

The true rhythm for peace

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(generously translated by David Watkiss)

Music as argument. Deterring bullets with bassoons. Music Fund pursues peace and understanding through music. How? It collects musical instruments in countries in peace to take them to places in conflict.

The expression “instruments for peace” usually refers to abstract political negotiations. But not to Lukas Pairon. This Belgian musician, quixotic idealist and Ictus Ensemble founder, gives this phrase a concrete meaning. He does it through Music Fund. The aim is simple: Music Fund collects musical instruments in the West and delivers them to conflict areas such as the Middle East, Congo and Mozambique. These are places where a violin, a bassoon, a flute, a cello, a guitar or a piano can be part of a creative way to end the atrocities of war.

Pairon fills up trucks with donated instruments in Europe and takes them to schools in Palestine and Africa so that students in those areas can develop their musical talents.

On 19 and 20 December 2009, Pairon will be at La Casa Encendida in Madrid, Spain, supported by Musica de Hoy, under Xavier Guell's direction, to receive donations of musical instruments. “We’ll put up a ‘hospital for instruments’ so that luthiers can repair the instruments in bad condition,” says José Guirao, of La Casa Encendida.

After collecting donated instruments in Madrid, Pairon will return to places where he previously has taken instruments. He recently delivered a full lorry in Kinshasa. In January, he will go to Gaza and the West Bank, places he has visited twenty times in the last ten years. In this rocky and paradisaical “promised land”, Israelis and Palestinians live as enemies. People like Pairon are a kind of manna, bringing a bit of harmony and understanding to a region of chaos.

Music Fund's vision inspired Palestinian Edward Said and Jewish conductor Daniel Barenboim. Both used their prestige to create the West-Eastern Divan, an orchestra that unites Arabs, Israelis and Spanish musicians to show that living, working and making art together is possible.

Few people have heard of Ramzi Aburedwan. His story exemplifies the story of

his people, but he has decided to turn away from a future of damnation, a life without a future. He was an anger boy. His picture throwing stones to Israeli soldiers during the first Intifada appeared in newspapers around the world. After a while, fed up with the dark prospects of violence, he went to Angers, France, and learned to play the viola, violin and piano. "Usually Palestinians, who leave their country, don't want to come back", says Ramzi. But he decided that, by coming back, he would be more useful to his people, and he did.

"I wanted to share with my people all I had learned," he says. Today he's the manager of Al Kamandjati ('the violinist') Music School in the old part of the Ramallah. He exchanged stones for instruments. He returned to refugee camps with a big bag of beautiful melodies to show and share with his people. He teaches music along with the idea of a better life. He has become a role model in his neighbourhood.

The time for foundations, such as Al Qattan, has come. Palestinians, such as Duaibis and Maha Abboud Ashkar, who live in the Israeli city of Nazareth, have started a similar project with their son Nabeel, who is a musician and a member of the West-Eastern Divan orchestra. "Our society is blooming. Politics have deceived us, but we have found a way of challenging the occupation", says Ziad Khalal, director of the Al Qattan Foundation, which has branches in London and Ramallah. "We promote all kinds of activities related to culture, education and art in our society. For us, this is a way to fight", says Khalal.

Lukas Pairon collaborates with these organisations on the ground. He is not from this region, but has engaged deeply with peace through art through these collaborations. "I believe the solution will only be found through mutual understanding and shared responsibility. For this reason it is necessary to search for a third way that brings them closer together and convinces them that their future lies in understanding." The crux is finding a way of living together. For that purpose, Pairon has just started in Belgium an association, called Third Party, that works to create accord and promote shared initiatives. Third Party is a manifestation of Pairon's idealism and commitment to peace. "Our slogan could be: do not boycott; understand each other", he insists.

Pairon has promoted projects both in Israel and Palestine. When the West-Eastern Divan was started, the Belgian asked Baremboim: "What can I do?" The conductor said: "Bring instruments." Pairon didn't think twice and started his campaigns of collection in the west. A total of seven countries have cooperated up to now: Austria, Germany, United Kingdom, Belgium, France and Holland.

In the Spanish campaign, Music Fund will have the support of musicians such as

Jorge Drexler. "I'm a great supporter of the idea. There's nothing than music to challenge fundamentalism. This project builds bridges between Europe, Israel and Palestine when the region needs them most. At this particular moment when fear is predominant and vested interests perpetuate that fear we have to show that living together and understanding are the right way", says Drexler. His song, *Milonga del moro judío*, has turned into a kind of hymn for Music Fund. The poem of Chicho Sanchez Ferlosio and the verse Drexler added to it before the Iraq war fit perfectly with the spirit of the project. "I'm a Jewish Arab who lives with Christians; I don't know who are my people or who are my brothers."

Delivering instruments is not enough for Pairon. Up to now more than two thousand have been donated. "But the instruments need to be looked after: a piano needs tuning, a violin needs a lot of care, and guitars can be made in the same place where they are played." The work of Music Fund and Pairon does not end with delivery. The most important thing comes after that: "We train tuners and teach the art of making instruments."

That's why guitar maker and Paco de Lucia admirer, Christian Bertram, and Pierre Helou, wind instrument technician, spend long hours at the Al Kamandjati workshop in Ramala. There they get the instruments ready for Ramzi Aburedwan's pupils or train others such as Shehade Shelalkeh, who was made famous by a story in the New York Times about this new luthier in Palestine.

For the same reason, Olivier Marie has lived all this year in Nablus. His task is to train Sameh As'ad, who will become the first piano tuner in the Palestinian city. Olivier and Sameh meet everyday in the silence of the workshop, next to the school of music. They choose this location for an important reason: "Here there's a lot of silence. We need absolute silence to listen to a piano's problems", says Olivier. But that is when the silence is not interrupted by the repetitive noise of machine guns. "It makes you really crazy", says the French tuner.

His host is Sammi Hammad, founder of the non-profit organisation, "Nablus the Culture". He's an entrepreneur who gets what he can by renting out his iron forge. It is difficult to be successful in business in a city where unemployment reaches 67%, so he has decided to work on raising the awareness of his people. "There are years when I can't produce anything because they don't let me, so I promote concerts, poetry recitals, lectures, theatre, cinema," he says.

It's a matter of survival and also of justice: Hammad continues: "Since the 1967 occupation, Israel has tried to annihilate the city, to destroy it physically and drown our roots, our symbols, our culture. There's not only a military siege, they

want to take away our essence. We have no option but reconstruct it, rebuilt our identity.”

That’s what Ramzi is trying to do in Ramala as well. He proudly shows a rehearsal by his small pupils. “That’s the way we can resist the conditions in high spirits. Culture is going to help us overcome everything. When you are happy you resist better”, says Ramzi. He knows that well. He has grown up with the hardships of life in a refugee camp. “It’s a hard place, there’s no law, parks or trees.” He knows that music will give his pupils an escape and that it has the power to give them so much more. Music doesn’t cause harm, but it’s not passive: it moves and flows, it’s like a weapon of massive reconstruction. “We cannot hope for things to get better while doing nothing. Waiting is a waste of time. The first thing we have to do is to reunite our culture and roots. They are scattered. People have emigrated and lost their culture. I encourage Palestinians to come back. All together we’ll know better what to do.”