



TIBOR KRAUSZ

John Ferguson (c.) poses with a class at the YES Academy in Bangkok, Thailand, during a week-long workshop in American musical genres.

## John Ferguson spreads goodwill for America across the developing world through the transforming power of music.

By Tibor Krausz / Correspondent

**A**BANGKOK, THAILAND  
 mjad Dabi had a simple wish: to keep polishing his technique on his favorite piano compositions by the French Impressionist masters Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. But in the midst of a brutal civil war in his native Syria, his artistic pursuits became more futile and perilous by the day.

Last September, the young pianist was injured by a car bomb that exploded outside a school for music near his home in a residential area of Damascus, Syria; a dozen civilians were killed. A few days later another car bomb blew out the windows of the conservatory where he had been studying.

"We'd be playing music and hear explosions going off nearby," says Mr. Dabi, who looks uncannily like US composer George Gershwin and whose face bears scars from the first bomb blast. "It felt like living a nightmare that was never going to end."

But for Dabi and another young Syrian

musician, violinist Andrey Mukaddasi, who founded an interfaith string orchestra in Damascus, the nightmare did end. Soon both were on a flight to Bangkok, Thailand; from there they eventually would head to the United States to continue their studies.

"I figured we should get them out of there before they came to serious harm," says John Ferguson, a classical pianist from Houston who helped the young Syrians leave their war-torn country by arranging scholarships for them at music colleges in Texas.

Mr. Ferguson is the founder of American Voices, a US nonprofit whose mission is to spread goodwill across developing nations by helping aspiring young musicians indulge in their passion for the all-American art forms of jazz, Broadway musicals, and break dancing, as well as classical music.

Over the past two decades he has worked in some 120 countries from Nigeria to Myanmar (Burma).

At his Youth Excellence on Stage (YES) Academies, held in countries from Afghani-

stan to Thailand, hundreds of up-and-coming talents practice playing orchestral compositions, such as Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," or stage music from Broadway classics, such as "Company," under the guidance of American teachers. The programs culminate in high-octane gala concerts performed by the participants – invariably to rapturous applause from local audiences.

In a similar vein, during his Camp Unity initiatives Ferguson brings together young artists from warring communities in sectarian strife-ridden nations such as Lebanon and Iraq to foster friendships through a shared love of music and dance.

That spirit of camaraderie was on full display at a YES Academy in Bangkok in early May for nearly 300 teenagers from across Thailand and the region. Playing side by side in a string quartet were Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian students from Yala, one of Thailand's three restive southernmost provinces where an Islamist insurgency has

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claimed thousands of lives.

"We did have some instances of animosity at first," concedes Ameen Mhamad, a teenage Muslim cellist from Yala. "But religious differences disappear when you have to work together to produce a piece of music."

"We get along well," attests Suprawee Chansawang, a Christian student who plays the violin in the interfaith orchestra.

Ferguson can chalk up another small victory for the transformative power of music.

"It happens all the time," he says. "In Iraq we have seen real friendships develop between kids from Kurdistan and Baghdad at our YES Academies there."

Ferguson also works with US embassies across the developing world to help stage jazz festivals, offer training (as well as musical scores and instruments, if needed) to struggling youth orchestras, and engage in "hipplomacy" by flying in American teachers to coach youngsters from Guatemala to Sudan in hip-hop and break dancing as a form of artistic self-expression.

He also directs the American Music Abroad concert series for the US State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, which has just sent the Boston-based bluegrass band Della Mae on a tour of Central Asia, including Islamabad, Pakistan. Similar tours by US jazz quartets, folk bands, and gospel choirs are in the works for other poor nations.

"I became fascinated by John's mission," notes James Latt, a retired school principal from Washington, D.C., who recently joined American Voices to help out with organizing. "We have so many moving parts," he says.

A lanky, good-natured man, Ferguson operates out of a shipping-container-sized office tucked away at the end of a small cul-de-sac in central Bangkok. He's on the go relentlessly, living and working *allegriissimo*.

One week he may be in Sudan preparing the ground for a YES Academy; the next he's back in Bangkok running a YES Academy there for the fifth time. One moment he's organizing a tour of US hip-hop dancers to Nigeria to help train local aficionados; the next he's firing off e-mails arranging the trip of a jazz band from New Orleans to a music festival in Venezuela.

## Help through the arts

**UniversalGiving** ([www.universalgiving.org](http://www.universalgiving.org)) helps people give to and volunteer for top-performing charitable organizations worldwide. Projects are vetted by Universal Giving; 100 percent of each donation goes directly to the listed cause.

Below are three groups selected by UniversalGiving that support the arts:

■ **Asia America Initiative** (<http://bit.ly/AsiaAmerica>) promotes peace, social justice, and economic development in impoverished communities. Project: Donate a musical instrument to a school in a war-torn area (<http://bit.ly/MusicforPeace>).

■ **South African Education and Environment Project** (<http://bit.ly/SAEPPROJECT>) raises funds for social programs in South Africa. Project: Provide music lessons in townships (<http://bit.ly/MarimbaLessons>).

■ **Cultural Canvas Thailand** (<http://bit.ly/CulturalCanvas>) promotes community interaction and social change through artistic outreach and volunteerism. Project: Volunteer to help those in struggling groups in Thailand express themselves through art and creativity (<http://bit.ly/VolunteerArts>).

In odd moments you'll find him sitting, head in hands, trying to catch a little shut-eye. "It's on the educational side where you can make a difference," stresses the pianist, who gave up performing to dedicate himself to his ventures. "You create a big band in Azerbaijan, and it keeps going after you leave. You start a jazz festival in Almaty [Kazakhstan], and it becomes an annual event. That's how you leave a mark."

That insight dawned on him in 1990, just as the Soviet Union was unraveling after the fall of the Berlin Wall. While living in Paris and playing in a classical crossover ensemble with two other Texas musicians, he was invited to perform at an arts festival organized by the Latvian Independence Movement in Riga, Latvia, during the heady days of the "Singing Revolution" in the Baltic Soviet satellite states.

"We had this experience of being treated like rock stars just by virtue of being Americans," Ferguson recalls. "I realized what a potent and popular brand America was."

As the front lines of political turmoil moved elsewhere, Ferguson followed – first to the warring states of the former Yugoslavia, then farther afield to Central Asia and the Far East. After the Sept. 11 terror attacks in 2001, he shifted his focus to the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Along the way, he has had to tangle with obtuse bureaucrats. "The longer you work in a country, the more some corrupt officials [come to you for kickbacks and other benefits]," he observes wryly. He's also had to try and work his way around certain cultural taboos. In more conservative Muslim societies, in which dancing and singing – especially by young women – are frowned upon, for example, "We may have to teach [students] surreptitiously," he says.

In 2005, after the ultraconservative Taliban movement in Afghanistan had been ousted from power by US forces, Ferguson flew into Kabul with a group of American jazz musicians. Their mission: to jam with a traditional Afghan quintet whose members had just dug up their instruments from where they had buried them for fear of Islamist purists.

"We rolled off the plane and had a blast," he recalls. "Our aim was to connect culturally."

That remains his *modus operandi*.

"We target countries that are emerging from war and isolation," he says. "You start from scratch and then build."

Both of his Syrian protégés share his sentiments about the unifying power of music. "American Voices has done everything for us," says Dabi, who plans to return to Syria when it is safe to help train a new generation of musicians. "In the Middle East we need musicians and artists far more than we need engineers," he insists. "We need a new Renaissance."

"Music has the power to unite people," Mr. Mukaddasi agrees. "It transcends politics, race, culture, and religion. It helps people connect without saying a word as they share their hopes, passions, and sorrows."

■ To learn more, visit [www.americanvoices.org](http://www.americanvoices.org).

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