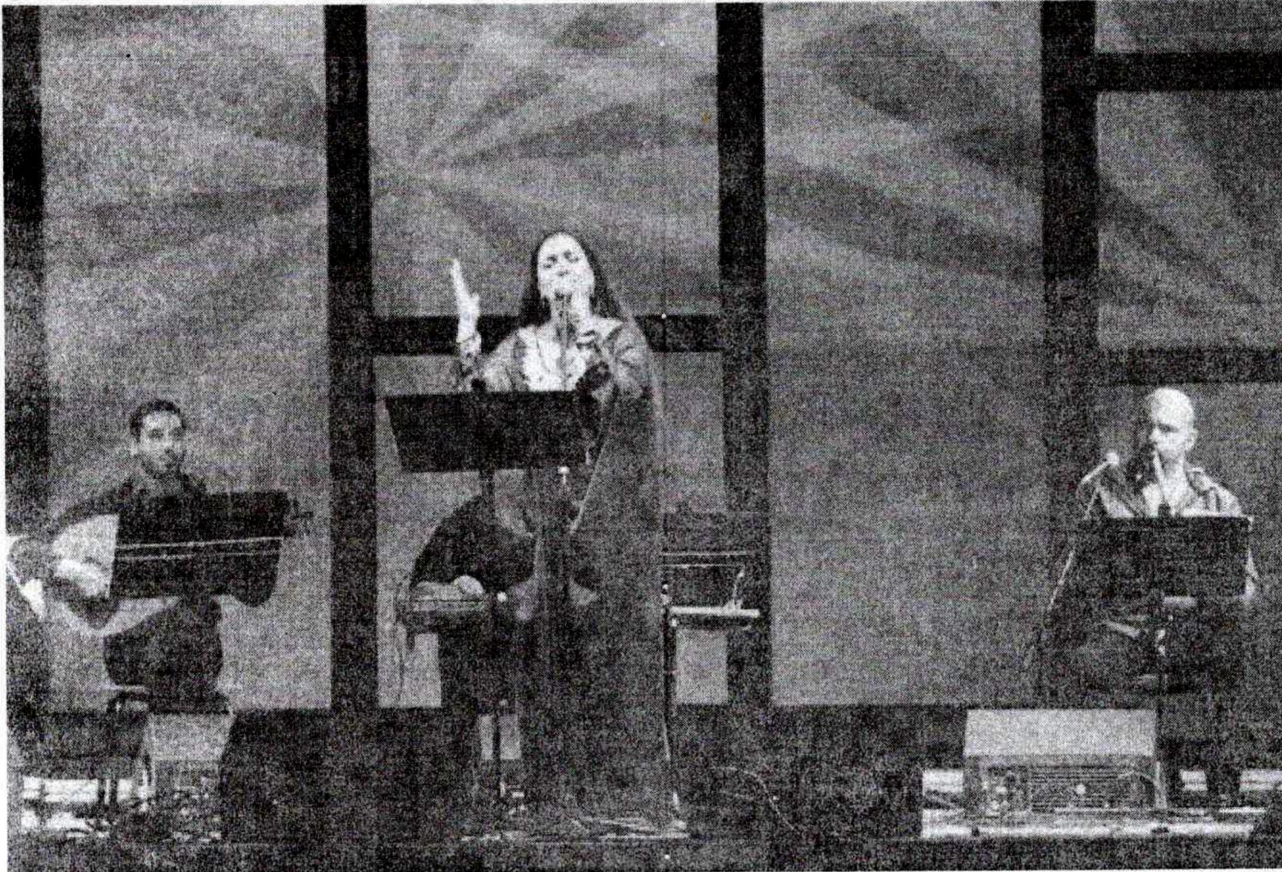
Assyria calling

Nourhan Tewfik quizzes Lebanese singer Ghada Shbeir on, among other things, her work to keep heritage alive



"My aspiration is for turath," or heritage, "to always be present, for us to reclaim it, build on it, but never abandon it."

Thus the famed Lebanese singer Ghada Shbeir, best known for giving traditional and ancient music a contemporary twist, while preparing for the 4 September concert that concluded the 13th annual Bibliotheca Alexandrina Summer Festival.

Turath inspires and illuminates the work of Shbeir, who as well as a vocalist is a musicologist, researcher, teacher and composer. Her repertoire ranges from the Syriac and Maronite hymn and chant to the qassidah (classical poem), the Andalusian muwashah, the mawwal (a related form relying on improvisation) and the dawr (a light song with some space for improvisation). Her albums include Qawaleb (The Modes), Al-Qasida (The Poem), Al-Muwashahat and Andalusiya, and she performs songs by the legends and icons of 20th-century Arabic music: Sayed Darwish, Om Kolthoum, Fairouz, Sabah and Asmahan, among others.

A graduate of the Université Saint-Esprit de Kaslik (USEK), Shbeir went on to earn a masters and a PhD in musicology, a discipline that allowed her to combine her talent with her passion for the past, making important discoveries about Syriac musical heritage. The Syriac language, she wrote in a World Policy Journal article entitled "Speaking in Tongues" (Spring 2012), "used to be the vernacular of cultural and

scientific communication for religious and educated people of Middle Eastern societies. The alphabets of many languages, including Arabic, originated in Syriac. With the rise of Islam in the 8th century, the Syriac language began its long decline as a commercial and everyday-use language."
It was such research that enabled her to use "Syriac's unique and complex sounds to create a new way of singing in Arabic. In order to do so, I drew on famous and great works of ancient Syriac writers, such as Father Mar Evram. All these efforts seek to ensure that Syriac is passed on from one generation to the next in a truthful and authentic way," she writes. Here as elsewhere Shbeir emphasises the written word, reflecting her love of poetry. The word and the musical note determine and influence one another, she says:

"The specific maqam," or musical mode, "must cater to the words you are singing. If they are steeped in emotion, you go to Nahawand, or Hijaz. If on the contrary it is inundated with tarab," the participatory aesthetic particular to Arabic music, "and characterised by poise, you go to the Sigah or Rahat El Arwah. The written word directs you. It tells you whether it has what it takes to hold an improvisation, or whether it can only carry a concise tune."

The choice of lyrics, Shbeir goes on to explain, is also influenced by the musician's aspirations for the song. "You choose the text depending on what you expect it to serve," she says. "Whether you want to elongate the maqam or to break it down, for example." It all requires familiarity with the written word. This is especially clear in Al-Qasida (to be followed by Al-Qasida II), featuring classically structured poems like Ya Shaqiq Al-Rouh (Oh, Soul Mate), by the Kuwaiti poet Abdel-Aziz Al-Saud Al-Babtain, with whom Shbeir has often collaborated.

Likewise the muwashahat, a form of poetry and singing invented in Andalusia: "I have a very special fascination with and love for muwashahat, born of my interest in varied rhythms and the maqamat." But she experiments with the genre. "The muwashah might be in its already established form, but I'd work around it, add a khana," one of the four sections that make up a given composition, "or perhaps integrate a musical element from the Abbasid or Umayyad heritage. I might also incorporate other beautiful lyrics that I find to be in harmony with the original text, renegotiating the rhythms by letting it come out as a mawwal..."

The attraction of the genre is the space it gives improvisation: "I'm not interested in knowing a muwashah by heart and getting up on stage to sing it as it is. Rather, I like to experiment. The whole ambience of the concert helps you do that. It helps you deliver a mawwal through a mental and auditory transition which can take up to 30 minutes to materialise."

Of her two muwashahat albums, Al-Muwashahat (2006) won a BBC World Music Award in 2007. It includes 16 muwashahat, one of which is "Mawwal Walada", with lyrics by the 11th-century Andulasian poet Ibn Zaydoun written for Wallada Bint Al-Mustakfi, the daughter of the then Umayyad Caliph Mohamed III of Cordoba. Shbeir composed the music for Ibn Zaydoun's text herself, leaving space for improvisation. Shbeir has also published a book on Arabo-Andalusian music, The Muwashah After Egypt's 1932 Conference. Some of the seven muwashahat in the second album, Andalusiya, are over 1,000 years old, but they reflect Shbeir's contemporary sensibility in the arrangement and delivery of the music. Shbeir is currently working on the album Muwashahat II, in which she plans to return to the simple oriental takht (or traditional Arab ensemble with oud, qanun, nay, kaman and sometimes riq) because "a muwashah," as she puts it, "is only 70 per cent singing". It shouldn't require too elaborate an instrumental accompaniment.
For the dawr as well as the muwashah, Shbeir follows in the footsteps of the greatest Egyptian composer of all time, Sayed Darwish (on whim she also wrote a book, Sayed Darwish: The Muwashah and Dawr). "I consider him the genius of the 20th century," she says. "I believe that his musical compositions are

very different to those of his predecessors and successors alike. Of course many musicians gained knowledge from his repertoire, and attempted to build on it, but his work remains the pillar of Arabic music."

Shbeir has participated in three musicals, her most recent being Ibn Battuta, composed by Hisham Gabr, and staged in Bahrain, Oman and Italy. "The musical genre is still new to me, but then again nothing can prevent me from participating in a theatrical work, especially if I can find a place in it for my favourite work pattern, improvisation. For me," she adds, referring to her many roles and achievements, "the musician's role transcends following rules. Instead of performing as directed, a real musician will make their own imprint. They'll take the composition, and develop it. Their essence will show in their voice, performance, personality, recitation. But a musician can tell what they want or don't want only when they've studied enough. It is knowledge that gives you confidence in your project. I don't see why we should all go on the same path, and compete to produce the same music."

As well as her performance and research, Shbeir teaches muwashah singing at the Lebanese University and Syriac singing at the National Conservatory of Lebanon. She is also the director of the Oriental Arabic Choir at USEK. "Teaching helps keep me in this atmosphere of constant discovery. I keep unearthing new maqamat, and rhythms." Backed up by the history of Arab music, studying the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, the writings of Ibn Khaldun and the 10th-century philosopher and music scholar Al-Farabi, the discoveries are often absorbing. "For example, I remember how I taught my students last year Al-Farabi's methods of pronunciation and recital. Another example is Abdel Wareth-Assar, the renowned Egyptian actor, who also wrote a very important book on elocution. How can one be a musician and not know about these icons and their important contributions?"

Shbeir certainly does. "If you look back on the 20th century," she says, "you'll see that each artist made his own imprint in music, whether in muwashahat or qasaid, or by introducing new techniques altogether. Together, these musicians have enriched our repertory, and set standards for us to live up to. Those great icons left us a very fine dough that we must remould it into something new."