

Music in Afghanistan Today

A Report on Fieldwork conducted in late 2005

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Context

The revival of music and music education in Afghanistan should be viewed as one of the most important measures that can be taken to rebuild this much-traumatised nation. The healing powers of music are too well known to rehearse here. In addition to this, the widespread popularity of music in Afghanistan allows the rejuvenation of music to contribute directly to the building of a viable democracy. Democracy needs more than bricks, concrete, irrigation systems and parliaments if democracy is to be sustained by being based on civil society. Civil society includes the musicians, artisans and musical traditions of Afghanistan. Together they provide a living thread between the culture achievements of the past and the future.

The definition of music used in this report is a universal one – it includes traditional, modern, tribal and orchestral music. This universal appeal is also an important aspect of the project for the revival of music and contrasts sharply with the policies of the Tālibān who banned most music, although it needs to be noted that not even the Tālibān were able to destroy or impose a complete ban on the entire musical traditions. For example singing and playing frame drum by women at female wedding gatherings or unaccompanied chanting of patriotic and religious songs by male singers were exempted. Given our universal definition of music and music education, every small step towards the revival of a multicultural and multimedia music tradition and industry in Afghanistan is a blow against fundamentalism not only in Afghanistan, but also in the region as a whole where the influence of the Tālibān continues unabated.

Fieldwork was undertaken in Kabul from 22 November to the 16 December 2005. The objectives of this fieldwork were to:

- present and discuss a project for the revival and promotion of music in Afghanistan with appropriate Afghan authorities (cultural and educational institutions, national and international NGOs, and local professional musicians);
- assess the state of musical performance and education in Kabul;
- ascertain whether there are any plans or projects by the Afghan government, national or international organisations for rebuilding the shattered musical traditions and music educational institutions in Afghanistan.

Despite the ongoing instability in Afghanistan, this fieldwork was possible because of the support of my Afghan relatives in Kabul. My arrival in Kabul generated a great deal of media attention, not only because I am the first Afghan to have received a doctorate in music but also because my father was a noted Afghan composer, musician and conductor. The Afghan and international media followed my visit to Kabul with great interest both when I was there and subsequent to my returning to Australia. Media Coverage and the powerful oral traditions of Kabul made it easy for me to contact the leading musicians in the city.

The musical traditions of Afghanistan are being revived, but without extra effort, there is no guarantee that the musical education and performance traditions of Afghan music will survive.

Music is back as part of an Afghan social life

The interim government in Afghanistan has removed the complete ban on music imposed by the Tālibān. In the first hours after the withdrawal of the Tālibān forces from Kabul, Afghanistan National Radio started broadcasting patriotic songs from archived tapes of male singers. Despite this positive change, a complete ban on Afghan women singing on Afghanistan National Radio and Television remained in place until 2004. The Directorate of Music Production of Afghanistan National Radio and Television now employs a small number of women singers. However, at the time this report was written, there was an attempt by some members of the recently elected parliament of Afghanistan to again outlaw women singing on radio and TV. Though women singers are allowed to perform on stage, these types of performances do not happen often and they are not encouraged.

Music is an important part of a few privately funded commercial radio and television stations, such as Watandar, Arman, Tolo, Ariana and Āhina. Unlike Afghanistan National Radio and Television, which mainly broadcast the archived recordings of Afghan female and male singers, the commercial stations play largely foreign film and pop songs originating from India, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Iran. The broadcasting of these foreign songs is something of a musical 'invasion', which might have less impact if the local traditions of Afghan music were encouraged.

Challenges

Despite some positive developments, the revival of music has been patchy, intermittent, very slow and severely hampered by circumstances reflecting the long history of musical destruction. For example, Afghanistan today does not have a single performer for some of the important musical instruments that were used in urban and classical music. In the case of local Afghan music, there are some musical traditions in which only one or two musicians survive. There is not a single *sārang* and *santūr* player, while only one *dilruba* player is left to carry on and transmit his skill and knowledge to others. The same can be said about some other traditional instruments and about some musical forms and genres of Afghan traditional music. The surviving players are likely to be the last because of the difficulties of attracting pupils- new funding and other support could overcome this bottleneck. There is also little appreciation of the vast variety of western classical music and the measures that needed to be taken to rebuild the pre-existing modern, orchestral traditions that Kabul and other cities once had.

The revival of music in Afghanistan has also suffered from misbalance. For example, although the Music Directorate of Afghanistan National Radio and Television employs Pashto singers, there is no Pashto instrumental ensemble. A Pashto instrumental ensemble had been part of the musical directorate of Afghanistan Radio for the last five decades, for without such an ensemble who can accompany the Pashto singers. This oversight has important political and social implications too. Some Pashto musicians, who had been historically associated with Afghanistan Radio, are currently employed as musicians in the musical ensembles of the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police. Other Afghanistan communities have suffered a similar depletion.

Poor infrastructure has a negative impact on all aspects of the revival of music in Afghanistan. Even the musicians employed by the Directorate of Music Production in the Music Directorate of Afghanistan National Radio and Television work under difficult conditions which reflect the more general lack of resources for musicians in other government institutions. The so-called 'symphony orchestra' is fortunate in being able to use a studio in the building of Afghanistan National Radio and Television near the airport for rehearsals. However, the three other ensembles are housed in the old building of Kabul Radio station in the heart of Kabul. But their circumstances today are severely reduced and cramped compared to the 1980s when they occupied the whole building. All the ensembles put up with poor conditions. They have insufficient space, the instruments are in poor or broken condition, and there are no funds for the repair of the rooms or the instruments and no funds for the building of rehearsal rooms.

The level of discomfort is considerable owing to poor ventilation, the lack of heating in winter, and the lack of proper lighting. On some days during my visit, the rooms were so cold that the musicians stayed outside in the sun to warm themselves up. The harsh weather has exacerbated the damage to the remaining instruments. Given their very low monthly salaries (about \$40 AUD) the musicians themselves lack financial resources to address any of these difficulties. Underlying all these obstacles is the ongoing tradition of corruption that makes it difficult to record, play and perform music without paying bribes.

Other difficulties

Some other difficulties that are holding back the revival of the livelihood of local musicians and musical traditions are:

- the lack of any particular plans or projects for the revival of music;
- the lack of action by government institutions directly responsible for the promotion of music;
- the poor working conditions of musicians and music education;
- the increasing number of one-man ensembles consisting of a singer and his synthesiser, putting aspiring but less wealthy musicians out of business;
- the lack of professional and expert musicians with an academic background in music and a broad knowledge of musical traditions- such knowledge could assist authorities in designing a comprehensive plan for rebuilding and promotion of music;
- the lack of funds for the making and maintaining traditional musical instruments;
- the lack of funds for rebuilding rehearsal rooms, concert halls and recording studios, where the local musicians can practice their art, make recordings and hold concerts;
- the lack of government, private and foreign patronage to local artisans and song writers;
- the low, indeed miserable monthly wages that are paid to local musicians for their work, including poor remuneration for the recording of new tunes and live performances.

Potential

Despite the difficulties, there is small room for optimism. Certainly Afghanistan has sufficient essentials in place to make the revival of local music possible. These positive developments include:

- the new democratic air in Afghanistan that is encouraging the revival of civil institutions;
- live musical performances are increasing at weddings, official ceremonies and especially at organised concerts arranged by governmental and non-governmental organisations to highlight the presence of music in contemporary post-Tālibān social life;
- many musicians have returned to Kabul from exile in Pakistan, Iran and Europe;
- some of these returned exiles have rebuilt their ancestral houses in the ruins of the once flourishing musicians' quarter Kharābāt, while others are trying to do so;
- some musicians continue to live in modern flats near the presidential palace, where they were housed by the leftist regime between 1980 and 1992.

Musical education

Small steps have been taken already to rebuild musical educational institutions. Specifically:

- A small music department has been re-established within the School of Fine Arts, thanks to the help of the Polish Humanitarian Mission to Afghanistan (with 70 students and 7 teachers). However, without rehearsal rooms, musical instruments, musical materials and notation, qualified and experienced music teachers, a music library and music archive, this institution does not function properly.
- The Music Department of Kabul University has also been re-established with about 40 students studying for higher degrees in music. Unfortunately, they all lack primary musical education. They have plenty of musical instruments but also lack qualified music teachers, a music library, and rehearsal rooms.
- Some music courses are available at the Music Training Directorate of the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism. About 47 adult music trainees currently study Western music theory and solfa, and Afghan traditional music. However, the department is handicapped by a lack of musical instruments and music teachers.
- The Agar Khan Music Initiative for Central Asia funds and runs a music program in Kabul, called the Tradition Bearers program. This program supports the time-honoured process of transmitting an oral music tradition from a mentor to a pupil, a training method that is known as *Ūstād-Shāgird*. In Afghanistan this program is concentrated around the spiritual and physical rebuilding of the musicians' quarter, an old part of Kabul known as *Kharābāt*. This is the only centre for music education in Kabul that has sufficient musical instruments, music teachers and rehearsal rooms.
- Some short-term (3–6 month) music courses, funded by international charity organizations, are run at orphanages such as Ashiyana and Allahudin. The young orphans involved in these courses are disappointed when they discover that their involvement cannot be extended beyond three months owing to the shortage of funds and sponsors.
- The Foundation for Culture and Civil Society has established a six-month music program for the musical education of girls. Two girl's schools in Kabul have been selected for participation. The FCCS also provides out-door and in-door concert venues for Afghan musicians and funds publicity for these concerts. With the assistance of the European Union, FCCS also sponsors musical festivals such as *Gul Surkh* ('Red Tulip'), which occurs every year in the city of Mazar-i Sharif.

Musical ensembles

Small progress has been made in the re-establishment of the orchestral traditions and formation of different musical ensembles.

- The brass band of the Afghan National Army was re-established with some assistance from the Turkish government. The brass band comprises eighty-two musicians, who have a shortage of instruments, though they have received some instruments from India. However, they prefer to use their old musical instruments, which have been repaired numerous times and are in very bad condition. The reason for this preference is the poor and non-standard quality of Indian brass instruments. A number of musicians were summoned from retirement to complete the brass band.
- Twenty other musicians are members of the traditional and pop ensembles of the Afghan army. Some of these musicians were well-known musicians from Radio Afghanistan in earlier times.
- Two days after the defeat of the Tālibān, a small group of surviving instrumentalists and male singers took up posts in the Directorate of Music Production, which is a sub-department of the Music Directorate of Afghanistan National Radio and Television. They formed a small ensemble. Soon other Afghan musicians, who had lived in exile in Pakistan, also returned to their former positions in the Directorate of Music Production. The result was that the directorate now had sufficient artists divided into four ensembles: Orkestar Mahli ('Regional Orchestra'), Orkestar Klasik ('Classical Orchestra'), Orkestar Amator ('Amateur Orchestra') and Orkestar Samfuny ('Symphony Orchestra').
- The Directorate of Music Training (a department in the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism) has its own musicians who are also divided into four ensembles. They are Arkestar Sharqi ('Eastern Orchestra'), Arkestar Mahali ('Regional Orchestra') a group of Sufi musicians and a pop ensemble called Amateur Orchestra.

Interviewees

Key government and university officials, NGO activists and social organisations that met with Dr Sarmast and indicated their support to this project

1. Abdul Aziz, the Deputy Commander for Planning and Education of the Orchestra of the Afghan National Army
2. Abdullah Hakim Soraya, the General Director of Orphanages at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
3. Ahmadzai Ashraf Ghani, the Chancellor of Kabul University
4. Boniewicz Anna, the Program Manager of the Polish Humanitarian Mission to Afghanistan
5. Faryad Sayed Farooq, the Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts
6. Firoz Islamuddin, the Head of the Music Department of the Faculty of Fine Arts of Kabul University
7. Ghaznawi Ghafur, the Deputy Minister of Education
8. Hakimyar Timor, the Director of the Cultural Department of the Foundation for Culture and Civil Society
9. Mohammad Qassim, and the Commander of the Music Ensemble of the Afghan National Army
10. Mohammad Yousef, the Director of the Aschiana orphanage
11. Nangialai Homyoun, the Director of the Music Training Directorate of the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism
12. Raheen Sayed Makhdam, the Minister of Information, Culture and Tourism
13. Roshan, Najib, the General Director of Afghanistan National Radio and Television
14. Sidiqi Mirwaiss, the Program Manager of the Aga Khan Music Initiative for Central Asia in Afghanistan
15. The Director of the School of Fine Arts and music teachers of this school and a number of musicians

Recommendations

A coherent plan for the sustainable revival of music and music education is essential. In particular, priority needs to be given to the development of a national music education strategy. Given the great poverty of Afghanistan and the lack of infrastructure, such an ambitious plan can succeed only with the support of international community working through the co-operation of the Afghan government and local musicians.

1. The establishment of a centre for the revival and promotion of music in Afghanistan

- To supervise and co-ordinate the rebuilding of Afghan music via a representative committee of domestic and international stakeholders. Duties to include professional, financial, administrative and media support to the project.
- To be located in Kabul with an office at Monash University in Melbourne.
- To monitor the existing range of activities to ensure the development of a sustainable national plan.
- To oversee the other initiatives identified below.

2. The establishment of a vocational secondary school of music

- To encourage boys and girls in Afghan music traditions and to produce graduates for further tertiary and professional training in musical theory and practice.
- To develop new musical educational curricula reflecting the wide range of Afghan and foreign traditions of music (especially Afghan and Western classical).
- To encourage international exchange programs involving school students and teachers with like-minded groups, for example in Australia (where various youth orchestras would be interested in such an exchange).

3. The promotion of tertiary musical education

- To encourage graduates from the professional secondary school of music to continue studies at the Music Department of Kabul University.
- To develop proper musical infrastructure at the university.
- To encourage the revival of tertiary musical education through international exchange programs for teachers and students.
- To encourage research into the science of music, musicology/ethnomusicology and the making of musical instruments via international links, including the Monash University partners in this project.

4. Revival of Afghan musical forms and compositional structures

By their inclusion in the musical education curricula at secondary and tertiary levels and by encouraging musicians to perform and create new compositions and tunes in those Afghan music genres that are now threatened with extinction.

5. Revival of the theoretical basis of Afghan classical music

- By documentation of oral traditions and radio programs about classical music.

- By publishing contemporary musical treatises and the documentation of oral traditions with scholarly commentary and critical analysis. These will be used for teaching and learning.

6. Rebuilding the traditions of Afghan folk music

- By transcribing Afghan folk songs in Western staff notation.
- By using this notation as a part of educational curriculum as material for solfa training in singing and in ear training.
- By encouraging urban musicians to rework and make the Afghan folk songs part of their repertoire.
- By establishing appropriate training in the making of musical instruments and their repair in secondary and tertiary music education.
- By initiating and sponsoring the opening of workshops, and providing financial and technical support to musical instrument makers.

7. The development of an archive for Afghan music

- Establish an archive at Kabul University to act as a repository for musical records, copies of academic work on Afghan music, copies of Dari/Persian musical treatises, etc. Dr Ahmad Sarmast is willing to contribute from his private library and recording archive to make this possible.
- To provide an archive for scholars, teachers, students, musicians and the media to use as a reference library

8. Rebuilding the Kharabat

- Rebuilding the musicians' quarter Kharabat in Kabul would preserve a district of great historical cultural importance.
- The area should not become a museum but a place of active learning, mentoring and performance.
- A unique institution of this kind could act as a focus for cultural tourism to Afghanistan.

9. The formulation of a policy for music broadcasting

The democratic spirit of Afghanistan tolerates a wide variety of foreign and domestic music, but at the moment the latter is severely disadvantaged. Incentives need to be designed not merely to rebuild traditions inside Afghanistan but also to make those traditions appealing to the media and the international public by:

- Encouraging small Afghan ensembles to play on community occasions and during official engagements.
- A media program to highlight the individual achievements of artists and artisans.
- Government sponsorship for Afghan musicians to travel abroad and establish an international platform for their domestic popularity.
- The Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism of Afghanistan, with the agreement of the General Director of Afghanistan National Radio and Television,

should provide private commercial radio and television stations with selected copies of the archived tapes of Afghan musicians.

- A youth policy for encouraging young people to perform Afghan music individually or in bands - perhaps by organising a national competition along the lines of 'Afghan Stars'.