

“SINCERITY OF EXPRESSION IS THE HEART OF AESTHETIC IMPACT”

A Conversation with Hala Masri

by *Laurie King-Irani*

“The union of words and melody has been inseparable in the Arabic musical tradition; so, too, have beauty of expression and voice been indivisible.”

—Jihad Ali Racy,
Lebanese Ethnomusicologist

Unless one has had the privilege of hearing her clear, strong and expressive singing voice, one would not guess that Hala Masri is one of the best young singers in Lebanon today. Masri, a 1987 graduate of the Lebanese American University who currently works as drama coordinator for theatrical productions at LAU, sings with the Beirut Group for Arabic Music, which performs classical Arabic music, under the direction of conductor Selim Sahab. Masri’s personality is the opposite of the stereotypical “diva”. She is humble, even a bit shy, when discussing her talent and artistic philosophy. Despite her natural reserve, however, one quickly senses the sincerity of her passion for classical Arabic music and her deep respect for all those who strive to preserve and advance this rich musical heritage.

Masri did not consciously choose to become a singer, rather, she stumbled into her musical career during her third year of studies at LAU, where she majored in Communication Arts with a concentration in radio/tv and film. A colleague, Rima Karimeh, upon hearing Masri sing during a theatrical rehearsal, remarked that she had an exceptional voice and unique style and urged her to have her voice appraised by a professional musician. Overcoming her own modesty, as well as her anxieties about her father’s probable reactions to the idea of a musical career for his daughter, Masri auditioned with the respected musician and conductor, Selim Sahab, to ascertain whether her voice held promise. As soon as he heard her sing, Sahab knew that he had discovered a natural talent. He suggested that she attend rehearsals of his choir, train under his tutelage, and eventually perform classical Arabic songs in public. This meeting marked an important turning point in Masri’s life; she even remembers the date, “October 28, 1985,” she recalls, laughing.

Although pleased and excited by the prospect of training and singing with an accomplished maestro, Masri was quite concerned about the reaction of her family, particularly her father, to the possibility that she



Hala Masri performs as a soloist under the directions of Selim Sahab at the Sayyed Darwish Theater in Cairo, 1988

would soon be performing publicly. “Here, in our society, the performing arts are considered inappropriate for girls and women; to sing, dance or act in public is still considered a sensitive issue. I really wanted to sing with Selim Sahab’s choir, but I did not want to upset my father, so I had to present the situation to him carefully. I didn’t tell him about my desire to perform until I had attended several rehearsals and had had a chance to see for myself the nature of the group and the quality of the people. When I was sure that no one could point to anything improper about the choir, I informed my father. He was upset at first, but I convinced him that this was a serious, artistic undertaking. It was not as though we were performing in restaurants, clubs or cabarets at midnight! Gradually, my father’s misgivings disappeared.”

Despite social and cultural pressures that dissuade young women from pursuing careers in the performing arts, Masri noted that “you find many women in all the arts in Lebanon. In our theatrical productions at LAU, for instance, women often fill all the key roles, not only on the stage as performers, but also behind the scenes, as managers, directors and designers. I think that women are so drawn to the arts because they seem to be more sensitive than men. A woman in our society cannot express her feelings as openly as a man can; she can only express them fully in indirect ways, for instance, through writing, painting, singing or acting.” Masri paused for a moment, then added, thoughtfully, “I was reading a book about Umm Kulthoum (the legendary Egyptian singer who died in 1973). In the book, it was mentioned that Umm Kulthoum had composed two songs; however, neither of them found its

way out to the public. It came to my mind then that, although we have women who are very well known as singers, we do not have any women composers or conductors of music, and women instrumentalists are not as numerous as men."

Masri is very reflective about the music she sings, and was eager to discuss her insights into the aesthetic principles which inform Arabic classical music and distinguish it from other musical traditions and genres. "Although I am not an expert in musical theory, I love singing Arabic classical music, and I really enjoy listening to all forms of classical music, whether Arabic or Western. I love to listen to anything that is precious. I like classical music because it is classical—it is music that has withstood the test of time and maintained its value, whether it is an Arab muwashah or one of Beethoven's symphonies." Noting the differences between Arab and Western music, Masri commented that "melody is richer in the Arabic tradition; it's in the melody that we find the aesthetic impact. In the Western classical tradition, melody is not as important as the distribution of the sounds, the harmony. Here is where we find the aesthetic heart of Western music. When I am singing classical music, I want the audience to feel the beauty and the sincerity of what I am expressing. If they are affected, if my message of the song's sentiments arrives, I am satisfied. However, I have to say that when we Arabs first encounter Western classical music, we have to train ourselves to hear it as it was meant to be heard; we must learn how to understand it before we can enjoy it, as if we were learning a new language. Unfortunately, young people in the Arab world nowadays have to be trained to listen to Arabic classical music too! The current generation, and their parents, seem not to appreciate our own national classical music, or to understand and value its tradition. This problem is related to other problems we are confronting in the post-war period in Lebanon. There is not enough concern with the arts in general; too many people see the arts as something secondary, a luxury that they can live without, and I think that this is sad. We need to improve art and music education in our schools, we must introduce students to the richness and beauty of Arabic classical music from elementary school onwards."

Masri's own formation as an artist took place against a social, political and cultural background that was quite different than the current situation in the Arab world. Coming of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s, she was exposed to Arabic classical music to a far greater degree than the Lebanese youth of today, who are increasingly influenced by cheap, common musical forms through the media of radio, and, most notably, through music television videos. The artists who most

influenced Masri's own musical tastes and styles were Asmahan, Abdel Wahab, Umm Kulthoum, and other singers who are not very popular among Lebanese teenagers of today. Masri noted, with dismay, a growing tendency among the Lebanese people to worship everything Western and to denigrate everything Arab. "Unfortunately, we have this complex that Arabic music is not as advanced as Western music, whether classical or popular."

The musical environment of Masri's childhood and adolescence were markedly different; she recalls that the relationship between Arabic music, culture and politics was much closer when she was a child. "During my childhood, the period just before the seventies, Arab artists and composers were producing a fantastic type of music that had a very powerful impact on audiences throughout the Arab world. Here in Lebanon, I remember from my early childhood that we would listen every night to Sowt al-Arab (Voice of the Arabs), 'idha'at Lubnan (Lebanon Broadcasting) and 'idha'at al-Qaahira (Cairo Broadcasting), and everyone, children and adults, would sing along with the songs and become enthusiastic and feel deep sentiments. When you hear the music of the 1960s and earlier, it leaves a distinct impact on you; you even get 'goose-bumps'! The songs of Abdel Wahab, Umm Kulthoum, Layla Mourad, Abdel Halim Hafiz, Faiza Ahmad, and others were incredibly moving to all who heard them; even small children knew the words and melodies. This period was the zenith of our classical Arab music. Many years will pass before we again have great musicians like Sayyed Darwish, Muhammad Qasabji, Riyad Sumbati, Zakariya Ahmad, Muhammad Abdel Wahab and others. "

If Masri were to give advice to young Arab women aspiring to careers in the performing arts, she would tell them to start earlier than she did in studying music seriously. She advises gifted young women singers to go back to their own music heritage and learn it in-depth. "No culture can improve without a fundamental knowledge of its origins. For me, the experience of singing with Sahab's choir and orchestra has been a school in itself. I learned a lot, and I am still learning a lot!" Masri is happy that she was introduced to this group, as it made such a difference in her professional and personal life. She is also pleased that more young people are discovering the joys and richness of classical Arabic music through the performances and rehearsals of the Beirut Group for Arabic Music. "Lately, I have noticed that most of the audiences attending our concerts in Beirut are young people. They are curious about this music, even though they don't learn about it in school and cannot hear it as frequently as I did when I was their age. I think this is a good sign for the future of Arabic classical music."