

OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

American Musicians Are Doing Something Profound in Beijing Right Now

Nov. 16, 2023



Illustration by Vanessa Saba. Photograph via The New York Public Library

By Matias Tarnopolsky

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While presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping were drawing the world’s attention for their talks in San Francisco this week, a different kind of summitry is happening in China. There, representatives from their two countries are speaking through violins, cellos, oboes and clarinets.

I write from Beijing, almost exactly 50 years after the Philadelphia Orchestra arrived as the first American orchestra to perform in China in a key moment of Ping-Pong diplomacy. I traveled there to be with a [group of its musicians](#) for two weeks of concerts mingling American and Chinese musicians, master classes, chamber music performances and panel discussions.

It may seem naïve to argue that a symphony orchestra can help solve the world’s problems. But a lifetime in music has convinced me that it’s not only worth the effort to try to do our part; it is our responsibility. Certainly the American government supports the idea: Secretary of State Antony Blinken recently announced the [Global Music Diplomacy Initiative](#), reinforcing the idea that cultural diplomacy is a powerful force for good in the world. Our visit here is one of the initiative’s first projects.

Since the Philadelphia Orchestra’s [historic 1973 visit](#) to China, we have returned 12 times. That decision is not a signal of approval of China’s policies. Rather, our journeys to China signify a belief in the possibility of change through dialogue. They make real the principle that music communicates shared ideas and feelings that words alone cannot convey.

The Asia Society honored the orchestra last month as an Asia Game Changer in recognition of its perseverance, for returning to China as often as it has to continue the musical conversation even during the most difficult periods in the relationship between our two countries. Diplomacy is a slow process. Like the centuries-old and ever-evolving art form of classical music, it teaches patience.

At the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting, where the presidential encounter took place, U.S. officials were certainly projecting American values. How does an orchestra project them?

Happily, we don’t have to worry about bans on high-tech trade, investment restrictions or threats to access to critical raw materials. But an orchestra is a microcosm of society and of democratic ideals, where our aims can be achieved only through collaboration, listening and dialogue. Our mere presence in countries with autocratic regimes can seem miraculous.

The concert hall provides a democratizing space. The lights dim, the conductor gives the downbeat, and the orchestra starts to play. From that moment, we are all equals immersed in the same experience, with focused, willing cooperation and commitment to the best possible outcome.

If there is a single essential point about an orchestra, it is that to achieve any kind of impact and to convey the passion and beauty of the music, every musician and every audience member must be connected. When one musician gives a little more, another must give a little less, a constant shaping of music in real time — a shared intuitive conversation. All must be absolutely in tune with one another.

Can music pull the world back from the brink? In early 2008, I was working on the New York Philharmonic’s concert in Pyongyang, a project conceived to enhance the atmosphere of the six-party talks on the denuclearization of North Korea. At the time, observers and even many of the musicians themselves questioned whether any potential good would come of the effort. But for those present — a delegation of some 400 Americans, including the orchestra, supporters and the largest contingent of foreign journalists to visit North Korea since Madeleine Albright’s 2000 visit as secretary of state — it turned out to be a profoundly inspiring journey.

What happened in Pyongyang, at minimum, was that a group of Americans and North Koreans, citizens of sworn enemies, sat in a room together for a couple of hours and listened to Dvorak, Gershwin and, as an encore, the Korean folk song “Arirang,” which is part of the soul of every Korean on either side of the Demilitarized Zone and caused many members of the audience to tear up.

But it was so much more than that. The emotion of that shared occasion in the concert hall is forever etched in my mind and, I am sure, in the memory of all who were there. Diplomatically, politically and socially, we were far apart, but because of the music, we were humanized for each other, even for a short time. That is real progress.

As we were leaving Pyongyang after two days of music and discussion, a senior orchestra administrator reminisced about the Philharmonic’s 1959 journey to the Soviet Union with Leonard Bernstein, noting that after that tour, it was still 30 years before the Berlin Wall came down. I think the end of the North Korea story is not yet written.

Born in Buenos Aires, I was raised in London and embarked on a career in arts administration. My first job in the United States came in 1999, in the artistic department of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, then led by the conductor Daniel Barenboim. I witnessed the founding of his most consequential creation, the [West-Eastern Divan Orchestra](#). He formed the orchestra with his longtime friend and intellectual partner, the Palestinian American scholar Edward Said, who died in 2003. I arranged the first U.S. visit of the orchestra, which brings young Israeli, Palestinian and other Arab musicians together to make music.

The Divan orchestra’s associated conservatory, the Barenboim-Said Academy, with music students from these backgrounds, now has a permanent home in Berlin. These students [keep making music together](#) during one of the most desperate times for the Middle East. There, beyond the notes, technique and theory, the students learn musical citizenship, forming a new generation of ambassadors for positive change in the world.

When I was in China in 2019, I had the opportunity to speak with a senior Chinese official, a member of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, who conveyed in proud terms the success of the growing presence of Western classical music in China. His intent was to demonstrate China’s increasing global influence.

It was a party line talking point, and I was expected to simply praise their success. (I remained silent.) However, as we walked away from the formal meeting, he took me to one side, gently, and congratulated the Philadelphia Orchestra for its quiet commitment to China over the past 50 years.

The bluster was gone. He reminisced about how the orchestra’s 1973 visit had been the subject of joyful dinner table conversation throughout his childhood. He said it had been moving to share the experience with his children.

“Keep doing what you are doing,” he said. “It’s beautiful, and I feel like it’s the only thing that’s working.”

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