



HOUSTON CHRONICLE

MAY 20, 2006

On Sept. 11, 2001, Zade Dirani, a young Jordanian pianist, was scheduled to perform at the home of friends in rural Maine.

But the tragic events of that day led to the cancellation of the evening concert. Instead, Dirani performed later that month — and it was an emotional event for everyone.

"Here I was, an Arab and a Muslim, sharing my music and culture," Dirani recalled in a phone interview. "We were connecting. There were American families, Jewish, Christian and some Buddhists, and we were communicating on a level that transcends all political and religious boundaries. They really all got it."

It was a turning point for Dirani, who went on to do a three-year concert tour, playing 200 nights a year in homes, churches, temples and schools. It was, he said, a grass-roots effort to promote better understanding of his faith and culture.

Dirani, now 26, will perform in Houston Thursday, but it won't be part of his house tour. This time Dirani is accompanied by more than 35 musicians from 18 countries, including Iran, Mexico, Denmark and SouthKorea, on what he calls the Roads to You: Celebration of One World tour.

The idea was born while he was hiking with a friend in New Hampshire, discussing ways to make the house concerts more global. All they needed, he said, laughing, was backers and more musicians.

Before coming to the United States in 1998 to attend Boston's Berklee College of Music, Dirani studied at Jordan's National Music Conservatory, founded by Queen Noor, wife of the late King Hussein.

"During my years there, I studied classical Arabic scales and music theory, Western classical and piano — that was my instrument," he explained. "As soon as I began playing the piano, I started composing. I was about 14 or 15, and it went hand in hand. I was always interested in combining Middle Eastern and Western music."

Dirani recently released his third CD, Beautiful World, with original compositions combining styles from the Arab world and the West.

"I read that they were describing my music as 'global pop,'" he said. "That's OK with me; my music is quite accessible."

And so are his performances, described as "energetic and passionate" by Jill Carroll, assistant director of the Boniuk Center for the Study and Advancement of Religious Tolerance at Rice University. The center helped bring Dirani and his musicians to Houston.

"He is a small person in terms of his physical frame," said Carroll. "He's about 5 feet 5 inches (tall) and 120 pounds, but when he gets behind the piano, all this energy comes out. It's very inspiring. And when he speaks, he has a very powerful voice."

After Queen Noor and Berklee agreed to back Dirani's Roads to You project, Dirani was off and running. He needed musicians who not only were talented but also had leadership skills and an appreciation for other cultures. Ultimately, 25 of the 35 musicians chosen were Berklee students or alumni.

Some of the questions Dirani and the others discussed were: How can we be leaders and musicians at the same time? What is the role of the musician on a global level? And what can be learned from the efforts of Bono and U2?

Those are issues they may discuss for a while. In the meantime, the Roads to You tour is visiting Houston; Orlando, Fla.; and Los Angeles.

Last week, the group was in Washington, D.C., where they had several concerts attended by Queen Noor, first lady Laura Bush, Queen Rania (wife of Jordan's King Abdullah) and a variety of diplomats, lawmakers and college students.

"It was our first stop, and it was extremely successful," Dirani said. "We visited middle schools, high schools, a temple in Maryland and several other places. I can't tell you how much I enjoy the dialogue when we open it up to students. It becomes a multilayered educational experience."

One of their visits in the Washington area was at the conservative Islamic Saudi Academy, in a Virginia suburb.

"It was quite monumental because it was only the second musical performance to be presented at the academy," he said. "But they invited us because they believe in our mission. The principal spoke up and said: 'We did this because your tour represents what we believe: that we are all the same, regardless of where we come from.' "

The students had concerns about the way Islam is presented in the West, he said. But they were optimistic and wanted to work to create better understanding of their culture.

Dirani breaks his musicians into eight groups so they can talk with more people. Included are an Argentine tango group, a Middle Eastern music group, an "Abrahamic" trio (a Muslim, a Christian and a Jew), a brass band, a Latin-Brazilian group and a folk and jazz ensemble.

The Roads to You concert at Rice University will feature Dirani and his International Musical Assembly, along with the United Nations Association International Choir.

While in Houston, the groups will visit schools, senior-citizen centers and churches (including a Lakewood Christian youth group workshop/performance) and perform in several homes. Each piece Dirani has written focuses on a different part of the world.

Most people are politely inquisitive in the question-and-answer sessions. His worst question came from an adult who asked: "Do you know how to make a bomb?"

"I said: 'This question proves to me the importance of the work we are trying to do. The straight answer is 'no.' But it gives me more strength and commitment to keep doing this.'"

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