

Lifestyle



Lebanon's music national conservatory teacher, composer and saxophonist Nidal Abu Samra rehearses with singer Sarah Kouzi at the Al-Madina theatre in Beirut ahead of a concert. — AFP photos



In this file photo head of Lebanon's national conservatory, operatic soprano, composer, and academic Hiba Al-Kawas poses during a studio photoshoot session at her office in Sin el-Fil east of Beirut.



Lebanon's national conservatory of music teacher, soprano and concert organizer Ghada Ghanem (left) sings as student Aline Chalvarjian plays oud (lute) during a concert at the Al-Madina theatre in Beirut.

# LEBANON CRISIS MUTES NATIONAL MUSIC CONSERVATORY

At Lebanon's national music conservatory, pianos collect dust and classrooms sit empty, making the institution another casualty of an economic collapse that has crippled the public sector and hampered education. Toufic Kerbage, 65, watched the value of his pay packet and pension evaporate after the Lebanese economy began melting down in 2019, taking the local currency and people's savings with it.

Without family support "I would have starved," said the music teacher, who began working at the conservatory in the late 1980s. "It's difficult at my age to ask for money," he said from the silence of the conservatory's branch in Sin al-Fil, a suburb of the capital Beirut. Once on a comfortable income, Kerbage now earns around \$70 a month, in a country the World Bank says suffers the highest food price inflation globally. He has been teaching his classes online, battling Lebanon's "disastrous" internet and spending more than he earns on a generator subscription to get through hours-long daily power cuts.

The state-run conservatory, with several thousand mostly school-aged students and 17 branches around the country, counts prestigious musicians like the composer and oud player Marcel Khalife among its alumni. But as the economic crisis grinds on, some teachers have quit. Many others have turned to online class-



Lebanon's national conservatory of music teacher, soprano and concert organizer Ghada Ghanem (center left) and guest singer Elie Rizkallah take part in a rehearsal session at the Al-Madina theatre in Beirut.

es to save on travel costs or teach private lessons on the side to make ends meet. Kerbage said he was "worried" about colleagues without a support network.

### 'Musical revolution'

Taking matters into their own hands, a group of teachers and students have been holding independent concerts to highlight their plight and give musicians a chance to support each other and perform. "I am here today to stand with my colleagues who are not happy with the way we are treated," said concert organizer Ghada Ghanem, who is also a teacher and soprano. Some teachers have moved house or "sold their cars" to survive, added Ghanem, herself a conserva-

tory student during Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war. The shows' proceeds will be invested into creating further performance opportunities or distributed among those involved, she said, calling the initiative a "musical revolution". "Let's fix our problems with our own talent," Ghanem said recently from a darkened Beirut theatre before a recent show - the second in a planned series. "Depression will attack us if we sit and do nothing." Matthew Ata, 10, said he was "a bit nervous" about his debut concert performance.

Despite starting with the conservatory two years ago, he only met his guitar teacher for the first time at the show. "We really hope that things will get better" and in-person classes will resume, said Mat-

thew's mother, Rita Jabbour. Some students said the protracted online teaching and disruptions had left them feeling discouraged. Software engineer Aline Chalvarjian, 33, who studies oud and lyric singing, said she had "lost motivation". The conservatory used to be "like a second home", she said. Now, "we feel that we are left behind".

### 'First' pay boost

Like other public sector workers throughout the crisis, conservatory staff have taken strike action to demand their rights are respected, with the head of the conservatory teachers' league sacked in January after organizing protests. In recent months, teacher strikes at Lebanon's public schools have paralyzed the education sector. Soprano Hiba al-Kawas, who last year became the first woman to head the conservatory, said she had worked day and night to improve the situation, but political deadlock has stymied progress. Lebanon's entrenched political elite, widely blamed for the country's crisis, has failed to take action to stem the three-year economic collapse.

As sectarian barons bicker over who should be the country's next leader, the presidency has remained vacant since October 31, while a caretaker government with limited powers has been at the helm of the bankrupt state for almost a year. Despite the obstacles, Kawas said



Lebanon's national conservatory of music teacher, soprano and concert organizer Ghada Ghanem speaks to the public before a concert at the Al-Madina theatre in Beirut.

she had managed to secure pay increases that should allow a return to in-person teaching. A teacher who was paid 30,000 Lebanese pounds per hour - \$0.50 based on an exchange rate used for public sector salaries - would earn 300,000 once the wage hike takes effect, she said. It is "just a first step", Kawas added. Teacher Kerbage expressed optimism at the new regime, which he said should push his monthly earnings into the hundreds of dollars. "Anything" would be welcome, he said. "I would be able to pay for my fuel, for my electricity, and for some food - that's a lot." — AFP



Lebanon's national conservatory of music teacher, Fadi Rashid, plays guitar during a concert at the Al-Madina theatre in Beirut.



Lebanon's national conservatory of music teacher, soprano and concert organizer Ghada Ghanem (right) and guest singer Elie Rizkallah perform during a concert at the Al-Madina theatre in Beirut.



Lebanon's national conservatory of music student, Aline Chalvarjian, plays oud (lute) during a concert at the Al-Madina theatre in Beirut.



## Adidas posts loss as Kanye West split 'hurts' business

German sportswear giant Adidas reported Friday a hefty first-quarter loss, acknowledging its split from controversial US rapper Kanye West was "hurting" its bottom line. The company booked a net loss of 39 million euros (\$43 million) from January to March, compared to a profit of 482 million euros in the period a year earlier.

The end of its highly successful Yeezy line, designed in collaboration with West, hit sales by about 400 million euros in the quarter. But overall sales were not as bad as feared, with analysts seeing early signs of improving fortunes, and Adidas's share price rose 7.5 percent in the afternoon on the Frankfurt Stock Exchange.

Adidas halted its tie-up with West - now known as Ye - in October after he made a series of anti-Semitic outbursts. The loss of Yeezy, along with falling revenues for its lifestyle brands, "are of course hurting us," said new CEO Bjorn Gulden in a statement.

But there was no news Friday about what it would do with its huge stock of Yeezy trainers. "The options are narrowing," Gulden told reporters after the results were released, but finding a solution will take time as there are "so many interested parties". —AFP

## 'Very happy' Ed Sheeran wins US copyright trial

British pop phenom Ed Sheeran expressed joy and relief Thursday after a US jury found he did not plagiarize Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get It On" in composing his hit "Thinking Out Loud," calling the ruling a win for creative freedom. The English musician hugged his team inside a Manhattan federal courtroom after jurors ruled that he had "independently" created his 2014 song. Outside, he told reporters he was "very happy" but "unbelievably frustrated that baseless claims like this" even make it to trial.

The civil lawsuit was filed by heirs of Gaye co-writer Ed Townsend, who alleged that harmonic progressions and rhythmic elements of Sheeran's song were lifted without permission from the classic made famous by Gaye. The heirs sought a share of the profits from Sheeran's hit.

"If the jury had decided this matter the other way, we might as well say goodbye to the creative freedom of songwriters," Sheeran told reporters.

"It is devastating and also insulting to be accused of stealing other people's songs when we put so much into our livelihoods," he added. "I am just a guy with a guitar who loves writing music for people to enjoy." "I am not and will never allow myself to be a piggy bank for anyone to shake."

### 'Songwriter's alphabet'

The jurors spent some three hours deliberating whether Sheeran's song and Gaye's classic are substantially similar and if their common elements are protected by copyright law.

Sheeran spent days testifying with guitar in hand, playing demos for the court to prove the 1-3-4-5 chord pro-



Ed Sheeran leaves Manhattan Federal Court and speaks to members of the media after he was found not guilty in a music copyright trial.

gression in question is a basic building block of pop music that can't be owned.

The 32-year-old said he writes most of his songs in a day, and said he co-wrote "Thinking Out Loud" with singer-songwriter Amy Wadge, a regular creative collaborator. A musicologist retained by the defense told the court the four-chord sequence was used in a number of songs before Gaye's hit came out in 1973.

"These chords are common building blocks," Sheeran said Thursday. "They are a songwriter's 'alphabet', our tool kit." "No one owns them, or the way they are played, in the same way nobody owns the color blue." Plaintiff Kathryn Townsend Griffin left court and breezed by reporters smoking what appeared to be a cigarillo, saying only: "God is good all the time, all the time God is good."

### 'Sense of relief'

Industry insiders closely followed the copyright lawsuit as some feared



British singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran departs Manhattan Federal Court in New York. — AFP photos

it could chill songwriters' creativity and open the door to future litigation.

It was the second trial in a year for Sheeran, who successfully testified at a London court last April in a case over his song "Shape Of You," saying the lawsuit was emblematic of copyright litigation going too far. The judge also ruled in his favor in that case.

Sheeran's "Thinking Out Loud" shot up America's Billboard Hot 100 charts upon release, and won Sheeran a 2016 Song of the Year Grammy.

There have been a handful of landmark music copyright cases in recent years, notably when Gaye's family - who was not part of the New York lawsuit against Sheeran - successfully sued the artists Robin Thicke and Pharrell Williams over similarities between the song "Blurred Lines" and Gaye's "Got to Give it Up." That result in 2015 surprised many in the industry, including legal experts, who considered many of the musical components cited as foundational, and existing largely in the public domain.

Then an appeals court decision confirmed Led Zeppelin's victory over a similar case focused on the classic "Stairway to Heaven" - a victory for songwriters that Sheeran's case should bolster. "I hope that the verdict gives songwriters and publishers some sense of relief that they don't need to be looking over their shoulders quite so much," said Joseph Fishman, a law professor specialized in intellectual property at Vanderbilt University. "That would be a big shift from the mood following the 'Blurred Lines' verdict."

### 'Sanity prevailed'

The swinging pendulum has nevertheless left some songwriters fearful of the volatility of opinions from jurors who almost certainly do not have a background in musicology and must rely on expert witnesses for context.

After delivering the verdict, juror Sophia Neis told journalists it took a beat for all seven members to find common ground. "There was a lot of back and forth" with advocates on both sides, the 23-year-old said.

Joe Bennett, a forensic musicologist at the prestigious Berklee College of Music, told AFP he was "delighted" that "sanity prevailed" in the case. "In music copyright litigation cases involving one or two bars of music, the plaintiff's allegation of plagiarism is almost always wrong," he said. "Coincidental similarity happens all the time, particularly with chords and short melodic fragments." "Hopefully this sensible verdict will discourage other spurious complaints." — AFP