

Music as a Means of Developing US, DPRK Relations

As the New York Philharmonic prepares to perform in North Korea on February 26, the National Committee on North Korea (NCNK) is launching an occasional newsletter about exchanges taking place between our two countries.

Over the last several years, many groups have traveled from the United States to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea or DPRK, (the official name of North Korea). During this period, U.S. non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other groups have hosted many North Korean delegations, both in the United States and in other countries. These exchanges have allowed citizens in both countries to gain a better understanding of one another, providing a basis for improved relations. Through exchanges of doctors, agricultural experts and teachers, North Koreans and Americans have had the opportunity to begin to understand one another's cultures, societies and traditions.

While the New York Philharmonic may be the most eminent American musical group to visit the DPRK, it is by no means the first. American music groups that have performed in the DPRK in the past include "The Trail Band" (a blue grass band from Oregon) and a trio of classical musicians from Chicago. And, while the New York Philharmonic is rightly famous among aficionados of classical music, it is not the most widely known of the American musical groups to perform inside the DPRK. As you'll see in our first newsletter story below, the twice Platinum, GRAMMY Award-winning band Casting Crowns performed a combination of popular tunes, their own music, and North Korean songs in Pyongyang in the spring of 2007.

U.S. Musical Performances in North Korea – My Experience

By: Robert E. Springs, Jr.

As a frequent traveler to North Korea on behalf of a humanitarian non-governmental organization, I applaud the upcoming performance by the New York Philharmonic scheduled to take place in North Korea's capitol, Pyongyang, later this month. I have been an eye-witness observer of the dramatic changes that have taken place inside North Korea over the last ten years – I recently returned from my 47th trip -- and I heartily encourage this type of goodwill exchange.

It can be difficult to understand the current context inside North Korea without access to obtain first hand information, and so I thought I would share some highlights.

There are many examples of North Korea allowing various levels of their society to be "exposed" to music composed outside of the country. Several non-governmental organizations have taken musical groups over the last five years. In each case these groups have selected their own music and have been encouraged by North Korean representatives to perform their own music and "world recognized pieces." North Korean artistic schools I have visited train musicians in both national and classical music.

Another point of reference is the inter-Korean symphony concert in August of 2000 at KBS, jointly broadcast in North and South Korea. Subsequently a second inter-Korean concert was broadcast live in both North and South Korea, and popular South Korean pop groups such as *Shinhwa* and *Baby V.O.X.* have

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performed their own music in Pyongyang.

In April 2007 our organization took the GRAMMY Award winning group *Casting Crowns* to Pyongyang. The group, which had its first two albums certified “platinum,” performed their own music as well as some familiar tunes in Pyongyang. They were very well-received and played three concerts to increasingly packed houses. Their performance was broadcast nationally, and they received an award for their rendition of *Amazing Grace*. Third parties who were in North Korea at the same time confirmed seeing the broadcast shown in a public setting in Pyongyang.

On most of my trips to North Korea, which typically last two weeks, I interact with local community leaders, workers, and citizens who have been the recipients of our aid for the last ten years. This represents tens of thousands of ordinary people who have benefited from the generosity of the American people, and they are demonstrably grateful. We have developed mutual understanding and respect for each other over the last ten years, and I believe this has directly contributed to the many changes that have taken

place in the DRPK. Among the thousands of people we work with at the local and central government level, the overwhelming attitudes are of seeking peace and reconciliation.

If we know anything from the cold war, it is this: music can inspire thoughts and open minds far beyond the constricted political boundaries that



citizens in many countries must face. People to people exchanges and working together to find real solutions are the keys to normalized relations. The New York Philharmonic should go to Pyongyang in the spirit of goodwill and cultural exchange. Any other motive will only inhibit the advancement of increased openness.

Robert E. Springs, CEO & President for Global Resource Services (www.grsworld.org), a humanitarian non-governmental organization, has worked in North Korea for over ten years. For more information about the Casting Crowns trip, please visit the GRS website.

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The National Committee on North Korea (NCNK) advances, promotes and facilitates principled engagement between citizens of the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. It enables thoughtful dialogue about North Korea among experts from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences in an effort to foster greater understanding in the United States about the DPRK. Views expressed by individual NCNK members and/or contributors to this newsletter are their own.

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