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# An important time for a cultural voice

I'm writing this as I listen to the exciting rendition of Bernstein's *West Side Story Symphonic Suite* bouncing off the walls, ceiling and floor of a concert hall many consider the greatest in the world: Vienna's Musikverein. Thirty-two gold bare-breasted ladies, arms crossed placidly across their waists, hold up the balcony with their very heads. Scores of indolent white marble statues above the balcony doors don't make the job any easier.



Swanee Hunt

I'm watching this rehearsal not as ambassador, but as wife of the maestro — a role I play with relish, a delightful diversion from the press of diplomatic and managerial responsibilities. And as I sit here with time (finally) to reflect and integrate, I realize that observing Charles' work over the past few months has been a telling metaphorical glimpse into the economic, political and social realities of this region of the world.

For interspersed with concerts under his baton at the glorious State Opera and other magnificent houses of refined Austrian culture, Charles journeys throughout the new democracies, along the well-beaten paths such as the Czech Republic, but also to the far reaches of Central Asia, and the war-torn innards of central Bosnia — bringing American music to places where our culture is a symbol of hope, strength and stability.

When he returns home, I hear touching and hair-raising stories. Take the concert in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan in Central Asia — for most of this century simply part of the Soviet sprawl. The main street of the capital was so quiet, the visiting American maestro could hear crickets chirping at 9 p.m.

All the musicians wore their coats, some wore gloves, in the unheated rehearsal room. With their economy in ruins, the players of the Tajik Philharmonic, most of them Moscow-trained musicians, had not been paid for six months. And even back then, their monthly salary was \$5. So at the end of the concert, Charles, who himself was donating a week of his time, took out his wallet and handed each member \$5.

Earlier, at the dress rehearsal, one of the players had asked if Charles would return soon. "If you'll come back to conduct next year," he promised, "I'll stay in the orchestra." At that moment, culture-nourishment was powerful enough to stave off economic starvation.

Then there was the trip to Sarajevo and nearby Mostar to organize a peace concert. With his flak jacket and helmet on, Charles drove the dark tortuous roads of central Bosnia throughout the night. There was virtually no other traffic as he made his way past strips of bombed-out houses. At one point, his road took an unusually steep incline. He started up the hill, then got out to look carefully. There were no road signs, but something wasn't right and he wasn't sure what. He backed up, wheeled around and diverted to another road.

The next day, on his return, he saw that the steep incline actually was a blown-up bridge that once spanned a river. A moment of hesitation had saved his life. But that near-miss didn't deter him from continuing his planning of the concert, to bring some new hope to a war-weary people, and remind the rest of us of their plight. What more important time for a cultural voice than in the face of debasing atrocities and hopelessness?

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That collage of dramatic settings — highly cultured Vienna, economically starved Dushanbe, war-ravaged central Bosnia — illustrates how the economic, political and cultural interact in this world. The finery of Vienna is financed by an economy that is thriving, in a politically stable environment that allows Austrians to spend more on the arts than on defense. Meanwhile, the economic problems of the Tajiks lead to social unrest that foments political instability and affects their arts budget as well. And the promise of financial aid for reconstruction is one of the greatest incentives for peace to Balkan leaders and for the hope of an artistic renaissance.

All of which reminds me that our foreign policy must be broad-based: embracing the economic, political and cultural components of a society. That means the task of diplomacy is more complex than any one person could possibly carry out.

So I feel especially fortunate to have another at my side. And I realize that, beyond the dozens of speeches I make or articles I write, my resident symphony conductor is probably the most effective envoy our country could send to this part of the world — reaching beyond the mind, into the soul of the people.

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