

Within Sound of the Nile

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Tracing the composer Soliman Gamil

abstract:

When Howard Carter discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun in 1922, scientists from all over the world were searching for traces of prehistoric times in Egypt. Already as a child Soliman Gamil was joining some of them to learn about the music of pharaonic times. Subsequently to his musical tuition in Cairo and Paris he traveled all over Egypt to document ancient musical rituals and ceremonies with a reel-to-reel recorder. He invited some of the village-musicians that he encountered during their performances, to Cairo, where he wanted to experiment with them and to develop compositions. During this process he discovered the hieroglyphical notation, which was unknown until then.

Soliman Gamil was also active at the intersection of art and politics. Like many other artists of the 50s and 60s he saw the possibility to shape the idea of a new society under President Nasser. All cultural initiatives came to a stillstand in 1970, when Sadat took power. Hence nowadays his music is widely unknown in Egypt.

On the surface Soliman Gamil's music might nourish western exoticisms, however throughout his life the composer was looking for connecting elements between East and West. Over many years he was presenting western classical music to an Egyptian audience in a weekly radioshow. But he was also the first to bring Sufi-music on a western stage.

A blend of wisdom, grace and psychedelic/spiritual power is characteristic for his music. In the movie 'Summer 70' (1971) by Nagy Shaker and Paolo Isaja, whose soundtrack solely consists of Gamil's music, this mixture creates an interesting area of conflict with the images. Since late 2010 the experimental film belongs to the permanent archive of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Soliman Gamil's music is published by the renowned english sound-art label 'Touch'.

interview partners:

Serenade Gamil	daughter
Abdo Gobaer	writer
Nagy Shaker	designer, artist and professor at Cairo university
Dr. Achmed Al-Maghraby	director of the cultuarla center 'Makan' in Cairo
Mohamed Hindi	musician in Soliman Gamil's national troupe
Scheich Mohamed El-Helbawi	sufi-singer
Gamal El Ghitani	writer and art critic

FX:

Nagy Shaker Film 'Summer 70'

Music:

Psychogeographical recording SG - 'Inshad'

Young woman:

This is the kind of music that always plays with the TV-series that represent or illustrate the 1001 nights. It reminds me of islamic gardens with fountains and colored birds and greenery - that's basically the atmosphere that comes through this music. It's quite typical oriental music in that sense.

Mod:

Mike Harding and Jon Wozencroft were not looking for typical music, when they approached a handful of embassies in London during the early 80s. The managers of the by now established sound-art platform were rather eager to find interesting sounds. From the staff at the egyptian embassy they received a tape with this...

Music:

Soliman Gamil - Inshad

Mod 2:

Within Sound of the Nile - Tracing the composer Soliman Gamil

by Paul Paulun

Serenade Gamil:

There is a tradition nowadays here in Egypt which we also found to be a tradition during the pharaonic period. It's called: 'The crying ladies'...

Mod 2:

Serenade Gamil, daughter

Serenade Gamil:

During the pharaonic period when somebody is dead, you have these women going to the funeral process to cry for the person who died and it was sacred. He went to this process wearing black as a woman - with his eyeglasses - and he told me: I was so afraid that they discover that I'm a man because no woman can wear eyeglasses during this funeral. But it was so interesting and so sacred that I had to go and record it, because it's the source. It's as if it is living throughout the years.

FX:

reel-to-reel sounds

Music:

Taksim Arghoul

Mod:

From the early 60s on Soliman Gamil was touring the whole country with his UHER-Report reel-to-reel recorder. He wanted to record musical performances in the villages.

Apart from him hardly anyone else was doing this.

His interest in Egyptian music was already sparked at an early age. No surprise, since there were scientists from all over the world exploring the country when he was born in 1924. Just two years ago the archeologist Howard Carter had discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun. There was a gold rush mood and everyone was trying to find further traces of prehistoric times.

When he was 14 years old, he was allowed to join the renowned German researcher and musicologist Hans Hickmann for his studies on pharaonic music in the old temples. On the mural paintings they found images of musical instruments that were still in use in the villages at that time.

Serenade Gamil:

He was having his instrument, the khanoun and he used to measure the size of the chords of the harp on the walls of the temples compared to the khanoun just to find out with which tone and which musical scale it was used during the pharaonic period.

He found this living in the villages and that was amazing. Same instruments – and this long tube which is called arghoul. It's a folkloric instrument, but it is also a pharaonic instrument.

Abdo Gobaer:

He wrote a series of articles about the pharaonic music and he discovered – with the help of people who are Egyptologists – a lot of things, which before him, we didn't know – at least in Egypt.

Mod 2:

Abdo Gobaer, writer

Abdo Gobaer:

I find Soliman Gamil is different from other conductors, because he writes and second because he tried to make something completely new, which is kind of symphony–music, but taking the items from our heritage. I leads to being modern and at the same time being an Egyptian.

I was doing the same – I was looking in our heritage, in the items which I can use, in my modern writing. We as writers are struggling to make our own way in the novel and change it to become really an oriental or egyptian writing.

FX:

Nasser speech

Mod:

Who am I?

Where am I?

What shall I do?

Who is my target?

Questions like these got important after 1952. King Farouk was forced to abdicate after a military coup d'état led by the Free Officers Movement under General Naguib and Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Nasser propagated the idea of Pan–Arabism and wanted to unite all Arabs from the

Atlantic Ocean to the the Persian Gulf in one huge National State. And the young republic of Egypt should lead the way of this aspiring Kulturnation. – People were looking eagerly for a new identity.

Nagy Shaker:

In the 50s and 60s there was a very special culture movement in all domains. In theater, in music, in folk music.

Mod 2:

Nagy Shaker, designer, artist and professor at Cairo university

Abdo Gobaer:

Cairo was a beautiful city – very quiet, very clean – full of culture. Everywhere you'd find exhibitions. You'd find halls, in which they'd do music, all kinds of music...

Music:

Rhythmic Dialogue (short)

Nagy Shaker:

There was a big activity in inviting groups from Upper Egypt, from the Delta, from here and there to come to Cairo and perform in festivation. So there was this mixture, this connection, there was this interest in knowing our music, which we here in Cairo... – we didn't experiment. So people started to know that there is something else to know about.

Music:

Rhythmic Dialogue (short)

Abdo Gobaer:

Most of the artists were leftist, so they find what happened in '52 is a chance for them to influence this new regime, which came and wanted to make a social society.

Music:

Rhythmic Dialogue (short)

Nagy Shaker:

I founded puppet theatre, but after 10 years or so, I believed that puppet theatre is not for children only, it could be for adults also, so I started to make performances for adults and it was based on political and social problems.

Music:

Rhythmic Dialogue (short)

Abdo Gobaer:

Most of the artists and writers in this period were building or trying to build this new society. They work in their field, doing their job, of which they think that it is their responsibility.

Music:

Rhythmic Dialogue (short)

Nagy Shaker:

There was this dream for a better Egypt, you know. And all people were having this sense and the will to do something. Everywhere, everybody in his field – even the man

who is agriculturing his land. This was the atmosphere of the time.

Music:

Rhythmic Dialogue (short)

Dr. Achmed Al-Maghraby:

It was the period when Egypt was in modernization, Sarwat Okasha used to be the Minister of Culture and he used to have this idea; 'We have to do what the West is doing. We have to imitate the West, if we would like to be developed.'

Mod 2:

Dr. Achmed Al-Maghraby, director of the cultural center 'Makan' in Cairo

Serenade Gamil:

The political vision at the time was to impose socialism in the villages in Egypt. So he said: No, let's create cultural centers in each village and let people in the village express themselves through painting, through poetry, through music and perform in these cultural centers. We cannot impose a political vision, which is outside from the normal peasant in Egypt. Let them express what they feel! This is the real socialism. So for him the peasant is eloquent.

Mod:

Cultural workers and politicians were in close contact, and in the end Soliman Gamil's point of view was adapted – even if folkloric music was regarded as backwardly and uncivilized at the time. Contrary to other arabic or european music it was lacking a theoretical background.

Dr. Achmed Al-Maghraby:

So they created the ballett, the symphonic orchestra, the conservatoire, the arts academy and at the same time in every village you could find a small group of traditional musicians paid by the government.

Music:

Promenade on the Nile

Nagy Shaker:

I found that this is a man, who is fond of this sources. He was spending time and his money to collect ambigious people on his account to Cairo.

He was going all over Egypt to search for those players with different folk instruments and collecting themes. He was inviting them to Cairo to experiment with them, to study with them and to make groups.

Mohamed Hindi:

We made a school. A school in Champollion Street, in his apartment. He had a school there for all the popular musicians, where we would sit and learn popular music.

Mod 2:

Mohamed Hindi, musician in Soliman Gamil's national troupe

Mohamed Hindi:

He was very humble, one of the truly humble men. He would sit with the ordinary folk. On the floor, like this. He was Shabi, e.g. rooted in traditions, and he sat with the Shabi people and would say 'do it like this, or like this.'

Nagy Shaker:

He was not a traditional composer, not staying at the table and write. No, he was improvising with the artist, the player in the same moment.

Mohamed Hindi:

A phrase might be written with four or five notes. But then Soliman comes and says 'you play this here with your own imagination!' Play this with your imagination and don't worry a bit about what's written. I just wrote this down for memorization, for some other group that will come in and record. But as for that, you go and play it however you want.'

Nagy Shaker:

From this experiment he composed lots of music with his ideas. Using their skill in playing and he was imagining a new music form with these elements.

And they try together to experiment until he found something interesting and then he fixed it.

Mohamed Hindi:

He would take the Shabi performance, and listen to what was there. But whatever was missing, he would put it in. He would take from here and then from here, but it would all agree with itself. He would make it agree. He took nothing by mistake.

You hear his music, and it has spiritualism, spiritualism in the body. And when you go back and listen to it, some will say 'that's not Shabi.' I say 'that's Shabi' and you might say 'What on earth are you talking about?!

Music:

The Sinsimia

Serenade Gamil:

And he was so severe with the punctuality of what has to be performed. And they used to understand him, because they wanted also to get the perfection and to prove that they are real musicians capable of good music and good interpretation.

Mod:

Musical traditions were passed on from one generation to the other orally, but when rehearsing with Soliman Gamil the musicians were taking notes.

Serenade Gamil:

They don't have notes. They have a circle, they have this, which like the Nile, which is an M, an N, and they have the bird.

And they have interpretation for everything. You have interpretation for the time, for silence, for the notes. And it all comes from hieroglyphical language.

Afterwards he communicated with them through these symbols.

Mod:

In 1969 Soliman Gamil founded a troupe for folkloric music. It was the first ensemble for such music and they wanted to proof to everybody that they exist and that they have instruments – valid for music.

FX:

Rabaaba–player in courtyard

Nagy Shaker:

For example the rababa. When you hit the rababa, it's not very nice to hear it, it's a little bit rough.

But to do something valuable from these very old instruments with the limited possibilities – this was his challenge. To put it in a more complex music with modern ideas, with modern imagination, with creativity to make it his music. He believed in these instruments.

Mohamed Hindi:

He had such solid experience with the traditional instruments. And he was the only one who would take these instruments and develop them. How would he develop them? According to their real essence.

Nagy Shaker:

In the folk music you can hear only one instrument or two – and they usually sing the same melody together.

So he was trying to make combinations between all these with respect of its character, but putting together to make a new value.

Mohamed Hindi:

It keeps its own color, that's his genius. You can hear Beethoven. You listen to this traditional Egyptian instrument, and you can hear Beethoven.

Music:

Sacred Lake

FX:

Sufi–singing

Serenade Gamil:

When he was young his father said: You go with your eldest sister. Her husband will take care of you because you need some discipline and her husband is a police–officer. So you need some discipline because you're reading all the time, you're following musical troops, you are doing this – you're not studying .

He went there and he was following the muled 'Sidi Hargag' in Luxor. So he was continuing his life and his passion – and it was in Luxor!

He used to have this foto that he gave to me as a gift telling me that from these days I became the one I am now. So – he was riding a horse with no clothes for a riding, no saddle on the horse and he was going into the desert in Luxor.

Mohamed Hindi:

They were a family from a shabi area, Sayyida Aiysha, a really nice shabi area. And they always loved to walk around and to find shabi weddings. Weddings, you know, with old people sitting around – and horses. He would come down from his house and watch everything.

Serenade Gamil:

My father was interested in Sufi music, too. He used to get lost when he was a kid, like four or five years old – He was living in this district near the citadel, where there were many muleds, celebrations and he used to be fascinated with the folkloric troops and with the Sufi–singing and Inshad – its singing.

Sultan Hassan – my father used to spend his childhood in this mosque. He used to sit inside and listen to the recitation of Quran. He used to love this place. For him it's his second home. And Sultan Rifa'i – both of them. He used to study there. He used to sit there, just to sit there and meditate.

Mod:

Soliman Gamil started to study arabic music by the age of 14. Later on he got tuition in piano, counterpoint and harmonics by italian professors in Cairo. In 1950 he went to the 'Ecole Normale de Musique' in Paris. There he wanted to study composition with the influential composer Nadia Boulanger.

She had already taught Pierre Henry in the years before. And along with Pierre Schaeffer and Jaques Poulin Henry was developing his vision of a collage–like music just at that time– the musique concrète.

Music:

Pierre Henry – La Guerre

Mod:

The environment of the university was definetely interesting. However Gamil was not really affected by the electronically modified sounds.

After he had studied for a year in Paris he went out of resources, so he wrote to Tahsin, a great writer and minister of education in Egypt at that time:

Mod 2:

And please help me to get a scholarship to continue my music–studies. I'm sure I'll not be in Paris to compose because I'll not have inspiration. I'll promise you that I'll go back to Egypt – even staying in the street, but its's there where I find my inspiration.

Music:

Pretense and Destiny

Serenade Gamil:

He is looking for the soul of the human being through music. For him musical expression was not music. It was the expression of the Egyptian during the whole life.

In the pharaonic civilization music was accompanying everything. Birth, offerance to the Sacred, everything was sacred – even labor. And you find this in the folkloric music.

Dr. Achmed Al–Maghraby:

The traditional music had a function in society and people have to participate.

Serenade Gamil:

During birth you have this musical ceremony.

Dr. Achmed Al–Maghraby:

So you go to a wedding, you sing, you dance.

Serenade Gamil:

Marriage, death – it is a funeral with music.

Dr. Achmed Al-Maghraby:

You go to the church, you sing. You go to the mosque, you sing. You listen to the Sufimusic, you participate – you move.

Serenade Gamil:

Also when people go to work in the fields they're singing. When they're coming back from the fields, they are singing another song. When they are moving to go and find jobs in another village they are singing.

Music:

Psychogeographical recording 'Supplication' starts

Serenade Gamil:

Or in moments of solitude and melancholy you find this musician with the Nai – it's this folkloric instrument which is pharaonic – sitting and playing just for himself to get out his expression, psychological state of mind or maybe for a supplication.

Sheik Mohamed El-Helbawi:

Music in all of the world, whether it be Western or Eastern, it is all one fabric. Taghur, the great Indian philosopher, he once said 'all of the peoples will one day meet together, and they will meet together through music.'

Mod:

Sheik Mohamed El-Helbawi, Sufi-Singer

Serenade Gamil:

The inspiration can be from different sources. It is different – yes, but it is one source for him. The Inshad and coptic singing in the church and his researches about pharaonic music – because nobody heard what this music is – the pharaonic one. So he was imagining it through the folkloric music in Egypt.

Sheik Mohamed El-Helbawi:

The relation is of three cultures which have met together and become enmeshed together. There is a blending. But even in this blending, the color of each component is preserved, and so is the type of performance.

And an interaction and meeting came about between these musics, without any contradictions or conflicts.

Nagy Shaker:

After he studied the pharaonic work he could understand that there is sort of an influence and relationship, which reached to coptic music in a way or another.

Serenade Gamil:

He did this research about the relation and interaction between Sufimusic in Islam and Coptic singing in the church. He used to record that in churches in the desert, these monasteries in the desert, little ones, like Wadi El Natrun.

FX:

coptic singing

Serenade Gamil:

They have this traditional way of singing in the church – coptic way. So coptic music is very important because when you hear a recitation in the church, it's like you're hearing a sheik reciting.

For him preserving traditional music is having the roots and the continuity of the roots from pharaonic to Coptic to Islamic.

FX:

exhibition–sounds, murmuring

Mohamed Allam:

History is just another school subject like chemistry and physics.

So just like we have history, others have books about history.

Everybody studies history, by the way you're not the only one with history.

Mod 2:

Mohammed Allam, A stream of the Holy Words, Video 2008

FX:

exhibition–sounds, murmuring

Mohamed Allam:

I haven't lived for 7000 years, so don't tell me 7000 years of history.

I don't issue my official papers from the pyramids. I didn't go to school at Karnak temple.

So don't bullshit me.

Try to respect my intelligence, don't take me for stupid.

Like I said my name isn't Mina or Ramses, so don't tell me I am a Pharaoh or we are all Pharaohs.

Mod:

Cairo's young artists are no longer inspired by the cultural heritage of Egypt. Against the backdrop of mass tourism and the superficial consumption of history, history rather turned out to be a heavy burden.

The idea that Soliman Gamil's music is compatible with western exoticisms and would mainly nurture the kitschy pyramid–cult of mass tourism, is therefore widespread.

Nagy Shaker:

The young generation cannot reach this, because they didn't grow up with the knowledge to analyze such a work.

You have to explain what this music is about, from where it comes and how it was done. And then when they do hear it again, they can appreciate it more.

Gamal El Ghitani:

It is very strange, because some people consider this time when Soliman Gamil presented his programme and played his active role in our life, as closed-walled and socialist.

I lived in two periods: the first was more open for culture, and we were more active to touch another culture. From the 70s we had the official political 'open-door-economy' in the economy and the social life, but not in the culture.

Mod:

Gamal El Ghitany, writer and art critic

FX:

Sadat , 'Open-Door-Policy'-speech

Abdo Gobaer:

Culture in general was hurt very bad by Sadat, because when Sadat took power, he thought that culture is producing politicians. So he closed all the cultural magazines and art magazines.

We used to produce 350 films in the time before Sadat, in the time of Sadat we came down to 20 films, which means that we lost a lot of impact in the arabic culture and arabic art.

Gamal El Ghitani:

When Sadat came to the authority, he declared: 'I am a muslim president for a muslim country'. It was very dangerous, because he was not a muslim president, he was an egyptian president for the egyptian people, because egyptian the people consists of muslims and christians, small communities and perhaps some people who do not believe.

Sadat gave a clear sign to the fundamentalists. And the more dangerous amongst them then split the society. Many of them supported the Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia. They consider music and Sufi-singing to be anti-islamic. Before it was a national project aimed at the future.

Abdo Gobaer:

One of the people who was really hurt was Soliman Gamil. They didn't stop him or do anything against him, but he was in the corner. Before they were in the front: him and the people like him.

Music:

Sufi Dialogue

Mod:

After the change of power the cultural domain ran dry more and more and nowadays you cannot learn or know how to play rabaaba in the Conservatoire or Arts Academy. There the ancient egyptian instruments are considered backward and outdated.

Nagy Shaker:

Young people now are more interested in politics, and they are active to discuss all the problems of today in Egypt and the world through their work; painters or actors or musicians etcetera etcetera.

Since the last 10 years there is this movement which is growing little bit by little bit. They have very difficult conditions to work. They don't have support and they are struggling and they want to go on expressing themselves through all kind of art. There is something happening which I think is optimistic.

Mohamed Allam:

Please tell me
what do the Pharaohs have to do with you?

There is such thing as anthropology,
if you know what I mean,
things have their origins.

Then again
don't talk to me about village traditions.

What are the traditions of the village anyway?
The peasants, the ignorants,
these are the 'traditions'.

Do I have to be ignorant for you
to say I have village traditions?

Don't tell me these things
Try to forget them
so we can communicate.

You say the Pharaohs, the village traditions,
the builders of history, the builders of civilization.

You build civilization?
Well how many floors does it have?

Where is the civilization?
What did you build it with?

Music:

Alexandrian Dance

Gamal El Ghitani:

The serious culture is not like before, 30 years ago. I am worried, because some sorts of music which Soliman Gamil presented for the people, disappear.

For example the sufi-music. It is for the tourists and the nouveau-riche in the wedding and the ceremony. There are many colors and everybody can go, but it's not spiritual.

Sheik Mohamed El-Helbawi:

Now, material reality has triumphed over the East and the West. The material reality is the most important.

Now all that you find in music is the simple expression of base instincts. Here in Egypt, we have such naked music. It is been beamed down upon us by satellites. But man must see: where is his origin, his essence?

Many of us, my brothers and I, we hold on to the traditions. Why? So that things will carry on through the generations, and the generations will meet.

Serenade Gamil:

My father was living in both. In tradition and in modernity. Any modern invention or research about physics was fascinating him.

He wanted Egypt to be developed with preserving the sources of its main tradition. And to preserve that you cannot neglect modernity. You have to use modernity to be able to preserve and to put it in a good channel. I think this is the main idea about his life.

Sheik Mohamed El-Helbawi:

Modernity is what lies in front of our faces.

If you are just an imitator of others, you'll be forgotten. You have to put your own fingerprints on history. You have to speak for yourself, not so that you'll be remembered in history, but so that you can change the discussion.

Serenade Gamil:

Now we have this conflict of civilizations and all that. For my father it was always that civilizations are completing each other and giving to each other.

There is always complementarity and civilizations are inspiring each other and giving and taking. It's not that they don't know each other. They complement each other for the good being of the humanity. It's an ongoing human process. No separation no boundaries. They are melting.

FX:

static radio noise

Mod:

For 17 years Soliman Gamil had a programme in radio called 'Alhan min al-sharq wa l-gharb', 'Music from East and West'. Each show started with a few lines of mizmaar and rabaaba, that musicians of his orchestra had played.

He explained and analyzed in a very descriptive way the music of Western composers like Mozart or Beethoven and tried to initiate people to this kind of music.

Gamal El Ghitani:

His programme not only presented the classical music, but also the oriental music, oriental classical arabic music, indian music, also the popular music from Egypt. When I say popular, I mean the countryside, the Sufi music, music from Upper Egypt, arghoul, nai ...

Soliman Gamil, he was like a bridge. He spoke about Sheik Mohamed El-Helbawi like Beethoven.

Mod:

But Gamil not only brought the Egyptian people in contact with western music. He was also travelling in Europe, giving lectures on Egyptian music at conferences and

presenting his own music. – He also prepared the first appearance of a sufi-choir outside of Egypt.

Nagy Shaker:

I was doing an experimental film with one of my Italian colleagues. This was at the beginning of the 70s and in that time he was in Stockholm presenting his music. And I told him: 'Please Soliman, pass in Rome, where I was living at that time, to give me your music, because I want to use it in my film.'

So he came to Italy and he left me all his rolls and all his music and I chose some of his pieces and put it in my film. I'm lucky that I got it, because it's a one-hour experimental film with only his music. There was no dialogue – it was only music, effects and the picture.

Mod:

In late 2010 a restored copy of the film 'Summer 70' by Nagy Shaker and Paolo Isaja got presented in the course of the festival 'Mapping Subjectivity' at New York's Museum of Modern Art. The festival presents the experimental arabic cinema from the 1960s to the present.

In March 2011 it was showcased in London's Tate Modern and until 2013 major capitals will follow.

Due to the releases of Soliman Gamil's music on the renowned sound-art label 'Touch' the composer is known to a certain circle of music enthusiasts in the West.

However one may hope that in the dawning 'new Egypt' he will finally get the recognition he deserves – and also that culture in general will be able to leave its shadowy existence.

Music:

Echoes of Memphis

(on top of music)

Gamal El Ghitani:

When I listen to the music of Soliman Gamil I'm surprised why this man did not become a great composer in Egypt and in the Orient. This is a big question for me. -- He has a gift, he has studied, he was a professor... But sometimes... unlucky! We are unlucky, because his music didn't arrive for anybody.

Mod 2:

Within Sound of the Nile – Tracing the composer Soliman Gamil

by Paul Paulun

Research: Chloe Griffin, Paul Paulun and Sam Wilder

(on top of music)

Sheik Mohamed El-Helbawi:

The most important thing in life, the most crucial point, is to be able to distinguish what is wasteful from what is fruitful. And this is why the lord created you ears.