

Randa Safieh on a concert tour of British, American and Palestinian musicians that aims to help reestablish Palestine's cultural heritage



'The message is always much stronger through music'



'Road to Jericho' is an innovative project comprising a concert tour pioneered by British, American and Palestinian musicians – coming to London in June 2011 – plus a feature film that draws a stark contrast of musicians creating music against the backdrop of the occupation. The project is the brainchild of Simon Hewitt Jones, Drew Balch, Antony Pitts and Ramzi Aburedwan. Inspired by the musical revival in Palestine since the first Intifada, 'Road to Jericho' aims to convey the cross-cultural exchange and collaboration of the Eastern and Western musicians and thus to reformulate Western perceptions of Palestine and stimulate awareness of life under occupation.

West Bank musician Aburedwan was raised in the refugee camp of Al-Amari in Ramallah and founded the Al-Kamandjati ('the violinist') Music School in 2002 to provide a musical education to Palestinian children. In 1987, at just eight years old, his picture became an iconic image of the first Intifada, often seen in the campaign posters of the uprising; a little boy aiming a stone at an Israeli tank after seeing his friend shot by an Israeli sniper. Aburedwan's destiny changed course when he was given the

opportunity to learn how to play the viola. He was later offered a scholarship to study at the conservatory of Angers in France and went on to establish the Palestinian ensemble Dal'ouna in 2000.

The acclaimed group will perform alongside Fifth Quadrant, the string quartet of which Simon Hewitt Jones is the lead violinist, in a series of concerts in May and June 2011 that will take them to Jerusalem, Ramallah, Bethlehem, Jenin and Gaza in Palestine, as well as to cities in Egypt and Jordan and Aldeburgh and London in Britain. Their final performance will take place on June 10, 2011 at the opening of the Spitalfields Summer Music Festival in London.

While Fifth Quadrant is a classical collective headed by violinist Simon Hewitt Jones and violist Drew Balch, the music performed on their tour will be a fusion of Western classical music and Arabic

oriental music performed by Dal'ouna, with traditional instruments such as the *oud*, *bouzouq*, accordion and *nay*. On the programme is Dvorak's *American String Quartet* (op. 96) and the world premiere of *Who is My Neighbour?*, a piece based on the biblical story of the Good Samaritan, which takes place on the road to Jericho. This piece was specially composed by Antony Pitts, the award-winning British composer of contemporary choral works and founder and conductor of the vocal ensemble Tonus Peregrinus.

Meanwhile, a documentary will follow the musicians against the landscape of the Middle East conflict, up until their last performance at the Spitalfields Festival. The aim is to illustrate how the relationships between the musicians and their cross-cultural dialogue develop, as well as to give people an insight into Palestinian life.

Hewitt Jones met Aburedwan when he

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was first invited to perform in Palestine by the Choir of London in 2007. There, he also encountered Pitts, a regular visitor to Palestine, at a performance of part of his oratorio *Jerusalem-Yerushalayim* at St Anne's Church in the Old City of Jerusalem. Since then, Hewitt Jones has been travelling to Palestine twice a year to perform and teach at Al-Kamandjati.

'Road to Jericho' was born during one of these visits to Palestine. While travelling in a mini bus, Aburedwan shared with Hewitt Jones and Balch his desire to bring Western classical music to Palestine. This developed into the idea of bringing Fifth Quadrant to perform there and of exposing Dal'ouna's music to Britain in a cross-cultural exchange, to compete in the international arena. Hewitt Jones elaborates: 'The magic of what Ramzi is doing is trying to get a new generation of Palestinian musicians; home-grown talent, because then you have strength of identity.'

I asked Aburedwan how the Palestinian situation has influenced his music. 'The music that I compose is my emotion, my situation as a young Palestinian, a young musician,' he says. 'One of the pieces describes my childhood as a boy who is throwing stones. The piece is called *Coincidence*. I cannot compose something and go out of my reality because the melody came as an expression from inside. This expression will be linked systematically to what the Palestinian people live.'

The British counterpart's music, composed by Pitts, was the focus of a workshop by the musicians in December 2010. Pitts recounts: 'I had the chance to see and hear first hand how Ramzi and his

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colleagues worked with their instruments, particularly the *bouzouq*, the *oud* and various percussion, and to learn more about Arabic melodic and rhythmic modes. So these were key factors in developing those first musical ideas.'

Hewitt Jones believes that the project will help to alter Western perceptions of the Middle East, yet remains philosophical. 'I think it is really important for us not to pretend that music changes stuff in any particularly tangible way,' he says. 'All we can do is tell people, inspire people to think. We are not politicians, we do not want to say, "this is how it should be." If you are a foreigner, how do you contribute to an indigenous culture that needs to regrow itself? A lot of Palestinian culture has been worn down. In Gaza, the music school we had been working with was destroyed during the offensive of January 2009 – what do you do in that situation? I think the answer is to bring and present ideas.' Aburedwan, too, believes that perceptions can change 'through showing the result of cooperation and showing that the people of this country still exist and have their own culture and own way of living and own way of music. [The message] is always much stronger through music.'

Hewitt Jones remembers a poignant experience from the first time he performed in Ramallah; somebody approached him and said: 'Thank you for giving me the last

two hours of my life back. This is the first time in weeks we haven't thought about this terrible thing.' Hewitt Jones tells me: 'Music feeds you with a sense of emotional well-being. It takes you out of your present moment for enough time to keep you sane. That is always part of the reason that we go to Palestine.'

What does Hewitt Jones hope the 'Road to Jericho' initiative will accomplish? 'The most important thing to me is the idea of showing how the musical process comes together with two different musical vocabularies, Eastern and Western, brought together in a way that creates something new and stronger and makes sense on many levels, regardless of who you are as an audience. It's great to see that musical growth, it's totally different to what you see in the newspapers all the time. There are these positive stories going on in Palestine. Most people will think of the Middle East and have negative images in their mind. What I suppose we are doing is saying, "when you think of Palestine, think of these amazing things, the amazing olive groves, the amazing musicians!" That's something I hope for.'

The late Yasser Arafat used to say: 'The Palestinian National Movement is not only the gun of the freedom fighter but mainly the pen of the writer, the brush of the painter, the words of the poet.' Now that the Palestinian side has abandoned the dialogue by arms and resorts to the arms of dialogue, the Palestinians' cry for freedom will express itself more and more through the music of their composers and musicians.

With special thanks to Simon Hewitt Jones, Ramzi Aburedwan and Antony Pitts. www.roadtojericho.com, www.spitalfieldsfestival.org.uk

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(Opposite) Simon Hewitt Jones and Drew Balch

(Left) Simon Hewitt Jones and Drew Balch in the Jordan Valley, November 2010

