

Notes on a musical friendship

The Palestine Youth Orchestra, a powerful symbol of hope for the state, is kicking off its UK tour in Scotland, writes David Kettle

Y ou'd be forgiven for not even knowing there was a Palestine Youth Orchestra. For a state so often in the news because of violence, struggle and disagreement, offering young musicians the chance to develop their skills together might seem the last of the region's concerns.

In fact, the PYO is about more than simply encouraging young players – crucial though that is. It's about celebrating Palestine's creativity and cultural richness in front of international audiences, and also about feeding back into Palestine's sense of its own cultural identity. And UK audiences get the chance to check out the PYO across a six-date national tour this month, which kicks off in Scotland with concerts in Perth and Glasgow, preceded by a week of intensive rehearsals at Glasgow's Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

That perhaps unlikely Scottish focus comes partly via teacher and flautist Heather Bursheh, now based in Aberdeen, who lived in Palestine for more than 16 years and was the PYO's musical director from 2007 to 2009. "I'm Scottish, and I was a member of the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland in my youth. I kept up the connection with NYOS when I moved to Palestine in 1998," she explains. "I always had a notion that the PYO might one day come to

Scotland, but it wasn't until this year that the UK Friends of the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music made it possible."

That conservatory, named after the renowned Palestinian scholar and musician, incorporates branches in Ramallah, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nablus and Gaza, and serves as the PYO's home – as much as it has one. "It is very difficult to travel from one town to another, and for the orchestra to rehearse in Palestine," says Wissam Boustany, music advisor to Palmusic, the UK charity organising the tour. "It's extremely precarious to arrange anything with any degree of certainty. That's why we're so happy to have our week of rehearsals at the RCS in Glasgow – the city has opened its arms and welcomed the PYO."

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This is clearly no ordinary youth orchestra, and it was born – back in 2004 – in circumstances that are far from ordinary too. "Since 1948, Palestinians have been displaced and scattered all over the globe," continues Bursheh, "to the extent that the Palestinian diaspora population is now about equal to the population that remains inside historic Palestine. Because of this long-term exile and the desire to strengthen Palestinian cultural and national identity, the Conservatory decided from the foundation of the PYO that it would be open to Palestinians wherever they are in the world."

For this UK tour, that means, alongside a majority of players from Palestine itself, there are young musicians from Israel, Syria,

Lebanon, Egypt, Greece, the USA and Australia. And from the UK, too, as Boustany explains: "We're delighted that there will also be students from British conservatoires. This collaboration allows for the exchange of ideas and cultures among students and teachers, and widens the horizons of everyone involved."

On the podium will be eminent British conductor Sian Edwards, who's worked with the PYO since back in 2006.

The programme, too, has a cross-cultural flavour, with Beethoven's *Leonora Overture No. 3* and Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* rubbing shoulders with Arabic classical songs and even a bit of Arabic improvisation. "A lot of the Palestinian musicians are familiar with Arabic music as well as Western classical music," says Bursheh, "and I'm sure many of the Scottish musicians will also be involved in traditional music, so I'm confident there will be a lot of informal learning and fun on both sides."

For Boustany, however, behind the tour lies a desire for a positive vision of the country. "Palestine is too often perceived through the filters of news and politics, which usually focus on violence and discord – this has a very dehumanising effect over time. In a country that is still in the process of trying to establish fundamental justice and human dignity for itself, our young musicians inspire us to live, love and dream for a better future." ■

The Palestine Youth Orchestra performs at Perth Concert Hall on 25 July, and at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall on 26 July, before travelling to Leeds, Birmingham, Cardiff and London, www.palmusic.org.uk/the-pyo/



The Palestine Youth Orchestra will rehearse in Glasgow for a week before starting their UK tour