

Can classical music come out of Nazareth?

Nabeel Ashkar has worked for years to bring Western art music to Arab young people in Galilee.

by [Mordechai Beck](#) in the [August 26, 2020](#) issue



Nabeel Abboud Ashkar (Photo by Wasim Karam)

Nazareth, the childhood home of Jesus, is laden with historical and religious memories. The city has a colorful marketplace, a distinct local cuisine, olive presses, and spice shops. It is the largest Arab city in Israel, with about 60 percent of its inhabitants Muslim and 40 percent Christian. Last December, another element was added to the city's lively cultural mix: a Festival of Liturgy to mark the Christmas season.

The festival, intended to be an annual event, is the brainchild of a Christian native of Nazareth, Nabeel Abboud Ashkar, and is the climax of years he has spent trying to bring Western classical music into the lives of Arab young people in Galilee and the rest of Israel.

When he was a boy, Ashkar's parents encouraged him and his brother, Saleem, to study classical music. "Our parents were very passionate about classical music, which at that time in Nazareth was very unusual," he recalled. Both boys were taught to play the violin and the piano, and weekly they were taken to concerts in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, or Haifa.

Saleem turned out to be a prodigy at the piano. He performed a Mozart concerto with the Haifa Symphony Orchestra at the age of ten. At age 17, he played in Chicago with Zubin Mehta and the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, and at 22 he played at New York's Carnegie Hall.

Nabeel's career was not so straightforward. "I loved my music but wasn't as focused as my brother," he said. He studied physics and music at university and then joined the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra based in Seville, Spain, which was founded by Jewish pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim. This orchestra brings together young Israelis and Arabs from across the Middle East to play together in some of the most prestigious auditoriums in the world.

After further studies in Germany, Ashkar returned to Nazareth in 2006 with the idea of establishing the city's first classical music conservatory. The project was supported by the Barenboim-Said Foundation, created by Barenboim and the Arab scholar Edward Said with the aim of fostering intercultural understanding.

The school started with 25 students, using teachers who came from Tel Aviv twice a week. "By the end of the first year, we surprised even ourselves in the progress the kids had made, in the commitment of the parents, and in the relationship between parents and teachers."

Music is not a part of the curriculum in most Jewish or Arab schools in Israel, so Ashkar had to start from scratch. Lessons were offered after school. By the end of the first year, the number of students nearly doubled, so it was clear that there was a demand for the program. The students were Christian, Muslim, and eventually Jewish as well.

A landmark moment occurred when Ashkar took a group of eight- and nine-year-olds who had been playing their instrument for only two and a half years to a performance competition in Tel Aviv. To enter the competition, the school had to pretend the students had been playing for five years. Ten students won prizes. "When the jury asked where they were from, and they said 'Nazareth,' they had to

ask them again. They couldn't believe it!" said Askhar.

In 2012, two conservatory students won first prize in a violin competition in Tel Aviv. This was another big moment for the program. "We proved that there is talent in Nazareth and that it is possible to give Arab youngsters a path to musical excellence," said Ashkar. "It showed everyone that there is a space for us in Israeli culture, especially in the area of classical music."

Ashkar decided to expand the program to other parts of Israel. "We could create the possibility for Arab and Jewish youngsters to study and play together. This creates channels for dialogue and makes the Arab youngsters feel more integrated into the local scene."

The Festival of Liturgy took place in the Basilica of Jesus the Adolescent, known locally as the Salesian Church or the Salesian Don Bosco Church. Built in 1923 by the Roman Catholic community of the Salesians of Don Bosco, its tall, chalk-white stone tower dominates the city. Its Gothic interior enhances every musical performance.

The festival began with a concert by a choir from Germany, the Collegium Vocale Hannover, singing a variety of sacred music works by composers from Tallis to Brahms to Britten. Conductor Florian Lohmann apologized when introducing Chaim Nahman Bialik's *Shabbat Hamalka (The Sabbath Queen)*, saying he hoped the choir's Hebrew accents were right. They were.

Another concert took place at the auditorium in the Nazareth Industrial Park. It featured the Ensemble Folklórico Latinoamericano, which offered a rendition of Ariel Ramírez's *Misa Criolla*. The members of the group, which included Israeli musicians, were joined by the Tel Aviv Collegium Singers.

"The idea of the liturgical festival," Ashkar explained, "is to celebrate and enjoy the very rich classical musical tradition that came out of the church between the 17th and 20th centuries." Though its origins are in Christian liturgy, it appeals to people with different religious backgrounds, he observed.

The festival also included some music from the Jewish tradition, Askhar said, and "we are now searching for Muslim liturgical elements to include in the future festivals."

The aim of the festival is to bring people together from all backgrounds “to celebrate the beauty and significance of the city of Nazareth while experiencing great music. . . . It is by no means an attempt to carry out a festival for Christians only.” In fact, the festival was supported and sponsored by Muslim, Jewish, and Christian business owners and families. Well over half the audience were Jewish Israelis from all over the country. The remaining audiences were both Christians and Muslims from the Nazareth area.

The German choir that opened the festival performed two more concerts in Nazareth, one featuring Benjamin Britten’s *A Ceremony of Carols* at the New Maronite Church and the other featuring Mozart’s Mass in C Minor at the Don Bosco Church. It was accompanied by the Galilee Chamber Orchestra, one of Ashkar’s many projects.

The orchestra is another part of the story of Nazareth’s discovery of Western classical music. In 2012, the group was made up almost entirely of Jews. Ashkar wanted to create an Arab orchestra, and at first, people made fun of him for this effort: “You’re doing an ‘Arab orchestra’ with three Arabs!” By 2019, half of the orchestra’s members were Arab, along with the conductor—Ashkar’s brother, Saleem. Many of the Arab musicians are students from the Nazareth conservatory. Members are paid, and before the pandemic the orchestra performed four to six times a year. Last summer it had its first international tour, performing in Germany.

“The interaction between the members is really exciting,” said Askhar. “The stability of the older Jewish musicians and the enthusiasm of the Arab youngsters make for a wonderful blend. It gives me hope that the music that we are offering can give not only an aesthetic dimension in young people’s education [but] be a model for cooperation between the various groups of this country. We hope that our festival will light the way.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Out of Nazareth.”