

PROFILE

# Breaking musical boundaries, bridging cultural divides

*Hadas Bram GRD '31 combines Islamic and Jewish musical traditions.*

// BY ANYA GEIST

The santur sounds out of another time. Out of place, too, in a New Haven apartment.

The Persian instrument has been played for centuries. As first-year music doctoral student Hadas Bram GRD '31 sits criss-cross on the floor, gently hitting its dozens of strings with small mallets, the twangy sound resonates through her living room. It sounds to my untrained ear almost like a beautiful cross between a guitar and a xylophone.

“Playing the santur feels like home for me. It’s a home I must continually work for, nurture and care for,” Bram later wrote to me over WhatsApp. “Playing the santur is both difficult and comforting. Difficult, because of its infinite and almost overwhelming possibilities; comforting, because even in the hardest moments, I find so much comfort in it.”

Bram’s academic work concentrates on connections between Jewish and Muslim sacred music. After an accident in her early adulthood, Bram became interested in exploring music through the sublime. Her released works, under the stage name Princess Laila, deepen these nuances and facilitate understanding between people of disparate backgrounds.

Bram is descended from Persian Jews, and she grew up in Jerusalem surrounded by Persian music, literature and poetry. She encountered a santur at age 16 and knew she wanted to play the instrument.

Her whole family pitched in and found someone who imported the instrument to Israel via Turkey — since Israel does not import anything from Iran directly. Bram said Persian Jews generally struggle to maintain their connection to Iran, because once they have immigrated to Israel, Iranian policies dictate that they cannot return.

“Being the hyphenated identity, being Israeli-Iranian, it’s always so weird,” Bram told me. “People just don’t think that between



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YOUR NATURE SHALL BE THUS —  
I HAVE SET MY HEART TO WITNESS  
COUNTLESS CRUELITIES*

- SAADI, NO. 466

these two political entities that are fighting, there are people who are in the middle.”

And yet, Bram feels it is important that Jewish Persian culture continue to live.

When she was 20, after playing for a few years, Bram enrolled in a conservatory in Jerusalem, where she studied Arabic and Persian music. She went on to pursue Arabic and musicology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

It was there, in 2020, that Bram was hit by an ambulance and nearly died.

It took her ten months to be able to walk again. Even today, five years later, she has major health issues. The experience transformed her relationship with spirituality.

“There was something in that near-death experience that made me want to explore sublime things and transcendence,” Bram said.

Bram’s newfound sense of purpose has led her to look for meaning in Persian Jewish music and explore the connections between Jewish and Muslim music in the Middle East.

In Iran and other places, Jews historically often borrowed pieces of texts or melodies from Sufi communities and then sang them in a Jewish context. And, Bram told me, there are many knowledgeable Jewish scholars of Islamic mysticism, strengthening the ties between the two traditions.

Bram is working with Professor Edwin Seroussi of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem to compile a database of documents, photographs and recordings that illustrate the Jewish-Muslim relationship in sacred music. Seroussi, a former fellow of sacred music at the School of Music, hopes the database will be released online in late 2025.

“It’s a huge amount of material that we are processing photographs, for sure,” Seroussi said. “So we want to present a quite comprehensive audiovisual documentation of this shared space.”

Seroussi’s colleague, Nili Belkind, a research fellow at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, said that researching and documenting Jewish Arab musicians



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HADAS BRAM

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