

# Harmonious Union

In 15th Season, Embassy Series Turns Concerts Into Cultural Bridges

by Valerie Cooper

**I**n the realm of cultural diplomacy, Jerome Barry is an ambassador who hits all the right notes. Barry, a professional tenor, teacher and linguist, said the most effective form of diplomacy is cultural understanding and outreach — which is exactly what he strives for each year with the Embassy Series, a concert program he founded back in 1994.

Since then, the Embassy Series has grown in size and popularity, with each season featuring dozens of classical musicians performing in embassy and other international settings that showcase the particular country or composer of that performance.

"There are no politics involved — this is all cultural diplomacy," Barry said of the series, which he continues to direct. "My feeling is that cultural diplomacy is something we need desperately nowadays, with our cultural economic borders being blurred, and all the internationalization going on."

To that end, the concert series has opened up more than 50 of the city's embassies to Washington natives and tourists alike, who have experienced not only the music of different countries, but by extension their culture, history and people.

This unique lyrical endeavor — which began with only six embassies — is now in its 15th season and continues to grow geographically and musically more diverse each year. One season featured more than 45 embassies as host venues, but Barry has since scaled the list back. Some 20 embassies are lined up for the 2008-09 season, with more in the works.

Despite the increasing number of interested embassies and patrons, Barry said he wants to keep the focus simple: quality music in an intimate setting available to everyone. "The Embassy Series is a boutique, but it's not snobby," he told *The Washington Diplomat*. "We try to make it accessible to as many people as possible."

At the same time, Barry said it's crucial "to keep it intimate," so attendees get an unadorned feel for an unfamiliar culture. Some events are held at the ambassador's residence and welcome as few as 30 guests, while others, such as the Embassy of Austria, can accommodate more than 300 in their chanceries.

The 2008-09 season kicks off Oct. 31 with a performance by soprano Katarina Mitchell at the Embassy of Slovakia. Other embassies currently scheduled are Israel, Iceland, Croatia, Poland, Turkey, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Australia, France, Senegal, Portugal and Argentina.

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— JEROME BARRY  
Embassy Series founder and director



The tickets, ranging from \$50 to \$150 per concert, also cover a reception or dinner that usually consists of the spotlighted country's native cuisine. Barry noted that the cost is roughly equivalent to the price of a performance at the Kennedy Center. In fact, three of last year's Embassy Series artists have played at the center. "I stress strongly that these concerts be of the highest quality," Barry said.

Last season was the first to feature young pianists, several of whom placed at notable international piano competitions. Austrian pianist Matthias Soucek, for example, is the youngest winner of the International Brahms Competition in Germany.

Jazz was also included for the first time in the 2007 season, and with the



immense response it received, Barry said there was no question about bringing it back this time around.

One such performance will commemorate jazz artist Ahmed Ertegan, founder of Atlantic Records, who died in late 2006. Grammy Award winner Fahir Arslanoglu will pay tribute to the prominent music magnate with a performance at the Turkish residence in December. "It is truly a special event — a historic event," Barry noted.

Along with adding to the musical diversity, Barry said he also hopes to keep adding more countries and cultures each year. "This brings all kinds of people together — it entertains, but it also brings understanding," said Barry, who is fluent in about a dozen languages. "We love to understand other people's misdeeds, and the way to do that is through their culture."

Along with the European countries that have been a staple since the beginning, the Embassy Series has steadily expanded to cover the Middle East, Asia and other parts of the world — including countries without the best of relations with the United States. For instance, Cuba, China and Venezuela joined the ranks in recent years. Laos, Colombia and Uzbekistan are debuting with the series this year, as is the African nation of Senegal. Barry said he hopes to add more sub-Saharan African embassies in the future as well.

Another trend he intends to continue is opening up "houses" and cultures that were once closed to American audiences — an exchange he described as mutually beneficial.

"People who perform here are treated well, shown a lot of respect and appreciation that they'll remember when they return to their country," Barry said. "They're apostles of diplomacy. They're how others learn about us. Our bottom line is that we're promoting goodwill through the culture."

**New in its 15th season, the Embassy Series continues to evolve with its concert performances.** For instance, last season was the first to feature young pianists such as Matthias Soucek of Austria, above. Last year also introduced jazz into the repertoire, which continues this year with Fahir Arslanoglu, left, paying tribute to jazz great Ahmed Ertegan at the Turkish residence in December. A popular staple, the Mercedes-Benz Piano Trio — the Embassy Series ensemble-in-residence, top left — returns with a performance at the Hungarian Embassy on March 20, 2009, as well as at the German Embassy on April 3.

For more information on the Embassy Series, please call (202) 625-2381 or visit [www.embassyseries.org](http://www.embassyseries.org)

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