

THE JERUSALEM INTERNATIONAL OUD FESTIVAL ISRAEL

Mordechai Beck reports from a festival bringing together Israel's divided communities under the unifying banner of the pear-shaped lute

The Jerusalem International Oud Festival is a striking demonstration of musical willpower when faced with a difficult, and often hostile, reality. Given the on-going political situation and the cultural environment it engenders, it is nothing short of a miracle that the Zionist Confederation House can successfully organise an annual festival showcasing Arab and Oriental music. Launched in 2000, the festival's goal was to present local ethnic music inside Israel. But, as festival organiser Effie Benaya observes, the music had no local home, even though its roots stemmed from traditions familiar to the majority of Israelis – Jews and Arabs alike. “The ruling Ashkenazi-European ethos of the country was so potent as to deny the legitimacy of this other culture,” agrees Avi Shoshani, founder and director of the Centre for Middle Eastern Classical Music in Jerusalem. He points to the deep political and historical rifts between Israeli Jews and their immediate neighbours as the main reason for this situation. “Those running public radio, as well as the major impresarios, are invariably Ashkenazi or people brought up in the Western tradition,” he observes. “They cannot conceive of a classical music that is not Western and European. That Arabic and ethnic Jewish music has its own classical canon is beyond them, if not intellectually then emotionally. This is ‘the enemies’ music. Unfortunately this is still true, despite the success of the Oud Festivals, or [the fact] that the Andalusian Orchestra received the prestigious Israel Prize this past year.”

The central location for the Oud Festival is the beautifully appointed Zionist Confederation House, on the border between the eastern and western sides of the city. “The idea for the house,” explains Benaya, “came from Kalman Sultanik, a Polish-born, Holocaust survivor living in New York. He



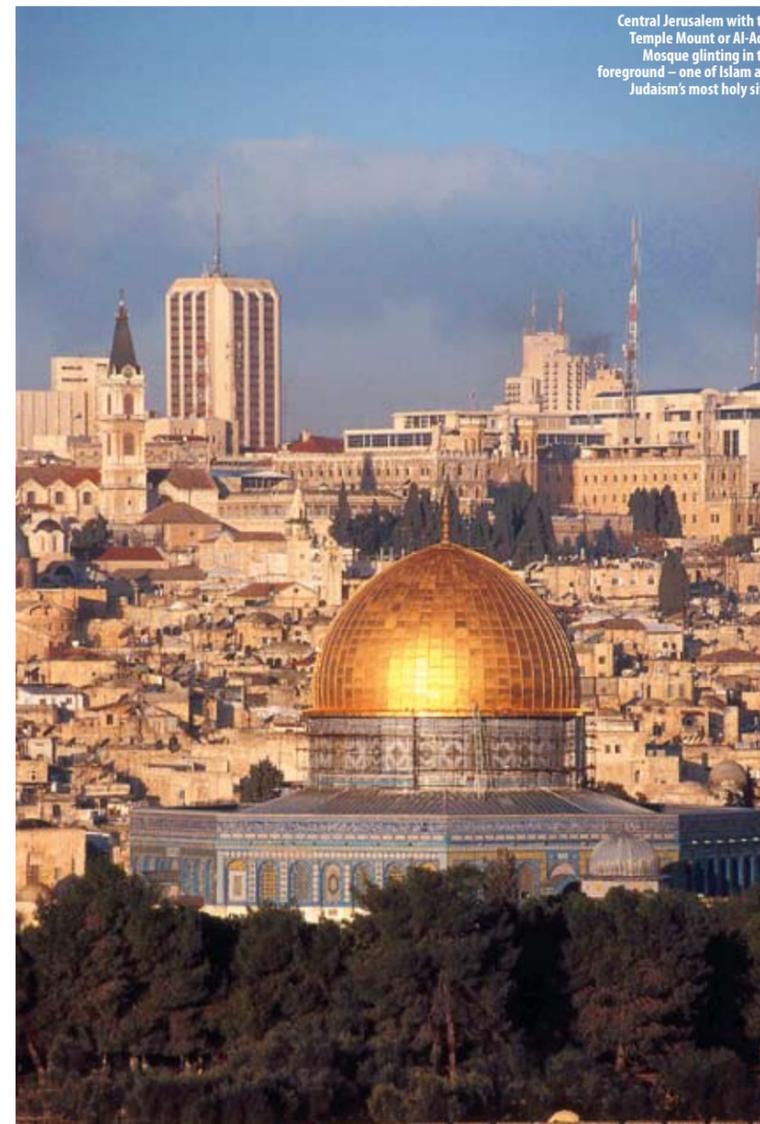
dreamed of establishing a cultural centre that would promote pluralism and dialogue between different groups, an idea that received the enthusiastic backing of the then mayor of Jerusalem, the late Teddy Kollek. Even the location – across from the walls of the Old City – makes it a perfect setting for our activities.”

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As if to underline its cultural and political context, the Oud Festival opened in the year of the second *Intifada*. Despite this, the festival took off, with half a dozen concerts in the Zionist Confederation House. “We’d had an earlier series on Arab music,” recalls Benaya. “I’d asked professor Tassir Elias of

Haifa University to organise it, and it had been an immediate success. Even though our hall holds only 100 people, I could see that there was a demand, both from the local Arab population, and from Jews who had been born in Arab lands and for whom the music was familiar. We then came up with the idea of a festival of world music in which the *oud* would act as a symbolic metaphor for the music of the entire region.”

So successful was the first festival that the decision was made to expand it and use other, bigger venues. Funding, too, increased, initially from within Israel but eventually from the European Union, since many of the artists who would appear at the festival were living in Europe. “Increased funding helped the festival reach an international level,” Benaya continues. “We were able to invite artists from abroad and request original music. The groups or individuals come to perform just for us. There are works created just for the festival. Even when we do



a special programme – say the songs of Oum Kalthoum or Mohamed Abdel Wahab – they will be with arrangements and performances by different artists, so there are no repeat performances.”

From an initial audience of 500, the festival has now grown to cater for 18,000 people, who listen to an ever-widening variety of music in some half a dozen halls throughout the capital.

From the outset, Benaya decided to build each year's event around a specific theme or composer, as well as offer novel fusions of old and new. Thus one year the focus was on the Egyptian musician Abdel Halim Hafez (1929-1977), another year on Oum Kalthoum. In the last two years the focus has shifted to the other end of the Mediterranean, recalling the climax of the ‘Golden Age’ of Spain (11th-13th centuries) where Jews, Muslims and Christians mixed and crossed-fertilised in many areas of life, including poetry and music.



HOW TO GET THERE

- There are several airlines flying to Tel Aviv (the nearest airport) from the UK, including: BA, El Al, Thomsonfly, BMI and Israir.
- From Tel Aviv you can take a bus or taxi to Jerusalem. It is roughly 45 minutes by road.
- Songlines Music Travel will be organising a trip to the 2009 festival. For more information on our trips, see p17 or www.songlines.co.uk/musictravel



The ambience of the festival also allows for novel combinations of different musical milieus – this might be an Israeli singer of popular songs with a medieval Hebrew poet, or the juxtaposition of the sharp sounds of an oud player with the sonorous tones of the Indian *vichitra veena*.

Over the years, a number of the performers have become almost ‘regulars’ – Taysir Elias, Zohar Fresco, Barry Saharov, Yair Dalal, Sameer Makhoul and Ara Dinkjian. A member of the band Night Ark, Dinkjian delighted his audience one year by bringing his father, Onnik Dinkjian, one of Armenia's most popular folk singers who, unlike his son, still lives and performs in Armenia, and is one of the most well-known ambassadors of Armenian culture. Recently, too, Dinkjian junior organised a concert called Peace on Earth that saw Armenian, Turkish, Jewish, Greek and Arab musicians play together – to demonstrate that such co-operation is possible.

No less important, the festival gives a platform to local talents who would otherwise not receive such exposure. These include Palestinians, who lack local stages, plus Bedouin and Israeli Jews from the Oriental-Sephardic tradition whose traditional melodies are normally limited to the synagogue. The nearby Centre for Middle Eastern Classical Music has also played its part, educating a whole new generation of musicians – Jews and Arabs – in the music of the Middle East. Many of their teachers and recent graduates take the stage at the annual Oud Festival.

Benaya ensures that local Arabs attend the concerts by giving out a certain number of subsidised tickets. In recent years he has staged extra performances in Arab cities such as Nazareth, the ‘Triangle’ (central Israel) and Sh’faram – additions which are joyfully received, despite the fact that the source is the Zionist Confederation House, hardly the obvious choice for nurturing local Arab culture.

The political situation does, of course, prevent some major figures from the Arab world from performing here. Benaya meets many of these musicians at other world music festivals and hears of their willingness to perform in Jerusalem, if only the political climate changes. “I have a vision,” says Benaya, “that the great classical living artists will come here. I’m optimistic. It has to happen, and soon!” ●

The Jerusalem International Oud Festival runs November 21-28 2008
www.confederationhouse.org/english



Past festival posters