



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 Magnificat Institute for Sacred Music -- provides an interesting

approach to the problem of preserving and developing the several century-long musical practice associated 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 European music was, for many centuries, the history of the music of the Christian liturgy. 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 immediately. Only within the last century, have the long-standing and rich musical traditions 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 education. Bearing also some responsibility for

the abandonment of the musical traditions in question is a relatively recent trend to "popularize" religion and, closely connected 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 century-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. Compounding 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 Jerusalem, 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 Lama. 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, undoubtedly, 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 Studium Theologicum Jerusalemitanum. 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 Azzari'ye, 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 solfege, 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 beginning 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, Eastern 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 reli-

gious and non-religious music. The diversity of activities and opportunities that spring 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.

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