



INANNA  
Foundation

## **EU Grundtvig Workshop**

### **MUSIQI SURYAYTO**

**(Rijssen, 3-7 July 2013)**

#### **SYNOPSIS REPORT**

The workshop *Musiqi Suryayto* was convened in Rijssen, the Netherlands, July 3-7 2013. The Inanna Foundation organized this workshop whose aim was to bring scholars, musicians and learners together to work on the development of the contemporary Assyrian/Syriac music. As the first gathering of its kind, the principal purposes of this historically unique workshop was to discuss the main problems and challenges facing contemporary *Musiqi Suryayto*, to provide a learning platform for people interested in the innovation of *Musiqi Suryayto* and to improve the quality of the music produced by Assyrian/Syriac musicians in Europe.

Twenty-nine participants from various European countries, the United States, Iraq and Lebanon either gave presentations or simply attended the workshop. The participation of 20 participants from Europe was financed by the EU Grundtvig Lifelong Learning Programme. Aware of the historical significance of this gathering, the workshop organizers (the Inanna Foundation) endeavored to attract all the key figures in the field of Assyrian/Syriac music. Unfortunately, for various reasons not all could attend.

The participation of two non-European guests was partly sponsored by the generous contributions from the *Assyrischer Jugendverband Mitteleuropa* (AJM) and some other people who attended to the workshop. We would like to thank all contributors for their support.

The workshop programme was structured to cover all the different aspects of the Assyrian/Syriac music. On the first day, Dr Naures Atto and Soner Onder welcomed the participants, introduced the agenda and opened the workshop. In their opening speech, they elaborated on the historical

importance of this gathering and raised some core questions to which the workshop should pay particular attention. Thereafter all participants briefly introduced themselves through their work. After the opening speech, Abboud Zeitoune held an interactive session with the participants about their expectations of the workshop. The first session ended with the welcome speech by the workshop's guest of honour, Chorbishop Paul Mikhael (Beirut, Lebanon) who is one of the initiators of the modern *Suryoyo* songs. Fr. Mikhael has played a central role in the development of *musiqi Suryayto* in the last century and composed many famous folk songs (with his first composition in 1967).

The second day sessions began with the keynote presentation by Fr Mikhael in which he addressed the historical roots of Syriac music by drawing parallels with the ancient Mesopotamian musical traditions. Fr Mikhael illustrated how this musical tradition has continued and survived down the centuries through its modifications in the Syriac church tradition (examples from Bar Dayson and Mor Ephrem). Fr Mikhael stressed that the present-day Assyrian/Syriac music is rooted in the Syriac Church. At the end of his speech, Fr Mikhael prayed (*teshmeshto*) for the soul of the esteemed Assyrian/Syriac musicians (amongst them the poet Danho Dahho) who passed away. Fr Mikhael's presentation will be translated into English and published in the workshop proceedings.

Dr Abrohom Lahdo's first lecture was about the use of Mesopotamian music instruments in ancient times. He showed more than 40 pictures of musical instruments originating from the ancient Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian and Assyrian times. Dr Lahdo explained how the role of these instruments during royal events or on private occasions, during offerings to the gods, in Akitu festivals, in funeral ceremonies, before going to a war or in sport activities. Importantly, most of the present-day music instruments, including the lute, saz, drums, derbakke, qanun, flute and zorna, were already known and used in the ancient times. To illustrate the richness of this music heritage, Dr Lahdo quoted from the Greek historian Herodotus (500 BC): "I went to Babylon after the Persian conquest of Babylon and the music was well-developed."

After both lectures, participants joined in the lively discussion, drawing parallels between the past and the present. The general understanding was that the origins of *musiqi Suryayto* are still

not well known, especially among the majority of the present-day performers of this music. Although this can be related to the lack of institutional resources (music schools and trained teachers), the absence of written material about this music is also an important drawback. Except for the use of the Beth Gazo, the Assyrian/Syriac music tradition is predominantly an oral tradition which is faced with the danger of extinction.

After the discussion about the historicity of the Assyrian/Syriac music, Abboud Zeitoune, the author of *Music Pearls of Bethnahrin*, gave a comprehensive introductory lecture about modern Assyrian music both in the homeland and in the Western diaspora. In a chronological and regional order, he presented the development and history of Assyrian Music in each setting. Commencing with the pre-Seyfo period (1915) and the Assyrian national songs by Gabriel Asaad in 1920's-1950's, his main focus was the much later introduction of the first west-Assyrian folk songs in 1967 and the subsequent progress achieved in Qamishlo and Aleppo. UNESCO concerts have also given an important impetus to the music. In his discussion of the East Assyrian music, he concentrated on several periods in Iraq and Iran. Looking at Iran, he discussed masters like William Daniel, Nebu Issabey, Paulus Khofri and others and also reviewed the choral activities of Shoora Mikhalian and Vania David which have been significant in the development of this music. Turning to Iraq, he touched on the early works of Hanna Petros (1931) and Gibrayel Sayad (1935), as well as mentioning the significant support of Jamil Bashir in the 1960s. Abboud concentrated on presenting such recorded items as audio excerpts, available record covers and old photos of artists. He claimed that the period of recordings in the Sureth language commenced in 1917.

In his presentation, *The identity of Assyrian/Syriac music: Music notation and rhythms*, the composer and singer Sardanapal Asaad (Makdisi-Somi) explained the Oriental music scales and rhythms and their origins from a comparative historical perspective. He summarized the historical scales and the old music vocabulary of Mesopotamia and the Pythagorean music system, as well as giving an insight into the scales and measurements in Assyrian/Syriac church and folkloric music. The Syriac church music hymns are written in various scales but they have not yet been properly notated by anyone. Sardanapal also discussed the identity of

Assyrians/Syriacs which is linked to the discussion of setting a standard for the commas in the quarter tones. In the end of his lecture he talked about his symphonies and their various themes.

Dr Tala Jarjour, assistant professor of music at the University of Notre Dame, explored Syriac chant in music scholarship. Her presentation offered a brief overview of western (mostly European) scholarship on the music of chants and hymns in the Syriac church, collectively referred to as Syriac chant. She located existing scholarship in its historical and intellectual context, and touched on some of the challenges this eastern modal musical system presents to a European modernist approach. As most studies on the subject have been by musicologists, the presentation looked at some methodical differences between musicology and ethnomusicology and underlined the necessity of devising new methods based on ethnographic fieldwork to encourage the study of Syriac chant. The presentation also called for more awareness among musicians of the significance of local knowledge in the construction of successful scholarship on Syriac music in general. Using everyday language and employing references to practical examples, the speaker stressed her point about the necessity of local hermeneutics by discussing problems in existing scholarship, be they general on the question of mode or specific to Syriac music. In this interesting encounter between a music scholar and an audience of musicians, the ensuing discussion about musical examples and analytical problems provided a welcome validation for the former and thought-provoking insight for the latter.

In his second presentation, Dr Abrohom Lahdo discussed the interplay between religious and secular music from a historical perspective. Accordingly, Dr Lahdo demonstrated that Syriac Orthodox Church music is a continuity of pre-Christian Mesopotamian music traditions. After the fall of the Assyrian Empire, its musical culture was maintained under the rule of the Persians and then of the Romans. Their post-Christian music begins with Bar Daysan (AD 154-222), who developed a music tradition in Edessa (Urhoy) and its surrounding area. Later, Syriac music and folk songs were passed on and preserved by Harmonius (son of Bar Daysan). Mor Afrem (AD 306-373) was the first to introduce singing and music into the Syriac Church. He also integrated women's and men's choirs in the church. Mor Afrem and subsequent church musicians, among them Mor Jacob, Mor Ishok, Mor Balay, Rabula, Quqoyo and many others, have composed thousands of hymns. It has been their practice to borrow the melodies from *Qadmoyo* to

*Tminoyo*. Dr Lahdo stated that there are 37 forms of singing in the Syriac Orthodox Church (namely, *BSogitho*, *Madroscho*, *Conitho*, *Zumoro*, *Hulolo*, *Qolo* etc.). He stated that the church music is very rich and the Sunday Mass in the Syriac Church was like a ‘concert’. However, in the eighth century the Syriac Church Synod decided not to introduce any more new hymns. Dr Lahdo said that this musical tradition has been passed down from generation to generation. In his concluding words, he underlined the fact that the Syriac Church music is among the oldest church music and that this should be recognized as world cultural heritage by UNESCO.

Hanibal Romanos, who is working on the archive of *musiqi Suryayto* and assisting Abboud Zeitoune in the documentation and categorization of songs, gave a short presentation about the digitization of old Assyrian/Syriac reel tapes (tape recordings). In his presentation, Hanibal pointed out how important it is that professionals undertake this task and demonstrated the quality difference between a song digitized from a master tape and the same song digitized from an old cassette. The message of his lecture was that if Assyrians/Syriacs want to see the revival of their music, the older classics have to be re-mastered and re-released so that younger generation musicians has the chance to learn the songs and be inspired to produce new classics.

In a specific session, the workshop focused on the traditional melodies (*nahle*) of *musiqi Suryayto*. Yaakob Danho, an experienced *oud* player and choir-master of a choir in Sodertalje, explained that the reason for writing a new song was a way to mediate ideas to the people in different musical arrangements. The singer Ninib A. Lahdo discussed his experiences of writing music. In the subsequent discussion, some participants underlined the progressive role of music in organizing people in their struggle for justice and freedom. Participants commonly underlined the importance of protecting and improving traditional melodies in the songs produced. These are what give the Assyrian/Syriac music a unique identity, distinguishing it from other musical traditions.

In the session about writing lyrics in the diaspora, four renowned lyricists described how they have written their lyrics. Through his lyrics Hapsuno Bahho, who is the author of more than 130 songs, hopes to give voice to the oppression of his people and their traumatic past. His other agenda is to promote the use of the Surayt language by singing in this language. The underlying

idea is that, if Assyrians/Syriacs did not want to disappear as a group in Europe, they should sing in their mother tongue. Saied Lahdo has written many lyrics the majority either focusing on the culture of his people (*marduthonoye*) or love songs. George Farag, the producer of and actor in the well-known film *Holo Malke*, discussed how his experiences in life have been reproduced in his lyrics – the outpourings of his perception of his environment and the pain of his people. Lyrics, he said, are the products of these feelings which must be expressed. Orahim Lazar, who has written many lyrics for numerous singers in *Madenhoyo*, also stressed the importance of using only the Assyrian language in lyric writing. He also pointed out the importance of writing patriotic songs in the diaspora.

In a longer session, the participants discussed the quality of contemporary *musiqi Suryayto*:

- Some participants criticized the Assyrian/Syriac media for broadcasting music which is sub-standard and contributes nothing to the development of the Assyrian/Syriac music. All participants joined in stressing that just singing in Surayt or Sureth would not contribute to the development of this music. The most important factor is to produce ‘good quality’ music linked to the roots of this musical tradition to help the survival and improvement of the *musiqi Suryayto*.
- One of the most common problems is the lack of open, positive criticism among singers. This is seen as an obstacle to fruitful co-operation between the various performers of this music. In this context, the increasing gap between the older and younger generation of singers of this music is another problem which hinders the establishment of learning links between generations.
- Participants commonly underlined the absence of an independent institution which can pass judgement on the quality of the songs produced and provide a platform to which individual singers can apply for a review of their artistic work before going public with it.
- Another problem is that content-wise many contemporary lyrics are weak. Moreover, lyrics and melodies sometimes do not match each other. This weakness reveals the urgent need for the institutionalization of Assyrian/Syriac music.
- In relation to the above-mentioned problems, there is no uniformity in the language of lyrics. There are many linguistic errors, both in the writing of lyrics and in the pronunciation, especially among the younger generation.

- Participants discussed the use of different languages in their performances. They stated that, for pragmatic reasons, many singers are no longer happy to sing *Suryoyo* songs especially at weddings, principally because the audience prefers popular songs in other languages. There were two contradictory opinions about singing in different languages at weddings. Some argued that singers should be free to sing in any language at weddings because such an event is private and people want to have fun. Others said that in the first period after emigration the promotion of singing in their own language was an absolute necessity. However, nowadays they believe that it is no longer necessary to confine their singing to their mother tongue. The many participants who opposed this view emphasized the importance of singing in their mother tongue at all community events because both the language and the musical tradition are at risk of extinction.
- Participants commonly emphasized the influence of other neighbouring musical traditions Arabic, Turkish and Kurdish, on modern Assyrian/Syriac music. They criticized the production of songs which are classified ‘*musiqi Suryayto*’ but in fact are copies of these other highly influential musical traditions. They underlined the risk of the disappearance of Assyrian/Syriac music because of a lack of awareness among the performers of this music.

The workshop continued with a session about the use of modern styles in Assyrian/Syriac music. Ilona Danho, a young performer who has recently graduated from the Brussels Conservatory, illustrated how it is possible to combine traditional melodies with new styles (in this instance, jazz) fruitfully in new musical arrangements. Ilona elaborated on the importance of the existing instrumental music in the Assyrian/Syriac music and stressed the necessity of the function of arrangement (as trio, quartet, concerto, chamber music) in the modern presentation of this tradition. As a sample, she played the audience the concerto for violoncello by Nouri Iskandar (Assyrian/Syriac composer), which in her opinion, is no less educative than the compositions of the Italian composer Luciano Berio which are taught in classes in the Conservatories all over the world. Ilona’s main message was the need of improvement in *musiqi Suryayto* and giving it an international character rather than a local one.

The second presentation in this session was that of Gabriel Savci, a young rapper, who gave a talk about *Suryoyo* rap and hip-hop. Gabriel explained how, as a broad conglomerate of artistic

forms, hip-hop comprises different manifestations of the culture: rap music (aural), turn-tablism or "DJing" (aural), breaking (physical) and graffiti art (visual). Rapping (also known as emceeing, MCing, spitting or rhyming) refers to 'spoken or chanted rhyming lyrics'. Gabriel, says hip-hop is everywhere, on TV, on the radio and even in schools. Assyrian/Syriac young people who have grown up in the western world, whether we like it or not, come into contact with hip-hop. He stressed that therefore, rap can be used to teach children and young people history, language, politics, social norms and much more. Gabriel stated that other nationalities also listen to 'Suryoyo Hip-Hop' and he thinks that this is a great opportunity for Assyrian/Syriacs to let the world know that they exist.

Participants expressed polarized ideas about the use of Western styles in *musiqi Suryayto*. Some argued that 'Rap or Jazz can never become *musiqi Suryayto*!'. Some others pointed out the importance of a careful approach to the combination of modern styles with classical Assyrian/Syriac melodies (*nahle*).

In the last open discussion session, the participants developed their ideas for improving *musiqi Suryayto*. Some of the ideas expressed were as follows:

- In general participants expressed the need of a musical institution which will both protect and improve *musiqi Suryayto*; control the quality of contemporary music and function as a reference centre for the Assyrian/Syriac music.
- Some participants proposed the establishment of a music school or a conservatory. Fr Mikhael suggested that the music school should also be organized within the church in order to meet in the need of the musical education of priests and other functionaries. According to Fr Mikahel, such a music school should be founded in the monasteries (especially in the monastery of the Patriarchate of the Syriac Orthodox Church) in order to produce well educated priests and deacons (*mshamashone*) who can spread the *musiqi Suryayto* in its traditional style. As a result of these efforts, an important essence of this music tradition could be transmitted to younger generations and composers who can then continue in building on this tradition.
- Rejecting a central structure, others were more in favour of local efforts, including the establishment of a choir in every city in which Assyrians/Syriacs live in the diaspora and in

the homeland; offering local music courses to the younger generation either in local community organizations or churches. An idea was also put forward about organizing intensive biennial ‘summer/winter courses’ for singers in the early stages of their careers, depending on financial sources.

- The majority of participants proposed that at least one concert be organized annually to improve the quality of *musiqi Suryayto* and to change the attitude among people towards their music.
- Participation in national or international music festivals and the promotion of the status of Assyrian/Syriac music internationally.
- Developing closer links between the *Suryoyo Ma’erboyo* and *Madenhoyo* dialects and the composition of collective songs in these two dialects.
- Making use of new technology to develop innovative, trans-border musical productions (for instance, the composition of songs sung by singers living in different countries).
- Development of a specific website or setting up a Facebook group for *musiqi Suryayto*, to function as a platform for discussions about music and for the sharing of artistic work.
- Development of an educative TV programme about *musiqi Suryayto*.
- Setting up international projects for the protection of one of the world’s oldest musical traditions: *musiqi Suryayto*.

## **Conclusions**

In the last session, the workshop was evaluated by all participants, taking the expectations mentioned in the opening session of the workshop as their point of departure. The organizers and participants were very pleased with the results of the workshop, which were the collective achievement of all participants. A common idea was that this international gathering had created the space to get to know each other better and to develop concrete ideas for co-operation. The workshop organizers handed out learning certificates to all participants as confirmation they had attended the workshop.

Following the suggestions, the workshop agreed on developing three follow-up activities:

- The organizers aim to publish a book based on the contributions made during the workshop. The editors of this book will be Dr Tala Jarjour, Abboud Zeitoune and Dr Naures Atto.

- In order to develop a sustainable network and create a discussion platform, a Facebook group named ‘Musiqi Suryayto’ will be set up. The administrators of this group will be Abboud Zeitoune, Aysu Tavsan and Hanibal Romanos.
- To co-ordinate the follow-up activities to the workshop (organizing summer/winter schools, concerts) and, to develop projects which will protect and promote Assyrian/Syriac music, an international network or a similar organization will be established. This issue will be discussed in more detail on the Facebook and other platforms.

The charity concert which was held on Saturday 6 July was dedicated to Assyrians/Syriacs caught up in the civil war in Syria. Almost all workshop participants in this concert performed for a discriminating audience of about 320 people. The concert proved a good way to disseminate the workshop results to a broader public and was recorded by the TV channels Assyria TV and Suroyo TV.

The concert was organized in cooperation with the Mor Afrem Stiftung (Germany). The ticket prices (€10 adults, €5 children) were kept low in order to attract more audience. The money collected from ticket selling and donations (€ 3,530) has been sent by Mor Afrem Stiftung to Syria and will be used for charity work. The costs of the concert were € 3,140.

The whole workshop will be broadcast in several episodes on Assyria TV. Some sessions of the workshop have also been recorded by Riad Asmar to be used in a documentary project about Assyrian music.

On behalf of all *Musiqi Suryayto* workshop participants, we would like dedicate our workshop achievements to our esteemed teacher and friend Ninos Aho who passed away on 15 July 2013. He is the author of many well-known lyrics and poems. Malfono Ninos Aho was one of the guests of honour invited to this workshop. Unfortunately, his serious health problems prevented him from making the journey to participate and be with us. May his soul rest in peace and may he inspire many generations to come!

Inanna Foundation

August 2013