

Listening to Jerusalem With Ara Djinkian

By Geoffrey Clarfield

People do not usually come to Jerusalem for the music although there is much music here. Many visitors, whether they be Jews, Christians or Muslims come for religious reasons, usually some sort of collective or personal pilgrimage. Many others come to see the historical and archaeological sites of a country blessed with a “surfeit of history,” going back a million years when so many of our genetic ancestors attempted the migration up the rift valley from Africa. Some come to visit a vigorous and threatened democracy that rose from the ashes of the Holocaust.

Every Jewish, Christian, and Muslim ethnic group in Jerusalem has its own musical liturgy. Much of the old Jewish liturgy was recorded by a remarkable musicologist named Avraham Zvi Idelsohn who laboriously recorded the full range of Jewish religious chant in this city during and after Ottoman times, which he later published in his multi volume classic ten volume [Thesaurus of Oriental Hebrew Melodies](#) published in Germany between 1914-32.



Armenian Church, Old City, Jerusalem (photo-Geoffrey Clarfield)

Then there are the liturgies of the Aramaean (Syriac), Armenian, Ethiopian, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Catholic Churches

and monasteries as well as the hymns of Protestants at their various churches-English, Scottish, German, and Swedish. Each of these communities have had their secular folk music that punctuates the life cycle of those communities who are family based, such as the Armenians who inhabit their own quarter in the Old City which I have just recently visited.

Then there is the “classical” or European Art Music brought to Israel during the early 20th century by Jewish refugees from Germany, supported by the government, the schools and private conservatories, music departments in colleges and universities, with their regular public recitals by organizations such as the Israeli Philharmonic. And then there is Israeli popular music with its many, many variations but all inspired by a combination of Jewish tradition with a Mediterranean tendency towards regional melodies and a focus on wistful lyrics about love and loss.

Finally there is a Jazz scene in Israel’s most secular city, Tel Aviv that is respected in both Paris and New York (There is also a Jerusalem Folk Club where immigrants from the Anglosphere play the ballads and blues of their countries of birth. I drop in to play there now and then).

Of course there are local, national, and foreign radio and TV stations where Israelis can hear music from all over the world as well as endless offerings on the Internet and YouTube. Israelis are free to listen to what they want, one of the unrecognized blessings of its democratic political system, so often taken for granted by its citizens who are surrounded by countries and regimes that censor all and any music produced in their countries (See the case of [Egypt for example](#) and which is typical in the Islamic world).

During the 1990s young Israelis began to distance themselves from Russian melodies, French balladeers and the British rock and roll of the 1960s that had such a powerful impact on earlier Israeli popular music. This generation rediscovered the secular music of Middle Eastern Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

They adopted (or raised the profile) of middle eastern instruments such as the oud, kanun, ney and darbuka and created a new style called Mediterranean. The exponents of this rising tide of Israeli music have since the nineties, only grown in number and popularity and slowly radio, TV and even the schools are recognizing this vitality.

The institutional expression of this rising tide is the [International Oud Festival](#) which takes place annually in Israel and which features local and regional interpreters of this ancient modal tradition. .

During the nineties I was living in the Galilee and as I had learnt the Saz and Oud from a similar kind of music played by Kalderash Roma in Toronto years before (they called themselves Gypsies), I was welcomed by a cohort of Israeli musicians ten to twenty years younger than me, who were discovering this ancient stream of music here and adapting it to their aesthetic interests. At the time almost all of them were listening to the recordings of an Armenian American oud player called "Ara" and who came to perform in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv

to sold out audiences.

Ara in his own unique Armenian American way was ahead of the curve and had formed a band called Night Ark. They released their first album in 1986 called Picture and a second called Moments released in 1988. Altogether Night Ark as a project produced four CDs.

I managed to get hold of these remarkable recordings some time after they were made and was deeply impressed. One of Ara's pieces is known in Greece as Dinata Dinata, and which was performed (sung) by the renown Greek singer Eleftheria Arvanitaki at the closing ceremonies of the 2004 Athens Olympics. This is quite the triumph for an American musician who musicologically is not in the mainstream. With my friends in the Galilee we played some of his melodies at our gigs and they have never left my memory.

And so, about twelve years ago I found myself working for the Alan Lomax Archive in Manhattan as their Director of Research and Development, a position I held for three years. One day during my typical Manhattan "busyness" it hit me that this same Ara Djinkian was based in New York.

I called him up and arranged to meet and interview him for a longish article that I had planned to write. We did meet and he was very generous with his time but then, I lost the tape of that encounter and gave up.

During a recent house move I did not find the tape but, I found some of the notes that I made after the interview of that time and from that I have reconstructed what was for me a memorable meeting. I sent this information to Ara to fact check and he graciously filled in some of my memory lapses.

Ara lives in a lovely house in a suburb across the Hudson River from Manhattan. He keeps all his musical instruments and extensive collection of old recordings from Ottoman and post Ottoman days in his basement where he listens, plays, and

often records. Those old flat disc records are not vinyl but 78 rpm shellac artifacts (because they spin at 78 rpm or revolutions per minute).

He showed me some of his vintage collection and pictures of Jewish, Greek, Armenian and Turkish musicians, now long gone but with whom he communes daily. He calls them “the guys” and they are as alive to him as are the Jazz musicians in the city of New York.

Ara told me that this basement was his “man cave” where he listens, practices, and sometimes plays with other musicians and where he instructs the occasional student. He told me, “Some musicians have told me that I hold the oud pick incorrectly or that I do not hold the instrument properly.”

He continued, “My mother is not worried about that but tells me that I do not smile enough on stage as I am so concentrated on my music. Are they right? I do not know. But one thing I say to everyone is that I never practice, I just play a lot.”

Over a cup of tea and some baked Armenian delights Ara told me that his grandparents were orphaned in the Genocide. His parents were both born in France and met in New York, at the same church in which he plays the organ.

His father was and is a gifted singer in both Armenian and French and was adopted by the Armenian community in New York to celebrate wedding parties and baptisms and so, Ara grew up with melodies of his ancestors in suburban New York.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he told me. “I liked the Beatles as much as any other American toddler and teenager, but I had a lot of time for the music of my own people. In fact I showed some talent on the middle eastern drum, the darbuka and was inducted as a small kid with my father and other musicians playing music at weddings in the community from an incredibly young age. We were even featured playing at the New York World’s Fair and there is a picture of me on my wall with my

drum as a kid.

Although my father was a singer, he also played the oud and kept it safe in his bedroom. I was instructed not to touch it as ouds are delicate and a young kid like me could have easily damaged it irreparably, so you can imagine what I did next. While my Dad was working at the furniture store (he was a gifted salesperson and gave me and my sister a nice middle-class existence) I found time to hold and play it. As I had so absorbed the music and seen so many other oud players it took me a short time until I was playing some of the melodies of our ensembles.

Yes, my father found out. Yes, at first, he was quite angry but then he mellowed and accepted me as an oud player as well as a drummer, and so by the time I was a teenager most of my weekends were spent playing gigs.”

When high school ended, and “College” loomed Ara was in a pickle. He did not want to do a typical arts and sciences degree at one of New York City’s colleges. His father got involved and together they found an institution of higher learning that suited his needs.

The conservatory is called Hartt School of Music in Hartford, Connecticut. There the staff remarkably created a special “oud major performance” degree just for Ara since he didn’t fit in anywhere else. The program did not exist before he went there.

At first it was touch and go, but meeting other young musicians like himself allowed Ara to understand the structure of classical music and Jazz without giving up his calling as an oud player.

This eventually led to his formation of his band Nyima and later Night Ark, which includes a remarkable tale about getting access to producers at RCA Records who took a chance on this unusual ensemble that seemed to have come out of nowhere.

Sometime before his success at RCA Ara's charm and entrepreneurial skills got his first band (the Nyima Ensemble) a place at the Montreux Jazz festival in Europe by showing up on their own coin and telling the organizers that they represented the "chance of a lifetime" to highlight this unusual group of what are now called "Fusion musicians."

Once Night Ark was established Ara divided his time between playing at Jazz festivals, teaching students and gigs in the community. With regards to his students he told me, "I know the maqams and I have played a lot of the near eastern repertoire, and I teach my students what I know. I meet them halfway as I do not claim to be an expert. When my students learn it is because they are open to me and I to them."

Ara was feeling comfortable as we talked about a whole range of musical issues, and he added two intimate stories. The first was his feeling towards the Ottomans. He told me, "There is no doubt that the Ottoman genocide of the Armenians was deliberate and organized and any reasonable Armenian could easily come to the conclusion that all Turks are detestable but, one must remember almost every Armenian who escaped the genocide did so because a Turk helped them survive and so, I show up in Turkey and perform there. I feel obliged to do so, despite residual anti Armenian prejudice.

And then he joked with me as a fellow musician that having played so many community weddings, he had had little time to find a suitable Armenian American spouse as he wanted a partner in life who "got" him. He laughed when he told me that when he met his wife who had married early and then divorced, and that once they became a couple, they discovered to their amusement that as a young man he had played in the band at her wedding. "

So contrary to the old Jewish expression that you cannot really dance at two weddings, Ara and his wife did. Three kids later they are living happily ever after.

Whenever Ara comes to Greece or Israel, he is received like a star for in truth that is how he is perceived in this country, as a musical pioneer of a new form of Israeli and Mediterranean music. When I tell other musicians here that I once spent an “afternoon with Ara” at his home in New York they are impressed. One last thing.

Ara plays the organ every Sunday at the Armenian church in New York so when you listen to his music you will hear secular Armenian and Ottoman melodies, the influence of the Armenian liturgy and the influence of the European Classical music and Jazz that is as ubiquitous in America as it is in Israel.

After thirty years Ara is still popular here in Israel as he has fused the kinds of traditions that have never died out in this country. These musical streams are alive and well and a younger generation of oud, saz, darbuka, kanun players and singers here are creating a new sound.

Ara is considered by so many young Israeli musicians as a pioneer among those who have rediscovered their near eastern musical heritage. And so during this difficult time when I am in Jerusalem I listen to a lot of Ara. His music has become part of the soundscape of this remarkable city.

Hear him for yourself and then decide if I am right.

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