

## Legacy of a Star - Fayrouz

More than just a singer's name, Fayrouz is a concept whose connotations are ethnic and nationalistic as well as musical and poetic.

Born and educated in Beirut, she began her musical career as a chorus member at the Lebanese Radio Station. In the late 1950s her talent as a singer became fully acknowledged. Met with unprecedented enthusiasm, Fayrouz's early songs featured the singer's distinct vocal timbre and lyrics expressing romantic love and nostalgia for village life.

In the summer of 1957, she faced an audience in the open air for the first time, standing at the base of one of the six columns that comprise the temple of Jupiter in Baalbeck. It was the largest audience that had ever gathered at the Roman temple. Under a crescent moon, Fayrouz, flooded with blue light, began to sing, in a calm, confident voice, Lubnan Ya Akhdar Hilo (O Green, Sweet Lebanon). People were spellbound; it was a magical moment.

She also sometimes sang adaptations Arab folk tunes. By the early 1960s Fayrouz was already one of the main attractions of the annual Baalbeck Festivals and a celebrity not only in Lebanon but throughout the Arab world. The dissemination of hundreds of songs, many musical plays and several films had widened her audience to include Arabs living in Europe and the Americas.

During most of her singing career, Fayrouz was part of a three-member team which included the two Rahbani brothers, responsible of her lyrics and music. Fayrouz's songs owe a great deal to the musical and poetic genius of these two Lebanese artists. In recent years they have also reflected the composing talent of Ziad Rahbani, Fayrouz's son. In addition, they testify to Fayrouz's broad musical background, which encompasses Christian liturgical forms as well as the secular traditions of Arab music.

Since the first time she appeared live before an audience in 1957, Fayrouz has traveled to places that as a child she seemingly could hope to know only through her grandparents' tales. She has sung at the ruins of the Philadelphia Amphitheatre in Amman, as well as in Damascus, Baghdad, Rabat, Algiers, Cairo, Tunis; she has traveled overseas, reaching out to Arab emigrants in Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, New York, San Francisco, Montreal, London, Paris, and many other cities throughout the world. On these trips, Fayrouz has been offered as a traditional gesture of welcome, the symbolic key of many cities; perhaps the closest to her heart remains the golden key she received from the Mayor of Jerusalem which she received during a private visit there with her father in 1961. Although Fayrouz did not sing during her one visit to the holy city, Jerusalem is honored in many of the songs she has sung since her pilgrimage there.

The Fayrouz \_Rahbani legacy is a peculiarly twentieth-century cultural phenomenon. During the early postwar decades, most urban communities in the Arab world underwent rapid expansion, partly because of an influx of population from the rural areas. The city of Beirut in particular had absorbed a substantial number of people whose ethnic and social roots went back to various Lebanese villages, especially those in the mountainous regions of central and northern Lebanon. Politically and socially influential, this segment provided fertile ground for the rise of a new artistic tradition - music, dance, poetry, fashions, handicrafts - whose context was unmistakably urban but whose ration was folk and rural. Beirut was also experiencing the growing impact of modernization Westernization. These changes rendered indigenous artistic expressions less accessible and less appealing to many Lebanese. Furthermore, Beirut was becoming a highly cosmopolitan community. A significant number of the city residents had non-village and even non-Lebanese and non-Arab backgrounds. These developments and the extensive role of the modern entertainment media - radio, television, concert halls, public theatres - were conducive to the rise of an urban mass audience. They were also prerequisites for the development of the kind of modern musical language of wide appeal that is superbly manifested in Fayrouz's songs.

One further influence upon the Fayrouz-Rahbani legacy was the nationalistic sentiment that followed Lebanon's independence. Although not always articulated in specific ideological terms, this sentiment was shared by government officials and a number of influential writers, poets, and artists. This feeling, which profoundly affected Lebanon's music and arts, was based on a number of fundamental premises. One was that Lebanon was culturally and historically distinct from its Near Eastern neighbors and was in many ways compatible with the West. Furthermore, an important aim of the Lebanese government was to develop the country's cultural image and to increase its international recognition and prestige. On the artistic level, a conviction not unique to Lebanon was that (a) folk art of the rural communities conveys the true character of the nation and (b) as it exists in its natural setting, folk art is in a "primitive" and "unscientific" state. Therefore it has to be developed as a respectable national expression by skilled experts and advisors. Such aspirations prompted the government to generate and sponsor a new folk-inspired artistic idiom generally known by the name "Lebanese folkloric." In addition to examining similar developments in several other Third World countries, the folklore movement in Lebanon studied the model of the Soviet national ensemble. In May 1965, the Russian choreographer Igor Moiseyev was officially invited to examine the dabkaks, or line dances, of the various Lebanese villages and to create modern interpretations based on these dances. Before leaving the country, the Russian visitor reportedly created new dabkaks and taught them to a number of local individuals who later became dance teachers and choreographers - professions relatively new to Near Eastern culture.

In the ensuing years several folkloric ensembles were established in Lebanon. Among them was the Lebanese Folk Troupe, which presented newly created songs and dances and featured celebrated singers such as Fayrouz, Sabah, and Wadi' al-Safi. Government-sponsored, this particular troupe performed at the Baalbeck Festivals, which incorporated Western symphonic music, ballet, and drama and presented artists such as Joan Baez, Rudolph Nureyev, and Herbert von Karajan. During its height in the 1960s and early 1970s,

the folklore movement in Lebanon attracted the talents of a significant group of composers, performers, playwrights, choreographers, dancers, costume designers, and producers, all from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and nationalities.

The principal vehicle for the new idiom was the *masrahiyyah*, or musical play. In such a play the main plot focuses upon village events and in some cases upon notable incidents in Lebanon's political history. The costumes of the dancers and singers are based largely on the traditional dress of peasant communities in central and northern Lebanon. Spoken dialogue in colloquial Lebanese Arabic is combined with orchestral programmatic music and songs by a celebrated singer or singers are featured. Many of the feature-songs appear as accompaniment for folkloric *dabkah* dances.

Fayrouz's songs, many of which were originally sung in folkloric musical plays, were compatible with the political, social, and demographic trends in Lebanon, especially as they existed before the civil war. They represent a unique synthesis of elements derived from local folk songs, traditional Arab music, popular European forms, and, to a lesser extent, the music's of Soviet Russia, Armenia, and the Balkans. This synthesis, however, has not occurred in isolation from broader Arab issues and legacies. Fayrouz's songs have often expressed widely-shared Arab sentiments and used texts in classical Arabic by well-known poets such as Kahlil Gibran. Some songs have been based on the traditional *muwashshah* vocal form, whose roots go back to Moorish Spain. Others present modern adaptations of older classics by the early twentieth century Egyptian composer Shayk Sayyid Darwish and the contemporary Muhammed Abd al-Wahab.

In Fayrouz's repertoire as a whole, both text and music are marked by innovation. The lyrics generally focus less narrowly on the theme of unrequited love than do most Arab songs. Instead, they may range from mildly rebuking a forgetful lover or reminiscing about village life, to voicing passionate love for Lebanon and commemorating the city of Jerusalem. In all instances the subject matter is presented with an air of poetic tenderness to a degree seldom encountered in other Arab forms. Her special combination of lyrics, music, and vocal quality accounts Fayrouz's ethereal and widely accepted Arabic titles as "Neighbor of the Moon" and "Our Ambassador to the Stars." The vocal timbre of many traditional Arab singers tends to be slight by nasal and guttural. In contrast, Fayrouz's voice - commonly described as *mukhmali*, or "velvet-like" - is smooth and clear. She utilizes head resonance and her vocal style is relatively free of the ornamentation that characterizes much Arab singing.

Three melodic instruments are essential to the *Rahbani* ensemble. One instrument is the accordion, which in this case is specially prepared to produce the "neutral" intervals found in Arab music. Another instrument is the *buzuq*, a long-necked fretted lute furnished with metal strings and associated with itinerant gypsy musicians of Lebanon and Syria. The third instrument is a small fipple flute or recorder made from wood and comparable in construction and sonority to the *kaval* of Turkey. Playing in unison and at the octave with occasional drone effects, this combination provides a bright cluster of timbres and a lively, rustically zestful tempo typical of *Rahbani*'s music in general.

The literary-musical legacy of the Rahbanis and Fayrouz has been accepted by many Lebanese as a nationalistic, cultural, and political symbol. At the same time, it possesses artistic qualities that extend its appeal to listeners from a diversity of social, national, and even ideological backgrounds. Fayrouz has been regarded by many educated Arabs as an emblem of modernity and an exemplar of the self-respecting, dignified Arab artist. During the past quarter century Fayrouz's music has not remained static. This artist's versatility and insight have enabled her to respond to various social and musical trends. In the last few years the dwindling mystique of village lore, the revived interest among young Arabs in traditional Arab music, and the expansion of the pan-Arab mass audience have all had noticeable effects upon her repertoire. In turn, Fayrouz's artistic legacy has profoundly influenced contemporary Arab music and culture.

For the girl who loved to sing to her friends and neighbors in zuqaq al-blat, it was an overwhelming experience when in 1957, President and Mrs. Camille Chamoun presented her with the "Cavalier," the highest medal ever conferred on a Lebanese artist; twelve years later, a memorial Lebanese stamp was issued in her name. Meeting royalty, once an experience she had expected to encounter only in the fairy tales of childhood or the fantasies that she played out in her musical dramas, has become a reality for her. King Hassan II of Morocco not only invited her to perform at the Royal Palace but appeared in person to greet her at the Rabat airport. And in 1963, King Hussein of Jordan presented her with the Medal of Honor, followed by His Majesty's Gold Medal in 1975.

Yet to Fayrouz, all the official acclaim and recognition that she has received over the years does not parallel the joy she experiences as she sings when she spots the absorbed attention of a single anonymous listener in a crowd. To her, singing is not merely a perfected profession, but a way of life.

The Fayrouz of today, like the Fayrouz of yester-year, continues to attend mass in the village church at Antelias. There, every year, during Good Friday she sings to the devout villagers with a dedication that perhaps is equaled only by their simple piety. It is this dedication which consistently refines her talent and continues to set Fayrouz apart in a category all her own amid the chaotic trends of Middle Eastern music.