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Nayla de Frelge, president of Baalbeck festival, left, is seen with festival executive committee member Joumana Atallah. (Photo/Supplied)

PARIS: “The Sound of Resilience” concert in Lebanon on Sunday aims to be “a unifying and all-encompassing cultural event,” said Nayla de Freige, the president of the Baalbek International Festival.

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic means that the annual festival — established in 1955 and a key cultural event in the region — cannot be staged as normal this year, but de Freige recently announced that a special musical show would take place at 9 p.m. on July 5 at the Temple of Bacchus. There will be no audience but the concert will be broadcast live on TV channels across the region, including MBC4 in Saudi Arabia, and streamed online.

Overseen by artistic director and conductor Harout Fazlian, the concert will feature the Lebanese Philharmonic Orchestra, the choirs of Antonine Universities and Notre Dame Universities, and Lebanese group Qolo Atiqo. It will commemorate the 100th anniversary of the proclamation of Greater Lebanon, the predecessor of the modern-day country, on Sept. 1, 1920.

De Freige said that prior to the pandemic, the festival planned to invite the Orchestre national d’Ile-de-France to perform.

“We were ... in discussion with the orchestra’s director, Fabienne Voisin, to coordinate this great event,” she said. “The program was to include Beethoven’s ‘Ninth Symphony’ in celebration of the year of Beethoven, plus a Lebanese composition.

“Our plans were impacted by the pandemic and therefore had to be postponed indefinitely. We chose to mark the event, however, with a symbolic concert.”

Lebanese maestro Fazlian was keen to stage a show despite the pandemic, she added, and had a vision of what might be possible by doing so without an audience at the historic Temple of Bacchus.

“We thought first of broadcasting the concert on social media networks but Claudine Aoun Roukoz, the daughter of Lebanese President Michel Aoun, had a different idea,” said de Freige. “She is the daughter of the president of Lebanon, who is the Honorary president of the festival, a long standing tradition... and she supported our ideas, saying that it would be even better to broadcast everything simultaneously on all Lebanese TV channels.

“All of the Lebanese channels have agreed to broadcast the concert at the same time. It is a unifying and all-encompassing cultural event and, for the first time in Lebanon, we see the solidarity of the media. The idea was also supported by the minister of culture, who offered the services of the orchestra free of charge.”

Even though there will be no audience, precautions are being taken to ensure the health and safety of the performers is not endangered.

“The festival committee worked with the minister of health to guarantee the necessary physical distancing to protect the 150 participants on the stage,” said de Freige. “They will be standing 1.5 meters apart, in the middle of the Temple of Bacchus, where there are usually 700 spectators.

“Lebanese TV channel LBC1 will film the event using 14 cameras and two drones under the supervision of well-known director Bassem Christo, with Jean-Louis Mainguy in charge of the scenography (design of the stage set).”

The choirs offered their services for free because they want to help revive Lebanon’s cultural sector, de Freige said.

“It has been seriously damaged by the catastrophic economic situation in Lebanon, which means it has been three years since any festival has received funding from the state,” she added. “That plus the COVID-19 pandemic are immense obstacles.

“That is the reason we named the concert ‘The Sound of Resilience,’ with the hashtag ‘Let’s raise the sound of music,’ because music is considered an engine of creativity, solidarity, resilience and life.

“Solidarity is the main beauty and force of this project, which has a one-of-a-kind mission of collaboration between various artists, partners and providers. All are offering their services for free.”