

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



Violinist Sami al Shawa who will be the subject of a future CD set by the foundation in 2015. Photo courtesy of the AMAR Foundation

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 under-developed,” laments Kassar. “They don’t care, they are corrupt.”

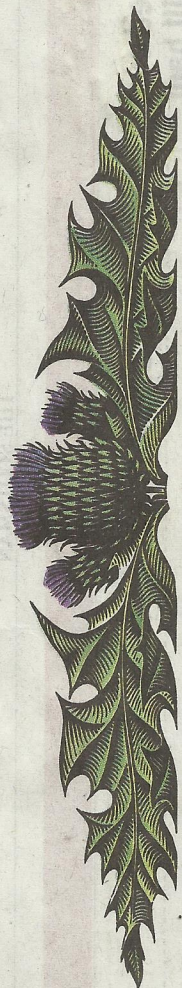
When Kassar found the Anani collection, he knew that he couldn’t keep it to himself. It was not his to keep. So he convened a conference at his home in Beirut, and the Arab Music Archiving and Research (AMAR) Foundation was born.

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



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WORLD



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

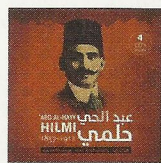
SONGLINES

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

Amar Foundation (4 CDs, 301 mins)



*Classic stuff from Egyptian song's
baddest of bad boys*



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, booze, 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, Asmah 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.

NEIL VAN DER LINDEN

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Plus Tim Harford: why can't banking be more like baking? Comm

THE WEEKEND

Islands £3.30; Republic of Ireland €3.50

s Newspaper

FINANCIAL TIMES | Saturday November 2 / Sunday November 3



'Abd Al-Hayy Hilmi 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 Hilmi 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.

SONGLINES

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."

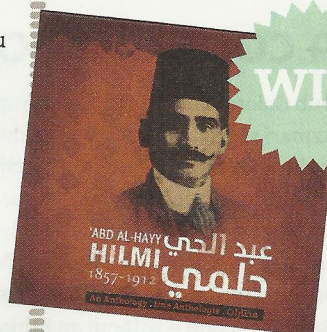
Saleh Abdel Hay
(1896-1962)

"One of the greatest singers from the 1920s."

Sami al Shawwa
(1889-1965)

"The greatest violinist of the Middle East."

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



We have three copies of the AMAR Foundation's latest release to give away.

To enter, answer: What does AMAR stand for?

See p5 for competition rules and address

بقلم جون لويس تصوير لوري فليتشر

أغاني زمان تنتصر على الزمن

"توفي عبد الحلي حلمي قبل أكثر من قرن. لكنه كان رائدا أصيلا في عالم الموسيقى"، يقول كمال قصار متحدثا عن المطرب المصري عبد الحلي حلمي، الذي ولد في القاهرة في عام 1857، واستطاع في الفترة الأخيرة من حياته المهنية من عام 1903 وحتى وفاته عام 1912 أن يسجل المئات من الاسطوانات. غنى عبد الحلي حلمي بصوته القوي المميز المقامات العربية والأدوار بحرية، متجاوزا في بعض الأحيان القواعد المألوفة الجاهزة، وكان يرتجل وهو يشدو بقصائد الحب بشكل يشير الدهشة، إلا أن أعماله لم تتم إعادة تقديمها إلى الجمهور بشكل واسع إلا في عام 2013، وذلك بفضل مؤسسة التوثيق والبحث في الموسيقى العربية (Amar) في بيروت، والتي يرأسها كمال قصار، والتي أصدرت مؤخرا مختارات موسيقية وغنائية رائعة من الأعوام 1857-1912، تقع في أربع مجموعات من الإسطوانات. وهذه المؤسسة تأخذ على عاتقها مهمة إحياء الموسيقى العربية القديمة وإخراجها من عالم النسيان، ومن مشاريعها القادمة إعادة تقديم أعمال عازف الكمان سامي الشوا (1889-1965) إلى جانب أعمال مجموعة من المطربين السوريين واللبنانيين من أوائل القرن العشرين.

ويقول قصار إن هذه الأعمال الغنائية والموسيقية كانت تتمتع بشعبية واسعة جدا في وقتها، مضيفا "كان الموسيقيون والمغنون أسماء كبيرة وشهيرة، ولو صدرت الاسطوانات في ذلك الوقت لبيعت منها آلاف النسخ، ولكن شهرتهم بدأت في التراجع في ثلاثينيات القرن الماضي". ويشير قصار إلى أن الموسيقى الكلاسيكية الغربية عانت من النسيان أيضا، ويقول "بأخ مثلا كان منسيا لنحو قرن من الزمن، نريد أن نقدم هذه الموسيقى المنسية إلى جمهور أوسع، وهي ليست صعبة الفهم، إنها أنغام جميلة، وأغان عن الحب والحياة والخسارة، إنها موسيقى خالدة".

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 maqams and love poems, improvising and reinventing 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 (1889-1965), 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

3

IDEAS

#1



Make room on your mp3 player for our top picks from Lebanon's Amar Foundation

Abdu Al-Hamuli

They say they don't make them like they used to and, in the case of Egyptian singer and musician Al-Hamuli, they'd be right. Born in 1836, 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 tek* and *Enta 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.

Salah Abdel Hai

Abdel Hai was another Egyptian who devoted his entire life to singing. He sang in the classical tarab style, often propped up on a throne-like chair wearing a red tarboosh. Despite his strong voice carrying songs like *Leh Ya Banafseg* across more than half a century, recordings of him singing are exceptionally rare.

Asmahan

The Syrian singer's life reads 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 *Layla Al-Ons fi Vienna*.

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*.



اليوم صار بإمكانك الإستماع الى
أساطير الطرب القديم على جهاز
mp3 بفضل مؤسسة Amar اللبنانية

عبد الحمولي

مطرب وملحن مصري، ولد عام 1836 وهو من أبرز الأسماء في عالم الموسيقى العربية في القرن التاسع عشر، وله فضل في تحديثها. قدم ألباناً تجمع بين المزايج المصري والتركي، وغنى مع فرقة "أبو خليل القباني" المسيحية الأرثوذكسية، من أشهر أغانيه "الله يصون دولة حسك"، و"أنت فريد في الحسن". قبل وفاته بأشباع عام 1901 سجل بعض أعماله على أسطوانات.

أم كلثوم

أشهر مغنية في العالم العربي على الإطلاق، لفتت بكونك الشرق. ولدت عام 1908 في قرية بمحافظة الدقهلية المصرية، وبدأت حياتها الفنية بالغناء الديني والإنشاد. مثلت ستة أفلام، وغنت كلمات أشهر الشعراء بألحان أعظم الملحنين، مثل كمال الطويل، ومحمد القصبجي، ورياض الشناطي. ومن ينسب أغانيها الخالدة مثل "هجرتك" و"أنت عمري" ونهج البردسي، و"أهل الهوى"؟ توفيت عام 1975، وشيعت في جنازة مهيبه شارك فيها نحو أربع ملايين شخص.

صالح عبد الحي

ولد في نهاية القرن التاسع عشر في مصر، وأمضى نصف قرن كامل في الغناء، ولا يذكر الطرب الاصل إلا ويحضر في الألبان عبد الحي بطربوشه الأحمر، جالساً على كرسيه، وهو يعني "ليه يا بنفسيج" الأغنية التي لا تزال شهرتها مستمرة حتى اليوم، أثار بحدوبة الصوت وحلاوة النغمة وامتداد النفس والحس على تقاليد الغناء الشرقي الاصل، وغنى الموشحات ومن أشهرها "يا شادي الألمان". لم يتزوج وكس حياته كلها للغناء، الى ان رحل عام 1962.

أسمهان

"لإلالي الأتس في فيينا"، "يا طيور"، و"يا ليت للبراق" هذه الأغاني الشهيرة هي بعض روائع أسمهان، المطربة الاميرة الآتية من جبل الدروز في سوريا. ولدت عام 1917 وهي أخت الموسيقار الشهير فريد الأطرش، واشتهرت بصوتها الأورالي الفريد وجملاتها الفائقة. هاجرت الى مصر لتبدأ مسيرتها في الغناء والممثل. قبل ان تكون كانت جاسوسة للمخابرات البريطانية، وتوفيت بحدات غامض قبل انتهاء تصوير فيلمها الثاني عام 1944.

بهيجة حافظ

ممثلة ومخرجة وكاتبة مصرية، ولدت في الإسكندرية عام 1908 لعائلة ارسطوقراطية. حصلت على دبلوم في الموسيقى من باريس، وهي رائدة في التمثيل والإنتاج السينمائي، وأول وجه نسائي يظهر في السينما المصرية. عزفت الموسيقى التصويرية للعديد من الأفلام الصامتة ومن أشهرها "إلالي البوابة"، و"زينب".