



Clockwise from left: the citadel of the Tower of David at night; rabbi Haim Louk with Orchestre Chabab Al Andalous; a view of the Dome of the Rock in the old city; Alemu Aga from Ethiopia; prayers at the Western Wall; stallholders in the Mahane Yehuda market

Other performers this year include Israeli composer Shye Ben Tzur with Johnny Greenwood, Djivan Gasparyan, Stephan Micus, Aziza Brahim and Culture Musical Club, the fabulous *taarab* orchestra from Zanzibar.

# Jerusalem Sacred Music Festival

**Simon Broughton** ventures to the politically-charged city of Jerusalem and finds a place where borders and religious boundaries are blurred

Of all the cities in the world, if any should have a sacred music festival, surely it's Jerusalem, a sacred place for Christians, Muslims and Jews. For Christians it's the place where Christ was crucified, buried and rose again. For Muslims it's where Muhammad set off on his 'night journey' to meet God in heaven. For Jews it's the site of the one remaining wall of Herod's Second Temple, destroyed by the Romans in 70AD. Jerusalem is holy for an estimated four billion people in the world and for someone like me, with no religious belief, it's still a magnet for its layers of history. The holy sites are juxtaposed and jostling, fought over for 2,000 years.

At Jaffa Gate, from the citadel of the Tower of David, we gaze over the narrow lanes and rooftops of the Christian, Armenian, Muslim and Jewish quarters of the Old City, an area of just one kilometre square. You can see the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the golden Dome of the Rock and just beside it, the Wailing Wall. "It all began here and went out

all over the world," says Itay Mautner, one of the directors of the Sacred Music Festival. Looking down at the walls, gardens and historical remains below us, he adds: "we are bringing all of that back and putting it here... with some new twists."

The Jerusalem Sacred Music Festival is about to present its fourth edition, which comes at the end of a summer-long Season of Culture. The main venue is the citadel of the Tower of David where stages and performing spaces are erected within the massive fortifications. Last year, on a small stage in front of an olive tree in a fold of the walls, *Songlines* favourites Ballaké Sissoko (on *kora*)

**"In music, love and spirituality, there is more in common between us than different"**

and Vincent Segal (on cello) performed pieces relating to the Malian king Sunjata as well as their football-loving sons. At one point Segal drew attention to all the sounds around us – the traffic, the birds, the hubbub. "Just imagine the sounds these walls have absorbed!"

Later that night they absorbed the ebullient sounds of New York's Klezmatics on the main stage with the larger-than-life 'kosher gospel' singer Joshua Nelson. Other evenings the range of Israeli stars was a reminder of what a melting pot the country is, with artists from American, European, North African, Ethiopian, Yemeni, Iraqi and Iranian backgrounds.

The most spectacular concert featured Morocco's Orchestre Chabab Al Andalous, with rabbi Haim Louk and an Israeli choir. There is a rich shared repertoire of Arab-Andalus music and the Moroccan orchestra was familiar with the Jewish repertoire of Louk, who was born in Casablanca, but moved to Israel. He sung in Hebrew and Arabic over a background of

swooping violins, lutes and percussion. It was glorious music – powerful and uplifting – and the performance drew a large audience from several different communities. "God gives us different ways to worship, but there is no difference between your blood and my blood," Louk said to me afterwards. "In music, love and spirituality, there is more in common between us than different."

Over lunch at an Armenian restaurant serving excellent Palestinian Taybeh beer, Gil Ron Shama, another one of the team, talks about how the festival is at the centre of a movement for peace and reconciliation. Wherever possible they are trying to bring the different cultures and religions together in the city's politically-charged atmosphere. In Jerusalem there are three roughly equal-sized communities: the Arabs, the Orthodox Jews and the 'other Jews.' It's really only the last group that the festival reaches. The Chabab Al-Andalous concert, however, was one that reached beyond the regular visitors.

Israel has changed in the way it has grown to accept and revel in its Mizrahi (Eastern) culture. "When I was growing up, aged six, I felt ashamed of my father's Arabic music," Ron Shama says. His father came from Egypt, his mother from Poland and he speaks Hebrew and Arabic. "But after years of wanting to be Western European we've started to love the Middle East – things like hummous, the *souk* and, the music, the *maqam*."

One of the special commissions for this year is a special maqam concert, featuring players from several different countries that use the Arabic-style modes. It's put together by Israeli *kamancheh* (spike fiddle) player Mark Eliyahu and will feature an Israeli Arabic *oud* player plus musicians from Turkey, Azerbaijan and India working with Eliyahu, who hails originally from Dagestan. A meeting of musicians like this is a very rare occurrence.

The festival is making a statement through music and culture. "I'm not naive," says Naomi Fortis, another of the organisers, "we can't create peace here. But we can change the hearts and minds of those who come here and hopefully carry them with us so we can create a wider change."

As well as the special commissions and invited artists, the festival also encourages people to experience the sacred music that is a continuous part of the fabric of the city – in the very places where it has been performed for centuries. The festival's Tracing Sanctity programme maps out the music and rituals you can visit of the three religions in 35 locations. The solemn afternoon ritual and chanting in the Armenian church I went to last year is centuries old.

The Jerusalem Sacred Music Festival finishes with an all-night event in the citadel, which starts at midnight and finishes at dawn. About 20 groups are on the various stages, inside the museum and on the ramparts. Around the site there are snack stalls, tea houses and a bar. There's also a liberal sprinkling of cushions so you can lie down comfortably, look at the stars and the coloured projections on the Turkish minaret as music wafts all around. It's a night where dream and reality are hard to distinguish. ♦

**+ DATES** *The Jerusalem Sacred Music Festival runs this year from September 1-4*  
**+ ONLINE** [www.jerusalemseason.com](http://www.jerusalemseason.com)



Michal Fatah; Simon Broughton; Neman Djurjovski