A Moving Remembrance and Memoir of our Music For The Children of Za’atari
By Rosanna Butterfield, Violoncello Fellow, New World Symphony

Rosanna Butterfield, Cello Fellow at the New World Symphony - America's Orchestral Academy, wrote this beautiful, moving story about her experience at Za’atari Refugee Camp, in Jordan with our Music For The Children of Za’atari Residency for the Syrian Refugee Children in August.

(Photo: George Mathew, Music For Life International)

It would be easy, in this climate of lockouts, no-hire auditions and dwindling endowments, to feel helpless and discouraged as a young professional trying to make a career in the musical world. Last week, one of the visiting coaches at the New World Symphony emphasized the importance of making connections with our audience as well as our board members and administrators. It’s becoming clear that the survival of great musical institutions depends on the strength and goodwill of the relationships that we musicians form with our colleagues and the community which we serve. And this is how it should be. What is music if not the language of shared emotions, shared experiences that cannot be described in words? We have at our fingertips the tools for building stronger, more supportive communities, for rebuilding and mending broken relationships. The key is the spirit in which we make our music. This past summer I had a variety of experiences which taught me a great deal about the spirit of music.

The first was my trip to Medellín, Colombia, with members of the New World Symphony. We spent a week at the beginning of May giving lessons and rehearsing with the Orquesta Filarmonica de Medellín. On the last night of the visit we played as members of the orchestra under the baton of Pablo Mielgo. I have rarely witnessed such energy and passionate enthusiasm for the music as I saw that week.
The concert itself was fantastic — it felt as though we were dancing our way through Dvorak’s “New World Symphony”, arms linked with one another and the audience. The way in which the members of the musical community interact in Medellín is truly inspiring. There is a sense of support and encouragement that goes both ways between the more advanced players and those just beginning to learn. Sometimes when we get into the highly competitive “professional” scene, we lose track of building and maintaining that kind of working relationship. In the case of the Academia in Medellín, the young musicians’ strong bonds with one another is one of the main things that makes them stand out, and the result is electric.

In July 2014, I was invited to travel to Amman, Jordan, with a New York City-based organization called Music for Life International, as a representative of both the New World Symphony and the Verbier Festival. I had heard of the benefit concerts that they had been doing at Carnegie Hall, and admired the vision of its founder, conductor George Mathew. In January 2014, several fellows from the New World Symphony went to New York and played in “Shostakovich for the Children of Syria,” where Mr. Mathew announced that they would be sending a group to Jordan to connect with the refugees themselves later in the year. It is a special and joyful thing to walk on stage in a massive, beautiful concert hall and play a symphony dedicated to people in need on the other side of the planet. But it is altogether another thing to make a commitment to take that music to those people in person. George Mathew had the passion and drive that it took to make the trip happen, along with the support of some very generous sponsors and donors. In August, George and a string quartet which comprised myself and three amazing colleagues from the Metropolitan Opera and the Buffalo Philharmonic, traveled to Amman, where we were hosted by Questscope. Over the course of our week-long visit, we held an open rehearsal for members of the Palestine Youth Orchestra, coached a young orchestra at the National Music Conservatory, and even had a day-trip to see the ancient city of Petra. But the main focus of the trip was working with children in Za’atari, a refugee camp close to the border with Syria, where Questscope has an extensive educational and mentorship program. I had no idea what to expect, but it turns out that a group of children seeing a cello for the first time behaves the same whether they are extremely privileged kids from Miami Beach or Syrian refugees in Jordan. These young people’s hunger for knowledge and for music was evident, and over the course of our few short visits, they made huge progress in our workshops and learned how to hold instruments and read simple rhythms. Before we left for the trip, I had wondered about how our Syrian audience would react to hearing Haydn, Borodin and Shostakovich string quartets for the first time, and worried that we might be imposing “our music” on “them.” And then I realized that I was completely upside-down in my thinking. Who am I to decide who music belongs to? I am no more a child of Soviet Russia than the children of Za’atari are. If I can enjoy and connect with the music of Shostakovich, why shouldn’t they? The audience not only enjoyed the music — they were mesmerized. We also found a string quartet
arrangement of El Helwa Di, a well-known Arabic song that we suspected everyone in the audience would know. Sure enough, they jumped at the opportunity to teach us a little about their musical tradition, coaching us on the correct tempo and style, and joining in. By the final performance, we had about ten people lined up behind us, singing joyfully at the top of their voices! At the end of our final performance at the camp, which was attended by members of the Council of elders and the Jordanian police, a policeman stood and gave an impromptu speech. He said “Even we policemen realize that we need more than food and shelter to survive. Today your music has nourished our souls.” The image of this strong man in his uniform speaking so poetically will stay with me forever. George Mathew also spoke wise words about the effect that music can have on a community:

“Introducing music in Za’atari has the power to change the narratives that the children create for their future. There is a radiance and a resilience that these children emit when they are focused on their future. Their engagement with music then becomes a hopeful representation of that future for the entire community.”

After working with Questscope and Music for Life, I feel so moved and inspired by the work that they do, and I want to continue to be a part of it. My trip to Jordan has changed my life, particularly my way of thinking about the needs of others. I don’t think that it’s naive to believe that music can help to defeat evil and create truly lasting change in the world. Music is about sharing; music is about making space for beauty and for inward reflection in our lives. Music is light and joy and goodness.