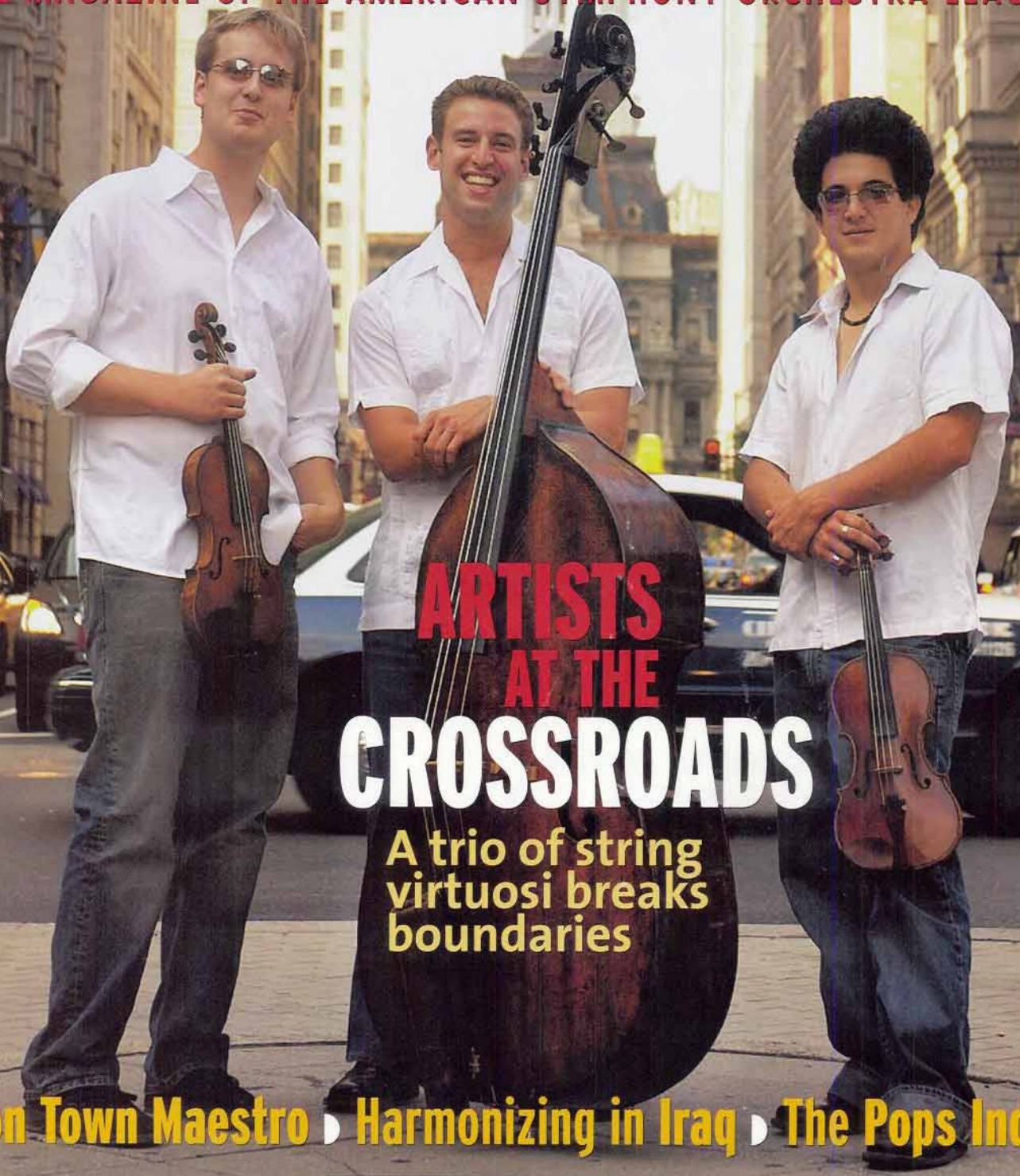


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SYMPHONY

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA LEAGUE



ARTISTS AT THE CROSSROADS

A trio of string
virtuosi breaks
boundaries

Toon Town Maestro ▶ Harmonizing in Iraq ▶ The Pops Index

SYMPHONY

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA LEAGUE

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For ten heat-scorched days last July, American musicians worked alongside more than 300 Iraqi artists in workshops and performances of symphonic repertoire, Broadway, jazz, and folk music. Faculty member Allegra Klein kept a diary of her experiences.

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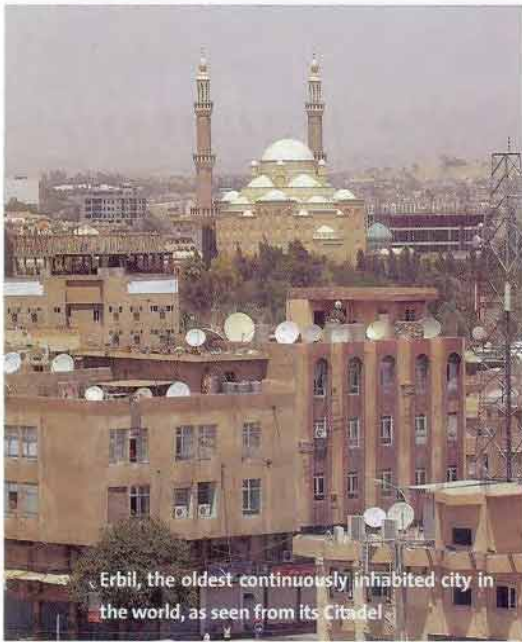
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Photo by Daniel Mezick





Erbil, the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, as seen from its Citadel



The violin section of the Iraqi National Unity Orchestra

IRAQI Overtures

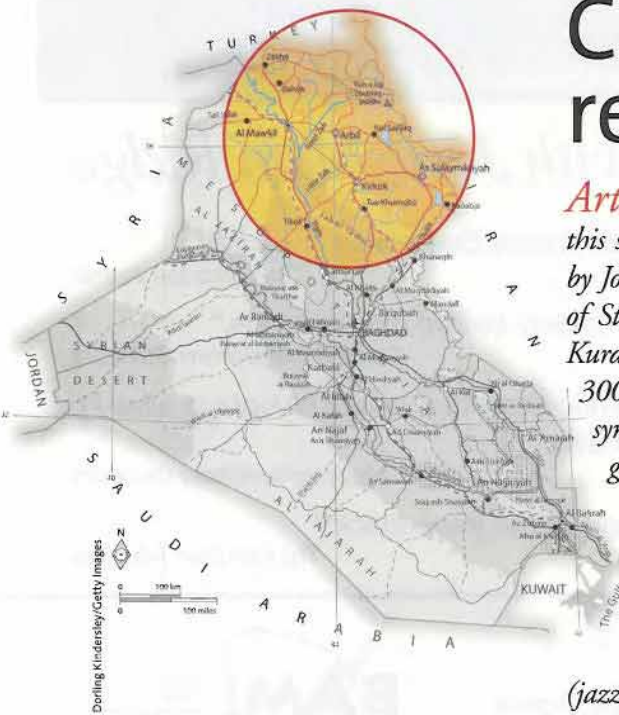
by Allegra Klein

Cultural diplomacy in a region torn by conflict

Artists and ensembles from all over Iraq made history this summer at the first-ever Iraqi Unity Performing Arts Academy. Organized by John Ferguson of American Voices in conjunction with the U.S. Department of State and the Kurdish Ministry of Culture, the Academy took place in the Kurdish city of Erbil in northern Iraq from July 13 to 23, 2007. More than 300 Iraqi artists participated in workshops, rehearsals, and performances of symphonic repertoire, hip-hop dance, and Broadway jazz, and folk music. Two gala concerts, attended by overflow audiences at Erbil's new Peshawa Hall, were broadcast live throughout Iraq.

The Unity Academy featured an American faculty teaching music, dance, and theater to students and professionals ranging in age from seven to adult. Teachers included Demetrius Fuller and David Handel (conductors), Marc Thayer (strings), Eugene Aitken and Werner Englert (jazz/winds/brass), Michael Parks Masterson and Quae Simpson (dance), and Carole McCann (musical theater).

Also on the faculty was Allegra Klein, a violinist and founder of Musicians For Harmony in New York City, who kept a diary of her experiences at the Academy.

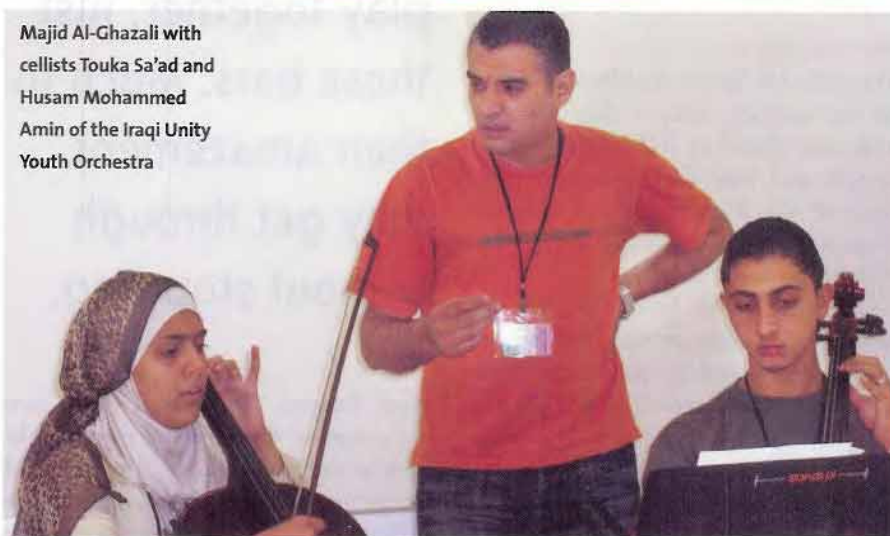


Dorling Kindersley/Getty Images



Iraqi Unity Performing Arts Academy teacher Allegra Klein, in flowered dress, with members of the Iraqi Unity Youth Orchestra

Majid Al-Ghazali with cellists Touka Sa'ad and Husam Mohammed Amin of the Iraqi Unity Youth Orchestra



Friday, July 13, 2007

Friday the 13th. Normally I'm not superstitious, but can't help feeling the significance as I wait in the Austrian Air terminal in Vienna for my flight to Erbil. The other teachers also congregate here, having arrived from the U.S. and Germany. Most of us have never met before and chat nervously but excitedly as we await our flight.

First thing to greet us in Erbil is the searing dry heat—upwards of 120 degrees. I am relieved to see John Ferguson of American Voices at the other end of customs and baggage. A Kurdish military

entourage escorts us to the Khanzad Hotel, our home for the next ten days. Perched on a hilltop about 20 kilometers outside the city, it's a veritable fortress, complete with cement barriers, armed guards, and a sign on the front door that says "No Guns."

After unpacking, we head into town to the musicians' hotel, the Erbil Tower. It's a far cry from the luxury of our hotel, and some of the Baghdad folks were not happy. But it is great reuniting with my old buddies, most of whom I haven't seen since my 2003 trip to Baghdad, when I first encountered the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra (INSO).

Back to the Khanzad afterwards for a midnight drink with the other teachers, a chance to start getting to know everyone...

Saturday, July 14

We head to the Ministry of Culture, which is apparently brand new. Lots of classrooms, 750-seat hall, backstage area, and—air conditioning!

Even though John has prepared a schedule, mass chaos ensues. Seems like an eternity before we finally sort out who goes where, and Marc Thayer (who back home is V.P. for Education and Community Partnerships at the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra) and I end up with the Erbil string orchestra. According to John, this group has been "on strike" for the last several years. Level was very basic—needed to show them how to set up, how to tune, how to run a rehearsal. We start with the "Air" from Bach's Suite No. 3 in D. Then on to the Suleymaniya group (Suley, as we came to call them). More polished, have been working together for a long time. Played Grieg's *Holberg Suite*, not too bad.

We all have lunch at the Ministry—no small feat for over 300 people. As a vegetarian, there's not much for me: rice, okra soup, chopped salad, bread. But we have a chance to mingle with our Iraqi colleagues, and I start catching up with my Baghdad friends.

After lunch, we break off into smaller groups—jazz, chamber music, etc. The INSO librarian, Majid Azzawi, asks if I would work with ten kids from the Baghdad Music and Ballet School, including his fourteen-year-old daughter, a talented oboist named Dua'a. These students are joined by a handful of adult members of INSO, plus a few young people from Erbil and Suley. So we form a new Iraqi Unity Youth Orchestra, which I am now somehow conducting (N.B.: I am not a conductor).

Long but rewarding day, dinner back at Khanzad with the teachers. It's served outdoors, near the swimming pool and trees, the only lush scenery in the desert landscape for miles around. With the cool evening breeze and Western pop music, it feels like a Caribbean resort.

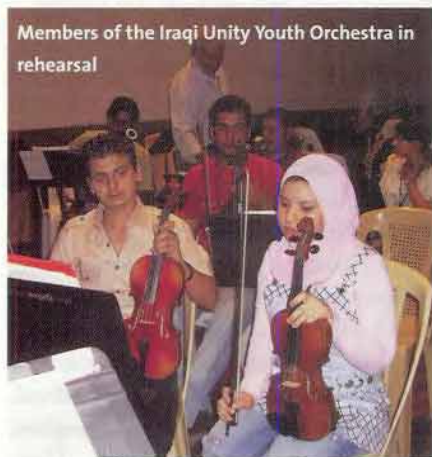
Sunday, July 15

Another chaotic morning. This time, we start with the Iraqi Unity Orchestra—

actually three orchestras (Baghdad, Erbil, Sulay) plus the youth orchestra, all combined together. Everyone is running around trying to get 120 stands and chairs to fit onstage. The INSO librarian is frantically changing the toner on the rented copier, as everyone crowds around trying to get copies of their parts.



A Kurdish folk group at an Iraqi Unity Performing Arts Academy concert



Members of the Iraqi Unity Youth Orchestra in rehearsal

After lunch, Marc and I decide to take one orchestra apiece. I choose Erbil, he takes Sulay. (Conductors Demetrius Fuller and David Handel are working mainly with INSO and the Unity Orchestra.) I meet Julio for the first time—one of our Kurdish translators, a transplanted multilingual Colombian who's been living in Erbil for ten years and wants desperately to become an Iraqi citizen. I try to wrap my brain around this, as all the Iraqis I've ever met want desperately to get *out* of their country...

The Erbil orchestra has no conductor, so I'm it. We start the Bach "Air," but have to stop after two measures. Most have

never heard the piece and are not good sight readers. So we break it down, part by part, stand by stand, just the first four bars. By the end of the hour, I ask them to play together, just those bars. Much to their amazement, they get through without stopping. It is a breakthrough moment for us all.

Monday, July 16

The makeshift library doubles as an office for the teachers. Sdeq, a Kurdish cellist who once played in INSO, speaks good English and runs the Academy library. Most of the 35-plus boxes of donated sheet music and supplies that we brought with us also reside here.

Our Iraqi friends have discovered the wonders of camera phones, and we are constantly stopped to pose for photos. Demetrius and I escape for a few minutes and head upstairs to see how the dancers are doing. We happen upon Ms. Carole's kids (Carole McCann, children's theater specialist), adorable seven- to ten-year-olds who are learning the story of *The Wizard of Oz*—in Kurdish, no less.

After morning rehearsal, all participants are invited to stay for my lecture on the Suzuki violin method. Our only "dual" translator—Kurdish and Arabic—joins me onstage, repeating everything I say in both languages. It's slow going, but at the end, I'm thronged by dozens of string players who want to find out how they can become Suzuki teachers. We hope to bring teacher trainers back in the coming months, and if the Suzuki method takes hold, Iraq would be the first country in the Arab world to have it.

Tuesday, July 17

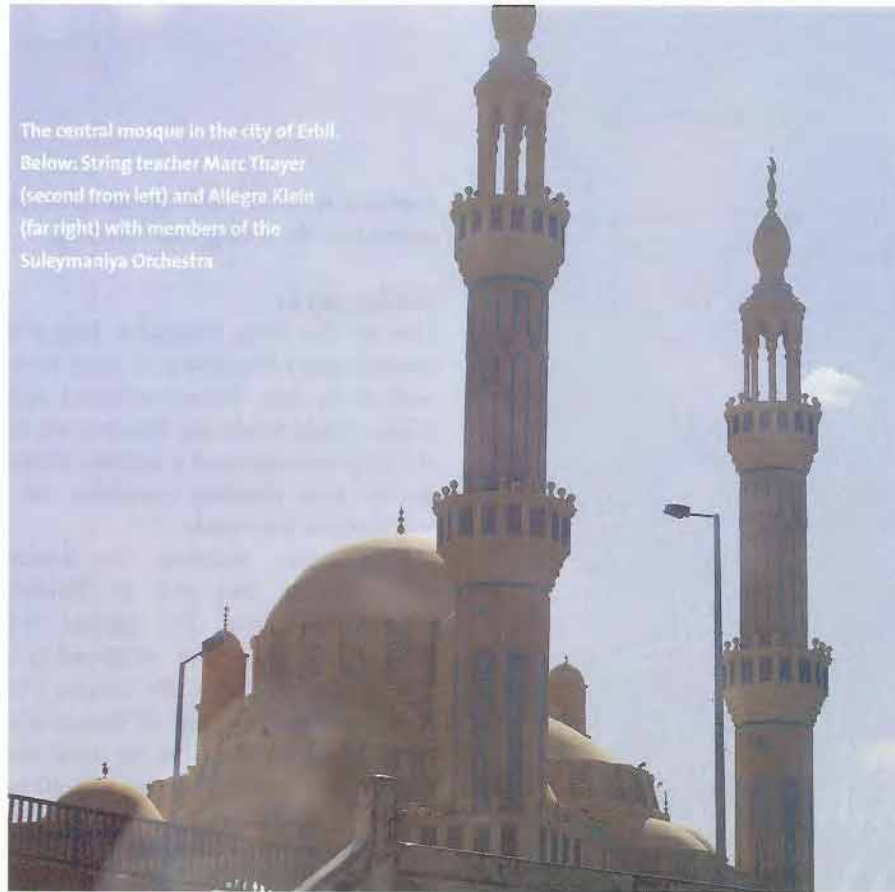
Today I sit in with the INSO, in the back of the first violins. Play a work composed by their conductor, Mohammed Amin Ezzat. This is a haunting piece for solo cello and string orchestra, appropriately

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titled *Requiem*. Mohammed Amin gave me a copy of the score and parts to take back to the States. Marc, Demetrius, and I hope to persuade American orchestras to perform it.

The soloist is Karim Wasfi, a charismatic "Lawrence of Arabia" type (no surprise, his father was an Egyptian film star) and self-proclaimed Yo-Yo Ma of Iraq. He studied at Indiana University with Janos Starker and is actually quite decent.

Later that evening, Majid Al-Ghazali, former INSO concertmaster now living in Jordan, arrives from Amman. To celebrate, Karim leads a delegation of the Baghdad musicians (and me) on an expedition to Ainkawa, a Christian neighborhood in Erbil, where we find an Austrian beerhouse (!) and reminisce over authentic German brews.



The central mosque in the city of Erbil.
Below: String teacher Marc Trayer
(second from left) and Allegra Klein
(far right) with members of the
Suleymaniya Orchestra

Wednesday, July 18

A film crew arrives from ABC News [a segment later aired on *World News Tonight*], but many of the Baghdad musicians leave for fear of having their faces shown on television. Most were persecuted for their affiliation with Americans after INSO came to Washington, D.C., in December 2003, and some have relatives who were kidnapped and even murdered as a result.

The Erbil strings are coming along nicely with the Bach “Air”; they can play the whole first part now. The cellists’ endpins keep slipping on the tile floors. Ever resourceful, however, they’ve created makeshift ones out of belts and suspenders.

The youth orchestra is working on an Iraqi folk tune, and I’m learning about their native sonorities, harmonies, and rhythms. I don’t know how to conduct the last bar of the piece, so Demetrius offers to help. He wraps his arms around mine to show me, and the kids stare in amazement: men and women in Iraq almost never have physical contact in public. I take a minute to explain that we’re “just friends.”

Several of the kids want to play solo for me, so we go into the lobby of the Kurdish Ministry of Culture, where one of the tinny uprights is planted, and I listen to them play. Zuhul Sultan, a sixteen-year-old pianist, accompanies them. All but one



piano teacher has fled Baghdad, so Zuhul is mostly self-taught—hard to believe, she is so gifted. I cannot help but wonder how they all manage...

Thursday, July 19

The Suzuki Association of the Americas has donated a video of *Nurtured by Love*, based on Shinichi Suzuki’s book by the same name, and I want to show it as a follow-up to my lecture. Trying to get it screened in the auditorium proves a challenge, but we finally manage. More excitement over the Suzuki program, but also concerns about how to divide up the materials.

After rehearsal, some of the musicians take me to shops in Erbil. We pick out CDs, which they burn on the spot from the original versions. Apparently this is legal here. Then everyone heads to the “Central

Park” of Erbil. Park? Greenery? I am dying of curiosity. After being searched by armed guards, we enter a sanctuary unlike any place I’ve seen in Iraq. A beautiful man-made lake is filled with swan boats and fish, fountains spray mists of water, trees abound, and couples and families stroll freely about. We make our way to the center, where there is an outdoor restaurant, and stay well into the wee hours.

Friday, July 20

Friday is their Sunday, so we finally have a day of rest. We’re all exhausted, can’t wait to sleep in. After lunch with the musicians, some of the teachers set out for Erbil’s main attraction: the Citadel. One of the oldest continually lived-in settlements in the world, it dates back some 8,000 years. Inside, Julio takes us to the Kurdish Textile Museum, where we drop hundreds of dollars in their gift shop.

Actually, it’s only a half-day of rest, as we spend the remainder of the afternoon at the Ministry of Culture with the Unity Orchestra. We finally distribute the Suzuki materials. I mediate disputes over who gets what, and everyone manages to share in the end: Conflict Resolution 101.

Saturday, July 21

I can’t believe it’s almost over. The dancers and jazz musicians have their concert tonight, so the stage is only available for a couple of hours today.

Rehearsals are getting frantic, but I duck out because Kim Dubois (cultural attaché from the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad) asks me to participate in a press conference. More than a dozen camera crews come: Al Jazeera, Al Hurra, Iraqi and Kurdish T.V. and radio, plus reporters from Egypt, Syria, Turkey, etc. As I ponder what to say, I realize this has been one of the most significant and rewarding experiences of my life, and I’m so fortunate to have been able to participate. When my turn finally comes, I manage to convey some of my excitement about being here, and my hope to bring the Iraqi Unity Orchestra to the U.S.

The jazz and dance concert is spectacular. So colorful and varied, from folk to hip-hop to classical ballet, it is truly a feast of Iraqi, Kurdish, and American culture.

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Sunday, July 22

Our last day. Dress rehearsal is long and stressful, seems like there is so much more work to be done. Nerves are frayed, and a fight nearly breaks out between one of the Iraqi musicians and a member of our faculty. John smooths everything over, and harmony is restored.

VIPs arrive, including the deputy ambassador to Iraq and the Kurdish minister of culture. The teachers and selected Iraqi participants are invited to a private reception before the concert. I've never seen such an array of flowers and sweets and dignitaries, but we make our little speeches to the VIPs and rush off to prepare for the concert.

All goes so much better than we could have imagined. John has done a great job of programming, and the orchestras get to show off what they've learned, from Bach and Grieg and Ellington to traditional and contemporary Iraqi and Kurdish compositions. I make my conducting debut and am so proud of my Erbil strings and youth orchestra musicians!

Afterwards, everyone piles into buses back to the musicians' hotel, where a party ensues. Almost no AC there, but we dance like maniacs anyway. Many are in tears, no one wants to go home. Lots of photos, promises to keep in touch.

Monday, July 23

The musicians are gone, and the teachers depart for Vienna, though John stays behind to wrap up everything. As we reflect on our time in Erbil, I cannot help but wonder what will happen to our Iraqi friends. We all want so much to carry on the work we started, and hope that support will continue and we'll be able to return.

We resolve to keep in touch with our colleagues across the continents, praying they will remain safe, and looking forward to the time when we can reunite. ∞

Allegra Klein is a New York City-based violinist, teacher, and arts administrator who founded Musicians For Harmony, a nonprofit promoting peace among nations through music.