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SONAD PROJECT: INSPIRING THE CROSSING OF HUMAN DIVIDES THROUGH ARTISTIC PERFORMANCE

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“I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends.”

Abraham Lincoln spoke these words over 140 years ago. They embody the mission of the Sonad Project: to inspire the crossing of human divides, to “make friends”, in Lincoln’s words, through expressive music performance, as well as through all manner of artistic performance, and through multiplying workshops.

My personal journey began in Philadelphia. My parents, Nathan Stumacher and Paula Kimmel, an artist and a piano teacher, were immigrants from the Ukraine. My mother Paula, born in Odessa, arrived in Philadelphia at the age of 4. She and her family fled pogroms in which large numbers of Jews were being killed. In the New World of Philadelphia, Paula helped raise her three younger siblings. Her father Isaac, for whom I am named, was a jeweler by day, and an opera lover and vociferous reader by night. He taught himself five languages and was proud of having read the complete works of Thomas Mann in the original German.

My father Nathan was the “celebration baby”, born nine months after his parents arrived in Philadelphia from a small town near Kiev. Nathan’s father was a tailor who died of tuberculosis when Natey, as his family called him, was 8, and himself recovering from a one-year bout with tuberculosis. Recovery from this deadly disease in the pre-

penicillin days was extremely rare. After her husband's death, Nathan's mother struggled to support her four children, moving her family around the Philadelphia area many times and working odd jobs for threadbare wages.

Nathan's career as a profoundly gifted artist was interrupted by the Great Depression. He helped his family survive by putting food on the table, working whatever jobs he could, including WPA work as an artist creating the backgrounds for the stuffed animal exhibits in the Philadelphia Museum of Natural History.

In 1948, Nathan and Paula moved to a cooperative Quaker community in Bucks County, northeast of Philadelphia. Now joined by my older brother Russell and myself, we were the first Jewish family in the community, paving the way for several others. We were followed shortly by several African American families. The name of the community was, and is, "Bryn Gweled", Welsh for "Hill of Vision."

George School, a Quaker Preparatory High School in nearby Newtown, Pennsylvania, was our high school of choice. Bryn Gweled and George School added Quaker beliefs to our Jewish upbringing. All the while, music beckoned, including solo piano concerto performances at age 12 with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Undergraduate studies as an English Major, mixed with an abundance of music performance, followed at the University of Pennsylvania, or "Penn", as it is affectionately known in Philadelphia and beyond. Penn's sports teams, interestingly, are nicknamed "the Quakers." After Penn came graduate piano and conducting studies at The Juilliard School in New York City.

I had the honor of serving the Apple Hill Center for Chamber Music as Founder, Pianist, and Executive and Artistic Director of the Apple Hill Chamber Players and Playing for Peace for over thirty five years. I resigned in October of 2007 to found the Sonad Project.

Playing for Peace, the mission of Apple Hill, proved itself to be a magnetic and charismatic force in the world, binding together musicians from Israel, Palestine / West Bank, Jordan, Cyprus, Ireland, and cities across the US. What we had the honor of creating and

discovering through Playing for Peace is the magical ability of chamber music study and performance to inspire the crossing of human divides.

During these years, I frequently encountered individuals without musical background who nonetheless wanted to be involved. One young college student from Antioch Yellow Springs approached me and said: "I love this work, but I am not a chamber music player and I don't attend classical music concerts. How can I be part of this process of reaching across human divides?"

Hence the call to Sonad. The call to found Sonad in the fall of 2007 was the call of a vision to expand exponentially the number of people who can partake of the magic of crossing human divides.

Sonad expands Playing for Peace on the concert side to include not only chamber music concerts, but also solo and orchestra concerts, as well as non-classical music performances.

On the workshop side, Sonad's vision is a series of multiplying workshops, each containing six small groups of four-to-seven people from diverse and in some cases, conflicting, backgrounds. Some of these groups will work on conventional chamber music projects. Some will devote themselves to artistic endeavors of their own choosing. Topics may include writing, rehearsing, and performing a play. They may include writing, and then reading to the workshop community, a collection of short stories. They may include researching, rehearsing and performing folk dances from around the world. Any artistic endeavor agreed upon by the group members will be welcome.

After the workshop is completed, each participant will have the option of replicating her or his Sonad experience by collaborating with the Sonad organization to run another workshop.

As Sonad realizes its goal of reaching and inspiring a significant and ever-expanding percentage of people worldwide, we give new meaning to the words spoken by Robert F. Kennedy the night Martin Luther King was killed: We must "tame the savagery of humankind and make gentle the life of this world."

Since its incorporation as a non-profit organization in November of 2007, Sonad has engaged in tours of Israel, Palestine/West Bank, and Jordan in February and March of 2008; of California in April of 2008; of eastern cities of the US; of Israel and Jordan in March of 2009; of California in April of 2009; and of Jerusalem, Ramallah, Bethlehem, and Jenin in June of 2009.

Plans for 2010 include the first Sonad Workshop, at Kings Academy in Madaban, Jordan; a Sonad Al Kamandjati tour of refugee camps in Palestine/West Bank; a residency in Jerusalem; a residency in Damascus, Syria; and a residency in Northern Ireland.

I would like to share with you eight stories, culled from Sonad's amazing and remarkable experiences over the past two years.

The first is the story of Ramzi Abdurewan, a fine violist whom I had the pleasure of coaching in the 90s. Ramzi founded Al Kamandjati, based in Ramallah, West Bank/Palestine, in 2002.

Ramzi was raised in a Palestinian Refugee Camp in Ramallah. His father was shot and killed by Israeli soldiers in the First Intifada in 1988. There is a famous poster of Ramzi as an eight-year old boy in 1988 throwing stones during the First Intifada, blended with a photo of Ramzi playing his viola in concert ten years later as a distinguished young man.

Al Kamandjati is Arabic for "the violinist". The mission of Al Kamandjait is to provide world-class concerts and instruction to all the villages and refugee camps in West Bank and Lebanon. It has been Sonad's honor and privilege to provide workshops and concerts for Al Kamandjati in 2008 and 2009.

Ramzi says that he chose music over violence, and he wants to give the young people of Palestine and Lebanon the same opportunity he had.

One of Sonad's goals is to provide a concert piano for Al Kamandjati. We have located a beautiful Steinway, and will be offering the public individual piano key sponsorships.

Ramzi has told me that he, like most Palestinians and Arabs, does not like to use the word “peace.” His view is that “peace” is used to justify the Israeli occupation of West Bank/Palestine. His interest, rather than in “peace”, is to make lives better through beautiful music.

Ramzi notes with passion that the Israeli occupation has endangered Palestinian children and Palestinian culture. He, and Al Kamandjati, are committed to protecting, nurturing and amplifying Palestinian culture and Palestinian children.

It is Sonad’s honor and privilege to stand with Ramzi and Al Kamandjati.

The second story is the story of Lena, a beautiful pianist from Jewish West Jerusalem, whom I had the honor of coaching in the 90’s. Lena has devoted her life to running the Hasadna Conservatory in Jewish West Jerusalem. Hasadna’s founding mission is to provide the highest level of music instruction for Israeli Jews and for Palestinians. Hasadna’s history and culture have included mixing Jews and Palestinians deliberately so that no one knows who is a member of what group.

Lena has been particularly graceful, determined and inspirational in playing chamber music with Arabs and Palestinians. Sonad is privileged to be in residence at Hasadna annually, providing concerts and master classes.

The third story is the story of Nadia Abboushi, the Head of the Piano Department of the Edward Said National Conservatory in Ramallah. Nadia resides in Ramallah with her husband Sameh, a retired architect. She has been studied piano with me for many years. Nadia was one of the founders of the Edward Said National Conservatory back in the early 90’s.

She is the sister of Hanan Ashrawi, one of the chief Palestinian negotiators in the peace process.

During our Sonad visit this past June, Nadia told me that she is not permitted by the Israeli authorities to go to Jerusalem. This pains her on many levels. She grew up in Jerusalem. And she is particularly close to her ninety-year old aunt who lives in Jerusalem.

Nadia was in fact allowed to go to Jerusalem this year, on only one day, Easter.

Why is Nadia deemed a security risk on all days except Easter?

Nadia sent me this poem during the 2002 Israeli invasion of Ramallah:

“Dear Eric,

I wrote this on the day the Israeli army invaded Ramallah --March 11th, 2002.

“It is hard to tell the time of day.
A heavy stillness veils the sun.
One dares not breathe after a sleepless night.

Only the birds' stupefied trills pierce the incessant drone
Of army tanks that plough our street.

Here in Ramallah, it is spring.

I choose the corridor floor to sit and write,
Knowing no place safe from F-16 missiles or Apache helicopters.
Suddenly the muezzin's call for prayer resounds:
"God is greater than all."
His cry penetrates the frightened alleys of refugee camps,
Drowning the loudspeaker's call for surrender of men,
aged fifteen to sixty...

All voices entangle in polyphonic strettì.
The fugue gets too complex to resolve.
Is there a composer out there?

Thank you, Eric and friends,

For stretching across the barbed wire,
Defying the checkpoints to affirm your humanity and ours.

As we listen to your music and you hear ours,
The composer slowly emerges from little hands unafraid to dance,
And big black eyes attune to the light.”

The fourth story is about the Israeli gentleman who runs the music program at Kibbutz Mizra, in the north of Israel, near Nazareth, in an area heavily populated by Israeli Arabs. He is extremely active in providing music instruction and concerts for all the Jewish and Arab communities of the north, and he works tirelessly to host all manner of workshops which combine Israelis and Palestinians. It is extremely arduous for Palestinians to obtain official permission to go to Israel, but this gentleman works tirelessly with the authorities to make this happen.

At the Sonad Concert at Kibbutz Mizra in Feb of 2008, the overflow audience consisted mainly of young residents of an Israeli Arab town near Nazareth. Their boisterous enthusiasm was amazing and wonderful, albeit not in the mainstream of classical music audiences. A fantastic time was had by all.

It should be noted that the kibbutz movement in Israel is a flashpoint for the Israeli Arab and Palestinian communities, whose members recall vividly that many of their friends and family were forced to move off the land to make way for various kibbutzim.

This made the Sonad Mizra concert all the more sweet. Our music seemed to inspire the audience to feel positive energy.

The fifth story is about our Palestinian driver from Arab East Jerusalem. He is extremely skilled at avoiding the Israeli Army checkpoints between Israel and West Bank. When we traveled from Ramallah to Bethlehem, we approached the checkpoint outside of Ramallah and then turned left and went in a circuitous route over the Jercho Mountains. We avoided all the checkpoints into Bethlehem.

Our personal experience going through the Wall of Separation, which divides Israel from West Bank/Palestine, was that most of the time, we

avoided all the checkpoints. The question then presents itself: If the reason for the Wall is to keep Palestinian terrorists out of Israel, and the reality is that most of the time people are able to move across the Wall, then what is the Wall all about?

There are those in West Bank who present the viewpoint that the Wall is about one group of people oppressing another, about one group of people exerting power over another. How can one refute that argument?

Our driver did have to undergo a two hour van search when going to Ben Gurion airport near Tel Aviv, Israel. He remained calm and patient, but our insides were churning. The Israeli soldiers conducting the search were younger than our children.

In early March of 2008, when Sonad was in Amman, Jordan, there was an attack by a Palestinian from Arab East Jerusalem on a Yeshiva Rabbinic School. The Jerusalem Post and the New York Times were quick to proclaim that Arabs from East Jerusalem were not to be trusted.

Our Sonad answer to this proclamation is that we constantly, and willingly, put our lives in our Palestinian driver's hands, and we will continue to do so, in the words of the Beatles, "Eight Days a Week."

The sixth story is about John Steinmetz, a composer and bassoonist from Los Angeles. Sonad, along with the Keene Chamber Orchestra, commissioned John to write a new work, entitled "Together", scored for orchestra and beginning string players. The world premier was in Amman, Jordan in March of 2009, at a concert I conducted of the Amman Symphony Orchestra. The full program was Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3, the solo piano part of which I had the honor of playing, Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, and Steinmetz's "Together".

The sixty beginning string players for this performance were from a Palestinian Refugee Camp in Amman, from the National Music Conservatory in Amman, and from the Kings Academy, a preparatory high school in Madaban, north of Amman. Kings Academy has just started a beginning string program.

The concert was beautiful and received standing ovations after each piece. The audience was the largest of the Amman Symphony season, completely sold out, with 200 people turned away.

John was able to attend the concert, making the occasion extra special. In his introduction to his piece, he made the point that one of the boundaries we need to cross is the boundary which separates so-called “professionals” from so-called “beginners.”

The sixth story is about Jenin, a town deep in the heart of West Bank/Palestine, with a history of widespread terrorist activity emanating from its Refugee Camps. Al Kamandjati has a branch in Jenin which provides concerts and instruction for over one-hundred students and their families.

Sonad had the pleasure of performing a recital there on Feb 29, 2008, before an overflow audience of young people and parents. There was an air of joyfulness and celebration that day, and the beauty of the children and their parents was palpable and moving.

There, we learned that there is no word in Arabic for “concert”. What is used is “hafla”, which means both “party” and “concert.”

In March of 2009, while in Amman, Jordan, we received word from Ramzi, the head of Al Kamandjati, that the Jenin Al Kamandjati branch had been destroyed by a fire of unknown origins. We were horrified and saddened.

In June of 2009, we had the honor of performing the first concert in Al Kamandjati Jenin’s new concert hall, a moving and beautiful occasion.

The seventh story is about the candlelight memorial concert Sonad performed at the Sakahini Cultural Center in Ramallah on March 1, 2008. This was the day when over 130 Gaza civilians lost their lives in Israeli bombing attacks. The Israeli bombing was in retaliation for twelve Israeli injuries from bombs emanating from Gaza.

We thought that Ramzi would cancel the concert, especially since the casualties were on live TV for all to see. People were justifiably horrified

and upset at the live conveying of young children dying in the arms of their parents.

But Ramzi decided to go forward with a candlelight concert by Sonad to honor those who suffered casualties during the day's horrors. He was adamant that culture must go on; we must not be dissuaded by acts of violence.

The next day, there was a Martin Luther King style protest march in downtown Ramallah, calling for an end to the Israeli bombing of Gaza. The march route went from the center of Ramallah past our hotel and to the Sakahini Center. Ramzi, and Celine his partner, plus other friends from Al Kamandjati, took part in the march. We hosted them for a subdued dinner afterwards.

Our last story is about "the two Emils." The first Emil is Father Emil Shufani, a priest in the Greek Orthodox Church, who runs the Mutran School, an award-winning Israeli-Arab school in Nazareth. Mutran has been voted the best school in Israel the last several years running.

The second Emil is Emil Ashrawi, the husband of Hanan Ashrawi and Nadia's brother-in-law.

Sonad had the honor of performing workshops and concerts at the Mutran School in 2008 and 2009. At the Sonad March 2009 Mutran concert, we were joined in the program by wonderful Mutran school instrumental ensembles and by the Mutran chorus.

Father Emil Shufani is now a good friend. Back in 2000, he raised the funds for several hundred Palestinians, Arabs, Israelis, and Europeans to visit Auschwitz Concentration Camp in Poland together. His impulse for this trip came from prior discussions he had with Palestinians and Israeli Arabs who conveyed to him their disbelief and disrespect regarding the Holocaust. Father Emil said, "We must walk in the shoes of the other, in order to understand them."

When we met with Father Emil at Mutran in March of 2009, he seemed discouraged about the prospects for peace. He said, "The Israelis, the Palestinians, and the Arabs have been so entrenched for so long in their

positions that they are not able to say 'yes' to any of the wishes and demands of the other."

One of the best ways to summarize Sonad's mission is that we aspire to persuade people in conflict to consider saying "yes" to at least some of the wishes and demands of the other.

I asked Emil Ashrawi, Hanan's husband, to tell me what he would do to solve the Israeli Palestinian conflict if he could wave a magic wand. He said:

"I would do three things: 1) Ban all religion from governments. 2) Remove any sense that one group of people is in any way superior to any other group of people. 3) Make it be that no group of people would be able to accumulate the power to oppress another group of people."

Inshallah! God Willing!

Emil Ashrawi also explained that because he is a Palestinian who was born and grew up in what is now Jewish Western Jerusalem, in a house, now destroyed, in sight of the Western Wall, he is one of 500, 000 Palestinian Jerusalemites in similar circumstances, displaced from their residences in what is now Jewish West Jerusalem, whose Palestinian ID's have been revoked by the Israelis, in the name of security. Many of these Palestinian Jerusalemites are also US citizens. In the aftermath of 9/11 and ever since, the US government has also revoked their US passports.

Emil's concern is that because he had open heart surgery this past year, and because his daughter teaches college in Washington, DC. and therefore her Palestinian ID and US passport have been revoked, his daughter would be unable to come to his funeral in Ramallah if, God forbid, this would happen.

I would like to close with five quotes:

The first is by student and good friend Reem, who teaches the music program at the Kings Academy in Jordan:

"It occurs to me that, with one exception, the whole world consists of "the other."

The second is by Albert Einstein:

“The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing.”

It is imperative that we all lead our lives in ways which inspire the crossing of human divides. Each and every one of us can and must do this work.

The environmental movement teaches us that every day 200 forms of life on earth become extinct. When you do the math, this is 73,000 extinctions per year, 730,000 per decade, and 7,300,000 in the next 100 years.

We human beings frequently think that we are outside of the laws of nature, or rather, that we control the laws of nature.

It is quite possible, and actually extremely likely, that we are wrong on both counts.

I urge you to consider carefully and deeply that the crossing of human divides is an urgent human species survival issue.

Again, each one of us must do our part.

The third quote is by the famous Spanish cellist Pablo Casals, who lived a long and beautiful life in the twentieth century:

“Each second we live is a new and unique moment of the universe, a moment that will never be again. And what do we teach our children? We teach them that two and two make four, and that Paris is the capital of France. When will we also teach them what they are? We should say to each of them: Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all the years that have passed, there has never been another child like you. Your legs, your arms, your clever fingers, the way you move. You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything. Yes, you are a marvel. And when you grow up, can you then harm another who is, like you, a marvel? You must work - we must all work - to make the world worthy of its children.”

The forth quote is a letter written to me by Lara Harb, a pianist from Ramallah. In 1998, I had the honor of coaching a Schumann Piano Quintet chamber music group. The group members were Assaf, an Israeli violinist and soldier; Amr, a Syrian violinist; Lotem, an Israeli violist; Mahmoud, an Egyptian cellist; and Lara.

Lara wrote this essay to me about her experience:

“I nervously set up my music on the piano and looked at the Egyptian cellist, but he was busy setting up his music. I glanced at the Syrian violinist who was the closest to me and smiled as I saw the usual calm expression on his face. I then looked over, with hesitation, at the Israeli violist. As our eyes met, my smile faded away for I saw an expression on her face that was new to me. I wondered if she was feeling the same way I was. Did I have that same expression on my face? We were suddenly interrupted by the gesture of the first violinist, who was also from Israel, indicating that we were about to start playing. I had immediately turned my face towards him and was sunk in fear and anticipation again. He noticed that and smiled at me comfortingly.

That smile, I had seen that same smile before. I could see clearly the image of a person, a young man, smiling at me that same way. An avalanche of relating images suddenly flooded into my mind. I heard people screaming. There were a few gun shots. I remembered faces of strangers being dragged into an Israeli military jeep. There was a loud explosive sound and the crowds, all of a sudden, were dispersing in all directions. A strange smell was stinging my nose. My eyes were burning and my lungs were bursting - it was tear gas. I was running aimlessly; I just wanted to escape that acrid stench. I suddenly bumped into someone. My heart sunk deep into my stomach as I looked up and saw that the man was an Israeli soldier. He smiled, trying to reassure me that he wasn't going to harm me. I couldn't trust him. I was only 10, but I knew that those soldiers were hurting Palestinians. Seven years later, that smile came to haunt me again. We started playing the Schumann Piano Quintet.

Suddenly all the frightening memories vanished as if they had never been real, as if they were just a dream. I felt like the small

worlds of each one of us were uniting into one limitless universe. We were all in absolute understanding of each other. There were no boundaries and no differences. Arab, Israeli, Jew, Christian, Moslem: none of that existed in the universe we were creating - we were all simply humans. Fear and insecurity were unknown to us. Life, for the first time, seemed to make sense to me. I was free! I woke up from a terrible dream into a beautiful world. I was experiencing something I felt was unfathomable before: I was experiencing peace - true peace. I felt so lucky because such true peace will probably not exist in the Middle East, at least for a long time. It was as if I had been given a glimpse of something others would only experience in the future. I was stunned by the beauty of the music we were playing.

When the piece ended, I wondered if Schumann ever even faintly imagined that he would change the life of a girl from the Middle East at the end of the twentieth century. His music opened up my mind, gave me hope, and gave me the opportunity to experience something heavenly. I thanked him. I then looked at the Israeli violinist. He smiled and I smiled back. “

The last quote is from the Book of Isaiah: 57:14- 58:14

“Prepare, Prepare
the road, yes, clear a thoroughfare.
Remove the stumbling block
From the people’s way!

Cry from the throat, do not relent,
Raise up your voices.

Banish oppression from your midst,
Remove the menacing hand and tainted speech,

Give yourself to the hungry,
Fulfill the needs of the poor.

Then shall your light burst forth like the dawn,
Your waters of healing flourish again.

Then shall your light shine in darkness,

and your darkness shall be like the noon.”

In closing, I leave you with these thoughts:

The world frequently delivers these messages: I am right AND you are wrong. I am right BECAUSE you are wrong. **Sonad's mission** delivers a different, more powerful message: I am right AND you are right, and together we will create a future which is way more than twice as good.

We will see you on Isaiah's road. Bring your sunglasses, because the light will be brighter than you can imagine!

Thank you.

Eric Stumacher
Pianist/Conductor, Executive and Artistic Director