

# U.S. Musicians Visit North Korea

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## ***This AFSC delegation just came back from DPRK without SARS related problems - Alice***

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### **For Immediate Release**

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### **U.S. MUSICIANS VISIT NORTH KOREA**

*Trip Sponsored by American Friends Service Committee*

*Underscores Peace, Reconciliation*

Philadelphia, PA - A delegation of three leading Chicago-area classical musicians participated in the Spring Friendship Art Festival in Pyongyang, North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK), April 12-19. The trip was made possible by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) which has worked for peace and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula for decades.

James Reilly, AFSC East Asia Representative organized the tour. The delegation included: **Patrick Blackwell**, a graduate of the Juilliard School in New York City who is now in his fourth season singing with The Lyric Opera of Chicago; solo and collaborative pianist **Jamie Schmidt**, an adjunct faculty member at Lake Forest College and the full-time music director at American Girl Place Theatre in Chicago; **Heather Braoudakis** with the Chicago Symphony Chorus Resident Ensemble, Imagination Theater and The Caroling Party. Heather was accompanied by her husband **Paul Braoudakis**, a communications director for the Willow Creek Association a group that links like-minded, action-oriented Illinois churches together for strategic vision, training, and resources.

The Chicago Ensemble performed twice, including a performance attended by Kim Yong Nam, official head of state and President of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK. The ensemble performed live in front of thousands of Pyongyang residents and millions around the country via national television. The group's participation was noted in several newspaper articles during the festival.

**Heather Braoudakis** was awarded the Festival's Silver Prize for a female vocalist. This publicity allowed us to present a professional yet engaging and friendly face of Americans directly to the Korean people.

"We clearly have very different opinions and come from different worlds," **Braoudakis** noted. "However, we asked them to not judge us, to see us as individuals and apart from our government. We tried to do the same toward them. We built up a level of trust and by the end of the week I felt honestly that we had become friends."

"We spent the entire week with three guides/translators with whom we became friends," **Braoudakis** adds. "We ate, drank, strolled, talked, debated, and laughed together, building powerful ties of understanding and compassion that endure despite the political divide that continues to separate our two countries."

The festival, now in its 21<sup>st</sup> year, includes hundreds of performers from nearly 50 different countries. The group attended a number of cultural performances while in Pyongyang, and observed music instruction in the Pyongyang Children's Palace. They also shopped in city stores, ate in a local noodle restaurant, visited museums and parks, and took a ride on the Pyongyang subway.

Most importantly, the group was able to build trust, understanding, and personal friendships with North Koreans through professional cooperation and informal discussion. The musicians and AFSC worked closely with the festival officials in planning and implementing their performances.

For **Jamie Schmidt**, perhaps the most poignant moment was teaching the song "Circle of Friends,"

written for his theater in Chicago, to the waitresses in the hotel restaurant and guides. They practiced it for five hours the next day, and that night, Americans and Koreans gathered together around the restaurant piano and sang it beautifully.

Jamie notes, "I stayed up till four a.m. that night, having an intense, heartfelt conversation with our two guides. No one was around who spoke English, we were speaking freely and from our hearts. It was an amazing discussion, and I learned a great deal from them. I came to understand them, and their country, far better."

"In the beginning, this relationship was something of a 'delicate dance'," **Paul Braoudakis** added. "However, we were most impressed with the relationships we built with our three guides/translators."

The group observed a number of disturbing aspects of the country as well. They visited the mausoleum where former leader Kim Il Song is preserved. There were posters criticizing the US military and a graphic photo exhibition of the two middle-school girls run over by an armored vehicle in Seoul late last year. There were glimpses into a society that allows very little personal expression or freedoms, and how that affects individuals on a daily basis.

"North Korean people are not 'evil,' nor are they all starving," states **James Reilly** who has conducted extensive research in East Asian politics at the Brookings Institution in Washington DC. "They are hardly the brainwashed, faceless pieces in a threatening military machine that the US media tends to suggest. They are human beings. They have families whom they love very much. They showed us pictures of their children and talked about their future. We played billiards with one of our guides and his wife, and talked late into the night sharing dreams and personal experiences."

"I see myself as a pacifist and that became consolidated on this trip," reflects **Schmidt**. "My main purpose in coming was not musical, but to make personal communication and build relationships. We used music as a vehicle to go beyond the 'megaphone diplomacy,' and I think we succeeded."

"For me, this trip was not based on professional ambitions; no one in the music circles will recognize this as an 'achievement'," **Patrick Blackwell** emphasized. "I came to North Korea for personal reasons, but it was not an easy decision. Yet when I saw children waving at me, when I was able to share my music with people here, I was very glad that I had come."

The American Friends Service Committee is a faith-based organization working for peace, justice and reconciliation in 22 countries of the world. With national headquarters in Philadelphia and

regional offices in Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Des Moines, New York, San Francisco, Seattle, Pasadena, California; and Cambridge, Massachusetts, AFSC emphasizes people, not politics or ideology - upholding the dignity and promise of every person.

"Engagement with North Korea is not impossible," **Reilly states**. "We can be friends, and come to understand and trust each other as individuals. This is as true in politics and economics as it is in the cultural realm. It will be a slow, difficult process, but our experience of the past week shows that engagement is the only road to true peace."

"[It was] an incredible opportunity...an experience of a lifetime." **Paul Braoudakis** concluded.

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*The American Friends Service Committee is a Quaker organization that includes people of various faiths who are committed to social justice, peace and humanitarian service. Its work is based on the belief in the worth of every person and faith in the power of love to overcome violence and injustice.*

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