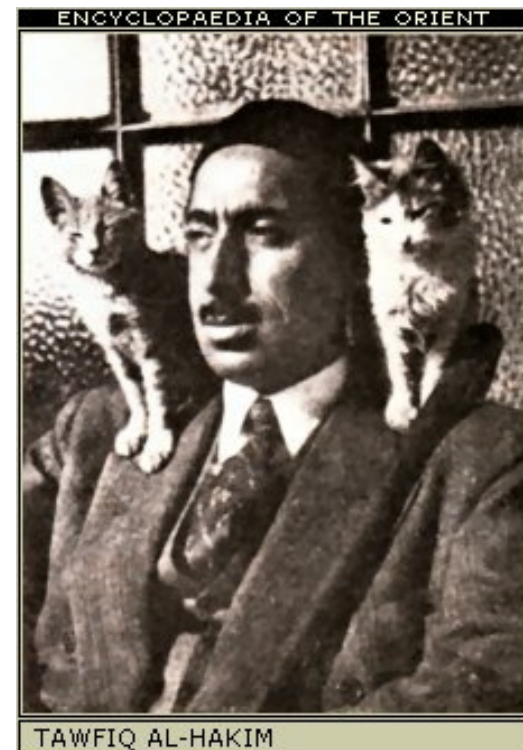


The Inspiration for *Sumeida's Song*

by Jill Leahy

Tawfiq al-Hakim, (b. Oct. 9, 1898, Alexandria, Egypt – d. July 26, 1987, Cairo), is considered to be the founder of contemporary Egyptian drama and a leading figure in modern Arabic literature. His wealthy family wanted him to become a lawyer, but after traveling to Paris to continue his legal studies, he fell in love with Western theater. On his return to Egypt, he worked in several government positions, but he eventually resigned and spent all his time writing, eventually writing more than 50 plays.



He became famous as a dramatist with *Ahl al-kahf* (1933; *The People of the Cave*), which on the surface appeared to be based on the ancient legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, but “was actually a study of the human struggle against time.”

Although influenced by European playwrights like Ibsen and Shaw, Tawfiq al-Hakim incorporated his Egyptian perspective in plays: “psychological issues such as personal

identity, relations and attitudes towards the West, the conflict between the spiritual East and the material West.” In the book *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, the author Roger Allen wrote: “The performances were not a success; for one thing, audiences seemed unimpressed by a performance in which the action on stage was so limited in comparison with the more popular types of drama.” It was problematic in the realm of both production and reception that led Tawfiq al-Hakim to use some of his play-prefaces in order to develop the notion of his plays as '*théâtre des idées*', works for reading rather than performance.

Nevertheless, in 1945 he was invited to write several short plays to be published in the form of newspaper articles. The most memorable of these plays is *Ughniyyet al-mawt* (*Song of Death*), the one-act play that was the inspiration of *Sumeida's Song*.

Sources: *Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.*, Tore Kjeilen/LexicOrient, teachmideast.org

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“You are a fountain whose water sprinkles a picture-perfect paradise in which pomegranates are planted, bunches of grapes dangle, and flowers and sweet herbs dance with myrrh, aloes, spikenard, and every tree used for incense.”

Excerpt from “The Wisdom of Solomon” by Tawfiq Al-Hakim, translated by W.M. Hutchins, published by Three Continents Press, Washington, D.C.

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PITTSBURGH OPERA
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Study Guide to the Opera

Sumeida's Song

Music by Mohammed Fairouz

Libretto adapted from the translation, by Denys Johnson-Davies, of the play *Ughneyyet el-Mawt*, by Tawfiq Ismail al-Hakim

Rachel Calloway and Dan Kempson in the 2009 World Premiere Production of *Sumeida's Song*
(Photo by Jill Steinberg)
<http://mohammedfairouz.com/sumeidas-song-2009/>



The High Cost of Family Honor

by Jill Leahy

Sumeida's Song, a chamber opera in three scenes, was written in 2009 and had its first fully-staged production as the opening event of the first "Prototype: Opera/Theater/Now" festival in New York in January 2013. For the libretto, Mohammed Fairouz, a classically-trained Arab-American composer, adapted the translation, by Denys Johnson-Davies, of the well-known Arab play, *Song of Death*, by the Egyptian writer Tawfiq al-Hakim. The opera highlights universal themes: family conflict, tradition versus modernity, and revenge versus forgiveness. The work also explores the idea of revenge killing as a way to restore a family's honor—a mother expects her son to avenge his father's murder.

While honor killings most often occur in paternalistic societies, against women who have “shamed” their family by breaking a prescribed code of sexual behavior, notions of honor and shame to justify killing are not unique to any one culture or religion. Modern audiences may view this as an Eastern, Arab, or even Muslim cultural issue, but it is important to understand that the teachings of the Quran and Islamic Law strictly forbid honor killing. In Indonesia, believed to be the country with the largest Muslim population, honor killings are unknown.

However, look at our Western history: dueling was accepted as a way to defend masculine honor and even continued into the late 1800s in Canada. Cultures of honor appeared among Bedouins, Scottish and English herdsmen of the Border country, and others with little allegiance to a national government; cultures of honor appeared among cowboys, frontiersmen, and ranchers of the American West, where official law enforcement was often out of reach. Even in today's news, there are shootings among gang members for “dissing” (disrespecting) one of their members, making Alwan's soaring statement “I won't kill” all the more memorable and *honorable*.



Mohammed Fairouz in Arabic (read right to left)

Sumeida's Song Synopsis

Setting: A peasant house in a peasant village in Upper Egypt, during the early 20th century

SCENE I Asakir and Mabrouka, two Upper-Egyptian peasant women, are sitting in silence and listening for a train's whistle. The two women are awaiting the arrival of Asakir's son, who has been away for 17 years. Asakir tells Mabrouka that she hopes that the identity of her son has not been revealed to the rest of the village people. Mabrouka assures her sister that the village has been led to believe that Alwan drowned in the water-well when he was a child of two years.

Asakir proclaims to Mabrouka that soon the whole village will learn that her son, the son of her murdered husband, is still alive and that the murderer of his father and the rest of the Tahawis—a clan with whom they have an ancient blood feud—should fear his vengeance. She reveals that she had instructed her nephew, Mabrouka's son Sumeida, who has been sent to fetch Alwan from the station, to sing as a sign that his cousin has come. Slightly delayed after the whistle of the departing train, Sumeida's song is heard emerging from the distance and heralding the long-awaited arrival of Alwan.

SCENE II Sumeida enters the room announcing his cousin. Alwan enters and is embraced by his mother. He then greets his aunt Mabrouka who tells him that "our hope lies in you" and leaves with Sumeida. Asakir, now alone with her son, quickly dispenses with pleasantries and presents a saddlebag that she has kept for 17 years. She explains to her son that this is the saddlebag in which his father's body was brought to her, carried upon his donkey, and presents her son with the knife from the murder, saying that she has kept it with the blood on it so that it has rusted.

After an initial silence, Alwan gravely asks who is responsible for this crime and Asakir answers without hesitation that it is Suweilam Tahawi. When he asks her how she knows, she explains that the whole village knows. Composing himself, Alwan asks his mother if the crime was investigated, to which she explains that "We have no enemies but the Tahawis." Alwan then tells his mother that he has not come to kill but to tell the villagers that he wishes to bring them a better life where they will "live like human beings in houses, where the animals do not sleep with them," and where they have access to education, a better quality of life, and clean running water.

Asakir becomes irate and disowns her son when he will not listen to her, ordering him out of her house. She curses him and, realizing the futility of his position, Alwan tells her that he will return to the station and return to Cairo. He prays for her and asks that her agitated soul be calmed.

SCENE III Sumeida enters and finds Asakir alone and motionless after her encounter with Alwan. Asakir tells her nephew that Alwan has returned to the station "to flee from taking revenge for his father." She strikes herself again and again while Sumeida tries to prevent her from harming herself. Asakir then asks Sumeida to bring the knife that she has kept for 17 years so that she can use it to rip open her belly. Sumeida tells his aunt that she has gone mad. She stares at him and asks "Sumeida—are you a man?"

Characters of the Opera

(All members of the Azizi family)

Asakir [ah-SAH-keer] *mezzo-soprano*
An Egyptian peasant, Alwan's mother, who has mourned her murdered husband for 17 years

Mabrouka [ma-BROO-kah] *soprano*
Sister of Asakir, Sumeida's mother

Alwan [AL-wahn] *baritone*
Asakir's educated son, who left the village at the age of two, and has since attended Azhar University and become a Sheikh

Sumeida [soo-MAY-dah] *tenor*
Mabrouka's son, Alwan's cousin, who is ultimately charged with avenging the family honor



Sumeida's Song Synopsis (cont.)

When he asks what she wants from him, she tells him to take the knife and plunge it into the chest of her son Alwan.

Asakir gives Sumeida the knife with resolution and invokes that "may his blood wash off his father's blood that has dried on the blade." Sumeida tells her that she will hear his voice raised in song if Alwan's killing is brought about and hurries to catch up with his cousin. Mabrouka enters, and Asakir tells her that Alwan has fled and cowered from avenging his father's death, and so has died. Mabrouka asks where her son Sumeida has gone, and Asakir tells her that he has gone "after Alwan to stop him from going."

Mabrouka pleads with Asakir to listen to her but Asakir screams that she hears nothing. Mabrouka then hears Sumeida's singing. She turns, terrified by her sister's state, and asks desperately what is happening. Sumeida's song is heard, this time heralding the death of Alwan. After intoning the words, "my son," Asakir collapses.

Abbreviated synopsis courtesy of Boston Opera Collaborative.
For full-length synopsis by the composer, visit:
<http://mohammedfairouz.com/sumeidas-song-2009/>

Meet the Prolific Composer

by Jill Leahy

Mohammed ("Momo") Fairouz, born in 1985, is one of the most frequently performed, commissioned, and recorded composers of his generation. Hailed by *The New York Times* as "an important new artistic voice" and by *BBC World News* as "one of the most talented composers of his generation," **Fairouz integrates Middle-Eastern modes into Western structures, to deeply expressive effect.** His large-scale works, including four symphonies and an opera, engage major geopolitical and philosophical themes with persuasive craft and a marked seriousness of purpose. His most recent symphony, *In the Shadow of No Towers* for wind ensemble, was described by Steve Smith of *The New York Times* as "technically impressive, consistently imaginative, and in its finest stretches, deeply moving." His solo and chamber music attains an "intoxicating intimacy," according to New York's WQXR.

Fairouz's cosmopolitan outlook reflects his transatlantic upbringing and extensive travels. His catalog encompasses virtually every genre, including **opera, symphonies, ensemble works, chamber and solo pieces, choral settings, and electronic music.** Prominent advocates of his instrumental music include the Borromeo String Quartet, The Imani Winds, violinist Rachel Barton Pine, and clarinetist David Krakauer, who all appear on his Naxos portrait disc, *Native Informant*.

Described by *Gramophone* as "**a post-millennial Schubert**," Fairouz has composed 13 song cycles and hundreds of art songs. Anthony Tommasini of *The New York Times* called his debut opera *Sumeida's Song* "intensely dramatic [with] a searing score. The Arabic elements of his style—microtonal modes, spiraling dance rhythms, plaintive melodic writing—give fresh, distinctive jolts to the Western elements."

His principal teachers in composition have included György Ligeti, Gunther Schuller, and Richard Danielpour, with studies at the Curtis Institute and New England Conservatory. Fairouz's works are published by Peermusic Classical. He lives in New York City.

"One difference that sets Fairouz apart is worth mentioning: Inspired by the Arabic art of calligraphy, he composes by hand in pencil—a method that's been practically eliminated by musical-notation software."

Biography freely adapted from Mr. Fairouz's website.
For additional details, visit: http://mohammedfairouz.com/biography/#short_bio