINDEN

TRACK TO TRY Shekaawutu Fa-Qalat
'Abd Al-Hayy Hilmī
An Anthology 1857-1912
Amar

Amar, the Lebanon-based Arabic Music and Research Foundation, is rescuing and digitising the earliest recordings of Arabic music, performances caught on fragile 78s. 'Abd Al-Hayy Hilmī is well worth preserving: a capricious diva who sang women’s songs as well as men’s, he died young of excessive drinking after a sea turtle feast. His voice, cajoling and improvisatory, shines out of the occasional lacquer crackle.
TOP CLASSICAL ARABIC ARTISTS
AMAR Foundation's Kamal Kassar selects five artists from their archives.

Abd Al-Hayy Hilmi
(1857-1912)
Egypt's bad-boy singer.
See the review on p79.

Leila Mourad
(1918-1995)
Egyptian singer and actress. Kassar was seven when he first heard her and was "struck by love."

Zaki Mourad
(1880-1946)
"A wonderful Egyptian Jewish singer."

Saleh Abdel Hay
(1896-1962)
"One of the greatest singers from the 1920s."

Sami al Shawa
(1889-1965)
"The greatest violinist of the Middle East."

+ MORE See p27 for our Spotlight feature on the AMAR Foundation

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To enter, answer: What does AMAR stand for?
Send your answer and address to:...
أغاني زمن تنتظر على الزمن

"نوفي عبد الحفي حلمي، قبل أكثر من قرن، لكنه كان دائماً إماماً في عالم الموسيقى.

بولي كامد قصية، شعبية جداً من العصابات التي صدح في الماضي في عام 1895، واستطاع في الفترة الأخيرة من حقبة المهنية من عام 1910 وحتى عام 1912 أن يسجل أعماله في الاستوديو، على عبد الحفي حلمي، يستوعب النغمات الموسيقية المفعمة، والأنوار المترنة، شبهوا في بعض الأحيان التوقيع المعاملة المفتوحة، وكان برجل حرف، وهو يبقى هم总体

الحفل بشكل غير مباشر، إلا أن أعماله لم يتم إعادة تقديمها إلى الجمهور بشكل كامل وكان

إلا في عام 2013، وذلك بفضل مؤسسة الوثائق والبحث في الموسيقى العربية في برلين، والتي ترأسها كامد قصية، وهي تشتهر بتقديم الأعمال الموسيقية الغنائية الأخرى.

أعمال عدن ويعرف، عام 1898، إلى جانب أعمال نجوم عرب في الفترة من 1899-1965.

وهكذا، فإن هذه الأعمال العامة والموسيقية كانت تجمع شعبيتها وتعمق حاصل على طريقها.

""

Words John Lewis  Photos Laurie Fletcher

The man making Arab music go pop

"Hilmi might have died more than a century ago, but he was the original rocker," says Kamal Kassar. He’s talking about the Egyptian singer Abd Al-Hayy Hilmi, born in Cairo in 1857.

In his short recording career – between 1903 and his death in 1912 – he made hundreds of albums. His tenor voice took liberties with classical Arabic maqam and love poems, improvising and inventing them. But, amazingly, it’s taken until 2013 for the first major retrospective of his work to be released.

Abd Al-Hayy Hilmi: An Anthology 1857-1912 is a four-disc box set released by Kamal Kassar’s Amar label, whose mission is to revive interest in forgotten Arabic music. Projects include a retrospective of work by the Egyptian violinist Sami Al-Shawa (1859-1965), and a collection of Syrian and Lebanese singers of the early 20th century.

“This was very popular music in its time,” says Kassar. “These musicians were household names and each of their discs would have sold thousands of copies, but by the 1930s, their popularity had declined.”

Kassar points out parallels in Western classical music. “Even Bach’s music was almost forgotten for a century. We want to bring this forgotten music to a wider audience. It is not difficult to understand it – these are beautiful melodies, songs of love, and life and heartbreak. It’s timeless music.”

amar-foundation.org
Abdu Al-Hamuli

They say they don’t need them, like they used to and in the case of Egyptian singer and musician Al-Hamuli, they’d be right. Born in 1896, he combined Egyptian and Turkish music – something that had never been attempted before. He was still making records up until his death in 1901.

Umm Kulthum

As Edith Piaf is to the French, Umm Kulthum is the most famous singer in the Arab world. Known as the ‘Star of the East’, she is remembered for classics such as Hagar and Ene Omri, and early recordings are now collectors’ items. Showing the affection Kulthum’s fans had for her music, her funeral was attended by more than four million people.

Saleh Abdel Hai

Abdel Hai was another Egyptian who devoted his entire life to singing. He sang in the classical ‘tarab’ style, often perched on a throne-like chair wearing a red turban. Despite his strong voice carrying songs like Lah Ya Babma also across more than half a century, recordings of him singing are exceptionally rare.

Asmahan

The Syrian singer’s life needs like a spy thriller and she ultimately became more famous for her personal life than her voice. She was accused of espionage during WWII and died in a mysterious car accident before shooting the end of her second film. Her best-loved song is Layali Al-Une fi Wannaa.

Bahiga Hafez

Born in Alexandria in 1908, Hafez gained a diploma in music from Paris and was the first female to appear in Egyptian cinema. She played the soundtrack for films, including Layla the Bedouin and the show-stopping Zaynab.