

The Sound of Music **by Masha Hamilton**

KABUL - In a small room snuggled into the war-damaged buildings of Kharabat Street, Zahed Nodar sits cross-legged on a maroon carpet, inhales deeply and closes his eyes as if to shut out the blare of car horns, the shouts of men pulling wooden carts, the scent of wood smoke and rotting fruit, his own years spent fleeing the fighting.

Then he nods to his fellow band members, leans over his armonia and begins to play with a passion that makes his rich, lined face look far younger and the audience feel larger than four.

Kharabat, the musical heart of Kabul for a century, is hopping again after the enforced silence of the Taliban years. In tiny shops or simply nestled against the last remaining walls of buildings demolished by rocket fire, scores of musicians perform all day long, playing traditional instruments like brass-bottomed tabla drums, stringed rababs and armonias, which combine keyboard and accordion.

A revolutionary musical revival is under way here after six years during which all music, even humming on the streets, was forbidden. The lively scene on Kabul's version of New Orleans' Bourbon Street is one indicator. Another is the birth of Radio Arman, a new station unlike anything Afghanistan has ever seen.

"When you deprive someone of water for five days and then you finally give them some, you will see what the taste will be," said Masood Sanjer Ghayoor, Radio Arman's music director. "That's what music is to us Afghans."

Kabul's musicians have become heroes of sorts to many, lifting spirits as Afghanistan faces the challenges of reconstruction after nearly a quarter of a century of warfare.

"We need to smile and laugh. The music helps with that," said Zaralasht Asadullah, 19, an avid Radio Arman listener who is studying to be a surgeon.

But those fueling the musical resurgence take some risks. This is a country still woven with fundamentalists. The entrance to Radio Arman is unmarked. Guards peek out through a tiny window much like the one in the Emerald City. Once visitors pass in their identification papers, the window slams shut. Those allowed in are often frisked. Security is tighter than at most Afghan government ministries.

"Conservative elements who didn't like music haven't all left; they're just underground for the moment," explained station consultant Dominic Medley. "It doesn't hurt to be vigilant."

RADIO ARMAN

In a country where television sets cost far more than most can afford and electrical service is patchy at best, battery-powered radios fill an entertainment gap. Radio Arman, which went nationwide May 1, has won the lion's share of listeners in the capital, an accomplishment for a station not quite a year old.

It has modeled itself after its Western counterparts. It targets 15-to-35-year-olds, plays upbeat drive-time-style music in the morning and features teasing banter between men and women disc jockeys. It even has a call-in program for young people on Tuesday nights.

On Fridays, the day the Taliban used to carry out public executions, Radio Arman has instituted a different tradition. It presents its Top Forty -- a list of the most popular songs in the capital. Ricky Martin and Jennifer López have made that list, but the leading spots always go to Afghans, whose music is the station's core.

Weekly, the station spotlights an up-and-coming Afghan musician in an hourlong program. It also has begun presenting awards to local musicians. The first were handed out four months ago. About three hundred musicians entered, and four went home winners in various categories.

"This goes a long way toward encouraging our musicians to get better by giving them something to strive for," said Nulifar Shuja, 28, who calls herself one of Radio Arman's biggest fans. "I listen to the station every minute I can."

Radio Arman has enthusiasts even in the city's poorest neighborhoods. Mahbuba, 15, who lives with 16 others in a two-room home her family built among war rubble, listens to Radio Arman whenever she can. "I love it too much," she said.

With an audience this broad, musicians often lobby for their tunes to be played. "We've made some famous just by broadcasting their songs," Ghayoor said.

Not only the musicians are famous. With Radio Arman on the lips of many young city residents, announcers and directors have become locally well-known. Listeners call in comments and praise. Ghayoor, too, has become a minor celebrity, which is a big change from the Taliban years when, working at Radio Afghanistan, he tried not to be noticed at all.

"Sometimes they let us play Islamic chants, but that's as close to music as we got. Look at this picture of me." Ghayoor, clean-cut and dressed in jeans, pulled from his wallet a snapshot of him frowning, wearing a turban and full beard. "I'm 18 years old in this photo. I never thought it would end."

When the Taliban came to power, private citizens hid their radios and went on with their lives, but Nodar and other Kharabat Street musicians knew they couldn't give up music. Most, including Nodar, fled to Pakistan. Kharabat became a shell of what it had been for generations.

The street had already weathered challenges. As renowned as it is for its musicians, it is nearly as well known for its scarred buildings, ruined in fighting between rival mujahadeen nearly 10 years ago, when one side gathered on Bala Hissar and the opposing forces hunkered down in the city's center. The rockets largely missed their intended targets, instead plunging down on Kharabat and other neighborhoods. Several hundred people were killed on Kharabat Street alone.

No one had money to repair the damage, which remains today, but the musicians dusted off their rababs and tablas and kept playing. "What was our choice?" asked Nodar, a quiet man whose lapis ring is his only adornment. "This is what we know."

OUTSIDE HAIRCUTS

These days, children dash in and out of the music shops, merchants sell food and street-side barbers squat outside so that their patrons, who sit in front of them with bowed heads, can listen while getting a trim. Residents of Kabul and nearby villages flock to Kharabat to hire musicians for weddings and parties, oblivious to the daunting traffic, potholes the size of elephants' feet and the dust that floats down from the hill of Bala Hissar, once occupied by Alexander the Great.

For the musicians, the work is mainly a labor of love. On a recent day, Nodar spent half an hour negotiating with a man who wanted his band for an upcoming party. The haggling was polite but firm, and both sides refused to budge until the very end. Their deal: the equivalent of \$40 for two performers for six hours of work. Nodar agreed, he said later, because he hoped they would make more in tips.

"On one hand, it is an exciting time to be a musician in Afghanistan, and on the other hand, it is difficult," Ghayoor said. Not only is the pay low, but most are unable to make CDs, which could be another source of revenue. The five recording studios once located in Kabul no longer exist. Opening a small studio is Radio Arman's next goal, Ghayoor said.

The plans, however, are cautiously expressed. Though the Taliban fled Kabul, no one is yet ready to say that fighting is finished for good. Afghanistan is a country of too many factions and too little opportunity. But *arman*, translated, means hope, and Radio Arman's policy is to focus on the positive.

"We don't know what will be the future of Afghanistan," said Radio Arman's Medley. "They have a long way to go. Still, think of it: men with guns pausing to listen to music on the radio. Who can say what power that will have?"