

Polyphony Conservatory: uniting Arab and Jewish musicians in Nazareth

Bringing young Arab and Jewish classical musicians together is the mission of Nazareth's Polyphony Conservatory – and that mission is more vital now than ever

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Nabeel Abboud-Ashkarin, pictured in his hometown, Nazareth. Photograph: Antonio Olmos

In a music room on the slopes of Nazareth on a sweltering late-June afternoon in Galilee, the violinist Nabeel Abboud-Ashkar coaches a group of young musicians through a Dvořák piano quintet. After hours of sweat and graft, the players are still rapt as the 35-year-old maestro gives pointers on dynamics in Hebrew flecked with "crescendo" and "pianissimo". Raising a pencil, his Arabic "Yalla" ("let's go") could also be Hebrew slang.

The string players are a local Palestinian Arab violinist, Feras Machour, aged 18, and three Jewish players in their early 20s – all four Israeli. The Jewish students have come from Tel Aviv, a two-hour bus ride away, to the country's biggest Palestinian Arab city. Although Nazareth's pinkish-stone Ottoman mansions now host gourmet restaurants, Ohad Cohen, a violinist, says that, for most Israelis, the city is still synonymous with

falafel joints. "We're trying to compete with the food," Abboud-Ashkar interjects drily, "and attract people for the music."

"The first time I stood in front of Jewish kids, coaching a quartet," he tells me later, "it was one of the most unusual moments of my life. There's so much separation between the communities here, so little interaction, and so many stereotypes and misconceptions" – not least that "an Arab can't play Mozart well." Yet "after an hour or two, it felt like any other rehearsal".

Abboud-Ashkar was speaking during rehearsals for the chamber music festival *Incontri* in Terra di Siena, in Tuscany. Earlier this week, he telephoned me from Italy to say the rehearsals had continued, despite mounting tensions within Israel due to the military operation in Gaza. Demonstrations in Nazareth and other Palestinian Israeli cities against civilian deaths brought clashes with the police. "This is the worst I can recall in terms of the level of anger and hatred I've witnessed," he says. "But despite what parents were hearing on the news about 'riots' in Nazareth, the students still came. We continued working together."

The quintet is led by Abboud-Ashkar's elder brother, the concert pianist Saleem Ashkar, aged 37, who is to resume his Beethoven sonata cycle at the Sage Gateshead this autumn. The brothers from Nazareth are alumni of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra of young pan-Arab and Jewish musicians co-founded in 1999 by Edward Said and Daniel Barenboim. Their youth ensembles are one spinoff of a groundbreaking programme of music education aimed primarily at Palestinian Israelis – who number more than one in five Israeli citizens – and led from within that community. Inside Israel – where the Divan has never performed – "every past effort to bring people together through classical music miserably failed," Nabeel says, "because there was not enough investment in the Arab community so they could meet as equals. This is what we're doing: creating equal opportunities for the Arab community, and using that to bring Arab and Jewish together."

The violinist spoke to me at his home in Nazareth as tensions were already flaring over the killings of three Israeli teenagers and a teenage Palestinian. "Whenever there's an attack on Gaza, a kidnapping, it causes things to polarise here. But that makes it even more important to continue doing what we do."

The younger brother returned from music studies in Germany to found the Barenboim-Said Conservatory in Nazareth in 2006, with 25 students. It was renamed the Polyphony Conservatory two years ago (and is now financially independent of the Barenboim-Said Foundation). Though still housed in makeshift premises, it has 130 students, 30 of them in a branch in Jaffa. More than 90% are Palestinian Israeli. Its annual budget is \$900,000, one third of which is covered by an three-year EU grant; a third by donations to the Polyphony Foundation in New York, set up in 2011 with

financiers Craig and Deborah Cogut; and another third generated locally. Nabeel, Polyphony's artistic director and previously a soloist with the Jerusalem Camerata and Haifa Symphony orchestras, received the Yoko Ono Lennon Courage Award for the Arts in 2012.



Saleem Abboud-

Ashkar (back left) and Nabeel Abboud-Ashkar (back right) with the Polyphony Ensemble at La Foce, Val d'Orcia, Tuscany. Photograph: Paul Flanagan

One lesson he took from the Divan ("I never missed a year") is that music is "not just something in a concert hall, but an influence on society outside". Western classical music is "part of the identity of so many communities globally. That's why it's the best medium to work with. It enables young people to create something beautiful together that needs commitment – to music and to each other." This, for him, is the common ground from which to explore differences. The impetus is "an urge coming from our region. It's a survival need – because what's the alternative?"

It was the divided response to Israel's military assault on Gaza in 2008/9 that spurred on their move beyond the conservatory. "As an Arab-Israeli citizen I felt the need to step up," says Nabeel. Houses in Nazareth are crammed on to its hillsides. Across a bypass is the more expansive Nazareth Ilit (Upper Nazareth), built as a Jewish city overlooking the Arab one. In the rest of Galilee – where more than half of Palestinian Israelis live – Arab and Jewish towns are also distinct. Under an official policy to "Judaize the Galilee", settlements were built here before those in the territories occupied after the 1967 war. It was an "ongoing effort to balance Arabs and Jews," Nabeel says, driving through the countryside. "The two communities are physically close, but there's no interaction." That divorce is mirrored in the school system, where Arabic schools stress science to the neglect of the humanities.

Nabeel and his wife, Lilian, a science teacher, share with his parents the house built by his grandmother. Its garden of fig and apricot trees is a rare oasis in a city whose residents are obliged to build on every spare patch of land. As children, the brothers

were the only classical pianist and violinist in Nazareth, ferried to lessons and concerts in Haifa, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Their father, Duaibis, a telecoms engineer, was a communist (at a time when many progressive Arabs were) with a printing press and a passion for classical music. Their mother, Mahaa, taught in a school for the deaf and blind. Nabeel, a graduate of Tel Aviv University in music and physics ("the mentality of the minority – I had to secure Plan B"), built on Orpheus, the non-profit music education foundation that was a labour of love for his father.

Nazareth is steeped in Arab music (the hometown of oud players Trio Joubran). The Polyphony conservatories teach western classical. "For Arab people, it's a way of being heard," Nabeel says. "By mastering it, they become part of a larger world." Despite its being "new to the Arab community in Israel," they now have a waiting list. In a city with bilingual Arabic-Hebrew signage, the muezzin also vies with church bells: some 55% of Nazarenes are Muslim; 45% are Christian. There is rough religious and gender parity in the student intake. A dozen Jewish students have joined from nearby towns and kibbutzim. In 2012, two violin students, Feras Machour (of the aforementioned quintet) and Yamen Saadi, won Israel's biennial Paul Ben-Haim competition, the first Palestinian Israelis to do so. There is, Nabeel says, "no compromise on the musical level to do a social project".

Saleem, who came to the Yehudi Menuhin school in Britain aged 13, before music school in Jerusalem and London's Royal Academy of Music, was a soloist with the Israel Philharmonic at 17. "If I stand on stage in Tel Aviv and they clap," he says, "they're realising how a Palestinian can become part of the country. If we hide, it doesn't play into our hands, but into those who want us away from here." Some people would see his presence on stage as proof of equal opportunity. "That's absolute rubbish," he responds. "I didn't come out of the system. There was no system. I had to leave to develop. I want a child who wants to study piano or violin to live in this city. It's not about pretending inequality doesn't exist; it's about correcting it."

The pianist (who lives in Berlin) is artistic director of the Galilee Chamber Orchestra, formed in 2012. Of its 32 professional musicians from across Israel, six are Palestinian Arab – though the aim is an "equal presence". In the Youth Orchestra also under Polyphony's umbrella, half of the 50 players are Jewish, from the Jerusalem Music Centre. They come to Nazareth for seminars on music and society. "It's to stimulate the kids, not force them," Nabeel says. "We trust they'll ask the questions – and they do." As well as playing in Israel, the ensembles tour abroad, cementing friendships. Saleem sees the project as "anything but cosmetic. We're not aiming for symbolic value; it's not about Arabs and Jews playing at weekends. We're investing in our youth."

During weekend exams at the conservatory, Nabeel instructs a flautist and a trumpeter in Arabic, switching to Hebrew for the French horn player. Younger children, such as the

recorder player in a flowery jumpsuit, may not yet have mastered Hebrew. Whole families are present, sitting on the edge of their seats, filming on smartphones. Nabeel is the sole Arabic speaker on the panel. Of 27 teachers, only two are Palestinian Israeli. Most drive from Tel Aviv each week – drawn, they say, by the students' talent and discipline. Nabeel hopes the imbalance will shift as graduates return to teach.

But Polyphony goes beyond professional musicianship. Another lesson Nabeel learned from the Divan was "how little Arab and Jewish people know about each other, and how difficult it is to change what they think they know when they're 24 or 25". The Alhan ("melody" in Arabic) programme brings non-instrumental music appreciation to 2,400 children in 12 Arabic primary schools. Next year it extends to a total of 30, including four Hebrew schools, reaching up to 5,000 children; and to 25 Hebrew and 15 Arabic kindergartens. Not only will children study the same syllabus of western classical, Arab and Israeli music, but the groups come together during the year for classical music concerts, creating what Nabeel sees as "rich interaction in a way that hasn't happened before". The Arab-Jewish Galil School in Eshbal, 40 minutes' drive north of Nazareth past sunflower fields and olive groves, is one of only a handful of bilingual schools in Israel, and a harbinger of the scheme. The principal, Kemal Al Munis, tells me the music input has markedly improved the atmosphere: "Music nurtures the soul of the students."

At his home in Tel Aviv, Dan Sagiv, Polyphony's pedagogic adviser from the Levinsky College of Education, hails this as a "historic moment". In a system so split, he is training 70 teachers together in an identical music curriculum for Hebrew and Arabic schools. Sagiv, 37, a saxophonist and "music activist" who spent six years in Arabic schools in Galilee, says: "I believe with my skills I can change how society looks. There's a lot of people doing political discussion, and not enough doing structural work from the bottom." The Levinsky College and Jerusalem Music Centre are among partners sought out by Polyphony. The Ministry of Education recommends its programmes, though it gives no direct funding. As Nabeel sees it, "the Arab community in Israel is torn. There's a strong, natural connection to the Palestinian cause while trying to integrate into Israeli society. The fact that I'm reaching out as a citizen to Israeli Jewish institutions to create a better, alternative reality doesn't compromise my own identity." One aim is to "empower the people who believe in finding ways to live together. Their voices are not heard enough. The events are far louder."

While music education is sometimes dubiously advocated as a counter to militancy, for Nabeel it is "every child's right. Music will definitely take people away from violence: it will help them listen and respond in a more measured way. But it doesn't take them away from what they believe in. If you educate people, you give them more efficient tools to express what they believe, and stand up for themselves."

One gifted graduate of Nazareth, Mais Hriesh, a flautist aged 19, has just finished her first year's scholarship in the US, studying for a double major in human rights and music. Recalling an argument with Jewish friends in the Youth Orchestra about a drive she opposes to enlist Palestinian Christians in the army, she says: "They know my position. But afterwards we respected each other. We have different perspectives, but that doesn't prevent us from playing together. We don't pretend everything's pink and perfect. We just try to create the best musical masterpieces we can."

• The Italian festival Incontri in Terra di Siena takes place every summer at La Foce, Val d'Orcia, Tuscany. Polyphony ensembles will take part in the finale on 27 July. Details: itslafoce.org.



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