

Friends hope music is avenue to peace

By Marc Shulgold, *Rocky Mountain News (Contact)*

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Photo by Naser Musa

Musicians and friends Yair Dalal, left, an Israeli, and Naser Musa, a Palestinian, are performing together in a series of "Peace Concerts."

Palestinian musician Naser Musa composed a song titled *Salaam*, which he'll perform with his Israeli friend and musical colleague Yair Dalal this weekend.

To Sands, the similarity of the Hebrew and Arabic words underscores his belief that peace is possible between Arabs and Israelis. In a demonstration of how those traditional adversaries can co-exist, he is presenting "Peace Concerts" featuring Musa, Dalal and local tabla player Ty Burhoe.

"I've seen an upsurge of interest in such Arab-Israeli collaborations over there," said Sands, a composer/pianist who began producing concerts by players from those warring sides in 1999. "This is a nonpolitical way of promoting peace, not taking sides - to feel a sense of common humanity."

That message is not lost on the musicians.

"When I met Yair at a Middle-Eastern music camp in Mendocino (Calif.) five years ago, I played for him an Arabic song," Musa recalled. "And he said, 'Oh, that melody is an important part of our Shabat service.' And so I set Arabic words to it."

The two became friends and have performed together occasionally. Musa said the message is simple: "When peace is discussed through music, people will listen and enjoy."

He understands it's not all that simple. "In the Middle East, when you say peace, it means politics. But we're lucky - we can say it in a song."

Musa admitted he was fortunate in another way, being raised in a household without hatred for the Israelis. "I'm Christian, born in Jordan. My family moved there from Palestine in 1948, so they didn't have to live in camps."

As he studied music, he became intrigued with various styles, blending their sounds through song and his chief instrument, the lute-like oud.

"Playing music with an Israeli is not a concern. It's part of what I do. I don't claim to represent anyone or any side. Just me."

The coincidence is inescapable: *Salaam* is the Arab word for peace.

"It sounds close to *Shalom*, doesn't it?" asks concert producer Sheldon Sands about the Hebrew word that carries the same definition.

In a sign of solidarity,

The concerts are the result of a brainstorming session by Sands and Shaul Gabbay, director of the Institute for the Study of Israel in the Middle East (ISIME) at the University of Denver. "Sheldon and I were trying to find a way to show there is already peace over there," Gabbay said. "And he came up with these players."

Gabbay knows first-hand that longtime hatreds can be overcome.

"Amin Kazak is an associate of mine at ISIME, who is Palestinian refugee. I was a commander in the (Israeli) army during the 1982 Lebanon War, and we discovered that we were one block from each other during a battle. Now, he is my friend - we teach a class together."

Both Musa and Dalal are expert oud players, with Dalal also an accomplished violinist. Sands noted that the addition of Burhoe on the Indian tabla "brings a fresh take to the music."

"It brings a sense of openness to our playing," Musa said. "And, it makes a statement that there is injustice everywhere" - a reference to the recent terrorist attacks in Mumbai.

Those involved in the concerts speak with optimism about the cause of Middle-East peace, yet they remain mindful of the obstacles. "I am constantly getting interference," Musa said, referring to opposition from Palestinian groups. "They won't try to stop me from playing these concerts, but they will maybe give bad publicity. There might be boycotting of these concerts."

Sands observed that resentment comes from Jews, too. "There are those who criticize liberal Jews for ignoring the (Israelis') mistreatment of Palestinians," he said.

None of the participants in these concerts expects peace to emerge from the collaboration, but all believe it will come one day.

"When I talk to people," Musa said, "they all say the same thing: 'Enough is enough,' but they are afraid to express that belief freely in their countries."

"That's the tragedy," Gabbay said. "There are those who want to live in peace, but they're driven away by the extremists over there."

"When there will be peace, it will be a warm, people-to-people peace, and it can start with people from both sides meeting with each other, making music together."

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