

## How to understand Zaki Nassif Music?

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Like so much in Lebanese culture, the beloved songs of Zaki Nassif (1916-2004) are felicitous blends of orient and occident. His melodic style lends itself easily both to the traditional Arabic singer, and to singers trained in the western choral tradition.

The songs also make the transition to a western-style performance easily because they do not depend on the complexities of Arabic "*maqam*" (melodic mode), which has pitch relationships that are different from the western system. His songs show strong influences of both the Syriac and Byzantine musical traditions, and are far removed from other Arabic-language traditions.

Traditional Arabic music is without harmony, and includes heterophony: parts may be doubled (not harmonized) higher or lower, and with different instruments or voices. Also, musical gestures associated with the sounds of the Arabic language itself color the vocal style as much as anything else. In Nassif's songs harmony may also be present. In "*Mily ya jannaat blaadi*" and "*Daqqa w daqqa mshina*", Nassif himself has harmonized some vocal and accompaniment sections, however most of them are in unison.

The accompaniments in our performances are improvised by the pianist and 'oud player, if they are not specified in the original manuscript. In brief, Nassif's songs are very much like those of his American predecessors, such as Cole Porter and Richard Rodgers, in that they provide a rich ground for improvisation and amplification by musicians and arrangers, so much so that he is known as the Father of the Modern Arabic Song.