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REVIEWS AND CRITIQUE

Foundation for Arab Music Archiving and Research

Manal Nahhas

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A top a hill in the town of Al Qirna Al Hamra, in the Metn region of Mount Lebanon, overlooking Beirut and the sea, sits a large traditional mountain house. The lot of that house hosts the Foundation for Arab Music Archiving and Research (AMAR) in an elegant, simple building that resembles a kindergarten student's concept of a house: a quasi-rectangular structure capped by a triangle with a window that affords views of foliage and the road downhill to Beirut and the vast Mediterranean Sea.

The furniture inside is strikingly simple: two tables and a box near the door that could easily be overlooked. The box is in fact a phonograph – more than eighty years old – that holds captivating sounds. Inside the house, there is a cabinet of hundreds of white, oxidized envelopes that look like medical dossiers. This is where old music records are kept before their content can be transferred to CDs. This closet holds names now absent from the memory of the new generation: Mounira Mahdiyya, Ali Al Qasabji, Abdel Rahim Al Masloub, Abdel Hay Hilmi, Youssef Al Manilawi, and Mohammad Othman.

The founder of the center, Kamal Karim Kassar, pursues this archival and revivalist project to shed light on a forgotten dimension of the Arab Nahda, or renaissance which began in the late nineteenth century, a historical era altogether absent from secondary school curricula save for mention of icons such as Mohammad Abdu, Jamal Eddine Al Afghani, and Gibran Khalil Gibran. The books in these curricula do not even hint at the prominent role music played in the Arab renaissance, even though both Egyptian writers Tawfiq Al Hakim and Naguib Mahfouz have said that they counted musical theater, female singers, and musicians among their primary cultural influences.

Through this project, Kassar sweeps the dust off an element of the past that many believe has withered along with oral culture, left unpreserved, without trace.

Manal Nahhas: What kind of musical archive has been preserved by AMAR?

Kamal Kassar: AMAR's treasures comprise the largest Middle Eastern music collection in the world. This archive is made up of more than seven thousand 78 rpm (revolutions per minute) records, most of which date back to the period between the start of musical recording in 1903 and the 1930s. Recording music on this type of disk began in Egypt in 1903, then spread to reach Syria and Lebanon at a later stage. The emergence of this technology coincided with the golden age of Arabic music.

MN: What is the link between music of the early nineteenth century, Napoleon's campaign in Egypt, and the beginning of the Nahda?

KK: A significant artistic movement surfaced in Egypt at the start of the nineteenth century after the French campaign and the entry of foreign firms into the Egyptian market.

The Khedive wanted to transform Cairo into a city of splendor and importance to rival Istanbul. Thus, he demonstrated keen interest in sponsoring artists, as well as commissioning musical performances and building theatres. Egyptian royalty emulated him in sponsoring the arts, and consequently new forms of music appeared and developed. One of them was a form of singing known as Dawr, which emerged in the early nineteenth century and was later developed by Mohammad Othman and Abdouh Al Hamlawi in the second half of the same century.

MN: There are recordings on YouTube of sheikhs singing Quran verses with the intonations, rhythms, and musical style of Dawr. Did sheikhs influence the music of the Nahda?

KK: At the start of the twentieth century and amidst the surge in artistic production, German, English, French, and Lebanese companies began producing records for artists of all calibers, leaving a legacy of thousands of phonograph recordings. Artistic activity was peaking at the time, and the success of singers tempted a number of Sufi sheikhs to abandon their turbans and turn to singing. This is why we can clearly see the marks that Sufi singing has left on Dawr.

MN: What factors led to the decline of this era of music history?

KK: But the era of musical recording took a downturn in the 1930s with the rise of radio broadcasting and cinema. Composition was adapted for musical films, and the trend to imitate Western arts also appeared. At that time, Arabic music became hybrid, trying to integrate the sounds of both Western and Oriental instruments. But despite being influenced by Iranian and Byzantine music at an early phase and Western music later on, this music remains Arab in character.

MN: What effect did the World Wars and the Great Depression have on the closing of this chapter in Arabic music?

KK: The Great Depression beginning in 1929 shook the world economy, and as a result, the pace of musical production slowed down. Recording companies faced many

difficulties during that time. In addition to this, the archives of Bairdaphon and Gramophone in Germany were lost during the Second World War. Only part of the Gramophone archive survived and is currently owned by the English company EMI. Certain companies resort to this archive to produce little-known recordings by Arab artists such as Mohammad Abdel Wahab, as well as prominent Turkish singers and Egyptian divas from the period between 1920 and 1930.

MN: Did this era of Arabic music reach a climax, and did it leave behind a lasting legacy, equally impacting all cultures in the Arab world? Is music in the Arab world today stylistically unified?

KK: The important heritage of Arabic music is the creation of new forms of musical phrases, despite having slipped into oblivion. Musicologists around the world believe the period between 1903 and 1930 saw the emergence of Arabic and Middle Eastern classical music in Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. The musical styles of these countries are almost identical, while that of Iraq diverges from them even though it bears resemblance to the Middle Eastern musical heritage. Classical Iraqi Music was more influenced by Persian, Turkish, and Indian music and emerged to be quite unique. Furthermore, Iraqis have preserved their music more than other Arabs; they make an effort to collect old recordings and upload their content to the Internet.

MN: How did your hobby of collecting music become a professional archival practice? What is the role of the internet in the preservation of Arabic music and in connecting musicologists researching this musical history?

KK: The Internet has allowed me to communicate with others who share my interest in the old music of the Arab Middle East. I haven't stopped collecting and archiving these kinds of musical records since I was young, and I have accumulated and sought to expand a private archive since the early 1970s. Collecting old records was a hobby to me.

In 2006, I moved to Dubai to work as a result of what is known in Lebanon as the "Divine Victory." I was introduced to several Arabic music forums in Dubai, and I came across amateurs with similar interests, as well as researchers and musicians who work in this field. The most prominent researchers are French, while the first Arab researcher who took an interest in this kind of music was [Ali Jihad Racy](#), professor of ethnomusicology of the University of California at Los Angeles. There had been a plethora of studies about this phase in the history of music (1903-1930) – the most influential studies were undertaken by [Frédéric Lagrange](#) and [Virginia Danielson](#).

I have met some of these researchers, including Frederic Lagrange. He called me one day to tell me that the largest old musical collection in Egypt, Abdel Aziz Al Anani's collection, which holds 3,500 discs and contains 600 hours of recording, was put up for sale. The Israeli radio tried to buy it, but the Egyptian press aborted the deal. The Egyptian Opera House also tried to purchase it but did not have sufficient funds. The Anani family then decided to sell the records separately to dealers, which meant that the collection could have disappeared, considerably reducing the records' value. At that point, I intervened and bought it.

MN: Libraries around the world, even the Library of Congress, face the thorny problem of digitization of archives and the challenge of upgrading digitization methods as technology continues to supersede itself. Does AMAR face similar problems, and how do you address these challenges?

KK: The archives stored at AMAR are more than a hundred years old, and the problem is that the audio of records disintegrates with time. Faced with this challenge, the foundation is digitizing their content.

But transferring music to new media comes with a challenge that the largest library in the world, the Library of the Congress, also faces. It is known as "migration," and to a certain extent it is similar to what happens when movies are transferred from VHS to new media. Our foundation follows the recommendations of the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA), which employs the best methods for restoration. This makes it easier in the future to transfer the recordings from CDs to a new medium, if we decide to do that. When audio files are transferred onto a hard disc, they are numbered and provided with detailed technical information that describes both the file itself and the software used to read it. The system we follow is American and similar to that used to preserve music at Harvard and Indiana University.

MN: How do you transfer music from old records to CDs to digital files?

KK: Transferring music from an old record to a digital file is a very delicate process. We import six different types of phonograph needles from England in order to match the category of the record as well as the amount of damage that has been done to it. These needles are flat-headed and read the record by laser; unlike the old needles, which corrode the delicate surface of the disc, these needles prevent the record from being scratched. They read the surface of the records and not its depth, which is usually damaged by the old iron needles. We also use instruments that filter out the background noise.

We could say that our main task is digitizing the records' content and then backing up the digital files using another server, but the best way to preserve old music is to sell it on CDs, then upload it to the Internet at a later stage. AMAR is working on a project to start an online radio that broadcasts old music and offers information about it. On the hundredth anniversary of the death of Youssef Al Manilawi, one of the first Arab singers to have his songs recorded, AMAR published all of his works in a CD collection, in addition to a book about him to which musicians and researchers contributed. Furthermore, AMAR collaborates with several universities in Lebanon, such as the University of Kaslik, Antonine University, and the American University of Beirut.

MN: What are AMAR's aims, and how do you revive collective memory and raise the society's awareness of a shared musical heritage? Is it common for a society to forget its musical history?

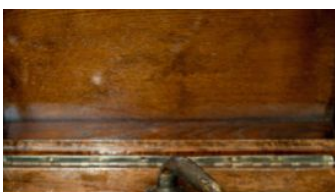
KK: AMAR seeks to disseminate the musical material it gathers and archives for the purpose of acquainting people with classical Arab musical heritage. Persian classical music, for example, is known and widespread in Iran, and the same goes for classical Turkish and Indian music, which has not faded even with the popularization of Bollywood music. Unlike what happened in the Arab world, societies in these countries did not abandon their musical legacy, nor did they lose their [collective] memory.

But it is not uncommon for people to forget the works of their most prominent composers. Johann Sebastian Bach, for example, died in 1750, and people forgot about him for one hundred years before the music scholar Arthur Mendel revived and published his works. Also, not all of Bach's works were known; his most famous works had to wait until 1920 to be published. Similarly, Antonio Vivaldi's works remained unknown for many years and were only published after the Second World War.

MN: What will ensure the sustainability of your organization's activities?

KK: We hope that AMAR becomes a well-established foundation that is able to subsist and preserve the entire Arab musical heritage, then publish it using modern means. The survival and development of AMAR undoubtedly depends on support from large cultural funds, which will speed up the work of the foundation and allow everyone to benefit from its results.

Translated by Youssef Zbib





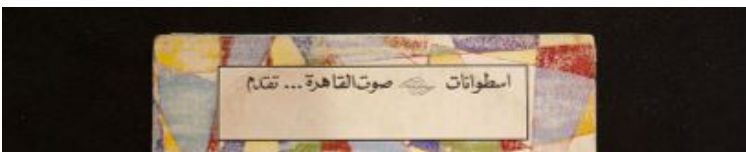
Inside the archives of AMAR. Photography by Tanya Traboulsi.



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