

## Remembering Zaki Nassif: A Lebanese Musical Odyssey

By Sami Asmar

Born in 1916 in the town of Mashghara in Lebanon's Biqa Valley, Nassif studied music composition and piano at the American University of Beirut . After his studies were interrupted by World War II, he continued to pursue music at the hands of a European professor at St. Joseph University. In the early 1950s, under the French Mandate, Nassif joined the music staff of the Near East ( Al-Sharq al-Adna ) Radio station under the direction of Palestinian musician Sabri al-Sharif. That station had moved from Jerusalem to Cyprus and was based in Beirut before closing down but, during a brief period, brought together many musicians who built the foundation of the modern popular music genre in the region.

In the mid 1950s, lyricists/composers Asi and Mansur Rahbani, singers/composers Wadi al-Safi, Zaki Nassif, and Filimon Wahbe, and singers Fairuz, Sabah, and Nasri Shamsiddine, along with other contemporaries such as Tawfiq al-Basha, Halim al-Rumi (whose daughter Majida later sang many of Nassif compositions), long-time flautist Joseph Ayoub, and percussionist Michel Mirhej Baklouk, most of whom met at the Near East Radio station, became a core group credited with the establishment of the modern popular Lebanese song with the start of the Baalbek festivals, set in the Roman ruins of Baalbek.

Zaki Nassif's career reached national recognition with his early contribution to the Baalbek Festival with the song “Tallu Hbabna Tallu” (The Beloved Ones Have Arrived), which quickly became a huge hit. The lyrics, which describe receiving beloved visitors in the beautiful setting of the Lebanese countryside, cover three themes: romance, hospitality, and patriotism. The magnificence of the lyrics was matched by Nassif's brilliant melody, which combined beauty and folk-style simplicity. Decades later in a 1991 interview, Nassif discussed how village folk tunes inspired his compositions and revealed that “Tallu Hbabna” was inspired by the comic folk chant “Qam al-Dib Ta Yurqos ” (When the Bear Tried to Dance).

The third element of the song's success was the vocalist. Nassif intended that his song would be performed by the Baalbek chorus, but decided instead that it would be best performed by his colleague Wadi al-Safi, an archetypical folk singer. The rest is history; for nearly four decades, Wadi al-Safi probably performed this song at every concert in his life; it was requested by delighted audiences who

would typically rise to the traditional dabkah line dance. The song was typically performed by al-Safi at live concerts during a suite of songs with a similar theme such as “ Khadra Ya Bladi Khadra ” (My Green Country) and “ Zra'na Tlalik Ya Bladi ” (We Planted the Hills). Unfortunately for Nassif, with time his name lost association with “Tallu Hbabna”; many people erroneously assumed that the song was composed by either Wadi al-Safi or the Rahbani brothers.

Nassif collaborated with many groups and artists. In 1960, journalist Said Fraiha founded the Al-Anwar group that included both Zaki Nassif and Wadi al-Safi and often performed at Casino Lubnan. Al-Anwar featured the typical style of Zaki Nassif, namely modern music rooted in folk rhythms and melodic simplicity. This was similar to the work of the Rahbani Brothers but, while the Rahbanis drew on folk music of Mount Lebanon, Nassif did the same for the Biqa Valley. The Rahbanis, Filimon Wahbe, Tawfiq al-Bahsa, and Nassif also formed a quintet called the League of Five modeled after the Russian group; during this collaboration they modernized their music. This group earned the sponsorship of Badi' Boulos, the founder of Studio al-Fann, a recording studio in the Sin al-Fil neighborhood in Beirut. Perhaps to honor the historical importance of Studio al-Fann, when producer Simon Asmar started a star-search talent show on the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, he called it Studio al-Fann and, for many years, had Zaki Nassif sit on the judging committee. Throughout this period, Nassif continued to compose for the country's leading singers, including the Gibran poem “ Ya Bani Ummi” for Fairuz.

Although outside of Lebanon Nassif was known as the great folk singer who popularized the da'una genre and composed popular songs for the Baalbek festival, people who worked with him knew two other aspects of him. Nassif was a classically trained pianist with a passion for playing Chopin pieces at private gatherings and was a scholar of ancient Byzantine chants. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of the Byzantine repertoire and discussed how the chants' Eastern scales, similar to the traditional Arab modes called maqamat, inspired his own compositions. Lebanese ethnomusicologist Nidaa abu Mrad researched the influence of Byzantine music on Nassif's work for an academic publication.

Just as Nassif started his career with a hit, he ended it with another hit when he composed and sang “Raji' Yit'amar Libnan ” (Lebanon Shall be Rebuilt). Intended as a celebration of the end of the long civil war in Lebanon and a show of the

solidarity of all the Lebanese factions in re-building, the song became an unofficial anthem for all who shared a patriotic feeling of conciliation. Even for a serious topic like this, Nassif chose an upbeat rhythm and, sure enough, was received by impromptu dabkah lines when he performed it.

Since for most of the 1990s Nassif taught at the conservatory and seemed detached from folk music, “Raji’ Yit’amar” brought him back to the people and the same crowds who loved “Tallu Hbabana,” a fitting conclusion to a long career. This song, however, brought up parallels between Zaki Nassif and Egypt’s Sayyid Darwish (1892-1923). Darwish was the people’s singer and his simple yet awesomely sincere song “Biladi Biladi” was so popular and fitting that the nation turned it into the official national anthem. Nassif’s songs, for now, will remain an un-official anthem.