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Kabul Lullaby

Making music in post-Taliban Afghanistan can be playing with fire

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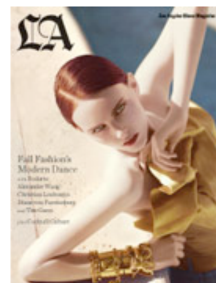
Photo by Dr. Ahmad Sarmast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In 1960, at the age of 17—a comparatively late age for a budding virtuoso—Richard “Dobbs” Hartshorne, living in Denmark while his father was a Fulbright fellow teaching Kierkegaard at Aarhus University, fell in love with and began formal training on the double bass. Three months later, he was accepted to Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio, and two years after that he began pursuing a masters degree at the Juilliard School.

Then in 1967, Dobbs did something that would change the course of his life: He bought a copy of the Bach Suites. Written in the early 1700s, the compositions are considered among the greatest classical works. “My teacher at Juilliard, Stuart Sankey, told me to study all six,” Dobbs recalls. “He said the Bach Suites would teach me everything I needed to know about music. But the understanding was, *Just don’t play them in public*.” Conventional wisdom among the master musicians of the day was that the double bass—the lowest pitched of the bowed string instruments—couldn’t handle Bach’s notes in a way that would be pleasing to the ear, certainly not in the way a cello could. Dobbs didn’t accept that.

“It took me 25 years to learn how to play them. And then it took me five years to record them,” says Dobbs. He performed all six in a single concert in Dublin, and in 2006, instead of touring Europe or the Americas, he headed to Afghanistan, where he would literally risk life and limb to play.

Or maybe not. “Afghanistan is perfectly safe,” Dobbs tells me one warm spring night. I’m in my office in Los Angeles. Dobbs is in Kabul—in a hut on stilts that serves as the guard shack for the guesthouse where he stays when in the capital city—talking to me on a cell phone he has borrowed from Zargul, the rifle-toting night watchman. Zargul has also prepared a statement for the American people. “America and the President,” he enunciates in practiced English, “please let Mr. Dobbs keep coming to Afghanistan. Music brings Afghanistan from darkness to light.”

> "Listening to Bach with your eyes closed, 'You get to think and feel whatever you want...There is no law against that.'"

The darkness to which Zargul refers is multidimensional. There are the three decades of war Afghanistan has endured, beginning with the invasion by the Soviets in 1979. And there's the fact that while the Taliban was largely in control—nearly a decade, beginning in 1992—music was outlawed. According to the Taliban's fundamentalist interpretation of the Koran, anyone who listens to music will have molten lead poured in their ears come judgment day. The Taliban's religious police enforced that idea by shuttering conservatories and destroying musical instruments. Radio Kabul was closed, its archives decimated.

By 1996, with the fall of Kabul, the Taliban was able to impose in Afghanistan the strictest interpretation of Shariah law in the Muslim world. "Even at weddings and around campfires, music was banned," says Harvard scholar Dr. Hassan Abbas. "Professional musicians fled the country." As a result, many of the Afghans whom Dobbs plays for today have little or no musical experience.

Which is never a problem, according to Dobbs. "Listening to music is simple," he says. "You don't have to understand it—you just have to sit silently and listen to it." Listening to Bach—or any music—in a quiet place with your eyes closed, he says, "you will find it is almost impossible not to have an emotional reaction. You get to think and feel whatever you want, and that produces emotion. There is no law against that."

It wasn't long after U.S.–led forces arrived in 2001 that music returned to Afghanistan. In 2006, Dobbs was invited to the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif to perform at an extended New Year's celebration. With the Foundation for Culture and Civil Society—a local NGO—as host, musicians from India, Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and America (Dobbs) played for tens of thousands. "Two female vocalists with the Tehran Symphony Orchestra sang—the first female singers to perform publicly in Afghanistan in 35 years," he says. He's been asked back every year since.

From the Kabul guard shack, Dobbs describes what has been happening on tour: Earlier that morning, he'd played at a private girls' school that is part of the organization Afghans4Tomorrow. "The reaction was phenomenal," he says. In addition to banning music for nearly a decade, the Taliban outlawed education for girls. So the idea of young girls learning music is dually groundbreaking. The U.S. State Department concurs, in theory, even if its means of bringing music to the underserved is radically different from Dobbs'. "Earlier in the year, the U.S. Embassy sent three musical groups to play at the same school," Dobbs says. "They arrived in bulletproof vans wearing bulletproof vests. They were escorted by guards with machine guns and soldiers who checked the building for bombs before a single note was played."

Dobbs travels the country without security or fanfare. He dresses like an Afghan, wearing a white turban, white shalwar kameez and a musician's embroidered vest. "Most people think I'm a local, and it helps that I look like the attorney general—we both have bushy white beards, white hair and fair skin."

Known for ferreting out corrupt officials and former Taliban warlords serving in President Hamid Karzai's government, Attorney General Abdul Jabar Sabet is both feared and revered. "Everyone insisted the two of us meet," Dobbs chuckles. "So it was arranged. He pulled up in an armored SUV surrounded by bodyguards. I was in a dusty pickup with a group of local musicians. We shook hands and smiled and went our separate ways."

How dangerous is it to play music in Afghanistan? "If you are in the south where the Taliban has a lot of control, it is dangerous," says Ahmed Rashid, bestselling author of *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, via cell phone from his village outside Lahore, Pakistan. The militant organization is rapidly gaining a foothold in Rashid's home country. "The Taliban has been blowing up girls' schools here and outlawing music, enacting the same kinds of laws we saw in Afghanistan in the 1990s."

After nearly eight years of a U.S. presence, there are still security issues in Afghanistan. Dobbs says that when he plays in the south, “no one is told where exactly I’m going except for the director of the facility.” The issue is particularly sensitive because his annual tour includes a concert at a women’s drug-rehabilitation clinic in the ancient southern city of Gardez. The facility is the first of its kind in a country rife with addicts, many of whom are women.

Ironically, the clinic is financed by local mullahs hoping to help alleviate suffering. But if discovered, it would most certainly be targeted by the Taliban. “A foreigner playing music for women would not be looked upon well,” says Rashid. While the Taliban doesn’t know about Dobbs’ concerts at the clinic, the suggestion is that the militants have a vague idea. During his visit last year, a bomb targeting one of the clinic’s benefactors went off at the local mosque. “The bomb misfired; one person was injured, but no one was killed,” says Dobbs.

Should the fact that music in Afghanistan is played in secret be celebrated? “I am well aware of the power, of what music does to a society,” says Dr. Ahmad Sarmast, one of Dobbs’ Afghan colleagues, from the courtyard of a restaurant in Kabul, where he’s having dinner with musician friends. “People who sit and play together harmoniously do so regardless of circumstance or ethnicity or social class. You must work with the government to accomplish this.”

Sarmast is a musician and musicologist and, by title, the musical liaison to the Ministry of Education of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. His goal is to rehabilitate the country’s formal music-education system, which had been destroyed by the Taliban. His father was the conductor, composer and arranger for Afghan king Mohammed Zahir Shah’s orchestra in the 1950s and ’60s. Growing up during the Soviet occupation, Sarmast was sent on scholarship to Moscow, where he studied at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory. By the time he’d completed his undergraduate and masters degrees in 1993, the Taliban was in power. For eight years, he lived in exile in London and Australia. Only after the U.S. invasion was he able to return.

Today, Sarmast helps run the Afghan portion of Bach with Verse, the nonprofit organization Dobbs runs from his hilltop home in New Hampshire. While Dobbs’ Afghan tour may involve a one-man show, it takes a village to allow him to play each day—he literally sings for his supper. Manpower and transportation are provided for by an indigenous nonprofit called WADAN (Welfare Association for the Development of Afghanistan), which means *prosperity* in Pashto.

With this effort come extraordinary challenges. In 2007, despite considerable democratic reforms throughout the country, elements of the Afghan parliament tried to outlaw music once again. And two days after his first phone call from the guard shack in Kabul, I receive an email from Dobbs: “Today we dropped by the minister of education’s house. There were soldiers surrounding the house. It turned out the minister’s father had been kidnapped by the Taliban. They paid the ransom, and [he] was just released.” After handshakes and greetings, the soldiers learned Dobbs was the American double bassist working with Sarmast, and they had a request: “They had me sing a lullaby,” writes Dobbs.

Lullaby: a quiet, gentle song sung to send a child to sleep. Which might explain why music is the universal language—at least to most people. Both comforting and empowering, it should be celebrated in public, not secreted away or performed by musicians in bulletproof vests.

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