

From our winter 1994 issue, Andrew Michael Simon reports on an eventful, overwhelming and at times bizarre trip to North Korea to perform at the Spring Friendship Art Festival



An American clarinetist IN NORTH KOREA

On 12 April 1992, I was on a plane to Beijing where I was to meet an official who would hand me a visa and put me on a plane to North Korea. I was not told his name or how to find him; he would find me.

I was about to make history as the first American soloist to play in North Korea since the Korean War. I had been invited to participate in the Spring Friendship Art Festival, which this year coincided with the 80th birthday of the Great Leader, Comrade Kim Il-Sung – in the eyes of the North Koreans, the greatest event of the century. The most repressive and anti-American regime surviving had finalised my plans at 11pm the previous night with an unofficial, unsigned letter – only naming the title of an anonymous official (I found out later that there were dozens of officials with the same title). As far as I know, the organiser and I were the only Americans granted entry into the country – there was no precedent. I was going at my own risk; I couldn't even tell my hysterically anti-communist, German war-refugee mother that I was going.

We landed in Beijing. There was nobody there to greet me. Luckily, I saw a group of people holding a sign that said, 'Welcome to Pyongyang'. I introduced myself. Nobody had ever heard of me. I reminded them that I was an honoured guest of their government. They, in turn, reminded me that they were there to aid upwards of 80 delegations en route to Pyongyang, including despots from Cambodia, Zaire, China, Senegal and Kenya. After a three-hour wait, during which my connecting flight left without me, a man approached and introduced himself as a representative from the Spring Arts Festival, said he

was expecting me, bundled me off to a primitive hotel, took my passport for visa reasons, said he had no contact number, and left, saying 'trust me'.

In contrast, on my arrival in North Korea, 'The People's Paradise', I was greeted by hundreds of flag-waving citizens, hurried across a red carpet to the VIP door, waived through immigration, put into a chauffeured Volvo, and before I knew it, was at my hotel being greeted by my guide, Mrs Kim (she wouldn't divulge her first name) who began a 24-hours-a-day watch over me.

There were more than 1,500 artists from over 30 countries.

Pyongyang is the show capital of North Korea. With all the Mercedes-Benzes around, it's hard to believe that this is the same country that is promoting a 'two meals a day is healthier' campaign. The day before the President of China arrived, a large number of false storefronts were hastily erected; after he left, they were taken down. Propaganda signs and martial music were everywhere, and so were imported products from around the world (surprisingly from America and Japan, too). They built a Triumphal Arch bigger than the one in Paris. Their sports stadium has the largest seating capacity in the world. The people enjoy a crime-free existence, a long existence, and a peacefully happy existence – all you have to do is 'believe'.

Discipline is ever-present. The Mass Games in honour of Kim's birthday are

an amazing display of virtuosity; it was astonishing to see thousands of 14-year-old boys demonstrating their skill at Taekwondo by breaking bricks in mid-air in perfect rhythm to nationalist music, while tens of thousands more in the stands used coloured cards to produce messages and revolutionary tableaux. Even more unbelievable was an evening soirée, which featured hundreds of thousands of local inhabitants dancing and singing to nationalistic music they had learned almost since birth, all to a background of extraordinary fireworks. So powerful was the hypnotic effect of the music that even the foreigners rushed from the stands to participate, chanting words they didn't even understand.

The magnitude of the celebrations didn't stop there; the Arts Festival featured a 300-strong orchestra supporting a 500-strong chorus singing the praises of Kim Il-Sung. After the curtain went down, a woman wearing a traditional North Korean gown came out and announced my name, my country, and the piece I was going to play. No more than 30 seconds had elapsed when the curtain rose, revealing a stage empty except for a piano and a music stand.

As I was playing the last movement of Weber's Clarinet Concerto No 1, I was struck by the thought that I almost didn't get to play at all. I was told the evening I arrived that because I didn't participate in the first week of performances, I couldn't play in the second. After throwing a tantrum, I was given a 150-second time slot (I had brought four hours of music with me). Their restrictions limited my choice to a solo piece or a Korean reunification song. They didn't like the solo work, and detected a South Korean

influence in the re-unification song. I was informed that they would provide their own version for the evening's concert.

When I arrived for the performance, I was told they thought the Korean music was boring (later I discovered the reason why – they couldn't find the music). Now they liked my solo piece so much that they wanted me to play two. They had allotted me more time, so I insisted they let me play the Weber I had prepared. At the snap of the fingers, and a pianist walked through the door. She was introduced as an international competition winner. After hearing her play, it was easy to guess which country the contest was held in.

After the performance, a member of the Cultural Institute interviewed me with 'hopes of introducing me to the world'. His first question was, 'What do you think of our pianist?' When I said that she was great, but refused to admit that she was the best pianist I had ever heard, the interview drew quickly to a close.

When I got back to the hotel, the Cuban dance troupe was putting on an impromptu performance in the lobby. This was typical of the communist performers, anxious to 'do their thing' for the sheer love of it.

I was supposed to play on 15 April, which was Kim Il-Sung's actual birthday. In the morning, however, I was told the entire concert was cancelled. It was rumoured that Kim Il-Sung himself was going attend the Games that evening. The organiser and I were told that we were invited to attend the Games the following day; but the organiser announced that he wanted to go on Kim's birthday, and jumped on a bus bound for the stadium. Our guide then stopped the bus, and insisted that he get off. He asked what she expected him to do that evening, as he was forbidden from the Games and my concert had been cancelled. She spoke with someone for a minute, then announced boldly, 'The concert is back on, and I hope you can come to enjoy Mr Simon's performance tonight.'

When the organiser tried to make a long-distance phone call which didn't get through, the hotel charged him \$50 (US) for using their operator. He refused to pay the bill. Our guide didn't understand his outrage, as it was only \$50; she only made \$80 (US) monthly, but, as all her needs were provided by the state, she saw money as worthless paper.

These were not the only bizarre occurrences:

- I sat among 100,000 North Koreans and Cubans chanting anti-American slogans while wearing a big badge proclaiming my nationality.
- When I asked if there was any religion in North Korea, my guide responded, 'Catholicism'.

- There was a large fire in the hotel which was ignored/denied by the management.
- In order to send postcards, I had to wait three days for stamps. They had pictures on them of four of the world's greatest tennis players: Becker, Lendl, Graf and a local North Korean girl.
- When my friend got a headache, a doctor was called in who attempted to prescribe a strange-looking tablet. My friend said he had already taken an aspirin, whereupon the doctor asked if he could get some for him, too.
- Riding with me one day, the Minister of Culture (for that day, anyway) was filling up the car with cigarette smoke. After I asked him to stop, he whirled around and exclaimed, 'Aah, you and your weak American lungs!'
- On the Great Day, a local department store offered a 7.5% discount on all merchandise; the hordes of over-anxious shoppers were met by a no-nonsense, kick-boxing security guard.
- During the Mass Games, a young girl fainted from exhaustion. Two of her teachers ran out on the field and promptly stood her up again; she finished the remaining three hours of the show.
- One girl could not recover so easily: a North Korean guide for an Australian group suffered a nervous breakdown when she witnessed the incompetence of several bureaucrats, something she had been taught was an impossibility.

On my last day in North Korea, I went through the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum, nicknamed the 'anti-American museum'. The museum guide, my personal guide and I were the only people in the 52,000-square-metre building! Among the 'historical' exhibits were pictures of American imperialist aggressor priests torturing North Korean children. Other titbits included documents from American generals proving that the US started and lost the war, and several electronically activated battle scenes using mechanical replicas. The immensity of this museum is impossible to describe; just one of the 80 or so rooms contained dozens of aeroplanes from the Korean War.

During the tour, I got into a lengthy discussion with the guide. It was here that I first realised that brainwashing could rob an entire race of one of humanity's fundamental qualities: curiosity. I asked the guide if Kim Jong-Il, the Great Leader's son and successor, had any children. She



didn't know, and didn't seem to care; if it hadn't been dictated to her, it didn't warrant her interest. Again, when I asked about the first man on the moon, she had heard about some experiments but didn't know or care about much more. As she took pride in the equal distribution of wealth in North Korea, I asked her if she led the same lifestyle as Kim Il-Sung. She replied, 'probably'.

On the plane back to Beijing, I thought how amazing it was that 1,500 people from vastly different backgrounds shared exactly the same experiences and formed a common link which would stay with us, even if we would never meet again. I felt I had accomplished something; I had introduced the American style of clarinet playing on television to an estimated 20 million viewers (not bad for a country of

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22 million); I had seen the other side of the Iron Curtain, and hopefully started a series of cultural exchanges.

The plane landed in Beijing. I was supposed to meet the same host I had had the previous week, but when he saw me in the airport, his jaw dropped and he said, 'Mr Simon, but we weren't expecting you...' ■