ancient tradition

from extinction

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"In the 12th and 13th centuries," Shbeir explains, Ibn Zeidoun "fell hopelessly in love with Wallada Bint al-Mustakfi and wrote some of the most important poems." Princess Wallada, daughter of the caliph of Cordoba at the time, opened a salon for Cordoba's most famous intellectuals.

"I found myself in the country where Arabic culture fused with that of the Andalus and gave birth to this type of music a thousand years ago," she says.

When asked if her album is an attempt to resurrect traditional music, she replies: "Sometimes when you are in a very dark place, if you light one candle it is enough to fill the room. Sometimes I say maybe one person can do something to remind people, or attract attention. ... This work includes muwashahat that are a thousand years old.

"My aim is to send a message, to shed light on this issue that is [in danger] of [becoming] extinct. And as someone involved in this project [who has] already conducted research on this issue, I have a duty to bring it back to life."

Shbeir says composers were still working on the muwashahat well into the 20th century.

"Starting with Mohammad Abdel-Wahab, work on the muwashahat started to slowly recede," she says, as musicians became more interested in other genres of music.

Still, she says, "the Rahbani brothers worked on the muwashahat. They composed seven [of them] which constitute a great movement in this genre of work. After that [they] created a new type of muwashah known as the 'modern muwashah.'

"After that, Zaki Nassif composed two muwashahs for Fairouz. ... And after that work on the muwashah came to a halt."

When asked where she positions the history and legacy of the muwashahat in relation to today's types of popular music, Shbeir responds diplomatically: "I am in no position to offend or marginalize any of today's musicians. I respect them all and I think they all have ideas to offer. ... Let them present them. And history will be the best judge. Not us.

"At the time of Umm Kulthum and Abdel-Wahab there were hundreds of other musicians. They were not alone. But time filtered everything. Today you mention a handful. ... These are ones who accomplished something.

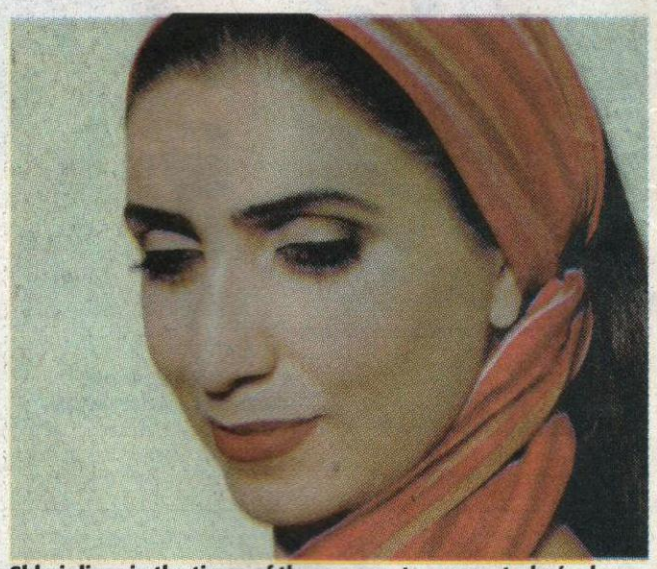
"The main difference is that before, not all musicians used to perform live on stage. There used to be censorship. Those who did not meet certain standards would not have been allowed to present live concerts. ... They were instead restricted to night clubs."

Shbeir says that today the media has allowed for public appearances by a large number of artists, only some of whom are committed to professional standards. "Others," she says, "when you hear them I say to myself it is a shame that this kind of work is being broadcast."

Breathing life back into an ancient t

Ghada Shbeir uses new album to save old, endangered songs from extinction

Hanan Nasser
Daily Star staff



Shbeir lives in the times of these songs to escape today's chaos.

BEIRUT: It is 10th-century Andalusia. A lover cries to the moon of all the pain inflicted by hopeless passion. Another lover pours yet another cup of wine to forget his beautiful – yet cruel – beloved. Skip ahead a thousand years or so, to 21st-century Lebanon, and musician Ghada Shbeir is singing these same songs on a new album entitled "Al-Muwashahat."

Released last month by the independent label Forward Productions hot on the heels of two sold-out concerts at Hamra Street's Masrah al-Madina, "Al-Muwashahat" seeks to preserve an endangered form of song that runs a real risk of extinction.

A musicologist as well as a musician, Shbeir studied at the Holy Spirit University in Kaslik (USEK) and holds a master's degree in Middle Eastern music and song. She currently teaches music theory at USEK and at the National Conservatory of Music, and is at the same time working toward her doctorate.

As Shbeir explains in her liner notes, she named her album "Al-Muwashahat" after the plural form of the word *muwashah*, or melody, which refers to a once-rich musical genre of songs that are structured by stanzas and transmitted from one person to the next solely by word of mouth.

In conversation, Shbeir's smile is ever ready, and she exudes a wealth of enthusiasm as she details the arduous research and painstaking analysis she conducted to prepare for the album. The *muwashahat*, she explains, were invented and elaborated upon at the end of the 10th century, during the Islamic reign of Al-Andalus, and much of their history has been lost to time.

Shbeir has also published two books on the subject. The first is a study of the Arab-Andalusian singing tradition, entitled "The Muwashah after the Cairo Caucus of 1932." The second explores the music of Sayyed Darwish.

Shbeir says she was first inspired to make an album two years ago while writing her master's thesis.

"I researched the types of old muwashahat, some of whose authors and composers are unknown," she says. "After that I decided to present my findings in an album."

'This is not a popular type of music that would certainly be a hit'

"Al-Muwashahat" contains 16 tracks. Shbeir selected them carefully, trying to gauge which songs would be most appealing to modern-day listeners. Some of the muwashahat she chose are extremely rare, while others are well known.

"This is not a popular type of music that would certainly be a hit," says Shbeir, adding that Forward Productions was nonetheless entirely supportive of the project.

Shbeir says she decided not to alter the original structures of the muwashahat in any way.

"I preserved their traditional character," she says. "I did not redistribute the music."

The muwashah, Shbeir writes in the liner notes, follows a specific system that diverges from the standard meters of poetry "which follows one measure and one rhyme throughout. In contrast, the muwashah varies and sways in length, rhyme and duration."

Considering the sensitive structure of the songs, Shbeir opted to sing solo, without layered or backing vocals, which allows her more freedom, she explains, "to generate feelings."

On the album, Shbeir is accompanied only by a spare-sounding *takht*, an ensemble of five or more musicians playing traditional Arabic instruments such as the *oud*, *qanoun*, *ney*, *rik*, violin and acoustic bass.

Tracks such as "Badat Min al-Khidri" ("She Emerged from Her Tent") and "Kom Bina Hana al-Humayya" ("It is Time for Drinking Wine"), each brought to life by Shbeir's highly refined voice, take listeners back in time to Cordoba's white alleyways, Grenada's red-tiled roof tops and endless nights of dancing in Seville.

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