

Silk Roadblock

Yo-Yo Ma's celebrated project for global understanding through music runs into Donald Trump's sour note.

BY MANUEL MADRID AUGUST 2, 2017



MAX WHITTAKER/SILK ROAD

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In 2000, the revered cellist Yo-Yo Ma embarked on a project that would today seem quixotic: uniting a group of musicians from every corner of the globe, with the goal of using music to transcend national and cultural boundaries. He couldn't have imagined then how radical a statement the simple existence of the Silk Road Ensemble would soon become.

Silk Road joined together virtuoso musicians on instruments from different cultures that had never before been played together. These include the pipa and sheng from China, the Galician bagpipes, the oud from the Middle East, and more than

a dozen others. Artistically, the result is astonishing. Culturally, the message is that appreciating “the music of strangers” (the title of a 2016 documentary about Silk Road) can be transformative.

But quite without intending to, Silk Road now finds itself as a cry of artistic protest against heightened xenophobia and irrational immigration policies. President Donald Trump's self-proclaimed “travel ban,” despite being partially restrained by court decisions, continues to leave Silk Road musicians and countless others literally stranded in uncertainty.

Kayhan Kalhor, for one, doesn't know if he will be allowed to return to his home in California.

A world-renowned player of the Persian kamancheh and one of Silk Road's first members, Kalhor was born and raised in Iran, one of the countries included in both Trump's original and revised executive orders. Kalhor, who carries a Canadian passport, left the United States in June to visit his wife in Iran, a long-delayed homecoming. Kalhor, ironically, had been unable to return to Iran due to political problems with the country's previous administration. In the Mideast, he stands for dangerous artistic freedom. In the United States, he is treated as a possible menace.

A few days after his U.S. departure, after flying from Iran to Turkey for a concert, Kalhor received a letter from the American embassy in Ankara. His green card was being revoked. No reason was provided in the letter.

“Normally, the United States would be home for me, but I'm stuck in Iran at the moment,” Kalhor told the Prospect on a call from his home in Tehran. “I'm having two lives—I really don't know what's going to happen.”

Kalhor moved to America in 1992 after he graduated from the music program at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. Kalhor's weapon is a bowed string instrument of delicacy and range, virtually unknown outside his native region and

surrounding countries. The kamancheh is widely used in Iranian classical music. Immigrants like Kalhor who are able to demonstrate an “extraordinary ability” in science, business, or art can be granted an EB-1 visa, which allows for employment-based permanent residency. I ask Kalhor if he had received such a visa and whether he had used it in his application for his green card. “Yes,” he says—and then laughs. “But apparently that doesn't count for anything.”

Another Silk Road member, the celebrated Syrian clarinetist Kinan Azmeh, knows the feeling. He was stuck in limbo after Trump's initial executive order in January. Azmeh, who first arrived in New York to study at Juilliard only one week before the September 11 attacks, has lived in the United States for 16 years. He was granted a green card through his EB-1 visa in 2014.

Azmeh was in Beirut for a concert the night the executive order was signed, prohibiting Syrians and citizens of six other Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States. Azmeh, who has been unable to return to his apartment in Damascus for six years because of the country's ongoing civil war, is still struck by the memory today. “I still find it hard to believe that one signature can change the lives of so many people,” Azmeh said in an email to the Prospect. “I continue to think that such a ban is an insult to humanity.”

Less than two months after being stranded in Beirut, Azmeh was treated to an unexpected dose of déjà vu. He had been scheduled to attend and perform in England at the Skoll World Forum, an annual gathering for social entrepreneurs around the world, but could not get a visa to enter the country. The British government had outsourced visa processing to a for-profit company, VFS Global. The usual ability of performing artists to have recourse to senior diplomatic personnel in special situations was blocked—by private-sector bureaucracy.



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Cristin Bagnall, Silk Road's director of artistic and learning programs, pulled out all the stops.

“We've had challenges over the years, but in those cases the issue was complexity. I've never had one where everything was done correctly, and we still got turned away,” says Bagnall.

Cristina Pato, acclaimed player of the Galician bagpipes and longtime Silk Road member, had to draft an alternate program for the ensemble to play in case Azmeh couldn't make it. He almost didn't. It took the combined personal influence of Yo-Yo Ma and officials from the London School of Economics and Oxford University to get Azmeh there just in time for Silk Road's performance, exhausted from having to revise last-minute travel plans.

“What I was used to, after [the 9/11 attacks], was a conversation around: OK, what hoops do I need to jump through?” says Bagnall. “Now, the word is that a Syrian is just going to be a problem.”

“There's an acceptance that this is just how the world works now,” Bagnall adds. “I don't know if I want to live in a world like that.”

Because of the complications inherent in carrying a Syrian passport, Azmeh was forced to miss a rehearsal and a panel discussion. The theme of the entire forum? “Fault Lines: Creating Common Ground.”

The irony of a cross-culture collaboration that uses music, a language without borders, being limited by borders is not lost on those in Silk Road. And the travel ban isn't dead yet—far from it. In June, the Trump administration asked the Supreme Court to reinstate the six-country ban, requesting an expedited hearing. Later that month, just before the end of their term, the nation's highest court lifted a stay order on the ban, allowing for its partial implementation. Under the partial ban, permanent residents, visa carriers, and immigrants with a “bona fide

relationship with a person or entity” in the country will be allowed in.

The constant legal back-and-forth that has come to define the ban, which has been blocked multiple times over the course of the last four months, can still make life difficult for foreign musicians, even if they have a green card.

With so much recurring uncertainty surrounding the application of the ban, booking artists like Kalhor and Azmeh is a risky prospect.

This confusion, “has a very strong impact on arts presenters,” says Matthew Covey, director of Tamizdat, a nonprofit that does pro bono work for foreign artists struggling to enter the country. “If you're a big venue, you're taking a major production risk to book an artist when you don't know if there's any way that they're going to get here.”

Long before Trump, Ma testified before the House Committee on Government Reform in 2006, pleading with the government to ease the “extraordinarily high” barriers faced by foreign musicians. “I think dignity is the huge issue that we're all talking about,” he told the committee.

As anti-immigrant sentiments heightened in the new millennium, Silk Road continued in its mission of connecting different cultures from around the world. Since 2014, ensemble members have made several trips to refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan, bringing instruments and sharing their art with children displaced by the conflict in Syria.

“I think cross-cultural collaboration should be the norm and not the exception,” according to Azmeh, who, in addition to Lebanon and Jordan, has also visited refugee camps in Holland and Germany and has hosted various fund-raising concerts for

Syrian refugees. “We forget that this is what humanity should be all about. In fact, it is our only way forward.”

The impetus of the Silk Road Ensemble flows directly against the undercurrents of xenophobia and nationalism that have pervaded the recent political backlashes in the United States and Europe.

“Hatred is a result of ignorance,” says Kalhor. “Culture can overcome that. Culture can introduce people to one another.”

The Music of Strangers documentary winds down where the present day begins: navigating the challenges of a world growing rapidly more exclusive. Kalhor sits in front of the camera and relays his belief that the toxic rhetoric of the few will one day fade away in the minds of the many.

“Nobody remembers who was king when Beethoven lived,” Kalhor reminds the audience. “But culture stays. ... Music stays.”

For the moment, Kalhor has no choice but to stay in Iran. What comes next, he doesn't know.

This story has been updated from its original version.