

London based singer and composer Merit Ariane Stephanos specialises in Arabic and Middle Eastern vocal music, drawing on both classical Arabic and Western contemporary influences. Born in Hamburg, to a German mother and an Egyptian Coptic father, her artistic journey has taken her from the Western classical tradition to studying Arabic music both in Egypt and in the UK. Her distinctive voice combines colours and techniques of both Western and Arabic traditions.

Merit sang before she could walk. By the age of 11 months, she knew 20 folksongs by heart. Her first public performance was at the age of 4, when she interrupted her mother's seminar and sang folk songs and nursery rhymes to a team of stunned psychoanalysts. She has studied with singers as diverse as contemporary music specialist *Jane Manning*, Wagnerian soprano *Annemarie Sand*, Lebanese classical singers *Abdul Salam Kheir* and *Aida Chalhoub* and Hungarian folk singer *Marta Sebestyen*. After moving to Britain, Merit gained a BMus Honours at *Edinburgh University*, where she studied with composer Nigel Osborne. At *Goldsmiths College*, she continued her research into contemporary vocal techniques for her Masters in Contemporary Music Studies. Through her studies in Egypt, Merit developed a special interest in Mwashshahat and the Arabic music of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, including the songs of Oum Kalsoum, Asmahan and composer Sayyed Darwish. Merit performs with her Arabic Jazz Trio *Hjaz* and Arab/Eastern European Ensemble *Jaljala*. As an Arabic soloist, she collaborates with Renaissance Singers *The Clerks* medieval ensemble *Joglaresa* and Arabic group *Al Farabi*. Always searching to explore new sounds and musical possibilities, Merit sings with and composes contemporary vocal music for her Soprano Quartet *Tongue Stuff* and performs with the avantgarde *New London Chamber Choir*. Her latest project - *Oriental Jazz - A journey between East and West*, a collaboration with jazz pianist *Alcyona Mick* and Egyptian oud player *Nehad el Sayyed*, explores original compositions alongside traditional repertoire.

As a soloist, Merit has toured nationally and internationally and performed at festivals including the *Liverpool Arabic Arts Festival*, *Brighton Early Music Festival*, *City of London Festival*, *York Early Music Festival*, *Buxton Festival* and at prestigious venues such as *St John's Smith Square*, the *South Bank*, *Kings Place*, *Vortex Jazz Club*, *St Ethelburga's Centre for Peace and Reconciliation* and *St David's Hall* in Cardiff. Her voice features on the soundtrack for the Channel 4 Documentary: '*Dispatches: The children of Gaza*'. In July 2011 she premiered a piece by British composer *Peter Wiegold*, written especially for Merit and his ensemble '*notes inegalès*' at the opening of the *Brunel Institute for Contemporary Middle Eastern Music*. Most recently, she worked with composer Joe Townsend on a music theatre project about the figure St George for *Opera North*.

Merit is a passionate advocate for music in education and the community. Sponsored by *War Child Amsterdam*, she lived and worked in Mostar, Bosnia & Herzegovina, supervising a therapeutic music programme for the *Pavarotti Music Centre*. She teaches as an outreach mentor at the *Royal College of Music* and is a trainer for the *Trinity Guildhall KS2 Teacher Training Programme*. As creative artist and leader, Merit has worked for organisations including the *Philharmonic Orchestra*, *Britten Sinfonia*, *Guildhall Connect*, *Norwich and Norfolk Festival*, *Opera Circus* and *Opera North* and the *Helen Bamber Foundation* for victims of human rights abuses.

Merit has just returned from a 3 month trip to Lebanon, where supported by a *Gerald Finzi Trust* scholarship, she researched Arabic Christian singing traditions. Her debut album of her own interpretations of classical Arabic songs will be available later this year.