

# يُومَا YUMA

A song cycle for female voice, string quartet, and percussion.

Picture a stage transformed into a space that evokes Yemen's ancient spirit and beauty. Large, textured carpets cover the floor, and intricate, embroidered costumes bring vivid color to life. The women of the ensemble stand together, each adorned with traditional jewelry crafted by Yemeni artisans, each piece echoing the history of a nearly forgotten world. In the midst of this rich ambient is Shani Oshri, a soprano whose voice carries not only technical mastery but a deep connection to her heritage. She leads the performance with music that speaks to resilience, tradition, and the untold stories of Yemeni Jewish women.

**YUMA** is more than a concert—it's a revival of songs that once lived only in the private rooms of Jewish Yemeni homes, sung by women during daily chores and family gatherings, far from the public eye. These songs tell the stories of life's most intimate moments: birth, marriage, loss, and celebration, woven with the wisdom and emotions of the women who composed them. For centuries, these voices went unheard beyond the confines of their community, their music passed down orally, with most songs never written. *YUMA* changes that by bringing these songs to the public stage in an immersive experience that bridges past and present, east and west. It's an experience that will transport you to the heart of Jewish Yemeni culture, making you feel a part of its rich heritage.



Shani Oshri is both the driving force and the heart of this project. Raised in two contrasting worlds—one secular Persian and the other ultra-Orthodox Yemeni—she grew up navigating the

boundaries between her roots. Trained as a classical opera singer, Shani once distanced herself from her Eastern Yemeni heritage to pursue a career in Western classical music, excelling in lead operatic roles. She kept feeling that something essential was missing. She eventually returned to the music of her roots, drawn to the voices and stories of Yemeni women, whose songs mystically resonated with her. This project is Oshri's way of reclaiming her heritage, honoring the resilience of her foremothers, and sharing it with the world—empowering women worldwide and bringing peace to the ancient Yemeni souls.

The *YUMA* ensemble, composed entirely of women, performs with a unique blend of classical and traditional instruments, creating a musical fusion of Eastern and Western sounds that is both captivating and unprecedented. The show unfolds as a narrative, guiding the audience through the stages of life—beginning with birth, moving through love and loss, and culminating in a celebration of memory and continuity. Accompanied by video art that translates the lyrics, the audience gains a deeper understanding of the depth and intensity of these songs, making this cultural legacy accessible and alive in the present.

The historical significance of *YUMA* is profound. For generations, Yemeni women's songs have been kept from the public, with men often assuming the role of preserving and performing them. *YUMA* returns the music to its origins, reclaiming it for the women who created it. This concert is not just a performance but an act of empowerment, bringing these voices forward to be celebrated, respected, and recognized on the world stage. It honors the lives and stories of Yemeni women who, despite the constraints they faced, crafted a rich musical legacy that has endured. *YUMA* is an invitation to witness the strength and beauty of an ancient culture through music that was nearly lost. It's a tribute to the resilience of Yemeni women and a call to honor voices that, though once silenced, are now given the stage they deserve.

## **About the Songs of The Jewish Women in Yemen:**

The songs of Jewish women in Yemen represent a unique folk tradition, sung in Hebrew with a distinct Yemeni dialect. These songs reflect women's day-to-day life and encompass the yearly cycle of holidays and significant life events—birth, marriage, and death. Many honor mothers, while others serve as laments during mourning ceremonies. Created by women who could neither read nor write, these songs were passed down orally from generation to generation, with their creators' identities now largely unknown.

The life of a Jewish Yemeni woman centered around her husband's wishes, with her role confined to the home and rarely visible in public. Jewish households in Yemen observed Torah law and local customs that governed every aspect of daily life. Household routines included kneading, baking, cooking, laundry, childcare, and cleaning, during which women would sing to release their frustrations, sorrows, and hardships. Through these songs, women expressed the complexities of family life,

forced marriages, childbirth, and mourning. Often, these songs reflected the singer's mental state, capturing the challenges and oppression she faced. The lyrics conveyed both the every day and the tragic, revealing a painful yet enduring reality.



### **Examples of Songs and the Structure of *YUMA***

The show combines dramatic texts with music to narrate the hidden lives of Yemeni women. Stories of demons, rituals, laws, rivalries, and countless hidden tales emerge between the lines of the music.

The performance opens with themes surrounding childbirth—a time when women protect the new mother from spirits and forces that could harm her or her child during this vulnerable period. It is also a time of protection from the household's male figure, as the new mother is off-limits to others, with no one permitted to touch her.

Following this, the show addresses the harsh reality of young girls being sold into marriage with older men. Though this practice was customary, it came with deep pain and insult for the women. In private, they sang, lamenting and expressing rage against their oppression.

The show concludes with songs of death, featuring the tradition of *nesting songs*—raw, intense poetry sung with a handkerchief covering the mouth. This style of poetry is neither “beautiful” nor religious, yet it carries the weight and resonance of unfiltered grief.



At the time of death, the women acted as heralds—their wails echoing through the neighborhood to announce the passing. In that era, they were forbidden to mourn openly at the funeral, which men led. Instead, after the ceremony concluded, it was their turn to visit the grave, where they would express their grief in a raw, primal melody. They became the vibrating, resonant emotion of the community.

## **About Shani Oshri – The Singer and Creator of the Project:**



Shani Oshri is a multidisciplinary soprano specializing in neo-traditional classical and Eastern music.

Born in 1993 in Netanya, Oshri grew up in two contrasting homes: secular Persian, the other ultra-Orthodox Yemeni. From a young age, she navigated opposing worlds, drawing inspiration from two vastly different cultures. She was a typical teenager at her mother's house, surrounded by walls adorned with pop-punk posters. Meanwhile, in her father's ultra-Orthodox household, she listened to Jewish poetry sung in traditional Yemeni biblical tones. These worlds existed separately, each unaware and unaccepting of the other—a proper cultural contrast.

This tension between worlds and cultures has profoundly shaped Oshri's career. For her, the relationship between religious and secular life mirrors that between classical opera and sacred Eastern poetry. At home, she learned biblical cantillation; at the academy, she studied German phonetics. During the week, she attended harmony and solfège lessons at the conservatory, while on Shabbat, she joined women in communal readings of Psalms. She has always grappled with how to merge these halves into a single identity in a reality where each world forbids the other.

Oshri has consistently been a pioneer and trailblazer, often representing a minority she would bring to center stage. In elementary school, she was nearly the only one excluded from the choir due to "excessive ornamentation" in her singing. At the classical music academy, as an Eastern woman in the minority, she quickly understood that to succeed, she needed to distance herself from her roots in Eastern music. This approach worked; the more she turned away from her heritage, the more recognition she received—an actual child prodigy. However, inner tension grew as she took on lead roles in operas like *Julius Caesar*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and *The Magic Flute* and won various competition prizes. She began to feel a sense of inauthenticity, a deep awareness that something was missing and she was not "in her place." This dissonance ultimately led to the literal loss of her voice; she could no longer sing. This vocal break

became a turning point, a call to action—an identity crisis. She realized she needed to find a new language where both her identities could unite, creating a whole greater than its parts. Her Eastern identity within the Western world of European classical music and her female identity within Jewish poetry traditionally reserved for men—all demanded integration over division.

After graduating with honors from the Academy of Music, Oshri seemed set on a classical opera path. However, her body signaled a different direction, prompting her to embark on a journey of self-discovery and a deeper exploration of her roots.

In Jewish *piyyutim*, Oshri's voice felt neither strained nor exhausted; instead, it resonated naturally, as if channeling the voice of an ancient Yemeni grandmother guiding her way. One day, she came across an ad in an old newspaper from Gila Bashari, a prominent figure in Yemeni Jewish music, offering a course on traditional Yemeni cooking. Oshri reached out and insisted Bashari teach her everything about this musical tradition. What began as trepidation transformed into a sense of liberation, freeing her from the classical demands of perfection and embracing a style where beauty lies in imperfection. Oshri's unique stylistic fusion began to emerge.

Today, Oshri transitions effortlessly between diverse stages and genres. At Carnegie Hall, she performs Mozart's iconic Queen of the Night aria from *The Magic Flute*, followed by a ballad reflecting on the Holocaust of Thessaloniki's Jews. At the Yemenite Jewish Heritage Center in Rehovot, she sings Shabbat songs by Shabzi alongside Schubert's classical song cycles.

In 2022, Oshri recorded her debut album with composer and guitarist Daniel Akiva, a Prime Minister's Award for Composition recipient. The album features rare Ladino poems in modern arrangements, including pieces that had never been recorded. She also premiered *Shards of Memory* by Naama Pearl-Zadok, a piece for soprano and an East-West orchestra that reflects the life of a Jewish Yemeni woman and draws on melodies from *diwan* and traditional Yemeni women's songs. Oshri starred in a leading role in the Israeli premiere of Goldfaden's Yiddish operetta *Bar Kochva*, performed in theaters nationwide. In 2024, Akiva composed an original piece for Oshri titled "Little Sister - *piyyutim* for vocals and strings," inspired by Spanish renditions of *piyyutim* from Spain's Golden Age.

Her operatic repertoire includes roles such as Kapisa in *Orpheus* (Talman), Ash in *The Boy and the Spells* (Ravel), Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute* and Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro* (Mozart), Cleopatra in *Julius Caesar in Egypt* (Handel), and Monica in *The Medium* (Menotti), among others. As a soloist, she has performed in oratorios such as Mendelssohn's *Psalm 42* and *Gloria*, Mozart's *Requiem* and *Great Mass in C Minor*, Schubert's *Mass in G Major*, Vivaldi's *Magnificat* and *Gloria*, and Pergolesi's *Magnificat* and *Stabat Mater*.

Oshri holds a bachelor's degree from the Buchmann-Mehta School of Music at Tel Aviv University. She is the recipient of multiple scholarships, including those from the Ronan Foundation, the Rabinowitz Foundation, and the Municipality of Netanya for encouraging young artists, as well as an excellent scholarship from the Buchmann-Mehta School of Music. In November 2022, she was awarded the "Diamond Rose" at the international opera competition at the Royal Conservatory in Brussels.

She has participated in various festivals worldwide, such as *Music for Peace* in Dresden, the *International Guitar Festival*, the *Israeli Music Festival*, the *Abu Ghosh Festival*, and the *Acre Music Festival*. She has also performed at *The Charter's Global Gala* in the presence of the Dalai Lama, among other notable events.

While Oshri's story is deeply personal, it has grown beyond herself. She embodies a living, singing model of unity, bridging divides across ethnicities and cultures. Her journey mirrors a long-standing and painful fracture within Israeli society—a wound this music seeks to heal. Through her multidisciplinary, multicultural path, Oshri offers a new avenue for unity and provides genuine inspiration to all who listen.

## **Additional Links**

**1** – In 2021, composer Naama Pearl-Zadok invited Shani Oshri to record Yemeni women's poetry with instrumental accompaniment. This video captures Oshri's initial rendition of a Yemeni women's song and marks the beginning of her exploration into blending traditional music with modern arrangements.

<https://youtu.be/oZ8ary7txP4?si=CxrRn3eRLByHHmsd>

**2** – *Corona Concert, "My Hearty Pet"*: An arrangement and performance by Shani Oshri of a traditional Yemenite women's wedding song. At weddings, precious sesame was brought out from storage, and in this song, she affectionately refers to her husband as "my sesame," celebrating him with warmth and joy.

[https://youtu.be/3Popz0sr9C0?si=dp52l0dsAQ5Wpl\\_Q](https://youtu.be/3Popz0sr9C0?si=dp52l0dsAQ5Wpl_Q)

**3** – *The Mother's Song – Ya Walda*: From the album *Memory Traces*, released in 2023 in collaboration with creator and composer Naama Pearl-Zadok.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/5DBqnh8bWoU7EtUVppqC7p?si=4n4YFt5-Ti6rriK3NkuW2A>



In the photo: Shani in a traditional Yemeni Henna dress.  
Continuing a female tradition that has lasted for thousands of years.