Interview with Lara Harb

Lara is a pianist from Ramallah, West Bank, Palestine. She attended Apple Hill twice as a teenager in the late ’90s. She moved to the US to attend Brown University, stayed for a PhD at NYU, and, as of September, is a professor of Arabic literature at Dartmouth College in Hanover, NH.

What is your favorite memory of Apple Hill?

There are so many little memories that shaped my experience. I remember the atmosphere, and the happiness I felt there. I think of all the music I heard there. One specific event I remember was a concert of two jazz singers, improvising. It was unbelievable music, and something I never would have had the opportunity to hear in Ramallah. Musicians would come to Israel, but they wouldn’t come to the West Bank. When the Apple Hill Chamber Players came to Ramallah, they brought one of few chances to hear classical music performed. And then I came to Apple Hill and heard all that music – it was amazing and enlightening. And of course I met so many great people!

Coming to Apple Hill, what was it like for you to experience a music workshop in such a rural place – living in a cabin in the woods, performing in a barn?

It was fun! At 15, it was a fun experience. Obviously, at the time, it wasn’t my main impression – coming to America was a much bigger impression. Living in the West Bank, travel is restricted – there are checkpoints everywhere, and you can’t travel around without a permit. So arriving at the airport in Boston and driving for two hours without a checkpoint – that was more of a big point for me. But in retrospect, the experience of living in a cabin does seem unusual.

Performing in the barn – there is an amazing energy. You feel the history of all the musicians who have played there. It’s unique; there is something special about Apple Hill itself.

Is there something you learned from Apple Hill that is still with you? How do you feel your life is different for having attended Apple Hill?

At the time, Apple Hill made me become serious about music, although I didn’t continue on to a career in music. Growing up in Palestine, and learning music there, there happened to be a piano teacher in town, and that’s how I chose piano. Now that the conservatory has opened in Ramallah, there are many more opportunities to study different instruments than I had, but we didn’t have as many choices, and I didn’t have the bigger picture. At Apple Hill, there were serious musicians, and I realized you can be so serious about music, and that you have to be in order to be a very good musician. Musicians have a discipline to seek perfection, to attempt perfection. That discipline can be applied to anything, even if you go on to do other things.

Are you still in touch with your friends from AH?
Yes, through Facebook, I’ve gotten back in touch. Immediately after coming back from my session, I
definitely kept in touch. For example, there is a violinist who I attended Apple Hill with who now plays in
the East West Divan Orchestra.

After I returned, an Israeli violinist came to visit me in Ramallah. It was an interesting experience. She
was nervous about coming, but she had the guts to come, even though her family and friends were
against it. It was enlightening for her to see Ramallah, the other side. I remember when she visited we
wrote an email to Eric [Stumacher, former Apple Hill director and pianist] together.

**What are you doing now? Is music still part of your life?**

I am teaching Arabic literature at Dartmouth College. I came to the US in 2000 for college, and ironically
I ended up close to where I started. When I was 15 I never would have expected that I would be here!
Coming to the US from Palestine comes with complications, which can be negative, but it can also be an
opportunity to change people’s opinions, just by standing in front of them and being a human being.
Now the US is like a second home to me. I like Dartmouth – the students are great, although the winters
are cold!

Yes, I am still playing music, although not seriously. I can’t play the difficult pieces I played when I was
younger. I played through college and even did a senior recital, but then I decided to do a PhD which
takes a lot of time. I’ve been moving around too much, but I’ve invested in a digital keyboard. Music is
coming back into my life. Some people do yoga, or sports, to bring their focus back, and relax, and think
clearly. I do music.

**The letter you wrote about your Playing for Peace experience is still on the Apple Hill website. What
do you think, looking back at it now?**

It’s weird to look at something you wrote in the past, like it was written by a different person. But that
letter was an honest, sincere expression of what I was feeling then.