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#### **The oud: a bridge to peace**

by **Linda Menuhin Abdel Aziz**

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JERUSALEM - Marking its 10th anniversary, the International Oud Festival has just finished on a crescendo of success. Since its inception, the budget has increased tenfold and the audience has grown to around 10,000 enjoying the cultural richness of the two-week programme in Jerusalem and Nazareth. The festival, whose crowning glory is the oud, symbol of Arabic music, has this year hosted co-productions by Arabs and Israelis as well as artists from Turkey, Greece and India. A prominent cultural feature in Israel, the festival attracts support from the European Community, the Jerusalem Foundation, the Jerusalem municipality and the Ministry of Tourism.

In its first years the festival was limited to a couple of performances, mostly attended by Israelis who were uprooted from Arab countries after the establishment of Israel, just like their brethren the Palestinians. Both groups share a love of classical Arabic music.

Iraq'n'roll, an original performance, attracted a big audience, blending together Iraqi classical music performed by Yair Dallal, international music master, and modern rock music by Dudu Tassa. Both have Iraqi origins. Yair and Dudu embarked on a musical journey to which the audience could not stay indifferent.

Knowing both artists closely, I could not conceal my excitement for their joint venture: I have been pushing for this trend since 2003 after setting up Kanoon, an organisation to promote Iraqi Jewish music. Yair Dallal is a well-known music composer. He focuses on the revival of the Iraqi Jewish repertoire. Jews had developed classical music in modern Iraq—such as the al-Kuwaity brothers who started their musical journey in the first half of the twentieth century there. Dudu is the grandchild of Daoud Al-Kuwaity, brother of Saleh Al-Kuwaity, who left behind around 1,200 lyrics in Arabic. Dudu's interest in rock music, Reggae and ethnic music developed from an early age.

While staging the "Baghdad Coffee Shop" programme, I came across Dudu at the Israel Broadcasting Studios, while I was telling the story of the glorious Iraqi Jewish musicians, whose careers flourished in Iraq. The Thirties and Forties in Iraq were a period of coexistence between Arabs and Jews. The stories I told included the substantial contribution of the al-Kuwaity brothers to Iraqi modern music. Both musicians were very close to King Faisal, who set up the first classical Baghdad bandstand at Alzehour Palace. There they went on the air, even before the Iraqi Broadcasting Service was properly established. But their career nose-dived following their departure to Israel.

During the interview, Dudu suddenly realised that the success stories he suspected beforehand of being legends spread by Jews who missed their homeland in Arab countries, actually happened. This anecdote reflects not only the vast distance separating Dudu from his grandfather's music but also the ignorance of Israeli society of the musical bounty produced by Jews from Arab countries in particular, and Arabic music generally. Israeli Oriental music (Hebrew lyrics with Arabic tunes) was considered for many years illegitimate and remained unrecognised by the media. It sold cheaply in street markets, yet was hugely popular on feasts and private occasions.

According to a recent poll conducted by Ynet, the majority of Israelis voted for Oriental music as their preferred music. Many factors crystallize the Israeli perception of

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Oriental and Arabic music. At the turn of the 20th century it was mostly waves of Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe who left their imprint on the nascent culture and music. Religious music was receptive to Arabic music, partly because Sephardi Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef allowed psalms to be sung to Um Kulthoum's music, which he was fond of, early in his career, while serving in Egypt, in the late 1940s. Iraqi Jews applied the Maqam (type of scale) to the Psalms, which they cherished and developed while living in Iraq for 3,000 years.

The popularity that the Oud Festival enjoys is the best evidence that Oriental and Arabic music have broken through to the Israeli mainstream. The Oud Festival is a ray of hope on the cloudy horizon of our region. It is indeed an Israeli acknowledgement of Arab culture. In the future we should like to see Arab singers, such as the Syrian Sabah Fakhri, perform live, rather than settle for his repertoire performed by Israeli Arabs. Arabs in the region can leave their imprint on Israeli nascent culture through musical and cultural encounters to establish constructive dialogue and co-existence, at least for the sake of the next generation.

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\* Linda Menuhin Abdel Aziz is an active member of Israeli civil society, a member of the board of The Smart Middle East (<http://www.smart-middle-east.org.il>) and Justice for Jews from Arab countries (<http://www.justiceforjews.com>), and a founding member of the Israel-Syria Peace Society. This article first appeared in Elaph in Arabic on 6 November 2009 and is distributed by the Common Ground News Service (CGNews) with permission from the author.

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