

Music can build bridges between people

Interview with Marie Thérèse Kiriaky, the coordinator of Arab-Austrian Women's Association.

By Ioannis Christidis

“NAI¹ Oriental Orchestra” and chorus, and the music school “Nineveh” are three music projects run in Vienna by the “Arab-Austrian Women's Association.” Their goal is to bring together musicians from Syria and other countries in order to work for peace and to promote the Syrian culture in Austrian society. Marie Thérèse Kiriaky is the key person behind these projects. She introduces herself as a woman with a multicultural background. She was born in Syria of parents of Greek and Lebanese roots and portrays herself as a Christian who grew up in the midst of an Islamic culture. In the 1990s, after graduating in French literature at the university of Damascus, she got married and moved from Syria to Vienna. There, she became a teacher and a very active person in civil society, especially in respect of the affairs of Arab women and young people. In the following interview Ms. Kiriaky, alongside an overview of the humanitarian and social work of the Arab-Austrian Women's Association, contextualizes the current music and cultural projects of the organization, within the particular conditions that emerged with the mass arrival of Syrian refugees in Austria, especially after 2015.

Ms. Kiriaky, when and why was the Arab-Austrian Women's Association founded?

MTK: In 1997, following discussions with colleagues, we established an Arab Women's Organization. Once we received the Austrian nationality, we renamed our group the “Arab-Austrian Women's Association.” Our goal was to help our community to integrate into the Austrian society, as well as to help women and the new generations with their special issues. Some problems were brought with us to Austria. For example, the Egyptian, Somali and the Sudanese women were suffering from genital mutilation. At that time, the genital mutilation operation was not considered as a crime, because it was conducted outside of Austria. We coordinated with the African Women's Organizations and supported them in taking effective steps to change the law. Later, when there were civil wars in our countries, we had to deal with the issue of refugees. We worked with Palestinian refugees, then Iraqi and as of 2015 we are mainly working with Syrian

¹ The “nai” is a simple flute made of reed, that constitutes one of the main wind instruments of Middle Eastern music.

refugees.

Did you face any problems within the Austrian society?

At the beginning, people in Austria did not actually know what it meant to be an Arab woman. Common clichés we were confronted with were that we were “machines” that “produce” children, that we were ignorant, etc. This does not mean that the Arabs did not have their own prejudices regarding Europeans. There were a lot of misconceptions on both sides. Slowly, this has changed. I think such misunderstandings can be resolved, when together we organize projects which allow us to meet and to further our understanding and accepting of each other through learning about our history and culture.

What kind of projects or activities did you organize?

We organized various cultural activities, film festivals, exhibitions, lectures, etc., meant to share our culture and promote a meaningful understanding and appreciation of it. Gradually, people started to accept us and come to our activities.

How did the events in Syria affect your activities?

In 2011, the revolution started in Syria and later on the civil war. In order to help, I decided to create the project “Balsam.” Initially, I was really afraid that the new Syrian generation will be cut off from its mother tongue. I decided to go to the Syrian-Turkish border and start a project for teaching Arabic in a very easy way. There, we were faced with many other problems, especially among youth, like drug addiction forced marriage, promoting religious fundamentalism, preparing boys to become soldiers and many other negative aspects. We built a community inside the camps to issue alerts for such cases and advised them how to best deal with them. In 2013, we started a medical campaign and brought doctors from Austria to Turkey. In 2014, with the help of the UN Staff Council in Vienna, we opened a polyclinic for women and children. Throughout 2, years, we provided free-of-charge medical services to approximately 15,300 women and 7,000 children. Finally, we established a cultural center for children and youth in Antakya, including a library with 3,500 books in three languages (Arabic, English and Turkish) and we recruited a teacher to help the children along. In 2015, based on the “Balsam” project, I was awarded the UN Secretary General Mr. Ban Ki-Moon Prize for my voluntary work. However, this all was the result of teamwork. In 2016, the United Nations Women’s Guild in Vienna and in 2017 the one in New York also recognized and supported our work.

How was the situation here in Austria during the large refugee movement of 2015?

It was a wonderful moment. The Austrians were really generous. I remember families coming to the main train station, bringing food and clothes, even the children were bringing their books and toys to be distributed to the refugees. In such moments you feel that there is still hope for humanity. What happened later is another story. For political reasons, there was intensive propaganda against foreigners. Since 2015, about 50,000 Syrians have come to Austria. Most of them were given asylum and moved forward in their lives. The Syrian community in Austria has been very supportive of them. As women, we were the first to do so.

As of 2015, you started organizing more things related to music. You founded the “NAI Oriental Orchestra” and choir. You have already organized four major concerts. How did it all begin?

It was always a dream of mine to create a large choir. When I met Orwa Al-Shoufi, a young and very talented oud-player and composer, who managed two music schools back in Syria, I asked him, if he could undertake such a project and he accepted the invitation. After some months, he had the idea of putting together an orchestra. I supported his initiative and the NAI oriental orchestra became a reality, including about one hundred members to date. Later we created the “NAI Choir” and we also founded the “Nineveh” music school, so as to prepare the new generation to participate in the orchestra.

Are all these musical activities addressed only to the Syrian community?

Not at all, this is for everybody. The musicians in the orchestra are 2/3 Syrian and 1/3 from different nationalities all over the world, including Japanese, from Iran, Azerbaijan and of course Austria and other European countries. The choir consisted mostly of Syrians, but now we also have Palestinians, Iraqis and Lebanese.

You said you had a dream to create a choir? What makes it so special?

We are living in Austria, the country of music. Music can build bridges between people and this is the best way to introduce oneself. I think classical music is one of Austria’s most beautiful riches. Now the Austrian society is starting to see that we have our own music and I do not mean only the traditional one. Musicians compose and perform their own pieces, they make their own projects and we are supporting them.

Why do you think this did not happen before 2015?

We always had music bands, but never a professional orchestra. For some Arabs, cultural activities could not include music or singing. It was too bad. When the Syrian refugees came, I saw an opportunity to turn the table around. We were going to lead the cultural movement among Arabs

in the Austrian society and we managed it. In 2014, we organized the Syrian Cultural Days with Orwa Saleh, another Syrian oud-player and composer, and many other culture activities, like poetry nights, small concerts, painting exhibitions etc.

What are the future goals of the Association?

We are getting organized for the era after the regime's demise in Syria. We are preparing the youth to help rebuild Syria. For example, the NAI oriental orchestra is basically a project to reunify the scattered components of our society, since in Syria we had 19 religions and ethnicities. These people are now split up and down, horizontally and vertically. So I gathered all of these young musicians together with Orwa Al-Shoufi. In our work, there is no room for discussions about politics or religion. Here, we are Syrians. And we should try to be really responsible and to understand that we should introduce ourselves in a civilized way, by learning and by working very hard.

Syrian identity includes also the Kurds, it is not only about Arabs, right?

Syria is for everybody. There are Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Turkmens, Chechens, even Greeks. This is what really makes Syria special. If you say Syrian, everybody accepts it. The Kurds, specifically? Nobody knows that in Syria 250,000 Kurds did not have Syrian nationality. It is a big shame.

What are your upcoming activities?

For the next year, I want to repeat what we managed already once, namely to bring women with different political opinions together to speak about the problems in Syria. An example are the workshops benefiting from Austrian women's expertise on gender issues. Should there be peace in Syria again, through the "Balsam" project we can prepare the youth to go to Syria to rebuild it. In the cultural domain, alongside the NAI orchestra and choir, we are preparing a theater show, we have a newsletter entitled *Balsam*, and we are now trying to organize a youth forum, similar to the one we created for women. It is really important to consider that the new generation is very creative and has the knowledge to bring about change. Syrians are now blooming like flowers, because they live in a large space of freedom.

For more information about the Arab-Austrian Women's association visit:

<https://arabaustrianwomen.org/>

