



ABSOLUTE MUSIC

Nabeel Abboud Ashkar was a young violinist in Daniel Barenboim's West-Eastern Divan Orchestra when he envisioned an organisation that could connect the Arab community of his home town of Nazareth with Western classical music, and bring together Israel's different communities through shared music making. **Charlotte Gardner** travelled to the Incontri in Terra di Siena festival to meet him, and to witness the Polyphony Foundation in action



Above The Polyphony Ensemble plays at the opening night of the Incontri in Terra di Siena festival, in La Foce Cortile di Fattoria, Tuscany

Right The city of Nazareth, home to much of Israel's Palestinian population

he chords are only there if you have a physical connection. If you count one, two, three, four, five, it's never going to happen.' Pianist Saleem Ashkar is halfway off his stool, leaning intently towards the young Israeli string quartet the Polyphony Ensemble, representatives from the Polyphony Foundation in Nazareth. That evening they will play the opening concert of Southern Tuscany's Incontri in Terra di Siena festival, and while they may have momentarily been brought to a halt these are merely final touches; the quartet's playing has in fact been casting a profound spell over this deep-ochre-hued practice room in Montepulciano's Palazzo Ricci. As a result, it'll take more than a brief pause to puncture the feeling of being suspended in an emotionally taut bubble, far removed from the late July sun and panoramic views from the 16th-century Palazzo's loggia just on the other side of our door.

The chords in question are the ones right at the end of the Adagio, where in contrast to the lost, floating fugal conversation that has until now dominated the movement, the four string players suddenly lock in intense pianissimo union as the piano treads softly around them. The bars are taken again, this time the musicians eyeing each other intently. Then, mission accomplished, expressions of concentration give way to a quiet exchange of smiles as they launch into the scherzo's triple-time energy.

The extraordinary story of the Polyphony Foundation is the reason I've come to the festival, and to a journalist onlooker the concept of physical connection between these musicians feels potentially significant. For whereas 21-year-old first violinist Tal First and 15-year old violist Ella Bukszpan are Jewish, 16-year-old second violinist Jerjes Saleh and 21-year-old cellist Mahdi Saadi are Arab, and in Israeli society the Arab and Jewish communities rarely come into contact with each other, let alone socialise. Consequently, without the work of Polyphony these four would never have met, still less played Shostakovich together.

Even so, when I meet the foundation's co-founder and artistic director violinist Nabeel Abboud Ashkar – whose brother Saleem has joined the ensemble in Italy as a guest artist – he is quick to put a lid on any extramusical connections I might be making. 'Music doesn't need to have any additional symbolism to make it relevant,' he points out. 'And if you were to take out all the non-musical aspects of Polyphony, the music itself is enough for it to exist. However, because the focus is music, the rest can grow out of it naturally.' And certainly, Polyphony's story requires no journalist making extramusical connections to give it power.

The two brothers are from the all-Arab Israeli city of Nazareth, which is home to a large proportion of the country's roughly 21 per cent Palestinian minority. As a demographic group, Arabs are >



almost completely cut off from the Jewish majority, with children educated in separate schools with separate curriculums, and separate ministry of education offices and budgets. Nazareth itself is a challenging place to live because, despite significant population growth since 1948, it hasn't been allocated lands for expansion. As a result, the only option is for people to build on top of each other, and this is done in a chaotic fashion. As for Western art and classical music, during the brothers' childhood Nazareth society was neither exposed nor open to it, which in turn was reflected and reinforced by a school curriculum focusing on science, technology, engineering, mathematics and law – the subjects considered more likely to ensure future employment.

However, the Abboud Ashkars were a family who didn't conform. 'It started with our parents being different,' explains Nabeel. 'We grew up listening to Bach and Beethoven, and their first priority for us was to study music, which when we were younger was quite a commitment because they had to take us to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv for music lessons each week.' The two brothers were very different: 'From the first day that Saleem put his hands on the piano he was practising non-stop,' Abboud Ashkar begins. 'I, on the other hand, was the wild one, causing trouble, getting into fights and stuff like that,' he chuckles. 'Still, from the first day I touched a violin aged seven it did become an integral part of myself and my identity.'

In 1996, with Saleem already studying the piano at the Royal Academy of Music in London, Nabeel gained a place on a six-year music and physics degree at Tel Aviv University. Then, in 1999, the extraordinary happened: Daniel Barenboim founded the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra and invited both brothers to join its first cohort. 'It was something that we never imagined would be possible or available to us,' he reminisces, smiling. 'But the level that Barenboim and the teachers were expecting was definitely beyond my own level at that point, because despite my parents' incredible efforts I wasn't a prodigy, and I had suffered from incorrect teaching.'

Abboud Ashkar worked at correcting his technique, and by the time he had completed his degree in 2002 he had decided to pursue the violin. 'I was much better at science than I was at the violin, but I felt that learning a major piece of music, facing all the technical difficulties and being able to perform it on stage, was a far more self-enriching challenge than solving another equation or dealing with electric circuits.'

The fact that his Divan violin teacher was based in Berlin also offered him a way out of Israel. 'I was out of place there,' he explains. 'I didn't have much in common with my own community in Nazareth because of my commitment to classical music, and in Tel Aviv I was the Arab guy. So when I moved to Berlin I wasn't necessarily thinking that I'd ever want to return home. I was looking for a better place to live.' Germany, however, would turn out to be a short adventure. Abboud Ashkar drew Nazareth to Barenboim's attention, and Barenboim asked him for a proposal for a music school there. The Barenboim–Said Foundation offered a grant to make it happen – but with the condition that Abboud Ashkar set up the school himself. So, in 2006, he returned.

What followed was pure grassroots effort. Week after week, for four or five hours each day, Abboud Ashkar visited Nazareth primary schools, presenting instruments to children who had never seen a violin or cello before. He would then set himself up in a

classroom with a keyboard and interview all the interested children one at a time: 'And most were interested, because at least it was an opportunity to leave class for a few minutes.'

That September, the Barenboim–Said Conservatory opened with 25 students, taught by Abboud Ashkar and three Jewish teachers commuting from Tel Aviv. After eight months, the students had made the kind of progress one would expect to take two years, so the next year the conservatory doubled its numbers. Then, after another four years or so, its students started winning competitions in Tel Aviv. 'That was quite a thing, to have ten- and eleven-year-old kids from Nazareth going to Tel Aviv,' remembers Abboud Ashkar with pleasure. 'It was funny to see them go on stage, play very well, then say "Nazareth" when the jury asked where they came from. Usually, the jury had to ask twice to make sure that they'd heard right.' He laughs quietly. 'Then it was, "Who's your teacher?" And the reply: "Nabeel Abboud Ashkar," and the jury would ask, "What?"' He then concludes with matter-of-fact satisfaction, 'But today everybody knows that Nazareth is one of the major classical music centres in Israel. We were able to break this stereotype that classical music and the Arab community don't necessarily sit well together.'

The conservatory continued to expand. By 2011, 14 or 15 Jewish teachers were travelling to Nazareth each week,

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Nabeel Abboud Ashkar coaches the Polyphony Ensemble in its pre-concert rehearsal

and the first student had been accepted to study at the Hanns Eisler School of Music in Berlin. At this point Abboud Ashkar met New York couple Craig and Deborah Cogut, who believed the conservatory had the potential to make an impact on Israeli society as a whole. So they joined Abboud Ashkar to launch Polyphony, a pyramid of interlinked educational programmes with a vision of social change through music.

First came the Alhan Music Appreciation programme, run by specially trained teachers in Arab elementary schools, including two concert experiences over the year: a classroom-based chamber performance, then a narrated concert with full orchestra in a concert hall. Alhan began in 2011 with three schools and around 450 students, with Polyphony financing everything from the hiring and training of teachers to the buses bringing the children to the concerts. 'We just pestered everybody, saying, "Please, just let us show you that music is important!"' recalls Abboud Ashkar, laughing. 'It was quite a ridiculous situation, but I believed that in a year or two they would understand, and would then be willing to step up to make sure that this continued.'

Even he couldn't have foreseen the extent of the stepping up, though. After two years the programme was recognised by the ministry of education, which began fully financing the teacher training. Next came a subsidy for the concerts themselves, plus a partnership with the Levinsky College of Education in Tel Aviv to develop the curriculum. A three-year grant from the European Union followed, for 2014–17. As a result, this year 170 teachers were trained and the programme is reaching around 11,000 children across 35 elementary schools and 160 kindergartens.

Talented children spotted through the Alhan programme are then fed into two conservatoires: the original one in Nazareth, now renamed the Polyphony Conservatory, and another in Jaffa, which opened its doors in 2009. Recorder, winds, brass, guitar, mandolin and voice are now available in addition to the original strings and piano, and there is funding for poorer families.

The most talented conservatoire students then feed up into the Scholar-in-Residence seminars. Established in 2012 and taking place twice a year, these seminars

represent the most intensive interaction between Arab and Jewish youth musicians that Polyphony offers, bringing together between 30 and 55 young musicians, half Arab (mostly from the Polyphony conservatoires) and half Jewish (from all over Israel), for five-day orchestral workshops coached by members of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and the Munich Philharmonic, complemented by an academic curriculum examining the historical, political and social context of the music being performed. 'The idea is to show young musicians that they're a power for social change,' Abboud Ashkar explains. 'For instance, when we performed repertoire by Brahms, the Music and Progress course took an article by Schoenberg describing Brahms as a progressive and asked, what was progressive at the time of Brahms? This then leads to, "What is progressive in music, science and society? Are we progressive people?"'

What the seminars don't do is specifically address the social problems between the two Israeli communities. 'We leave that to them, actually,' says Abboud Ashkar. 'The ones that feel more comfortable go and talk about things – often about the differences in the way that they see each other. Everyone comes with a set of stereotypes, which they realise is wrong.' That night in Italy, members of the Polyphony Ensemble unwittingly cement his point after the concert as they pack up their instruments. 'Ella and I come from very open families,' states First, 'so it's not like Polyphony changed our concept.' Saadi, who didn't even know what a cello was when Abboud Ashkar found him in 2006, immediately counters, 'But before Polyphony, did you even imagine that an Arab would play a classical instrument?' First thinks, then owns, 'No, I was very surprised.' To which Saadi responds, 'Me too. So Polyphony brought the two communities together and made the weaker one, the Arab one, stronger. It's changed my life.'

The exchange is friendly and relaxed. There's a palpable team spirit despite this being the first time they've performed together as a chamber ensemble, and this is underlined when I ask where they see the future of Israel and of themselves as ►



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Israelis. Quick as a flash, the joke comes, 'Well, when they change prime ministers,' followed by group laughter. However, First then becomes serious: 'I don't know. But I can definitely say that *we* have no problem with each other.'

At the top of the Polyphony 'pyramid' is the Galilee Chamber Orchestra, a professional ensemble into which the most talented Polyphony youth orchestra musicians ascend. They perform the Alhan-narrated concerts, and also host an annual concert series with international soloists at the Nazareth Industrial Park. Because, as Abboud Ashkar points out, 'It's not enough to cultivate talents, because talents will leave if they don't have the appreciation of their own community.'

As for the impact of all these programmes, it has been truly immense – not least in terms of the original goal of levelling the educational playing field. 'Arab parents have told me that without our work they wouldn't see any reason to stay in Nazareth,' says Abboud Ashkar. 'It's providing a very important educational and cultural anchor which, given all the limitations and difficulties of the city, gives the young people and their parents a way out. Also, today, because of what we do, kids in Nazareth don't have to travel to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv as Saleem and I had to, and that gives me a great sense of accomplishment.'

Then there's the social impact. Abboud Ashkar recounts: 'A mother told me recently that of the many education programmes her children are involved in, this is the only one where you leave politics at the door. We've been able to create a space where instead it's about music, and people's ability to communicate on a personal level. And once that is done, politics gets a different perspective.'

For many people, all this would qualify as mission accomplished, but not for Abboud Ashkar. 'The scalability of the Polyphony programmes is endless,' he begins. 'The Alhan programme can grow not only into many more schools but can also be intensified in terms of interaction. This year for the first time a selection of Arab and Jewish classes will actually be visiting each other, but we can't do that with everyone at the moment because it's a matter of resources. Also, you can always expand conservatoires, and the youth orchestra could also grow and tour Israel and the world.' And as for Nazareth itself: 'It should have a multi-arts centre, not just a small conservatoire,' Abboud Ashkar states. 'There's a need, and there's a talent.'

He also believes that the Polyphony model is relevant beyond Israel's borders, helping minorities to integrate by creating common ground through music. 'Imagine two Syrian refugees winning a major competition, eight years from now. How much would that change the way that the German people look at Syrian refugees?'

In the meantime, performances outside Israel such as this Italian festival appearance mean a great deal. As Abboud Ashkar explains to the sell-out audience packed into La Foce estate's inner courtyard that evening: 'It's empowering for these musicians to see that there are people out there who care that we are making a difference.'

Even so, what ultimately lodges this concert in the memory, and what prompted a standing ovation from a clearly moved audience, was not the quartet's story but its playing. Which brings me back to that Shostakovich quintet: a piece of incredible emotional intensity which, despite being the work of a composer much associated with politically inspired subtexts, is entirely free of hidden meaning. Absolute music. Neither of the Abboud Ashkar brothers intended a connection, but the resonance it carried through these musicians was still profound. ●