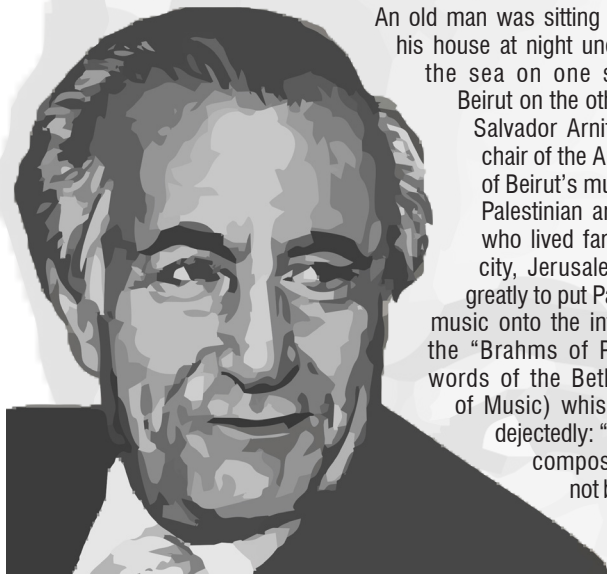


## Salvador Arnita The Brahms of Palestine

By Saleem Zougbi



An old man was sitting on the balcony of his house at night under the full moon; the sea on one side and greater Beirut on the other. The composer Salvador Arnita was retiring as chair of the American University of Beirut's music department. A Palestinian artist and musician who lived far from his beloved city, Jerusalem, and struggled greatly to put Palestinian classical music onto the international scene, the "Brahms of Palestine" (in the words of the Bethlehem Academy of Music) whispered quietly and dejectedly: "I still have so many compositions that I have not been able to realize: no orchestra, no financial support, and no state!"

Born in 1914 in Jerusalem, Arnita started playing the church organ at the age of eleven. He was strongly encouraged by the legendary Augustine Lama, who taught him for a brief period of time. At age sixteen, he was sent to Alexandria, Egypt, where he worked as church organist at St. Catherine's Cathedral and became conductor of its choir in 1931. In 1932, Arnita was granted a scholarship to study music at the Academy of Santa Cecilia in Rome, where he studied composition with Professor Alfredo Casella and organ with Professor Fernando Germani, the Vatican organist. The three years he spent in Rome were the supreme learning period of his life; here, Salvador Arnita the composer was born. In 1935, he took up studies for one year with Sir Landen Roland at Guild Hall College in London, teaching as well.

In 1936, Arnita returned to Jerusalem and was appointed music director of the YMCA, a post he held until 1948. Beginning in 1938, he was also engaged as a teacher: at Birzeit College near Ramallah until 1941, and at the Jerusalem Conservatory until 1947. From 1941 until 1947, he served as director of the Jerusalem Radio Orchestra. Arnita composed his early works during this period, mostly orchestral pieces that included a few choral works and chamber music. He was among the pioneers in classical music composition in Palestine, working creatively in a society that barely knew or cherished this style of music. His preferred style was romanticism; its philosophy and sound were closest to his heart.

When tragedy struck in 1948, Arnita fled to Lebanon, moving to the diaspora, as did many of his people. Similar to Vienna during the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries, Beirut became the Mecca not only for musicians but also for culturists, artists, and thinkers of the Arab world, especially Palestine. In 1949, Arnita settled in Beirut and joined the music department at the American University of Beirut (AUB), where he stayed until he retired in 1980. During these 30 years, he taught several young pianists and composed most of his works, also rewriting many of his earlier compositions. Salvador Arnita died in 1984 in Amman, Jordan.

Arnita toured many countries and performed in more than 100 concerts, either as a solo musician or as an orchestra conductor. He conducted the Berlin Symphony Orchestra, the Pittsburgh Orchestra, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and the orchestra at Tanglewood, among others. Arnita performed as piano or organ soloist with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Sir Henry Wood; the Rome Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Maestro Molinari; and the Boston Symphony under Charles Munch. His playing of the carillon (an instrument made of chimes) at Jerusalem's Bell Tower on Sundays rang out over the city as a special treat. He frequently performed at Harvard University and MIT as well as in a number of European cities. Among the prizes and honors that Arnita obtained is one granted by King Leopold of Belgium.

Arnita's works have been performed throughout the world, including in Australia, the United States, Germany, Poland, Austria, and France. Among his compositions are three symphonies, four concertos (one each for piano, organ, flute, and viola), two suites for orchestra, two piano sonatas, ten preludes, four preludes and fugues for organ, two string quartets, four sonatas for organ, and a "refugee cantata" for baritone solo, choir, and orchestra, which was based on Mahmoud Darwish's famous poem "Sajjil Ana

*Arabi*" ("Identity Card"). It earned great admiration not only because of its famous libretto and description of the plight of Palestinian refugees, but also because of its superbly dramatic music: In a passionate aria the choir and orchestra must struggle breathlessly to keep up with the themes of the solo baritone. Arnita's compositional mastery is well exposed also in "The Winter Night Was Dark and Still: A Christmas Carol," a chorale for organ, strings, choir, and two solo voices.

Arnita and his wife Yusra jointly composed an album for children titled *Shadi and Shadiyah*. It is important to note that Yusra was a remarkable woman. Daughter of the well-known 'oud player and chronicler Wasif Jawhariyyeh, she was highly educated. She taught musicology at the AUB and wrote songs; her keen interest in Palestinian heritage and culture led her to write a number of books. Yusra was honored several times by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and other Arab leaders.

Last May, during a conference I was attending in Beirut, I dropped by the AUB music department. When I began to speak to the chair of the department about my interest in the works of Maestro Arnita, a spark of excitement lit his eyes, and he said, "I knew him, I knew him, he was my great friend." On a personal note, I would like to add: God bless your memory, Salvador! You are our great friend, and we will work to make many people, not only Palestinians, understand your vision for refined music compositions in our tradition.

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