

(The following was written by Dr. Samuel Morris following a trip made by himself and Dr. Robert McBain to Israel, Palestine and Jordan. Dr. McBain had come to rehearse with the orchestra. Dr. Morris came to meet with officials for preparation and to support Dr. McBain on McBain's first trip to the middle-east.)

Why did you come to visit this terrorist nation? asked the teenage girl during a time for questions. Dr. Bob McBain had just finished a very long and hard day rehearsing the group of Palestinian youth in the Edward Said Music Conservatory Camp in Birzeit. They were suspicious of us and accustomed to having people of the world look upon them, for many reasons, as undesirables. To us, they were just talented teenagers.

However, these were not typical teenagers. Oh yes, if you watched them – or listened to them making noise in the dorms, they were very typical. However, if you observed them work so hard to learn music – very difficult music – and listened to the sounds they made, you would understand. They worked hard for ten hours of rehearsal every day of the camp. Hard! The music? Handel's Messiah. Palestinian youth playing the Hallelujah Chorus among others challenging selections. Challenging. Demanding. But play they did.

This Christmas Eve, perhaps the world's greatest living tenor, a wonderful bass soloist, and two rising stars in the international world of opera, will join these Palestinian youth with more than 150 vocalists from the United States and a scattering of international vocalists to sing and play as the climax of the **Prepare the Way... Concert Tour 2007: Peace on Earth, Good Will To All...** By the time they arrive in Bethlehem, the singers will have sung in Amman, Jordan, Nazareth, Israel, and in the St. George Cathedral in Jerusalem, Israel. Then, on Christmas Eve, they go to Bethlehem to sing with the members of the Edward Said Palestinian Youth Orchestra (PYO) including many of the teachers from the orchestra accompanying them.

Some of these young Palestinians will have no easy time getting to Bethlehem. They will travel the long way around to stay on the West Bank or face the impossibility of traveling through military check points. Where Americans would be waved through, they would face long waits or be denied entrance. Why? Because of the way they look and where they were born and the nature of the current conflict. There is no other reason. They are wonderful young people.

They often play on substandard instruments and use borrowed musical scores. They are polite and humble. They laugh and work hard. They eat simple food from all that is set before them. They are proud of their camp because it has electricity and water as well as a roof. They welcomed us as friends. In his reflection on the preparation, Bob McBain, the accomplished conductor, said: *This may not be my finest musical moment (two years ago he was in Carnegie Hall), but it is among the most significant for this is about so much more than music.*

I pray for Christmas Eve this year. It has been a dream of mine for many years – to try and remind people everywhere that the world can live in peace - a just peace. Bethlehem, for many in the world is a place of renewing that hope. For a few moments, we all relive the age old story of angels singing and shepherds coming.... If just for a moment, a wrinkle in time, in the little town of Bethlehem, let the songs of the angels be heard that kindness and love can win over hatred and bitterness. I believe it. And when you look into these faces of these children, you will see it too. May the children of the earth sing and play together.

Now, for the answer to the question from the first paragraph: “Why did you come to this terrorist nation? *We came because we pray for a just peace for you and for all of us. We came because we believe that we can be friends. We came to stand with you and others of good will in Bethlehem, this year, 2007.* They clapped their hands and shouted, Hallelujah! I just cried.

addendum:

On the day we met with the municipality officers, the deputy mayor of Bethlehem, Eng. George A. Sa'adeh, stopped Bob and I as we prepared to leave and said: *My daughter was killed in 2000 when the Israeli troops came into our community. I was wounded. She was 12 years old. I have given my life to work for peace so that another generation of children will not have to live under the threat of conflict.* Let us all pray for a just peace for the peoples of the middle-east and of the world.