

BEAUTY AMID CHAOS: IU-TRAINED CELLIST BRINGS HOPE TO WAR-TORN BAGHDAD

By Jennifer Piurek

Karim Wasfi was just 13 years old when he heard the recording that set his destiny in motion. The piece was Kodály's solo sonata for cello. The artist was Janos Starker, the Grammy Award-winning cellist and distinguished professor at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music.

"That was back in 1985. Despite my young age, I was so affected by that stunning performance. The power, fluency, artistry, musicianship—the mastery," said Wasfi in an e-mail from his native Baghdad.

The next several years were bleak: Iraq was in a constant state of war, cultural activity was limited, people were withdrawn and fearful. The only respected professions at the time, said Wasfi, were jobs in the military and the sciences. Wasfi, who comes from an artistic family and has played cello since he was six years old, had no desire to become an officer or a rocket scientist. He joined the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra, the first symphony orchestra in the Arab world, at the age of 14. "It was then when my fight commenced toward cultivation and refinement of society. I am not a sociologist, but I felt we had a message to convey through music," he said.

His message is that live music unifies and inspires people by providing hope. Circumstances are harsh, said Wasfi, and classical music reminds people of their resilience and

ability to survive. "The cello sound is better and more effective than car bombs, assassinations, or suicide bombers."

With help from his ex-wife, Nivan Saada, Wasfi followed his destiny to Indiana University in 1997. At IU, Wasfi studied with Helga Winold and Janos Starker, whose music had so inspired him many years before. "I was receptive, getting any tip. Every word of his was useful. It was not a coincidence to listen to that recording in 1985," said Wasfi. His father's death in 1999 prompted Wasfi to return to Baghdad to help care for his sisters. He traveled back and forth to IU several times before settling in Baghdad in 2002, leaving behind a promising career in the U.S.

In Baghdad, every day is a heart-wrenching struggle. The stench of death is in the air and on the streets. Many of the best musicians fled years ago and the rebuilding process in the wake of Saddam Hussein's fall is an uphill battle. But, though his life has been threatened by extremists who object to his having studied in the U.S., and armed security guards and snipers are the norm at his concerts, Wasfi is determined to share his music with the people of his homeland. "I feel proud and fortunate that I was able to turn IU into the most famous school in Iraq, and the cello into the most

preferred instrument in recitals and concerts," he said.

Wasfi may decide to run for office in the next elections of the National Assembly. Until then, he will continue focusing on the role of music, art, and culture in rebuilding his country. Album sales and national coverage about his mission in the *New York Times* and on MSNBC.com mean little compared with the gratification Wasfi gets from sharing his music with people who haven't heard a live concert in 10 years. "It is not easy to survive with my recitals and concerts, but it will get better," he said. "We have proven that life is worth it. I shall never give up."

Since this interview, Wasfi has been chosen as the new director of the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra.

To read the full conversation with Wasfi, visit music.indiana.edu/iusic.



Karim Wasfi

(See related Cultural Diplomacy article, p. 17.)

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