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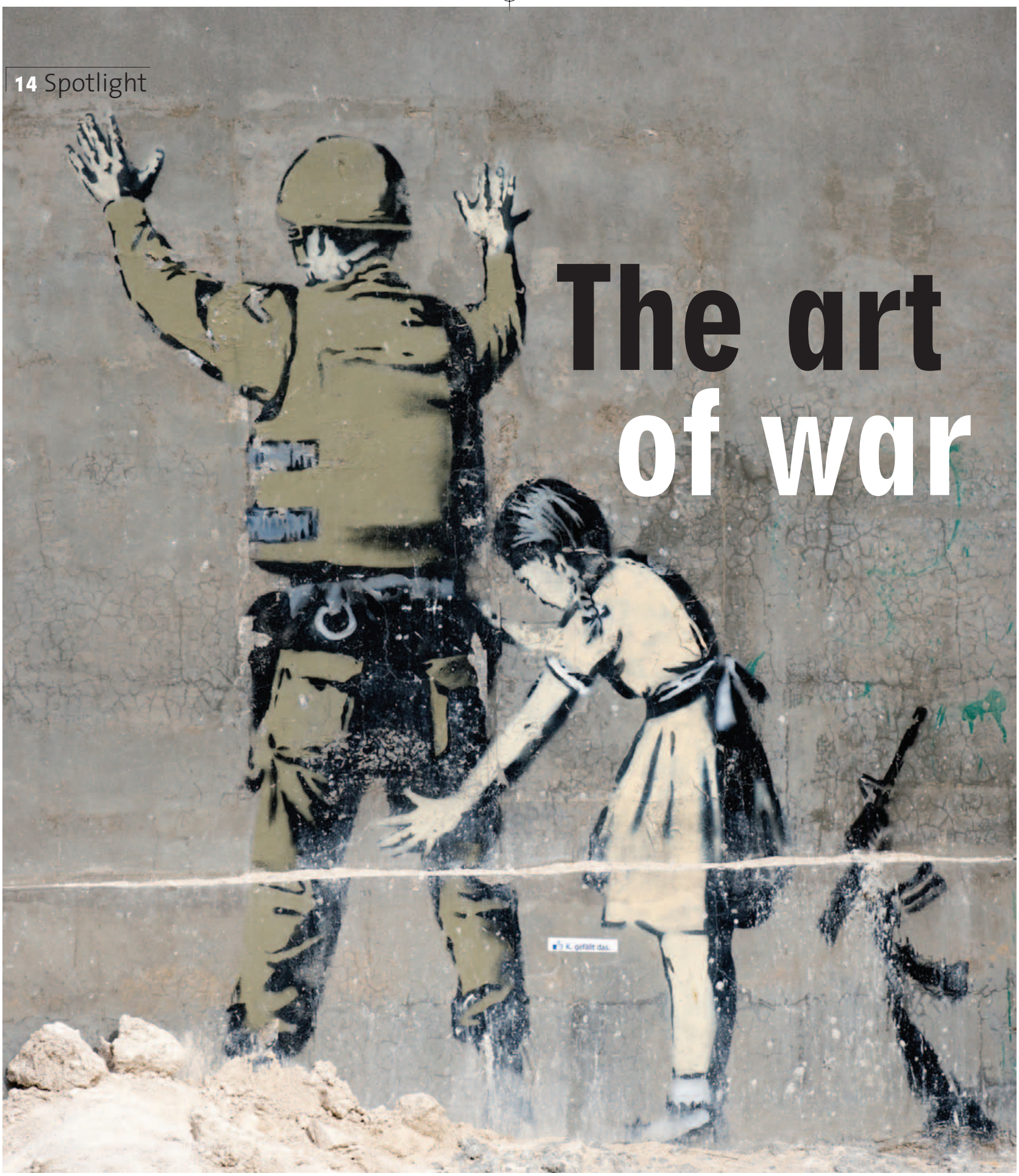

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The art of war

In the face of war, what does art really mean for those performing in conflict zones? **Clare Wiley** reports

By the summer of 2009, the US-led coalition had been fighting a violent and heavily criticised war in Iraq for six years. In June that year US troops had finally begun to withdraw from towns and cities, having formally handed over security duties to new Iraqi forces. The war brought an end to Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, but claimed countless lives and left in its wake thousands of displaced Iraqi citizens. Ongoing violence, suicide bombs and widespread political uncertainty left behind a country of people trying to piece their lives back together.

In August the same year, a group of musicians gathered for rehearsal in a bare concrete room, with no windows, in the marginally safer northern region of Kurdistan. The National Youth Orchestra of Iraq (NYOI), then in its first incarnation, was battling through Haydn's notoriously difficult *Symphony No. 99* when they were plunged into sudden darkness – another power cut.

Above: A Banksy mural on a wall in Bethlehem

'I just stopped conducting because I thought, there's no point,' says music director Paul MacAlindin, a hint of frustration in his voice. 'But the musicians just carried on right the way through to the end, even though they couldn't actually see the notes. I started conducting again even though nobody could see me. I thought, this is crazy, of course I should carry on, but I didn't know why.'

At the end of the performance a bemused MacAlindin asked his players how they managed to perfom in the pitch black. 'They said: "In Iraq we have so many power cuts that we memorised the music so that if it happens during a performance, we can get to the end." It's what they have to deal with,' he explains, 'and so they strategise their lives accordingly.'

Many of the young players continue to experience high unemployment, inflation, even chronic malnutrition. Many have little or no access to water and electricity, and the threat of suicide bombs and kidnapping remains. In light of these circumstances, what is the role of

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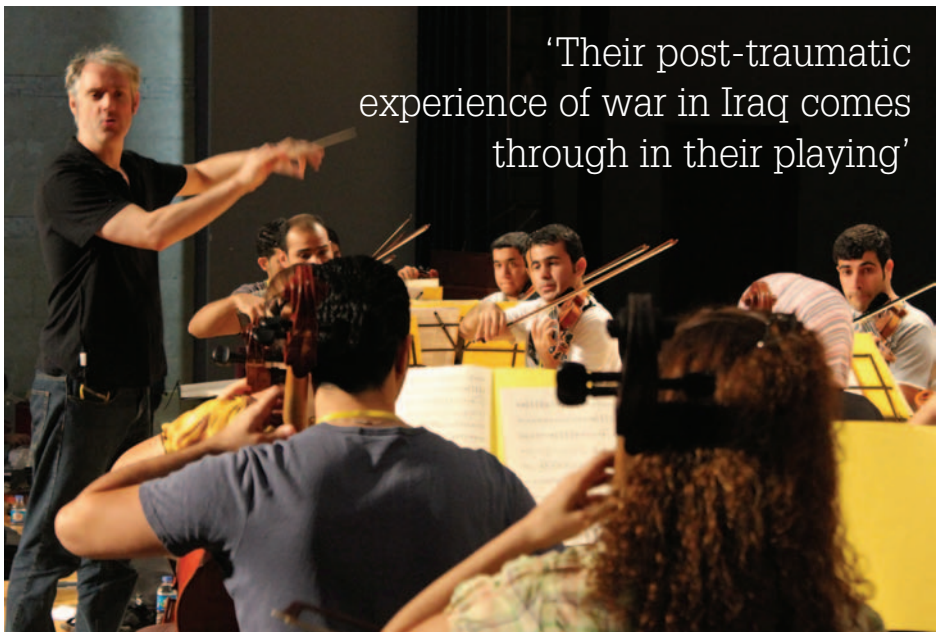
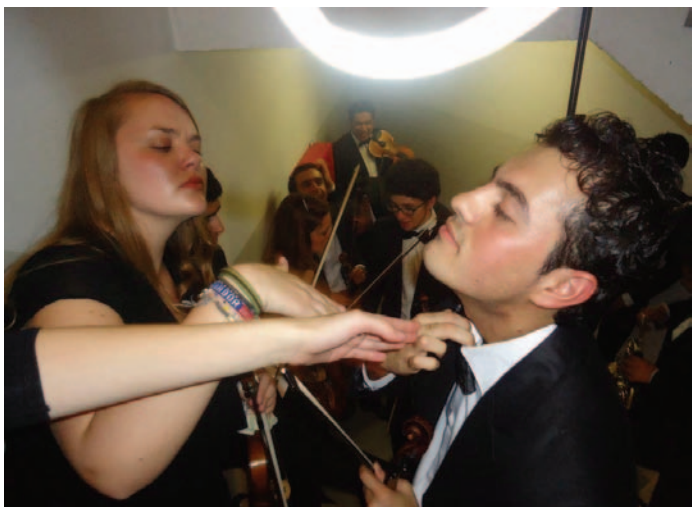
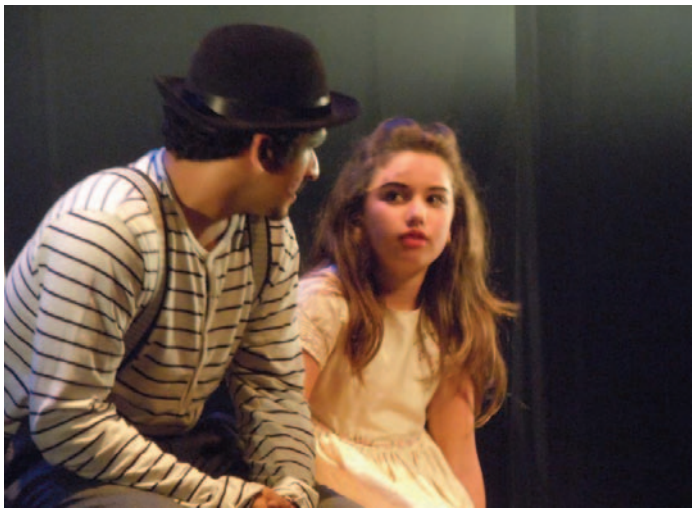


‘Their post-traumatic experience of war in Iraq comes through in their playing’





orchestral music in their lives? Such perseverance is a telling sign of what the orchestra – what music and art – represents in Iraq. In the face of war, the influence of the orchestra goes beyond basic notions of art as a form of self-expression It is instead indicative of the strive for a sense of normality, perhaps even a sense of fun.

‘It’s perfectly clear through some of the interpretations that their post-traumatic experience of war in Iraq comes through in their playing,’ saysMacAlindin. ‘We want to flip that round and show them that a youth orchestra is about being joyful, being fun, and most of all playing together, because many of them are physically isolated as musicians.’

The NYOI was the brainchild of Zuhal Sultan, a young pianist from Baghdad, who founded the ensemble when she was just 17 years old. Conductor MacAlindin came across Sultan’s call for a music director in a newspaper. ‘The headline was very simple,’ he recalls. ‘“Iraqi team seeks maestro for youth orchestra”. If you’re hit with a headline like that, and a very small report, it’s obviously eye-catching. We’ve only ever seen the bad side of Iraq on TV and through decades of negative media.’

‘The question just struck me – what is the culture of Iraq? I had no idea. I thought this would be a very interesting way to find out.’

Remarkably, the entire audition process for NYOI is conducted via YouTube. ‘In the first year I was shocked by the fact that these young people were battling away playing classical music, many with no teachers,’ says MacAlindin. ‘I was shocked that they were finding a way, even with Iraq’s really bad internet connection, to upload a video at all.’ What he discovered in the videos was a serious lack of teaching, a lack of basic technical understanding, but also the serious intentions behind what the musicians were trying to achieve.

Throughout the year, the players take part in a mentorship programme with music teachers from around the world. It’s a painstaking process that sees musicians upload a video to YouTube, and then follow the tutorial comments written on each frame, directly onto the clip. ‘It’s a very long, slow, control loop, but because real time video through Skype isn’t possible [due to poor internet connection]; this is the only way we can do it,’ says MacAlindin.

Each summer the group meets in Kurdistan for an intensive two-week course. ‘The model is the same as that of a standard European youth orchestra,’ he continues. ‘We’ve just transposed it to a country that has zero infrastructure to deal with that.’

MacAlindin is careful to point out that when choosing repertoire, he doesn’t ignore what’s going on in Iraq, and the ensemble doesn’t exist outside of the country’s musical and cultural heritage.

‘In terms of a reconciliation process in a conflict zone, we’re also presenting Iraqi Arab and Iraqi Kurdish orchestral music in each concert, that’s part of our identity,’ he says. ‘That’s much closer to their local soul than the western music that they also love.’

The Jenin camp, in the northern part of Palestine’s West Bank, is home to an estimated 16,000 refugees. In 2002 the Israeli army entered the camp, declared it a closed military area, and imposed a round-the-clock curfew. Fighting lasted 10 days, during which time medical personnel and humanitarian workers were prevented from entering. At least 52 Palestinians died, many of whom were civilians, 150 buildings were destroyed and hundreds of families were left homeless. An entire generation of people have experienced brutality and aggression; children attend heavily overcrowded schools, and many face a life of unemployment and debt.

‘The freedom to say what you want without fear, to tell your story without fear, this is the Freedom Theatre. We have a voice now, it’s much better than before. The Freedom Theatre changed my life’

Opened in 2006, Jenin’s Freedom Theatre aims to combat the devastation of the occupation, offering young people some form of artistic respite from the conflict. While the theatre does provide an emotionally safe creative space for budding actors, physically it’s far from secure: this year the theatre’s charismatic and much-loved founder, Juliano Mer-Khamis, was gunned down by masked men just metres from the building. Staff work in constant fear of hostility and last summer the Israeli Defence Forces made seemingly random arrests, causing damage to the building in the process.

Rawand Arqawi, the coordinator of the theatre’s school, which offers a three-year course for actors, spoke at this year’s Decibel Performing Arts Showcase in the UK. Her compelling message came across loud and clear: the Freedom Theatre and its ambitious young actors embody a quiet but formidable defiance. For them, art is a very powerful form of resistance against the occupation, one that is both literal and cultural. 'If the Israeli army sees we have all become great actors,’ says one young boy in a screened film of the theatre’s work, ‘we will have won.'

‘The Freedom Theatre saw the need to give these children and young people opportunities to reclaim and define their future,’ says Arqawi. ‘Our aim is to use the creative process as a model for social change, providing opportunities for the youth of the Jenin refugee camp to develop the skills, self-knowledge, and confidence which can empower them to challenge their depressing reality and to take control of their future.’

‘When I speak about what we’re doing here,’ she says after the talk, ‘it’s to find a new form of resistance. On the stage we tell people about

Top: MacAlindin leads the National Youth Orchestra of Iraq

Above left: NYOI musicians prepare for a performance

Above right: The Freedom Theatre’s recent production of *Waiting for Godot*

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Photo: © Şahan Nuhoğlu

Palestine so everyone knows about it. This is resistance, to prove to people that we're not tourists, that we're defensive of our land, to find a new way to fight and get our message out.'

To date the school has produced two performances: the first, in 2008, was a staging of Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The second was called *Fragments of Palestine*. 'The acting students gathered stories, which they wrote and performed, representing the Palestinian experience,' explains Arqawi. '*Fragments of Palestine* shows their interpretation of their society, framing issues of oppression under occupation and forbidden love in a society which follows strict customs and traditions.'

What's more, the theatre offers Jenin's young women the opportunity to express their individuality, make their own choices, possibly even determine their own future, in very oppressive conditions.

Arqawi herself is no stranger to the strictness of life in Palestine. For her, the theatre offered a chance for individual discovery, as well as collective resistance. 'The most important thing for me is that I found myself here in the theatre,' she says. 'When I came here I was a very weak girl, I had no chance to express myself, I had no chance to be strong or stand in front of people. Now I can say what I want, do want I want.'

'The freedom to say what you want without fear, to tell your story without fear, this is the Freedom Theatre. We have a voice now, it's much better than before. The Freedom Theatre changed my life.'

For Palestinian singer, musician and broadcaster Reem Kelani, art and music represent something even more fundamental: existence. She recalls a conversation she had with an Armenian man whose parents died in the Armenian Genocide. 'He said: "You can burn a book, you can burn a piece of antique furniture, but our music, our songs, our poetry, you can't burn; it travels it goes everywhere"'.

Born in the UK and brought up in Kuwait, Kelani's father comes from Ya'bad near Jenin, her mother from Nazareth in Galilee. She spent 14 years working on her debut album *Sprinting Gazelle – Palestinian Songs from the Motherland and the Diaspora*, released in 2006. 'It was a collection of traditional Palestinian songs all from pre-1948,' she explains. 'That was deliberate. It's to say, "Look, we've got 19th century songs, that means we were there."'

Whether an elaborate love song or a simple folk song, Kelani believes it's more powerful to sing an 18th or 19th century Palestinian song. 'I think it's more profound than donning a Che Guevara T-shirt or tying a Palestinian scarf around my head saying, "Liberation! Liberation!"'

'For me those songs have always been to acknowledge that I exist both personally and collectively,' Kelani continues. 'All these songs, all these wedding songs, harvest songs, love songs, lullabies, where did they come from? From Mars? Someone must have been there on that land to sing them.'

> 'You can burn a book, you can burn a piece of antique furniture, but our music, our songs, our poetry, you can't burn; it travels, it goes everywhere'

'Traditional and contemporary music set to resistance poetry has always been a way to express myself,' she says. 'It's not about saying, "Oh we're Palestinians, we are victims". Music actually tells you that if you exist you resist, because it emphasises your existence.'

From normality, to resistance, to existence, the arts give performers in the world's many conflict zones a powerful way of understanding, and perhaps even fighting the destructive impact of war. But can the performing arts really play a key role in the resolution of conflict, or is that merely idealistic?

'It is both idealistic and pragmatic,' answers MacAlindin. 'Yes it's idealistic to put a bunch of people together and ask them to play music although they come from different backgrounds. It's a way of getting a large group of people together to make a very big public statement that actually cooperation and reconciliation are an active living process in a country where, politically, that very same cooperation and reconciliation isn't happening at all. On that level it becomes hugely symbolic, as well as physically and pragmatically real.'

Kelani agrees that art and music can transcend politicians' ability to bring about conflict resolution. She says that art has a vital role to play in the very continuance and persistence of a culture of people.

'For the Palestinian struggle over the last 63 years, poetry and music have played a pivotal part, in terms of the fabric of the culture,' she says. 'The snag is that most Palestinian leaders, still to this day, don't appreciate culture as something that is quite influential so whenever they're talking about their narrative of resistance, culture and music don't exist. They don't realise that it has actually played a role and it continues to play a role.' ■

www.musicians4harmony.org/nyoi.html
www.thefreedomtheatre.org
www.reemkelani.com

Above: Kelani performs in Istanbul in 2008