

Arab Choral Music Invention and Innovation

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choral conductor

Twenty-six years ago, some young people from a particular club in Shefa'amr, the city in which I reside, asked me to establish a mixed choir, to be sponsored by the youth club of Shefa'amr. Thus, in a humble building, somewhere in the old quarter, we decided to build a rich musical future and to put Shefa'amr, a small town in Galilee, on the choral world map. Today, I can confidently say that the number of choral Singers in Shefa'amr is proportionally greater than in any city in the Arab world. At that time I was a pianist and teacher, working in different Arab towns and villages in Israel, attempting to bring the art of music to Arab children for them to enjoy.

I began thinking of the project from several aspects: How should I choose singers? How many hours should they practice weekly? What kind of music should we sing? Should I build an instrumental ensemble to accompany the singers? Where would we get financial support? I felt alone, since choral music was not common and there were no professional Arab musicians in this field. We could not get any historically documented information concerning specific compositions for choirs, although it was mentioned that the genre of *muwashshah* from the 10th century in Andalusia, Spain, was created especially for group singing or choirs.

Furthermore, there were no choirs in the Arab world, except in churches, and in *Zikr* groups in mosques. However, they cannot be considered as choirs in the commonly understood sense. Due

to the political situation, I could not visit Arab countries, except Egypt, for deeper study and research. So I decided to build a model of a choir that would combine Western concepts and fundamentals with Oriental concepts and requirements. I selected members on the basis of their musicality, not on their beautiful voices. I had decided to set up 'collective singing'. Solo singing is common everywhere. It was not easy to convince people with beautiful voices to keep on in the choir and my new style was far away from individual singing, which is usually governed by selfishness and authoritarianism.

This type of individuality has been affected by dictatorship and patriarchal, social and political systems, more in Arab vocal music than instrumental music. I focused on making the group, through singing, feel the strong impact of the collective on common destiny, by means of tolerance, supporting each other, listening to each other and feeling that everyone supports the individual and the individual supports all. These values were to serve choral work and to contribute to building a developed Arab society.

Al Baath (Revival) was chosen as the name for the choir. The aim was merely professional; we were determined to revive Arab song and to re-sing it in a collective manner, far from individual improvisation and performance. Improvisation is one of the most prominent features of Arabic music and improvisation comes from the individual rather than the group. Therefore, I had to fix my phrases, so that the choir could perform them correctly and beautifully. We succeeded in converting solo song to the collective choral genre. There were no compositions for choirs, except those made for church prayers. Most of such compositions were not documented in musical notes or were not accessible. I had to write the notes of the songs by myself and teach the music by means of repetition. My mission was easy because the songs were part of their heritage.

At the very beginning, I did not ask anybody to compose for

the choir. I concentrated on exploring our heritage so as to revive it by my own methods. I decided to deal with our senior composers, such like Sayyed Darweesh, the Rahbani Brothers and others who lived in the 19th and 20th centuries, the way the West had dealt with its great composers, by performing their compositions in different styles with several interpretations. I did not use polyphony or harmony, since I was not accustomed to hearing a chord formed of quarter-tones in one of its parts, and it sounded to me like an acute dissonance. I felt, as well, that Oriental music would lose its style and its features if we misused Western classical methods, even through vocalism.

Instrumental accompaniment was also a problem, since I play the piano, which lacks quarter tones. Although I developed a special method for playing piano, I often played round about the key, not accurately in detail. Sometimes I used the oriental keyboard, attempting to play quarter tones. One of the characteristics of the Oriental song form is that it is rhythmic, and the poetical measure fits the musical one, accompanied by rhythmic instruments such as the *durbakki*. But I tried not to use these instruments because of financial constraints. I used to be the arranger, the instrumentalist and the conductor.

To make things easy and flexible, I began recording an instrumental playback, according to my own vocal arrangements, aided by Bishara Khill, an arranger and composer. We both were pioneers in finding vocal arrangements and instrumental arrangements, which is considered a renewal in Arab singing.

It needed great precision and too many rehearsals. After several years of intensive practice twice a week, we experienced the fruits of many successes, which made local audiences admire Al Baath and consider it as a cultural phenomenon. The choir now gained devotees. Young people, in towns which had almost no exposure to cultural activities, started to be more interested in the choir, either by joining

or by asking for more performances.

We started to hear the choir's music on tape recorders everywhere. Despite the tight budgets, the Al Baath Choir proved to be an ideal model in Palestinian Arab towns. It has succeeded in creating a new cultural and musical climate. It has been, and still is, the second home for its members and their families. Celebrations, feasts and galas took place in its venue. We also used to initiate recreational and educational trips with husbands and wives, believing that close relationships among the members will create a comfortable atmosphere for training and singing.

After a long musical journey, and with the help of Isam Nassrallah, the choir manager, and the Sisters of Nazareth Convent in Shefa'amr, I was able to establish and direct the Sawa Center – an independent center for culture. The center has become a home for Al Baath and for other choirs who emerged from it.



*Sawa Choir in a workshop
with prof. Andre de Quadros*

These three main projects enrich choral life:

Heisa

I asked Radi Shehadeha, Palestinian author and director, to write a musical play for Al Baath, a new model of work that was not widespread among the Palestinian population of Israel. The choir started this musical theater work, using most of the Arab musical genres, such as Muwashshah, Dawr, Taqtoqa, and Mawal.

Voices for Peace

A big project included Al Baath (Arab), Collegium Tel Aviv (Jewish), and Timna Brawer (Jewish singer from Vienna), with Eli Meiri. The goal of the project was the common singing of three religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. After intensive rehearsals, and great determination, Al Baath was able to sing in four voices (despite the fact that the choir could not read musical notation). This project, in addition to calling for joint peaceful coexistence between Jews and Arabs, was also a quantum leap for the choir. Gradually polyphonic singing became *possible* for the choir.

Concert 'Ishtaqtillak'

This concert formed another quantum leap for the choir, when it appeared with an Oriental-Western ensemble of 12 players (Arabs and Jews). This work consisted of distinguished instrumental arrangements of Jewish and Arab musicians, according to my own vocal arrangements. In this work, I formed a new idea and approach for vocal arrangements. Mainly I began setting up special musical phrases, making the choir sing as a soloist does manipulating the poetic and musical rhythm. In addition, I merged several songs in which melodies, words, and rhythm were mixed together in order to create an atmosphere of 'Audio Chaos' to attract the attention of the audience toward a new style of performance.

One article is not enough to contain my long musical journey. I just wish to convey that in this corner of the earth, full of political and economic troubles, violence and wars, racial

persecution and harassment, there is a candle of hope in a little town (its population does not exceed 40 thousand inhabitants), sitting on the hills of Galilee, 20 km away from the town of Nazareth, overlooking the Mediterranean coast. There is singing and music, reflecting our sufferings and our optimism towards a better future for our children and our young people.

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