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Polyphony concert at HCRJ breaks down cultural barriers



JHV: JUDY BLUESTEIN LEVIN

Polyphony members Ibrahim Boulus, Deema Azar, Anastasia Klevin and Doron Alperin perform at Houston Congregation for Reform Judaism on Feb. 15.

By JUDY BLUESTEIN LEVIN • Thu, Feb 23, 2023

Special program brings Arab and Jewish musical students together

More than 150 members of the Jewish, Christian and Arab communities came together at Houston Congregation for Reform Judaism Feb. 15 to listen to chamber music and show their support for Polyphony, the first-ever classical music conservatory from the Arab-Israeli city of Nazareth.

Polyphony didn't disappoint. The professional-caliber musicians

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and soloists – Arab Muslim, Arab Christian and Jewish – gave an inspiring performance that included music from the greats, Beethoven, Mozart, Schubert, Puccini and others.

The talented performers included violist Doron Alperin of Petah Tikva, Israel, who is a founding member of the Galilee Chamber Orchestra and its manager since October 2019. Alperin played alongside violinists Ibrahim Boulus and Nassif Francis, cello Romi Kopelman and soloists Deema Azar and Anastasia Klevin of the Israel Opera and a teacher at the Polyphony Conservatory Nazareth.

Founded in 2006 by gifted violinist Nabeel Abboud-Ashkar as the Barenboim-Said Conservatory (later Polyphony Conservatory), its students use the transformative power of classical music to bridge the cultural and social divide between Arab and Jewish communities in Israel.

“We try to inspire conversation and to try to bring different groups together,” Abboud-Ashkar told the audience. “We started with 25 students and three teachers, and we were able to bring, for the first time, classical music at the highest level.



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Nabeel Abboud-Ashkar, Ibrahim Boulus, Romi Kopelman, Deema Azar, Nassif Francis, Anastasia Klevin, Doron Alperin and HCRJ Rabbi Steve Gross.

“My first goal was to break the misconception and the stereotype that classical music in our community are like oil and water. To achieve that, I was convinced there was only one way to do it, and

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that's to bring the best teachers from Tel Aviv all the way to Nazareth and teach," explained Abboud-Ashkar. "It was a two-hour drive each way – it was crazy, but my top three choices said, 'Yes.'

"I was the violin teacher, the director, the secretary, the janitor – everything. At the end of the first year, we surprised ourselves – the commitment and relationship we had between the teachers and the parents and the students – it was all just right. In the second year, we doubled the number of students and, by the third year, they focused on winning competitions."

The conservatory chose two students, ages 15 and 16, to enter a prestigious competition in which they would play Israeli compositions. And one of the judges just happened to be the composer.

It was a gutsy move.

"They both ended up in first place," said Abboud-Ashkar. "That was a game-changer, for us and for me.

"All the people that were in that hall – they never imagined in their wildest dreams two of our kids, the youngest members of the competition, would come and win this competition," said Abboud-Ashkar. "This shows us how powerful music is, breaking down boundaries and creating a common ground."

In 2011, Craig and Deborah Cogut joined Abboud-Ashkar as co-founders, and the conservatory was renamed the Polyphony Conservatory with the goal of creating positive shared experiences between Arab and Jewish communities in Israel.

It was then that Polyphony started to provide music education for children all across Israel.

"We came up with a multi-tiered program that starts with music education and appreciation in elementary school and mastery schools, where we created our curriculum that introduces young people to classical music, Arabic music and Israeli music," said Abboud-Ashkar.

Today, the Polyphony Foundation employs hundreds of teachers in

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more than 200 schools and kindergartens in more than 40 towns across Israel. The foundation benefits a whopping 50,000 students annually and is spreading classical music across Israel – while bringing Jewish and Arab people together in the process.

HCRJ Rabbi Steve Gross was enthralled to bring the program to the Houston community.

“This is everything I love – I love music. I love interfaith work,” Rabbi Gross told the JHV.

“Most of our current perception of the realities in Israel are of tension and fighting between Arabs and Jews. And while that is true, it’s not the only truth, and bringing Polyphony here demonstrates a very different reality,” said the rabbi. “Influencing youth to use their passions for music to bring harmony and peace into this world, into the region, in particular, is a beautiful goal.”

Longtime HCRJ program director Justin Deutsch helped pull the event together.

“For our congregation to do something like this – to bring the community in, bring individuals, from Israelis to Arabs, to come together – it’s awesome work,” Deutsch told the JHV.

“It’s all about interfaith and building peace amongst people and that’s really what we’re all about here. We really try to up the ante over here in our programming and our events, and this is the next level of doing that,” continued Deutsch. “Having 150-plus people on a Wednesday night around Houston is awesome.”

Attending the concert with friends from Congregation Beth Yeshurun, HCRJ congregant Janis Frank was wowed by the entire program.

“I thought it was remarkable,” Frank told the JHV. “That shows some real dedication. They obviously love what they’re doing.”

One benefit of the performers’ traveling is that during down times, they get to spend time together.

“Deema and Romi have been rooming together, and they were

sharing with me at lunch just how special it was because they don't know each other that well," said Rabbi Gross, "and they got to know each other's story a little deeper."

The entire experience was exhilarating to concertgoer Marilee Steiner.

"The music was magnificent, and the cause was worthy. It was inspiring to see this group," Steiner told the JHV following the concert. "I love to see that seed grow and spread for a better, more peaceful humanity."

The concert was underwritten by HCRJ, Congregation Beth Yeshurun, Jerusalem Peacebuilders, Robert Hoff and Kay and Fred Zeidman.

While this was Abboud-Ahkar's first stopover in Houston, he is looking forward to many more visits.

"Let us begin by creating positive shared musical experiences for Arab and Jewish youth," said Abboud-Ahkar. "And let us discover what we can build together."

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