

Mansour Rahbani

Contributed by Telegraph
Monday, 09 February 2009

Mansour Rahbani, who has died aged 83, was a Lebanese composer known throughout the Arab world for a long and productive artistic partnership with his brother Assi and the legendary diva Fairouz

Their work over nearly three decades revolutionised the music of Lebanon which had only recently been delivered from Ottoman and then French colonial rule.

During a time of enormous social change driven by rural-to-urban migration and an expanding media, they were influential moulders of national cultural identity in the fledgling state.

In the Arab world of the 1940s, music on the radio was dominated by the Egyptian "classical" model epitomised by Umm Kulthum, who sang epic song-poems with few words, based on maqams, the traditional scales of Arab music. In Fairouz, the Rahbani brothers found a singer to rival Kulthum, but their innovative compositions included more developed lyrics and fresh, modern, subject matter. They addressed love in the context of daily life, showed a reverence for nature, and reflected both rural and urban sensibilities.

Their music employed new European-influenced harmonies, arrangements and stylistic fusions and, most importantly, their songs were shorter: "[at that time] the shortest song was twenty minutes. We came along with the three minute song," Mansour recalled.

Although their Greek Orthodox background (and Fairouz's Maronite roots) meant their work was inevitably associated with Lebanon's Christian community, it was never explicitly religious. According to Mansour's son Oussama, the Rahbani brothers' works embodied a pan-Arab philosophy and "always paid tribute to the people rather than Kings or Presidents".

Such was their ability to sidestep factionalism that when sectarian tensions in Lebanon boiled over in the 1975-90 civil war, each of the opposing militias (Christian, Druze, Sunni, Shia) broadcast the songs of the Rahbani Brothers and Fairouz on their own radio stations for propaganda purposes.

But their music not only bound together strands within Lebanese society; with its openness to European traditions it exemplified the Lebanon's proudly adopted role as a bridge between east and west.

The son of a poor café owner in the mountain village of Antilyas, Mansour Rahbani was born on March 17 1925, the second oldest of six siblings.

His father Hanna occasionally played buzuk (a small lute) in a local café and their illiterate maternal grandmother gave Assi and Mansour a grounding in Lebanese poetry and folklore such as the dabke, a traditional village dance.

By joining a local choir, they naturally absorbed Greek Orthodox music, but were also exposed to the local Maronite and Assyrian styles. Later both Assi and Mansour studied western classical music. Inspired by a theatrical renaissance during their teens, they began staging their own amateur productions in musical theatre.

The death of their father meant both brothers had to work as policemen to support the family, but they were also part-time musicians and composers of songs and jingles at Radio Lebanon from the mid 1940s. By 1949, Assi was working there full time and Mansour joined him in 1953. It was at the station that they began to sign their works jointly as the "Rahbani Brothers" and started collaborating with Fairouz, whom Assi married in 1955.

Though already regionally popular, Fairouz and the Rahbani Brothers made their biggest impact in 1957 when they presented their folkloric operetta Traditions and Customs at the Baalbeck festival, an annual event with which they were to become almost synonymous.

In all, they produced more than 20 musical plays with Fairouz, including The Ring Seller, the basis for one of three movies they made in the mid-1960s, during the height of their fame across the Arab world. They also released numerous albums based on the plays, wrote songs for other artists such as Sabah, and made many theatrical and TV productions. In 1962, they appeared at London's Royal Albert Hall as part of an extensive tour of Europe and the Gulf States.

On a US tour in 1971, they sold out Carnegie Hall, and they last appeared together in London at the Palladium in 1978. The following year Fairouz separated from Assi, and her partnership with the brothers ended.

Mansour continued to work with Assi and other artists such as Ronza, but the final blow for the Rahbani Brothers came with Assi's death in 1986. The two had always worked as one, and Mansour continued to credit his works to the 'Rahbani Brothers'.

He completed 12 more musical plays on his own, the most recent being the current production The Return Of The Phoenix.

In 1998, Mansour and Fairouz staged an emotional reunion at Baalbeck, and Mansour kept up his prolific work rate till his final days.

Mansour Rahbani, who died on 13 January, is survived by his three sons Marwan, Ghady and Oussama, all of whom are pursuing careers in music. His wife Terez Abou Jouda predeceased him.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/4561001/Mansour-Rahbani.html>