



Suleymaniye Mosque, inside & out (built 1558) • Miles Trio & Erkan Ogur • David Jennings, Michael Miles, Geraldo de Oliveira

## A Report on Chicago Musicians in Istanbul [Musicians without Borders]

The Miles Trio, three musicians affiliated with and sponsored by the Old Town School of Folk Music, and funded through a MacArthur Foundation International Connections grant, departed Chicago on October 5 for a two-week residency of workshops and concerts at ITU MIAM, Center for Advanced Music Studies in Istanbul. MIAM is a graduate-level music school that is part of the Istanbul Technical University.

Two weeks prior to departure, the **NY Times** ran this disturbing story: **“A Sense of Instability Settles Over Turkey as Conflict With Kurds Flares...** Nationalist and pro-government throngs filled the streets of Istanbul and Ankara for two nights last week, chanting ‘God is great’ as they stormed a prominent newspaper and set fire to the offices of a Kurdish political party...”

Although this caused us to seriously consider canceling the entire tour, email exchanges with our hosts provided enough reassurance that this was an isolated incident, not an everyday routine, and we determined to continue.

Once there, the world of Istanbul was exotically rich with history, culture,



Galata Tower, built in 1348



“Hands up!” graffiti near Galata

cuisine. Armed with a banjo, a Brazilian cajon, and vibes, we stepped into this world for our cultural musical exchange. We presented workshops on composition, songwriting, jazz harmony, American folk music, Brazilian percussion and the American banjo. The students were all graduate level students from across the world who were very serious and devoted to their art. Things were going quite smoothly and as expected.

One evening after our concert we were approached by two Iranian musicians who explained that they ran a small community music school near the university. I was very interested in seeing this and we agreed to meet the following day at their school ([www.besiktasmuzik.com](http://www.besiktasmuzik.com)). After a few back and forth logistical details, came this note from our new friend, Farhad Shidfar: "You are welcome...Iranian tea will be waiting for you." I couldn't help but stare at this note and think that President Obama might be so fortunate as to receive such a note from someone in Iran.

That was Friday night. At 10am on Saturday news broke that a bomb exploded near the train station in Ankara, 250 miles away. Initially details were sketchy and the TV news was only in Turkish, so we were at a disadvantage. Heartbreaking fact is that this was the deadliest terror attack in modern Turkish history with 102 people killed and 400 wounded. But on Saturday morning, it was not clear what had really happened. So we proceeded to our destination, the Iranian music school.

Walking downhill towards the Bosphorus, 15 minutes from the university, we arrive at given address. Up four flights of stairs, we are greeted with the promised Iranian tea and a collection of four musicians. Our host, Farhad, treats us to a detailed explanation of his instrument, the *saz*, and the infinitely complex structure of microtonal melodies. He is joined by his friends playing drums—the hourglass *darbuka*, and the *daf*, a large hoop drum with rattles inside and his wife Parisa, an exquisite Azerbaijani singer. The fish market street below is buzzing with Saturday afternoon commerce. In this crowded little room on the 4th floor above the crowded street—music of America and Brazil joins hands with the music of Iran and Azerbaijan. Regardless of the fact that half the room can't actually speak to the other half, there is this beautiful sound rising, accompanied by the human hearts and spirits at play.

Then the phone rings with frightening news for Volkan, one of the musicians, that his sister and nephew are victims of the bombing, still alive, but being taken away from Ankara by helicopter. The room goes silent as Volkan quickly leaves. The look on his face changes from the bright glimmer of his ancient drumming to the dark shadow of heartache.



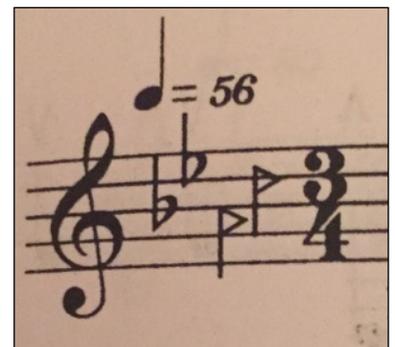
MIAM Music Conservatory



Open Air Market



Iranian music school



Microtonal Key Signature

I felt like the helpless witness to violent crime.

Later that day we are told that because of the bombing, our events for the next two days, including a concert with Turkish superstar Erkan Oğur, are cancelled. The local news, which we can't understand, is ablaze with reactions to the bombing and concerns for its spread.

Feeling like strangers in a strange land during a time of crisis, I wrote to the vice president of the university to make a suggestion that we devote our final concert (a few days later) to the victims of the bombing. I suggested that perhaps we could take up a collection, and talked with her about my vivid recollection of being on stage on 9/11 in a room full of shocked people. On that occasion we found the calming character of singing to provide some temporary balm to the horror of the moment.

The vice president, Yelda Ozgen, wrote back saying,

“Thank you very much for this wonderful message, I also feel that we shouldn't lose our hope and need to make more sounds for peace, more music to heal ourselves and maybe one day the violence stops. For a better world we have to work together as musicians.”

Erkan Oğur agreed to join us for the concert, but preferred that no explicit dedication be made, suggesting instead that we let our music speak for our hearts. At the concert, as we shared our musical spirits, he offered up a song that he described as a generic prayer—about nothing in particular but everything at once. We played our original works, a few jazz tunes, Brazilian chorro, and ancient music of Asia Minor. For two hours we became this far-reaching quartet. After a standing ovation and the presentation of flowers, the experience started fading into a dream-like memory.

Chicago jazz critic and radio host Howard Mandel, connected us to his brother Lawrence, who serves as the Deputy Chief of Mission at US Embassy in Ankara. We met with Lawrence two days after the bombing, and the day after our concert received this note.

### **To The Michael Miles Trio:**

“You all are the real diplomats, who meet with people from other countries, communicate through your music, and break down barriers. Sorry that events of the day made it harder for you.”

— Lawrence C. Mandel, Deputy Chief of Mission, U.S. Embassy, Ankara, Turkey.

In times of crisis, it seems that more Doctors Without Borders are what the world needs. What do the arts do to make the world better after a bomb blows up the train station? Not being a doctor, but



Neck of Saz



Michael & Farhad



David Jennings on vibes



Geraldo's amazing hands & bongos



Erkan Ogur and guitar

being musicians with the privilege of sharing and collaborating across dangerous or unfriendly borders, we have this exquisite responsibility and opportunity to touch the hearts of the people we encounter. By doing so, we can show respect and appreciation, and tangibly demonstrate it through artistic collaboration. The messages sent in every direction are beautiful, peaceful, and global in perspective.

We are artists without borders.

- Michael J. Miles, October, 2015

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Miles Trio with Lawrence Mandel  
Deputy Chief, US Embassy



Standing Ovation, MIAM Auditorium  
Oct 14, 2016