

The Road to Recovery

by Rebecca Winzenried

With assistance from orchestras and musicians worldwide, the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra is equipped to face the future.

When musicians anywhere are in need—of sheet music, or supplies, or training—other musicians are quick to lend a hand. It doesn't really matter whether the call comes from down the road or from a war zone halfway around the world. So when word started emerging about the plight of the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra, which was in serious need of sheet music, instruments, and supplies after years of isolation and economic sanctions, the music community started mobilizing.

Efforts resulted in the INSO being completely re-outfitted with instruments and a new music library, and able to travel abroad for the first time in more than a decade. On December 9, members of the INSO joined with the National Symphony Orchestra for

a concert at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. The two orchestras combined for the performance, entering the stage *en masse* and performing as a single unit, as NSO Music Director Leonard Slatkin and INSO Conductor Mohammed Amin Ezzat traded podium duties. Kennedy Center President Michael Kaiser's welcoming remarks included an announcement that the INSO had received a library of some 500 musical works, courtesy of the Major Orchestra Librarians' Association, pianos from Steinway and Yamaha, and—through a gift from the Catherine B. Reynolds Foundation—new instruments for each player.

The scene was in marked contrast to the INSO's December 2002 concert in Baghdad, played by candlelight due to yet

another power failure at the hall. That performance was halted when the candles set on music stands burned too low and were in danger of setting the parts on fire. At the time, not many people in the U.S. were even aware that there was an orchestra in Baghdad devoted to playing classical Western repertoire and the music of contemporary Iraqi composers, much less that the orchestra had been founded in 1959. Continuing to play was what they did to survive, to forget the troubles, as musicians told reporters who were in Baghdad to cover the impending war.

Musicians elsewhere understood. The INSO's determination to keep making music touched a nerve; e-mail inquiries to various musical organizations were common in the early days of 2003, as musicians



Above, members of a Kurdish ensemble demonstrate traditional instruments such as the *daf*, a drum covered in goatskin, during a performance for Washington, D.C. schoolchildren. At left, concertmasters Nurit Bar-Josef of the NSO and Noubar N. Banous of the INSO chat before the Kennedy Center performance. They traded the concertmaster chair during the concert as their respective conductors traded podium duties.

Robert A. Reeder—The Washington Post

Lucian Perkins—The Washington Post

and orchestra staffers tried to find the best route to get supplies to their compatriots in Iraq. Their attempts were complicated by international trade sanctions that had been imposed upon Iraq following its 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Items such as strings, reeds, sheet music, and parts for instrument repairs were difficult to get into Iraq. Part of the orchestra's fear of its sheet music catching fire at that candlelight concert was that there was so little printed music left. The INSO library consisted of about 40 sets of music; musicians worked with threadbare, taped, and marked-over parts dating back to the 1970s.

That was a time when the INSO was part of a vibrant cultural scene in Baghdad. The orchestra had more than 70 members, toured regularly abroad, and attracted classically trained musicians from other countries. But musicians started leaving the country after Saddam Hussein came to power and the country became engulfed in the Iran-Iraq War. The exodus accelerated in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, as sanctions made daily life and musical practice more difficult. Exiles included conductor Ezzat, who sought political asylum in Sweden in 2002 after being asked to write the score for a stage version of a novel by Saddam Hussein.

By then, the INSO's membership had dwindled to about 40 musicians, although the orchestra managed to stick fairly well to its schedule of monthly concerts. Days after the end of major military action last May, INSO Director Hisham Sharaf had located all the musicians. Rehearsals resumed, albeit in a new location; the orchestra's home venue, the al-Rasheed Theater, had been bombed. (There were scattered reports of damage to musicians' houses, and Sharaf suffered a hand injury when his home was hit.)

It was during rehearsals at the Baghdad Convention Center, under tight security in the U.S.-protected "Green Zone," that



Robert A. Reeder/The Washington Post
INSO Conductor Mohammed Amin Ezzat consults with NSO Music Director Leonard Slatkin during their first joint rehearsal.

Colonel Scott Norwood, senior military assistant to Ambassador Paul Bremer, the U.S. administrator in Iraq, began sitting in with the orchestra. Norwood, a trumpet player, told Bremer about the sad state of the orchestra's scores, and the ambassador began contacting publishers about the possibility of getting some music donations. G. Schirmer Vice President Susan Feder, in turn, passed along word to the Major Orchestra Librarians' Association—which is how Dallas Symphony Orchestra Librarian Karen Schnackenberg began communicating with Baghdad, and how the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra became a MOLA member.

As the project coordinator, Schnackenberg headed up a campaign to gather

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music on the INSO's "wish list" of about a dozen works. The orchestra, she notes, was initially a bit shy about making requests, but after assurances that MOLA did indeed have the resources to obtain most any symphonic repertoire requested, "it was like kids in a candy store—there were almost too many options." MOLA organized three collection points where its U.S. and international members could send scores and parts: Washington, D.C. (through the National Symphony Orchestra), London (through the London Symphony Orchestra), and Sydney (through the Symphony Australia National Library).

Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra Librarian Doug Adams catalogued donations of retired or duplicate sets of music from orchestras, and new sets purchased with donations from groups and individuals. "There was a tremendous amount of detail involved," says Schnackenberg. "But then, that's what we librarians do." Within two months, MOLA had gathered 500 complete sets of parts and scores—an estimated two tons of music. "I don't think it will really sink in until they start opening the boxes," she says.

An announcement that MOLA's first shipment of scores, library supplies, resource materials, and recordings was on its way was made at an INSO rehearsal in November, when Musicians For Harmony Executive Director Allegra Klein just happened to be sitting in with the violin section. Klein had traveled to Baghdad with Wafaá Al-Natheema, founder of the Institute of Near Eastern and African Studies, to deliver donations from their respective organizations for the INSO and its educational arm, the Baghdad School of Music and Ballet, which had been gutted by looters. The INEAS had become a contact point and a conduit for donations through the online newsletter that Al-Natheema, an Iraqi native now living in

Boston, maintained for the INSO. New York-based Musicians For Harmony, for example, had contacted Al-Natheema earlier in the year about donating supplies and proceeds from its second annual September 11 commemorative concert.

Klein, a violinist, was asked to sit in on a rehearsal in Baghdad. "They were very warm and inviting to me. It was musician talk—they wanted to know if I played this piece or that." Orchestra members, who outside of rehearsals were dealing with issues of day-to-day existence—loss of their full-time jobs, power outages, personal safety—expressed anxiety about their musicianship in light of an impending visit to Washington, D.C., where they would take the stage with the NSO and Yo-Yo Ma. "They were excited about the trip, but knew they'd have to sound good," says Klein.

A First Tour

Plans to bring the INSO to the States had been formulating in Kennedy Center President Kaiser's mind for some time before he visited Iraq last September in his role as a State Department cultural ambassador. Stories about the INSO's artistic isolation reminded him of those that had emerged from South African artists during apartheid. "This is a country with a very rich cultural history and we know very little about it," says Kaiser. "For instance, I was surprised to hear how much contemporary music and art is being made there, that reflects the world they are living in."

Among the new works he heard was Symphonic Poem No. 2 by 35-year-old Iraqi composer Abdulla J. Sagirma, which includes an ensemble of traditional Kurdish instruments. Kaiser began working with the INSO and the NSO to put together a program mixing Sagirma's work and Ezzat's *Three Fragments* with traditional fare such as Beethoven's *Egmont* Overture and the "Farandole" from Bizet's *L'Arlesienne*.

The various factions converged for the Washington concert. Sixty INSO members, including 72-year-old founder and violist Munther Jamil Hafidh, made the

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Musicians For Harmony, Inc.
INSO flutist Fu'ad Al-Mashta, a teacher at the Baghdad School of Music and Ballet, with one of the two students who had returned to his class in November.

trip to D.C. courtesy of the U.S. State Department. Details of the INSO travel itinerary, coordinated by the tour company Classical Movements, were kept under wraps, and while orchestra members tried to deflect questions about war and U.S. policies, the political significance of the group's arrival couldn't be avoided. Members of Washington's diplomatic corps occupied a good portion of the seats for the concert, President and Mrs. Bush were in attendance, and greetings from Secretary of State Colin Powell were translated into Arabic.

Near the end of the program, prior to conducting the traditional Iraqi work *Over the Palm Trees*, Slatkin noted that while the two sides do have to translate their speeches, among the musicians, "There's no talk

of anything but music. They want to know, 'What kind of strings do you use?' 'What kind of mouthpiece do you use?'" He pointed as an example to soloist Yo-Yo Ma, who had calmed the nerves of INSO musicians by plunking himself down in the cello section for rehearsals, then doing the same for the concert, before and after his solo turn in Fauré's *Élégie* for Cello and Orchestra. "Which of these two orchestras is that cellist in the back auditioning for?" Slatkin wondered.

After borrowing cellos, basses, and timpani for its Washington debut, the INSO returned home to the promise of new instruments and a foundation for the Iraqi National Symphony Library, which will be used by the orchestra and other groups around the country. "They are really in very good shape now," says Klein. "The School of Music is another matter." At the end of the year, Musicians For Harmony was concentrating on gathering donations and supplies, such as blank music notebooks, reeds, and child-size instruments, for the school, where many of the INSO members teach (but reportedly hadn't been receiving salaries). Operation Harmony, a project of the National Endowment for the Arts, was also gathering supplies and instruments for the school and other musical training institutions in Iraq.

The INSO visit involved a human element that transcended the usual business of arranging orchestra tours for Neeta Helms, executive vice president of Classical Movements. She ushered the musicians from their first nerve-racking security checks at New York's JFK Airport to their last tourist stop at Rockefeller Center on the way out of the country. "It was very hard to say goodbye. Usually when a tour ends we say, 'See you next time.' That's not true in this case," she says.

But just as orchestras were among the first American groups to visit countries such as China and Vietnam, "maybe they will be doing tours to Baghdad soon," she says. ∞

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