

ZAKI NASSIF 1916-2004

Born in Mashghara, in the southwest Bekaa region of Lebanon on July 4th 1916, Zaki Nassif was the son of Chaker Nassif, an industrial merchant, and Rashideh Ibrahim, a musically-sensitive mother who nurtured Zaki's musicality in early life with her singing at home. Egyptian Sheikh Salama Hijazi's singing of classical Arabic and both, Sheikh Mohamed Rifaat's and Sheikh Mustafa Ismail's reciting verses from the Holy Qur'an influenced his musical sensibilities that were further developed by his attendance of Syriac and Byzantine (Greek Orthodox) church services. His exposure to traditional dabkeh¹ developed also his conviction that these Lebanese folkdances could be a true expression of collective celebration, of joy, and of solidarity, or "dalouna"².



In 1920, during the early days of the French mandate in Syria and Lebanon, his family moved to the Beirut³, the new capital of Lebanon. As the youngest of two girls and three boys, his childhood was happy during the years 1922 - 1933, despite the first family bankruptcy in 1925. During that period, he had his initial exposure to regional instruments, including the plucked-string "oud" and the "mijwez" flute. In 1933, a serious foot condition left him with a life-long handicap. It forced him to leave his high school studies at the French Lay Mission (presently the "Lycée Français") at an early age and joined later on the "School of the Holy Saviour".

Zaki Nassif's study of music began at the Institute of Music of the American University of Beirut in 1936. His instructors were made up largely of members of the Kouguell family: Arkadie and his wife taught him voice and piano, and Arkadies' brother Rudolph taught him cello. The noted composer Toufic El Bacha (1924-2005) was also a close friend and colleague of Zaki Nassif during these days of study at AUB. Also, El Bacha's uncle Khalil Maknieh mentored Zaki during that period. In

1 Dabke in Arabic is literally "stamping of the feet"; is the most popular Arab folk dance in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria. A line dance, it is widely performed at weddings and joyous occasions. The leader of the dabke heads the line, alternating between facing the audience and the other dancers.

2 Dalouna: The "dabkeh" originated in the Levant where houses were built from stone with a roof made of wood, straw and dirt. The dirt roof had to be compacted which required stomping the dirt hard in a uniform way to compact it evenly. This event of cooperation is called ta'awon and from here comes the word awneh, meaning "help." This developed into the song Ala Dalouna. The word itself as Zaki asserts is derived from Syriac.

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spite of some interruptions caused by the family business, he remained at AUB until 1941 after which he continued his classical music studies with Bertand Robillard. As were many other students at AUB, he was affected by prevailing social and political ideas. These ideas deeply influenced his patriotic and social beliefs throughout his life, shaping up as well his musical outlook, characterized by a genuine interest in folk music, poetry and dance in addition to an encyclopedic knowledge of Byzantine & Syriac music traditions.

A second family financial setback in 1949 had a strong effect on the composer, and following this event, he dedicated himself to the music profession. In doing so, he eventually contributed significantly to what became to be known as the "Lebanese Renaissance." This period was the beginning of a golden age for Lebanese-produced music in general and Lebanese folk-dance-influenced works in particular. Zaki Nassif, Toufic El Bacha, Philemon Wehbeh (1916-1985), Assi (1923-1986), husband of the famous singer Fairouz, and Mansour Rahbani (1923-2009) were among the leading components of this music. They, except Wehbe, also formed a quintet, with Abdel Ghani Chaaban (1925-1977) named 'The League of Five' that was modeled after the Russian circle of composers⁴ "The band of Five" (1856-1870) whose objective was to promote musical modernism along side the local musical identity. Their focal points were first Near East Radio (1953-1956) and Radio Liban in Beirut, then the Baalbeck festival in 1957 & 1959, in collaboration with Marwan and Wadiha Jarrar (1930-2011), Sabri Sherif (1922-1999), Badi' Boulos and others. These collaborations also played a significant role in the development of regional dance, in the form of formalized stage choreography for the dabkeh. In 1960, "The Story of Lebanon" performances were given by the Anwar Group, championed by the journalist Said Fraiha (1905-1978) and directed by Nizar Mikati: this time with only Zaki Nassif and Toufic El Bacha participating alongside Wadi'El Safi and Afif Redwan (1929- 1972). The Anwar Group ended their activities in 1964 after presenting another program at Baalbeck Festival entitled "Our Land Forever" preceded by three years of touring in the Arab countries and Europe.

Starting from 1965, Zaki Nassif worked solo and achieved two major participations in the 1970 and 1974 Baalbeck festivals besides composing many songs for choruses, as well as for celebrated singers like Sabah, Wadi El Safi, Nasri Chamseddine (1927-1983), Majdala, Widad, Suad Hachem, Najah Salam, Samira Toufic and Joseph Azar. After the Lebanese War started, Nassif composed his masterpiece performed by Fairuz "Ya Banni Oummi" (1981) based on Gibran Khalil Gibran's texts and continued his contribution to music in Lebanon with his more than a decade long collaboration with Caracalla Dance Troop and writer Antoine Ghandour for

⁴ The five composers are: Balakirev, Cui, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin

theatre and TV. He also worked with a new generation of singers like Majida El Roumi, Ghassan Saliba, Ali Hleihel and others. One of his most important and influential songs of the late 1980s was “Raje'h Yit'Ammar Loubnan”, for which he wrote both words and music. In Lebanon, it became an extremely popular song, rivaling even the national anthem. This afforded him nation-wide recognition and generous and significant royalties from the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation that supported him for the remaining years of his life. His last masterpiece, lyrics and music, is "Mahma Yitajrah Bladna", that expresses passion and sincerity for the plea of his homeland, after the first Qana massacre in 1996.

Zaki Nassif died on March 11, 2004, leaving a rich and vibrant musical heritage consisting of about 1,100 of songs and pieces of music belonging to various genres and styles. He may be considered the founder of a new Lebanese Arabic school of compositions, unique in a genre that combines words, music, orchestration and dance.