

Amanda Ekery

5/5/17

### Syrian Female Musicians: The Last Hundred Years

Over the last one hundred years Syria has been controlled by the Ottoman Empire and the French, formed the United Arab Republic with Egypt, had uprisings leading to the rise of the Baath Party, been at war with Israel and Lebanon, and is currently in the midst of a civil war. Throughout Syria's turbulent history, female musicians have developed a voice through *banat ishreh* (communities of women who meet to sing, dance and socialize), refugee choirs, popular and folk music. Like many female musicians around the world, there are more opportunities for Syrian female artists now than one hundred years ago. In my paper, I will discuss how these opportunities have been shaped.

In 1918 Damascus was captured by British forces, ending the 400-year rule of the Ottoman Empire. Syria was soon put under a French mandate, which divided Syria into three regions. Relatively few female musicians became popular at this time because most performances were for private parties, weddings or family gatherings. If they did become famous it was because "they were "discovered" ...or they chose innovative, excellently composed, or very well-arranged compositions; and they competed fiercely with other performers" (Zuhur, *Singing* 96).<sup>1</sup> It was also considered inappropriate for women to be in public without a male family member.

---

<sup>1</sup> Umm Kulthum, a famous Egyptian singer, was Asmahan's rival. Their rivalry was brief due to Asmahan's untimely death in a car crash at age 31.

According to Haifaa Jawad, in her book *The Rights of Women in Islam*, “In the contemporary Muslim world, everything has been take out of its context. Women’s rights are no exception” (Jawad, 15). It was thought that women needed protection by the men in their life while they were outside their home. Because of this idea, there were restrictions placed on working women including musicians.

During this time, a singer known by the stage name Asmahan became popular, performing in movies and recording many songs by Arabic composers. Asmahan had incredible technique that allowed her to sing virtuosic music not common in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and first appeared onstage with her brother Fu’ad, who acted as her chaperone and also played in the orchestra. She kept up her moral image in public by marrying a Druze<sup>2</sup> named Hasan al-Atrash. However in private, against her family’s wishes, she got her own apartment so that she could gamble and party with other women – in other words according to Zuhur, to live like a man (Zuhur, *Singing* 95).

When Asmahan was at the peak of her career, during World War II, there was growing dissent for French rule in Syria and many wanted to be independent. The media began a rumor accusing Asmahan of espionage and sadly this is what she is now most known for. In most of Asmahan’s biographies, who were written by men, there is not information about her musical accomplishments at all (Zuhur, *Secret* 167). When the rumor was published, Asmahan’s first movie *Entisar Al Shabab (The Triumph of Youth)* premiered. The plot is about two young singers, played by Asmahan and her brother Farid, moving to Egypt in search of fame and fortune. In

---

<sup>2</sup> A Druze is a member of a religious community originating among Muslims in Syria.

the movie, Asmahan ends up marrying a wealthy man, Mohi, who hired her to sing at his party. Mohi's mother does not approve of his marriage to a singer, as it was seen as an inappropriate profession if pursued professionally. Mohi's mother threatens him to divorce Asmahan or she will disown him. Asmahan leaves Mohi for fear that she has ruined his relationship with his mother. When Mohi becomes ill, Asmahan sneaks in to see him.

In the Appendix there is video of Asmahan singing "Yalli Hawak" which happens after her visit with Mohi (90, Zuhur Secret). In this song, Asmahan is demonstrating her vocal technique through her ability to articulate every nuance of the line. She connects emotionally with the song, with the expression on her face, as she is singing about loss of love. Her melody is mirrored in the orchestra, and when she sings the accompaniment becomes sparser, allowing the focus of the text and her story to be the focal point.

After World War II Syria elected its first president Shukri al-Kuwatli who led the country to full independence in 1946. During this time period, members of the military formed the Arab Socialist Baath Party. In 1958 Syria and Egypt formed the United Arab Republic, but soon after in 1963 the Baathists seized power of Syria and ended the Republic. Hafez al-Assad became president of Syria. The Baath Party wanted to achieve economic growth and knew women's participation was needed in order to make that happen. In 1967 they founded The General Union of Syrian Women, which helped to get more women working and passed laws to ensure that girls attended schools (McHugo 111-153). It wasn't until Hafez's son; Bashar took office in 2000 that the government funded education for the arts (Dickinson 39).

Syrian women have played a strong role in performing folk music. This music is mostly performed at home or at weddings and in some religious contexts.

Traditional folk songs from the Syrian Jewish music tradition are known as *pizmon*.

Most *pizmon* are composed by setting sacred texts to secular Arab melodies. When Syria became independent from France in 1946, the government banned Jewish immigration to Palestine. Syrian Jews were being persecuted and many illegally escaped to Palestine. In 1948 the Arab-Israeli War happened, establishing Israel as a Jewish state. Throughout the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Syrian Jews faced discrimination and many tried to flee to Israel. The Jewish community in Syria was also very isolated and held onto their traditional mind-set (*Jews in Syria*, 136).

Women didn't sing in public because it was thought to incite sexual feelings. There is a term in Orthodox Jewish communities "*kol isha*, which states '*kol b'isha ervah*', literally 'the voice of a women is a sexual incitement'" (273, Shelemay). However in Syrian Jewish communities it was acceptable to sing for religious ceremonies like bar mitzvahs and weddings. There was a separate section of the synagogue designated for women where they could sit and sing. The section was "often behind a screen or other barrier" to keep men and female performers from seeing each other (274, Shelemay).

Today there is a small population of Syrian Jews. There are young women who leave these communities, become Rabbis, and reconsider their place in society. One woman explains how she has slowly realized that "the community that I saw as only patriarchal and oppressive [I now see as] one of complexity in its weave of Middle Eastern tradition" (287 Shelemay). While Syrian women are seen as less

within a religious framework, they are not powerless. Many find meaning and value through music.

*Pizmon* are still sung today and continue to evolve. They are mostly taught aurally and give women an opportunity to sing in a variety of settings. In the Appendix you will find the *pizmon* 'Yehidah Hitna'ari.' This *pizmon* was composed in 1933 for the *bar mitzvah* of Joseph Staff and is very popular.

Joseph Staff was one of six children when his father passed away. His mother went into mourning for many years, never leaving the house and only removing the black coverings on her furniture ten years after her husband passed. The text in this *pizmon* relate to her through the first stanza. "The one who carried me" refers to his mother and "end your trouble" refers to her mourning (Shelemay 7). This *pizmon* is very repetitious, which allows everyone to learn it quickly and sing along. The simple accompaniment also gives focus to the lyrics and the story of his mother. By having melodies that repeat and text that is personal and relevant to the community about a woman, it allows Syrian Jewish women to not only participate but also feel included through music.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were *banat ishreh* communities in Aleppo. Women would form these communities to sing, dance and socialize. They were most well known for singing *ataba* (songs of lament). Within the walls of the *banat ishreh*, women were free to interact and form relationships without male presence. *Banat ishreh* no longer exist, so religious communities offer women a safe space to make music.

Raja Banout is a Syrian refugee currently living in Turkey. She has formed a choir called Haneen that is made up of refugees from different regions of Syria. Banout formed this group to bring Syrian women together and create a home away from their country. Sharing the music from their unique regions empowers women to create a little bit of home in their current turbulent situation. “Musical involvement by Syrian women derives almost exclusively from their traditional roles in planning and participating in domestic ceremonies” (281, Shelemay). Many of these women’s families are spread out across different countries, trying to find new jobs, secure homes for their families and start new lives.

In 2000, President Hafez al-Assad died and his son Bashar took over Syria. Bashar and his wife Asma “institutionalized high and traditional arts as part of their economic reform policies” (39 Dickinson). Assad’s push for Syrian artistry helped to create The Higher Institute for Music and Dance in Damascus in 2004, which has become the premiere school for Syrians to learn western and traditional Syrian music practices. The Higher Institute for Music has trained musicians like Sousan Eskanda, a violinist currently living in Germany.

Today the civil war is being fought between those who support Bashar and those in opposition to him. Many Syrians have fled the country for safety. In 2011 the Syrian National Symphony Orchestra had a concert bringing together Syrian musicians of different political views. In an interview about the concert Sousan said “It doesn’t matter if we all have different opinions, we have to find a way to bring them together” (Khaleeli). Many musicians who grew up and were trained in Syria no longer live there because of the civil war.

The Higher Institute for Music and Dance is also home to the Damascus Opera House. The Opera House has performances year round by students, the Syrian National Symphony Orchestra and Music Festivals. In Appendix, see a picture of the Oriental Music Festival held at the Opera House. There have been several attacks on the Opera House, one in 2012 where the Institute was ransacked and in 2014 there was a shooting killing two people. The community has helped to rebuild the Institute and continues to host concerts. Most recently on March 19, the Syrian National Symphony Orchestra held a concert "Generations," that included young and older musicians from Syria. Although the featured soloists and conductor are male, there are many women who play in the orchestra and are seen performing in the many music festivals hosted at the Institute. The Opera House has been a major venue for musicians to play in Syria in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One Syrian woman explains, "when the concert begins, when the first note of the piece is played, I'm taken to another world where I can forget about the noise of war" (AFP, Opera House).

Another graduate from the Higher Institute is Lubana Al Quntar, a dramatic soprano. She is recognized as the first Syrian opera singer, and the first Arabic opera singer to participate in international singing competitions. Lubana has performed with the Syrian National Symphony Orchestra, and has performed the role of Carmen in Carmen, The First Lady in The Magic Flute and Violetta in La Traviata. Do to the violence in Syria, Lubana moved to Washington DC as a refugee in 2011. In 2016 she performed in New York City with an orchestra made up of refugee American musicians. See picture in the Appendix. In an interview Lubana describes how she struggles with finding new opportunities since she spent most of her career

touring Europe and performing in Syria, “I had to start life from a zero point,’ she said. ‘It’s a constant struggle, like every day, especially my heart and my mind are always with my family and my people” (AFP, Opera Singer). In the Appendix there is a video of her performing at the Library of Congress with NEC alum Kenan Adnawi.

In this video Lubana and Kenan are performing classical *Arabic Maqam* pieces. *Arabic Maqam* refers to melodic modes found in traditional Arabic music. The first selection is the *Muwashah*, which is a musical form that is well known and found in all Arab music. The seven minute long instrumental intro adds drama to the piece, making Lubana’s entrance more exciting. There is a lot of melodic embellishment that requires great technique, similar to Asmahan and characteristic of Arabic music. The rhythm of the poem and the articulation are key to the delivery. Lubana and Kenan are performing for the Library of Congress, which shows that this art form is of interest and is now beginning to spread across the world. Lubana is also the featured musician for this event; she is addressing the audience, sharing the history of the music and educating the audience.

Each of the artists and music discussed relates to Syria’s history and to the place of women in that trajectory. Asmahan was only allowed to perform in public with her brother because of Islamic law; Syrian Jewish women were allowed to sing within their religious community that was isolated; *banat ishreh* were formed so women could sing comfortably with other women; present day artists like Lubana Al Quntar and Sousan Eskanda received formal training at the Higher Institute and perform worldwide because of the conflict in Syria today. There are more opportunities now for Syrian female artists, however most of these opportunities



are not in Syria. Lubana shares traditional Syrian music and travels the United States and Europe teaching classical voice and performing with orchestras. Sousan has also fled Syria and now plays music in Germany, where she lives. The refugee choir Haneen is another opportunity for women to gather and sing. As the world becomes more connected there are more opportunities for Syrian women to share music from their country. Although these opportunities have risen from unfortunate circumstances, they continue to play and form communities where they can connect with each other and audiences around the world.

## Bibliography

AFP. "For war-weary Syrians, Damascus Opera Brings Welcome Respite." *Daily Mail UK*, 13 Jan. 2015. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-2907676/For-war-weary-Syrians-Damascus-Opera-brings-welcome-respite.html> Accessed 21 Mar 2017

AFP. "Syrian Opera Singer Performs with US Refugee Orchestra." *Almonitor*, 21 June. 2016. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2016/06/entertainment-us-music-syria-conflict-refugee.html> Accessed 22 Mar 2017

"Deadly Mortar Attack on Damascus Opera House." *Aljazeera*, 6 April. 2014. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/04/deadly-mortar-attack-damascus-opera-house-20144610300808940.html> Accessed 21 Mar 2017

Dettmer, Jamie. "Women Sing a Song for Syria." *States News Service*, 29 Feb. 2016. [libraries.state.ma/us/login?gwurl=https://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=EAIM&sw=w&u=mlyn\\_b\\_public&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA444588820&it=r](https://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=EAIM&sw=w&u=mlyn_b_public&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA444588820&it=r). Accessed 31 Jan. 2017

Dickinson, Kay, et al. *The Arab Avante-Garde: Music, Politics, Modernity*. Wesleyan University Press, 2013.

Jawad, Haifaa A. *The Rights of Women in Islam*. St. Martin's Press Inc, 1998.

"Jews in Syria" *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1973, pp. 134–139., [www.jstor.org/stable/2535647](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2535647).

Khaleeli, Homa. "The Orchestra of Syrian Musicians: When there is violence you have to make music." *The Guardian*, 23 June. 2016.

McHugo, John. *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years*. The New Press, 2015

R. Raslan and Mazen. "Musical Concert Brings Together Veteran and Young Musicians at Opera House in Damascus." *Syrian Arab News Agency*, 19 March. 2017.

<http://sana.sy/en/?p=102508> Accessed 21 Mar 2017

Shelemay, Kay Kaufman. "The Power of Silent Voices: Women in the Syrian Jewish Musical Tradition." *Music and the Power of Play in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia*, Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009

Sirees, Nihad. "A Song of Lament for Syria." *New York Times*, 26 April. 2013.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/27/opinion/a-writers-lament-for-the-female-musicians-of-aleppo-syria.html>. Accessed 31 Jan 2017

Zuhur, Sherifa. *Asmahan's Secret: Women, War and Song*. Center for Middle Eastern Studies The University of Texas at Austin, 2000

Zuhur, Sherifa. "Singing a New Song." *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era*, The Feminist Press, 2014

*Syria: The Reckoning*. Directed by Suhaib Abu Doulah, Al Jazeera, 2013.

## **Appendix: Music Examples and Pictures**

1) "Yalli Hawak" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHIL2oJi5aU>

Performed by Asmahan

2) "Yehidah Hitna'ari"

Pizmon composed by Joseph Staff

ולצונטפּט בן עיניך
ב"ה
יְהִידָה לֵאמֹר עַל יְדֵיכָא

2 שִׁיר בְּרֵאשִׁית

3 להַתְּלַמֵּד הַנְּעִים יוֹסֵף עֲרֵא צַפְרִייה הָיִן יִנ אֹדֵר ש' תַּרְצִינ

10 בֵּיאת נֶאוּוה

<p>12 לְהָן יֵא סַגְרַת אַל אֹוהֶאֱרִי שְׂרוּשְׁךָ עֵלֵא אַל סִי</p> <p>16 וּבֹאֵי עֵדִי</p> <p>17 יְהִידָה וּבֵי</p> <p>18 וַיִּנְקֹון קָפִי</p> <p>19 יְהִידָה וּבֵי</p> <p>20 בֵּיּוֹם יָד סַשְׁנוּתִי</p> <p>21 יְהִידָה וּבֵי</p> <p>22 לַעֲמֵס בְּרֹדְכִי הוּדִי</p> <p>23 יְהִידָה וּבֵי</p> <p>24 עָה לֹדַגַּע עַל תְּרִי</p> <p>25 יְהִידָה וּבֵי</p> <p>26 לַהַתְּחַלֵּל בְּסַשְׁנוּתִי</p> <p>27 יְהִידָה וּבֵי</p> <p>28 וּכְוֵה הַתְּנַדֵּךְ</p>	<p>15 לִבְשֵׁי עֹונֵךְ וְעֵרִי</p> <p>16 וְרַעֲיִי אַתְּ גְּדִיּוּתִי</p> <p>17 יְכַתִּירֵנִי בְּגוּרִי</p> <p>18 וּסְקֵה יִשְׁוֹעוּתִי</p> <p>19 כִּי הַיּוֹם זֶה נִכְנַסְתִּי</p> <p>20 עִם עֵדוֹת קְדוֹתֵי</p> <p>21 לַמִּי שַׁעֲשֵׂה נְסִיִּם</p> <p>22 אִין סְקִים יִרְעוּתִי</p> <p>23 וְאַחַזָּה לַתְּשֻׁבֵי רֵן</p> <p>24 לַעֲתֵס סַשְׁכְּנוּתִי</p> <p>25 וְאַשֶׁר קִיטַעַ</p> <p>26 לִכֵּן אֶקְרִישׁ עֲתוּתִי</p> <p>27 בְּהַם תַּשְׁמַח וְתוֹחֵה</p> <p>28 שְׁלוֹם לַעַם רַבּוּתִי</p>	<p>14 דִּי לַצְּרוּתְךָ דִּי דִּי</p> <p>15 בְּנֵן שְׂדֵי שְׂדֵי</p> <p>16 וּכְבֹשׁ שְׂמֵי שְׂמֵי</p> <p>17 כִּי אֲרִכּוּ יְסֵי יְסֵי</p> <p>18 אַחִי וְגַם אַחִיוֹתִי</p> <p>19 בְּלִבִּי וּבִשְׂפָתַי</p> <p>20 וְאוֹת אֶקְשׁוּר עַל יָדֵי</p> <p>21 הֵן נִשְׂאֲרַתִּי לְבִדִּי</p> <p>22 אַתְּ בְּרוּחִי שְׂעֵרִי</p> <p>23 כִּי יִבְשֶׁשׁ אֶת עֵדִי</p> <p>24 וְהֶאֱרִיךְ יוֹמֹתִי</p> <p>25 וּבֹו יִסְלַח תּוֹבוּתִי</p> <p>26 רִבֵּי שְׁלוֹם לְבַגְדִּי</p> <p>27 נִקְלָה כְּעֵינֶיךָ</p>	<p>13 יְהִידָה הַתְּנַעֲרִי</p> <p>14 אֶבְלֵי דְבִשֵׁי עִם יְעִרִי</p> <p>15 וְאַלְהֵי אֲבִי עֲרֵי</p> <p>16 יוֹסֵף לְקַבֵּץ פְּנוּרִי</p> <p>17 שְׂמַחֵי עִם יוֹלְדוֹתִי</p> <p>18 לַעֲבֹרֵן בְּחַפְלַתִּי</p> <p>19 פֶּאֶר כִּין עֵינֵי אֲסִים</p> <p>20 בִּי אֲהַנִּי עֵינֶךָ סִים</p> <p>21 הוֹזֵק אֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל נַעֲרִיךָ</p> <p>22 וְיִשְׂאֵל הַזֶּן נַמְרִיךָ</p> <p>23 בְּרוּךְ שֶׁהַחַיִּינִי</p> <p>24 לֹוֹסֵן זֶה הַגִּיעֵנִי</p> <p>25 וּבְבֹרֵךְ כּוּרֵי תַחִיה</p> <p>26 בְּרַבַּת הַדְּיוּם אַל תַּחִיה</p>
---	---	---	---

*You, alone the one who carried me, stir yourself.  
 An end to your trouble, enough, enough.  
 Put on your strength and awake,  
 And come to me, to me.  
 Eat my honey with my honeycomb,  
 In the garden of my fields, my fields.  
 Pasture my kids.*

The God of my father, my help  
 Who rides the heavens, the heavens,  
 Let Him adorn me with my crown,

And [make like] suckling babes my enemies, my enemies.  
 He will continue to gather my scattered ones,  
 For they have lasted long, my days, my days,  
 And I await my salvation.



### 3) Library of Congress: Traditional Syrian Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZK-IQTrdbe0>

Performed by Lubana Al Quntar and Kenan Adnawi

### 4) The Higher Institute

Lower picture shows Higher Institute courtyard. Top left and middle pictures are after an attack in 2012. Top right corner is an example of a student's schedule.



### 5) Oriental Music Festival at Opera House 2014



**6) Lubana Al Quntar with Refugee Orchestra NYC**

