



True Harmony: Bridging cultural divides through music

By Paula E. Kirman

Music is a universal language that can be used to bridge gaps between faiths and cultures. Ben Ragosin has first-hand experience with music's unifying power.


Ragosin, who resides in Edmonton but grew up in Israel, is part of a musical group at the University of Alberta that involves a number of people from different Middle Eastern and European backgrounds. The Middle Eastern and North African Music Ensemble is based in the Department of Ethnomusicology in the Faculty of Music under the direction of Dr. Michael Frischkopf. It consists of between 20 to 30 musicians and vocalists, varying from week to week at their regular rehearsals.

The ensemble has been together for four years and includes a large choir section and instrumentalists playing ethnic and Western instruments such as tablas, drums, oud, violin, and organ. Members of the group come from a variety of different backgrounds, including Egyptian, Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian, Moroccan, and Canadian-born people of European background. Ragosin is currently the only Jewish-born member of Israeli origin who attends on a regular basis.

"I love performing and creating music," says Ragosin of the reason why he joined the group. A former student at the U of A, when he heard the group was looking for male singers he jumped at the opportunity. Ragosin has a musical background, as well as some Arabic studies. Joining the group gave him the chance to sing and speak in Arabic – something he is not often able to do in day to day life. The influence of the ensemble has also resulted in him diversifying the instruments that he plays. Primarily a guitarist, for the past few years, Ragosin has been learning the oud, a Middle Eastern lute.

The Middle Eastern and North African Music Ensemble is inclusive in its approach to attracting new members. The group performs for the public four or five times during the academic year. People interested in joining can simply show up at a rehearsal. Songs are transliterated, so knowledge of other languages is not required.

"I just find so amazing that we gather every week, people who come from all over the region," says Ragosin, 32. "I could not do this in Israel. I could not play with a Palestinian who grew up 30 minutes from my kibbutz, living on the other side of the Green Line in the Territories. Here, we play together, the music."



As a result, Ragosin has been able to experience different perspectives on some of the most contentious issues concerning the situation in the Middle East. “I asked some of the older Egyptian people how long they have been in Canada. They said since 1969. I asked them why. After the Six-Day War they did not want stress and conflict and wars, so they came somewhere peaceful. For me, it was very interesting to hear that side of the story because I am familiar with the Israeli side. After the Six-Day War there was more euphoria than fear; for them it was different,” Ragosin explains.

Non-Muslim participants are also having the opportunity to take part in Islamic religious and cultural celebrations, in particular Ramadan. “We perform yearly at the Egyptian Society’s Ramadan party, so for me and for all the other non-Muslims it is an opportunity to learn about the customs of Ramadan.”

The mutual cooperation and learning works both ways. “We performed a Hebrew song last year. It was something just amazing for me, and a bit surreal to teach the entire group to sing in Hebrew. Suddenly they go, ‘Oh, that’s very similar to Arabic!’”

Ragosin was born in Edmonton and works in building and exhibit maintenance at the Telus World of Science. He left with his family for Israel when he was two and returned to the city in the mid-90’s to re-connect with family members still here and finish university. His degree from the University of Alberta is a B.A. in Political Science and Middle Eastern Studies. “Studying these topics in Canada was also very different for me because you can talk about ideas and concepts, but when you’re within a conflict zone, they can be very touchy and sometimes taboo,” he explains.

“Here, I could entertain certain ideas that would not be that easy to do in Israel. Also, I got to interact with other people from the region that I would not have been able to interact with in Israel. I remember the first week walking into class; I knew I was not going to hide who I am and where I am from, but you feel the tension. But once I started talking to the people, it was like, we’re all here, we’re all people. I am Ben, not an Israeli, and we go from there really. I built some really nice relationships with many people regardless of their origin.”

Another way in which Ragosin has drawn common threads with people of other backgrounds is through his private music lessons. A guitar teacher, his current roster includes students of both Jewish and Iranian backgrounds. “I find it kind of funny because all of my students are in the Callingwood neighbourhood, but half of them are Jewish and half of them are Iranian.”

Most of all, taking part in his musical adventures has created friendships between people who otherwise would likely never have met. “We are there as friends, as human beings really, considering the backgrounds we come from.”