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# How Do You Get to Carnegie Hall? Through Nazareth

The Polyphony Foundation of Nazareth is bridging the gap between Israel's Jewish and Arab communities. It's also turning kids into great classical musicians.

Noam Ben-Zeev | Dec 31, 2013 8:49 AM

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Nabeel Abboud-Ashkar, who started playing the violin at 8, was really just continuing in the family business.

Ten years ago his father Duaibis founded Orpheus, a nonprofit group to promote classical music in Nazareth in cooperation with nearby Jewish communities. Abboud-Ashkar went on to found the Polyphony Foundation of Nazareth, which aims “to bridge the divide between Arab and Jewish communities in Israel by creating a common ground where young people come together around classical music,” according to its website.

Polyphony happens when two or more melodic lines form a harmonious whole. For the Polyphony Foundation, the whole consists of conservatories in Nazareth and Jaffa, a youth orchestra and youth ensembles, and the Galilee Chamber Orchestra.

“Classical music, from Beethoven to the avant-garde composers, draws from many sources, so it’s open. At Orpheus, our goal is to

present the music in that spirit as a cultural and human phenomenon, not just as pleasure and entertainment,” Duaibis said when he founded Orpheus. He rejected the approach that access to classical music depends on one’s culture and economic situation.

As Nabeel Abboud-Ashkar puts it, “With Polyphony, I took Orpheus, which was established on a volunteer basis as a labor of love, to the next level.”

The next level includes the fact that in March 2012, two of Polyphony’s Arab students — violinists Feras Machour, 16, and Yamen Saadi, 15 — tied for first prize in Israel’s prestigious Paul Ben-Haim competition, in which young musicians perform compositions by Israeli composers. Both are students at the Polyphony Conservatory in Nazareth.

“Two years after our founding, 10 of our students were awarded Keren Sharett scholarships from the America-Israel Cultural Foundation, four of them at universities in Germany, the United States and Israel. That’s on top of the two students who won the competition,” says Abboud-Ashkar.

A graduate of Tel Aviv University in both physics and music, Abboud-Ashkar’s vision of a music center reaching beyond Nazareth began to come true when he met an American Jewish businessman.

“I spoke with him about a conservatory I wanted to found, about equal opportunity, about the Arab minority and young people, and about society in general, and he invited me to tour the United States. I got a completely new perspective on that trip. I went into synagogues and saw what an important cultural dimension they had, more than my own religion,” he says.

“I met with rabbis in Los Angeles and Detroit, and the question of what Judaism was took on a new importance. I visited Jewish communities and saw how different their ideals were from those I see here in Israel: their commitment, as a Jewish society, to human and civil rights, and the individual’s responsibility to contribute and effect change. It was eye-opening, and the goals were the same ones that I aspire to as an Israeli — the integration of Arabs into Israel. There I felt more Israeli than ever.”

### **Enter Yoko**

Then came Yoko Ono. After Abboud-Ashkar and his students returned after performing in the United States, recognition for his work grew. “Yoko Ono got enthusiastic over the idea and awarded us the Yoko Ono Lennon Courage Award for the Arts. [Maryland’s] Washington College awarded me an honorary doctorate in music, which was the greatest and most exciting moment of my life. The only ones to be awarded it before me were Isaac Stern and Placido Domingo.”

Polyphony has flourished since its founding in 2010 as a small conservatory with 95 students, all of them Arab. A year later student numbers increased slightly, and Abboud-Ashkar began the Alhan music-appreciation program in partnership with the Levinsky

Institute (*alhan* means melodies in Arabic). In the program, students in Nazareth's primary schools attended music classes.

When the program began, 850 students took part, and the necessary budget was enormous: \$350,000, which Abboud-Ashkar raised himself. In 2012, the conservatory had 130 students, 5 percent of them Jewish, and the number of students in the Alhan program climbed to 1,500.

That year the Polyphony Foundation established two orchestras: a youth orchestra with 20 players, 10 Arab and 10 Jewish, and the Galilee Chamber Orchestra, with 30 professional graduates. Abboud-Ashkar also led two-year seminars in which students met with musicians and intellectuals from Israel and around the world. Accordingly, the budget rose to \$600,000.

The orchestras are now bigger — the youth orchestra has 40 players — and the number of Jews and Arabs is almost equal. “Polyphony's youth orchestra has young people from Kfar Sava, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Harduf,” Abboud-Ashkar says, referring to a kibbutz in the north. “This year, a Jew and an Arab sit at every music stand.”

The Alhan program now has 4,000 students (“I want to reach 10,000 in two years,” Abboud-Ashkar says), and the number of students at the conservatory is approaching 150. The number of seminars is growing, too.

“This program is like a pyramid where the connections between the levels strengthen and nourish each other. The school program is the basis, the first path that's opened to the children. The conservatories are for those who choose to study music professionally,” Abboud-Ashkar says.

“We noticed that most of the children who want to be accepted to the conservatory are the ones who studied music in school. The greater the number who study at the conservatories, the greater the presence at the seminars. Naturally, the musicians of the youth orchestra and the ensembles are students of the conservatory, so any movement on one level of the pyramid has a direct effect on the whole.”

### **Success is contagious**

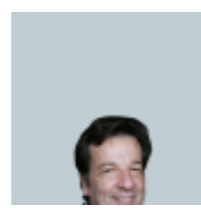
Polyphony's conservatory in Nazareth has no building of its own. It uses a school building in the afternoon. Inside, the activities run at full tilt, like private lessons with a break for a miniature concert by the top students for a visiting American donor. Both Hebrew and Arabic are spoken; the teachers and staff come from both communities and the students include Jewish children accompanied by their parents.

“Polyphony taught me to create a new reality. It enabled me to show people the beauty in it and convince them to be part of it. There's a new generation here .... We mustn't get into arguments over past political or social wrongs. Instead, we should see whether we can create a positive reality. To paraphrase the great conductor Sergiu Celibidache — that mediocrity was contagious — I say success is

contagious,” Abboud-Ashkar says.

“Polyphony is a magnet because of the high level, the positive approach, and the desire of Jews and Arabs to create together and connect. The level of teaching is very high, and the students know that anyone who doesn’t practice won’t stay. We don’t need students for the money, but for their own progress. That’s what pushes us forward. Above all, we take care that the social agenda not exist at the expense of the professional agenda, because that’s a recipe for failure.”

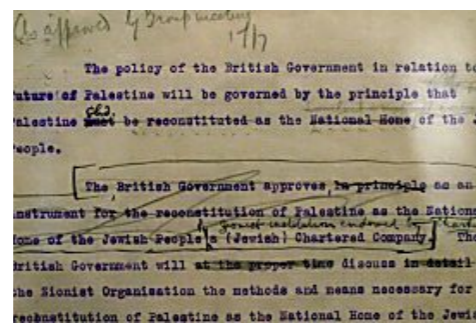
In April, Abboud-Ashkar will conduct Polyphony’s youth orchestra at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. “Carnegie Hall isn’t far either — it will happen the moment I feel that the level is suitable,” he says. “There has been a great response to our message in the United States. In our tours there, all the halls have been full.”



**Noam Ben-Zeev**  
Haaretz Correspondent



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