

First Lesson Nurturing the Oud Obsession

Oud: eleven or twelve string ancestor to the guitar,
a middle eastern lute, without frets

The oud had erupted as an obsession in me. I first heard the sound of the oud in Israel. On my return to the United States, my wife's aunt often danced to its music. She knew the oud players around New York, and several times, at family parties, someone would hire an oud player and Clarissa would dance.

I loved the dancing, the sinewy, snake-like movements of the oriental dance, I especially loved it without the distraction of the cheap costumes in which the movements are usually clothed. But the pure movement, the rhythm of the movement, the swirl of the body like the flow of the letters of the script in which the oud music was sung -- it was purely the movement that attracted me to the dance, not the clothes, not even the flesh. It was the body moving like the swirl of Arabic calligraphy.

I loved the intimate sound of the instrument: the sound of flesh and string, the pure acoustic sound. Oud means wood in Arabic and that's what I heard in the playing of the oud, the liberation of the music lurking in the wood, coaxed out by finger, nail, flesh.

I tried to find an instrument in the United States. On a visit to a small town just east of Los Angeles, I met a proprietor of a music store who also had an appreciation for the music and the culture of the oud. He had been warehousing the finest guitar woods for decades – Brazilian rosewood, curly maples – and he found various artisans to make instruments for him. He commissioned a small group of ouds from an Armenian oud maker. The problem with the middle eastern oud is always the wood. Wood is a premium in the middle east, and the instrument makers are not accustomed to the finer woods that the western luthiers use.

The combination of good western guitar woods and the eastern oud sensibility produced ten magnificent brazilian rosewood and maple instruments. I bought one of them, but I didn't know how to play it.

I approached the oud as I did the classical guitar: I played it with my fingers, no plectrum, like the guitar I prefer the feel of my fingers directly on the strings. I knew I owned an extraordinary instrument, but my style was so idiosyncratic, I never learned enough to play the instrument in concert.

I heard that one of the great oud players was coming to my town on a kind of cultural exchange tour of the United States. I took my instrument, arrived early enough to secure a front row seat, and sat there waiting for the concert to begin with my oud across my lap. I knew that even the sight of my instrument from the stage would be my ticket of introduction to the oud master.

I sat quietly through the concert with my oud on my lap. It was a magnificent concert. The oud player noticed my instrument; after the concert he motioned me to approach the stage. He looked at my instrument and invited me backstage where we could talk privately.

He asked about my instrument. I told him the story. He asked me to play for him, which I did in my completely unconventional style. "That's interesting," he said, "but of course all wrong."

"Teach me," I said, knowing in my bones in my blood that this may be the one opportunity in my life to receive proper instruction on my instrument.

He laughed and informed me that he no longer took private students (he was much too busy), and besides, he lived in Israel.

"I'll come," I said. I meant it. He laughed more, but he saw my seriousness and relented.

"Come to Israel and I will teach you. But bring your instrument."

I took a sabbatical three months later and went to Israel to sit at his feet and learn the playing of my instrument from the source.

I arrived at Ben Gurion airport with a broken oud and a broken heart. I found someone to repair it, a Russian violin maker, called heart of the strings.

After heart of the strings repaired my oud, I reached my teacher on the telephone. He lived quite far away, by Israeli standards, from Jerusalem.

His town was an Arab town northeast of Haifa. That means that in driving to him, I drove through the three largest cities in Israel: Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa.

Israel is a small country, and such a trip is only about 110 miles long. But getting through the cities is difficult, and I had no idea how long it would take me to make the journey.

I took directions from my teacher over the phone. It wasn't until I hung up and reviewed what I had written that I realized that in all his directions, through the three largest cities in Israel, through the several different geographic zones

that in Israel are so close upon one another, in all the complexity of his directions that required three free hours of driving and navigating, in all those directions there was not one street name. It was all "right at the bridge. . . left at the garbage dump. . .two o'clock at the rotary. . ." etc. Not one street name.

The town is named Shfaram, there are no Jews there today, it is one of the largest Arab towns in Israel. Today there are Christian Arabs, Moslem Arabs, and Druze living in Shfaram. There is an ancient synagogue there and I was told by an old Arab man on top of a nearby mountain that there were Jews living there as recently as the early Seventies, but none since. At one time, not long after the destruction of the Second Temple, the Sanhedrin (Jewish court) met there.

I started off on my first journey to Shfaram on Sunday, which is called in Hebrew "yom rishon" (Day One) and is so named from the account of Creation. Six days of creation followed by Shabbat, day one, day two, day three, etc. The Muslims identify their days the same way. Sunday is therefore a full day of activity in Israel, there is no such thing in Israel as a weekend, there is just six days of work, one day of rest, just like in the Bible.

So on Day One, I was hurtling through the Israeli countryside on my way to Tel Aviv and the up the coast to Haifa. When you leave Jerusalem you descend. Jerusalem is relatively high, and you move from the heights of the Judean hills around Jerusalem through the corridor (called the "prozdor") that has connected Jerusalem to the Sea for millennia, driving down through the forested landscape to the coastal plain that leads to Tel Aviv and the Mediterranean.

Tel Aviv is a large, smelly city, very fast and busy. There are always many distractions in Tel Aviv, but I didn't stop.

I hurtled through Tel Aviv and found my way onto the coastal highway that runs next to the Mediterranean all the way up to Haifa. About half way up the coast toward Haifa, the road relaxed from the tension of Tel Aviv, curved even closer to the Mediterranean, and for the first time I saw the sea, I could smell it in the air.

This is the new road, that is how it is known to Israelis. On maps it is designated by a number, two, but Israelis know it only as the new road. The old road which is marked on the maps by the number four, is parallel to the new road a little inland and often you can see one from the other. The new road is under constant renovation, especially around Tel Aviv, and it would take a few more trips until I realized that the old road is much faster, especially when there is traffic.

I came to Haifa. Both the new and the old roads lead to Haifa. I would later discover a road that leads to the north and avoids Haifa altogether, winding around the gentle sweep of Mt. Carmel. Haifa is the port city of Israel. It is built mostly on hills that roll down to the natural port on which Haifa is built. There are beautiful places to go in Haifa, but I didn't stop.

I passed through the port of Haifa, still hugging the Mediterranean but now I could see the ships docked in Haifa, from Holland, Africa, Kuala Lumpur, a dozen exotic addresses. Haifa is also busy, dirty, and smelly especially by the sea, it took me almost an hour to crawl through the center of the city.

Once through Haifa, I headed toward the western Galilee. Just north of Haifa, the scenery once again changed dramatically. I had entered the Galilee, in the distance I saw small villages nestled into the sides and on top of the hills. It was green and beautiful, open, unpopulated compared to the Tel Aviv - Haifa corridor I had just passed through; the air was clean, cool, fresh. I followed the signs to Shfaram where my teacher lived.

I had never been to an Arab town before. My teacher's directions were precise but none of the turns were marked with the names that he gave them. I had found my way by intuition and a pretty good road map tucked into my sun visor. I found the town easily, with not one wrong turn, and it was only when I entered the town itself did I get lost. I would later find out that there are two entrances to the town, I had taken the wrong one.

We had scheduled to meet each other at the gas station; there were several gas stations in the town and I had found the wrong one. I drove out in search of the other. I got hopelessly lost in the dirt roads of the town. Soon I was driving among shepherds with herds of sheep and goats, nothing was paved, the roads were barely wide enough for a single car to pass. Everyone stared at me as I passed. I was an hour late and looking for a phone to call him. I finally found a phone and just at the moment when I was about to exit my car to use it, I saw him in his car at the very same moment he saw me. I don't know which of us was more surprised. He had given up on me and was on his way home; we exchanged stories, and I followed him to his house.

He lived on the edge of the town (the other edge), overlooking a meadow below and the Galilee spread out in the distant east. It was a beautiful view. All the windows were open and the air rustled our papers on the music stand. His wife served me cola and some fresh figs and other fruit, I assumed that she spoke no English. Later I learned that she taught English in a school in Acco.

We went right to work. He began by showing me the basics, how to hold the instrument, how to manipulate the plectrum, called a reeshi which means eagle feather in Arabic, because that was the traditional way to pluck strings. We discussed the intricacies of extracting sound out of the instrument, we talked

mostly in metaphor and he intuitively illustrated his points sometimes in Hebrew, sometimes in Arabic (he was delighted that I read and write Arabic), sometimes in English. He showed me the traditional modes, called makamat, of the music.

It was very difficult, a complete re-education for me from the way I had taught myself. It required a tremendous amount of concentration just to play through all the examples he was showing me. Learning to use the reeshi, the plectrum, was difficult because I was accustomed to playing oud with my fingers, as I played guitar. We were head to head for about two hours. He gave me a reeshi that he no longer used, made of bone.

The reeshi was especially difficult for me to use. I worked it too hard over the strings. He lifted my hand and taught me an exercise, my hand floating up and down as if lifted by a pillow of air. I practiced the exercise while driving, sitting in a chair, watching television, walking down the street, gently lifting my hand up and down isolating the motion of the hand at the wrist. "Do this everyday," he said.

He heard something in my playing that I myself would not hear for months. When I began studying with him, I said to myself, "I've taken on too much here. I cannot possibly do this." He listened to me and said, "we will accomplish much in the months we have together." After every lesson, he congratulated me. I felt foolish, I could not even hear the notes at first.

He told me to close my eyes and listen, to hear the notes first and then to find them on the fingerboard. I couldn't find them in the beginning. They are microtones, notes that we do not have in Western music, notes that are closer together than each adjacent key on the piano, or each fret on the guitar. I could not hear them because I had never played them before, you cannot reach these notes on the guitar (unless you bend the strings), nor can you play them on the piano. They are not ordinarily a part of Western music at all.

"Listen," he said and I closed my eyes and heard the note in my head. Then I found it on the fingerboard. It was more mental than physical. I could only find the note when I paused to listen for it. I sat there in his living room overlooking the western Galilee with my eyes closed, trying to imagine in my mind the note I was trying to find on the neck of my instrument. Then I plucked the note, and I began to find it the more I listened.

The real work of playing an instrument at this level, I realized, is internal. "You have to listen," he said, "then you play." One time I sat in a master class with a great Spanish classical guitarist. Someone in the audience asked him which finger exercises he used to warm up for a concert. "None," he said, "is not physical. Is entirely mental."

Like matter and energy, the relation of which is fixed deep within the structure of things but not perceived, the relation of mental and physical, inner and outer, clarified for me on the fretless fingerboard of my beloved oud.

I realized that in our time together, we exchanged not one sentence of personal information about each other. It would be this way the entire time he taught me: I would show up, we would play for two or three hours, discussing only music. He knew nothing about me; I knew little about him. We spoke only music to each other and it was through the music that we were bound up together, soul to soul.

He gave me my assignments for next time. "Do you have time to practice?" he asked. "Yes," I said, "every day." He seemed genuinely delighted with me as a student, he saw that I learned quickly, and he knew how eager I was. "We will do a lot," he said again. He gave me more directions, and I headed back to Jerusalem, just as the sun began to find its way home in the west.

I was back on the road toward Haifa, as the darkness settled over the north, I watched the villages on top of the hills in the distance light up. It was beautiful and peaceful, the traffic had diminished, and soon I was smelling the Sea again and heading for Tel Aviv. I didn't stop on the way home, I gobbled up a couple of sandwiches in the car, and I was home in Jerusalem just over two hours later.

I was not at all tired, as a matter of fact, I practiced for two more hours that night. By the next day, I had begun to read the pieces he had given me. I realized that through the music we had entered a place deeper than our differences, before the separation of Isaac and Ishmael, the music of Abraham. The oud had opened my mouth, and it was singing the world.

This is the story of one of the best days of my life.

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