

# Beyond the Minor Second

**BY SIMON SHAHEEN**

ONE MONTH AFTER 9/11, I WAS INVITED TO GO ON THE BILL MAHER SHOW "POLITICALLY INCORRECT." THE COMEDIAN QUOTED FROM PRESIDENT BUSH'S SPEECH IN WHICH THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF DECLARED THAT THE NATIONS OF THE WORLD WERE EITHER WITH US OR AGAINST US IN THE WAR ON TERROR. WHAT DID I THINK OF THAT? MAHER ASKED ME.

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# About This Issue

What lies beyond the minor second? I'll leave it to Simon Shaheen to take you there.

Were you to "google" Simon Shaheen, the words that would keep popping up would be: "oud and violin virtuoso," "internationally acclaimed from Carnegie Hall to Egypt's Opera House to Beirut's Théâtre de la Ville," and "the most significant Arab musician and composer of his generation."

And more: In 1994, he was honored with the prestigious National Heritage Award at the White House. His all-star group Qantara (meaning "arch" or "bridge" in Arabic) fuses Arab, jazz, Western classical, and Latin American music into a unique blend of sound that was first heard to great acclaim on his debut album Blue Flame. In 2000, he became one of the first Arab-Americans to appear on the Grammy Awards.

Simon has also contributed selections to soundtracks for movies "The Sheltering Sky" and "Malcolm X," among others, and he composed the entire soundtrack for the United Nations sponsored documentary "For Everyone Everywhere," which celebrated the 50th anniversary of the United Nations Human Rights Charter.

Another site that comes up on Google notes that Simon Shaheen has never written a personal account of his life. Until now. We are pleased indeed to invite this truly gifted artist to take us to that special place beyond the minor second, where musical influences from many cultures intersect and merge, as if by magic, into "the sound of one world." Esthetically—and ethically—this is his world.

Simon's Blue Flame CD is available from AMEU's Book & Video catalog on page 15.

Now available, as well, is AMEU's 40th anniversary anthology "Burning Issues."

This anthology includes 20 entries that the editors consider among our most

engaging and relevant. Where possible they are updated. The selections are:

- Lest We Forget
- Political Zionism
- U.S. Aid to Israel
- Veto
- In the Beginning There Was Terror
- Deir Yassin Remembered
- Politics Not as Usual
- Inside H-2
- Rachel
- A Polish Boy in Palestine
- Censored
- Epiphany at Beit Jala
- People and the Land
- The Coverage and Non-Coverage of Israel-Palestine
- In the Land of Christ, Christianity Is Dying
- Confronting the Bible's Ethnic Cleansing
- The Islamic Alternative
- The Lydda Death March
- The USS *Liberty* Affair
- Timeline for War

The anthology also contains maps specifically drawn to accompany the articles, as well as a descriptive listing of all our *Link* issues and of our most requested Public Affairs publications.

Come the first week of December, in appreciation of your support over the past 40 years, we will be sending each subscriber a complimentary copy of "Burning Issues." Additional copies of the anthology may be purchased from our catalog on page 13.

From all of us at AMEU, our choicest best wishes for the holiday season.

**John F. Mahoney**  
Executive Director

*(Continued from Page 1.)*

I'm a musician, so I answered using a musical analogy. The distance on a piano between two adjacent keys is a half-step, or a minor second. The Arabic scale, however, allows for intervals smaller than a half-step which are called quartertones. These many intervals have no equivalent in Western music and are difficult for Western ears to hear. It is here, beyond the minor second that the richness and diversity of a culture, with its wide range of emotional experiences, is truly expressed. Politically speaking, I said, the danger of looking at the world in black and white is that it can easily lead to totalitarianism.

Also on the "Politically Incorrect" panel that evening was an F.B.I. agent, who came up to me while we were waiting in the Green Room, and said: "I know you are a Christian." Then he added: "We support Christians who live in the Middle East."

What my "ear" heard were the sounds of a black and white keyboard. Christians versus non-Christians. Christians versus Muslims. It was not the keyboard I knew in pre-1948 Palestine, where Christians and Muslims respected, even celebrated, each others' traditions.

## Tarshiha

As a child in the Galilean village of Tarshiha, whenever I performed on the 'oud or the violin with my father's ensemble or at a friend's house, people exclaimed in amazement among themselves and to my father: "Imagine this kid playing in Beirut, Damascus, or Cairo!" Those words rang in my ears, and the innocent questions to my father followed: "Why don't we go to Beirut? I want to play there! Can we go?" After all, the distance between my village, Tarshiha, and Beirut was only a one-hour drive.

However, I was young and living in the isolated atmosphere of Israel. It would take me years to understand why it was not possible to travel freely between Israel and the surrounding Arab countries. Still, I nurtured that dream—sparked by the comments of those adults—to perform on the stages of Beirut, Cairo, and beyond.

It would take 27 years for those dreams to come to fruition by way of performances at the City Theater in Beirut and the Opera House and the Sayyed Darwish Theater in Cairo. Formed in the spirit of my childhood, this dream to move and freely perform across borders and to live in an open space with no

*Link* author  
Simon Shaheen  
during a concert  
performance at  
the University of  
Notre Dame in  
2005.



restrictions and limitations continues to inform my vision.

The village of Tarshiha lies tucked into the mountains of the Northern Galilee, close to the border of Lebanon. This is my village, where I was born and spent my earliest years.

The village is situated on a mountain and its foothill called Mjahed. From the top of the mountain, we could see the Mediterranean Sea, the extensive terrain of the lush upper Galilee Mountains, and parts of southern Lebanon. Valleys and fields in which farmers grew wheat, vegetables and tobacco surrounded the village. My birth took place in our house, a structure made of many arches (Qanater, the plural for Qantara) attached to the church with a well in front of the house and a large backyard.

Tarshiha has been a center for craftsmanship and the arts and has produced many talents in music and visual art. In 1999, the Tarshiha Music Ensemble, consisting of twenty musicians, joined me for a performance at the Cairo Opera House. The performance included three instrumental selections from my own musical repertoire, something Egyptians were not used to since their music traditionally emphasizes vocal repertoire. After the performance, interviewers from Radio Cairo and Al Ahram newspaper asked me about the musical group that performed with me, assuming it was a national Palestin-

ian ensemble. When I told them that the ensemble was from one little village in the Upper Galilee called Tarshiha, it was apparent that they had difficulty understanding how a single village could produce such an abundance of talent!



**Simon's grandfather, Najib Shaheen, ca. 1915.—From the family album**

Within that musically-charged environment of my childhood village, I vaguely remember my grandfather, Najib, who was the deacon and the head of the choir of the village church. He had a distinctive and warm singing voice with a great command and sweet undertones. He used the 'oud to accompany his singing of traditional Arab vocal music, from 9th-century Andalusian to 19th-century Egyptian. In addition to the influence of his own voice, my grandfather owned a gramophone that played the old cylinder wax recordings of the greatest Arab singers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Abu Al-'Ula Mohammad and Sayyed Safti.



**Hikmat Shaheen, Simon's father.—From the family album**

All of my uncles and aunts were musical, with beautiful voices and good musical instinct. I remember in particular two of my aunts, Fahum and Shafiq, participating in various secular and religious ceremonies and events such as weddings, holidays, harvest celebrations, and funerals. As a child, I used to follow them and watch them interact with people in lively call and response. Their repertoire

included hundreds of folk songs as well as improvised vocal selections. I was fascinated with their ability for improvising the melodies and the lyrics in

a moving and expressive way that corresponded with the theme of each occasion.

My father, Hikmat Shaheen, was the only one among his brothers and sisters to formally study music and become a professional musician. He started his musical journey in the mid-thirties by studying European music theory with a German musician who lived in Haifa at the time, and later Arab music theory and 'oud performance with Salim al-Hilou, who later became the head of the Lebanese National Conservatory of Music in Beirut. In 1941, my father established the first Arab school of music, The Center for Oriental Music, in Haifa while continuing his music workshops and private teaching in Tarshiha.

One of my father's valuable achievements was his contribution to music education. He established a curriculum for teaching music in elementary, middle, and high schools in Palestine and composed close to 400 school songs that covered many themes such as nature, cleanliness and holidays including Christmas and Ramadan. Many generations of musicians studied with my father in schools, conservatories, teachers' seminars, and privately. He nurtured generations of remarkable musicians who later became professionals and played an integral role in the development of Arab and Palestinian music in the region today. Even now, more than forty-five years later, when I walk in the streets of Haifa, Nazareth, and other towns and villages, I always stumble upon many people who studied with "'Ustaz Hikmat" (Master Hikmat). They talk to me with kindness, warmth, and esteem, as if they want to pay me back

or reveal some of the sentiments they inherited from "Master Hikmat."

In addition to his teaching and educational contributions, my father's legacy continues through his work with the revival of folkloric music during a crucial era when Palestinians had been displaced and an intellectual vacuum had been created by the Jewish state.

This was my environment as a child. I was surrounded by art and music at home, in the village, and everywhere I accompanied my father. I lived the musical experience by listening to him, observing him, and living with him.

A month ago while I was visiting in California, my mother, Victoria, told me a story that occurred when I was two-and-

a-half years old. She said: "As I finished baking the bread in the backyard, I heard some noise inside the house. I entered the room and found you trying to climb up the closet. I wondered why you were trying to climb, but, as I followed the direction of your gaze and tried to make sense of what you couldn't say, I understood that you wanted the *rishi* (a pick used for the 'oud) in order to strum the strings of your mandolin." I vaguely remember when my father got me a small 'oud that fit my small size. I sat on the edge of the well in front of our house and kept trying to produce some melodies I had heard my father playing.

Two years later, when I was still less than five years old, my father regularly included me in his monthly concerts with his ensemble. It became a custom that I perform a solo on the 'oud after the intermission. My performances featured an instrumental composition with a free improvisation for 7-8 min-



**Simon, age 5 on the 'oud, front center. To the right, seated, his father, Hikmat; to the left, his brother Najib; standing to the right, his cousin George on the violin.— From family album**

utes. I always insisted on playing my father's 'oud, which was larger than me at that time. Whenever I look at photos from that period, all I can see of myself is the top of my hair and my hands holding the 'oud. This is the same 'oud whose top I painted with black shoe polish a year later as revenge for not being allowed to practice it at home.

## Haifa

When I was six years old, my family moved to the city of Haifa. Haifa is a port city that is situated on Mt. Carmel and a narrow stretch between the mountain and the bay of Akka in the Mediterranean Sea. Our house was close to "Abu Nassour," a beautiful beach where I spent much time as a child. It was my daily practice to go for a morning swim with my friends from the neighborhood and then ride my bike directly to school. The view of the city and the port from the top of the Carmel Mountain is breathtaking. A person can see as far as the other side of the bay, including the old city of Akka, Al-Naqoura (a border point between Israel and Lebanon), and the extensive terrain of the Upper Galilean mountains.

In Haifa, my father held many positions: instructor at the conservatory of music; professor of music at the Haifa teachers' seminary; and director of his Arab music ensemble. I used to go with him twice a week after school to "Bayt al-Karma," (the Vineyard House), a cultural center where he conducted his musical activities.

Initially, I only played with the ensemble on the 'oud. A few months later, my cousin George Shaheen introduced me to the violin. He helped me with some technical instructions, and in a short time, I started to play violin in the Arab style. Before long, I had a greater affinity for the violin, which led to my joining the Rubin Conservatory of Music in Haifa. For six years, I studied classical European performance with Abi Leyya, a violin teacher and human rights advocate, who nurtured my talent as a violinist and expanded my understanding of the European classical music repertoire. After Leyya's death, I continued my studies with the Russian violin master Kagan for another five years.

Living in Haifa was extremely important to my artistic development. I was exposed to Western classical music at the Conservatory, traditional Arab mu-

sic with my father's ensemble, and religious musical repertoire in the church, specifically Byzantine chants. At the Italian Carmelite private school I attended, there was emphasis on all of the arts, including music and theater. I remember school ceremonies at the end of each semester and during religious holidays in which I played solo performances on the 'oud and the violin, and accompanied the school choir in Arabic and Italian school songs.

In our elementary years, we were required to learn five languages—Arabic, English, Hebrew, Italian and French—along with the sciences and humanities. Despite a demanding curriculum and the hectic schedule at the school, my late afternoon and early evening hours were dedicated to various musical activities during the week and performances on weekends.

As a kid, I attended the weekly Sunday mass at our Melkite Catholic Church with my parents and participated with the church choir, which was led by my father. A large percentage of the religious chants at our church came from the Byzantine Orthodox church. I learned and memorized this entire repertoire, which later became an essential source of my musical vocabulary and creativity. As I grew older, I came to understand certain elements relating to the nature of our church. Centered in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, the Melkite Catholic Church technically belongs to the church of Rome, yet our practices are clearly influenced by the Eastern Greek Orthodox church.

Last year, my group Qantara and I were touring in Europe and one of the concerts was scheduled at the Megaro Performing Arts Center in Athens. After the concert, we were invited by the artistic director of the center for a drink at a nearby bar. It was explained to me that this old, small bar had served as a meeting point to many active underground personnel from World War II up until the late sixties. As we enjoyed our drinks, I noticed a few older men sitting at the bar who looked like devoted customers. Alex, our companion, introduced me to one of the gentlemen who had difficulty understanding English. When I discovered that he was the head of the choir in one of the Byzantine churches in Athens, I immediately started humming some of the Byzantine tunes, which for me was an even better form of communicating and relating. As I progressed deeper into

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**Simon in Cairo, Egypt, 1990, with Mohammad Abdel Wahhab, the first Arab composer and singer to bridge Arabic and Western music in an organic way.**

the tune, I heard other voices joining me. Their faces shared looks of joy and amazement. This was the beginning of a long night of Byzantine chanting with my Greek friends at the bar, chanting that continued until five o'clock in the morning, leaving my musicians and me only two hours to shower, pack our luggage, and catch a plane to Vienna.

### **Undergraduate Studies**

In 1975, after I graduated from the Carmelite high school in Haifa, I entered Tel Aviv University for my undergraduate studies. I took a double major in music performance, with a specialty in violin, and comparative literature. The university is located in the northern outskirts of the city, not far from the sea shore. I rented a three-bedroom apartment next to the campus and shared it with two Palestinian students, Ziyad and Zahi, originally from Nazareth. This was a period in which acceptance of Arab Palestinians was difficult, and the total number of Palestinian students at the university was close to only 90 out of an overall student population of twenty thousand. Prior to renting the apartment, I had applied for the student dorms and was denied. In fact, only seven Palestinian students were accepted to live in the dorms out of three thousand available residences. In addition to academic standards that were high and challenging, the political environment was

extremely challenging for Palestinians.

During my four undergraduate years at the university, I was involved with the Arab Student Association. Our primary concern was to push for Arab students' equal rights including admission, scholarship, and housing provisions. This was an ongoing battle in which we achieved small increments of progression. In addition to our academic priorities, we, as a student body, were involved in wider human rights activities. We worked closely with various progressive Jewish organizations, including Peace Now, in a struggle for full equal rights for Palestinians.

One of the most vivid events inside and outside of the university's campuses in 1976 was Land Day, in which all Palestinian students, professionals, and labor workers went on strike and demonstrated against the Israeli government's policies regarding the confiscation of land owned by Palestinians. As a result of these activities, many Palestinian students, including myself, were harassed in various ways by Israeli police authorities. Some demonstrators were picked up for interrogation and kept hours, days, or even weeks in prison. Others would be picked up in the early morning hours before an exam or presentation and taken to a police center for few hours and then released. By then, these students had missed their exam or project, jeopardizing their academic status.

As is still the case, the mid-1970s was a time of overwhelming discord and lack of communication between Palestinian and Jewish students as well as the segregation of Arab and Jewish communities. There was an amazing level of denial of existing Palestinian culture, which in fact, informed a large part of their way of living and identity. This was most true of the Sephardic Jews who were trying to disassociate themselves from Arab populations. Both Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews chose to ignore and disregard Palestinian culture as they usurped our traditions and claimed them as their own. Ironically, today there is something of a renaissance among Sephardic Jews in Israel who are rediscovering their Arabic traditions.

Back in the mid and late 70s, however, in conjunction with my intense activities for social justice and equality, I worked extensively toward promot-

ing communication and awareness of Palestinian culture through the development of my work, particularly in the Jewish sector of Israel. I played solo concerts, performed with an Arab music ensemble, and conducted Arab music workshops in many Jewish and Arab cultural centers in villages, towns, cities, and kibbutzim. I also performed as a classical violinist with various chamber groups and did a number of experimental projects, utilizing my knowledge of both Arab and Western classical music.

Through music, I attempted to connect our cultures even in the midst of intense political turmoil. But, an effective bridge must have a foundation on both sides. I tried to establish a starting point, but felt there was no sincere or serious attempt from the other side to communicate during my years in Tel Aviv.

### The United States

I moved to New York City in 1980 with two objectives in mind. The first was to pursue graduate studies in music education at Columbia University and in music performance and composition at The Manhattan School of Music. My second objective was to start my international career as a performer and composer. Upon my arrival in New York City, it was clear to me that most Americans had not been exposed to traditional Arab music, nor were there many musicians performing such repertoire.

In earlier cabaret scenes in the big cities such as in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, and Boston during the 1960s to the 1980s, people misidentified the music that was played as pure Arab music when, in fact, it was a mishmash from various regions and countries, including Turkey, Armenia, Egypt, Greece and Lebanon performed by musicians from those various regions. In these cabaret or nightclub settings, musicians played music for "belly dancing," which many Americans believed was representative of the entire repertoire of Arab music.

In addition, there was also the misperception that the music played in Hollywood films depicting Arab themes was authentic Arab music. This was music composed by Americans who did not have any training or understanding of Arab music. They had created music for films that tried to depict the Arab or so-called "Eastern" sound designed to fulfill and ac-

company negative stereotypes of Arabs.

Thus, when I began my studies in New York, it was important for me to connect with American colleges, universities, museums, and other art institutions in order to present performances of Arab classical and traditional music, Arab music workshops and lecture/demonstrations. My first concert, a performance sponsored by the World Music Institute (WMI) in early 1981, took place at the Alternative Museum in Manhattan. Other musicians who participated in the concert were my brother, Najib Shaheen, an 'oud player; Hanna Merhej, a percussionist; and Ray Rashid, a *riqq* (tambourine) player.

About 80 people attended that first concert at the Alternative Museum. I presented a program of pure traditional Arab instrumental music that included composed and improvised selections. I didn't know what to expect from the audience before the show. During the performance, it was clear to me that the listeners were engaged. Afterward, I talked to a number of people from the audience who expressed a great deal of enthusiasm as well as the need for more presentations of serious traditional Arab music. My sense was that this crowd was receptive and open to serious Middle Eastern music. In fact, my first successful collaboration emerged directly from that evening, a music and story drama titled *Majnun Layla*, which I created with American writer and story-teller Margaret Wolfson, who was in the audience that evening. This collaboration, which we started to present in 1984 along with the artwork of a Belgian painter, Xavier de Callatay, served as the harbinger of many projects that would bring cultures together and make the universal accessible.

As I finished graduate school, I continued to perform at other venues and to reach out to performing arts centers and educational institutions in New York City and beyond. It was important, I believed, to educate the audience about Arab music not only by way of performances, but also through workshops, residencies, and lectures. And, therefore, throughout the 1980s, many of my musical activities included a musical performance and a pre-concert lecture/demonstration, as well as a music workshop.

In addition to my performances as a soloist, I realized the need for a group that performed Arab



chamber music, both vocal and instrumental repertoires. In 1982, the Near Eastern Music Ensemble (NEME) was founded in New York City, consisting of seven musicians from the Arab world who had gathered in the United States. The ensemble began to perform at various music venues with the vision to preserve and increase awareness of classical and contemporary Arab music through performances, recordings and workshops.

### **Mahrajan al-Fan and the Arabic Music Retreat**

As my career progressed, I felt a need to institutionalize all aspects of Arab culture in addition to music. In the 1990s, I developed two projects: the Mahrajan al-Fan and the Arabic Music Retreat.

Mahrajan al-Fan, a festival of Arab arts, has taken place annually at the Brooklyn Museum and in Manhattan at Town Hall and Symphony Space. The festival was founded by me, a group of people in New York City and the Ethnic Folk Arts Center, to provide an opportunity for Americans of all ethnic backgrounds to experience Arab culture first hand. At the same time, the festival enables Arab-Americans and recent immigrants to celebrate their cultural heritage. The event, all under one umbrella, features music, dance, poetry, story-telling, puppeteering, filmmakers, lectures on Arab music, food, theater, children's programs, and costume exhibitions.

My second project, the Arabic Music Retreat, held annually since 1997 in western Massachusetts at Mount Holyoke College, evolved from my music residencies, lecture/demonstrations and private teaching. Through the committed efforts of our excellent faculty staff, among them associate director Dr. A. J. Racy and administrative director Kay Campbell, the Retreat offers participants a week of intense study in Arab music theory, history, private lessons on authentic Arab musical instruments, and ensemble coaching. Over the past ten years, the Arabic Music Retreat has helped hundreds of participants, Americans as well as non-Americans, obtain the knowledge to perform and conduct educational programs in Arab music in various cities and towns in the United States. Indeed, numerous Arab music ensembles have been established by "retreaters," introducing the Arab music repertoire to other, smaller communities.

### **Qantara**

Living in New York City exposed me to various musical expressions throughout the world. As a versatile musician, I had the chance to work with many fellow musicians who lived or passed through New York from other parts of the world. I worked on concert performances, studio recordings, and other projects with musicians from a variety of genres: Jazz (Al di Meola, Sonny Sharrock, Bill Laswell, Quincy Jones), rock (String, Lenny Kravitz, Stewart Copland), classical (Philadelphia String Quartet; Boston Early Music Ensemble), flamenco (Gerardo Nunez), rai (Sheb Khaled), Persian (Hussein Alizadeh), Indian (Vishua Mohan Bhatt, Zakir Hussein), and jazz/world fusion (Jeff Beck, Mike Richmond, Glenn Velez, Jamey Haddad).

Fascinated and moved by these diverse alliances, I was inspired to develop new works that would bridge these varied musical worlds and a group that could evoke the musical emotion of these culturally-crossed, exotic and rhythmically-charged sounds. In this spirit, the Qantara music ensemble was established in 1995.

My compositions for Qantara interweave different musical cultures including classical and folk Arab, Spanish flamenco, American jazz, and Latin rhythms. In these works, I established a formula based on a deep technical understanding of these various musical styles, some of which I had been exposed to and immersed in as a child, and some that were new to me.

The Qantara ensemble comprises musicians whose diverse and uniquely versatile musical styles lend to this organic blend of traditional world music infused with jazz concepts. The instrumentation of the group is: 'oud, violin, nay, flute, saxophone, classical guitar, double bass, and world percussion instruments. Qantara is the Arabic word for "arch." Hence, the group's name, Qantara, signifies the gateway to our new musical expression.

The music presented by Qantara enables different styles of performance and improvisation to stand out while sustaining a musical structure that goes beyond previously established stylistic boundaries. In my view, the ensemble provides a remarkable and distinctive example of world acoustic jazz, which

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was confirmed when our album, "Blue Flame," won eleven Grammy nominations in 2002.

As with my other projects and collaborations, it is the establishment of the bridge between cultures that creates new and genuine expression. Through my work, I've cultivated tools that facilitate harmonious communication and connection: a respect for the languages and behaviors of others; openness and interest; knowledge; sensible concession; and, finally, the sharing of arts. Just as my childhood instincts directed me toward playing in Beirut, Damascus, and Cairo, our freedom from limitations, restrictions, and borders requires connection with others.

### **Building Bridges in the Post 9/11 World**

After the events of September 11, 2001, a state of fear and confusion spread all over the United States. Some people reacted through revenge, hatred, and killing. Others showed restraint and a heightened desire for better communication with and an understanding of Middle Eastern cultures and traditions. At a time when a person stabbed a Sikh taxi driver because he mistook him for an Arab, I was playing in a memorial service at Riverside Church in Manhattan together with numerous international artists. Five thousand people came to pay respect to those who lost their lives on September 11, and to express their desire for peace. As I was walking among the people after the end of the event, many stopped me to express how moved they were by my performance. Their expressions were so true and loving for they wanted to use the understanding of other cultures as a tool to help free themselves from fear.

After the airports reopened, my group Qantara was among the very first to board a plane in New York City. We performed on September 21 and 22, 2001 in Bloomington, Indiana at the Lotus Festival, and in Chicago, Illinois at Symphony Hall. In Chicago, we shared the bill with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra who performed in the first half, and Qantara in the second half after the intermission. Both sold out performances, held just after September 11, had a special intensity and synergy.

The success and timing of those two performances marked a permanent change in how I would be approached by the media. Prior to 9/11, interviewers would ask me questions related to my music

and the function of that music within the artistic context in America. Following 9/11, interviewers became overly concerned with music as a means for promoting reconciliation, understanding, and bridging cultural differences. In interviews with CNN and the Chicago Tribune, prior to the Symphony Hall concert, I emphasized that since my arrival in the United States, the Near Eastern Music Ensemble, the Qantara music group, and my own projects have always reached out to the general American public, not because a tragic event had triggered this sudden need. Cultural connection has always been an essential part of these ensembles' artistic make up.

Following 9/11, there was a general fear of traveling and performing in the music industry and among music bands and performers. Many concerts were cancelled. My approach was to continue our performances and artistic projects, regardless of this hysteria. In fact, I increased the musical activities of both Qantara and the Near Eastern Music Ensemble and worked harder to fill many holes and cracks related to Arab music and culture.

### **The West Bank**

In 1997, I was invited, along with my Near East Music Ensemble, to perform at an International Symposium in honor of Columbia University professor Edward Said. The event, entitled "Culture, Politics and Peace," was held in the Cleary Theater at the University of Windsor in Canada. Edward delivered the main address, and later that evening the estimated 500 participants were invited to attend the concert.

Our musical program consisted of vocal and instrumental selections from the Andalusian period, traditional offerings from 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Egypt, and Lebanese songs, written by the Rahbani brothers, and sung by Fairuz. We also played instrumental and improvised selections composed by myself and others.

After the performance, as I was greeting people in the Green Room behind the stage, Edward came up to me. Most people who knew the famed Palestinian-American knew him for his literary works and political writings; not as many knew that he was an accomplished pianist and music critic. I knew that his major interest, musically speaking, was in classi-

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cal European music, especially German opera—not Arab music.

So when he approached me, I was surprised by his expression of astonishment and delight. “I never realized,” he said, embracing me, “that Arab music could be that beautiful and complex.”

Sometime later, I told Edward of my eagerness to go to Palestine and work with young musicians. And that has happened. For several years now, I have offered music workshops to Palestinian kids in the West Bank and Gaza, and inside Israel: in Nazareth, Tarshiha and Haifa among other places. We work on several Arab music topics including training in ensemble performances, private lessons in various Arab musical instruments, analysis of music theory, and discussions about musical growth and awareness.

My workshops in the West Bank have been facilitated, in part, by the National Conservatory of Music in Ramallah, an affiliate of Birzeit University. The conservatory, established in 1993, provides students interested in pursuing careers in music an academic education that includes both theory and practice. Following Edward’s death in 2003, Birzeit renamed the school the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music (ESNCM). Located in Ramallah, it has branches in East Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Nablus.

In the West Bank, I generally spend 7–8 days with a group of approximately 60 young musicians between the ages of 11 and 22 in venues such as monasteries or schools equipped with facilities for room and board. Most of my interaction with them aims to bring awareness to their musicality and to

broaden their understanding of the classical Arab music repertoire. After a week of intense studying, all participants perform in small ensembles in a final concert of the music repertoires they have developed during the workshop. Parents and friends attend the concert to give much needed support to the kids.

Every year, it is moving to watch and observe the changes that the kids go through during the workshop. When I first meet with them, I can feel their lack of concentration and focus. I sense their frustration from being humiliated by the Israeli occupation of their land. I recognize and understand how much they want to live and play music like other

kids who live normal and peaceful lives. Despite the harsh conditions and realities those kids experience daily, I notice a slight boost in their morale and a lift in their spirits as the week progresses. After the final concert of last year’s workshop, a mother of one child came to me and said: “When you come here, we send our kids to you like dry plants. When they return they are like flowers blooming.”

Each year while I’m conducting my workshop, the ESNCM

holds an open audition for their students and others for the chance to study at Mount Holyoke’s Arabic Music Retreat. Usually, the jury of the conservatory and I choose three or four young music students, and, if they can get a visa from the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem, we cover their airfare, their travel expenses, and their tuition (including room and board) through our own personal donations and from generous individuals.

Last August, we secured the participation of three talented students: one from Ramallah, one from Kokab in the Galilee region and another from a



**Palestinian students at the 2006 Arabic Music Retreat; left to right: Luay Abbasi and Laith Bandak.**

— Courtesy of Kay Campbell, Arabic Music Retreat

refugee camp near Bethlehem. When the young student from the refugee camp was introduced to a group of 80 people, he quipped that Mount Holyoke was the most beautiful 'refugee camp' he had ever stayed in, bringing down the house with laughter.

Over the years, I have seen these young people benefit from the Retreat in several ways. They spend a week of instruction in Arab music performance, theory, and ensemble playing with a talented and accomplished faculty. After that, these young participants move to the next level of performance and comprehension of traditional Arab music.

Aside from music, they have a week among new friends with complete freedom of movement in Mount Holyoke. They make friends with all kinds of people, from Americans their own age to college students and adults. Seeing this happen is poignant, especially for those kids whose vistas are limited, who never have the chance to meet people outside their towns. They are obviously faced with the challenge of having to study their own musical traditions in an English speaking environment. But, while this may be difficult, it is also uplifting for them to see the entire faculty, staff, and the many American participants revere the music of their Arab culture.

Even though most of these players are already very good musicians, they still have a lot to learn in terms of maturity and discipline. They must meet the challenge of working in an intense, disciplined environment with strangers. Without distractions from checkpoints and transportation issues, they have the rare opportunity to focus on just music for a week. They become immediately aware of their weaknesses and work hard to come up to speed. They feel proud to be representing their country and always strive to be among the best players.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to share an experience I had during a pre-concert talk at the Albany Institute of History & Art. As a way of helping the audience understand the concept of the quarter-tone in Arabic music, I asked them to imagine the neighboring black and white keys on the piano. Next, I asked them to visualize one extra red key between the black and the white keys. I told them if you hit the red key it would produce a new sound known as a

quartertone, which is unfamiliar to the Western ear. I was delighted to see how this analogy enabled the audience to understand the concept of quartertone.

Teaching how to listen to the red key – going beyond the minor second – encapsulates my mission as an artist and educator. Helping people to understand and appreciate my music might encourage and stimulate an interest in learning more about Arab traditions. Such exploration will lead to a stronger and more vibrant bridge between cultures.

The importance of this bridge building is demonstrated in a letter I recently received after a musical presentation I gave at the Rudolf Steiner School in New York City. In this letter an audience member writes: "Other than the caricatures of Arab music one hears on the television occasionally, I've never had an intimate experience with this music until last night. I'm completely transfixed by its depth and beauty. I could have sat there all night. Hearing this music allowed me to feel that I was experiencing the "folk soul" of the Arab people, and I have such appreciation! I consider that a major gift in my life." ■

### The Edward Said National Conservatory of Music

The Edward Said National Conservatory of Music, founded in 1993, is a private, non-profit educational institution affiliated with Birzeit University. With a faculty of 33, it provides training for more than 600 students in Ramallah, Jerusalem and Bethlehem. In 2003, the Conservatory launched the Palestine Youth Orchestra as a cultural initiative to bring together 100 talented Palestinian musicians from the Occupied Territories and diaspora.

American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA) has been a primary supporter of the Conservatory since 1999, along with the Swedish International Development Agency and the Ford Foundation. In February of this year, ANERA sponsored a concert tour of the Conservatory's Oriental Music Ensemble to benefit the Palestine Youth Orchestra. The Ensemble performed in Washington, DC, Philadelphia and New York City.

Student fees cover only 40 percent of the Conservatory's annual budget, and 65 percent of the students receive scholarships. With sufficient funds in hand, the Conservatory would expand its Ramallah facility and open branches in Nablus and Gaza. Donations earmarked for the Conservatory can be directed to ANERA, 1522 K Street NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC, 20005.

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