

Interview with the Syrian composer Nouri Iskander

Introduction

Nouri Iskander (b. 1938) is among the most prominent Syrian composers of his generation. His works combine influences from European classical and local musical traditions and their generic compass is wide: orchestral and chamber music, concert music for orchestra, choir and vocal soloists, an opera etc.

Due to the tragic war in his native country, he has been living in the Swedish provincial city of Örebro since 2014. I met with him there and conducted the interview on August 10th and 11th, 2016. We were partly at my hotel in central Örebro and partly at his new Swedish home. He is living with his wife and daughter in new-built flat in a new neighborhood on the outskirts of the town.

Nouri Iskander and I talked about his life and particularly about his early musical experiences, and he explained to me his views on the historical background for his modern Syrian-Arabic music and its esthetics.

Nouri Iskander belongs to the Syriac Orthodox Church.¹ It has its headquarters in the Syrian capital Damascus, but with the Arabic diaspora it has been spread worldwide also to Sweden and to the city of Örebro, where we now find two Syriac churches and congregations. The liturgy of the Church is among the oldest still surviving.

As a music scholar, Nouri Iskander has dedicated years of work to the transcription of orally transmitted traditional repertoires of Syriac Church music. His commitment to the preservation of this part of the region's cultural heritage, however, is combined with a strongly stated modernist stand, a strong conviction of the necessity of musical development and renewal.

Many aspects of Nouri Iskander's esthetic position and his views on music history mirror and derive their particular meaning from Middle Eastern esthetical and critical discourses with which most of DMO's readers will be unfamiliar, and thus call for a little introductory explanation.

This applies, for instance, to his attitude toward the concept and practice of musical *ṭarab*:² *Ṭarab* is short for a system of esthetic values that favors music's immediate

1 Nouri Iskander commonly uses the Arabic designation *al-kinīsā al-siryaniyyā*; accordingly, I write 'the Syriac Church' despite the existence of two Syriac churches: an orthodox and a catholic.

2 The transliteration from Arabic has been made according to the *IJMES transliteration system*. Some names are spelled according to commonly used Latinized forms.

emotional impact and considers music's ability to take hold of the listener and carry him away in a kind of enjoyable trance the prime criteria for its artistic value. In some contemporary Middle Eastern musical environments this *tarab* stands for the summit of Arabic or Eastern authenticity, contrasted to the alleged intellectualism of Western music; in other environments, however, it is seen as conservative and as a limiting esthetics that hinder true musical development.

The need for an introductory explanation also applies to Nouri Iskander's conviction of his music's rootedness in a particular regional cultural heritage that reaches back to the ancient cultures in Mesopotamia and Syria. The reference in the interview to the book *fi al-mūsīqa al-surīyyā* [On Syrian Music]³ by the composer and scholar Husni Haddad hints at the fact that Nouri Iskander's descriptions of the musical practice of these old, pre-Islamic, cultures are personally tainted interpretations of a widespread and widely accepted historical narrative.

I am grateful to Nouri Iskander for his hospitality during my stay in Örebro, for our long and focused conversations, and for his patience and help to overcome the linguistic difficulties. The interview was conducted in Arabic, and often we had to stop and repeat to remedy the shortcomings of my Arabic proficiencies.

I alone am responsible for the transcription and translation. Yet, I owe Sawsan Kassis heartfelt thanks for expert help with many tricky details.

Søren Møller Sørensen, Copenhagen, November 21st 2016

Early musical experiences

Søren Møller Sørensen (SMS): Before we begin, allow me to repeat: I'm not able to express my feelings about what's happening in Syria, and especially in Aleppo right now. And I'm deeply sorry that our talks must take place on the background of this tragedy.

Nouri Iskander (NI): Yes, we must be patient, and we hope that it'll be better in the future, God willing.

SMS: Yes, God willing. And I want to add that in my opinion dialogue is very important also under these tragic circumstances.

NI: Yes.

SMS: If you'd allow me, we could simply start with the beginning.

NI: Yes.

SMS: You were born in 1938 in ...

NI: ... in Deir Azzur.⁴

3 Husni Haddād, *fi al-mūsīqa al-surīyya* [On Syrian Music] (Beirut: Saadeh Cultural Foundation, 2009 [First edition: Damascus 1952]).

4 Deir Azzur is a Syrian provincial town by the river Euphrates, approx. 450 km to the northeast of the capital Damascus.

SMS: In Deir Azzur! What were your first musical experiences there?

NI: In Deir Azzur I only stayed for a short time. I moved to Raqqa,⁵ and after some years to Aleppo. I was then six–seven years old. In Aleppo I started in the primary school and I functioned as an altar boy in the church. In the church I heard beautiful tunes—the Syriac tunes. I loved these tunes. And when I was a little older I joined a scout orchestra, I played the trumpet. I loved music, and this love grew stronger and stronger. When I was 17–18 years old, I studied the violin for a year, and after high school I had the chance to take part in a competition for a grant for studying music pedagogics in Cairo.

SMS: In Cairo! But was there any organized music education in Aleppo at that time: music schools, a conservatory, or the like?

NI: No. There was no conservatory or anything of that kind. I studied the violin with a private teacher.

After high school I went to Cairo to study at the school of music pedagogics. The objective of the studies there was the improvement of the teaching of *anāshīd*⁶ and songs; I studied there for five years, 1959–1964, and when I returned I worked as a school teacher and at the teacher’s training college in Aleppo.

SMS: I understand that you were strongly influenced by the music of the church, but how about the music outside the church?

NI: I heard music in the radio, and, as I said, I studied a little of the music for violin and scout trumpet. But the religious music, the Syriac Church music, was the basis. After I’d moved to Cairo, I studied music and music pedagogics, violin and piano.

SMS: Arabic or European music?

NI: We were taught the piano. It was not on a very high level. But I played part of the piano literature [i.e., the standard repertoire for the piano]: the sonatas of Mozart and Haydn and some Chopin.

SMS: Already in Syria?

NI: No, no, in Cairo.

SMS: How about Arabic music?

NI: In Cairo, I studied Arabic music relatively cursory, but when I returned to Syria, to Aleppo, I studied it more intensively.

5 Raqqa is a Syrian provincial town by the river Euphrates between Deir Azzur and Aleppo.

6 *Anāshīd wa aghāni*. The word *anāshīd* refers to a broad field of functional vocal practices: religious hymns, patriotic songs, and school songs with pedagogical objectives.

The Syriac legacy

SMS: I've seen you in the program "ajrās al-mashriq" [The Eastern Bells]⁷ on the Lebanese TV channel "al-mayadeen" [The Squares]. Here you gave a lot of valuable information about the music of the Syriac Church. In your opinion what distinguishes this music?

NI: The Syriac music?

SMS: Yes.

NI: The Syriac music is the music of the Syrian environment. It's the old Syrian music. It's based on the Eastern *ajnās*:⁸ *bayāti*, *rast* and *zika*, and *higāz*⁹ and so on, and on small musical sentences, and on combined and simple rhythmical figures and melodies that are specific to this area.

SMS: Does that mean that the Eastern *ajnās* and Syrian *maqāmāt* originate in the Syriac Church?

NI: That I cannot say with certainty. But often it's assumed that these Syriac melodies are part of the foundation of Arabic music. Or you might say that they're one of the fundamental roots of this music. That's what I believe.

SMS: What's the link between this Syriac music and the ancient Syrian music?

NI: Yes, what's the link? We don't have any special key to this issue. But the book¹⁰ that you're showing me ... I like it very much. It's by a very good author. It says that the ancient Syrian music includes, for one part, the old pagan music that came from Mesopotamia and ancient Syria before Christ, and, for another part, music of the founders of the Church.

SMS: I don't know much about this, but I've asked myself: what are the sources to this part of music history? Do we have any written sources suggesting a link between the ancient music and the music of the Syriac Church?

NI: I haven't found any strong documentation that tells us that the ancient Syrian music is the same as the music of the Syriac Church. But hear what I say: the Syriac music is the continuation of the ancient Syrian music and the music of the pagan temples in Mesopotamia. At the time of Christ, things changed somehow, and people began singing new melodies and Syrian melodies that later became popular Syrian

7 A talk show program with alternating guests from the Eastern Christian churches interviewed by the host, Ghasān al-Shāmi. A transcription of the interview with Nouri Iskander is available on the internet: <http://www.almayadeen.net/programs/episode/830/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A4%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%8A-%D9%86%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%83%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%B1>

8 *jins/ajnas* is derived from Latin genus/genera. In this particular context, the word refers to the minor units of which the Arabic modes are composed.

9 Names for some of these modes or *maqāmāt* and/or for the *ajnas* defining them.

10 Ḥusni Ḥaddād, *fi al-musiqa al-sūrīyya* [On Syrian Music]

tunes with Arabic words. The Arabic music was not present at that time in Syria. Then the Arabs and Islam came and were influenced by the music of the region.

We consider the old Syriac music as being the result of four important trajectories.

- First: what was left of music from the pagan temple from the time before Christ, these melodies were given new words.
- Second: old popular tunes from Syria, Assyria, and Armenia, which were also equipped with new words: prayers.
- Third: works and compositions of the Church Fathers, the leading clerics.
- Fourth: a small group of Byzantine music that is called *qawānīn junānīyyā* [literally: Greek laws]. This is not a big group. It's small but important for the Syriac Church.

These four groups of Syriac melodies are the important ones. You can say with certainty that the Syriac music is rooted in the people of this area, its civilization and culture—Mesopotamia and Syria; however, I have no reliable documentation telling which of the melodies that came to the Syriac Church were pagan or not. Maybe a thorough researcher will be able to combine the musical sentences in these collections and distinguish them from each other, and then be able to say that this group seems to have old forms and are remnants from the temples, and this group has new and modern forms. Such a study is possible, but until now it has not been carried out. I wish I could do it. But time is always the enemy, and the conditions of life are always against us, especially in Syria.

SMS: I know from earlier talks that you've devoted years of your life to the recording, collection, and transcription of Syriac Church music. This is documented in two monumental books, one on the repertoire of the *Deir al-Zafaran*¹¹ Monastery, and the other on the repertoire of the *Ruha* Monastery.¹² In both cases, the musical notation is your work.

NI: I've got big confidence in the music of the Syriac Orthodox Church, because the Church owns a great, beautiful and amazing oral heritage of music. At different stages, I contributed to the collection and recorded parts of this music, while other people have contributed to other parts. Among the important contributors was the late patriarch, Jacob the Third. He recorded his own voice—he had good ears and a strong memory—in America where he spent some months.

Q: In America?

A: Yes, he recorded them in America, left a copy of them there, and returned. This is a very important reference for the melodies of *Deir al-Zafaran*.

11 Several authors, *al-mūsīqa al-siryāliyyā "kanz al-alhān"* [The Syriac Music "a treasure of melodies"] (Aleppo: al-maktabā al-siryāliyyā, 1997). Deir al-Zafaran is the popular nickname of the Syriac orthodox Ananias Monastery located near the town Mardin in present day Turkey near the Syrian border.

12 Mar Gregorius Yohanna Ibrahim, *al-mūsīqa al-siryāniyyā* [The Syriac Music] (Aleppo: Mardin Publishing House, 2003)

The other important reference is the collection of music that was recorded by a German-Swiss musicologist. He came to Lebanon to study Maronite music; we brought him to Aleppo to make him hear music of the Syriac Church, and I asked him to help me with the recording. He had a very good recorder—and, in fact, he recorded these church melodies for a month or so, and we were very thankful to him. And he travelled away, took one copy with him, and left one in the church in Aleppo.

Later, I worked with the recordings that he left in the church on the basis of a request from archbishop of Aleppo, Yohanna Ibrahim, who loved music very much, and who knew that I loved the music. He asked me to transcribe the music of the two schools: *al-Zafaran* and *Ruha*.

I started with the music of *Deir al-Zafaran*—the recording of patriarch Jacob the Third—and I worked approximately five–six years with the transcription of this collection, and then with *Ruha* school, also in about five years. Then two books appeared, the first with the melodies from *Deir Zafaran*, the second with the *Ruha* legacy. It was supposed that from these melodies we should form a big book with the liturgical repertoire of the Syriac Church. But we interrupted the work. We weren't able to carry the work out for various reasons. But if God gives us strength, maybe someday I'll carry it out. God willing!

Music with struggle and dialectics

SMS: I remember your presence at the seminar in Copenhagen last year and your impressive words at that occasion about your time in Cairo in the early 1960s,¹³ and your ideas at that time about the necessity of development and renewal of Arabic music.

NI: Cairo was very important to me. I studied the repertoire of world music.

SMS: ... what do you mean by “world music”?

NI: European classical music. I needed to study this music. Only after returning to Aleppo, I studied Arabic music in greater details: the *maqāmāt*, and the *muwashshahāt*, and the *qudūd*,¹⁴ and their relations to the Syriac music.

During my studies in Cairo, I realized that Arabic music developed only slowly while European music had reached high levels of artistic innovation. In many fields, Arabic music was a little behind the European. For example, in Arabic music there was only one melody and its forms were vocal more than instrumental. Much of the Arabic music is vocal: *adwār*, *muwashshahāt*, *taqtūqāt*,¹⁵ etc. It was my task to find out how to develop the Arabic music to a higher level than the present. We were in need of new rules concerning harmony and polyphony. We couldn't just imitate Western

13 “Syrian Music in the Diaspora”, seminar at the University of Copenhagen, Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, September 23th, 2015.

14 *muwashshā* (plur: *muwashshahāt*) and *qadd* (plur: *qudūd*) are traditional vocal genres. The *qadd* originates from Aleppo.

15 *dawr* (plur: *adwār*) and *taqtūqā* (plur: *taqtūqāt*) are traditional vocal genres.

harmony; we couldn't let Western harmony govern the Eastern *maqāmāt*. This isn't possible. It's totally impossible. The application of the Western rules for harmony and polyphony on the *maqāmāt* is very harmful to the nature and personality of the Eastern *maqāmāt*, and to the soul of Eastern music. Therefore, we need new research to establish rules appropriate for the Eastern *ajnās* and *maqāmāt*.

From 1964 and to the 1980s, I made experiments with a small Syriac church choir. It was experiments with hymns in the oriental *maqāmāt* in polyphonic style. I had success with this, and I was very happy about it. After this, I turned to harmony, which is a much more difficult issue. Harmony is groups of notes played at the same time and based on a particular feeling, and they've a relation to the musical scale. But it's impossible to use the chords from European music in connection with the *maqāmāt*. Therefore it's necessary to make many experiments to find chords—conglomerate of pitches—that are artificial, not based on the natural scale—and to find new relations between these conglomerates and the *ajnās* that the music of the *maqāmāt* are made from. In this, I was only to some extent successful. The results from the experiments with polyphony, based on the oriental *maqāmāt* and *ajnas*, were better. But I've used both polyphony and harmonies based on the oriental *maqāmāt* and *ajnas* in my renewed Syrian-Arabic music. I prefer to call it "Syrian-Arabic music" because the designation "Arabic music" is broad—from one ocean to the other. The Syrian-Arabic music is regional, it's originally the music of Syria, it was performed and sung in Arabic—no more, nor less. But it's not Arabic music, as we know it from the Arabian Peninsula. By no means! It's Syrian music. The designation "Arabic" is a political and international designation for the area from the Arabian Gulf to the Atlantic Ocean. I tried to develop this Syrian music into instrumental forms, such as the string trio that you have heard and the concertos for cello and 'oud. And I tried to the best of my ability to invent something new.

SMS: I'm looking in my notebook for some of the words that you used for this new music when we met last year in Copenhagen. Let me see: You were talking about a music that contained "logic," that contained "conflict" and "dialectics"—a "music of the brain," so to speak. But what are musical logic and dialectics actually? Immediately when I'm confronted with these concepts, I feel that I understand. But when I offer them a second thought, I'm not so certain after all.

NI: The Syrian-Arabic music, the traditional or classical music, basically consists of songs with orchestral accompaniment. Their forms are fixed and simple: dual or triple forms, AB or ABC or ABACAD, and so on. These forms simply add one musical sentence to another, and so on and so forth. It's a kind of narrative music. It tells you a story: "so and so and so it is." But I started to feel that we needed music with a dialectic, question and answer: why and how did this happen? These diverse questions in the music ...

SMS: ... a logical music that explicates the reasons for the musical events...

NI: ... yes, these diverse intellectual reasons for the development and dynamics of the musical sentence and its dramatic and expressive variations.

SMS: But this perpetual drive forwards in the European classical music is, to a great extent, a result of tonal dynamics.

NI: Yes, the European music was facilitated by harmony and polyphony in its development. It invented forms such as the sonata, the suite, the concerto—but particularly the sonata form. These musical forms present a musical idea, then a second idea is added, and these two ideas develop and alternate, they talk with each other and struggle, and change in dramatic ways.

“Idea” plays a role in this music. This highly developed music that contains elements of idea and drama, questions and answers, and contrast—it was music like that I felt that we needed. Because music that only presents one beautiful melody after the other doesn’t move the human being who has lost so much in his life. We needed music that’s like a knife that pierces and provokes to awareness and questioning. Therefore, I wished that our Syrian-Arabic music should be dramatic music containing ideas. I also wished that the audience, when they heard these highly developed musical ideas, would develop internally and become victorious, and rise to a stronger and higher level.

SMS: That seems to relate to the issue of the link between artistic and social renewal?

NI: Yes. This kind of intellectual music is for our part—we, in Syria—we need music of this kind to develop the people of this society and to save them from the hesitant, iterative music. That’s truly beautiful music, but it’s music that only repeats itself and brings nothing new, and that doesn’t develop. The advanced dramatic music that contains idea and drama—that is the music we need to improve our mental state from inside, and to create a new world in our societies with intellect and art in all its aspects.

SMS: I once discussed this issue with one of my Arab friends. He’s a musician, and he said, “... but in the system of the oriental *maqāmāt* one also finds intellect. It’s not easy to play a *taqāsīm*¹⁶ according to the rules of the *maqāmāt*. In this improvised music, you also find logic and intellect. I mean, if you play for instance a *taqāsīm* in *maqām rast* not everything is allowed, there are certain possible modulations and certain impossible.

NI: There’s intellect in the music of the *maqāmāt*, in how you can move from one *maqām* to another, and to make the transformations and moves. Yes, there’s intellect, and I don’t say that there’s no idea in the music of the *maqāmāt* but it’s a simple idea. There’re two kinds of *‘oud taqāsīm*. The traditional one is nothing but meaningless babble. But there’re a few *taqāsīm* that have meaning. It’s the *taqāsīm* where the playing is free and expresses a new situation and a vision of the future, a vision of a new situation. But this is only possible to very skillful, cultured, and intellectual musicians. The free intellectual *taqāsīm* initiates the creation of the new dramatic Syrian-Arabic music.

16 Improvisation according to the rules of the *maqām* system.

The new *taqāsim* with idea and drama, idea and brain, paves the way so we can write the new music with idea and drama that we need. The *taqāsim* is very useful for us, but only the serious and excellent *taqāsim* played by musicians with intellect. I don't deny that that there's intellect in the Arabic *maqāmāt* music. But the *taqāsim* as well as the songs are dependent on an esthetic theory that demands beautiful melodies and a beautiful performance—not a performance that expresses the emotional states, states of disapproval or anything of that kind, I was thinking of a performance that disapproves this simplified state of beauty. I was thinking of a situation with questioning and fighting and piercing, in order to ask and find appropriate answers to the situation.

Ancient pagan, old Syriac, and modern music

SMS: When you tell about yourself, your music, and its cultural background, you are traversing impressive spans of time, from the ancient high cultures of Mesopotamia and old Syria, through early Christianity to the present day. And it appears to me that you put equally strong emphasis on these two dimensions; it appears to me that you focus equally on the importance of the relation to the distant past and on the necessity of renewal and development. What is your opinion on the relation between these two aspects?

NI: I don't quite understand.

SMS: Knowing about the ancient times seems very important to you. They're the foundation, so to speak. But at the same time this very strong focus on the...

NI: ... renewal....

SMS: Yes!

NI: If we want to explain the character of the Syriac church music, it's necessary to go back to the pagan music in the temples before the spread of Christianity. In these temples, there were several gods of different kinds that influenced the life of society, its mentality, its philosophy, and its internal relations. These gods, and their relations with humans, and humans with humans, and gods with gods, all this was conflicting relations or harmonious relations that formed a particular mentality for the multiple pagan rituals. The book "Music in Syria" by Ḥusni Ḥadād describes in an excellent way how, in the temple of Ugarit and other Syrian temples, there were musical rituals in which groups of string instrumentalists, wind instrumentalists and choirs participated—the leader of the choir and the soloist sang hymns. The rituals were about the relations between the gods, about the relation between gods and humans, and between humans, and about the conditions of life. They were about all the details of life: love, death, etc. The music of this pagan ritual was filled with and marked by dramatic situations, dramatic music, the gods struggle with each other, the humans struggle with the gods, etc. These dramatic conflicts distinguish the pagan rituals.

SMS: That is to say that the drama is the important aspect.

NI: This drama between the gods and the humans remained until we came to the time of Christianity. Christianity reduced the drama. Now, only one God remained. Now, there were God and Christ and his disciples.

In the life of Christ, there was drama: his birth, his life, and his death. In the last week of the life of Christ before the crucifixion, we find drama: the last supper, and the washing of the feet of the disciples, and the people searching for Christ because they wanted to kill him. These dialogues survived and are inscribed in the rituals of the Syriac Church. Here's still musical drama. There're two choruses in the church—antiphony—and these two choruses are telling the story of what's going on, the story of Christ...

SMS: Now?

NI: Yes, even today. This dialogue still exists.

SMS: But...

NI: Wait a little! Suddenly, the storytelling stops. The narrator pauses, and the dramatic events appear in front of the altar, and you'll see the priest playing Jesus Christ, and the altar boys playing the disciples as if they were performing a theatrical play in front of the altar.

There's only little musical drama left in the Christian Church. But it still exists during Easter.

But when Islam came—when it was said: "Say: He is Allah. (...) He begetteth not, and he is not begotten. And there is no like unto Him"¹⁷—all the gods were eliminated except one, the Creator, and the drama in the music was definitely eliminated. In the music of Islam, the drama is eliminated and replaced by a kind of music that exclaims and narrates. It's not dramatic expression. It's music that tells a story. So it is, for instance, by Koranic recitation. It's not drama. It's narration according to the holy text of the Koran. In the time of Islam, the struggles between the gods were totally eliminated. Only one god remained, and there's no struggle and no discussion with him. In Islam, it's the belief that the music is the vehicle of the holy thought, and there's no drama in the Islamic hymns.

There's only one exception: the Sufi groups. These groups perform the ritual that we call '*dhikr*'. I've attended many *dhikr* rituals in Aleppo, in the mosques, and I saw and felt that this drama is not "horizontal" as the Greek drama or the pagan Syrian ritual. There's no "horizontal" drama between the protagonists. The drama in Islam is "vertical"; it stretches from the ground to the height without any individual protagonists struggling.

To put it in short: In Koran recitation, there's no drama. In the time of paganism, there was a great, dramatic music at the temples. Christianity reduced the drama, Islam eliminated it, and it only survived in the Sufi lodges; and Arabic music now—

17 The Koran: Surat al-ikhlas.

for instance the *muwashahat* and the *adwar*—has become a narrative music that tells a story. It's beautiful music—but there's no drama and no idea.

SMS: Does this absence of drama imply an absence of potential for development?

NI: Where the drama is present the development is faster, and the absence of drama in the religious music made it develop more slowly and left a music that's "mono", music that has only one melody and a "message-bringing" or narrating style. It's a beautiful style indeed, but it's without drama, and it stayed much less developed.

Drama and music: Sayyid Darwish¹⁸ and the Rahbani Brothers

SMS: As far as I know, the intention of bringing drama to Arabic music was also the background for Sayyid Darwish's music theater from the beginning of the 20th century.

NI: Before I turn to the music of Sayyid Darwish, I want to tell you something. In Europe, in the Age of Enlightenment, there were great creative innovations in the field of theatrical drama and dramatic texts, and the musicians also developed. They were influenced by the theatrical drama. The dramatic texts influenced music, and music started to play a dramatic role in itself. Sayyid Darwish and his likes in Cairo admired the dramatic music in Europa, the operas and music drama, but the atmosphere of development didn't influence them in the depth. There're fine melodies, but music with drama, music with inquiries and with questions, with development? No, they never made that kind of music. Isn't it so that the Arabic music is nothing but beautiful melodies and beautiful words? In the case of Sayyid Darwish, we've the melodies of the peasants and the workers. But at the end, it's nothing but usual theater with 10 or 15 beautiful songs. There's no dramatic singing. With Sayyid Darwish we've no melodramatic theater. Isn't it so? But with the Rahbanis...

SMS: ... that's the Lebanese composers, the Rahbani Brothers?¹⁹

NI: Yes, in Lebanon. Here I feel the presence of musical drama.

SMS: Inside the music?

NI: Yes, inside the music. The Rahbani Brothers created a dramatic music theater in Lebanon. But in Cairo? They created beautiful melodies. But dramatic melodies? Music with inquiries, questions, and so on? No, in Cairo they did not create that sort of music!

18 Sayyid Darwish (1892–1923) was an Egyptian composer and singer. In Arabic music historiography, he is often celebrated as a pioneer of modern Arabic music, as the author of groundbreaking Arabic music theater, and as a revolutionary artist committed to the struggles of workers and peasants.

19 Assi Rahbani (1923–1986) and Mansour Rahbani (1925–2009). Lebanese brothers and co-authors of several highly celebrated pieces of music theater featuring the Lebanese singer Fairuz.

Schoenberg among others

SMS: What's your opinion on the modern music of the 20th century: Schoenberg, Webern, Stravinsky, and others?

NI: The pioneers of modern European music made fine things and opened new horizons. For instance, Arnold Schoenberg's experiments with the atonal twelve-tone scale opened a wide field. But he didn't reach a big audience. His melodies, I think, moved away from that human condition that relates to musical beauty and to the feelings.

Stravinsky, on the other hand, he proved his worth in the neo-classical works. His innovations in the fields of rhythm and polyphony are valuable. And the newness of his harmony is great and very fruitful.

But the music that we call postmodern—John Cage and others—I am not able to conceive this as music. These composers—I've forgotten the names—they call all sounds music: electrical vibrations, bells, all kinds of natural sounds—they call it music, all of it.

SMS: I often work with this kind of music...

NI: I'm not able to accept it...

SMS: And, here I only want to hear your opinion...

NI: I don't hear it as music ...

SMS: No problem for my part!

Hearing your words, now, I recall the words of Arnold Schoenberg who said that his music of logic and rationality was the music of the future. And, that the issue on the lack of knowledge only was a matter of time. In the future the audience, according to Schoenberg, would hear and understand his advanced intellectual music.

NI: My point of view is moderate when it comes to who's the dividing line—like you in your studies of modern music. But in my view, Schoenberg is much more tolerable than Cage and his kind of postmodernists. For by Schoenberg we still have a bridge to the logic of music scale and tones. But he was not able to gain high esteem by the great audience.

SMS: This leads us to another important question. Is there an audience for this music of logic and rationality?

NI: There's an audience but it's not big. There must be music to make people joyful. If everything was brain, or turned into philosophy, we would be lost!

Life in Sweden

SMS: My last questions are about your situation here in Sweden.

NI: Ask what you want.

SMS: How are you?

NI: In Sweden I've suffered hard, and I've experienced a kind of intellectual misery for one and a half years.

SMS: How about your musical life?

NI: There has been no musical life for me in one and a half years. All the time I was thinking: why this exodus? Why is Syria hit, and why are people fleeing, and why this unrighteous, unjust war? Why this injustice to the Syrian people? For one and a half years, all this has had a great impact on my mind. I haven't at all been able to work with or think about music. I've been in a very bad condition.

After relaxing here for four or five months I started to regain my strength, and I thought that life must continue with courage, and that we could make use of the experience, and that I could resume my activities. I was thinking that we should have courage to continue life and that the future will be better, God willing!

SMS: God willing! Hopefully you're often with your friends from the church and with Syrians here?

NI: The Syrians ask me if there maybe could be Syriac music as part of the activities? God help me to be able to accomplish that. It's important for them, and for me, too. And if anything new happens, I'll call you on the phone, and let you know about it.