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BEHIND THE WALL

Amid the devastation and daily struggle of life, music brings a shred of hope to children on the West Bank.

Jessica Duchon reports

The soldier in the booth is busy. I think he's playing a computer game. The traffic at the checkpoint builds, but he doesn't notice. Beside him, a machine gun points towards our car. Nobody dares to toot to get attention. After about seven minutes, he waves a bored hand, ushering us on.

This sort of hold-up is typical – indeed, rather mild – for a day in the Occupied West Bank. But when we finally reach Ramallah, behind the busy main streets there lies a little oasis: a peaceful courtyard decked with honeysuckle is home to Al Kamandjati, an independent music school whose name means The Violinist. The Barenboim-Said Foundation is the most famous music-education institution in the Palestinian territories; I had gone in search of the others.

Al Kamandjati's founder, Ramzi Aburedwan, spent eight years studying the viola in France before returning to Palestine to bring music to children who are contending with the poverty and trauma of military occupation. The Edward Said National Conservatory, established since 1993, does similar work on a larger scale, with a network of music schools across Palestine providing music education in both western and Arabic instruments for children aged six upwards.

Aburedwan grew up in the Al-Amari refugee camp in Ramallah, but was lucky enough to encounter a

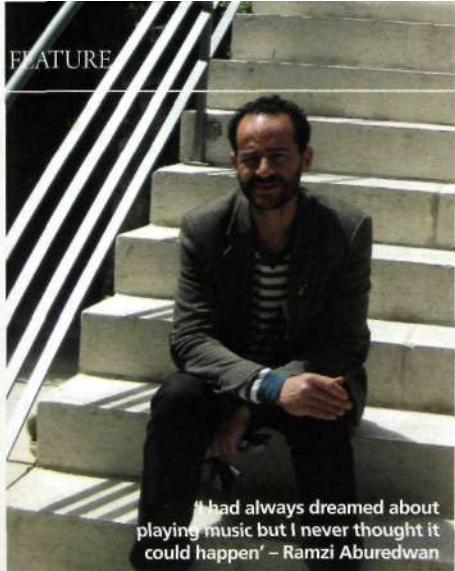
teacher who was visiting after the Oslo Agreement. 'She invited me to a stringed instrument workshop,' Aburedwan tells me. 'I met the viola and fell in love immediately. I had always dreamed about playing music but I never thought it could happen – I was from a poor family that could not afford music lessons.' Al Kamandjati and the ESNC are both addressing this issue thanks to support from various international foundations, Unesco and the EU: Al Kamandjati gives free lessons and prioritises the most impoverished children, while at the ESNC about 75% of pupils are on full scholarships.

'In 2002 after the invasion I decided that I have to start work,' Aburedwan relates. 'It was difficult; there was a curfew and all the children I met were drawing tanks and guns. At the same time in France I saw children painting the sun and houses.'

He called friends around Europe and asked for help. Everyone said yes. 'They all came over at their own expense and we toured Palestine doing concerts and workshops as a first step, to show the kids, parents and donors what we could do. We gathered 100 instruments from around the world and in September 2005 we started here with 20 kids. Now we have 500.'

Jalil Elias, director of the Bethlehem branch of the ESNC, is excited about his school's new building, due to open later this year; expansion is order of the day.





'I had always dreamed about playing music but I never thought it could happen' – Ramzi Aburedwan

The ESNC's students currently total about 1,800, plus 500 on the outreach programme. 'We teach music to give the children a new mentality and a new life; we teach them music to let them breathe,' he declares. 'This is how we can let the Palestinian people, through music, find peace for themselves; we believe that music is one voice for all, across the world. Wherever we come from, a soul is a soul. Together we need peace and freedom, through music and in a peaceful way.'

Elias and Aburedwan, asked about the biggest challenge facing them, had one answer: 'The occupation.' One problem is lack of continuity; teachers, drawn from all over Europe and America, are usually only allowed into Palestine for three months at a time.



But there's worse. Concerts arranged in Jerusalem or Gaza often cannot take place because permits are not granted; and a one- or two-hour journey to outreach projects or performances can take three or four hours due to the number of checkpoints en route (eight in the 140km journey from Ramallah to Jenin, for instance).

'They don't want us to develop, to think, to play music, to dance, to open our mentality; to open out to the world,' says Elias. 'They want us to be like cows or dogs, leave our own land and go abroad. Whatever it costs us, we are going to stay here and we will continue teaching music. Music is our soul, our breath, our feelings and our freedom. Politics is dirty: lies, lies, lies. But when you play music like Beethoven or Mozart, you play from your depths, your feelings, your touch and your heart. Music is truth.'

Daniel Barenboim's West-Eastern Divan Orchestra has dominated the western media with its message of dialogue between young Israeli and Arab musicians. Magnificent it may be on a musical level, but neither Elias nor Aburedwan feel that the WEDO is yet helping the situation on the ground.

Aburedwan has played in the WEDO, but suggests: 'Performing in the best halls in the world has no connection with the reality here. I think this orchestra will have more meaning if it takes a very clear position and condemns the occupation much more strongly.'

'With the attention abroad for the WEDO, people have a good conscience and feel that something positive is happening – but it's not true, because to solve the problem you have to *solve* it. We are supporting very much now the economic boycott campaign because we believe in South Africa this was an effective form of peaceful resistance.'

'There are more than 300 scholarships available to people in Gaza,' Aburedwan continues, 'but the Israelis will not let them go out. So we are with the boycott of Israeli education until they let the Palestinians have their own education. I am not allowed to play my concerts in Gaza or Jerusalem, so I am calling also for a cultural boycott until I, as a human being and part of this earth, have the right to play to my cousins, friends and normal people in Gaza.'

Touring the area it's clear that ordinary Palestinians exist in an atmosphere of constant fear, as if within a pressure-cooker – penned in, dependent on the whims of their occupiers and the complex oddities of the permit system. Nobody we met could pass a day without encountering Israeli soldiers, machine guns, checkpoints, tanks or the 'separation wall', a concrete monstrosity that in places is nine metres high. On it, someone has scrawled: *CONTROL <ALT> DELETE*; another has added: *ONE WALL, TWO JAILS*.

Music cannot solve these problems. But if it can provide a shred of brightness, it can keep hope alive. In such an atmosphere, the significance of that is simply immeasurable.



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