

Breaking the Silence AKA The UB Project, Mongolia [Facebook: The UB Project]  
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The UB Project was inspired by two related objectives concerning music and its role in the artistic development in contemporary Mongolian culture especially within the city of Ulaanbaatar. The first goal was to bring musical education and inspiration to at least a small portion of Ulaanbaatar's desperately large and underprivileged orphan population; the second was to bring high quality music into the public spaces of the city as a symbolic gesture, promoting artistic enrichment and accessibility as imperative constituents of cultural development. The funds from the Davis Foundation supplied all of the financial resources for this project – there were no other fund-raising efforts involved or donations collected, though the project was presented at the Clinton Global Initiative University (CGIU) conference in March, 2014 primarily in search of information that might make the project more successful, but also in search of valuable personal connections that might prove advantageous for the project's longevity.

We feel that the UB Project was a nearly overwhelming success. Not everything went exactly as planned, but the goals were achieved along with a plethora of other wonderful surprises along the way. The first deviation that we were forced to make from the original plan had to do with the number of orphanages that we could feasibly visit within the allotted amount of time. Transportation around Ulaanbaatar proved to be much more time consuming, dangerous and expensive than anticipated. This forced us to limit ourselves to visiting only two orphanages, Our Home No. 1 and Erdem Tov (Education Home), but allowed us to work with more children at each site since the budget still allowed us to purchase eleven violins – even more than originally anticipated. In retrospect, this turned out to be more of an advantage than an obstacle. Teaching violin to small children in groups of five or six at a time for only one month with the expectation of them being able to perform in front of an audience by the end is an incredibly strenuous, albeit rewarding, task. That being said, we did it – or perhaps it is better to say, they did it. Another unanticipated advantage involved the children's exceptional enthusiasm and maturity. The daily lives of the children that we were working with are filled with struggle, uncertainty and anxieties that most children will never consider until they have nearly reached adulthood. Though these are certainly undesirable conditions, the children who endure them are enriched with a sense of responsibility well beyond their years and express the deepest appreciation for any generosity that is presented to them. Though it was at least partially a result of our determination that made this project successful, it was just as much a result of the remarkable attributes of the orphans we worked with.

The public performances were also very successful. Perhaps it would be presumptuous to infer that their popularity will have a direct result on Mongolia's artistic development – but they certainly raised significant awareness throughout the city concerning the project. The audience in attendance at our final event was considerably larger than expected and a majority of the people who came had only heard about the project after having heard us play on the street. After the project was concluded at the final event, several TV news stations and one radio station requested both live and recorded interviews with us, always with the preference that we might bring the orphans along. Though it is the capital city of Mongolia and has a population of nearly two million people, the residents of Ulaanbaatar create an intimate community; consanguineous and patriotic; news of anything that might play to the advantage of their country's future spreads quickly and is cultivated in very socially organic ways.

We are confident that our final event was not the end of the UB project. The popularity of our performances and of the conceptual foundations of the project throughout the local community along with the several inquiries that we've received from other young musicians, expressing interest in becoming involved in the project, would perhaps make the UB Project more difficult to stop than it would be to give its naturally collected momentum the allowance it has already requested. Already we

are in contact with several parties and individuals who are interested in continuing our efforts. Though the specific details of the projects new direction are yet to be determined, it is certain that the UB Project will have a future. One of the great characteristics of the UB Project is its simplicity. Now that we have set up strong connections with the two orphanages, the Music and Dance College of Ulaanbaatar and what is now called The UB Youth Ensemble (the group of young conservatory musicians we worked with for the performances both on the street and during the final event that desires to continue cultivating the ensemble for performance purposes no matter what happens with the project), any future volunteers would merely need to visit the orphans and provide them with violin lessons, since the children now have their own instruments, whenever they are willing; or program a public concert with the cooperation of The UB Youth Ensemble, which is now experienced with the execution of such things. There is no knowing how many people might benefit from this project; the longer it continues, the more lives it might touch – but for now we have at least made an impact on eleven of the most personally determined young violin students in the world, any of the dozens of audience members at our final event and perhaps hundreds of Mongolians who might have heard us on the radio or seen us on the news. We are proud of the impact that has already been made, but there is no reason to think that it will stop here.

Peace does not imply happiness or comfort, gentleness or ease – rather it implies that there is struggle, and that there is something to be done about it. There is no war in Mongolia or political oppression, the Mongolian people are generous and hospitable beyond compare, and although the country supplies a challenging geography, Mongolians live with tremendous resourcefulness and wholehearted confidence. The danger that the orphans face is entrapment. They come from impoverished families and often from parents who attempt to utilize an ancient lifestyle in a rapidly developing urban community – and their parents were not the first to make this mistake. The conflict between the nationalistic promotion of tradition and the devastatingly privileged consumerist drive to develop, lock the orphans’ parents, the orphans and their next generation as well in an endless loop of mere survival. For the orphans, peace has nothing to do with stability but rather with inspiration – peace means that there is something to be done, that they now know the loop they exist in is not mandatory. Even if they fail to escape it, a life of attempt will be so much more than a life of helplessness.

This project has changed me more than I could have ever imagined. To put things as simply as possible, I have learned that the least privileged are not necessarily the least capable. The opportunity to work with the remarkable children involved in the UB Project exposed me to new definitions of maturity, appreciation, diligence and conviction. Originally, I was expecting to use music as a vehicle for teaching these principles to the children, but in the end it was myself who had to learn what these words really meant and to what extremes they might be taken. This doesn’t mean that we didn’t have anything to present to the children, only that what we came to give them they were more prepared to receive than I would have ever been able to anticipate.

It was our goal to inspire the orphans during their precarious developmental stage and to inform them enough to potentially harbor a lifelong interest in creative activity for the primary purpose of steering them towards a more peaceful future. We were simultaneously striving to re-kindle the innate and necessary artistic culture of the Mongolian people and their impressionable country, because like the orphans, it is also on the cusp of fresh opportunity. Gerle and I are so proud of the children for being able to do what they can do at this point and we know from our experience with the kids that any one of them can do anything they want with their lives. If some of them desire to continue pursuing violin or any musical aspirations that would be wonderful, but if not it’s just as well. The important thing is that we know they have the ability, they have the determination and the courage, they have the creativity, they have the energy and the enthusiasm to do absolutely anything. If they are able to take anything away from this project, if they remember anything from this experience – we merely want them to know that too, we want them to know that they can do anything.





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