

Washington Jewish Week

Arts & Entertainment

Concert dedicated to victims of January attacks in Paris

March 4, 2015

By Lauren Landau



Morris Simon, the Simon Firm/Embassy Series

Four noticeably young faces walked on stage at the Embassy of France and took their seats. The members of the Paris-based Hermès Quartet began to perform a concert dedicated to the victims of the January terrorist attacks that took place in the Parisian offices of Charlie Hebdo, a satirical magazine, and Hyper Cacher, the kosher supermarket.

Presented by The Embassy Series, a 501(c)3 non-profit corporation dedicated to “uniting people through musical diplomacy,” the program began with Joseph Haydn’s “Quartet No. 62 in C Major, Op. 76, No. 3,” then continued with Robert Schumann’s “String Quartet No. I in A Minor, Op. 41, No. 1,” before rounding out with “Quartet No. 2” by Leoš Janáček.

In the program, a statement written by Gary Tischler said, “We live in a time when we are inundated with daily tragedies, the disruptive vagaries of extreme weather, the progress of disease, fires and calamities. People forget.” But, he wrote, “We are here tonight to remember...and let the playing of the music of Haydn, Schumann, and Janáček balm our grieving hearts in the spirit of brotherhood in the face of daily horror.”

After the concert, Jerome Barry, director and founder of the series, said attendees received the message.

“Through music and poetry and the arts, people find solace when there is a tragedy,” he said, “and of course, we were commemorating this terrible tragedy of terrorism in January in Paris, and I think people become immune after a while unless you remember them and touch them emotionally, and tonight I think a lot of people were touched by the beauty and the special poignancy of everything that was played.”

Washington resident David Blum said he knows the Embassy Series well, but particularly wanted to attend this one.

“It’s a small way of making a very small statement about what happened in Paris and ISIS and how people need to stand up to them in any way that they can,” he said. “This music is an expression of the highest of civilization, and ISIS is an expression of the lowest of non-civilization, so the contrast itself is a way of standing up to it.”

Violist Yung-Hsin Lou Chang said she received a lot of positive feedback about the evening’s performance. “Many people told me that they love the expression that we bring out and they are touched,” she said.

It’s impossible to miss those expressions. All four members of the quartet, violinist Elise Liu in particular, are animated when they play, displaying facial expressions that mimic the emotion in the music they’re playing.

“The music is our way to express ourselves, so of course when you’re playing you have all kind of feelings and emotions, so we are like actors in a way,” cellist Anthony Kondo said.

He said when’s he’s playing, he’s focused on the music. But walking on stage, knowing the purpose of the concert, he said he felt a need to give something to the audience. “It’s not about being dramatic or to over-do the things,” he said. “It’s about being true in your feelings.”

Executive Director of L’Alliance Française de Washington, D.C., Sarah Diligenti-Pickup described the concert this way: “For the first part, the Haydn part, when the second movement came, that was a bit of a shock,” she said, referring to the German national anthem. “I knew what was going to happen, but it’s different listening to the second movement of that part, played by a quartet and then bringing all of these images of Nazi Germany with Deutschland Über Alles,” she said. “For me, that was very striking.”

It was an emotional experience that she said brought back memories of teaching in the Jewish school in Toulouse that was attacked by gunman Mohamed Merah in 2012.

“What people I think don’t realize in France, is that anti-Semitism has been on the rise from before the attack in 2012,” she said. “I think it had been on the rise since I left, basically the late 1990s.”

She said people hide their anti-Semitism behind anti-Israel sentiments.

Kondo said he is “totally concerned” about the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe. The Jewish musician said his great-grandfather was in Auschwitz, and having that family legacy gives him a certain perspective on current events.

“I’m scared about people getting out of France because of that,” he said, “because there is all this calling about Netanyahu and Israel who is stating ‘come to our country,’ and you should stay in your country, because you are French and you have your religions and it’s not your religion who is your nationality.”

But art can only go so far in bridging these gaps, Pickup-Diligenti said. “The power of music, I think, can move people who are ready to receive it,” she said, adding that the problem is there are people who may not be ready to receive a message of peace. “Those who are ready to receive it will be moved by the concert, will be moved by words, will be moved by poetry, but those who are not ready, will they even be slightly touched? I don’t know.”