

Ireland

Music and message of Baghdad's Concert for Peace expected to fall on deaf ears in Washington

IRAQ: Normality and foreboding fuse in Baghdad as Iraq awaits the worst

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IRAQ: Normality and foreboding fuse in Baghdad as Iraq awaits the worst. Michael Jansen attended a concert where music by Dvorak and Bach was the backdrop to talk of war

Traffic is heavy as we speed through the centre of Baghdad, past monumental government buildings of the style I call "Mesopotamian modern", round traffic islands where the water plays by day and night in fountains of bronze and stone, across the soaring arc of the Jumhurriyah bridge over the Tigris.

We whiz by ranks of shops displaying gleaming fruit in red, yellow and gold, electrical and electronic goods, clothing, computer software and games and flowers imported from Syria and Jordan. Everything is available here, at prices most Baghdadis cannot afford.

Our destination is the diplomatic enclave in the Mansour quarter. On our route are walled, single-storey homes with flat roofs and cast cement screens, each identified by block, street and house number.

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Our host, Pakistani oilman Mr Murtaza Lakhani, lives in an elegant white bungalow next to the Nigerian ambassador. He greets us at the door and urges us to take our gift, a compact disc by the Baghdad music group we have come to hear. We join Iraqis, diplomats and UN officials for a drink before the Concert for Peace begins.

The event has been hurriedly organised by Mr Murtaza, a man born in Karachi who has lived most of his life abroad, and the UN Development Programme chief, Mr Francis Dubois, an uncharacteristically frank UN bureaucrat wearing a flowing brown Arab cloak trimmed in gold.

The concert is in honour of Dr Hans von Sponeck, a former UN humanitarian aid co-ordinator here, and his team of US, Australian and South African individuals who are striving to mount a peace mission of distinguished figures. Their aim would be to avoid the war the Bush administration seems determined to wage against this country, already reduced to the level of Lesotho in conflict-torn Africa.

We take our seats and the chamber group - piano, two violins, cello and clarinet - launches into one of Antonin Dvorak's Slavic dances.

On the wall behind the musicians hangs a painting of two actors' masks against a black background. Outside the window, beside the swimming pool, attendants feed fires in two metal braziers. The music washes over the gathering.

It is a magic hour, a tragic hour. This is, perhaps, the last concert in Baghdad for a very long time. The musicians play more Dvorak, a Bach meditation, a polka by Smetana. The last three are their prize pieces, classical compositions based on old Iraqi songs.

In each we can hear the ancient, grey-brown Tigris flowing through the city, the traffic rushing along its wide boulevards, the wind whispering in the fronds of the palm trees in this green, garden city. The musicians play Lovely Baghdad a second time as their encore, clarinet in the lead.

We stand to honour them and lovely Baghdad.

A few hours earlier I met a European diplomat who said that the Bush administration was unlikely to take any notice of the proposed peace mission of eminent persons that includes former South African president Nelson Mandela and former US president Jimmy Carter, last year's Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

"Washington is absolutely determined to have its war," the source told The Irish Times.

"It's a mistake to think it will be a war for oil. They can get all the oil they want from Iraq without war. The war is part of a grand scheme to dominate this strategic region. The US will succeed but it will also earn the hatred of the whole world. The war will generate the terrorism Washington says it wants to eradicate. For Baghdad, the Iraqis, it will be a holocaust. There will be a decade of chaos in the region."

Pundits predict that this war will be the most destructive and bloody of Iraq's two recent conflicts. The Iraqis say they intend to fight in the towns and cities. Citizens are reportedly armed to the teeth.

Baghdad is the key. If it falls, Iraq will fall. Some in Iraq expect the US to bomb the city heavily, bulldoze homes, shops and offices to clear wide corridors for tanks and move in troops in armoured vehicles. There will be no fighting in narrow alleyways and courtyards.

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