



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

-Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra Performs in Baghdad-

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Baghdad, Iraq - Goodwill between the United States and Iraq could be heard literally as Iraq's National Symphony Orchestra (INSO) performed American as well as Arab music for an enthusiastic U.S.- Iraqi audience at the Al Rasheed hotel July 26.

Sponsored by the U.S. Embassy, the concert was significant according to Ambassador to Iraq Ryan C. Crocker who told the audience, "The presence of the INSO today is a signal of the transition that is underway in Iraq."

The performance signifies a shift in Iraq from the extreme violence of the recent past to a more normal atmosphere of "the world of arts," the diplomat and arabist told the 600 people attending the musical event.

The INSO is one of the oldest orchestras in the region, dating to the 1940s. At that time it was made up of students and professors from the Institute of Fine Arts and the Baghdad Philharmonic Association. Throughout its history, the orchestra has performed in Lebanon, Jordan, Russia, Azerbaijan, the UAE and the United States.

The two-hour long program consisted of Iraqi and American compositions, with pieces by Iraqi composers such as Husam Al Ansari, Jamil Bashir, Ali Kassaf and H.G. Mommer.

For the American portion of the performance, selected compositions included those by "Duke" Ellington, C.W. Cadman and George Gershwin, whose beautiful "Rhapsody in Blue" captivated the audience.



Karim Wasfi, director of the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra, plays his cello during the opening piece by Iraqi composer Husam Al Ansari "Tathini" in a July 26 concert sponsored by the U.S. Embassy.

Ambassador Adam Ereli, the Public Affairs Counselor at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, narrated American composer Aaron Copland's "Lincoln Portrait," a work composed for narration. Copland used material from the speeches and letters of President Abraham Lincoln, including the Gettysburg Address, and quoted original folk songs of the period. The musical piece was written by Copland as part of the World War II patriotic war effort in 1942.

The INSO currently consists of about 70 musicians and is led by Director Karim Wasfi. Born in Cairo in 1972, Wasfi began learning to play the cello at age six at the Music school in Baghdad. He later earned degrees from Indiana University's School of Music and studied at Cairo University and Boston University.

"The orchestra administration does everything it can to promote genuine Iraqi creativity and – notwithstanding critical problems faced – to preserve a central place in our society for culture and art," said Mr. Wasfi in a statement.

Wasfi gave a solo performance on the cello by playing Iraqi composer Husam Al Ansari's "Tathini," or "Hurt by your love."

Ambassador Crocker acknowledged Iraq's long contribution to culture noting, "Iraq traditionally has led this region in the arts, in theater, in literature and in music. And we're very pleased and proud to have worked with the INSO and the Ministry of Culture to make this event possible. Today's program reflects that partnership."

John Balian, Cultural Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy, said "We are in the process of planning additional bilateral cultural activities with Iraqi art and cultural groups. We believe culture is an excellent means to promote mutual understanding and friendship between Iraqis and Americans.

Balian also pointed out that his office arranges student exchanges at the secondary and university levels which send more than 200 Iraqi students to study in the United States every year.