

Music in Palestine before 1948



By Rima Nasir Tarazi

This article briefly explores four genres of music that prevailed in Palestine during the first half of the twentieth century, namely, folkloric music, Arabic classical music, national anthems, and Western classical music. It highlights a few of the factors that contributed to the development of these various musical genres, taking into consideration that Palestine is part of the extended region that includes Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt, and that it shares with those countries basic elements of their musical traditions.

Folk music is the most prevalent genre of music all over the world. It is spontaneous and unsophisticated, and it expresses the general spirit of a people as it addresses current situations and moods in a direct manner. Folk music in Palestine is expressed in song and is often accompanied by dances. It was vibrant and alive at the turn of the twentieth century and still remains an integral part of social celebrations, especially weddings, whereas dirges are performed at funerals. It is interesting to note that the lyrics that accompany music change according to the situation. Talented poets and singers called *zajaleen* are often called upon to improvise and transform the words to fit any emerging situation at the spur of the moment. In Palestine, the scene of so much political turmoil, it is not uncommon to hear the lyrics of a love song turned into a political ditty, a call to an uprising, or a satire aimed at personalities in high places.

Classical Arabic and Oriental music constitutes a deeply rooted tradition in Palestine and the region. At the beginning of the twentieth century it continued to be transmitted orally from one generation to the next through



Artwork by Sliman Mansour.

individual teaching and small-scale performances held in homes or small venues such as coffeehouses. It was not until the middle of the last century, with the introduction of radio, cinema, and the gramophone, that it began to be shared and appreciated on a larger scale. Moreover, memorable performances of famous Arab musicians from Egypt,

Lebanon, and Syria, who frequently visited Palestine to perform in the major cities and in the newly established Palestine Broadcasting Service (PBS), contributed significantly to the prevalence and appreciation of Arabic music during that period.

The diaries of Wasif Jawhariyyeh (1897–1973), an amateur musician and performer, are an important source of information about the vibrant musical scene at the time, especially in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, very few scores were notated during this period. Palestinian music is therefore hardly available for researchers who have to rely mainly on PBS archives and some of Wasif Jawhariyyeh's recordings.

The establishment of the PBS in 1936 by the British Mandate, via the radio station named Jerusalem Calling, played a major role in propagating music and in

Early twentieth-century Palestine flourished with folkloric, classical Arabic, and classical Western music, and the popularity of national anthems reflected the defiant political spirit of the time.



Augustine Lama

providing opportunities for outstanding Palestinian and visiting musicians and performers to be heard nationwide. The Arabic section of the PBS was directed by the renowned Palestinian poet Ibrahim Touqan – who was relieved of his post after four years because of his political activism. The Arabic music section was directed for four years by the popular composer and singer Yahya Lababidi; its music ensemble was directed by the outstanding Syrian buzuq player and composer Mohammad Abdel Karim.*

One of the more renowned members of the PBS musical team was composer and conductor Yousef Batrouni who was versed in both Oriental and Western musical genres. He enhanced the musical skills of many of his colleagues and renowned visiting performers by teaching them music theory and notation. Amin



Birzeit College alumni gathering in 1946.

Majaj, a 16-year-old violinist, made a dent in the music landscape at the time by forming his own ensemble in the PBS which was also invited to perform by the Egyptian Broadcasting Service. He later became better known as a prominent pediatrician.

The PBS also played an important role in introducing classical music to the public. This was accomplished through a variety of musical programs, many of which employed the PBS orchestra. It was composed largely of foreign musicians

and performed at the YMCA in Jerusalem; some of its members also gave private lessons. An outstanding event during that period was Arturo Toscanini's visit to Palestine and his conducting of the PBS orchestra.

Arab national songs flourished during the first half of the twentieth century and continued beyond, due to the emergence of Arab nationalism and the struggle for Arab renaissance and liberation from the yoke of subjugation and colonialism. Schools played a major role in propagating anthems that became a beacon for youth and a rallying call for national consciousness. Two of the most influential contributors to this genre were the Lebanese Fleifel brothers whose songs were very popular in Palestine

the *Nakba*, Yousef Batrouni continued this tradition at Birzeit College together with two other younger composers, Rima Nasir and Amin Nasser, who gradually developed anthems into art songs and cantatas.

Classical music started to become a vibrant part of the Palestinian musical landscape before 1948. A few prominent names in Jerusalem stand out as pioneers and major players in propagating classical music through teaching numerous students to be performers and appreciative listeners.

Augustine Lama (1902–1988), an organist, composer, and teacher, was among the most accomplished classical musicians in Palestine. His influence



Amin Nasir, Rima Nasir, Yousef Batrouni, and Kamal Naser.

as they were being taught in schools and sung enthusiastically on various occasions by young people. The Fleifel brothers' music was set to words written by renowned Arab poets who expressed the mood and aspirations of the people during that period. The appeal of these anthems reverberated beyond Palestine and Lebanon. *Mawtini*, written by Ibrahim Touqan, remains one of the most popular anthems in the region. The composers Salvador Arnita and Yousef Batrouni made further contributions to this genre. After

on the musical landscape can be felt even now through the many outstanding students who studied with him, the latest being his composer son, Patrick, who currently lives in Paris. Augustine Lama studied music with the Franciscans and spent the rest of his life in Jerusalem as chief organist of the Catholic Church, also composing, teaching, and conducting school choirs.

Salvador Arnita (1914–1989) was a composer, conductor, organist, clarion



Salvador Arnita conducting the Palestine Orchestra with the Birzeit College Choir in 1941.

player, and teacher. Originally a student of Augustine Lama, he continued his music education in Italy before he came to play a major role in the musical life of Jerusalem and the region. He was head of the music department at the YMCA, a vibrant cultural center in Jerusalem at the time and a venue for the PBS orchestra, and he taught music at Birzeit College for many years. As a teacher, Arnita inspired many of his students to take up music seriously (including the author of this article); as a composer, he left a legacy of orchestral works and songs written especially for the choir of Birzeit College. After the *Nakba*, Arnita and his musicologist wife Yusra, daughter of the renowned Wasif Jawhariyyeh, moved to Lebanon, where he took on the post of head of the music department at the American University of Beirut, and she taught musicology.

Yousef Batrouni (d. 1955) was also a student of Augustine Lama. An extremely talented and versatile musician, he contributed to the development of the music section at the PBS, taught music, composed songs, and conducted school choirs even after 1948. He left a legacy in

the form of a sizeable number of national anthems that, unfortunately, have not yet been published.

Yousef Khasho (1927–1996), another student of Augustine Lama, pursued his musical education in Italy. Having worked as an organist, teacher, and composer, he left Palestine after the *Nakba* to settle in Amman, where he became a cofounder of the Jordanian music academy.

Hanna Khatchadurian (Ohan Durian, 1922–2012), who studied music at the Jerusalem Conservatory, was a very talented composer and pianist. She gave piano lessons, conducted choirs, and raised the level of classical music appreciation at the Armenian schools and at Birzeit College, where he taught for a while. After the *Nakba* he changed his name to Ohan Durian and moved on to Europe, ending up in Armenia as artistic director and principal conductor of the opera house in Yerevan.

Ibrahim Bawarshi, from Haifa, and Hanna Khilil (1896–1980) from Nazareth, were also among the composers and music teachers whose education was based on Western classical music and whose

contribution to the musical renaissance in Palestine was outstanding.

Schools played a major role in propagating classical music. The school system in early twentieth-century Palestine featured governmental and nongovernmental schools, with most of the latter being located in the Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Haifa, Nazareth, and Ramallah areas. A number of these schools were affiliated with religious organizations such as the Islamic Waqf and the various Christian denominations; whereas some of them were foreign, others were run privately by Palestinians. Foreign schools introduced classical music to their students through music teachers who came from abroad. A limited number of students received piano lessons in some of these schools, and music teachers taught singing to school children of all ages, forming school choirs that performed on special occasions. The Quaker Friends School in Ramallah was foremost among the schools that considered music to be a high priority. Many of its graduates would later contribute substantially to the advancement of the music scene in Palestine, among them Salwa Tabri, Nadia Mikhail, and Tania Tamari. Some private, independent Palestinian schools had the vision early on that music and art were vital for the education and development of children. Therefore, they employed expatriates to teach Western classical music, since no formal system of Arabic music education existed at the time.

Jerusalem has always been a musical hub in Palestine. For centuries, Jerusalem has embraced peoples from all over the world who come as visitors, seekers of knowledge, and devout pilgrims. This has earned it a special place in the hearts of many faithful who express their devotion in a variety of musical genres. One can



Artwork by Sliman Mansour.

hear chants coming from the Aqsa Mosque together with calls to prayer from the city's various minarets, blending with the chimes of the various churches together with the Oriental chants of the Orthodox, Coptic, Syriac, and Ethiopian churches, and the Western choral singing of the Catholic and Protestant churches, in a mosaic of superb harmonic sounds not to be surpassed anywhere.

Let us hope that the harmonious sounds of the music in Jerusalem will touch the hearts of all believers and guide them to create a more harmonious world.

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* Many accomplished musicians were active at the time, and the names of some of the players mentioned in PBS archives can be found in the article "A Century of Musical Talent" by Rima Nasir Tarazi, published by TWiP in December 2012.