

Music on Troubled Soils – The European Music Council in Ramallah and Jerusalem

by Rebekka Leibbrand,

The Middle East is a hot spot. Accordingly its media coverage is dominated by reports of political repression, violent destruction and bomb attacks. The daily news paint a bleak picture of war, murderous hatred and a shocking feeling of despair. However, here as everywhere in the world, people long for peace – and a few particularly brave people even try to overcome borders and psychological barriers to bring about a peaceful coexistence with their neighbours.

From 22 to 23 October the Board of the European Music Council (EMC) met at the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music in Ramallah, where its director Suhail Khoury presented the work of his music school. „It is our aim to support the music students in their respective cultures and offer an alternative to hatred and violence,“ Khoury said. Adding that he hoped some of the students would return to the school as teachers one day.

Following the Board meeting, the conference Music on Troubled Soils took place in the Jerusalem Music Centre in Israel, from 23 to 26 October. The conference was organised by the EMC in cooperation with the Israeli Music Council (IMC Israel). It provided a forum for musicians promoting peace to discuss the role of music as a means to enhance understanding between different communities.

The conference offered most of its 50 participants the chance to present their work to the public. Attending were many dedicated musicians from South Africa, the USA as well as many European countries such as Germany, Sweden, Portugal and Cyprus. The presented projects are based in Palestine, Israel, Cyprus, the former Yugoslavia and Saudi Arabia.

„We have often crossed borders by singing,“ Laura Hassler, founder of Musicians without Borders said, telling an anecdote about the difficulties she and her colleagues faced, when trying to cross the border between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina with a bus full of musical instruments serving as music classroom. Together with a group of Dutch and other international artists the American-born activist undertook various music projects focusing on the Balkan helping people in the region to establish socio-cultural centres. The project offers workshops for children. Also aiming at self-empowerment and continuity it focuses on training new music teachers, as well. Currently the project is being introduced to Palestine and Cyprus.

„I have a confession to make: I am an Israeli Jew who works with Palestinians,“ Danny Felsteiner began his presentation about the foundation of a music school in Silwan, a Palestinian neighbourhood in East Jerusalem. This rather sarcastic remark can be explained by the difficulty in finding participants for Israeli-Palestinian projects – a cooperation unfortunately often branded as treason by the respective groups. Apart from his work as a teacher, Felsteiner plays in the Israeli-Arabian ensemble Derech As-Salaam, also named Tariq Hashalom, which means „The way to peace“ in Arabic and Hebrew, respectively. The band of four opened the conference on Thursday evening with a performance of their repertoire, which is based on traditional Arabic music as well as the ensemble's own compositions with Hebraic and Arabic lyrics. The Palestinian members of the group had to get a permit in order to enter Jerusalem for this performance. On an everyday basis, however, it is very difficult to organise rehearsals and concerts across borders.

Another rather moving performance was given by the Mozaik Choir, a cooperation between the Palestinian Sawa Choir and the Israeli Efroni Choir. The choirs whose singers are mostly girls, sing their songs together in both languages. Apart from singing, one of the main aims of the Israeli and Palestinian choirmasters is to bring about a meeting between the children's parents in the near future, thereby initiating a dialogue between the peoples beyond the issue of music.

David Sanders, associate professor at the Montclair State University's Broadcasting Department, draws three vital conclusions from the conference in his final speech: In the first place, it is important to built up a closer international network between the activists in order to exchange experiences, publish best-practice examples and support each other. Secondly, the media should be involved in the effort to reach a broader public publishing positive news about troubled regions. And last but not least, monitoring studies should be carried out to find new patrons and sponsors.

Although the conference has been criticised for a lack of geographical diversity in its participants, it was a step in the right direction – a very moving and inspiring event. Most visitors were deeply impressed by the unremitting dedication some people showed working for peace between enemies. Although the projects have been targeting different groups and have been set up along different time frames, they have one thing in common: They want to give joy to the population in troubled regions, help them to re-establish self-confidence, support their search for their cultural identity and offer a means to communicate with their neighbours and fellow beings.

„Do you really believe you can help us with your music in this country?“ an amused security guard asked us at our departure at Tel Aviv airport in Israel. Of course it would be naive to think that we will be able to solve such a deeply rooted political conflict with a bit of music. Nevertheless, all these highly motivated musicians who presented their projects during the conference in Jerusalem can sow some seeds of hope for more humanity, tolerance and peace. We hope these seeds will grow successfully one day.

For more information about the conference, its participants and the presented projects please visit our EMC website at www.emc-imc.org/mots.

Translation by Andrea Hofmann