

Luthiers sans Frontieres UK, Mission to Kabul August 2013

Luthiers sans Frontieres (violinmaker's without borders) is a group of volunteer violinmaker/repairer/teachers who offer training in countries that have growing music facilities but no expertise in maintaining the instruments.



You get some interesting reactions when you tell people you are spending your summer holiday in Kabul. You might expect a teacher at a busy School of Violinmaking to head off somewhere quiet in the summer, however, the chance of teaching in such an extraordinary situation was one I just couldn't refuse. People were concerned about my safety but after three LsF missions to Haiti I felt I had enough insight and experience to know it would be ok.....probably! Having said that, I didn't tell my Mum where I was going!

The approach came from Dr Ahmad Sarmast, Head of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music in Kabul. Founded in 2010, ANIM is the only Music School in Afghanistan. Boys and girls from all backgrounds aged between 8-18 receive a general education plus specialist tuition in all kinds of music from traditional Afghan to jazz to western classical. The standard is very high and this is all the more impressive when you think that just a few years ago, under the Taliban, music was banned, musicians were persecuted and instruments were destroyed. Dr Sarmast had heard about LsF's work and was keen to add a repair facility to his growing school.



LsF volunteers are a hardy bunch, in fact the phrase 'extreme lutherie' was invented for us on our first Haiti mission. We are used to living in very basic conditions and working long hours with minimal tools and maximum creativity. It's a far cry from the cosy workshops that we are used to. Missions are planned with a local partner eg a Music School which takes responsibility for accommodation, food etc. Living conditions can be very basic or very nice. You get what you get.

Lsf UK sources donations of tools, fittings etc. and these are sorted and stored ready for missions. Funds are raised through various activities and personal donations. Friends and colleagues in the UK violin trade were very eager to support the Kabul mission, some donating large amounts of equipment for the project. It really felt that I was carrying with me the goodwill and hopes of many people that Afghanistan might be heading towards a brighter future.



ANIM's success is due in large part to the founder and Director, Dr Ahmad Sarmast and the highly talented international and Afghan staff that he has attracted to work there. The school is growing rapidly and has a wonderful atmosphere, full of noise and energy and purpose. If this is a sign of the future of Afghanistan, then it's very encouraging. LSF's brief was to set up and equip a repair workshop and to begin training four teachers in the maintenance of instruments and bows. According to William Harvey, the School's Julliard-trained violin Professor, the idea that bows could



be rehired was a revelation to the school. Before he arrived, they were being discarded once the hair was worn out. Bow rehairing would be high on the agenda.

I arrived with 40kg of tools and supplies; everything that would be needed to start a workshop from scratch. To my delight, ANIM had taken on all of my recommendations and provided an excellent room with a workbench, grinding wheel, lamps, whiteboard etc. Training started the next day. Everything about the School was well organised and professional. If I needed anything, it was got for me. Every now and again the workshop door would open and with the welcome words "chai Ustad?" a

cup of green tea would appear, just what I needed!

Teaching started with assessment of the instruments and progressed to basic repairs eg gluing open seams (a lot of them in Kabul's dry climate) to bow rehairing and lastly setting up the instruments.



I had learned some Dari, and I had an interpreter for the morning sessions. It was hot, but bearable as Kabul, has very low humidity in the summer (unlike Haiti). I taught for 3 hours in the morning and 3 hours in the afternoon. It was exhausting but at the same time, an enormous pleasure involving demonstrations, lots of drawing and much discussion and laughter. The four students were very enthusiastic and learned quickly, even though the work was totally new to them.

Any Lsf volunteer will enjoy the challenge of passing on their skills in very different circumstances. For a teacher, though, it is one of the best kinds of training. It really makes you think about how to communicate. You

need to explain problems and solutions more efficiently and more creatively as time and resources are very limited. I brought back many new ideas to try out on my own, unsuspecting students at Newark. One of the highlights was presenting ANIM with a violin made at the Newark school bearing a label inscribed with our good wishes, in both Dari and English. That was really special!

After two weeks I felt that we had all reached 'saturation point'. Each of my students had rehired at least two bows to a surprisingly good standard. They had undertaken a range of minor repairs on their own and larger projects as a team. Setting up is always the dilemma on an LSF mission. It's the hardest thing to teach in a short time and we all know how important it is. We did what we could and now they need to practice and develop their new-found skills.



Sadly, I had little opportunity to get to know Kabul. It's not an easy place to be a visitor. One is advised not to wander around the streets or go anywhere without an escort. All public buildings are



heavily guarded and the city centre is like a fortress in places, 'The vibe is a little tense', someone said. Having said that, normal life goes on and looking around you notice lots of new building and an extraordinary number of newly planted trees! I never once felt threatened or uncomfortable and received only warmth and friendliness from the Afghan people. I often found myself wondering what it must be like to grow up in this alcohol free, more family centred society which we know so little about in the west.

I did make it to the workshop of Mr Hesa, a famous maker of traditional Afghan instruments. His workshop is a converted shipping container and he sits on the floor working away while outside, young children at another business hammer sheet metal into tin trunks. The noise is deafening. I purchased a beautiful 19 stringed Afghan robab. It's a challenge to keep in tune (no peg reamers in Kabul) but it's an ever present reminder of a wonderful time in an extraordinary place.

Looking back, we achieved an enormous amount in those two weeks. It was a great privilege to be able to contribute to the future of music in Afghanistan. Kabul, ANIM and my students will be very much in my thoughts as Afghanistan faces the challenges of the coming year.

By the way, when I told my mum where I'd been; she wasn't that bothered!

Further details

Future Involvement

The LSF mission was originally planned in two parts. The August mission was to set up the workshop and give initial training. A later mission would be longer and offer more in-depth training. In the meantime, a Luthier from Australia has offered to go to ANIM in November. As this is being sponsored by an Australian organisation, ANIM has taken this up offer and so the second visit might occur in 2014 depending on how things develop at the School.

Finances

The project was financed by ANIM and the cost to LSF UK was nil.

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J and A Beare

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Check out the videos on YouTube: Search for 'Robert Cain Kabul'

<http://www.afghanistannationalinstituteofmusic.org>

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