

A Dream Come True

The Edward Said National Conservatory of Music



By Rima Nasir Tarazi

This issue of TWiP comes at an opportune time as the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music of Birzeit University celebrates its 25th anniversary. As a founding member of the conservatory, I have had the privilege of sharing some of my thoughts on music in this prestigious publication. Today it is with a deep sense of nostalgia that I feel transported to those early days in 1993, when the conservatory was born. Now, many years later, it is heartwarming to witness the remarkable developments in the musical landscape of Palestine.

Through the vision of the founders, Salwa Tabri, Rima Tarazi, Amin Nasser, Nadia Abboushi, and Suheil Khoury, and the dedication, determination, and concerted efforts of so many founding teachers

The Palestine Youth Orchestra at Naseeb Shaheen Auditorium.



and staff members, Palestine's music arena has expanded its scope from popular folkloric music, which has always been an integral part of Palestinian social life, to include all kinds of musical genres, ranging from the traditional and classical Oriental and Arabic music, with its growing numbers of highly professional ensembles and performers, to Western classical music, with its impressive orchestras, ensembles, and outstanding instrumentalists. The last 25 years have also seen a tremendous rise in musical activities and initiatives in Palestine, encompassing new music schools, outreach programs, festivals, concerts, competitions, tours, publications, and recordings.

It all started in 1990, when five of us came together to study the music situation in Palestine at the request of the Welfare Association. The initial findings indicated that, in general, music in Palestine was at a low ebb. The few existing music programs were mostly in private schools and colleges and were restricted to Western classical music and choral teaching. They were run by teachers who had been privileged to be pupils of the musical pioneers of the beginning of the twentieth century, Augustine Lama, Salvador Arnita, Yusef Batroni, Yusef Khasho, and Hanna Khashadourian. Arabic music was only taught on an individual basis by professional and amateur instrumentalists, many of whom were members of the Arabic section of the Palestine Broadcasting Station in pre-1948 Jerusalem.

As we musicians confronted this drab reality, our vision of a world harmonized by the beauty of music resurfaced. We decided to take the risk of fulfilling our dream at a time when our people were immersed in the struggle to restore our national rights and to be liberated from an unending brutal occupation. Believing strongly that music has the power to motivate, to liberate, and to heal, we were bent on a mission to address the situation and came to the conclusion that the only means to promote music and enrich the musical and cultural life in Palestine was to establish a professional music school that would offer music education in the afternoons to students for the duration of their school years. Such a school would also provide gifted students with opportunities to pursue higher musical education after graduating from high school, if they chose to do so.

As music did not seem to be a priority at the time in the minds of the general public, it was a challenge for us to attempt to launch as ambitious an endeavor as a conservatory of music within the circumstances of the occupation. However, with dedication and persistence, we were able to establish the first branch in Ramallah. This could not have happened without the support of several friends who shared our vision that music reflects the soul and ethos of a nation and is a most effective means of expressing joys and pains, hopes and aspirations, and that music is a universal language that brings together human beings in solidarity and understanding.

Birzeit University with Conductor Vincent de Kort. Photo courtesy of ESNM archives.

Birzeit University, which had always promoted music and all forms of cultural activities since its establishment, welcomed this initiative and was happy to have the conservatory under its umbrella, offering the Ramallah branch its premises for several years. The Birzeit University board of trustees asked the founders of the conservatory to be responsible for its operation.

Munther Nabulsi, Edward Karkar, Huda Khoury, and Canadian-Lebanese friend Linda Kouri were the first generous donors who enabled us to take the first step. Amin Nasser volunteered to direct the conservatory for two years

the board. He was quoted as saying that the conservatory was the most important project initiated in Palestine during that period. After his untimely death, the conservatory thought it fit to honor his great legacy and moral support by naming the conservatory after him.

The community, especially parents, quickly began to realize that music was changing the lives of their children for the better. They recognized that it was indeed a potent tool for survival and for inculcating in their children values and qualities that would help heal their wounds and enable them to

several outreach programs in a number of locations. The municipalities of Beit Sahour and Ramallah generously offered the ESNCM the plots of land on which the Bethlehem and Ramallah branches were erected. It is now very common to see children of all ages in Palestinian towns where there are ESNCM branches and other music schools proudly carrying instruments of all kinds and sizes on their backs or shoulders, transforming the music scene in Palestine into a vibrant, lively, and energetic reality.

Moreover, the number of music graduates from the ESNCM who are

The orchestras and ensembles. An orchestra or an ensemble is an educational institution in itself, ingraining in its members the qualities of cooperation, perseverance, discipline, confidence, humility, the art of listening, and the importance of perfection. It is also a means of communicating with audiences all over the world and creating bonds of solidarity and friendship with musicians of various nationalities. It is difficult to express in words the thrill that orchestra members feel when, as Palestinian youth coming from the inferno of the occupation, they are



Palestine Strings with Nigel Kennedy in London before their concert at the BBC Proms. Photo by Suhail Khoury.

while piano teachers Nadia Abboushi and Salwa Tabri, and wind-instrument teacher Amin Nasser transferred their students to the fledgling school. To implement the vision of the founders in promoting Arabic music and giving it the prominence it deserves, an Arabic music section was established right from the beginning, run by renowned musician and *oud* player Khaled Jubran.

One of the most enthusiastic moral supporters was Edward Said, a pianist himself and an honorary member of

face the challenges of their times and confront the hard conditions that they were continuously exposed to. They also started to observe the cathartic power of music and the opportunity it provided for their children to share its beauty and harmony with each other and with their listeners.

As the interest in music was being expressed through the growing demand for music education, the conservatory established four more branches, in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nablus, and Gaza, over and above



Student concert at the Jerusalem Branch of the ESNCM. Photo by Fares Mansour.

pursuing higher music education is very impressive. Several of them have returned home to teach and to enrich Palestinian cultural life; others are still abroad pursuing their studies or establishing new careers in important musical centers.

I would like to highlight a few luminous moments and achievements in the life of the conservatory over and above its primary role in offering music education to hundreds of students annually.

acclaimed and received with standing ovations and roaring applause in such prestigious venues as the Royal Albert Hall and the Royal Festival Hall in London. I am sure that such uplifting experiences, which momentarily liberate them from the reality of their situation, will be imprinted in the memory of these youngsters for life.

The ESNCM has five orchestras. The Jerusalem Children's Orchestra includes beginners from all branches. The Student Orchestra is composed of advanced students from all branches.

The Wind Orchestra brings together students from all branches. The Palestine Youth Orchestra, founded in 2004, unites young Palestinian musicians from all over the world, including a number of youth from Arab countries. This orchestra has performed almost annually in several European and Arab countries since its establishment. The Palestine National Orchestra, founded in 2011, embraces professional musicians of Palestinian origin from all over the world. In the words of ESNCM general director Suheil Khoury during this orchestra's inaugural performance, "The Palestinian dream is becoming a reality: Today an orchestra, tomorrow a state!"

The ensemble entitled The Palestine Strings gave a landmark performance at the Royal Albert Hall in London

benchmark in the musical landscape of Palestine. It was first performed at the inauguration of the Ramallah Cultural Palace and several times subsequently, with packed audiences for each performance. The production was the fruit of teamwork that brought together a number of Palestinian organizations and individuals with a German guest orchestra. We are happy to announce that next year *Fawanees* will be staged again, this time with the Palestinian Youth Orchestra.

Recordings have introduced the public to the works of local musicians and have helped some of these musicians launch successful careers. New books by local musicians have been published by the conservatory. Some texts were written specifically for ESNCM curricula.



with the renowned Nigel Kennedy. The Arabic Ensembles include Jerusalem Maqamat, Jerusalem Oud Quartet, Banat Al-Quds Ensemble; Nablus Arabic Music Ensemble; Gaza Oriental Ensemble, Gaza Orchestra for Oriental Music; Ramallah Turath Oriental Ensemble, Maraseena Oriental Ensemble; Bethlehem Arabic Music Ensemble, and Jeelan Music Ensemble.

Music competitions are held on a national level and generate great energy and a lively musical environment where young instrumentalists from all parts of historic Palestine and the Golan compete in a spirit of friendship and mutual appreciation.

Music productions and recordings. The children's musical, *Fawanees*, based on a tale by Ghassan Kanafani and produced in 2004, was a

Music festivals. Seasonal festivals have introduced audiences to some outstanding musicians and have enriched the musical life in several Palestinian locations.

In conclusion, and on behalf of the ESNCM board, I would like to express our deep appreciation to all those who have supported the conservatory across the years and to the teams of teachers and staff whose diligence and dedication have made it possible to instill the joy of music in the hearts of our youth and of our people in general. *Article photos courtesy of Riziq Ghyada.*

Musician Rima Nasir Tarazi is chairperson of the board of the ESNCM and one of its founders. She is also a member of the Birzeit University board of trustees. She can be reached at rima_tarazi@hotmail.com.



Our Business Services

Ideal Location for Conferences, Seminars, Meetings & Special Events.

JRV provides a set of services tailored for business purposes: meeting halls, equipment, business lunches, accommodation and exhibitions.



Restaurants - Swimming Pools - Weddings - Family Vacation
Conferences - Retreats and Special Events

111 Bisan Street, Jericho, Palestine, P.O.Box 162
Tel 02 2321255, Fax 02 2322189

www.jerichoresorts.com, reservation@jerichoresorts.com
facebook.com/jerichoresorts