



Hiba Kawas: Musician

(Born in 1972, in Saida; currently living in Beit Miri; recorded in her home. Language: colloquial/educated Arabic.)

Shall I start with my childhood? I was born on July 17th 1972 in Saida, and I am an only child. I came after seventeen years of marriage (laughs), I have a notebook of all the incidents of my childhood, from the day I was born. My mother used to keep a record of my development. I started doing things very early, for example, I was only six months when I stopped using diapers. At the age of one year and a half, I started writing. My mother discovered me holding a pencil between my fingers and copying the newspaper. When I was only a month old, at the time a child begins to listen - I used to have stomach colics - I started crying when my mother turned the radio off. When the music was on, I didn't cry. This was the first sign of a link between me and music. My mother was a soprano and plays the piano, and my grandmother has a nice voice and plays the 'oud very well, so the family encouraged my interest in music. When I was two and a half, my mother heard someone

playing 'Jingle Bells' on the piano, when she came into the room she saw me perched on the piano chair, playing with two fingers. She brought me piano teachers. In Saida, there are no professional music teachers, I had to learn with many different teachers, and I suffered a lot until I reached the Conservatoire.

At four years old, I started to compose, though surely not as I compose today. At four, I used to spend hours playing the piano, so my mother tells me. During the same period, I enjoyed inventing things. I used to carry a hammer around the house. You can't say that I lived a girl's childhood. I had the body and the feelings of a girl but the mentality of a boy. I didn't play with girlish toys. I had a room of my own, a dream room, very well equipped for a young child. I didn't play with dolls, I only played with toys that needed construction. I remember once people came to our house to repair it, they gave me a hammer and I started working with them. When I was three years old, I made a small wooden guitar with strings and a device to change the tuning; my father still has it. I also learnt how to deal with electricity. By eight, I could repair any electrical equipment. When the electricity in Saida was changed from 110 to 220 volts, I changed the electricity in our house.

What else? I wanted to discover a cure for cancer and heal people. When I was six the school magazine did an interview with me, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I said I wanted to become a doctor to treat poor people, and discover a cure for cancer. I entered school at the age of four and a half - my mother was the school principal. These are the stories she told me. I enjoyed reading a lot. Like any young child, I started with fairy tales. According to my mother, I didn't like the way these stories ended. At six I started writing and recording the music I composed. I still have some of the recordings. Though there's a lot of difference between the person I am today and the person I was twenty years ago, yet there's a connection, you can feel they are the same person.

There are four major stages in my life, this was the first one, my early childhood. All my friends were boys, I used to play wars, cops and robbers. I used to shoot. At eight, I wrote my first poem and composed its music. It was during the Israeli invasion [1982], it was called the 'Zaman Ghaddar' ('treacherous time'). At eight I finished elementary school and moved to the intermediate. In the second stage, between eight and twelve, I started reading Gibran, and by twelve years old, I had read all of him. This helped me a lot at school, that I knew his writings already. During my early childhood my friends were my cousins, we were about the same age. In the second phase my friends changed - of course, my mother was my best friend through all the phases [mother comes into the room]. Between eight and nine, I formed most of my knowledge, I read Gibran, Mikhail Naimeh, Shakespeare - I read all his plays and sonnets. I don't say that I understood everything, but when I moved to secondary school it was helpful to have read these things five years earlier. During that period I also read the Bible and the New Testament. I knew the Quran by heart. I used to read medical books as well, because I wanted to study medicine. At

eleven, I started reading history and politics. As I told you, I wanted to cure people from cancer, I made a room in our house into a workshop and laboratory. I spent a lot of time there - it was fully equipped. I used to do experiments. At the age of twelve, I invented a medicine for burns - on my twelfth birthday, I was badly burned, I used it on myself. Then all the family started using it, I made bigger quantities, but couldn't discover a material that would preserve the medicine over time.

When I was twelve, the Israeli army evacuated Saida, and I wrote a song called 'The Wedding of Saida'. Until the age of fourteen, I used to write poetry, then I discovered that I don't like language as much as music and art. At thirteen, I participated in a contest organized by UNESCO. The president of the jury was Walid Gholmieh.¹ I won the first prize with a song whose words and music I composed. I remember I was in first secondary at that time. Walid Gholmieh me told that I should go to Paris to study music, but I wanted to finish my education first, I was still young. This was my first encounter with Walid Gholmieh. At the same time, we formed a music group in Saida, I used to write and distribute the music for it.

I forgot to tell you about our school concerts. I had my first concert when I was seven years old, I played the piano. Apart from school concerts, our music group started to organize private concerts during the last two years of school. We were eight, everyone played on a different musical instrument; we used to spend the whole year practising, and hold two concerts a year.

In the last years of school, I did experimental sciences. I had a lot of plans in mind. I wanted to study languages, and to travel to many countries, learn their languages and get to know their music. I was also interested in pathology, to discover a cure for cancer. Not only this, I wanted to discover the mystery behind the Bermuda triangle. At that time, I wanted to do *everything*, now I am more focused in my aims.

I liked music a lot - instead of returning from school and studying, I used to go and rehearse with the music group. I have a longing for music, I began to focus on it. At that crossroads, having to choose between pathology or music, I was sixteen. I went to Walid Gholmieh for his advice. I believe that the universe is ordered, I believe in the universality of being. We are one with the universe. It is one piece, you cannot separate. I believe that there is a universal power, some may call it God, you can call it anything you want. My personal power is somehow connected to this universal power, there is a discipline in the universe, everything is organized. So what happens in my life is part of this order, and because we are part of this universal power our will to power plays an important role in disciplining the self to reach its goal. Though I went to Walid Gholmieh for his advice, I already knew that I was a musician. But I had a fear, I used to ask myself, am I really a musician, can I add something new to music? If I can't, let me work at something else where I can add something new. My aim of originality is part of my aim in composition. The music I am composing is

different from earlier Arabic music, and different from other world music traditions. I am a new person, with an Arabic Oriental voice that doesn't exist in the west. I am a new person with new music in the Arab world as well.

Now my fourth phase begins. When Walid heard my voice and my music, he said I should do nothing else. He expected I would do something original. He still remembered my performance when I was thirteen years old. So at sixteen I went to the Conservatoire, I graduated with a masters degree in music composition with high distinction, and a masters degree in operatic singing, also with high distinction, and higher studies in musicology, conducting and piano. Of course, attending the Conservatoire was a new experience, and I began to see a different future. My musical personality was clearer. I started participating in concerts with the Conservatoire. I tried to record all my compositions in the studio because it's important to listen, it's a way to criticize, to improve. From then until now, Walid Gholmieh has played an important role in my life. He encouraged my obsession with music and composition. It's important to have someone near you who makes you feel you must continue. He encouraged my work on Arabic opera, and this has been basic. He has also taught me many things about life. I believe the musician is inseparable from the person. Your philosophy and perspective enrich your music and give it meaning, so that it's more than notes on paper. Walid Gholmieh has taught only one person in the Conservatoire to compose, that's me. He wants to transmit all his knowledge to one person. I wish the whole Arab world would pay more attention to the transmission of knowledge and ideas. Many experiences have ended with the death of a person. This means always having to start from the beginning. At the Conservatoire, I learnt musicology, composition and opera from Dr. Toufic Kerbage; music composition, conducting and musicology from Walid Gholmieh; and opera from Garo Tchadarian. I took piano with Madeleine Madawar.

Here I should speak about my travel to Italy and my study there. In Italy, it was a different phase, the most important musicians in the world are assembled in the Academy I was invited to study in. The best opera singer in the twentieth century, the best cello player, were teachers there. The students were professors who teach music in universities. The Chigiana Academy in Siena is one of the best musical academies in the world. I was the only student who hadn't finished her diploma. I was very young compared to the others. The musical experience and culture I got from Italy is something I surely wouldn't have received here. We all should know the music traditions of the world. People are mistaken if they think that Western classical music is not an extension of our culture. Classical music started in Mesopotamia and moved to Egypt, then to the Greeks, who gave it to the Romans and from there to Europe. During the Abbasid period, music was very complex and completely different from Arabic music as it is today. This is proved by the descriptions of Abbasid music we find in books, they all describe how the music was written at the time. There are no music notations, only descriptions. There are many reasons for

this. One of them is war - Hulagu destroyed libraries and documents. Even the musical instruments we have today were all present then in elementary forms.

The Chigiana Academy is a very special place. It's only open during certain months of the year. A day spent there is equal to a year elsewhere in the quantity of information that you receive, the courses are very intensive. Carlo Bergonzi taught me opera, any encyclopaedia you open will tell you that he is the greatest tenor of the twentieth century. I also studied with Franco Donatoni who is one of the most important composers of contemporary music in Europe. This was an experience! Life there was different, it was a musical environment, when you walked in the streets you heard music. The Academy is an old royal palace. We studied from eight in the morning till nine at night. Then we gathered in the main square, where a symphony orchestra was rehearsing. It's an environment you couldn't dream of! It was a totally different experience.



I came back to Lebanon, and since then I think that a new element has entered my composing. From the beginning, I composed with the spirit of the Orient and the technique of the West. But when I came back from Italy, a new sound emerged which is the contemporary sound. I brought this sound with me from Italy, and my music composition improved. This will help me to compose Arabic opera. I am combining all the techniques I learned in order to suit Arabic words. It is very difficult to sing in Arabic at a high pitch and over a wide range. I was also able to find the pitch that is able to carry these words over long passages.

At first, when I came back from Italy, I passed through a stage of depression. Here again, Walid Gholmieh played an important role, he encouraged me to continue with musical composition.

He said that I should give in to my obsession for music. I'm sure it wasn't by chance that I was invited to give a concert in Saida where I presented some of my musical compositions. Then I recorded some new songs. Then I made a leap in music composition, in 1995 when I traveled and recorded a composition with a symphony orchestra, and then released my first compact disc. Others were released later, with music I composed when I was sixteen. During that period I gave a lot of concerts at the Presidential Palace, in the Russian Cultural Center, and in Italy where I was studying. I also traveled to Germany and gave a concert there with the Stuttgart Symphony Orchestra. Also in Syria. I went to a lot of places outside Lebanon. My name began to be known. Earlier I recorded a song "Ughanika habibi" ['I sing to you, beloved'] which was played on television, and people liked it. The press accused me of appearing and disappearing, but this was because I was still studying and preparing my masters degree, to which I gave priority. Then I released the compact disk 'Ughanika habibi',

and this was followed by the concert I gave at the 'Forum de Beyrouth' (1991). This was a great experience. All my life I had been preparing for this event. It was a complete music experience because I was involved in all the details. From that concert onward, I consider I entered a new phase. I am not going to talk about what I am composing now, it is a new thing I am working on, and it will need a year to be ready. All this is to achieve Arabic opera, something new in the history of Arabic music. I forgot to tell you that during that

period, I also finished clinical psychology at the Lebanese University. What else? I read a lot especially in philosophy, history and politics. I read everything in general, but these are my priorities. That's all.

Dania: I will ask you a question now. How do you evaluate Lebanon as a place for women to live in?

Hiba: For women to live in? I do not look at it in that way. In my view women create their own place. There is no country for women and country for men. It is how women behave in a given country. They either create their own place or they don't. In Lebanon, women are more active than in other countries, or maybe they started to do something before women in other Arab countries. Now there isn't much gap between Lebanon and the Arab countries, all women are aware that they have to be active.

It was women's mistake, they relied on men and gave them authority. I am talking history here. Women are demanding their rights, but they only need to exercise them. What are they waiting for? Are they waiting for men to give them their rights? Everyone asks me whether I am with the demand for women's rights, and I always reply in the negative. The mere fact of asking for your rights means that you are in prison and asking the warden to open the doors for you. Who can stop a woman from acting? Who can tell her no? And if someone were to say no, what would happen if women disobeyed? The first time might be difficult, but after that it would get easier. I blame women for one thing, they have a kind of twisted intelligence, they use twisted methods to reach their aims. They tell their husband that he is the man of the house just so as to be able to hold him by the ear, and make him do whatever they want. All women are the same, there is no man who does not do exactly what his wife asks him to. She weeps in order to gain control. Her strongest instinct is motherhood, it prevails over everything, over her work and over becoming an achiever. The motherhood instinct blinds her. If women changed this twisted intelligence, which I call 'women's intelligence', they would have achieved greater things throughout history. But this didn't happen. Be more direct and achieve more! Civilization was originally based on women. When men were busy hunting, women were creating languages. During the earliest eras of civilization, women were household heads. Then the man discovered lead or iron, and worked with it. They took power over women. Power shifts from one person to another, depending on who is doing the work. Iron was replaced by money; today the one who owns the most money is the most powerful. In my opinion, the situation of Lebanon is very good and it prepares women to be whoever they want. We are eating the rights of men. Don't worry!

Dania: Do you think you would have been a different person had you lived elsewhere?

Hiba: Born elsewhere, or lived part of my life elsewhere? I'm sure I would have been a different person, because it would have been another culture, another conscience, another collective unconscious, another life, another experience, another background. My Oriental culture is a very old and very deep, and it is very present in me, both Oriental culture and Oriental philosophy. We are the ones who created them, we who are living in this region. Philosophy developed here, religion also. Our history is awe-inspiring, its reservoir is very big. Our music is different, our sensations are different, our musical background is different. The philosophical dimension of our music is not present in the West. I say we have a musical tradition which, if it was written differently, would be more beautiful than any other music. I'm a person who belongs to anywhere in the world which accords with my feelings and mentality, but there is an Arabic Oriental tradition present in my music, and in my mentality, culture and unconscious.

What else? I can tell you that besides working on my performances, I am a teacher at the Conservatoire and a member of the executive board. I am also a member of the curriculum

committee, and of the committee which prepares teachers to teach in schools. I also teach at the Lebanese University in the Faculty of Health. For my concerts, other than the composition, I take care of all the details. I supervise everything from A to Z. I write the contracts, I do the negotiations, I do my own marketing, I follow up on all the details, otherwise I can't sleep.

Besides Walid Gholmieh and my parents, there is another person I should mention, someone whose help has been essential and is currently my friend, Bahia al-Hariri². I met her - besides the fact that I'm from Saida - I met her at a concert in the presidential palace in 1993, and our friendship grew. She liked my music, I sang both foreign and Arabic opera then. She believes in my work and she is encouraging me. She helped me make my first compact disc, she helped to finance the production, because music needs money, especially the kind of music I'm working on, there's a lot of expenditure but little income, the profit never covers your expenses. She has become more than a sister. These are the people in my life - my parents, Walid Gholmieh and Bahia al-Hariri - who have supported and backed me.

When I'm composing music I am inventing something very abstract, especially that I am doing something which did not happen before in the history of our music. I'm still at the beginning of the road. Writing music has allowed me to choose a different kind of poem. I have stopped writing poetry, I believe that language is very material, and music is more abstract. Language expresses things, and helps people communicate daily, but not to express important feelings, or the universality of being. Language divided the universe and renamed everything - this is a tree, a house, a dog, a table, a cellular phone, you and me. Language helped divide the universe at a time when it was still a whole. Now every poem I choose revolves around Sufism. Sufis believe in the universality of being. Sufi poetry tries to purify language from its materialism. That's why it suits music better, through its abstraction. Music is the absolute, physics proves this. Nature expresses its presence through sound -- imagine complete silence, as if someone has pressed 'pause' on the universe! It isn't possible. Even if you shut your ears there is still sound, sound never disappears. They say that the universe started with the big bang, but it was nothing more than a vibration and a sound. All scientific theories confirm the presence of vibrations everywhere. Life is a vibration, then it is a sound, every living being, even our cells vibrate. Music after all is a science, one of the oldest sciences. If you go back to the earliest civilizations, the first sciences were music, astrology, philosophy, then mathematics and medicine. They developed, but the science of music was always present.

Recorded and translated by Dania Sinno

End Notes

1. Walid Gholmieh is the Director of the 'National Conservatory of Music'.
2. Bahia al-Hariri, sister of the current Prime Minister, member of Parliament, and Chairwoman of a cultural foundation in Saida.