

God, Life, and Everything Music

I recently heard a BBC report about the only grand piano in Gaza. If ever an instrument had a mission impossible, it is this. When it was discovered - hidden in a bomb-damaged building - it was unplayable. But then a not-for-profit group came in and rebuilt the instrument nearly from the ground up.

Why is this even news?

Because it brings music to a place that knows so little.

You see, one reason it was hidden was because many conservative Muslims think musical instruments are haram - forbidden. Some extremists feel that all music is forbidden. So in addition to the war taking lives on a daily basis, in addition to unemployment being at dizzying levels, in addition to the whole area being a rubble pit, the people of Palestine are supposed to face this without music.

I claim no expertise on the Islamic law and music, but I've read some articles, some "Ask the Imam" type columns about music. Apparently, in Islam, this is a hot topic. Is music of any sort allowed? If so, what type is allowed?

In the interest of full disclosure, I play instruments. And I sing. I love making music by myself or with groups. It doesn't matter. Music is life, and those who have none in their lives seem to me to live only a half-life.

So, when I heard that some Muslim clerics forbid any sort of music, I thought to myself, "Even if I were drawn to Islam, this would be a deal breaker. Any religion that finds music to be sinful will never win my heart."

BUT...

Also, in the interest of full disclosure, there have been and may well still be some Christian extremists who ban music, too. My father grew up in a church where not only alcohol but dancing was banned. Many churches once taught that musical instruments were the work of the devil (especially the organ, which was just making its way into churches at the time. Maybe they thought it was evil because it's devilishly difficult to play - I don't know).

And just look at our own society. We have lots of music, but we don't make it that much. Schools cut music programs before they cut sports. They think of it as a little "extra" rather than fundamental to living in a civilized society. And they commoditize it so that it's something to be bought and sold by professionals, not made by everyone.

So, Christians and westerners in general also have a history of hating and limiting music, and if it is not fair to say that ALL or even MOST Christians think of music is evil, maybe it's not fair to paint all Muslims with that brush, either.

In fact, the BBC article noted that lots of people listen to music on their MP3 players, and that there are just too many for the religious fundamentalists to go after. Performers, however, still have to tread a fine line. They have to paint their music as praising Allah, and make sure it never represents un-Islamic values. There is a lot of suspicion of musicians.

But it is changing. And changing for a good reason.

Music is giving some of them - most especially children - a bit of their lives back. That grand piano, with the sole piano teacher in the entire country being a Russian immigrant, is being used to teach kids music. They are learning Bach and Beethoven, but more importantly, they are learning how to leave the war behind, if only for the hour they have to practice.

I am familiar with rehearsal time. When I was a kid, forced to practice, it was sometimes torture. But when I got with my friends, and we made music for the love of making music, it was as if we were in a different world, a place that has no obligations other than getting that note right or tuning with the other horns. It is a place, when all instruments are in harmony, where you fly.

The kids in Gaza who are learning to play the piano are learning how to live with meaning and hope in a place that's filled with despair and futility. These are the kids who are living right now.

And it's not just one piano. Others, taking inspiration from it, are playing other instruments, or singing more openly. Others still are arguing that music is in no way haram but perfectly allowable. That music is the language of the body and the earth, and that it is in us whether we like it or not.

So, while it's just one piano, and many may think it is frivolous to spend time and money on music when there's so much misery in that little country, I see it as a sign of hope. May music grow and prosper there, and may it do the good work God intends.