

The Musician Noori Iskander



The Syrian musician Noori Iskander is considered one of the most important researchers, documenters and composers of old Syrian music, and is one of the most prominent live resources about Syriac folkloric and church music and its history, which goes back a hundred years to the "Raha" and "Deir al-Zaafaran" schools.

As a young deacon, Iskander found in front of him the forgotten treasures of Syrian music so, having researched it academically, he decided revive its tunes. His research allowed him to find the appropriate blends – albeit limited at first – to free the Arabic melodic phrase from its traditionalist forms.

Noori Iskander devoted himself to writing oriental music with the spirit of the era after his in-depth study of contemporary musical experiments which he didn't see as good enough to be able to lead to the composition of a symphony capable of preserving the essence of oriental music and being equal to international symphonies.

In this context the musician gives the example of the Aleppan "Qudud" with their

Syriac roots, before entering a state of stagnation at this point.

Noori Iskander's uniqueness lies in his ability to draw his listener into a world that combines church hymns, and ritual Islamic eulogies and songs with rare brilliance, without eliminating the popular folkloric elements.

He invites his listener on an inspiring journey through the oriental 'maqam', in a way that has encouraged creative discussion, which has been his main preoccupation over the last seven decades.

Noori Iskander, the son of Syrian oriental heritage, believes that far from allowing for development, continuously sanctifying heritage creates a negative situation in society, forming a divide between the listener and their inherited music, which in turn becomes an obstacle to the discovery of musical phrases with meaningful content which could be the core of a new, contemporary musical structure.

Iskander studied Aleppo with Fatishe Hermian, the great Syrian jazz musician. This opened up opportunities for written musical experiments in non-traditional ways, rising from the origins of the oriental 'maqam' without being restricted to its traditional rules and methods. The aim of these experiments was to create new content with new musical forms in order to achieve rich interaction between these musical ideas and phrases, through dramatic and dynamic dialogue. These experiments made use of "Polyphony – Harmony" as an analytical study and sometimes used sounds suitable for the spirit of the oriental 'maqam', such as harmonic chords.

Noori Iskander is considered one of the few researchers and composers who have tried to overcome the problem of the loss of the spirit of the 'maqam' in "Polyphony – Harmony", by creating a useable method for working on oriental and Syriac music, making use of flexible forms to free it from traditional ways of dealing with maqamat and to create new, interactive dialectic musical relations. He works to find non-traditional musical forms suitable for the oriental maqamat but following new harmonic blends, whilst preserving their spirit and content and avoiding blind imitation of the West. Thus he aims to create a new music in which there is a new, meaningful place for thought, philosophy and poetry in music.

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Noori Iskander was born in Deir al-Zur in 1938 and was on the first Syrian delegation to Egypt at the time of the Union in 1959, gaining his degree in Musical Education from Cairo in 1964. From 1989 he was employed as a teacher in this field in schools and teacher training institutes in Aleppo.

He spent around twenty years researching Syriac spiritual musical heritage, discovering hundreds of tunes which are considered the best of Syrian music. He experimented with contemporary forms to recreate these 'maqamat' using oud, cello and violin and finally producing a record, "Oud Concerto", and then "String Trio". He has also written two books, "Bayt Kazoo - The Tradition of Rahwiya Tunes", and "Bayt Kazoo - The Tradition of Deir al-Zaafaran and its Followers". He produced the "Dialogue of Love" in 1995, which was in the form of Islamic religious chants and unique Syriac hymns. In 2002 he composed the music for the Greek play "Bacchus' Slaves".

The outcome of his work in Damascus was two records, "Revelations" and "Vision", which formed the crowning pieces for his blending of oriental music with classical techniques.

In 1995 Iskander composed music – orchestra and choir – for the poem "Khattama" by the great poet Hussein Hamza.

Between 1996 and 2002 he was director of the Arab Institute of Music in Aleppo, after which he composed "Moans" in 2003 and in 2007 he wrote "The Giver of Love: an Introduction to Sufism".

Iskander has formed several choirs, the most important of which is "Qowqweyo – Al-Fakharoon", which has performed, in Syria and some European capitals, Syriac tunes typical of the Syriac Orthodox Church.

He has also worked on soundtracks for a number of cinematic films and television series.

Noori Iskander has been awarded by several local and international bodies. He was also awarded in the "First International Forum for Oriental Music – Oriental Landscapes" in 2009.

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