

Quiet Determination to Revive Music in Afghanistan

As a member of the jury of the Cultural Heritage Rescue Prize, one of my tasks is to identify people whose lives are making a difference in relation to the brutal attacks on cultural heritage in recent years through sectarian conflict. The prize was created by the Italian organization *Priorità Cultura* and its leader Francesco Rutelli, the exuberant former mayor of Rome. The first honoree was the courageous director of antiquities in Syria, Dr. Maamoud Abdulkarim. Finding a suitable successor was going to be a challenging task.

A few months ago, I attended a conference organized by the Asia Society in Hong Kong to discuss issues in cultural heritage preservation in the twenty-first century. A broad spectrum of professionals in the arts and culture talked about the challenges they are facing. I was surprised to learn that what concerned them most, without exception, was not the galloping development that is consuming architectural heritage across Asia, nor the explosion of tourism that has brought new problems to poor communities, nor the escalating natural and manmade catastrophes that have struck the region.

Yes, of course they were concerned about, and personally affected by, all these issues. But they were far more worried about an even more profound issue: the impact of these events on traditional Asian culture, which cannot survive without the physical framework that is being so rapidly eradicated. They were concerned that the intangible culture that lies at the foundation of identity in Asia (and elsewhere) is disappearing, without much public recognition, without a coordinated effort to protect these traditions, and often without even having been recorded. In other words, without a trace.

Among others, Dr. Ahmad Sarmast, a musicologist from Afghanistan, spoke inspiringly about his effort to revive music in his home country of Afghanistan. Sarmast is a small, tidy man, impeccably dressed, with the quiet confidence of someone who is not deterred by challenges. After hearing him speak, I felt that Dr. Sarmast deserved the Cultural Heritage Rescue Prize award. He received it on July 2 at the Spoleto Festival in Italy.

Dr. Sarmast is a world renowned musician and conductor, as was his father, Ustad Salim Sarmast. He graduated from an Afghan music school in 1981, then received degrees from Moscow State Conservatory and from Monash University in Australia, where he was given political asylum. In 2008, Dr. Sarmast returned to Afghanistan with a plan to restore Afghan music traditions that had been brutally suppressed under Taliban rule.

The Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM) opened in Kabul on June 20, 2010 and now has about 250 students. Sarmast offers music education to both talented budding musicians and to underprivileged children, many of them orphans. The school makes a point of accepting girls, which make up about a quarter of its student body.

Underprivileged children today receive a stipend of \$30 per month to allow them to focus on their studies.

The ANIM youth orchestra toured the world in 2013 and again in 2015, when Afghanistan's first woman conductor led a concert at Kennedy Center. But the climb to celebrity and success was not simple. On December 11, 2014, a concert at the French cultural institute in Kabul was interrupted by a Taliban suicide bombing attack on Dr. Sarmast. Dr. Sarmast survived the attack but lost hearing in both ears. Later, in Australia, surgeons removed eleven pieces of shrapnel from the back of his head, restoring partial hearing to one of his ears; he stills suffers from Post Trauma Stress Disorder as a result of the attack.

These challenges have only reinforced Sarmast's commitment to stem the tragic loss of the music that is so original, unique, and fundamental to his country's identity. He spends time annotating Afghan music in Western notation to help record a mostly oral tradition. The school continues to thrive in spite of the dangers that Dr. Sarmast, his students and their families undergo every day as they attend.

Studies at NCIF unify its students with a world beyond Afghanistan and with a world of their past. Music is the ultimate expression of the desire to celebrate life. In Afghanistan, Dr. Sarmast is its spokesman, and through his own brave actions, its hero.

Bonnie Burnham