http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/02/arts/music/02luth.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=kamandjati&st=cse

Amid West Bank's Turmoil, the Pull of Strings

June 2, 2009

Amid West Bank's Turmoil, the Pull of Strings

By DANIEL J. WAKIN

RAMALLAH, West Bank — The young man was handy with tools. A carpenter's nephew, he liked to fix chairs, windows and door locks. At other times he would stand idly on the street corner.

Ramzi Aburedwan noticed him. Like the Pied Piper, Mr. Aburedwan, a French-trained violist raised in a Palestinian refugee camp, was trying to lead Palestinian children into the world of music: namely, a music center he was establishing in an old quarter of the town.

But he had other ideas for the young man. The center had received dozens of donated string instruments from Europe: instruments prone to cracks, broken bridges and damaged scrolls.

The young man, Shehade Shelaldeh, would become the violin repairman.

And so, two years later, after absorbing lessons from visiting volunteer luthiers and a three-month apprenticeship in Italy, Mr. Shelaldeh, 18, has his own instrument repair shop. It is in a former garage around the corner from the music center, Al Kamandjati ("the Violinist"). He has learned to fix instruments and replace the hair on bows. He has already made two violins, one with a tiny Palestinian flag on the tailpiece, which anchors the strings.

"It's a beautiful feeling," he said one day in late April. "I want to work here and teach people." It is the precision of the work that appeals to him, he added, as well as the peace that comes from working by himself, late into the night.

In a place all too familiar with the sounds of gunfire, military vehicles and explosions, he said, "Al Kamandjati taught us to hear music."

The center, and Mr. Shelaldeh's acquisition of a trade born in the workshops of 17th-century Italy, are part of a recently kindled interest in classical music, both Western and Oriental, in the occupied territories. Parents, students and teachers here say it comes from the realization that culture is an effective assertion of national identity, particularly at a moment when the prospects for a Palestinian state seem to be receding. It is also a way to give idle young people something to focus on.

In Mr. Shelaldeh's case, classical music means a career. One of his main teachers, Paolo Sorgentone, reached at his workshop in

Florence, Italy, last month, said that while the young man had a lot to learn, he was a natural, “both in his hands and in his head.”

“From the beginning he showed a rapidity and intelligence to understand exactly what needed to be done,” Mr. Sorgentone said. “He has an intuition for this.” In a few years, he added, Mr. Shelaldeh will become an “excellent luthier.”

Mr. Sorgentone said he had advised Mr. Shelaldeh and his family that he should gain real training and suggested Newark College in England, well known for its violin-making and restoration program. He applied and is waiting to hear whether he has been accepted, and whether there will be enough money to send him.

Mr. Shelaldeh’s story, in a way, reflects the biography of Mr. Aburedwan, Al Kamandjati’s founder. As a boy in Al Amari refugee camp near here, Mr. Aburedwan was an industrious newspaper seller who slept in a room with his grandfather. Together they would listen to classical Arabic music on the radio. During the first intifada, which started in late 1987, he was photographed throwing a rock at Israeli soldiers. The picture was widely circulated.

One of his newspaper buyers, a vocal opponent of the Israeli occupation, would take foreign journalists to interview him. The same woman suggested to a visiting violin teacher from Amman, Jordan, that the boy might be a good prospect for a string workshop the teacher was offering.

The teacher showed him a viola. “Immediately I fell in love,” said Mr. Aburedwan, now 30. He began studying locally, and the American and European teachers who periodically passed through took an interest, struck by his curiosity and rapid absorption of technique. He spent a summer session at the Apple Hill Center for Chamber Music in New Hampshire. The French Cultural Center in Ramallah gave him a grant to study viola at the conservatory in Angers, France.

Toward the end of his eight years at the conservatory, Mr. Aburedwan decided to establish a music school in his hometown. He rounded up donations of money and instruments, invited colleagues to the area for workshops and pushed for the renovation of a building in

Ramallah's old town. Al Kamandjati opened in January 2006. Operating on a shoestring budget of about $400,000 a year, it now has about 400 students studying both Western and Oriental instruments.

"I want these children to achieve something," Mr. Aburedwan said. "That's my dream, that they have a way of expression, a way of living. I want these kids to participate in the building of a Palestinian cultural future."

Mr. Aburedwan said he saw the young Mr. Shelaldeh, whose family — including eight children — lived nearly next door to the center, loitering about. He eventually lured five of Mr. Shelaldeh's siblings into music lessons. The oud and the violin did not quite take with Mr. Shelaldeh. But Mr. Aburedwan knew of his propensity to work with his hands.

"He was like a technician of everything," Mr. Aburedwan said.

So when two violin makers, one French and one Belgian, came to work on the center's instruments, he pushed Mr. Shelaldeh to spend time watching. They gave him small tasks, like cleaning tools, and began showing him basic woodcutting skills.

Every few months, luthiers sympathetic to the project would visit to fix instruments and pass lessons on to Mr. Shelaldeh, giving him the kind of personal attention the average violin restoration student would not normally receive.

"The instrument makers were touched," Mr. Aburedwan said, and gave as much as they could.

The first thing Mr. Shelaldeh learned was how to cut wood for tools and how to hold a knife. Some Italians taught him how to make bridges, pegs and a sound post. An American showed him how to fix bows. Gianluca Montenegro, an associate of Mr. Sorgentone, came from Florence for a month, and they worked together all day, every day. Mr. Shelaldeh learned how to make a finger board.

Then he was invited to Italy for three months, starting last July, to apprentice with several firms, spending a week in Cremona, the Italian violin-making center, where he bought a special machine used to curve wood.

There he finished his first instrument, a violin based on a Stradivarius model, with a small Palestinian flag decal on the base. He also took back books on violin-making and history. Mr. Sorgentone gave him a video on violin-making, Mr. Shelaldeh said, “if I forget something.”

He built his tool collection slowly. The center bought a batch, and visiting luthiers left some behind.

In his workshop a string held bridges lined up by size. Another string held five violins in various forms of undress. Tools were arrayed on the wall over his work bench: a row of chisels (not nearly enough, he said), a tiny hacksaw, needle-nose pliers, clamps, curved instruments used to get inside the violin through the f-holes. A yellow paper outline of a violin was pasted above, the shape of the Guarneri del Gesù King Joseph from 1737, a renowned instrument.

At work one day, his hair fashionably gelled upward, Mr. Shelaldeh applied himself to replacing a poor-quality, ill-fitting bridge on a Chinese violin. He clamped a block of wood to his workbench and put the new bridge in a slot on the block. He removed the blade from a plane and carefully sharpened it on a moistened stone, then passed it over a lathe. Sparks flew.

“My dream,” he said, “is to become a famous instrument repairer.”