

# Music 1: Firdaus Women's Orchestra

**NOON SALIH:** In 1977, the Voyager spacecraft left Earth with two vinyl records onboard. Sort of like a time capsule, these records were made of solid gold and held a series of sounds and images intended for extraterrestrial life; they were meant to show the diversity of culture and life on our planet.

As the astronomer Carl Sagan put it, "the launching of this bottle into the cosmic ocean says something very hopeful about life on this planet."

And yet the scientists who composed the contents of this record, which took about a year, had a massive task on their hands: how do you encapsulate the sounds, images and messages of our planet?

In July 2020, more than 40 years later, the UAE sent off its own mission to space, the Emirates Mars Mission called The Hope Probe, or Misbar Al-Amal in Arabic.

**A.R. RAHMAN:** What if you get a sound to that expedition?

**NOON SALIH:** That's A.R. Rahman, the renowned Indian composer and performer.

**A.R. RAHMAN:** And what if it's, you know, embracing different cultures, but also having a very peculiar sound and still feel like... With space, there's a kind of emotion which happens, if you just look at even a photograph of space; there's the emotion of vastness, which make us feel like, "You're so small." You know?

## MUSIC

**NOON SALIH:** Using the Amal space expedition as a source of inspiration, A.R. Rahman began his task of composing an original piece for the Firdaus Orchestra, the legacy orchestra that debuted at Expo 2020 Dubai.

**A.R. RAHMAN:** I was introduced to the Expo by Mr. Kapur, Shekhar Kapur, and I met Her Excellency Reem Al-Hashimy. And then we were talking, she said, "Why don't you start an orchestra here?" And then I said, "Well, that's a great idea, with an all female orchestra from the region, you know."

**NOON SALIH:** And so the heavenly Firdaus Orchestra was born — an ensemble of 50 female musicians from across the Arab world that bring together a constellation of different talents and diverse instruments.

In this episode, the first in a three-part series exploring music at Dubai's Expo, we'll chart the makings of this wonderful orchestra with its gifted conductor Yasmina Sabbah and star mentor A.R. Rahman.

I'm Noon Salih, and this is Inside Expo, an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai, where history is being made.

### [INTRO STING]

**NOON SALIH:** A recipient of numerous awards, including a Golden Globe for his work on the Slumdog Millionaire film soundtrack, two Oscars and two Grammys, A.R. Rahman has sold over 150 million records, and his work is well known throughout the world.

**YASMINA SABBAH:** I remember when I was younger I actually performed one of his pieces in my local choir in Beirut as a student. It was called Zikr, and it was a beautiful, beautiful piece.

And I was like, "Oh my God, wow. That's the composer that, you know, we sang for."

### MUSIC

**YASMINA SABBAH:** My name is Yasmina Sabbah and I'm a choir and orchestra conductor.

**NOON SALIH:** With Yasmina at the helm, A.R. Rahman began assembling the orchestra back in 2020.

**A.R. RAHMAN:** And so we auditioned more than 200 people, and all of them are really good.

Whatever we get, we'll make that a sound of that orchestra.

### MUSIC

**NOON SALIH:** When auditioning for an orchestra, musicians can submit a performance piece of their own choosing or get assigned a piece to perform. That's how their skills are assessed. However, this is not the case with a conductor; since they don't play a particular instrument, the audition process is a little different.

**YASMINA SABBAH:** In June, 2021, I got a call from Artistic Director Mayssa Karaa asking me if I would be interested in conducting the Firdaus Orchestra, the first

female orchestra in the MENA region, for Expo 2020 Dubai. And I was like, "Wow, that's an amazing and once in a lifetime opportunity," and I was like, "Of course I would be honored and privileged to do that."

## MUSIC

And after a series of interviews, they also had my portfolio and the previous concert videos that I had done in Beirut before going until I got the acceptance and very quickly I just packed my stuff and went to Dubai to start this very exciting adventure.

**A.R. RAHMAN:** I felt like she had that instinct. She had the 'it factor' and she had this nice, charming quality, which she needs to manage people. And then she came and I understood that... her attention to details and not taking anything lightly and, you know, pushing the perfection itself was like, "Ah, now we got somebody," and it is almost autopilot. All you have to do now is to sit and jam and get what they're going to play.

**YASMINA SABBAH:** You know, a lot of people tell me that you don't conduct, you dance. So my entire body is involved and I can't help it. You know, it's not something I calculate, because what we want to do is not tell the musicians instructions, it's for that to show the music. And music moves through time, it flows through time.

So this is why my entire body is involved; my entire gesture is involved. And I feel this is my way of communicating. There are so many schools of conducting. There are so many conducting styles, but mine is one that is very expressive, that really involves all the body, but also maintaining clarity and precision.

**NOON SALIH:** The conductor's role is central to bringing the musicians together, and in a way they are credited for the way in which an orchestra interprets a piece of music.

**YASMINA SABBAH:** Now for a lot of people, you know, they look at me and you're like, "Oh, you're that person that just waves her hands around. Like, do you really do anything?" And, for me, conducting has to do way more with what happens behind the scenes than on stage.

So the conductor gets to work with the orchestra, prepare the orchestra and rehearse with the orchestra. It's kind of like a stage director, you know, for example, when you go and you watch Romeo and Juliet, for example, there are so many different renditions of this play, but every single time it's different because the artistic director has a vision for that. It's the same for the conductor. So how many times, for example, have we heard the same, for example, symphony by Mozart? But every single time, the interpretation is different, because of the musical decisions and direction the conductor wants to take.

So all this rehearsing, all the vision, all the interpretation happens in the rehearsal space, but during the concerts, what people see, these hand gestures are meant to keep the orchestra together. Because when you have so many different musicians and players, you know, they need to start together, they need to stay together, but other than tempo, it's kind of an exchange of energy.

We give them the energy to play the dynamics, the direction, and the orchestra performs and gives it back to the public.

**NOON SALIH:** Furnished with a brilliant conductor and talented musicians from 23 different nationalities, the Firdaus Orchestra set out to begin rehearsing.

**YASMINA SABBAH:** It was so exciting. You know, everyone was so motivated, so excited and this huge, positive energy and fantastic repertoire we had all brought together, really, was an amazing journey since day one.

So, you know, slowly, it starts of course, as a place where everyone respects everyone, where everyone is kind to everyone, but slowly, with time — this is always something that happens with time — the bonds grow stronger. We get used to each other as musicians, but also as people which enriches and makes even a more beautiful sound for the orchestra.

When you're in an orchestra, it's not about the individual anymore, it's about the collective. It's about blending the sounds because the new sound is the collective sound of the orchestra.

And in the first rehearsal, we were just all there and we started working on the repertoire so that, you know, that takes time because I mean, everyone's a professional musician, everyone can play the notes, but it's also quite a challenge to be able to blend as an orchestra, to understand each other as an orchestra and discover and create the new sound of this orchestra. That is quite unique by the way, because this is not the typical Western orchestra; this is an orchestra that brings together western instruments but also blending them with eastern instruments.

**A.R. RAHMAN:** I kept my mind open, because we don't want to think that there's an Arabic orchestra, a Western orchestra or an Indian orchestra. Okay, we'll have qanun, we'll have ney. We have, you know, violin, cello, and then we'll have a saxophone. We'll have, you know, three, four brass people, and it just fell into place.

**NOON SALIH:** The piece features an array of instruments as well as a choir of Dhrupad singers — the oldest existing form of Indian classical music, which is regarded as a form of meditation. It's called 'Humanitas Proorismos Al-Amal': Humanitas is Latin for 'human nature', proorismos is the Greek word for pre-destiny, and Al-Amal is Arabic for hope. The name in itself blending east and west.

**A.R. RAHMAN:** It starts with this oud solo bringing the aura of this region, and then it goes to strings, and then that's the prelude.

### **ARCHIVE PRELUDE**

**A.R. RAHMAN:** And then the main piece comes in and starts with the piano and a synth, and then... Then I brought this choir from a Dhrupad, kind of Hindustani, you know, kind of blending voices. And that actually is the main core tune of this.

### **ARCHIVE DHRUPAD CHOIR**

**A.R. RAHMAN:** Each note actually goes back to the higher note and goes back to the lower note, which is mostly like the body in Hindustani, and the very end of this full fanfare.

### **MUSIC**

**A.R. RAHMAN:** I don't feel shy to use a synth in the orchestra or an Indian Dhrupad with an orchestra, as long as the final emotion really moves you.

## MUSIC

**YASMINA SABBAH:** The challenge was to find ways to bring out these instruments that were not specifically designed to play in the middle of a big orchestra. Most of them sometimes also are solo instruments; how to make them blend within an orchestra when they are not necessarily soloists. And of course, being able to find the correct balance to make them shine, but not also overpower.

## NEY SOUND

**YASMINA SABBAH:** The ney was particularly challenging because, I would say, the timbre of the instruments, you know, the tuning of the instrument is sometimes not easy to integrate. You know, it's such a delicate instrument. So for balance also, it was a bit challenging to bring it out though it's an absolutely beautiful instrument. And Rebecca, our ney player, is just absolutely brilliant.

**NOON SALIH:** The Firdaus Orchestra is not only unique for the style of music it plays and the way it fuses different instruments; it's also unique in that it's the first all-female orchestra in the region.

**YASMINA SABBAH:** Personally, I forget that it's an all-female ensemble. I don't even think about it because for me, what is in front of me, is musicians, musicians that are making music. So we really forget that it's an all-female orchestra. The reason why it's as a female orchestra is not for musical purposes, but rather as a statement to break the stereotype of women in this part of the world.



**A.R. RAHMAN:** Here, we are coming to actually breaking stereotypes. We are breaking all those cliches, which people think about the Middle Eastern region.

We are going forward and holding to tradition, but moving forward in things which we can, and the integrity of everything is there, but this is how the world becomes more beautiful and complementing different arts, and arts bring joy.

**NOON SALIH:** The orchestra had its stellar debut to a full house. The audience was in the thousands, and the energy in the venue was palpable, with many fans eagerly awaiting to see A.R. Rahman and the Firdaus Orchestra play a space-themed medley and their highly-anticipated, new composition.

### **ARCHIVE – PROMO OF FIRDAUS**

**YASMINA SABBAH:** That was amazing. That was one of my favorites actually, because we had all these big themes from movies, like Star Wars and ET, you know, these big epic orchestral music. So that one was really, really fun. Loved that concert.

**NOON SALIH:** Being a conductor, Yasmina is facing away from the audience for most of the concert.

**YASMINA SABBAH:** You get so immersed into this musical world that you forget everything around you. The focus is so high. I don't know how to explain it, the energy so high; it's like we're in a completely different parallel place, in a bubble.

And I really forget everything around me. The only thing I know is around me is me and the musicians and the energy surrounding us.

I sometimes go back after a concert and I ask like, "Was there a lot of people? How was the people's reaction?" I don't even pay attention to that.

**NOON SALIH:** Since then, the Firdaus Orchestra has performed several times as part of the expo programming and will continue its journey beyond March 2022, with more performances in the UAE and around the world. In addition, a new state-of-the-art studio has been created to house the orchestra, with top, cutting-edge consoles and tools for future recordings.

**A.R. RAHMAN:** I think it, Firdaus... it brings in the memory of, you know, spirituality. And every action is done promising Firdaus, you know, of devotion and, amal, and so I felt like this should remain as something very pure.

It breaks stereotypes, and it's inspiring a whole new generation. And all the things that they thought is not possible here, it's broken. And it says, yes, it's possible. Yes, they can be world-class and we can entertain the world in a way... with keeping all the traditions and integrity, still move forward.

**NOON SALIH:** The Firdaus Orchestra is striving to shape the future of music and inspiring the next generation of young talent to pursue their dreams.

**YASMINA SABBAH:** I really hope that this will inspire young, talented girls to pursue music as a career. You know, a young girl would look at this orchestra and say, this can be a job for me. I can play in an orchestra. Maybe I can be the one behind, you know, the microphones or help the sound engineer. Maybe I can be the

musician. Maybe I can be the art director. So I hope that this just opens the minds and eyes of people to the million possibilities they can do in the field of music.

**A.R. RAHMAN:** Imagine 10 years back, it's not like a mainstream thing, conducting.

Now, every kid wants to conduct an orchestra, so that's great. That's inspirational.

## **MUSIC**

**NOON SALIH:** Inside Expo takes you behind the scenes at Expo 2020 Dubai, sharing our stories and others across the 170-year history of this global event. Learn more by visiting [VirtualExpoDubai.com](https://VirtualExpoDubai.com).

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