

# Sayyid Darwîsh's life

is one of those lightning trajectories in the history of music. He died at the dawn of a brilliant career. Although almost ignored in his lifetime by the musical milieu, he was made into a myth after his death. The eventual fame of this Alexandrian singer and composer led to the neglect of his predecessors and, ironically, to the neglect of his own creativity in classical forms. In the historiography of modern Arab music, Sayyid Darwîsh has become an icon symbolising progress, modernity, and the shift from "Oriental music," an elitist music created for Pachas and still steeped in the original Ottoman matrix, to "Egyptian music," the first figurative expression of the Egyptian people's soul and their nationalist demands. A return to the recordings of this turn-of-the-century master makes it possible to reconsider the true dimensions of the work of an original and experimental artist.

Sayyid Darwîsh was born in the popular quarter of *Kôm ed-dikka* in Alexandria, Egypt, and trained in his youth to be a *munshid* (chanter of hymns). He used to work as a bricklayer in order to support his family, and legend has it that the manager of a theatrical troupe overheard him singing for his fellow workers and hired him on the spot. While touring in Syria, he had the opportunity to get a musical education. He returned to Egypt before the beginning of the World War, and won some recognition singing in cafés and on stage the famous repertoires of the great composers of the 19th Century. To these he added *adwâr* and *muwashshahât* compositions of his own. Despite his talent, he did not meet with public acclaim. He was disadvantaged by his mediocre voice compared with such stars as Sâlih Abd al-Hayy or Zakî Murâd.

1918 was a turning point in his life. After too many failures

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(1892-1923)



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in musical cafés, he decided to follow the path of Shaykh Salâma Higâzî, the pioneer of Arabic lyric theater, and launched himself into the adventure of show business. He settled in Cairo and got acquainted with the major companies, particularly that of Nagîb al-Rîhânî (1891-1949), for whom he composed seven operettas. This gifted comedian had invented, along with the playwright and poet Badî Khayrî, the laughable character of *Kish Kish Bey*, a rich provincial mayor who squanders his fortune in Cairo with women of ill repute.

The emergence onto the scene of social issues and allusions to the political situation of colonial Egypt (the 1919 Revolution) boosted the success of the trio's operettas, for example "*al-Ashara al-Tayyiba*" ("The Ten of Diamonds," 1920), a nationalistic adaptation of "Bluebeard." Sayyid Darwish also worked for Rihânî's rival troupe, that of the actor Alî al-Kassâr, and eventually collaborated with the Queen of the stage, the singer and actress Munîra al-Mahdiyya (1884-1965); he composed for her comic operettas such as "*Kollaha yomên*" ("It Will Only Take Two Days," 1920) and started an opera, "*Cleopatra and Mark Anthony*," which was to be performed in 1927 with Muhammad Abd al-Wahhâb in the leading role. In the early twenties, all the companies used to seek his help, and he would propose his compositions to them. Eventually he decided to start his own company, acting and singing at last on stage in a lead part. His two creations, "*Shahwazâd*" and "*al-Barûka*," (1921) were not as successful as hoped, and he was forced to compose for other companies from 1922 until his death in 1923.

Darwish's stage production is consciously westernized: the traditionnal *takht* ensemble (lute – *ûd*, sitar – *qanûn*, violin, flute and tambourine – *riqq*) is replaced by an European type ensemble, conducted by *il Signore Casio*, Darwish's conductor. Many of his operetta tunes use musical modes compatible with the piano, even if some vocal sections use other intervals. The singing techniques employed in these compositions demonstrate his fascination with Italian opera, which he naïvely imitated in a cascade of oriental melismas. The light ditties of the comedies are, from a modern point of view, much more successful than the great opera-style arias. A number of those light melodies originally composed for al-Rîhânî or al-Kassâr are now part of Egyptian folklore. Such songs like "*Salma ya Salâma*," "*Zurûni*

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*koll-e sana marra*" or "*El helwa di qâmet te'gen*" are known all over the Middle East and have been sung by contemporary singers like Fayrûz from Lebanon or Sabâh Fakhri from Syria in newly orchestrated versions. Sayyid Darwîsh also contributed to the learned traditional repertoire. He composed about twenty *muwashshahât*, which are often played by modern conservatories and also sung by the great voices like Fayrûz and Sabâh Fakhri. But his major works are the ten *adwâr* – long metric compositions in Cairene colloquial Arabic. These demonstrate his contribution to turn-of-the-century classical music in the later phases of the modern Arab renaissance – the *nahda*.

In the traditional aesthetics defined in the second part of the 19th Century, the *dôr* was constructed as a semi-composition, a canvas upon which a creative interpreter painted a personal rendition. Sayyid Darwîsh drastically reduced the space for improvisation left to the singer and the instrumental group. His *adwâr* works are so rich and so full, so precisely built that an interpreter would be unlikely to alter the structure. Even the *ahât*, the traditionnally improvised section of sighs, are composed by Darwîsh in an interesting attempt at figuralism. Anecdotic arpeggios and chromatism were for his contemporaries a token of modernism (although they would be more severely judged nowadays).

Sayyid Darwîsh was himself recorded by three companies: Mechian, a small local record company founded by an Armenian immigrant, which recorded the Shaykh's voice between 1914 and 1920; Odeon, the German company, which extensively recorded his light theatrical repertoire in 1922; Baidaphon, which recorded three *adwâr* around 1922. His works sung by other voices are to be found on numerous records made by companies operating in Egypt in the early twentieth century.

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