Milton Academy Jazz Students Tour South Africa, Explore Cultures

IN MARCH, A GROUP OF 28 student musicians from Massachusetts' Milton Academy (along with eight adults) toured South Africa for 17 days, visiting schools and giving performances at institutions as well as jazz venues. This was the 10th time that I had taken students from Milton Academy on tour in South Africa.

During Milton Academy's recent tour, students directed by Bob Sinicrope (center) performed with students from Groote Schuur High School in Cape Town, South Africa.

FRANCES SCANLON

The origin of these tours goes back to 1991, when Milton Academy was fortunate to host South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim at our school. When Ibrahim heard our students perform his music, he was brought to tears and enthusiastically invited us to tour his homeland. Our first tour occurred in 1992, when many apartheid policies and practices were still in place. It was powerful to see firsthand the movement for racial equality and learn the significant role that music played in the struggle for political and social freedom. South African society was in a historic transition, moving toward the nation's free democratic elections in 1994.

Over the course of these 10 tours, we have established meaningful, ongoing connections with several South African musicians and school programs, especially the Music Academy of Gauteng (MAG) near Johannesburg, founded by Johnny Mekoa. A day's visit to MAG provides a forum for students from both schools to perform together, teach one another and learn from one another. It's a profound cultural exchange that always ends in a joyful jam session that makes all the differences in student backgrounds disappear.

Another long-term connection is with Cape Town's Amy Biehl Foundation, which highlights a remarkable story of reconciliation and forgiveness. Amy was a Fulbright Scholar from California who wanted to make a difference in South Africa. In addition to registering South Africans to vote, she worked with members of the African National Congress at the University of the Western Cape's Community Law Centre, researching gender issues to help influence the content of the nation's new Constitution.

On Aug. 25, 1993, Amy was murdered in Cape Town in an act of political mob violence. Through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Amy's parents requested amnesty for four young men who had served four years of their 18-year prison sentences in connection with Amy's death. These men were released because they convinced the panel their crime was a part of the political process against apartheid. The Biehl family then established a foundation to weave a barrier against violence in Cape Town townships by providing arts and athletic opportunities for disadvantaged youth.

Among the Amy Biehl Foundation's administrators are two of the men who served jail time for Amy's death. I have gotten to know these men very well. In fact, one of them, along with Amy's mother, spent a week at our home in Milton, and we can attest to the genuine bond and love that exists between the family and these two men. Milton Academy is most fortunate to be closely connected to this foundation. Since 2001 we have delivered thousands of dollars of donated materials to support their music program, and our students have been featured at several Cape Town Human Rights Day Township Jazz Festivals, which are sponsored by the foundation.

Milton students, like most young musicians, love to tour. Besides playing at numerous conferences and European jazz festivals, we've performed in California, Florida and Montreal, as well as twice visiting the White House. The benefits of touring are immeasurable. The musical growth that occurs during the tour is often remarkable. The excitement preceding the tour and the performance experience is unbeatable. While we're "on the road," we pursue opportunities to increase students' social awareness. Last but not least, touring is fun for the students and it creates lasting bonds within the group.

An extended tour can, however, be an expensive endeavor. In addition to our fundraising efforts, parents help finance these trips (based on the individual family's ability to pay). Additionally, our school is fortunate to have connections with companies that allow our students to act as "goodwill couriers," delivering donated materials (such as books, instruments and supplies) to music programs that are in desperate need. Over the years, we have delivered more than $170,000 worth of donated materials and donations to South African music programs. We are most grateful to the music companies and individuals who give us the privilege of delivering donated materials on their behalf.

Our students also travel closer to home and interact with residents in Milton. After all, students needn't travel long distances to experience the benefits of touring. Milton Academy has developed ongoing relationships with a local school for autistic children, as well as residential centers for senior citizens. Visits to these institutions have provided invaluable ways to expand our students' horizons. Interacting with people of diverse backgrounds offers opportunities to learn about inclusion and to develop compassion and acceptance.

Over the years, I have found that jazz education conferences have been a great resource for finding opportunities for student groups to tour. There are some wonderful tour companies who exhibit at the Jazz Education Network (JEN) conferences, and I have made some amazing friendships and connections at these gatherings.

I strongly encourage music teachers to take their students "off campus"—even if it is merely a trip down the street—so that kids can reap the priceless benefits of performing away from school. *—Bob Sinicrope*

Bob Sinicrope founded Milton Academy's jazz program in 1974 and continues to direct it. He is the president of the Jazz Education Network (JEN) and the recipient of the inaugural John LaPorta Jazz Educator of the Year Award as well as a DownBeat Jazz Education Achievement Award. Email him at bob_sinicrope@milton.edu.