

Jerusalem – Choral Music Overcoming Borders

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Jerusalem is the city that provokes noble sentiments and spirituality; it is truly the only city in the world that all the three Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) hold sacred, but it is also a city that provokes territorial possessiveness. Unusually, it was also the place, where, in February, 2010, three youth choirs which live close to each other demonstrated yet again that singing together and collaborating can be a conscious and assertive act to create a better world. And, historically, the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land monastery and administration hosted a five-day conducting course for Arab and Israeli conductors.

The choirs: Efroni Choir from Israel; the Sawa Choir from Shefar'am (the Palestinian part of Israel) and the Yasmeen Choir from East Jerusalem have a long history of collaboration. Their conductors, Maya Shavit, Eva de Mayo and Rahib Haddad, and Hania Soudah-Sabbara have quietly and effectively pursued their collective commitment to overcome the hurdles created by political realities to give the young people in their choirs the experience of musical collaboration across borders. For many years, several musical encounters in Israel and in Europe between these young people have fostered close personal connections between the singers and their visionary conductors, and created an awareness of each other's musical traditions.

IFCM founded its Conductors without Borders project a few years ago, primarily for building professional expertise in

countries where access to educational programs in conducting is limited. When IFCM gave its approval to designate this project, partly supported by the Eric Ericson International Choral Centre through the Carpe Vitam Foundation, as a Conductors without Borders project, it affirmed the continuing need for choirs and their conductors to be supported in border crossings. Indeed, the reality of borders as boundary restrictions is a daily source of anguish for both Arabs and Israelis.

Each of these choirs has its own border problems and different social contexts. The Sawa Choir, based in the Arab part of Israel, was founded by Eva de Mayo and Rahib Haddad as a Jewish-Arab partnership and this is the source of their rich singing. The Yasmeeen Choir, with Palestinian Catholic singers from East Jerusalem, is part of an innovative music education program, the Magnificat Institute, located in the Franciscan monastery in the old city of Jerusalem. The Efroni Choir from Emek-Hefer in Israel is an extensive program, distinguished internationally, and seeks to represent the diversity of Israel's musical cultures.

I came to be a part of this as a guest of the three choirs. I worked with each choir individually and then together just prior to the combined concert – Blessing – in which I conducted them in three pieces at the conclusion. The concert was notable in its rich and fascinating diversity of repertoire representing the many cultural wellsprings of the three choirs. For example, the Efroni Choir sang Hebrew music for the first time in this part of Jerusalem.

The Blessing concert was planned to take place in the Augusta Victoria church on the north side of the Mount of Olives, a site holy to both Christianity and Judaism. The Garden of Gethsemane is at the foot of the Mount of Olives. The substantial opposition from local Palestinians who saw this concert as a step towards normalisation resulted in the church closing its doors to the concert. In the hours preceding the

concert, the organisers and the conductors, committed to the human dimensions of the project, decided to move the concert to the relatively small performance venue within the Franciscan compound.

The singers and their conductors, in intimate and crowded conditions, created a highly-charged atmosphere of intense artistic and personal engagement. It was marvellous to see – here were the three choirs living in profoundly difficult situations, with no common language save English, simply singing and interacting together as though it was a natural thing to do. According to the conductors and audience members, the enthusiasm, the feelings of happiness and reconciliation swept all in an unprecedented tidal wave of transformational emotion.

On the day after the concert, I started teaching a conducting course to a group of Arab and Israeli conductors. Mostly young, and all with substantial musical experience, the purpose was on the acquisition of conducting skills and techniques, vocal ability, sight-singing skills. It was profoundly moving to see these conductors in a mutually supportive learning situation, experiencing the vulnerability of standing in front of their peers and developing their own individual conducting styles.

The words of the project participants have an eloquence that needs no explanation – see below.

Music is irrepressible and choral music with its access and appeal has the power to engage both heart and mind. The youth choral concert and the conducting course are testimony to the courage and vision of the four conductors, Maya, Hania, Rahib and Eva, and the many supporters of their choirs. The years ahead will likely have immense challenges for the people in this region but choral music there will continue to build bridges of understanding, and to provide consolation and comfort in dark times.

Commentary

...the amount of people who gathered in that small room, who didn't care who is an Arab and who is Israeli, that came to enjoy the atmosphere and the music... (Inbal Donnenfeld, Efroni Choir)

In Jerusalem, the city that has been for a long period the symbol of the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, where violence and national and religious struggles have blinded the beauty of variations in this special city, we could definitely create an amazing experience of cooperation between people who come from completely different backgrounds. By the power of music we were so united in our voices and hearts what made every minute of that concert unique and unforgettable! This concert has been a true Blessing for each of us, an event that gave us again the chance to open our hearts and minds and stand up for our beliefs in peace and coexistence" Nadine Abboud (Sawa Choir)

Maybe the idea to bring Arabs and Israeli to sing together will bring peace but while when i was singing with the Israeli choir I felt music may bring people together but we need justice for peace (Maura Makhoul, Yasmeeen Choir).

...a dream of a moment of joy and peace, that will help us remember that we have more in common than we think... Rawan Azzam (Sawa Choir)

I would not trade this week for any other. There was no tension whatsoever, I always realize that in doing music or

through music itself we forget differences and just want to enjoy the heavenly sounds that we can make through peace alone. (Jamil Freij, conducting course participant, East Jerusalem)