The oud: a bridge to peace

By Linda Menushin Abdel Aziz
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Marking its 10th anniversary, the International Oud Festival has just finished on a crescents of success. Since its inception, the budget has increased tenfold and the audience has grown to around 10,000 enjoying the cultural richness of the two-week programme in Jerusalem and Nazareth. The festival, whose crowning glory is the oud, symbol of Arabic music, has had its hosted co-productions by Arabs and Israelis as well as artists from Turkey, Greece and India. A prominent cultural feature in Israel, the festival attracts support from the European Community, the Jerusalem Foundation, the Jerusalem municipality and the Ministry of Tourism.

In its first years the festival was limited to a couple of performances, mostly attended by Israelis who were uprooted from Arab countries after the establishment of Israel, just like their brethren the Palestinians. Both groups share a love of classical Arabic music.

Iraq'n'roll, an original performance, attracted a big audience, blending together Iraqi classical music performed by Yair Dallal, international music master, and modern rock music by Dudu Tassa. Both have Iraqi origins. Yair and Dudu embarked on a musical journey to which the audience could not stay indifferent.

Knowing both artists closely, I could not conceal my excitement for their joint venture. I have been pushing for this trend since 2003 after setting up Kanoon, an academy for Arabic music. I was convinced that there was a place in Israeli society for the recognition of the musical bounty produced by Jews from Arab countries in particular, and Arabic music generally. Israeli Oriental music (Hebrew lyrics with Arabic tunes) was considered for many years illegitimate and remained unrecognised by the media. It sold cheaply in street markets, yet was hugely popular on feasts and private occasions.

While staging the "Baghdad Coffee Shop" programme, I came across Dudu at the Israel Broadcasting Studios, while I was telling the story of the glorious Iraqi Jewish musicians, whose careers flourished in Iraq. The Thirties and Forties in Iraq were a period of coexistence between Arabs and Jews. The stories I told were highly successful and attracted a lot of people. One day, I suddenly discovered that the success stories I was telling were all false. I did not believe my eyes at the beginning but the story was confirmed by Yair Dallal. To put it more simply, it was very likely that no such people existed.

Yet the anecdote was a real one: I had been suspecting beforehand of being legends spread by Jews who missed their homeland in Arab countries, actually happened. This anecdote reflects not only the vast distance separating Dudu from his grandfather's music but also the ignorance of Israeli society of the musical bounty produced by Jews from Arab countries in particular, and Arabic music generally. Israeli Oriental music (Hebrew lyrics with Arabic tunes) was considered for many years illegitimate and remained unrecognised by the media. It sold cheaply in street markets, yet was hugely popular on feasts and private occasions.

According to a recent poll conducted by Ynet, the majority of Israelis voted for

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Oriental music as their preferred music. Many factors crystallize the Israeli perception of Oriental and Arabic music. At the turn of the 20th century it was mostly waves of Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe who left their imprint on the nascent culture and music. Religious music was receptive to Arabic music, partly because Sephardi Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef allowed psalms to be sung to Um Kulthoum’s music, which he was fond of, early in his career, while serving in Egypt, in the late 1940s. Jews applied the Maqam (type of scale) to the Psalms, which they cherished and developed while living in Iraq for 3,000 years.

The popularity that the Oud Festival enjoys is the best evidence that Oriental and Arabic music have broken through to the Israeli mainstream. The Oud Festival is a ray of hope on the cloudy horizon of our region. It is indeed an Israeli acknowledgement of Arab culture. In the future we should like to see Arab singers, such as the Syrian Sabah Fakhri, perform live, rather than settle for his repertoire performed by Israeli Arabs. Arabs in the region can leave their imprint on Israeli nascent culture through musical and cultural encounters to establish constructive dialogue and co-existence, at least for the sake of the next generation.

Global Arab Network

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