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*Travel Specialists for Music and Performing Groups*

## WHY IRAQ WITH CLASSICAL MOVEMENTS

### **Classical Movements and Iraq**

Classical Movements is pleased that the US State Department and the John F Kennedy Center for the Arts asked Classical Movements to arrange the travel and meals and hotels for the historic US Visit of the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra back in December 2003. It was a difficult time for the Iraqi Nation and this visit presented much more than music making. It was a sign of friendship between the newly freed people of the Iraqi nation and hundreds of musicians from the National Symphony Orchestra and their orchestral colleagues around USA went way beyond to make gifts of music and instruments for the Iraqi Orchestra. Numerous Iraqi musicians had suffered as classical music was not in favor during many years of Saddam Hussein and further, the US had unintentionally bombed their own Rasheed Concert hall in the early days of the Iraq war of 2003. They were badly in need of music and instruments and parts. The orchestra also brought with them their Kurdish musicians and their unique instruments which were given their own time in the limelight.

Circumstances for planning this tour were challenging. There was less than 2 months to plan a lot, communications were extremely difficult, flights out of Baghdad did not exist and only military aircraft operated in very unfriendly skies. Visas were complicated by missing documents and national papers. Yet we managed to fly them out to Amman, Jordan, have their papers processed and then flown to New York only to arrive during a huge blizzard. Still in the end the musicians arrived in Washington DC, rehearsals commenced, the musicians toured Washington DC and even a chance to visit the White House on a private tour and met President George Bush. The concert was attended by the US President, over 50 Ambassadors to the US and numerous cabinet members. Classical Movements was glad to once again be a part of a difficult but challenging tour.

### **The Road to Recovery**

By Rebecca Winzenried

Symphony Magazine, March – April 2004

The Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra visit involved a human element that transcended the usual business of arranging orchestra tours for Neeta Helms, executive vice president of Classical Movements. She ushered the musicians from their first nerve-wracking security checks at New York's JFK Airport to their last tourist stop at Rockefeller Center on the way out of the country. "It was very hard to say goodbye. Usually when a tour ends we say, 'See you next time.' That's not true in this case," she says.

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## The Sweet Sound of Propaganda

**American bombs destroyed its Baghdad home, but this week the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra jetted into Washington for a glittering public concert. Were George Bush and Colin Powell really there to appreciate the Arab folk songs?**

By Andrew Buncombe

[The Independent/UK](#), December 12, 2003



Dreams can be realized in the most surprising of settings and in the most unlikely circumstances.

For Mohammed Amin Ezzat, conductor and composer with the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra (INSO), the moment came on Tuesday night in Washington's Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. There, in front of an audience that included President Bush and the First Lady, and Secretary of State Colin Powell, Ezzat's orchestra made its first ever performance in the United States and its first outside of Iraq for more than a decade.

The performance, claimed Powell, the official host who introduced the musicians to the great and good of Washington, testified "to the power of the arts to keep hope alive even under the cruelest oppressor. For the arts are the stuff of the human spirit, which no tyrant can crush". With a dramatic flourish that suggested there may be something of the performer about him, Powell then added: "President and Mrs. Bush, ladies and gentlemen, what you are about to hear is the music of hope, the sweet, sweet sound of freedom."

For those who wanted to believe, it was powerful stuff. Here, after all, were 60 or so members of the orchestra who had been flown to America, the cost split between the State Department and the Kennedy Center, and who were now performing before the Commander-in-Chief who had ousted Saddam Hussein and declared an end to major hostilities just seven months earlier. The department store chain Hechts had even provided winter coats for each of the musicians.

"We're trying to find a way to use music to combat what was a tragic circumstance no matter what side of the Iraqi argument you come down on," said the National Symphony Orchestra's musical director, Leonard Slatkin. (Members of the NSO played alongside the INSO at the concert, that included both Western and Arab music.) He said that during the two days of rehearsals, the musicians had talked about "nothing but music".

Bush was certainly one of those keen to promote this saccharine-infused view of the visit. After meeting with some of the musicians in the Roosevelt room at the White House, he declared: "Today I've had the honor of



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welcoming members of the symphony here at the White House. Maestro, you did a superb job. Thank you very much.

"It's very interesting that the Iraqi Symphony is made up of people who are Shia and Sunni and Armenian and Kurdish. They work for one thing, and that is a unified sound, a beautiful sound. And that's the country that is now emerging in Iraq, a country that will work together and recognize everybody's rights."

But Bush's comments and the performance of the INSO in Washington have angered many opponents of the war who believe the event was the latest in a series of stage-managed stunts designed to boost the president's domestic ratings. They said the attendance not only of Bush and Powell, but Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard Myers - the chief architects of the invasion that resulted in the death of thousands of civilians - was at best insensitive and at worst an insult to the Iraqi people.

Even the *Washington Post*, usually a reliable voice of the establishment if not the current administration, smelled a rat. "You've heard of show trials? Well, last night's appearance by the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center was a show concert," said its review of the concert. "The State Department flew 60 musicians the 6,200 miles from Baghdad to Washington to play for less than an hour in tandem with members of the NSO. As Winston Churchill might have put it, rarely have so many traveled so far to do so little."

Some critics have pointed out that the members of the INSO placed themselves in considerable danger by coming to perform in the US. Once news of the visit was announced this autumn by the Arab media, the INSO became a target. Its director, Hisham Sharaf, was shot at as he was driving near his home in Baghdad. The bullet passed through his windscreen.

"I don't know who or why," Sharaf told the *New York Times*. "I think maybe because of the concert. On [Arab news channel] Al Jazeera they say they are surprised the orchestra goes to Washington at this time. We don't have political reasons. Maybe the American side thinks about this but we go to play music, to see the American people and show them we have culture."

In addition to the attack on Sharaf, news of the concert led to attacks being carried out on the orchestra's instruments, stored at the School of Music and Ballet, where many of the INSO members teach.

Critics say the musicians have been used by the Bush administration in an ongoing propaganda effort designed to convince the American public that the invasion of Iraq has brought freedom to the Iraqi people and that life there is being transformed. "You have a government agency related to the military involved in the music scene which makes it very political," said Wafaa Al-Natheema, a Iraqi who runs the non-profit Institute for Near Eastern and African Studies in Massachusetts. She added: "If the US government really wanted to help they could use a non-governmental agency, a charitable institution like the institute or the UN."

Robert Greenwald, an independent filmmaker and producer of the recently released [Uncovered: The Whole Truth About the Iraq War](#) which lists what it calls "lies" that Bush told about the invasion of Iraq, said the



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performance brought to mind the president's Thanksgiving Day visit to US troops in Baghdad when he posed with a turkey set aside as a decoration. "I hope it was a real orchestra rather than just people they put in the costumes," he said. "I hope they will open up discussions with the Iraqi artists and writers who are deeply concerned about their country and what is going on."

Falih Abd al-Jabar, a senior Iraqi fellow at the United States Institute for Peace, told Agence France Press that Americans were likely to applaud the orchestra's performance but that many Iraqis were more concerned about water and electricity supplies. "It is a symbolic gesture really, a cultural exchange if you like," he said. "There are grand promises, but what materialized on the ground is very little. The hope is that this will be accelerated somehow or else delays would be detrimental."

The INSO is one of the oldest orchestras in the Arab world. Formed in 1959, it once had a German conductor and an international membership. During the Seventies and Eighties it toured countries including Russia, Algeria, Lebanon and Jordan. Under sanctions the orchestra found it terribly difficult to continue and many of its members left for Jordan or Europe. In 1994 the salary of the musicians was around \$1.50 a month.

For Ezzat, 42, the conductor who has dedicated his life to music and its performance under the most challenging circumstances, the decade of Western sanctions when his musicians struggled to find instruments and spare parts, was the most difficult he had known. "We could not get the musical instruments, we could not get the spare parts and there was a problem with a place for [rehearsing]," he said.

Amid such conditions, in 2002 he received a commission he realized that he could neither refuse nor complete. Aides of Saddam asked Ezzat to compose a score for a stage adaptation of the Iraqi leader's most recent novel, *The Gate of the City*. "I didn't say no, of course," he recalled. "I accepted. Then I went to Germany. I was a refugee."

From Germany Ezzat made his way to Sweden where he obtained asylum and watched the invasion of his country earlier this year by American and British troops. Then, this past Spring, with Saddam having been ousted and the orchestra's home in the Rashid theatre destroyed by American bombs, Ezzat returned to Baghdad and to his music - intending to pick up where he left off. More than that, he dreamed of building and developing the orchestra and showing the wider world what it was capable of achieving.

There is little doubt that the musicians who came to America - or at least those permitted to speak to the press - were pleased to be here and were not going to say anything that might suggest otherwise. At a press conference, 72-year-old viola player Munther Jamil Hafidh, one of the orchestra's founding musicians, announced: "We refuse to answer any political questions." At a second meeting with four of the musicians on Wednesday, I asked if any of them felt the presence of Bush, Rumsfeld and Powell at their performance suggested they were being used for propaganda purposes. Abdulla Sharaf, a violin player and composer, replied: "When we saw the President, the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State we thought it showed how interested they are in the arts."



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Khubat Abbas Abdul Razaq, a cellist and one of the orchestra's four women members, said: "I just want to say this is an honor to come to Washington and to play here."

Samir Yosif, a double-bass player, said: "We want to let the American people know that we have a culture, that we have something to give them. It's a great honor to be here and we thank the people who have helped us here to play."

Whatever else they take with them, the Iraqi musicians will leave Washington better equipped. In addition to their winter coats, a charitable trust has ensured that each of the performers will receive a new instrument. A separate organization has established an archive of more than 500 musical scores for the orchestra.

They also go with a new-found belief. Even if their visit to Washington has served the man who ordered the invasion of their country, it has also highlighted the plight of those struggling to produce art in Iraq. Sharaf, the musical director who was shot at, said: "Before, if you were not near the government and you did not talk badly about the government, you were safe. Now we can talk freely, but we don't know who is the enemy and who likes or doesn't like this music. But we hope - and I think all the Iraqi people think - that the future is better."

## TESTIMONIALS

**Debra L. Kraft, Executive Director [Choral Arts Society of Washington]**

"Thank you all for your fine work in creating an artistically successful and personally meaningful tour for the Choral Arts Society. I am grateful for your commitment to the excellent quality of the tour and constant care for the chorus while on tour. I also recognize your deep passion for music, your knowledge of the business and appreciate your long heartfelt history with Choral Arts."

**Dr. Mikhail Shtangrud, Choral Director [The Colburn School]**

"Thank you for the wonderfully planned and operated tour. The choir and the parents had a fantastic experience. Our performance venues were outstanding, each a full house. The friendship concerts and outreach encounters were truly meaningful, age-appropriate, as well as fun. Special thanks go to our tour guides (who) provided a wealth of information about their cities, as well as kept us all on enjoying ourselves and on time."

**Judy Neufeld Urbonas, Assistant Director [Winnipeg Mennonite Children's Choir]**

"The wonderful experience we have had in South America would not have been the same without the expertise of Classical Movements, who arranged the tour. All our dealings with Classical Movements were of the utmost order with a professionalism and caring attitude that helped us immensely. We value the relationship with them and would be most happy to work with them again in the future."

**Doreen Rao, Guest Conductor & Professor of Music [University of Toronto]**

"I have worked with many music travel specialists, but Classical Movements stands above the rest. Their experienced and knowledgeable staff understands the specialized needs of performing groups. Through their international network of staff, they provide the most memorable concerts in the most prestigious venues. Every element of the travel experience could be considered a work of art and Classical Movements is well prepared to make certain that their tour provide the finest experience at an extraordinary value. I readily endorse them."