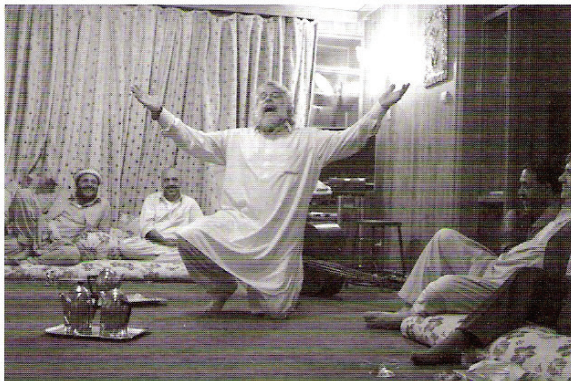


Dobbs with Verse

From Classical Bach to Classic Doo Wop: N.H. Musician Performs in Afghanistan

By Rachel Lehr

During the month of May, Richard “Dobbs” Hartshorne performed Bach and humorous original compositions on his double bass for a wide range of audiences in Afghanistan. Dobbs’ tour was sponsored by the nonprofit organization Bach with



Dobbs Hartshorne in Afghanistan

Photo by Rachel Lehr

Verse, and was hosted by the Welfare Association for the Development of Afghanistan, an Afghan organization working at the grassroots level in education, civic education, and drug control. The nonprofit arranged performance venues,

transportation, and hospitality for Dobbs in Kabul and the eastern regional capital Jalalabad.

Working and traveling in Afghanistan is risky, and one must always take extra security precautions as a routine matter of daily life. That can be especially challenging when lugging around a 150-year-old bass that weighs 35 pounds and is 6 feet tall. Dobbs, with the assistance of the nonprofit organization, was able to present 21 performances of his program “One Man Show” on this recent visit to Afghanistan. I was fortunate to attend a Dobbs performance where he introduced the audience to classical music with Bach’s Cello Suite No. 1, including a prelude and five dances, explaining that listening to silence between movements and waiting until the end for applause was for better enjoyment. Dobbs says he loves playing Bach around the world because “the music is simple and anyone can understand it. It has emotional depth that is powerful if you are open to it.” Dobbs has tuned his instrument to be able to play the entire Bach Cello Suites exactly as they were written, but on a bass. He feels that the sound of the bass,

though not as loud as a cello, is more resonant, with the same range as a human voice.

Dobbs was dressed every part the Afghan with a gold embroidered, mirrored Pashtun vest over his long Afghan shirt and baggy trousers, topped off with a woolen pakol hat. He told the story of “The Saddest Day,” when he was an eight-year-old and his pet turtle ran away. Dobbs was inspired to write this musical story, performed in Pashto, English, French, and German, in response to 9/11. Not intending to make light of the events of 9/11 but wishing to bring a childlike perspective, he sang “maybe I wouldn’t feel so bad about the terrorist attack and the war in Iraq if only my turtle came back.” He prepared audience members for the story by giving them permission to laugh if they thought it was funny. Although the Americans in the audience could not understand the story as recited in Pashto, the music tickled our senses of humor. A few of us began to titter when he sang “mon Coeur” in vibrato French and we were doubled over by the time he got to singing, in classic 1950s doo-wop style, “Since I Don’t Have You” ... in falsetto... in Pashto.

The Afghanis, seated on cushions around the salon, were moved by his music and touched by his attempt to sing and perform across the language barriers. Later we found out the turtle story, performed here for the first time in Pashto, hadn’t made much sense to them because “turtle” had been translated as “lizard,” and the irony of a turtle quickly running away was entirely lost. What was not lost was the resonance of transcendent music and the respite from conflict that brings joy and appreciation for all who share in the experience.

Feltmaker Rachel Lehr is part of the New Hampshire Artist Roster.