

## The Washington Times

December 11, 2003

Section: LIFE - ARTS ETC.

MUSIC

Page: B05

### New life, big stage for Iraqi Symphony

Author: *T.L. Ponick, THE WASHINGTON TIMES*

Article Text:

Security was tight at the Kennedy Center Tuesday night as the newly revived Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra (INSO) combined forces with the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO) in its first-ever concert on American soil.

With TV cameras and photographers arrayed throughout the buzzing Concert Hall, President and Mrs. Bush entered the presidential box along with National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice to take in the concert and affirm the importance of this historic cultural exchange.

If most people haven't heard of the INSO, there's a reason. Founded in 1959, the Western-style orchestra was abolished by Iraq's Ministry of Culture in 1962 and had to practice in secret until its revival in 1970. Soon there was Saddam Hussein, and the ensemble was repressed once more, with many of its musicians fleeing the country.

After this spring's war in Iraq, the group revived itself again and began recruiting new musicians, including some who play traditional Iraqi instruments. It's an ecumenical ensemble, consisting of musicians from Iraq's many ethnic and religious groups and also a few women.

The INSO attracted the attention of the State Department earlier this year. The orchestra's resulting journey to the United States was made possible through a public-private partnership between the Kennedy Center and the Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

Tuesday's concert was very much a media event illustrated by speeches and music. Kennedy Center President Michael M. Kaiser opened the evening with a somewhat too long speech praising the healing power of music. He drew huzzahs, however, when he said the **Catherine B. Reynolds Foundation** would donate new instruments to the Iraqis and that the Major Orchestra Librarians' Association had given them the scores of more than 500 works to restock their devastated music library.

Secretary of State Colin L. Powell followed with a brief, on-target speech praising the efforts of the INSO and asserting that "the arts are the stuff of the human spirit which no tyrant can crush." Both speeches were translated into Arabic.

The concert itself was an interesting, if brief, affair, its program bookended by Western bonbons with a creamy center of Iraqi compositions. The combined forces of the NSO and INSO created a gloppy sound at climactic moments, and the Iraqi brass section needs a little work on its intonation, but by and large, the two forces combined nicely into a huge but pleasant-sounding orchestra.

NSO Music Director Leonard Slatkin alternated conducting duties with the INSO's Mohammed Amin Ezzat, an engaging musician who obviously was thrilled to be on the podium in a major world venue. Mr. Slatkin conducted the ensemble in a vigorous interpretation of Beethoven's "Egmont Overture" as well as in an arrangement of the traditional Iraqi folk tune "Over the Palm Trees." He also led his forces in a lovely, low-key performance of Faure's *Elegie for Cello and Orchestra*, Op. 24, with the always-charming Yo-Yo Ma as soloist. Mr. Ma later joined the combined orchestras, sawing away in the cello section with the rest of the working stiffs - a nice touch of solidarity.

Mr. Ezzat conducted two Iraqi works, his own "Three Fragments" and the Symphonic Poem No. 2 of Abdulla J. Sagirma. Both works were tonal and enjoyable - superior, in fact, to much of the phony dissonance Western composers have been forcing on audiences for nearly a century. Each composition highlighted ensembles of traditional Iraqi instruments, including percussion pieces and lutes as well as the hammered-dulcimer-like santur and the haunting double-reed balaban.

The concert concluded with the wild whirling dervish of Bizet's "Farandole," from the second suite of his incidental music to Alphonse Daudet's play "L'Arlesienne." Conducted by Mr. Ezzat, it was a rousing send-off for what hopefully will be a long Washington relationship with a very brave little orchestra.

Caption:

Mohammed Amin Ezzat, conductor of the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra, looked to the balcony where President Bush was seated during a performance Tuesday night of the Iraqi orchestra with the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center.

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Record Number: 200312110900120036