

The Muna and Basem Hishmeh Foundation is a long-time friend of the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music (ESNCM) in Palestine, with an annual cooperation agreement in place to support the conservatory's academic programs and activities. The conservatory, with six branches around the West Bank and Gaza Strip, is the premier music education organization in Palestine, teaching Arabic and Western music to generations of young people, running music festivals showcasing local and international talent, developing orchestras and ensembles, and producing high quality recordings. The work of the conservatory, as with cultural institutions around the world, has been dominated since March 2020 by the Coronavirus pandemic, and the resulting state of emergency and recurring lockdowns in Palestine. In addition to the pressure this puts on the population and young people in particular, the political situation in Palestine is also in renewed crisis, the effects of which are already being felt in everyday life.

Many ESNCM projects have been put on hold during this period. However, the conservatory completed the teaching year online, with the creativity and innovation of the teaching staff and the flexibility and understanding of the students. Individual instrumental lessons and group theory classes were held online, and branches and individual teachers organized virtual concerts, keeping students motivated to share their recorded performances. Technical solutions and online teaching tools were developed, knowledge was shared, and most importantly, musical and psychological continuity was provided to the students in this most uncertain and worrying of times.

ESNCM has also played an important role in keeping music playing for the general public during the last several months, with new recordings and video clips involving students and teachers who have recorded tracks from their homes and gardens. These pieces have been viewed thousands of times via the conservatory's social media accounts. Examples include [Rima Habbash](#), a qanoun student from Gaza, who ends her performance by saying "Stay home!" [Nabd ensemble](#) is an independent group made up of ESNCM graduates and others, and with the supervision of an ESNCM Arabic music department teacher they produced this new arrangement of a classic Rahbani Brothers song. Meanwhile, on the initiative of the Academic Supervisor of Gaza branch, Anas al-Najjar, the Palestinian oud player Ahmad Al Khatib invited Palestinian musicians and singers living all over the world to participate in recording his new piece, [Ya Dar](#).

The extraordinary challenges of the spring and summer of 2020 must not overshadow the ESNCM's achievements in 2019 and early 2020. The Jerusalem Children's Orchestra and the Conservatory Orchestra both completed major concert programs during this year. Both orchestras are training ensembles for ESNCM students of different levels. This year the theme for the Conservatory Orchestra was 'magic and fairy-tales', and included Liadov's 'Baba Yaga', Dvorak's 'The Noonday Witch' and music from Tchaikovsky's ballet, 'The Nutcracker'. In addition, the Orchestra featured the music of an ESNCM student composer, written as part of the New York Philharmonic Very Young Composers' Program at Ramallah branch. The Conservatory

Orchestra always includes an educational concert as part of its performances, and this year for the first time, members of the orchestra worked with some of the school students in advance, leading workshops about how music is used to create magical effects and tell stories, and helping them to both understand the music they heard in the educational concert, and encouraged their own creative response to the topic. The flagship Palestine Youth Orchestra, consisting of young Palestinian musicians from Palestine and the diaspora, completed its most ambitious tour to date, playing 10 venues around Scandinavia and Northern Europe in August 2019.

The [outreach program](#) continued to thrive, taking music to every corner of Palestinian society. Ten choirs and 16 instrumental programs were developed in different Jerusalem neighborhoods and centers, as well as programs in UNRWA schools in Hebron, Dheisheh refugee camp in Bethlehem, and the "[Gaza Sings](#)" choir projects.

Two of Jerusalem's major music festivals took place in Fall 2019. ESNCM's [Layali al Tarab festival](#) held 11 events in November and December with audiences totaling almost 3000. The [Jerusalem Nights Project](#), which aims to revive Jerusalem's cultural life, included 16 concerts in the garden of the ESNCM Jerusalem Branch and several street performances by conservatory musicians.

These achievements are in addition to several more international tours by different ESNCM ensembles, one-off concerts by local musicians and visiting artists, and the all-important weekly student concerts in the branches of the conservatory. As the global pandemic continues to unfold and uncertainty abounds, the ESNCM is determined to find new and creative ways to engage with its students and audiences, and to keep music playing in Palestine.