

Voice of Devotion: The
Connection Between
Ministry and Music
AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. NIZAR FARES

The Al Noor Staff

N

izar Fares can scarcely walk the streets of his native Beirut, Lebanon, without being approached and embraced by well-wishers. After all, the popular singer boasts almost 70,000 Facebook followers, and is a past winner of *Studio El-Fan*, the prestigious Lebanese equivalent of *The Voice*. But Fares is beloved for more than just the usual flashy pop hits and music videos. Unlike some of his fellow stars, Fares is best known for his religious songs; for most of his career, he has devoted his voice exclusively to Christian music. He has done so since 1999, when he experienced a life-changing awakening of faith while imprisoned by Libyan dictator Muammar al-Gadhafi. Fares' faith informs more than just his music. He regularly travels to the Middle East, directly distributing food, clothing, medicine, and other supplies to the neediest refugees of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. When he's not tending to the displaced directly, he's on tour to raise

money for them, maintaining an intensive performance schedule that takes him to Australia, Canada, Europe, and around the United States.

In the midst of these efforts, Fares has also managed to pursue a successful academic career, earning a PhD in musicology from Holy Spirit University in Kaslik, Lebanon. He immigrated to the United States in 2013, and after brief stints at Tufts and William and Mary, he has served for three semesters as director of Astaza, Boston College's Middle Eastern music ensemble.

Al Noor sat down with Dr. Fares this spring, enjoying a wide-ranging conversation that touched on music, the Middle Eastern refugee crisis, and the status of Christians in the region.

A Discussion with Nizar Fares

Describe, if you can, the contributions and role of Christians in the music of the Middle East.

Nizar Fares: Early Christian religious music impacted early Arabic music, and the other way around as well. Some of the most well-known melodies in Arabic music are based on Christian songs. This makes sense—after all, the birthplace of, Christian music started in our countries, in our area. The first Christian music dates to 4th century and was composed by St. Ephraim of Syria. Until today, we sing those songs in our masses, especially in the Maronite masses and in the Syrian Catholic and Syrian Orthodox ones. And if you go to the Melkite and the Greek Orthodox Church, you hear a lot of Byzantine music. The Byzantines used the same scales that were used in classical Arabic music.

The only difference between Byzantine and classical Arabic scales is the progression of the scale itself, so how you sing the progression when you take a scale and you do an improvisation,

or you chant the text of the scripture. How you do it in the Byzantine way is a bit different from the Arabic music, but the scale itself is the same.

You should know that Arabic music is a mix of many cultures. I mean, the *futuh al-Islamiyya*, the Islamic conquests, conquered a lot of countries and they adopted their music and they annexed it all. They incorporated many influences into Arabic music. So you can see easily some old Arabic tunes that are similar to some Christian church music.

What about the popular music of today?

Nizar Fares: Popular music and Christian religious music have always been very intertwined. In the fourth century, for instance, Saint Ephraim knew that people were away from the Church, they weren't engaged. So he took a lot of the best-known folk music and he applied to church. So this is why, for example, I could sing for you a tune, which we sing every Sunday in the Maronite church. It's only three or four notes, which means that it is very archaic, very old. And, if you apply it a rhythm, a dancing rhythm, you will dance dabka on it. It shows you that it is essentially a form of folk music applied into the church. So there's a lot of music taken from pop music into the church and vice-versa.

Are there individual figures who help exemplify Christians' contributions?

Nizar Fares: Individual Christians have had a major impact on modern Arabic music. Nowadays you don't hear about it, but they did. Especially during the Renaissance of Middle Eastern music, which started around 1871. Christians contributed to this Renaissance with more than just their music. We also had a lot of poets who were fundamental to the revival, the *nahda*, of Arabic literature, from Nasif al Yaziji to Boutrous al-Bustani, from Mikha'il

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Na'ima, to Khalil Gibran. The Christians of the 19th century started seeing the Arabic language from a different angle.

It's the same with regard to music. Some of these contributions are hidden; for example, in 1942 the Christian oud player Farid Ghoussum composed a song for Egyptian diva Umm Kulthum, "Ifta Wadda Habibi." It was aired once, but because he was Christian it was stopped from being aired again. Until now we can't find any copies of this song.



Nizar Fares is a well-known Lebanese singer. Nizar Fares, 2017.

But the musical contributions of Christians are often very much out in the open. You also have a lot of Christians who were major, very well-known singers. For example, we can talk about Fairouz, we can talk about Wadi al-Safi, who passed away only five years ago. I had a personal relationship with him, and he gave me many of his compositions. I'm actually working on one right now. He had a tremendous impact on the Arabic community, not only in Lebanon but all over the Middle East. And the list could go on. As Christians, we had a big impact on Arabic music.

Jewish people also had an important impact on Arabic music. We cannot, for example, mention Arabic cinema without mentioning Leila Mourad and her family. Haga Ghariba, a song we're playing now with the BC ensemble, was composed by her brother, and the Mourads are known as a Jewish family. So there is a lot of impact from minorities on Arabic music.

How did growing up in Lebanon shape you and your worldview?

Nizar Fares: As a matter of identity, I have a very diversified identity within my family. I mean, we have a lot of religions in our family. You know, my grandmother is from one religion, my grandfather is from another religion, and my mom is another religion, so I became this mixture. But also it added on

my identity and it gave me a bigger responsibility. A bigger degree of acceptance, you know, to accept other ideas and other religions and other thoughts and worldviews. We are a very diversified country in Lebanon, which is also reflected in its nature. Lebanon has 26 microclimates, for example, and it is such a small country that all these climates coexist side by side. This affects the spirit of the people. People are joyful. They are very open-minded, very accepting, and very tolerating.

Why did you move to the United States of America? In what ways do you think being an immigrant has changed you?

Nizar Fares: Well, I'm still the same, in Lebanon or elsewhere. I'm the same person but with more exposure. Here, you can choose where to live and how to live your life. I can choose how to raise my kids. I can take them to church, I can surround them with church people, and I can shape them. I mean, life can shape them in the end, but I can help. And you can also leave them and they will grow as society would, but I think I have a responsibility as a father. If I don't teach my kids, somebody else will teach them. They are a sponge and they receive everything. So, since I have that choice, I'm happy to be in a place where I can conduct my life as I want.

How do you view the long-term prospects for Christians in the Middle East?

Nizar Fares: Oh, it's getting worse. And it's going to get worse. I'm praying that God will protect these people and that there is a divine plan. God loves His people, His refugees. So I pray that it's all part of the Master's plan. And at the end, I think life for the Christian faith has been all the time like this since Christ, so it's nothing new. We were always persecuted through ages. When people die for their faith, they will be with the Lord. That's our faith. There is always going to be suffering and persecution for our faith, and we have accepted this as part of our dwelling in this earthly life.

I just pray that in the coming days, God has mercy on our families. That is my prayer. I know a lot of families who have suffered from atrocities in Aleppo, and there's unspeakable stories about what they've been through. There are a lot of things that are happening that nobody is talking about. For example, on the Turkish border, you have one of the biggest organ trafficking corridors in the world. I have friends who were just injured, like a simple injury, and they went to the hospital and ended up dead. Afterwards, they bring them to their families, and they're empty, no organs. They endured

the worst, these people, especially in Syria. I don't know if I answered your question, but I don't see a green future for Christians in the Middle East.

What was your vision when you started "Nizar Fares Global Ministries?"

Nizar Fares: My vision is to help all the people who are suffering from fighting in the Middle East. The first, most important thing is that I'm not alone. People are helping financially from the U.S. I'm going back to the Middle East four times a year to help the refugees, and I couldn't do it by myself. In the places where I go, there are no other non-profits working. I go to a lot of Christian camps, a lot of Muslim camps, and we help with a lot of food supplies and health supplies. Sometimes we also just encourage them and pray with them.

I do concerts too. Because I have this big ministry with kids, all the kids in these camps know my songs. They are social songs. They teach them how to take care of themselves, hygiene, how to brush their teeth. The refugees are coming from faraway villages where there is no civilization. It is very minimal. So, you need to teach the kids how to take care of themselves, especially since some of the kids are without their parents. Their parents died.

Fares' album "Masafatou Qalben" deals with challenging themes. Nizar Fares.



I have a special place in my heart for the single moms there because I was raised by a single mom. During the war, Lebanon lost tens of thousands of men, so these are tens of thousands of families with widows. I have a heart for these kids. If I had the chance to live with my mom and someone could have provided her with help, I would have had a better childhood. I want to give the kids what I was deprived of.

Describe your most recent trip to Iraq. What was it like day to day? Where did you travel and what was your schedule?

Nizar Fares: My last trip to Iraq was at the end of November and beginning of December 2016. I was there for ten days. I visited Erbil

“People were so happy that Mosul was freed from ISIS, but when they went back to check their homes, they saw there’s no way they could come back for the next year or even two years. Because there’s no infrastructure, electricity, water—nothing.”

and Dohuk, which are the northern parts, under the authority of the Kurds. I was originally invited to do a big concert for “Christ Day.” But when they freed Mosul from ISIS, it started to have a more national theme. So it was called *Maharajan al Awda*, which means Festival of the Return. I went there and I sang and I ended the festival with many choirs and songs and dances. And I was blessed by different things. I visited many, many, camps, many refugee camps. I saw a lot of families. I went to three schools. I did beautiful kids’ outreach with grades one up until six. And we distributed a lot of sports shoes and sportswear to high schoolers.

That was during the day. During the night, I was doing concerts and home gatherings. Because not all people have churches. People who are far away from the city and villages, they just gather in homes or in camps. So we visited also a lot of camps. Some people, because they want to go back to their village, they are not in a camp. They are outside a camp somewhere in the wilderness, they have tents. What they are doing is, they do not want to be subscribed for the U.N., because everybody who is subscribed by the U.N. will have to leave Iraq at some point. These people want to go back to their homeland, so they intend to live outside the camp. We visit these people because nobody takes care of them. Because they are not on the official lists, you know? They are not affiliated with anybody.

We go especially to these camps, and we pray with them, we encourage them, we give gifts, clothes, whatever the need is. We intend to do it on a personal basis. So we arrive on site with our money and we buy on the spot. We don’t just send money, so we can watch everything: how it is spent, with the right people and so on. This is the work.

If you could share anything with our readers about the situation in Iraq, what would you tell them?

Nizar Fares: The worst thing happening in Iraq right now is something you might not hear in the media. People were so happy that Mosul was freed from ISIS, but when they went back to check their homes, they saw there’s no way they could come back for the next year or even two years. Because there’s no infrastructure, no electricity, no running water. no septic system—nothing. And all the houses are burned or looted. So they will be living in their tents and pre-fabricated houses in refugee camps for a long time.

The Iraqis are shocked and devastated. Because they’re realizing how hard it’s going to be to go home. So for me, this was psychologically my most challenging trip, because I saw how people are suffering.

How does your work give you hope?

Nizar Fares: On my most recent trip to Iraq, I spent my last three days in Dohuk, a two hour drive from Erbil. I had met one of the priests there before ISIS arrived. He is Syriac Catholic. He built a church for the refugees in a big shipping container, and it can hold something like 700 people. I arrived in the middle of the night, and we spent hours catching up. At 3 o’clock in the morning he asked, “why don’t you play a concert in our church too?” So I agreed, and the next day when I gave the concert, the church was packed. It was just beautiful. That concert for me was much better than the concert that had been planned far in advance, which was on Iraqi national TV and had 6,000 people in attendance. But the impromptu concert in the container in Dohuk was more prayerful for me. It was like God designed it. ♦