

# The Afghanistan National Institute of Music

An interview with Ahmad Sarmast by David Forrest

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**Over the last few years there has been a good deal of international coverage of your work and the development of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music. Could I start with asking what was the spark that guided you in this work?**

It was my strong belief in the power of music and my belief that the people of Afghanistan have been deprived of their musical identity for many years. Afghan children and, generally, the Afghan people have been deprived also of their musical rights to express themselves freely through music and music education. Most importantly is my belief that when we are talking about establishing a just and civil society, we cannot ignore music as we cannot ignore the arts and culture.

Establishing a civil society is not just having a parliament or elections, but it is as important to have or to return the musical and cultural rights back to the people and also to invest in the arts and culture.

I believe that music can play a significant role in helping the Afghan people, the government of Afghanistan and the international community to overcome barriers and to transform lives. That is why I made a decision to go back to Afghanistan to help the Afghan people use the power of music to bring about social changes, to transform the life of Afghan children and return their musical rights. I also wanted to contribute to the revival of Afghan music and musical traditions which were severely damaged during the years of war

and discrimination and, at the same time, use music as a bridge between Afghanistan and the international community.

**There has been quite a lot written on rebuilding lives through music and education. Could you talk a little more about that view of rebuilding your country?**

The thirty years of war left a very negative impact on the lives of the Afghan people. As a result of the war there are hundreds and thousands of orphans in Afghanistan who do not have access to any education and, up to now, there were no assurances or guarantees for their future. The Afghanistan National Institute of Music is very much committed to using music to create educational opportunities for the boys and girls from orphanages, to give them opportunities and to change their life through music and music education.

Up until now the Afghanistan National Institute of Music has been able to successfully change the lives of at least 80 students. Fifty per cent of the students are from a disadvantaged background, either from an orphanage or with a background with Aschiana. Aschiana is a non-governmental organisation which caters for street children.

These 80 boys and girls are no longer on the streets of Kabul. They have access not only to a general education but to a state of the art music education program, music education facilities and expert faculty from which they benefit enormously.

**We will talk more about the boys and girls a little later. You talk of music. What is included in that term “music”?**

We use music as a means of universal understanding – not just Afghan music, or western music, or the musical culture/tradition that surround Afghanistan. I believe that music is a universal language in spite of different styles, values and philosophies. Music is a common language that everyone can understand and it's a language that definitely can contribute to building bridges, bringing people closer, contributing to the unification of such a divided ethnic society like Afghanistan.

Our music program is very diverse. While we are concentrating on Afghan traditional and western classic music, the curriculum is designed in a way that from an early age Afghan children are learning music in a much deeper way. It is not just playing a musical instrument or reading music, but they are also learning theory of music and ear training.

As they move/progress from an early stage to more advanced levels, the music program is getting very, very complicated. The curriculum of the school is not focussing only on these areas of music, western and Afghan, but at the same time it allows our students to experiment, listen, practise various styles of music – whether the music is coming from neighbouring countries or whether it is jazz, rock, hip-hop or any type of music. As part of the commitment, belief and vision of the school the students have the ability for promoting musical diversity in Afghanistan, to freely express themselves through any type of music that is close to their heart.

**Any music school is really an expensive operation. Who are the major sponsors of your school in addition to your work with the Ministry of Education?**

Given the current status of general education in Afghanistan and also, as you have fairly pointed out, that music education is a very expensive experience, the Minister for Education in

Afghanistan, who was supporting this project, is not in a position to afford to have a state of the art Music Education program; but of course the political support is significantly important for encouraging the international community of donors to support the music program.

Especially when you begin a music program from scratch, when there's nothing available, you have to build infrastructure; you have to put all the resources in place, including establishing a music library from scratch, a recording studio, creating a practice building, employing the expert music educators which Afghanistan is currently lacking. So it's a very expensive project.

We have been very lucky and the vision that I set up for the school was encouraging in terms of the international donor community. In addition to the Minister for Education, we are generously funded by the World Bank - which is the biggest sponsor of the school - and the school is benefiting from two award bank programs, which are called the Afghanistan Skill Development Project. We are also generously supported by the Embassy of the United States of America, the Embassy of Denmark, the Embassy of Finland, the Goethe-Institut, the British Council, and a number of umbrella organisations which are bringing together various music manufacturing groups, such as the Society of Music Merchants from Germany; and of course we have got the professional development of the International Society of Music Education (ISME) and the International Music Council (IMC).

Our curriculum was originally designed by the National College of Music of London and has now been revised by our own faculty. We also have the ongoing support of Monash University from Australia.

**Each of these sponsorships must entail work from you in dealing and negotiating with these people and reporting back to them. Are they demanding sponsors?**

I think it is good to have a demanding sponsor given the level of corruption in Afghanistan.

The Afghanistan National Institute of Music is probably up to now the only autonomous institution within the government of Afghanistan which has its own financial, academic and administrative autonomy. Having a demanding sponsor is a good idea. In a way, it also supports us in showing the government and the community, the purpose of the funding that the Afghanistan National Institute of Music raises and how it is used. In addition, we transparently report back to the donors as well as the government of Afghanistan. Recently, we had a major audit from one of the sponsors and I am very pleased to say that it was a wonderful report that definitely encourages many of the donors to support us in the future.

**Not so long music was outlawed by the Taliban. Do some of those views still exist in your country or do they affect your operations in any way?**

I just want to make it clear that the Taliban are not representing the people of Afghanistan. This is a small group of narrow-minded extremists who do not precisely represent Islamic ideology and Islamic thought about music. What was happening in Afghanistan during the time of the Taliban, was the only incident in the entire Muslim world where music in contemporary times was banned. This is not the people of Afghanistan. This thought and ideology still exists within the Taliban. It is limited to the Taliban and maybe some other extremist groups. In the five years that I have been based in Afghanistan, and the last three years that the Afghanistan National Institute of Music has been functioning we have not seen a single threat from the Taliban – and not even a mention of it in the headlines of local or international media.

What keeps me in Afghanistan and the reason for our success is the support of the ordinary people of Afghanistan and the encouragement that I am getting on the streets of Kabul. An example of this is when our students returned after a big tour of the United States, and the students were met at

Kabul airport by total strangers with bunches of flowers – that is the support of the Afghan people.

**That is good to hear. Could we come to the Institute: when did it open?**

The idea of the establishment of a dedicated music school began in 2006, when I was still based in Australia. I initiated the Revival of Afghan Music Project. The establishment of a dedicated school of music was piloted towards the establishment and implementation of the bigger project. In 2008, I returned to Afghanistan. The school officially opened in 2010 but there were the years of planning, fundraising, putting the primary infrastructure and equipment in place, and inviting expat faculty from abroad. So after putting all the necessary prerequisites of music education in place, we opened in 2010.

**How many students were there in the beginning? And where did they come from?**

In the beginning, I inherited around 100 students from the School of Fine Arts, where the music department existed just in name with no music program, no music educators, no facilities or equipment, no musical instruments, and no sheet music. I inherited the music students and it became the responsibility of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music to help them.

In the beginning we had 100 students. Very soon, many of those students dropped off because of the implementation of the new curriculum, new programs, new equipment, and a new focus that required a lot from the student body as well. Some of the students were there in the music education program just by accident because it was close to their homes or because the school was providing free lunches. But as we began the program, they found that they did not have the commitment, or the motivation, and they probably realised that they did not want to be a musician.

We supported families. We invited families to talk so that we could explain to them what we were doing and also provide assistance. We stressed that by keeping their kids in the school, we were not giving them a bright future if the

kids themselves were not motivated, or didn't have the talent; in which case they might be better off going and studying something else. I am pleased that families were very understanding and they agreed to transfer their children to other schools. That also allowed us to get a new group of employees, given the limitation that we were facing at the very beginning of the establishment of the school.

We began with around a hundred students but now we have 175. More than one third of them are girls and more than 50 per cent belong to the disadvantaged community of Afghan children; the rest are students who live in Kabul. So practically at the moment, given the musical needs of Afghanistan, we are very small. We are moving slowly towards increasing the number of students in Kabul and also opening branches of the school in other provinces of Afghanistan. In the near future there will be branches in Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif and Jalalabad.

We have a very colourful mosaic of Afghan ethnicity in our school. The vision of the school is to improve lives, through music education, especially the lives of orphans. This has enabled us to get students from all over Afghanistan, through a close collaboration with an organisation called the Afghanistan Children Education and Care Organisation, or AFCECO, which is providing excellent care for orphans and does everything to improve their lives through education and give them access to a good quality education.

This allows us also to have students throughout Afghanistan - we have got girls and boys from Herat, from Mazar-i-Sharif, from Kunar, from Nuristan, from Farah, Panjshir - many, many parts, from the far corners of Afghanistan's provinces where the kids could not dream that one day they would have access to music education.

### **What is the age range of the students?**

The age range is from 9 to 20. Our program is an eleven year program; students begin in their at the primary level. After completing the primary and second levels they join us in our associate

diploma program which is somewhere between a school and university. So it is two extra years that enables students to stay longer in the school to improve their professional development and skills, given the lack of a proper higher education for music in Afghanistan.

### **As it is a school, what is the division of time between music and the other academic subjects?**

In many parts of the world, students might study for their general education in one school and come once or twice per week to a school to get their music education or to learn a musical instrument. Our program is different. We are also responsible for the general education of our students and we are very much committed to make sure that if, after Grade 12, a student does not want to continue with music, they have the ability to enter any courses in Kabul University or other universities of Afghanistan; that is, they're equipped to sit an entry exam and successfully get into a new field which would be more suitable for them. We are, in other words, responsible for the general education as well as specialist training of our students. During the day fifty per cent of the time is given to general education and the other fifty per cent is for the professional development of students as musicians.

### **Do the students come with a range of instruments on offer?**

We offer not only a full western orchestral range of instruments but we make sure that students who, even though they do not specialise in learning a traditional Afghan instrument, learn one as part of our vision to make sure that we preserve the musical tradition of Afghanistan and also that it is passed to young generations.

Students are learning two types of musical instruments: traditional Afghan and western musical instruments. When it comes to the western instruments, we teach every single instrument that Afghanistan needs and will enable Afghanistan to have its first national orchestra in the near future.

### **Do you have a good range of Afghani traditional instruments?**

We have been able to bring back to Afghanistan instruments that were thought to be obsolete, for example, the sarod. The sarod is a musical instrument used in the urban music of Afghanistan and classical tradition up to the late 1990s.

In the past traditional Afghan music was not part of a formal music education; it was kept within families and there were not many opportunities for musicians to pass on their knowledge and skills to people outside of their families. So some instruments have become obsolete or they were on the brink of being obsolete. The sarod was one of those. Thanks to the vision of ANIM, we now have about seven young boys and girls who are learning this instrument and who have successfully performed on this instrument on the big tours that we had.

There's another instrument called the dilruba. We have the privilege of having an elderly specialist on this instrument with us in the Afghanistan National Institute of Music. By creating the conditions for him to pass on his knowledge and skills to young boys and girls, it allows us to help preserve this musical instrument in Afghanistan.

### **Do you have a range of local musicians and music educators working with you?**

The faculty of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music is comprised of three groups of people. The first is those who are responsible for the general education of our students. The second group is Afghan musicians teaching Afghan traditional and Afghan classical music. And the third group is a group of experts, faculty, who come from many part of the world and who have been employed with the support of the World Bank. These people come and teach western musical instruments and western music academic subjects, not only to our students but also to a very small number of the local faculty who have some basic knowledge of western music.

### **What would be the most popular instrument amongst the students?**

Afghan children did not have access to any type of music in 1990s. They did not have an opportunity to see live musical instruments at concerts, on stage or even on TV because they were deprived of any musical activities.

When I returned in 2008, the knowledge they had was essentially about musical instruments that they saw at a wedding or on TV. There were a few Afghan musical instruments and a few western musical instruments widely used in Afghan weddings. There was also the Casio – the well-known brand of synthesiser, which is replacing many musicians as a one-man band. Plus, they were familiar with the drum kit and guitars. So they were the most popular instruments.

From the Afghan line, they were familiar with the rubab and tabla, nothing else. To make sure that students select an instrument, we have organised every year, during the audition, a tour of musical instruments, during which we introduce many musical instruments to our students, and then ask them to select whether they want to play any of those other instruments.

After the audition, the successful students have six months orientation in the school, during which time every single student learns a recorder - the newly enrolled students are only learning the recorder to begin reading music. After six months, they have sufficient time in the school to see various musical instruments, to listen to various musical instruments, to see how they are used in the youth orchestra or the wind/song band or the fusion/song band or in a rock group that we have in our school. After that they make a decision.

We teach every single instrument. In the string department, we teach violin, viola, cello and double bass. When it comes to the woodwind instruments, we teach flute, piccolo, oboe, bassoon, various types of clarinet, plus the various types of saxophone.

When it comes to the percussion, they are learning from a small triangle to timpani; and also percussion instruments from South America,

Africa, and Afghanistan. Our students are also learning marimba, xylophone, timpani, and so on. And they are learning piano. Of the brass, currently we are teaching trumpet and French horn.

Unfortunately, we are not able to promote the trombone or tuba in the school. Maybe one of the major reasons behind this lack of success is because we do not have someone capable of motivating students. We are getting a new brass faculty member very soon. He is coming from the United States and is specialising in band. We have a lot of hope that he will be in a position not only to motivate but at the same time teach the students instruments which are currently not in use in Afghanistan.

### **Does singing form a part of the education?**

At the very early stages, Grades 4, 5 and 6, all of the students are singing in a choir. At present we do not have a classical singing teacher or a singing program in the school.

**Do you mind if we just jump across to your recent tour of the United States and Canada? I was really pleased to read where Secretary Kerry, introducing a concert in Washington, said "I have had the privilege of travelling to Afghanistan many times now and I think you all know that we have very, very high hopes for your country, that you find peace and stability and we will continue to work with you for that." But the big point he made was: "And music. Music is the international language of peace and of possibilities and dreams. So we're happy to welcome you here as ambassadors of peace." It sounds a wonderful time. It must be difficult to organise a tour of so many students and many concerts?**

During the tour, we played a total of 19 concerts. It was with small ensembles, various ensembles, but the highlight of the tour was two major concerts: one in the Kennedy Center in Washington and one in Carnegie Hall in New York. A sold-out Carnegie Hall is a dream of any musician; plus having a full house at the Kennedy Center, indeed many people were shut out

because there were no seats remaining. That was a big achievement.

The tour was supported by the US Embassy in Kabul, the Afghan Minister for Education, and the Afghan Embassy in the United States.

One of the reasons that the Afghanistan National Institute of Music exists is the full and strong belief in every word that Secretary Kerry was talking about – the power of music and the significant role that music can play in building peace and stability in Afghanistan and also bringing Afghan people closer to their international community.

### **What's the next tour?**

A number of tours are confirmed for this year; some of them are very small. A small ensemble of our institute has been invited to perform in a music festival outside of Afghanistan. Two pianists will be participating in a Chopin festival in July. An ensemble of Afghanistan traditional instruments will be going to South Korea. The sitar and sarod student ensemble is scheduled to go to Estonia in late July. We have a big tour of Afghanistan where our youth orchestra, the 62 member ensemble that toured the United States, will be celebrating Peace Week in Afghanistan by presenting a number of concerts in the cities of Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif and Jalabad. This will be followed by a tour of the Middle East where our youth orchestra will be playing in the Muscat Opera House and, hopefully, in Dubai.

### **That is enormous. Could you tell me what's next on the agenda for the institute and what are the plans?**

After establishing the Afghanistan National Institute of Music and having very limited infrastructure and facilities in place, we are moving towards expanding. We are getting a new practice building which is especially designed for our students. We are building a concert hall that will not only be used by our students but it will be a source of pride for Afghanistan because it is the first concert hall designed in the last 40 years. Again, it is designed especially for music. We have never had such a concert hall in Afghanistan.

We are moving towards increasing the number of students. We are hoping that the girls at our school are not forced, when they turn 16, to go back to the country because they cannot live in the orphanages. The current regulations in Afghanistan prevent them from staying and force them to be moved from the orphanages to the countryside. We are also building a dormitory for 200 girls on the campus as well as a cafeteria.

**Is there anything else that you would like to highlight about the work you are doing?**

One more thing that probably we have to deal with is what's going to happen when the expert faculty leave Afghanistan. We understand that one day the funding will dry up and we have to make sure that once the expert faculty is gone, the music pedagogy is sustained in Afghanistan.

Once the funding stops, we can generate revenue from our existing program and our infrastructure. We are already moving in that direction to ensure the financial sustainability of this school. That's why the school has been established within the Ministry of Education. In the very beginning, I had a lot of opportunities to establish a private school, but I thought I'm not always in Afghanistan and this school and the future of this school should not be dependent on one person. That's why it was decided to build the school within the Ministry of Education with the full support of the minister.

At the same time, we have a plan for the sustainability of music pedagogy. We are currently investing a lot in the professional development of our older students as music educators, and they will be replacing, one by one, the expert faculty. They will be responsible for the continuation of the curriculum that we developed, for the division of

the curriculum, but of course this entails that they have the skills and ability to do so. At the same time we also have a financial plan which would allow us to use the ANIM existing infrastructure, adding new programs to generate revenue. By organising our own faculty concerts, student concerts, hosting music, allowing others to rent the concert hall for conferences and concerts, having invited musicians, and ticket sales, we would establish a source of revenue for the school.

While we are fully committed to the belief that there should not be any changes in the main vision and commitment of the school to improve and rebuild lives through music and education and that music and education should be freely available to children of Afghanistan, there are, at the same time people who are not eligible to study in our school but they are able to pay to learn music. We are in the process of establishing an after-school or an evening division, where people would be coming to learn music but they would be paying for their music education.

If these people come just to take a lesson, there would be one charge. But if they would also be wanting access to the practice facilities, there would be an extra charge involved. If they would like to use our library, there would be a different charge involved again. So we slowly are also moving towards the commercialisation of our program, while at the same time staying 100 per cent committed to improving lives through music education.

**That is absolutely incredible to hear. It has been a humbling experience to talk with you on your work. I thank you.**

Thank you.

Details of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music are available at [www.afghanistannationalinstituteofmusic.org](http://www.afghanistannationalinstituteofmusic.org)

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