CELEBRATING PEACE THROUGH MUSIC

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Reverend Victor Potapov with Mrs. Natalia Kislyak, wife of the Russian Ambassador

Photo: Kevin Allen
The lyrics of “the White Cliffs of Dover” bring back memories and tears to many even seven decades later when this tune was on the lips of the generation that experienced World War II. As Jerome Barry—founder of the Embassy Series—was singing “just wait and see, when the world is free” at the Russian Embassy commemorating the 70th anniversary of crossing the Elbe, you could feel heartbeats of the audience.

Seventy years after the world became free from the tyranny that unleashed World II upon humanity, peace sometimes has remained elusive. But the human yearning for peace has not withered and songs of yesteryears often make tears flow like wine.

The balmy spring evening of May 14, 2015 made one remember the cold winter night in Washington made warm by a celebration of “Peace Through Music” when the “embassies of Argentina, Poland, Italy together with the Apostolic Nunciature in the US, the Archbishop in Washington, WETA and the University of Georgetown celebrated again interfaith dialogue.” It was an evening to remember too. It was a diplomatic feat and spiritual nirvana—commemorating canonizations of Saints John XXIII and John Paul II by His Holiness Pope Francis via an artful tribute in a documentary by Sir Gilbert Levine who conducted many of the world’s finest orchestras in concert halls from the Kennedy Center to the Vatican, as well as on tour both in Europe and in North America and in celebrated recordings. He is considered “an outstanding personality in the world of international classical music television.”

Just like the soldiers who linked up two armies, crossing the Elbe River, yearning for peace, the work and the lives of Saints John XXIII and John Paul II was dedicated to link up the common humanity between different faiths divided at times by vitriol and ignorance.

Through his documentary “A celebration of peace through music,” Sir Gilbert took the viewers at the Argentine Embassy as well as on PBS on Good Friday and Easter Sunday on a marvellous whirl wind through countries and a millennium. He talked about Pope John XXIII convoking the Second Vatican Council, which adopted Nostra Aetate, the landmark Vatican declaration on interreligious dialogue and the relationship between the Catholic Church and Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.

Sharon Rockefeller
Pope John Paul II, known to be the first pope to visit a synagogue, furthered the spirit of Nostra Aetate throughout his 26-year pontificate.

“We believe one of the most significant if not defining questions of our time is fostering interreligious understanding,” said Georgetown President John J. DeGioia that evening. “There is no challenge we face in the world today that in some way is not either informed by or can’t be supported in some way by a deeper understanding of the role that religion plays in that context.”

The concert was a “dream come true” for Sir Gilbert, who has relatives who died in the Holocaust, and who deeply admires John Paul II because he “wanted to bring peace and understanding to all peoples of the world, to people of all religions.”

“This is our chance, for America, and for the world, to show the tremendous love that not only Catholics but Jews like myself and people of all faiths have for both John Paul and John XXIII – two popes who reached out as major parts of their pontificate to people throughout the world no matter what their creed,” said Sir Gilbert.
The audience was delighted at the program, the music and the interstitials filmed in Washington, Venice, the Vatican, Krakow, Buenos Aires which helped tie together the message of each of Pope Francis, Pope John Paul II and of Pope John XXIII and their efforts to reach out to peoples of all faiths and show how we are "all one." The effect of the music - perhaps the most effective means by which to "speak" this truth was understood and greatly appreciated by the distinguished audience attending the event at the Embassy of Argentina," said Ian Portnoy who was among the organizers of the event.

His Eminence Cardinal Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington said that music "can say things that words can never enunciate".

During her remarks at the screen of the documentary, Ambassador Cecilia Nahón talked about the importance of interfaith dialogue and recalled that in "Argentina freedom and religious diversity is guaranteed to all within a framework of pluralism, inclusion and peaceful coexistence among all religions". 
In a similar fashion, Ambassador Sergey Kislyak recalled the strong bonds of friendship between two war time allies – United States and the Russian people. He talked about the pivotal role the Lend Lease program played in preserving freedom from tyranny.

Former US Ambassador to Russian Federation John R. Beyrle talked about his father Joseph Beyrle, who is thought to be the only American to have fought in the US Army as well as the Soviet Army in World War II. With passionate words, Ambassador Beyrle shared the remarkable story of how his father’s life was saved by the Soviet Army and who was presumed dead only to be discovered alive and married by the same priest who had already performed his funeral two years earlier.
Though the Russian Embassy on Wisconsin Avenue is thousands of miles away from the English Coastline facing the Strait of Dover, everyone was singing

There’ll be bluebirds over
The white cliffs of Dover
Tomorrow
Just you wait and see
There’ll be love and laughter
And peace ever after
Tomorrow
When the world is free