

From VOA Learning English, this is As It Is. Welcome to the program. I'm Caty Weaver.

Today we will explore the power of music. In Jerusalem, drummers use music to make historical and spiritual connections. And in China, a visit by American musicians helped to shape international politics.

American Music Makers Make Friends with China

Richard Nixon made his historic visit to China. The visit led to the establishment of normal relations between the United States and China. But many say the relationship truly began a year later, when the Philadelphia Orchestra performed in China. President Nixon chose the Philadelphia Orchestra to strengthen cultural ties between the two countries.

Christopher Cruise has more about the group, and its most recent visit to China.

The Philadelphia Orchestra marked the 40th anniversary of its historic visit by returning to China last spring. The recent tour lasted two weeks and included five Chinese cities. The American ambassador to China, Gary Locke, talked about the visit.

“The arts are the medium that brings us together no matter our cultural backgrounds and our language.”

Herb Light plays violin for the Philadelphia Orchestra. He has been part of the orchestra for 53 years. He came to China on the group’s first visit in 1973.

Mr. Light says Chinese audiences back then had heard very little Western music. He says people listened politely, but they were not sure how to react. Sometimes, he says, concert goers made only a little noise after a performance to show they liked it.

“And then, subsequently, I think we’ve made eight trips or seven trips since then, the applause became more enthusiastic and more enthusiastic so, by now, in this day and age, the Chinese audiences are absolutely on a par with audiences all over the world in their enthusiasm for our concerts.”

On its visit to China this year, the orchestra performed in all kinds of places. David Kim is the concertmaster of the Philadelphia Orchestra. He says smaller groups of musicians played in libraries, factories, firehouses, and hospitals. Some musicians even played on an airplane while they were waiting for their flight to leave.

David Kim says interest in classical music is growing in China. He says the country already has excellent piano players, such as Lang Lang or Yuga Wang. And China is making new buildings for musicians to perform in.

Mr. Kim says Asian parents can be very influential in making classical music popular.

“Being a classical musician is a thing of honor in Asian culture. It begins with that and continues with the incredible discipline that is instilled in all of us Asians by our parents not only in studies but in, not so much sports, but really in music and art.”

David Kim’s parents are Korean. He says he sees more and more Asians entering the Philadelphia Orchestra, and other top orchestras all over the world. I’m Christopher Cruise.

A Spiritual Beat

Drumming is popular around the world. People use drums to communicate, to rest, and even to pray. The instruments are especially important for the Rastafarian religion of Jamaica. Here are Rastafarian drummers playing at the recent Sacred Music Festival in Jerusalem.

Their music is called Nyabinghi drumming. People play it together as a way to pray. Drumming is also an historical connection between Caribbean nations and Africa. Jamaican reggae music star Vivien Jones explains.

“That’s been in Jamaica since we were taken there as slaves. Slave master used to bang the drums. So the drums were there from the time we landed on that island, the drums were being played. So it was African drumming... all the way from ancient Ethiopia. All it did was it traveled in a slave ship to Jamaica and then it bloomed and blossomed again in Jamaica.”

Drummers learn the art from their parents and grandparents. Bonjo Iyapingi Noah says he started early.

“I grew up playing within the church. Before the elders would come and play, we the children we have to play. We learn this all from the elders. The elders sit us down and they teach us what to sing.”

He plays with a band of Jamaican musicians based in London. They call the group, Drums of Defiance. He says their music is holy and private. But, they are starting to play it in public to spread the teachings of Rastafarians.

Reggae star Vivien Jones invited Drums of Defiance to play with him at the Jerusalem Sacred Music Festival. Some of the group's music is based on Christianity's holy book, the Bible. Biblical stories often tell about ancient Israel and the city of Jerusalem.

"The importance of this place, Israel, from all our background, growing up as children, reading the Bible and things like this. You feel a presence of a higher level of blessing here."

Vivien Jones says Nyabinghi drumming is ceremonial music for Rastafarians. But it also speaks to people of every religion.

"We're singing of peace, we're singing of love, we're singing of caring for one another, your family. This is what we're singing about."

Vivien Jones and the Drums of Defiance plan to perform their music all over the world.

And that's As It Is. I'm Caty Weaver. See you next time.