

Historical Reflections

Peace Corps Iran Musicians

By Genna Stead Wangsness (Shiraz, Tehran, 1965-71)

On October 26, 1967, the evening of their coronation as emperor and empress, the Shah and Shahbanou inaugurated Tehran's Talar-e Roudaki. Roudaki Hall became Iran's national stage for music, opera, and ballet; home to the Tehran Symphonic Orchestra, Tehran Opera Company, and the Iranian National Ballet Company.



From 1968-72, seven Peace Corps volunteers were members of the Tehran symphonic and opera orchestras. This unique and highly specialized Peace Corps program provided young, accomplished American musicians a rare opportunity to contribute to a growing interest in the performing arts in a country far from home. Almost fifty years later, they recall the highs and lows of their experiences as they contributed in numerous ways to the world of music in the waning years of the Pahlavi era.

In the summer of 1968, following language and cultural training with Iran 20 in Brattleboro, Vermont, four musicians arrived in Tehran. Their assignments to Tehran's symphonic and opera orchestras came about through the efforts of field representative **Jay R. Crook**, who had negotiated with Iranian officials about volunteer placements into this experimental program. Jay had an interest in serious music, classical and opera in particular; Peace Corps encouraged him to meet with the symphony's director, Heshmat Sanjari, to make the arrangements.

Upon their arrival, the volunteers found that the symphony orchestra was departing for the Shiraz-Persepolis Festival of Arts', an event inaugurated as part of the imperial couple's coronation, to highlight Iran's developing cultural status. With little time to adjust, they flew with the orchestra to Fars Province. Rehearsing amongst the ruins of Tahkt-e-Jamshid, they were initiated into the realm of Iranian music and culture. However, the festival was cut short by the 7.4 earthquake near Mashhad on August 31, 1968; they endured a quick-turnaround, 24-hour bus trip back to Tehran.

Settling in, the volunteers began performing with both orchestras, which consisted of the same ensemble but with different conductors. Composed of Iranian musicians, as well as musicians from Armenia, Bulgaria, East Germany, and other countries, the volunteers were the first Americans to play with the orchestras, filling gaps in their strengths. The volunteers were busy six days a week for two ten-month seasons. The symphony orchestra rehearsed in the mornings for three hours and had about six concerts a year. The opera orchestra did the same in the afternoons under the very efficient German conductor, Heinz Sosnitza, giving many more performances than the symphony and at a higher quality level.



Jeremy Kempton (Tehran, 1968-70), with a B.M. in Music Education from the Eastman School of Music and a Master's degree from the University of Illinois, held the solo trombone position with the opera company and bass trombone position in the symphony. Although the volunteers performed mostly western music, the opera company did a series of performances of an opera written by an Iranian composer, based on an Iranian legend. The music was conservative twentieth century western with some Iranian flavor. The sets and costumes, however, were

very Iranian with sculptured effects from the walls of Tahkt-e-Jamshid. “In general I have never seen more beautiful or elaborate sets in any other opera house. That combined with the really gorgeous state of the art opera house was a very impressive tableau to present to visiting dignitaries.” Jeremy also was involved with the Iran-America Society, where he was music director for several musicals as well as the opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. He formed a chamber chorus and conducted a performance of *Messiah* by the combined choirs of the Christian churches of Tehran which included many American personnel.

Judith Klein (Tehran, 1968-69), a graduate of Boston University’s School of Fine and Applied Arts, had played French horn with a number of orchestras and with Harvard’s opera productions. She played French horn with the orchestra and taught members of the military and police bands at the Military College, Iran’s version of West Point. Judy completed one year of service.



Susan and Donald Oehler (Tehran, 1968-70) were graduates of New York’s Juilliard School of Music, playing flute and clarinet respectively. Donald was principal clarinetist with both orchestras. He taught at the Conservatory of Music for two years, traveled with a young string quartet from the orchestra, and organized a chamber music series with Susan. He recalls being “roped” into conducting a brass ensemble that fellow musician Jerry



Kempton organized. They tackled Copland’s *The Fanfare for a Common Man* among other pieces. At the end of his stay, Don soloed with guest conductor, Karl Oesterriecher, from Vienna. Susan played flute with both orchestras, taught at the conservatory, and played in chamber music concerts she and Don organized. She credits Jay Crook for recruiting them in the first place and always being very interested in the orchestra, often attending their concerts.

Arrival of Second Group

In 1970, Jerry, Susan, and Don departed and three new musicians arrived. After language and cultural training in Philadelphia and Karadj during the summer of 1970, they took their seats onstage with the symphony orchestra.



Phil

Phil Schutzman (Tehran, 1970-72), played percussion with the symphony. He had difficulties over his percussionist role and was disappointed that he did not have the opportunity to teach percussion at the conservatory. He left just three months short of two years.

Marilyn Swindler (Tehran, 1970-72), flutist, arrived with a Bachelor of Music from The Juilliard School. Marilyn played solos with the orchestra both seasons, as well as with a woodwind quintet. She taught flute at both the classical and traditional music conservatories. Along with **Judy Bevans**² (Tehran, 1970-72), she performed Baroque music recitals at a Tehran church, playing flute while Judy played the church’s harpsichord.



Marilyn

Diane Welzel (Tehran, 1970-72), clarinetist, arrived in Iran with a Bachelor of Music. She played solos with the orchestra both seasons, as well as with a woodwind quintet. Unwelcomed by the male head of the conservatory, she taught students at Tehran's American-run international schools, Community School and Iranzamin³.



Diane

A year after their arrival, Diane, Marilyn, and Phil performed at Tahkt-e-Jamshid during the 2,500 year celebration of the Persian Empire held on October 12-16, 1971. At the ancient Persian capital, huge tents were set up; heads of state and dignitaries from around the world attended. Diane recalls they were served black caviar and champagne on the airplane back to Tehran.

In May of 1972, just eleven days before departing Iran, Marilyn and Diane were honored to play solo pieces for President Richard Nixon when the thirty-piece orchestra played Mozart, Strauss, and Gluck during a state dinner at Niavaran Palace. Having been briefed by advisors that American Peace Corps volunteers played in the orchestra, President Nixon and his wife Pat met with them after dinner.

Post Peace Corps

Jerry Kempton has been music director for over fifty productions of musical theater and three operas in the New York City area and is the founder and conductor of the Island Chamber Symphony. He is the principal trombone with the Brooklyn Symphony and the Amore Opera Company in New York City and a published composer and arranger. "The two years I spent in Iran were among the most interesting and broadening of my life...overall it was a great time to be in the Middle East."

Judith Klein Linder Schneider is a Baroque scholar and editor of French horn sheet music. Other than the reference to sheet music available on Amazon, I have been unable to locate her.



Diane meeting Pat Nixon (back to camera) while the Shah looks on.

Don Oehler is Professor of Music at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, concert artist, member of the Carolina Wind Quintet, conductor of the Chapel Hill Philharmonia, and past director of the Cours Internationale de Musique, Morges, Switzerland, and the Corso Internazionale di Musica in Tuscania, Italy. He is founder of the Chapel Hill Chamber Music Workshop. He keeps studying his Farsi as best he can and has only positive experiences to report from his life in Tehran.

Susan Oehler Bush moved into arts administration. In 1989, she started a record label in New York, Albany Records, which concentrates on American composers and performers as

well as previously unrecorded music. They have released the music of Reza Vali, an Iranian composer now on the faculty at Carnegie-Mellon, who was a student at the conservatory when the volunteers taught there.

Phil Schutzman formed a jazz group that performed many of his original compositions, which often revealed an Iranian musical influence. He taught instrumental music for band, orchestra, and jazz ensembles in Stamford, Connecticut, for thirty-five years, retiring in June of

2013. Marrying for the second time in 2006, his wife, Zohreh, is Iranian. “I had a wonderful experience living in Iran and it changed the direction of my life,” an awareness voiced by so many volunteers who served in Iran.



Diane and Marilyn
(partially hidden) at
state dinner.

Marilyn Swindler Shayegan returned to Tehran under Iranian government contract to play in the orchestra from 1973-74. “I would be living in Iran now if not for the revolution, probably.” Four years ago, she sold the medical billing company she founded and retired. Remaining active as a performing artist, she plays the flute at recitals, small concerts, and with chamber and jazz groups. A watercolor artist for twenty years, she continues to paint, and she enjoys time with her two sons, one living nearby and one in Trinidad.

Diane Welzel Hargreaves completed her MM in clarinet performance at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music and then turned to computers as a profession. Diane retired from IBM on May 31 she has played in several small orchestras in the Atlanta area and taught private clarinet students.

The revolution of 1979 brought new philosophies about the performing arts. The Shiraz-Persepolis Festival of Art ended with the revolution. And after a decade of welcoming both local and international music, opera, and dance artists to perform on its stage, Roudaki Hall closed. The last performances were held in the fall of 1978, ending an historic era of cultural growth in Iran. Roudaki Hall was renamed Vahdat Hall (Unity Hall) and reopened in 1987. The Tehran Symphony continues to perform; the opera company was dissolved.

¹The festival officially opened on September 11, 1967. See festival history
<http://tinyurl.com/jtqdr5k>

²Judy Bevans (BA Music, M.Ed. and MM Early Music) taught at Reza Pahlavi School for the Blind in Tehran. While not assigned to Roudaki Hall, Judy performed for two years with Peace Corps volunteers at other venues, including playing jazz once a month at the Iran-America Society where she performed on the Society’s Steinway concert grand piano. She, Marilyn, Phil, and other musicians recorded an LP at IAS, “Jazz at the Anjoman.” Following Peace Corps, Judy worked as a music therapist with multi-handicapped children at the Perkins School of the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts, and returned to school to study harpsichord.

³See PCIA member Tara Bahrampour’s article at <http://tinyurl.com/hqlge67>.

Thanks to the volunteers who corresponded with me about their Peace Corps experiences for this article. Thanks also to Jay Crook, whose extensive knowledge of Iran helped with a few of the finer details. Historically, this group was one of Peace Corps Iran’s specialized assignments, presenting unique opportunities for young musicians willing to participate in an unproven field of Peace Corps/Iran collaboration. As was the case with the doctors and their families (KhabarNameh, February 2016), Peace Corps did not continue this specialized program. genna@peacecorpsiran.org.