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Music in Disaster Relief: The Aroma of Beauty

We drove into a gravel lot that was fairly clear of debris and started unloading the supplies to hand out. Others started making meat-and-veggie stew on large propane burners. It was hard not to stare at the devastation surrounding us or flinch at the stench of the decaying fish and squid washed in by the tsunami.

Then something magical happened. The pleasant aromas of the cooking soup began to drift through the air, a smell almost forgotten in the memories of the survivors who began to line up. They had not been able to cook for over a month. It awakened a hunger . . . an appetite . . . for delicious hot food—but also for life. It felt as if hope itself was actually wafting through the air.

Bruce Huebner, graduate of Tokyo University of the Arts, walked up and down the lines of waiting people playing his shakuhachi bamboo flute. The tunes gently carried stories of both pain and peace. It awakened a joy for life that had been forgotten. It



was not a way to distract people from the boredom of waiting in line. It was not mere entertainment. It was the delicious odor of a soup of a different kind, but one nonetheless real and meaningful. It pointed to a source of beauty that will always satisfy and never fade away. Our spirits heard it and remembered...

What part does music play in disaster relief? It was not a question I immediately tried to answer as everyone was over-





whelmed by the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disasters. But as it so happened, the very first shelter to which I brought supplies had an old electronic keyboard in the corner. When I mentioned that I was a musician to the shelter manager, everyone started to set up chairs and gather around the keyboard. Once I started playing, they didn't want me to stop.

Almost 100,000 people still reside in shelters three months after the earthquake, grief stricken and unable to move forward with their lives. People need love, and music opens doors for us to be in the shelters and show that love long after the need for material supplies has ended. The most important part of musical relief trips seems to be the building of relationships. After hearing us play, people are willing to open up to us with their lives and their stories.

We have witnessed dramatic changes in the mood at a shelter during the course of a concert. Festive shouts of "Bravo!" and "Wonderful!" ring through the air. Children come up to play with us. People repeatedly break down in tears as some deal with their grief for the very first time. One energetic 84-year-old gentleman sang songs from his youth as a thank you, bringing cheers from everyone in the shelter. For a little while, one broken-down community center was transformed into an elegant concert hall as the music transcend-

ed the surroundings.

The most dramatic response occurred at the Onagawa nuclear power plant's shelter following a moment of silence observed upon the two-month anniversary of the tsunami. The mood was incredibly somber, and we realized the usual upbeat beginning to a concert was far from appropriate. Bruce Huebner came up with the brilliant idea to call out a melody from one side of the gymnasium on his shakuhachi. Steve Sacks echoed a varied response from the other side of the room on his saxophone. Calls and responses of comforting melodies crisscrossed the room, mesmerizing us with their healing power by the end of the concert. As we were leaving, one of the junior high girls got up the courage to start playing her flute. Bruce and Steve quickly joined in and before long a whole group of adults were joyfully dancing in their celebration of life! You can see a short video clip of this amazing moment on my blog: <http://rogerlowther.blogspot.com>.

So far I've led 23 concerts in shelters with other Tokyo-based professional musicians. We have played in schools, hotels, sports complexes, community centers, and even outdoors. The set-up of my portable digital organ never fails to draw crowds and comments, but nothing compares to the reactions when I start to play. "Wow! You've turned our gymnasium into a beautiful cathedral," one shelter manager

told me. People always send us away with "Please come back, and play longer next time!"

Ten Christians from The Juilliard School came with me to Watanoha Elementary School shelter to help in musical relief work in the beginning of June (part of 14 concerts they gave in 12 days!). As the afternoon light began to wane, refugees began to pull out their flashlights and lanterns so that we could all see the music. The howling winds of the typhoon knocked out the power and created an eerie atmosphere inside the gymnasium full of people. Lakes of standing water surrounded the area from torrential downpours of rain. Yet the music allowed us all to relax and feel that everything was going to be okay.

At the International Arts Movement conference in New York City, Jeremy Begbie spoke of music coming into our broken world in such a way that encapsulates the importance of music in disaster relief. He said, "In a world that is so obviously not as it ought to be, it is the calling of artists to be agents of a new world, a redeemed world. Whenever we start to believe that nothing can ever be different, that our homes, relationships, careers are basically stuck in a groove and can never change and never will change... whenever we start to believe that the horrors of the world just have to be: the emaciated child compelled to beg at a road side, or the prostitute forced to the streets to feed her drug addiction... whenever we start to believe that there can never be anything new under the sun—it's the artist's calling to make us believe things can be different, that life can be new, that a new world is possible, a world that ought to be."

Do you also have great stories of the role of the arts in disaster relief? I would love to hear about them! Please write me an email: rogerlowther@gmail.com. JH