

## INTERVIEW

## Alon Sariel



Alon Sariel began studying mandolin, a stringed instrument related to the lute, at the age of eight at the Samuel Rubin Municipal Conservatory in Beersheva. The city's mandolin phenomenon began in the 1970s with the arrival of violinist Simcha Nathanson from the then-USSR.

Nathanson presented himself at the Beersheva Municipal Music School and offered to teach violin, but they asked if he couldn't teach something more exotic – like mandolin. Nearly 40 years later, Beersheva boasts a mandolin orchestra of 40 players, currently run by Nathanson's successor, Lev Khaimovich.

After playing with the Beersheva Mandolin Orchestra, Sariel transferred to the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance to work on a Masters in Early Music. Part of that program brought him to Brussels to study lute. For the past

six months he has been working under Professor Philippe Malfait at the Koninklijk Conservatorium Brussel, or Royal Conservatory of Brussels.

Sariel's interests extend to modern music, including jazz and

tain in the north of Israel called Miron where people came to see a Rabbi in the second century. "For many years after that, people would converge on the site from Europe and the Maghreb countries – each with their local instru-

**"Serving in the war with Lebanon was a very intense experience, performing on battlefields while wearing helmets and protective gear. It was a tough time."**

Jewish folk (or klezmer) but his current focus is on music reaching back to the 14th century. He is particularly excited by the way that music evolves in local communities.

The 22-year-old talks, for instance, about particular a moun-

ments – and a particular type of music developed," he says. "And that's just one mountain. There are so many melting points of Jewish music to explore from the 14th century to today."

But Sariel is far from being someone living in the past. Being

an Israeli, it is virtually impossible to forget the present day. He had to complete the mandatory three years of army service before beginning his Master's degree. But Sariel's army service was unique: he was selected by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) as one of 20 "extraordinary musicians". Each year, these 20 soldiers complete their army service by performing as a musical ensemble for troops across the country.

Although still required to endure a month of combat training, as well as occasional follow-up training, this opportunity allowed the young mandolin player to start his career much earlier than most Israelis, who usually must finish their army service before entering university.

"I served two years ago in the war with Lebanon," he remembers. "It was a very intense experience, performing on battlefields while wearing helmets and protective gear. It was a tough time. But I have no complaints. I know the combats soldiers had a harder time."

Most of his army performances were more relaxed, taking place when the soldiers come up to Tel Aviv for "cultural Sundays". The band played popular music, world and Israeli folk songs, giving some explanation and background on the compositions. But do the soldiers go for it? "Let's start with the fact that they were required to be there," Sariel smiles, "but most were very curious, very happy to have the programme."

His fellow army musicians were all his age – 18 at the time – and came from homes across the country. There was a democratic division of labour in terms of directing the group, which was a particularly good experience for him, trying in nicely with his growing interest in conducting. In Brussels, Sariel has been able to study conducting formally for the first time, extending his musical experience beyond the mandolin, lute

and guitar (which he does not play professionally but did play in the army).

When it comes to conducting, Sariel has some excellent role models close at hand. He is currently on tour with Daniel Barenboim's West-Eastern Divan for the second year in a row. Founded 10 years ago by Barenboim and the late Palestinian-American academic Edward Said, the orchestra aims to promote communication and understanding between Arabs and Israelis.

This summer, the orchestra brings together musicians from Arab countries, Israel and Spain to perform classical music in cities across Europe. They will also venture beyond Europe into Jordan. "Everybody knows this is not the best time for this conflict," notes Sariel. "I want to think that both sides are hoping for peace. What I'm sure of is that there's no other way of getting there than through communication. West-Eastern Divan works because we have a common language of music."

Sariel is aware that not all reactions to the initiative have been positive. "Some say it only works because we're musicians, and musicians are left-wing – not the most radical sides of either party. But I prefer to look at the hopeful side. I think it is a huge opportunity."

In addition to the political aspects, the ensemble gives Sariel the opportunity to observe Barenboim – one of the most prominent conductors working today – in action. West-Eastern Divan is an incredible learning opportunity, one which may help Sariel to make the difficult decision between performing and conducting. He hopes to combine both by studying for a PhD, but he knows performing will always remain a part of his work. "I can't ever stop performing, even if I wanted to."

Sharon Light

## THE LAST WORD

what they're saying in Flanders

## New Orleans, East Flanders

"When I played recently at a jazz festival in Ghent, it came across as a warm-blooded city with the streets full of exuberant people. Sort of like New Orleans, only better organised."

Randy Newman  
songwriting legend  
interviewed in *De Standaard*

## Minority rules

"French-speakers who go to live in Flanders are migrants who have to fit in, just as we ask Moroccans and Turks to do. We don't say that Arabic should become an official language just because we are multilingual in Flanders. That would be crazy."

Bart De Wever  
Chairman of the Flemish  
Nationalist party NV-A speaking  
(in French) on RTBF radio

## No magic solution

"I'm a negotiator, not a magician."

Karl-Heinz Lambertz  
one of the three negotiators  
appointed by the King  
to solve the political crisis

AntwerpZoo DePanne Baseball  
inFlanders VluchtMisdrijf Museum  
nacht FifthColumn

next week in Flanders Today