Music-Making in the Heart of the Christian Quarter

Adriana Ponce

Father Armando Pierucci, a Franciscan priest and an accomplished musician arrived in Jerusalem in 1988 to serve as the organist in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, one of Christianity’s holiest sites. His initiative to found a school of music in the Old City in order to develop local musicians for church services in the Holy Land — today the Magdalen Institute for Sacred Music — provides an interesting
approach to the problem of preserv-
ing and developing the several
century-long musical practice asso-
ciated with the Western Church in
the complex history and dynamics of
Jerusalem.

Sacred and Secular Musical
Heritages
The task of preserving this heritage is
formidable not only in the context of
Jerusalem. The history of classical Eu-
ropean music was, for many centuries, the
history of the music of the Christian lit-
urgy. A conception of music as a powerful
means to cultivate the spirit, to enhance
prayer, to exalt religious feelings and to
make mankind’s love for God manifest
made of the Christian Churches in Europe
some of the most important musical centers
during the Middle Ages, the Renaissance
and, to a lesser extent, the Baroque period.
As secular music grew progressively in
importance and its venues moved more and
more into the public domain (from courts
into the opera house and the theater),
composers devoted less of their creative
energy to religious music. But if the
importance of the church as a musical
center diminished comparatively, the
prominent place that music occupied in the
religious services did not do so immedi-
ately. Only within the last century, have
the long-standing and rich musical tradi-
tions associated with the Christian Church
begun to be abandoned.

To be sure, the situation is the result of a
number of elements. Significant among
them is the relatively trivial place that
music occupies in our conception of edu-
cation. Bearing also some responsibility for
the abandonment of the musical traditions
in question is a relatively recent trend to
"popularize" religion and, closely con-
ected with this, the proliferation of a
number of denominations which promote
the use of “catchy,” jingle-like songs, during religious services.

Western and Eastern in the Holy
Land
The task of preserving the several cen-
tury-long musical practice associated with
the Western Church is both particularly
important and difficult in the Holy Land. It
is important because of the significance of
its Christian sites. It is difficult because
the repertory associated with it is largely
perceived as “foreign” insofar as it belongs
more in the realm of European than of
Middle-Eastern or Arab traditions. Com-
pounding the situation is the fact that the
local Christian population has decreased
significantly over the last decades.

To this formidable challenge Father
Armando Pierucci, a Franciscan father and
an accomplished musician living in Jerusa-
lem, has provided a partial answer which if
relatively modest in scope is also, in many
ways, rather ambitious. After a long career
as organist, composer, conductor and
pedagogue, Father Armando came to
Jerusalem in 1988, invited by the
Franciscan fathers, to serve as the organist
of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre—a
position that had been filled for decades by
the late Agostino Lampa. The idea of
founding a school of music in the Old City
began to take shape in his mind during his
first few years here. Soon after arriving,
and in the belief that local musicians would
be in the best position to provide music for
the services in the churches of the Holy Land. Father Armando began to teach music to a small number of Palestinian children from the Old City. He devoted himself to instructing them in the basics of music and piano playing. As the word spread around over time, the number of students grew and so did his commitment. And after several years of hard work, his efforts crystallized in the formalization of his initiative: in 1995, the Magnificat Institute for Sacred Music opened its doors in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Founded by the Superiors of the Custody of the Holy Land—the Franciscan fathers who, since 1291, have been entrusted with the service and supervision of the Latin Christian sites in Palestine—the school functions in an old building inside the Saint Saviour Monastery, which is located, in turn, within the Terra Sancta Compound in the heart of the Christian Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. Although the affiliation with the Custody is, undoubt-edly, vital for the school, the whole project still owes much to a single individual, Father Armando Pierucci, its current director and a professor of sacred music at the Stadium Theologicum Jerusalem. His qualifications as a musician, love for the discipline and commitment to the Christian community in particular and to the Palestinian community in general are all reflected in his work.

When it first opened its doors, the Magnificat Institute constituted approximately twenty students and three teachers. Five years later, it has grown considerably. Sixty-five students are currently enrolled. And if most of them still come from within the walls of the city, a number of students also come from Azzariye, Beit Hanina, Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Ramallah, Bir Zeit and from as far as Jaffa. The Institute also is currently staffed by 15 music teachers who hold degrees in piano, voice, musicology, composition and music education from various internationally recognized institutions.

As its name and affiliation suggest, the school’s ultimate purpose is to form musicians for the churches of the Holy Land. Consequently, it offers degrees of various levels in the instruments which are more commonly associated with the performance of music in religious services: piano/organ and voice. Following the tradition and program of Italian conservatories, the students are required to take, in addition to the lessons in the instrument of choice, a number of courses in related disciplines such as theory and solfège, harmony and history of music, all of which are necessary for the formation of a musician.

The single largest funder of the school is the Custody of the Holy Land. But the Magnificat Institute also relies heavily on contributions from a number of private benefactors from Italy, Canada and the United States whose support and commitment to the project make it possible for students to receive lessons in rather privileged circumstances (class groups range from between 2 to 4 students) in exchange for a relatively modest tuition.

In addition to its instruction-related activities, the Magnificat Institute also organizes a number of events which are bringing to have an impact in both the religious and non-religious musical scene.
in the Old City. Not only do Palestinian children and youth have a place where they go almost every day, after school, to learn and make music but they also have the opportunity to perform in religious services and concerts. A number of recitals are held at the Magnificat Institute during the Academic year in which both teachers and students participate (at Christmas, Easter and at the end of the academic year). Additionally, some of the most advanced students are given the opportunity to play organ at the services in the Church of the Monastery. A small girl's choir with children from within the Old City— which is part of the Institute—performs at the Sunday Mass in the Church of the Monastery. And children from the community who are not regular students can participate in another, mixed, choir of boys and girls between the ages of 8 and 10 years old or can register for a special music class designed to develop the creativity and musical skills of very young children. Particularly worthy of mention is the Carlo Tavasi Piano Competition, also organized by the Magnificat Institute. The competition-to be held in its second consecutive year this coming March—brings together Palestinian children and youth from the various music schools and conservatories in the area and serves as a source of both stimulus and recognition for their studies. Despite its connection with the Latin Church, the school does not require that students participate in religious services or belong to any one faith or denomination. Its purpose is to open up the world of Classical Music for Palestinian children and youth and to offer them the possibility to participate in the performance of religious and non-religious music. The diversity of activities and opportunities that sprang from the Magnificat Institute are such that it is clear that if it seems to have been conceived with a specific ultimate purpose in mind, the Magnificat Institute also seems to have been conceived with a broad enough vision to adopt, as its most immediate goals, the development of the students’ love for music and the pursuit of the highest instructional level possible. Adriana Ponce teaches at the Magnificat Institute for Sacred Music in Jerusalem.