

Collective Singing for Social Inclusion: a more than 10-year journey for Lebanon's Fayha Choir

Barkev Taslakian, Conductor

Some numbers about the population of Lebanon

According to World Bank data, Lebanon's population was estimated at 6,825,442 at mid-year 2020. This number includes more than 479,537 Palestinian refugees registered at UNRWA and 1.5 million Syrian refugees, according to the Lebanese Government (only 865,500 registered at UNHCR). These numbers show that Lebanon has the highest refugee ratio in the world, according to the EU. The country is also known as a multi-cultural area since it has 18 different religious branches. Having all these cultures together in the same area can be very enriching on a cultural level but very challenging in terms of social cohesion.

Fayha Choir as entity to represent all of Lebanon

"It is a sample of Lebanon", said Jacques Vanherle (late president of Polyfollia International), in gathering youth from all social, religious and geographic affiliations of the country. The choir was established in 2003 in Tripoli. It is located in one of the poorest areas in the Mediterranean, with a history of civil war and internal conflicts. It has grown to have two other branches in the country and a branch in Egypt. It became the world's first Arab choir to represent Arab music in a cappella with polyphonic arrangements.

After touring the world and winning international prizes, Fayha Choir became the best image of the country for the Lebanese people. The choir represents the entire population and shows the humanity of Lebanon and the Arabs. This is especially positive since the bad news of the region seems to get more press time.



Children of Syria

Collective singing as tool for social inclusion

According to the Sing Me In Project, *“collective singing is a social act: it is about singing together. And singing together can create a strong, emotional and happy connection, even between people with very different ways of life”*.

Everything started after the 2007 conflict between Fatah al-Islam, an Islamist militant organisation, and the Lebanese Armed Forces in Nahr El Bared, a UNRWA Palestinian refugee

camp near Tripoli in northern Lebanon. The UNDP approached Fayha Choir to propose the Lebanese Palestinian Choir project. The project aimed to rebuild peaceful relations between Palestinians coming back to the camp after the reconstruction and the Lebanese community from the five villages surrounding the camp.



Nagham Choir, Lebanon

Although the project lasted only two years, the results were surprising in terms of the individual and collective evolution of the group. *"The Lebanese Palestinian Choir was the crossway that changed my life 180 degrees"*, says Mubadda Yunes, a Palestinian singer in the choir at that time. He is still a member of Fayha Choir today, like many others who started out in the project but continued as members of Fayha Choir.

An the same time, we received a proposal from the UNESCO regional office in Beirut to establish a children's choir of students from public schools and Palestinian camps from around Lebanon. More than 10,000 children were involved, and some of them are still singing in Fayha Choir today.

Nadia joined the UNESCO choir when she was 19 years old. She is now 29 and still a singer in Fayha Choir. Nadia says: *"Joining the UNESCO choir changed my life and made me the person I am today. From a refugee child who struggled a lot, to an effective citizen in her community that learnt all of her life and work skills from the choir"*.



Sonbola Choir

These projects were very successful and showed big achievements not only on a musical level but also on social and psychological levels. For the first time in their lives, youth and children performed their Arabian songs on the biggest stages in the country. For the majority of them, that was a dream that would have never come true without the choir.

Fayha Choir continued establishing choirs around the country with local and international organisations such as War Child Holland, Norwegian Refugee Council, Beit Atfal Assoumoud, SOS

Children's Villages, GIZ – German Cooperation, European Union and many others.

Later in 2015, international organisations started focusing on Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and many new associations were established in the country targeting youth and children in camps all across the country.

According to the UNHCR, "the total number of registered Syrian refugees in the Bekaa area in Lebanon stood at 339,473 individuals. The Bekaa hosts the largest number of registered refugees in the country at 38.6% of the total".

In this area, Fayha Choir launched two choirs for children from different camps for Syrian refugees: Sonbola Choir with more than 500 singers from 2014-2019, and Children of Syria Choir with more than 300 since 2014.

Jihan from Sonbola Choir was 12 years old when she said: *"Rehearsal is the only place that reminds me of my childhood in the streets of Syria. When I come back from rehearsal, the only way to stop hearing the sound of bombs in my head, is to sing what we learned in the choir"*.

Also, during our project with Sonbola, under the Create Syria project, we trained ten young and adult Syrian refugees from different associations in conducting children's choirs to help them establish their own groups in the different target areas.



War Child Choir

One of the major achievements we noticed about these children was the difference in their behaviour towards others. When we first met them, they were very chaotic, violent, aggressive and they had no interest in their physical appearance. During the breaks they were fighting all the time, throwing rubbish everywhere and bullying each other. Very soon after starting rehearsals, we could see the progress they made: they stopped fighting and shouting all the time, they played together, they cleaned up the area before leaving, they even had showers before coming to rehearsals and dressed beautifully.

Nagham Choir is also one of Fayha Choir's social projects. It is a project aimed at gathering youth from two areas in Tripoli that have historical political and religious conflicts.

For some of these projects, Fayha Choir won the IMC Music Rights Award 2015.

Fayha Choir has several similar projects that you can check out on the website, and also in partnership with international cooperation projects for refugees such as Sing Me In. You can also find documentaries about these projects on our YouTube channel.



Barkev Taslakian is a Lebanese conductor born in Anjar, Bekaa in 1964. He is the founder, artistic director and conductor of the world's most famous Arab Choir, Fayha Choir, a winner of many international competitions. Taslakian is considered the godfather of Arab Choral music. He was the first to promote polyphonic a cappella singing in Arabic and created a new school of choral singing by performing Arab music with new arrangements on an international level. He is a member of many national and international music and choral associations: the International Federation for Choral Music, the European Choral Association, the Arab Choral Network (founding member), the Lebanese Choral Association (founder and president). He also founded many choirs around Lebanon as projects for psychosocial support and social cohesion for children, youth and refugees, for which he won the Five Musical Rights Award from the International Music Council.
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Fayha Choir