

DC Offers Embassy Evenings of Musical Diplomacy

You're invited to these embassy soirees and concerts in the nation's capital

The Associated Press

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WASHINGTON October 5, 2010 (AP)

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This Oct. 1, 2010 photo released by Kimberly Mikec shows bass player Carlo DeRosa as he performs... (AP)

It's the season for embassy soirees in the nation's capital, and the public is invited to attend a series of concerts and receptions — not just for the music, but also as a way to sample the social whirl of the diplomatic set on a trip to Washington.

"It's an international experience," said Jerome Barry, artist and founder of the Embassy Series, a string of concerts and receptions that begin in October and end in June at embassies throughout the city.

"You can go to the Kennedy Center for a concert, but when it's finished, you go to the parking lot," Barry said.

"With us, you have the opportunity to dine and to exchange views, thoughts, a broader perspective. It's better than the news. It's all a positive type of approach."

Tickets are priced from \$40 to \$125 and include a concert, open bar with both wine and soft drinks, and a buffet that reflects the culture of the embassy. Guests can mingle with the ambassador and aides in an informal setting that would otherwise be unavailable to the public.

The music ranges from classical to ethnic, with an occasional program featuring opera or even Broadway, thrown in, and is emblematic of Barry's mantra, "uniting people through musical diplomacy." Attire is cocktail chic, though sequined dresses and the occasional tuxedo will dot the crowds.

At the season opener on Oct. 1, guests were treated to Iraqi music played on authentic folkloric instruments such as the santour — an early type of hammered dulcimer — and sung by Iraqis in Arabic. The musical event, held at the Iraqi Cultural Center at the city's Dupont Circle, had guests swaying in their seats and clapping to the Middle Eastern rhythms. One Iraqi woman even ululated in celebration. The musicians wore embroidered ethnic outfits and performed under the banner "Safaafir Iraqi Maqam Ensemble."

"We can lift our spirit and soar with the tunes that virtually go back centuries," Ambassador Samir Shakir M. Sumaida'ie told the crowd, expressing his relief that the evening provided a view of Iraq unrelated to war. "This is an opportunity to see the other side of Iraq."



This Friday, Oct. 1, 2010 photo released by Kimberly Mikes shows a table of food including fruit... (AP)

When the performance was over, attention shifted to food. A buffet offered platters of Middle Eastern dishes like baba ganoush, which is made from eggplant, along with lamb kebab, a meat-filled croquette called kibbeh, saffron rice, fattoush salad with pita and greens, and hummus. As guests worked their way through the spread, they also enjoyed fresh watermelon, strawberries and cantaloupe, along with dates and baklava pastries for dessert.

Upcoming events in the series include an Oct. 17 Beethoven concert at the Austrian embassy; an Oct. 29 concert of Baroque music at the Australian embassy; music, food and wine from Kazakhstan at that country's embassy on Nov. 21; and songs from the Irving Berlin musical "Call Me Madam" at the Luxembourg Embassy, Dec. 3 and Dec. 4, in honor of Perle Mesta, the socialite who inspired the musical and who served as a U.S. ambassador to Luxembourg.

The Iraqi event was not held at the embassy, but at the Iraqi Cultural Center, the venue's first such gathering. "The embassy is too small and the residence, although very elegant, would hold only 30 people in each room, not suitable for a concert," Barry said in an email. The event drew 175 people, filling the room to capacity.

Throughout the evening, the ambassador, Barry and their guests exchanged ideas from geopolitics to recipes. One guest observed that the events are a little like taking a trip abroad, since embassies are technically the property of their countries.

"We want people to experience some of the customs of the country to get a feeling for it," Barry said.

The Embassy Series, which sells tickets online or by telephone, is not the only avenue to the embassy circuit. The European Union holds an annual open house at member embassies in Washington (scheduled for May 7 in 2011). Cultural Tourism DC organizes an Around the World Embassy Tour each spring, a day of open houses at more than 30 embassies, as part of Passport DC, a program showcasing international culture and heritage in Washington. Next year the embassy tour is scheduled for May 14. An annual fundraiser for Cultural Tourism DC pits embassy chefs against one another in a contest; the next Embassy Chef Challenge is April 12, with tickets at \$250.



This Oct. 1, 2010 photo released by Kimberly Mikoc shows members of the Safaa'ir Iraqi Maqam... (AP)

In addition, some embassies dedicate space and staff for special programs to engage the public, such as the Embassy of Chile, known for wine-tastings, and Sweden's House of Sweden in Georgetown, which hosts everything from family events to lectures.

If You Go...

EMBASSY SERIES: <http://www.embassyseries.com/> or 202-625-2361