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### Genesis World Music Ensemble Weaves Unique Tapestry of Styles

**Musicians from five nations overcome multiple challenges to work together**

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The Genesis World Music Ensemble plays at the Kennedy Center in Washington on August 27. (Photo courtesy of Megan Bearder)

Washington -- Neither vast physical distances, nor language barriers, nor religious differences could prevent the Genesis World Music Ensemble from putting together a performance for a packed house at the Kennedy Center August 27.

With band members living in five different countries and several different time zones, the group of Muslim and Jewish musicians found it impractical to hold traditional practice sessions. Instead, the group relied on technology and creativity -- singing into phones, trading e-mail messages and sound files, and translating between languages -- to work together from April to August without ever meeting in person until two days

before their concert.

"I can say that it has been quite challenging, but somehow we have all overcome the obstacles. It seems like people are interested in what we have to say, and that is a satisfying feeling," Iranian-born composer, producer and guitarist Shahin Shahida told *USINFO* August 31.

In addition to Shahida, the group includes American Jewish tenor Alberto Mizrahi, affectionately known as the "Jewish Pavarotti"; renowned Moroccan oud virtuoso Haj Youness, who also serves as dean of the Casablanca Conservatory of Music; Grammy Award-winning keyboard and harmonica player Howard Levy, an American; a keyboard player, a percussionist and saxophonist from Morocco; an Ethiopian bassist and a harmonium player from Afghanistan.

Wendy Sternberg, the founder and executive director of Genesis at the Crossroads, which created the Genesis World Music Ensemble, described one of the group's unique practice sessions.

"Haj Youness, Moroccan-Muslim, halfway around the world sings the score into the phone -- albeit distorted by thousands of miles and the mere fact that he is an oud virtuoso, not a vocalist ... he belts it out from the bottom of his soul," she told *USINFO* August 28.

"With a transient upturn of a smile and a fleeting wink, Alberto Mizrahi, Greek-born American Jewish tenor reminds Haj in English, simultaneously translated into Arabic that he should leave the singing to him and stick to the oud. Erupting into

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laughter, the key is instantly transposed and a gleeful *oyyye* of delight is uttered by Abdelkader Rhanime, the saxophonist," she continued.

Currently in its eighth year of operation, the Chicago-based nonprofit Genesis at the Crossroads uses the arts to bridge cultures in conflict around the world -- including promoting and organizing events featuring Jewish, Arab and Persian artists.

"Our mission is to foster appreciation, awareness and the celebration of diversity while exploring the amazing cultures of these nations," Sternberg said.

Each member of the Genesis World Music Ensemble brought unique influences and backgrounds to the music to create new sounds.

"Perhaps the most prominent contrast is the fusion of jazz blended with the voice of Humayun from Afghanistan," said Shahida.

According to Sternberg, there are two themes that bring the group together -- the love of music and its potential for innovation and the use of individual talents to create a "stunning tapestry that honors their heritage and preserves their uniqueness."

During their performance at the Kennedy Center, the group played a flawless blend of musical styles from around the globe -- incorporating such disparate sounds as traditional Jewish music, American jazz, Arabic maqam, African rhythms and Afghan vocals in the Qwali tradition.

"Our entire musical program was skillfully designed to take our audience on a world tour with an ease that transcends otherwise imposing and often inaccessible or misunderstood genres," she said.

Sternberg said she was extremely proud when she looked out on a packed house at the Kennedy Center and "saw a sea of humanity willing to relinquish their positions on divisive subjects to be moved and inspired by music."

In addition to the performance in Washington, the group performed in Chicago's Lincoln Park on August 25 and August 26 and has plans to reunite later this fall for a tour through Casablanca, Morocco.

The [entire video](#) of the performance in Washington is available on the Kennedy Center Web site. [More information](#) on Genesis at the Crossroads is available on the organization's Web site.

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