

Luthiers sans Frontieres UK

Report on the Mission to Haiti July/August 2008

Dates: 11/7/08- 5/8/08

Location: Leogane, Haiti

Personnel

Robert Cain, Luthier and Lecturer at Newark School of Violinmaking
Pierre Picard, third year Student, Newark School of Violinmaking.
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Background

People are often surprised to learn that classical music has a place in Haitian culture. Haiti is better known to outsiders for its problems. Extreme poverty, natural disasters, ecological ruin, political instability and meddling by outside powers continually take their toll on Haiti and its people. Nevertheless there are also many positive things happening. One example is the Ecole de Musique St Trinité in Port au Prince. For about 40 years the School, supported by the Episcopalian Church of Haiti, has provided musical education for around 1400 young people. The UK equivalent would be Secondary school with Specialist Music College status but with a standard of playing which reaches far higher. The Orchestre Philharmonique St Trinité is the highest-level Orchestra in Haiti.

The Ecole St Trinité organises a three-week residential music camp for 140 students in the more rural setting of Ecole St Croix (another Episcopalian Church School) in Léogane, 20 miles west of Port au Prince. The Haitian staff from St Trinité are joined by about 20 volunteers from the USA who comprise music college students, teachers, and professional musicians, some of whom are former students of St Trinité, now living in the USA.

Security considerations

Travel to Haiti is not simple. The British, French and US governments advise against visiting Haiti. There are dire warnings about kidnappings, shootings, hurricanes and disease. This, rightly, caused some anxiety amongst the LSF committee. In the end we travelled as individuals, at our own risk, and arranged our own insurance. We took advice from the people who go every year and who know the situation intimately.

Invitation

The Invitation to LSF came from Janet Anthony, Professor of Cello at Lawrence University, Appleton, Wisconsin. Janet has dedicated a large part of

her life to the development of music education in Haiti and is the Artistic Director of the Léogane Camp. Recognising that there were a lot of instruments and bows in need of attention and very little expertise in the whole of Haiti, Janet asked if LSF could attend the camp and run a class in basic repairs, fitting-up, and bow rehairing. It was to be an unusual mission for LSF in that we would not be establishing a permanent workshop. Nevertheless we were convinced that it would be worthwhile.

The Workshop

We knew that setting up a temporary workshop at a camp would be a challenge and we thought hard, consulted, and prepared our kit thoroughly before leaving the UK. Nevertheless, on arrival, we were taken aback to find that our workshop was going to be a part of a single-storey hospital ward complete with beds, mosquitoes, mice and erratic electricity and water supplies (but, thankfully, no patients). After a period of 'expectation re-alignment' and some creative thinking we put together a very respectable Luthiers' field hospital/workshop. We worked on school writing benches, bedside tables and knees, mostly outside where it was a little cooler and the light was better. At this time, the term 'Extreme Lutherie' was born.



We brought with us about £2000 worth of donated tools, fittings, accessories, bows and consumables along with our own tools. Amazingly, there was very little that we lacked.

The working schedule followed that of the other camp activities and started at 07.00 with prayers and finished with the last rehearsal at 21.00. This meant that we shared all our meals and breaks with the other volunteers and students and were fully integrated into the team. There was a wonderful spirit of camaraderie within the camp. It was a very long day but there was not a lot else to do. We were advised not to leave the camp compound without an experienced volunteer or a Haitian person for security reasons. Given the heat (approx 35C), high humidity and long working hours we all found it pretty exhausting.

What did we do?

Teaching

We were asked to teach 6 students basic fitting-up and repairs, and bow rehairing to one student. Daoudi and Pierre took responsibility for instruments and Rob for bows. The teaching was conducted mainly in French. The students were from music schools in three centres, Port au Prince, Jacmel and Le Cayes. Some had previous experience and some had none. They were also music students, so spent some of their time on other camp activities. Unfortunately, Rob's student contracted malaria at the half way stage and had to leave the camp!

Other work

It was clear that we would not be able to teach the students to do complex repairs and so we divided our time between teaching and doing the more difficult repairs ourselves.

These amounted to:-

Rehairing 63 bows (all of the basic quality) plus various repairs from frog re-build, head pinning, faces, screws etc.

Repairing 2 broken cello necks.

As well as teaching and planned repair work, we had a constant flow of visitors wanting strings replaced, bridges straightened etc. We also fixed a flute, a bassoon and a few guitars.

Visit to Jacmel

At the end of the first week we were taken by car to Jacmel on the south coast. Jacmel has always been a city favoured by artists of all kinds. It also has a music school (Ecole de Musique Dessaix-Baptiste) run as a kind of independent community project. About 1200 young people attend the school for lessons and concerts. A second music camp was to be held here immediately after Léogane.

During our visit we made an appraisal the instruments, listed the repairs to be done and brought some instruments back to Léogane to work on. We also found time to visit the beach and swam in the Sea of Antilles.Aaaaah. This was our only real break in the three weeks.

What did we achieve?

1. At the end of the camp, as could be expected; the six students had different levels of skill. Some could competently do a basic set up on a modest violin; others could do some set-up jobs and some maintenance jobs. One student with previous experience can carry out a range of repairs including bow work. We had mixed feelings about training people under these circumstances. It was better than nothing but would be much more effective in a permanent workshop.
2. Mountains of instruments were put back into playing order and were immediately put to use in by the students. A rough estimate of the value of our work in UK terms is about £4000.
3. The tools and equipment that we brought with us will be allocated to the three centres as appropriate with a named person in charge of these in Port au Prince. This was done in the understanding that these will be available to any subsequent LSF mission. An agreement was signed to this effect.
4. The Haitian and American staff, and, of course, the students were frankly amazed at the quantity of work that we got through. An

unexpected outcome is that through contact with the many US volunteers at the camp the work of LSF UK will be known much further afield.

Was it safe?

Haiti is a difficult place to visit. Independent travel is risky and public transport is not for the fainthearted. In the context of our trip i.e. being met and taken around by local people, or experienced volunteers, it felt safe. We had no problems at all and, in fact I think our possessions were safer in Haiti than in my home town in England. Having said that, our movements were very restricted. We would have liked to be able to spend time exploring the country but that was not an option.

We would have no hesitation in going back there under similar circumstances. The recent devastation caused by three tropical storms shows how vulnerable the country is and how quickly things can change.

Was it worth it?

The cost of the mission to LSF was about £3000 and this figure is totally made up of travel costs. A large proportion of this figure was raised directly and indirectly by the mission members. Daoudi and Pierre obtained grants from charities and Rob was part-sponsored by Lincoln College. All our living costs in Haiti were met by our hosts. Given what we achieved in terms of the teaching, practical work, making contacts and paving the way for future missions we would say that it was extremely worthwhile.

Where do we go from here?

1. **Future mission.** The Haitian and American organisers would love us/LSF to return. We now have the practical experience to plan another mission and to make it more effective and fun. Our feelings are that it would be better to base ourselves at the Ecole de Musique Dessaix-Baptiste at Jacmel where a permanent workshop could be set up. Jacmel would also be a more pleasant place for volunteers to spend time.
2. **Janet Anthony will come to the UK** next year and speak about the work in Haiti at LUTHERIE 2009 on March 28th at Newark. This will be a great opportunity to publicise the Haiti music projects and the work of LSF UK and also explore the possibilities for future projects.

Recommendations

1. Any future Volunteer going to Haiti should speak fairly good French and also learn some Haitian Kreyol.
2. It would be a good idea for future LSF UK missions to have a team member who is involved with planning, budgeting and decision-making

but is not travelling. This person could give an objective view of things and also be a contact person in case of any problems.

3. There is a shortage of instruments, especially for the high level players. LSF should consider collecting donations of instruments, which could be taken by volunteers. Instruments could also be purpose-made as they have been recently for Cuba.

Conclusion

The mission was an incredible experience for us all. It was exhausting and frustrating at times but also enormously fulfilling. We came away with a feeling of having contributed something very valuable in practical terms. What we did not expect was that people appreciated the simple fact that we were there, working alongside them.

We also received a great deal in ways we were not expecting. We met many inspiring people, Haitians and Americans who believe that in spite of all the severe difficulties of everyday life in Haiti, music is still vitally important. That developing cultural opportunities is all the more important in a society where social cohesion is under strain. The music projects in Haiti provide opportunities for young people of all backgrounds to enjoy themselves in a positive way and for some the experience has been life changing. LSF UK and all those who contributed to the Haiti Mission can be proud of having contributed to something very worthwhile.

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