

Starting in Umm al-Fahm: Teaching Classical Music

The Ministry of Education has never taken responsibility for the training of Arab music teachers, and not even a single Arab music conservatory exists in Israel. The Alhan Program at Umm al-Fahm and the Polyphony Conservatory in Nazareth serve as proof that musical education for the Arab population can only grow from within it

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Once, several decades ago, music studies were compulsory in schools. Teachers taught music theory using the international Kodály Method, choirs were formed, small orchestras marched on Independence Day and in Purim parades, children sang holiday tunes and patriotic songs from songbooks, especially composed and published by the Ministry of Education. But even then, in those bygone days, there was an entire population that did not receive any music education: children in Arab-Palestinian schools in Israel.

Although attempts were made by the Ministry of Education in the 1960s to apply the Hebrew songbooks model, and anthologies of Zionist songs in Arabic were published, they were a failure - because of their low level and because they were immersed in ideology. To this day, when Arab adults are shown these songbooks from their childhood they are appalled. The Ministry of Education did not promote the training of Arab music teachers, did not encourage ensembles, and the entire Arab population was totally deprived of the right to be introduced to such an important part of life.



Duad Malchm, Music teacher in classroom

Photo: Rami Chelouche

Yet over the years, they did not remain alone: musical studies were also abandoned among the Jewish population, although their indispensability has been researched and proved, and has been discussed from every aspect. Music was removed from the list of mandatory subjects, and schools were required to expand the study of mathematics, bible studies and heritage studies. Therefore, the 1970s-80s were a barren musical period in the education system, and this subject was mainly available in specialized educational institutions - Conservatories and after school courses.

Needless to say, Arab children were not even given this opportunity: not even one Arab conservatory was founded in Israel. In the UK, music and playing musical instruments were recognized as a basic civil right, and consequently the state is obligated to provide it to each child. This is not the case in Israel.

And now, over the past two decades, a shift has occurred in this field - from the ground. Institutions such as the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, in collaboration with the Lewinsky College's Key program, the Department of Musicology at the Hebrew University, orchestras and musicians, and other bodies, have all initiated new models of musical education. In-depth, continuing and long-term studies - in contrast to the Children's Concerts approach, where children are brought to concerts and ordered to listen to famous classical music pieces, with teachers shushing them, moving among them and giving them terrifying looks, and suffering from the music just like their students. The Ministry of Education supported these initiatives, and the supervisors of national and regional musical studies began to invest in study programs and fostering initiatives. And not just for the Jewish population.

Sounds of Music

The road leading to the top of the hill on which the Araq al-Shabab School stands is narrow and steep, and a short climb reveals, from the summit, a wonderful view of the Wadi Ara and the surrounding region. This primary school is one of the few in the region where you can hear the sound of music during the school day. "I fought for these lessons" says the school's principal, Mahmoud Younis: "We were among the first among the Wadi Ara towns to introduce music studies. Music contributes to relaxation,

peace, and educates the soul - like sports. We also didn't have sports teachers here, and I fought for them".



Malchm, violin and pencil case. From 3 schools to 30

Photo: Rami Chelouche

Deputy Mayor Bilal Mahagna - an educator, math teacher and head of the PTA for over 20 years, joins the conversation, and describes the municipality's extensive support for music programs and adds: "Nothing compares to waking up in the morning to the sounds of Fairuz: they accompany you all day long and calm you; and nothing compares to falling asleep with the music of Umm Kulthum, that slides you calmly into the night. It is important for us that our children will be familiar with and experience music of all types. And how will they be familiar with it if they don't learn it at school? In the afternoon they are all at home, there are no courses or classes".

We enter a fourth grade class taught by the teacher Duad Malchm, a native of the region (1974) and graduate of the program for music education and violin studies at the Academy of Music in Jerusalem. He is teaching the minuet from Bach's suite for flute

and orchestra, and the children are excited, passionate, participate and raise their hands enthusiastically to be selected to practice the music before their classmates – and their behavior is enviable: they are not disciplined but rather are steeped in a culture of learning. Malchm repeatedly plays the music, and teaches it with movement: each musical phrase has its own movement, and through it you can quickly understand the numerous repetitions in the chapter, and its shape, the Rondo shape.

In the class's three rows, the students pretend to play the music with hand and body movements. Next, some of them approach the blackboard and demonstrate it to the class: the shape, instruments, melody, accompaniment – and using this method it seems clear to them. And it's great fun, with the music defusing the learning phobias and allowing self-expression, and the best learning is through activities and not through sitting idly. You can see cooperation among the students, alongside competition for who is most accurate. The amount of material they learn is tremendous - and it remains with them for a long time.

They will never forget this minuet. It is unlike a mathematical equation, it is absorbed deep into their self: "My goal is to change the students' listening habits. That's why I joined the Alhan program", says Younis, "this means that the parents pay 40 NIS per student, and it is held in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and the music teachers' supplementary studies. And what do we receive in return? Chamber music ensembles that perform in the school, as well as a full concert orchestra".

So what is this Alhan program (melodies in Arabic)? It became evident, after the Zionist-educational doctrine failed, that musical education for the Arab population can only develop from within the community, through educators and musicians belonging to it. Over the past two decades this is evident, among other things, in the founding of the Shfar'ama Conservatory by Amer Nakhla, and the year and a half since the establishment of the Polyphony Association by the violinist and teacher Nabeel Abboud-Ashkar from Nazareth.

In Nazareth, Abboud-Ashkar created a pyramid-like school system: the basis is Alhan: Music Studies in primary schools - and now, even in many kindergartens – based on the Key program and Levinsky College, which combine a study curriculum, teacher training

courses and concerts performed by ensembles. The second level is the Polyphony Conservatory, designed for those who want to deepen their studies - with a clear link between those who studied in the Alhan program in schools and those who study at the Conservatory in the afternoon. And at the top: a youth orchestra whose members are outstanding students, and above it – a professional orchestra of musicians named the Galilee Chamber Orchestra.

Existence, not coexistence

Dr. Dan Sagiv, the pedagogical director of the Alhan program, and instructor in teacher training courses, is the link between Levinsky College and Polyphony, after the retirement of his predecessor Dr. Duchi Liechtenstein (and after the Key program parted ways from the project). Five schools in Umm al-Fahm and the surrounding region, and 6,000 students in the Alhan program, especially in the north – these are the number of students in the project, which is continually growing, adding more and more schools that fight over it, and this is in addition to thousands of preschool children who already enjoy a taste of the music program.

“We began with three schools and now have thirty – in the triangle, Haifa and the North”, says Sagiv, and lists 150 teachers and kindergarten teachers learning in the training courses taught by instructors. “Music appreciation and understanding, how to recognize quality, selecting a repertoire, teaching methods, in-depth study of the pieces – they learn all these topics”, says Sagiv. “In Polyphony’s third year the progress is tremendous: Listen to students, their knowledge, the responses of the entire system – everything is completely different. The music has become part of language”.

In an interview with Nabeel Abboud conducted a year and a half ago, he explained his ideal: breaking down the barriers between Jews and Arabs in the study of music – not coexistence, simply existence: joint existence that stems from everyone’s need and passion for studying music. And the program is bearing fruit: two winners in the competition named after Paul Ben Haim, a competition that is truly Israeli-Jewish, were violinists from the Polyphony Conservatory in Nazareth: Firas Masour, and Yassin Saadi. (“Two years after we were founded we already have ten students that have won scholarships awarded by the America Israel Cultural Foundation, and four students in

universities in Germany, the US and Israel - in addition to the two competition winners," says Nabeel Abboud). Studying at the Conservatory are also Jewish children from the vicinity of Nazareth, with teachers that are Jewish and Arab, and the Galilee Chamber Orchestra that is also composed of musicians from both populations in equal proportion.

The name Polyphony is a musical term for multiple voices, in other words a fabric in which numerous voices are intertwined, with each one of them standing on its own, and together creating music that is greater than the sum of its parts. This is Nabeel Abboud's vision for Israeli society, as a result of which he founded, five years ago, the small, private Conservatory in Nazareth, that started with only a few dozen students, and now has hundreds – including two orchestras and musical education programs that seek to reach the hearts of those who have never studied music.

He raises the huge budget of hundreds of thousands of dollars by himself, and his dream is joint social existence that is not at the expense of uncompromising professionalism and level of teaching and playing: "Polyphony is a magnet - because of the high level, positive attitude, and desire of Jews and Arabs to create together and to interact" he said in an interview.

"The students know that anyone who does not practice will not remain. We do not need students for the tuition fees, but rather for their own progress. This is what drives us forward. This and the social context: as part of the Palestinian minority in Israel, I realized that I can fulfill the dream by collaborating with people who have a common vision. I also said this to the members of the orchestra: it is your project, you should be partners in its vision and building"

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