Photo courtesy of malekjandali.com

Ancient music pleads for a modern peace

Award-winning Syrian-American composer and pianist Malek Jandali performed in Sydney during Refugee Week as part of his debut Australian tour. He speaks to ***OLGA YOLDI*** *about his music and his longing for a peaceful Syria.*

Your concerts have captivated audiences around the world. Tell us more about how The Voice of the free Syrian children brings to the fore the conflict in Syria.
I will perform in many US cities and countries around the world. The objective is to give the voiceless a voice through music. The profits go to support humanitarian aid for Syrian children affected by war inside and outside Syria.

I feel blessed and humbled to have this opportunity to assist children in this way. I tend to believe that music has the ability to unite people and connects us with who we are. Music – and art in general – can be agents for positive change. Music contributes not only to building bridges between people, but also in bringing to the forefront our shared humanity and common values. Through music we learn about one another, it somehow creates this dialogue between people and spotlights those aspects we have in common, rather than our differences. Nowadays we believe we are all connected through the internet, yet we are really more disconnected than ever before. Through my work I always strive for a meeting of the minds in transforming the current narrative.

As an artist you work with children in the countries you visit. How was your workshop at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music?
I try to connect with the next generation of artists before they face life's challenges. I share my own life experiences in order to make it easier for them to face their own challenges. That is why I am so keen to get involved with students through music competitions, workshops or visits to schools. I feel honoured to do it and it's always such a gratifying and inspiring experience.

I reminded the students during the workshop in Sydney how lucky they are to be living in a free country and encouraged them to take advantage of it, to express their feelings or tell their story to the world through the music they create. I also reminded them how powerful they are as artists, how important it is for them to believe in themselves, follow their dreams and make a difference, no matter how many challenges they face.

I also take my music to refugee camps – although I call them concentration camps – because music is such a good therapy. The last time, I took instruments for the children in Jordan, but to my surprise they didn't want them. They quickly told me they really wanted umbrellas: "We want to cover ourselves when we go to the latrines." So I went back to Turkey and bought as many as I could, then went back to Jordan and gave them to the grateful kids.

That was a slap in the face. The children asked me to look at reality, and listen to them, because we are in our comfort zones we are unaware of how dramatically their needs have changed.

You integrate ancient melodies from Aleppo and the Silk Road into your works?
Yes, I believe it is my mission to preserve Syria's musical heritage. I have also composed and performed Echoes from Ugarit [www.youtube.com/watch?v=k41_3tPJvXU]. Ugarit in Syria is the place where the first documented music notation was discovered from more than 3,400 years ago. My composition, including music for piano and orchestra, was recorded with the Russian Philharmonic Orchestra. Its release was accompanied by a successful tour of the US, Europe and the Middle East. But my music is inspired by the Syrian people and their quest for freedom and human rights. My music gives a voice to the resilience and hope of the children I have met in refugee camps.

In 2015 you founded Pianos for Peace, a non-profit organisation that spreads the joy of music. What was its aim?
Pianos for Peace was established to make music accessible to disadvantage communities and build peace through music and education. It was created to fill a gap, as not everyone gets to experience the joy music brings on a daily basis. I believe art loses its power and meaning if it doesn't impact on every segment of our society.

So Pianos for Peace is an annual open festival of music using colourful pianos (painted by local artists) to inspire artists and unite people in the community of Atlanta where I live. The pianos are placed in public

spaces and parks for everyone to enjoy and play. After the festival they are donated to communities in need, such as schools, hospitals, nursing homes and organisations helping the disadvantaged. We have also given some of the pianos to deserving musicians.

During the Pianos for Peace festival volunteer musicians also contribute to outreach programs to disadvantaged communities in order to revitalise music education.

Some people warned us that if we left the pianos unattended in public places they would be stolen, but we had no issues. People even protected them from the rain. One day I saw this homeless guy who sat at one of the pianos and played a Chopin Polonaise beautifully. Suddenly people did not see a homeless man, they saw an artist.

"It is disturbing to think that every time I play a note, perform and compose a piece of music, someone is getting killed, a building is being destroyed and a child is drowning."

You were born in Germany, raised in Homs, Syria, and now live in the US. How did you become a composer?
I attended a performance of a Mozart piano concerto – that's all it took for me to want to learn to play an instrument. I gave my first piano concerto at the age of eight.

Yes, I was born in Germany, but moved to Homs with my family as a young child and was raised there. I received a scholarship and went to the US in 1994 and I now live there permanently. I left Syria before the war because there were simply no opportunities for me there.

I became a classical pianist, then a composer and when the Syrian civil war started I turned into a peace activist as well. I don't belong to any political party. I am just a humble artist, but I do value freedom and particularly the freedom to express one's art, which are essential rights I could not enjoy growing up in Syria. Apart from not being free, there was little respect for the most basic human rights.

When I first became a peace activist in the US, the Syrian police decided to attack my parents in revenge. It was only when I saw the images of my own mother beaten, downtrodden, with broken teeth and black eyes that I realised the extent of the regime's brutality.

To me there is no doubt the political system is going a long way to repress its people and undermine democracy. Journalists are being targeted and the media is tightly controlled by the government. The system also dislikes artists or anyone else who gives expression to what I would call beauty and truth. They will soon be in trouble because truth is powerful, and beauty is even more powerful than truth.

The Syrian civil war is the most disastrous conflict of recent times. The abuse and destruction that has overtaken the country is tragic. Yet Syria is also a country vital to many interests. How do you see the conflict unfolding?
Let's be clear, the fundamental cause of the war in Syria is the result of a brutal dictatorship wanting to remain in power at all costs. The abuses perpetrated by the regime were defined as state terrorism by the West in 1972. So in a way this is nothing new. The question is, what has been done since 1972 to address it?

It is traumatic to have to witness the cultural and social destruction of my country. Yes, the war is a fiasco of powerful interests, but genocide has been perpetrated against the Syrian people. The conflict has displaced 11 million Syrians who have fled their homes, 13.5 million are in need of humanitarian assistance, 6.6 million are internally displaced and 4.8 million have fled to surrounding countries and later Europe. Many of these are children.

For the past six years the West has failed to prevent or stop the abuses. All it has done is classify the Syrian people escaping the violence as "migrants", "refugees" or, if still living in Syria, "displaced persons". This language objectifies the victims.

If you check the Oxford Dictionary definition of the word "migrant", it refers equally to animal migration, usually a bird or to a seasonal worker looking for a job. Recently I was at Oxford University where I participated in a panel discussion on The Effects of Migration in Europe. I was the only Syrian and the last speaker, so I told the audience to refrain themselves from calling Syrian babies migrants, because they are not animals, and not to define mothers as seasonal workers, because they are simply human beings fleeing violence. It is easy to objectify people by using terms that distort reality.

Malek Jandali addresses the audience prior to the 'Ode to Syria' concert, St Stephens Uniting Church, Sydney, marking National Refugee Week and 26 June: UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. Presented by Sydney Peace Foundation in partnership with STARTTS, Amnesty International Australia and Brave Media. Photo courtesy Kunchok Gyaltsen

We Syrians face a terrible war. That is why the baby and the mother rejecting violence are going out onto the ocean in the hope of finding peace in a distant land, when many times they end up dying. Everyone was aware of Aylan Kurdi, the three-year-old boy whose image made global headlines after he drowned in 2015 in the Mediterranean Sea. It became news for a month, and then everyone carried on with their lives.

This shows the state of dehumanisation we are experiencing today, when we allow children to be gassed to death or drown in the Mediterranean and nobody does anything to prevent it. It is shameful.

As an artist my response to this tragedy needs to be positive, emphasising our common humanity. The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra is to premiere my symphony called The Silent Ocean, based on a young girl who escapes the Syrian war. She is forced to leave her home, cannot take any belongings with her but a melody. Thankfully, nobody can see music so nobody can take it away from her. The symphony is about the power of music in the face of adversity. I am hoping politicians will attend this concert.

There seems to be much apathy about the Syrian War now. The lack of reliable information and the repetitive images of destruction are not having the effect terrorist attacks in Europe are having on people. Initially there was interest, but after a while people get tired.

This is the most documented and filmed conflict in mankind's history. Yet there is a lack of reliable information as the government controls the media and it is highly dangerous for independent journalists to report from Syria.

A military defector called Caesar (whose job was to take pictures of civilians in prisons), smuggled more than 50,000 photographs out of Syria in 2013. The Caesar photographs identified victims and showed some of the key causes of death. Many of those photos were taken in detention centres or military hospitals.

When Human Rights Watch received a full set of images it published a report called *If the Dead Could Speak: Mass Deaths and Torture in Syria's Detention Facilities.* It researched the human stories behind thousands of photos and found evidence of widespread torture, starvation, beatings and disease in Syrian Government facilities. So people were starved, beaten and tortured in a systematic way and on a massive scale.

Photo courtesy of malekjandali.com

Malek Jandali in conversation with Archibald prize winning artist, Ben Quilty at NSW Parliament, Sydney on World Refugee Day.
Photo, Dhondup Tsering

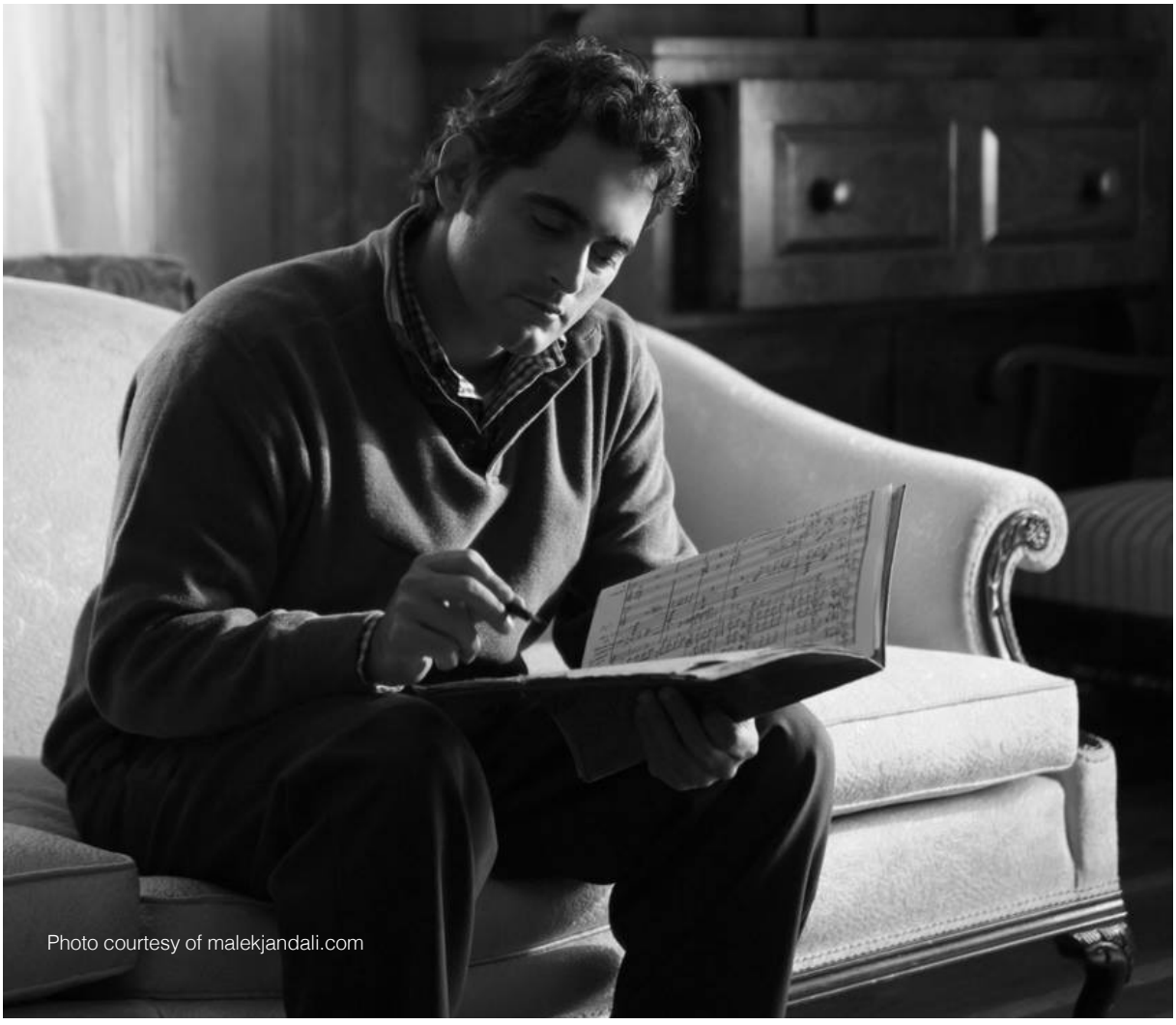

Photo courtesy of malekjandali.com

According to Human Rights Watch, the pictures present evidence of crimes against humanity. If this is not enough evidence to prompt the international community to do something about it, what is? When this conflict ends we will look back at this terrible episode in our history and we will seek to avoid such conflicts in the future. We did not learn from the Holocaust. Hopefully this time we will.

With a change in government, the Syrian people will figure out a way to live in peace. After all, Syria was the cradle of civilisation. My ancestors invented the alphabet and music notations. We are a 10,000-year-old civilisation with very rich culture, although the standards of art performance have declined dramatically in the past decade.

Life goes on for many Syrians who have sought refuge in other countries. Many are integrating well into new countries. Despite the difficulties of resettlement some are actually thriving and excelling in countries such as Germany and even here in Australia and Canada, because they are persevering and are free from violence and oppression. In spite of everything Syrian children continue to sing, learn, draw, but they want to go back home and help rebuild Syria. I imagine that every child I have met is like a phoenix in exile rising from the ashes. This is what inspires me and motivates me to compose and continue to raise awareness.

I believe once the war ends we are going to create a much more beautiful Syria through music, art, and the free spirit of these children. That is why my work was called the Free Spirit of the Syrian Children.

As I said, the fundamental problem in Syria is the dictatorship. The solution is simple: get rid of the dictatorship which is the fundamental cause of the conflict so that people can live in peace. That is why my symphonies are all about peace.

It is disturbing to think that every time I play a note, perform and compose a piece of music, someone is getting killed, a building is being destroyed and a child is drowning. It is my mission to eternalise their silence through a symphony that emphasises not the destruction, but the beauty of the Syrian people. ℟

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