

Global musicians promote peace with US tour

By Andrea Shalal-Esa

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The conductor of 'Roads to You: Celebration of One World' leads a group of 30 musicians in a performance for students at the Islamic Saudi Academy in Alexandria, Virginia, May 11, 2006. The event was one of the group's 100 planned workshops, and the second time in the Saudi Academy's 22-year history the school has ever held a musical assembly. The musicians, from 18 countries as diverse as Iran, Mexico, Denmark and South Korea, are fanning out across the United States this month to perform and teach cross-cultural understanding. (Kevin Lamarque/Reuters)

Thirty young musicians from 18 countries including Iran, Mexico, Denmark and South Korea are fanning out across the United States this month to perform in the hope of teaching cross-cultural understanding.

"Roads to You: Celebration of One World," is the brainchild of Jordanian pianist Zade Dirani, 26, who has performed for Nelson Mandela, Queen Elizabeth, former U.S. President Bill Clinton, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, and the Dalai Lama.

Backed by Jordan's Queen Noor, Boston's Berklee College of Music and Seeds of Peace, the project aims to "bring world cultures closer together," says Dirani, who recently won a coveted U.S. "green card," or permanent residency permit, based on his ability.

The group is truly opening doors. The conservative Islamic Saudi Academy in a Virginia suburb of Washington is hosting one of the group's 100 planned workshops, only the second time in its 22-year history the school has ever held a musical assembly.

"Music is one of the most open doors through which we can experience the beauty and humanity of other people's cultures," says Evan Gutierrez, 26, a Detroit percussionist who says the project is helping him use his music to work for peace.

Dirani's first two CDs hit the Billboard charts in the New Age category. His third, "Beautiful World," came out in early May, and includes far more Arabic influences than his earlier work.

The recording blends beats and rhythms from Arab and Western musical traditions in what Dirani calls "another attempt to try to deconstruct barriers through music."

Dirani, who studied at Boston's Berklee College of Music, has performed over 200 house concerts around the country since the September 11, hijacking attacks, in part to challenge stereotypes about his Arab and Muslim heritage.

This project aims even higher, Dirani told Reuters in an interview, saying he hopes to bring the international and U.S. musicians together one month a year for five years. This year, the group will perform in Washington, Houston and Los Angeles.

"There are a lot of misconceptions about a lot of countries around the world," he says, noting that Arabs and Muslims are not the only people who suffer discrimination and prejudice.

TWO-WAY STREET

During the tour, the musicians, all carefully selected for their leadership skills as well as musical talent, will talk with Americans in centers for the elderly, schools, churches and synagogues about how to move toward peace, Dirani said.

"It's almost like a thinktank that combines public diplomacy, leadership and music," he said, noting that each applicant had to fill out a 10-page questionnaire developed by a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Back in their home countries, they will initiate various projects to continue the dialogue, Dirani said, noting that he also views his own work as a "two-way street."

"When I go back to the (Middle East), I share stories of the kindness and support I'm getting here," he said. "The hate that people think is out there is really based on a lack of understanding."

This week, Dirani and two other musicians from the group -- a Christian and a Jew -- were to perform at the Islamic school as well as another private school, the Rock Creek International School, which teaches children Arabic beginning at age 3.

Then whole orchestra was scheduled to perform in Washington with the Carpe Diem choir, which includes people of all ages and different backgrounds also working for peace.

MAKING CULTURAL EXCHANGE 'COOL'

Busy Graham, who founded the choir in 2003, says the collaboration with Dirani has proven tremendously fruitful.

"This is such a liberating experience, to be able to sing in harmony and community with people from all of these different backgrounds," she said. "Through learning this music, we really learn about each other's pasts and culture."

Gutierrez says music is an easier way to experience the beauty of another culture than through religion, language or family structures, which can be difficult to understand.

"The greatest accomplishment is to give young people positive associations with worlds that might seem very strange to them," he told Reuters.

Dirani says he finds working with children particularly rewarding, especially when they have had little interaction with people from other countries.

"We are connecting with them through music. We make cultural exchange cool. It's like traveling, exploring the world," he said.