

**SRO Artists, Inc.**

<http://www.sroartists.com> | [gigs@sroartists.com](mailto:gigs@sroartists.com)

PHONE: (608) 664.8160

FAX: (608) 664.8161

**BIOGRAPHY: ASWAT // CELEBRATING THE GOLDEN AGE OF ARAB MUSIC**

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Presented in Association with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the University Musical Society at the University of Michigan

## **Aswat - “Celebrating the Golden Age of Arab Music”**

*North American Premiere Tour – March 2009*

Tour Direction by SRO Artists, Inc. :: [www.sroartists.com/artists/aswat](http://www.sroartists.com/artists/aswat)

### *Performance Overview*

The period from the 1920s to the 1950s is considered the “golden age” of Egyptian cinema, but it was also a golden age of song in many parts of the Arab world – in particular, Egypt, Lebanon and Syria. Many of these country’s greatest singers and composers reached unprecedented heights of artistry and stardom throughout these years. The beloved diva Um Kulthoum and Mohammad Abdel Wahhab from Egypt, Syria’s Farid and Asmahan Al-Atrash and Lebanon’s Wadi’ Al-Safi and Fairuz, all represent the very best this era had to offer and add to the impressive canon of Arabic music.

Now, one of today’s leading Arab composers and multi instrumentalists, **Simon Shaheen**, brings this era back to life with an exciting new project called: *Aswat (Voices) – “Celebrating the Golden Age of Arab Music”*. With a traditional, 15-piece Arab orchestra and special guest vocalists, Shaheen directs an evening of classic, unforgettable melodies, soul stirring voices and lush orchestral arrangements, authentically recreating and interpreting the sights and sounds of this magical time.

Shaheen’s international search for the top Arab singers of today has yielded **Ibrahim Azzam** of Palestine, **Sonia M’barek** of Tunisia, **Khalil Abonula** of Palestine, and **Rima Khcheich** of Lebanon. Together exclusively for the *Aswat* project, the vocalists render the most beloved Arabic songs of all time by composers like Mohammad Abdel Wahhab, Farid Al-Atrash and the Rahbani Brothers. The **Aswat Orchestra** includes several virtuoso instrumentalists and helps deliver a rich musical experience for devotees and new fans alike. As backdrop to the live performance aspect, a projection screen flashes preserved images and film footage of the great singers of the Golden Age. The result creates a multi-media experience of historical depth and lasting emotional impact.

### *Featured Artists*

#### **Ibrahim Azzam**

Highly influenced and inspired by his very musical family, Ibrahim showed exceptional talent at the age of five, with both his singing and instrumental skills on the oud. Born in Palestine, his father and mother were singers known for their vast command of the Arab traditional musical repertoire. At the age of ten, Ibrahim studied for a period of eight years with professor Hikmat Shaheen, a leading Palestinian composer and oud performer.

In 1975, Ibrahim moved to England and made his new home in London. Since, he established himself as one of the leading Arab vocalist in Europe and the Middle East. Ibrahim has performed in some of the most prestigious venues in the world including the Royal Albert Hall in London, the Opera House in Geneva, the Opera House in Cairo, the Royal Cultural Centre in Amman, the Cultural Palace in Ramallah, the Village Gate in New York City, Lisner Auditorium at George Washington University amongst others.

One of Ibrahim’s most distinguishable traits, is his unique and idiosyncratic voice, which was brought to light and compared to by one of the most prolific Arab Singer’s and Composer’s himself; Mohammad Abdel Wahhab. During the late 70’s and early 80’s, Ibrahim was taken under the wing of his newly found mentor, to become one of the finest performers of Abdel Wahhab vocal repertoire.

Ibrahim has equally performed with the likes of Wadi’ Al Safi and the Lebanese diva Sabah. He worked with established Egyptian composers Baligh Hamdi, Farouk Al Sahrnoubi and Hilmi Baker.

## Sonia M'barek

Sonia M'barek was born in 1969 in Sfax, Tunisia. She performed for the first time in public at the age of 9 years, but it was at twelve that she was revealed to a large TV audience. From (1977-1986) She attended the national conservatory of music in Tunis, graduating with a diploma of Arabic music. Since then she has sung for musicals theater productions like Asker Ellil, Eté 61, Taht Essour, Didon, and on film sound tracks for Abulkacem Echebbi (The Dance of Fire). Sonia has worked successfully with Tunisian lute players Ali Sriti and Anouar Brahem with whom she presented more of thirty concerts of classical Arabian music "Tarab" (1993-1994) giving place to the edition of CD "Tarab". In 1999, her recording "Takht" was distributed over all the Europe, United States, and in Japan with the German label World Network. She has participated in numerous conferences, workshops and master classes on Arabic singing in France, Belgium, Switzerland, Egypt, Tunisia, and Lebanon. In 2005, she was nominated by the ministry of culture to serve as the chair of national festival of the Tunisian music. She has received countless awards for performance and artistry from prestigious organizations around world from the Middle East, Europe and North America. [www.soniambarek.com](http://www.soniambarek.com)

### Recognition...

- Tunisia** 1987, Festival of Tunisian song: Artist of the year  
1987, Festival of Tunisian song: price of the Best song with the Tunisian songwriter Rachid Yeddes (Khali [el hozn baïd alik]).  
1994, 2002, 2007, Insignias of the national command of cultural merit  
1995, Didon of the feminine excellency  
1997, homage from the festival of the Arabic creative women  
2006, National command Insignias of republic
- France** 2000, golden Diapason for the CD "Takht"  
2001, Decoration of the city of Clermont Ferrand
- Jordan** 2002 Festival of Arab song, price of the best interpretation

### Certificates and Letters of appreciation from the following countries...

Tunisia, Egypt, USA, Germany, France, Belgium, Morocco, Canada.

### Festivals:

- Tunisia** International Festival of Carthage: Concert "Voice of the Freedom" (1991), Operetta "Taht [essour]" (1992), Concert "Tribute to Mohamed Abdelwaheb" with Arabian special guest performers (1992), Operetta "Didon" (1995), Concert "Koltou Man Tha" with Nacir Shamma (1997); International Festival of Hammamet: Concert "Music with No Frontiers" (1990) Concert "Narrations of Tunisians Poems" with the participation of the Tunisian Symphonic Orchestra (2000), Concert "Mediterraneans Songs" (2001); Several concerts and festivals: Gabes, Sfax, Monastir, Kairouan, Sousse, Testour.
- U.S.A** New York Seat of the United Nations- Auditorium Dag Hammarsjöld (2000); Washington - Kennedy Center (2000); Mahrajen al Fan Symphony Space with Simon Shaheen in New York (2005).
- France** Francovision in Paris (1991), UNESCO Seat in Paris (1995); Augustins Museum in Toulouse (1995); Cartier Foundation in Paris (1995); International France Radio (RFI) - Studio 104 (1997); "Café de la danse" in Paris (1999); Suds à Arles Festival (2000); Clermont Ferrand - Théâtre Wakan (2001); Royal Opera of Versailles castle with the French singer Charles Aznavour (Paris 2006)
- Spain** Festival of the Mediterranean Song in Palm de Major (1989); Festival of Sierra Majina in Jaën (2001); "La Caixa Forum" in Barcelona (2003); World Music Festival in Girona (2003)
- Egypt** House of the Opera in Cairo (1994 & 1997); Festival "Jadal"- Republic Theater in Cairo (2001)
- Germany** "WDR" Radio - Room Klaus Von Bismark Hall in Köln (1998); House of the World Cultures in Berlin (2000)
- Canada** National Center of arts in Ottawa (2001)
- Morocco** Mohamed V Theatre in Rabat (2000); Festival of World Sacred Music (2007)
- Belgium** Tunisian Youth Musical in Brussels (1982); Women Voice in Brussels (2000)
- Sweden** Södra Teatern in Stockholm (2001)
- Greece** Festival of Mediterranean classical music – Athens; Athens Concert Hall- theater of Epidaure (2001)
- Italy** Festival of the Mediterranean Feminine Voices in Djebelina (1994); Festival of the City of Catania (1994); Women Voice in Sassari (2005); Auditorium Nino Carloni in Aquila (2005)
- Syria** Festival Friendship and Peace in Lattaquié (1992)
- Jordan** Royal Cultural Center in Amman (2002); Al Hussein Cultural Center in Amman (2002)
- Swiss** Academy of Music in Bale (2001)
- Bahrain** Cultural Hall-Bahrain National Museum (2006)
- Romania** Athenee Theatre Bucharest

### Albums:

*Liberty* (1992); *TAWCHIH* (1997) ; *Takht* (1999); *Tair el Miniar* (2003); *Romances* (2005).

### Diplomas:

Diploma of Arabian Music (1986); Master in Right (1995); Third Cycle in Political Sciences (1999); Thesis of Doctorate in Political Sciences (in progress)

### Communications:

Musical Art, Right & art conference - Beit el Hikma (Carthage); Tunisian Music specification « Le Malouf » (Barcelone); Contemporary art and the creative imagination - Beit el Hikma (Carthage)

### Associations:

Member of the international study associations (1995-1997); Member of the executive of the « Rachidia » (2001-2003); Willingness Ambassador of the Tunisian association against cancer

## **Khalil Abonula**

Khalil Abonula is a Palestinian who was born in the city of Nazareth into a musical family. His father and mother were singers and both played on the oud. His mother taught him to play on oud and introduced him to theory in Arabic music. Since his early childhood, Khalil participated in school's special events as a solo singer and joined the church choir where he learned many of the Byzantine hymns. Also, he grew up listening to the masters of Arab classical music particularly the Egyptians Sayyed Darwish, Saleh Abdel Hay, Mohammad Abdel Wahhab and the Lebanese Wadi' Al-Safi whose voice and style of singing caught Khalil's attention in particular.

At the age of 12, Khalil began joining his father as a singer in community events and parties. This is when he started to develop his musicality and talent in search for his musical independence. After graduating from high school, Khalil started his first music band called "Samah," named after a spiritual style of singing and dancing in Syria.

He created a musical career for himself that led to performing in primary venues such as:

- The Folklore Festival in Athens, Greece in 1987.
- Sofia Festival in Sofia Bulgaria in 1987.
- The Festival of Arabic music in The Opera House in Cairo, Egypt in the years 1994, 1996.
- The Folklore week in Doha, Qatar in the years, 1995, 1997.
- Jarash Festival in Amman, Jordan in the years 1995, 1998.
- The Spring Festival In Paris, France in 1997.
- The Rabat Festival, Morocco in 1999.
- The Gaza International Festival, Palestine in 1999.
- Al Madina Festival, Tunisia in 1999.
- The Bethlehem Art Festival, Palestine in 2000.
- The Nazareth Music Festival, Palestine in 2000

## **Rima Khcheich**

Rima Khcheich, a Lebanese singer, was born in 'Kham', South Lebanon, in 1974. She started singing Classical Arabic music at the age of nine, and was awarded the bronze medal at the 'Bizert Festival for the Mediterranean Song' in Tunisia, 1985.

Rima's singing career started off with the children's choir at the 'Arabic Cultural Club', and later evolved into a solo performance with the 'Beirut Oriental Troop for Arabic Music' under the supervision and direction of Maestro Salim Sahab.

Rima studied the tradition of classical Arabic singing at The Lebanese National Higher Conservatory of Music' in Beirut, and her efforts were supported by her father Kamel Khcheich who encouraged her to memorize and master classics from the Arabic music heritage like \*Muwashahat, Adwar and other styles. She has performed Zakariah Ahmad, Al-Kassabji, Sayyed Darwish, Kamel Al Khal'i and Muhammad Abdel Wahab, amongst others.

Having participated in various concerts in Lebanon and around the world, Rima has gained international repute and admiration for her gift at performing complex Arabic classical forms such as Dor 'Emta El hawa', and Muwashah 'Anta al Mudallal'.

Currently, Rima teaches Oriental singing at the Lebanese National Higher Conservatory of Music and is invited on a yearly basis to Massachusetts, USA where she teaches voice and classical Arabic singing at Mount Holyoke College under the framework of the Arabic Music Retreat program directed by renown musician and composer Simon Shaheen.

Her professional collaborations include performing with Simon Shaheen, singing in renown composer Toufic Farroukh's album 'Tooty' released in 2006, and being an integral part of the Dutch-Lebanese- Iraqi band 'Orient Express'. This band tried to create meeting grounds between the Arab musical heritage and Jazz. The band released one album 'Orient Express' in 2002, of which this live recording documents their musical experimentations.

In 2006, Rima Khsheish released her debut solo album, entitled 'Yalalali' which features a number of old songs and Muwashahat, that she performs in a personalized, contemporary manner, alongside new compositions.

A showcase of Rima's limpid voice, 'Yalalali' not only reveals a deeply emotional and original musical expression, it also stands as a note of rebellion against the dictates of the commercial music market.

**[www.rimakhcheich.com](http://www.rimakhcheich.com)**

*\* Muwashahat: plural for Mawashshah, a vocal form in Arabic music. A strophic song with refrain. The form originated at Cabra, near Cordoba, in the 9th century; it enjoyed a vogue in Muslim Spain in the 11th century, and spread subsequently throughout the Arab world, where it survives in oral tradition. One of seven post-Classical poetic forms, it is performed on both secular and religious occasions and combines classical metres with new ones arranged in strophes. Each poem is divided into an indefinite number of units (abyat, sing, bayt), each containing a varied number of poetic lines. Musically, a mawashshah is performed by a solo singer alternating with responsorial, antiphonal or collective singing in unison, depending on the performing group. The performance of this difficult art, composed by specialists, demands a mastery of both maqams (modes) and usuls, the complicated rhythmic patterns of Arabic music. from the Center for Arabic Culture (CAC)*

## **Simon Shaheen, Artistic Director**

Simon Shaheen dazzles his listeners as he deftly leaps from traditional Arabic sounds to jazz and Western classical styles. His soaring technique, melodic ingenuity, and unparalleled grace have earned him international acclaim as a virtuoso on the 'oud and violin.

Shaheen is one of the most significant Arab musicians, performers, and composers of his generation. His work incorporates and reflects a legacy of Arabic music, while it forges ahead to new frontiers, embracing many different styles in the process. This unique contribution to the world of arts was recognized in 1994 when Shaheen was honored with the prestigious National Heritage Award at the White House.

In the 1990s he released four albums of his own: *Saltanah* (Water Lily Acoustics), *Turath* (CMP), *Taqasim* (Lyricord), and *Simon Shaheen: The Music of Mohamed Abdel Wahab* (Axiom), while also contributing cuts to producer Bill Laswell's fusion collective, *Hallucination Engine* (Island). He has contributed selections to soundtracks for *The Sheltering Sky* and *Malcolm X*, among others, and has composed the entire soundtrack for the United Nations-sponsored documentary, *For Everyone Everywhere*. Broadcast globally in December 1998, this film celebrated the 50th anniversary of the United Nations Human Rights Charter.

But perhaps his greatest success has come with *Blue Flame* (ARK21, 2001), where he leads his group, Qantara, on a labyrinthian journey through the world of fusion music to discover the heart of the Middle East. The album has been nominated for eleven Grammy Awards, and the band's performances have been called "glorious."

A Palestinian, born in the village of Tarshiha in the Galilee, Shaheen's childhood was steeped in music. His father, Hikmat Shaheen, was a professor of music and a master 'oud player. "Learning to play on the 'oud from my father was the most powerful influence in my musical life," Shaheen recalls. He began playing on the 'oud at the age of five, and a year later studying violin at the Conservatory for Western Classical Music in Jerusalem. "When I held and played these instruments, they felt like an extension of my arms."

After graduating from the Academy of Music in Jerusalem in 1978, Shaheen was appointed its instructor of Arab music, performance, and theory. Two years later he moved to New York City to complete his graduate studies in performance at the Manhattan School of Music, and later in performance and music education at Columbia University.

In 1982, Shaheen formed the Near Eastern Music Ensemble in New York, establishing a group that would perform the highest standard of traditional Arab music. This time also marked the beginning of Shaheen's workshops and lecture/demonstrations in schools, colleges, and universities to educate the younger generation. As a champion and guardian of Arab music, Shaheen still devotes almost fifty percent of his time to working with schools and universities, including Julliard, Columbia, Princeton, Brown, Harvard, Yale, University of California in San Diego, University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and many others.

His concert credits are a veritable compendium of the world's greatest venues: Carnegie Hall, Kennedy Center, Cairo's Opera House, Theatre de la Ville in Beirut, and Belgium's Le Palais des Arts. In May of 2004, Shaheen appeared at Quincy Jones' "We Are The Future," fundraising concert in Rome in front of a half million strong crowd.

As a composer, Shaheen has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, Meet the Composer, the Jerome Foundation, Continental Harmony, and Yellow Springs Institute. In addition to his recorded work, his theatrical repertoire includes *Majnun Layla*, (performances included the Kennedy Center in Washington DC, and The Museum of Natural History in New York), *The Book and the Stranger* (from *Kalilah Wa-Dimannah*), *Possible City*, and *Collateral Damage* with actress Vanessa Redgrave. He has also written the music for the documentary of the British Museum's Egyptian collection, which has toured U.S. museums.

Since 1994, Shaheen has produced the Annual Arab Festival of Arts, called "Mahrajan al-Fan." Held in New York, the festival showcases the work of the finest Arab artists, while presenting the scope, depth and quality of Arab culture. To continue this exposure to Arab music and culture, Shaheen founded the Annual Arabic Music Retreat in 1997. Held each summer at Mount Holyoke College, this weeklong intensive program of Arabic music studies draws participants from the U.S. and abroad.

For the past six years, though, Shaheen has focused much of his energies on Qantara. The band, whose name means arch in Arabic, brings to life Shaheen's vision for the unbridled fusion of Arab, jazz, Western classical, and Latin American music, a perfect alchemy for music to transcend the boundaries of genre and geography.

"I want to create a world music exceptionally satisfying to the ear and for the soul," says Shaheen, "This is why I selected members for Qantara who are all virtuosos in their own musical forms, and whose expertise and knowledge can raise the music and the group's performance to spectacular levels."

Qantara made their first live recording debut on *Mondo Melodia/ARK21's "Historic Live Recording of the Two Tenors & Qantara,"* featuring tenors Wadi al-Safi and Sabah Fakhri. The disc featured two instrumental cuts by Shaheen and Qantara, which, only begins to show the band's range and capabilities."

Shaheen and Qantara made their full recording debut with *Blue Flame*. Compositions of "Al-Qantara" and "Dance Mediterranean" sparkle like jewels, while the opening track, *Blue Flame*, is a bravura exhibition of Shaheen's -- and the band's -- virtuosity. The *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed the record "stunning," National Public Radio called it "a staggering tour-de-force of technique and passion," *CMJ* called it "a new benchmark in Arab-Western fusion," and the *Washington Post* termed it "eminently cosmopolitan."

The band has toured during 2003 and 2004, playing concerts and festivals like WOMAD USA, WOMAD Sicily, the prestigious Newport Jazz Festival, Montreal Jazz Festival. Traveling throughout Europe and the Middle East, Qantara's appearances have included: Beiteddine Festival in Lebanon; Les Mediterranean in France; New York's Central Park Summer Stage; Stern Grove International Festival in San Francisco; Chicago World Music Festival; Royce Hall in Los Angeles; University Musical Society in Ann Arbor; Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis; International Souk Ukaz at the historic citadel in Amman, Jordan; and Yabous Festival in the historical Tombs of Kings in East Jerusalem amongst others. In Palestine, Shaheen conducts an annual weeklong music workshop designed for gifted children.

In addition to performing with his two bands, Qantara and the Near Eastern Music Ensemble, Shaheen tours as a solo artist internationally and as a lecturer throughout the academic world promoting awareness to Arab music through numerous lecture and workshop presentations.

[www.simonshaheen.com](http://www.simonshaheen.com)