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Shahnameh in the Classroom: Iranian Music and DIY Cultural Diplomacy in the UK

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Abstract: On 23rd May 2012, *Price Zal and the Simorgh*, an orchestral piece based on a story from the Iranian epic poem, the *Shahnameh*, was premiered at two Brightsparks schools concerts at London's Royal Festival Hall. This was the result of a collaboration between the Education and Community Department at the London Philharmonic Orchestra, City, University of London and London Music Masters. The project included a strong educational focus, including workshops, teacher resources and training sessions. The central aim was to introduce Iran, by way of its music and storytelling, as well as broader aspects of culture and history, to British school children, and in particular to counter negative associations that children experience via the mainstream media. A follow-on project to create a children's picture book with music, composed and performed by Iranian musicians and based on the same story, led to *The Phoenix of Persia* which was published in 2019.

Drawing on personal observations, feedback from participants and wider project evaluations, this chapter will explore these projects in light of current debates around cultural diplomacy. To what extent might educational work promoting cultural understanding be understood as a form of cultural diplomacy and what are the challenges to using music and other arts in such an instrumentalised way?

Introduction: Beginnings

We are no longer represented just by our leaders. Knowingly or not, we are all representatives of our countries and we have the tools to make an impact. We are all diplomats now. (Bound et al. 2007:76)

On the mountain of gems lives the Simorgh, a magical bird who finds the abandoned baby Zal and raises him as her own ...

A tale of compassion and forgiveness, the story of Zal formed the centrepiece of the ‘Shahnameh Project’, a collaboration between the Music Department at City, University of London, the Community and Education Department at the London Philharmonic Orchestra (LPO) and the Bridge Project music education programme (London Music Masters) which took place in 2011-12 and which has been ongoing in different phases since. Jointly funded by City University, the Higher Education Innovation Fund and the LPO, the project introduced Iranian music, culture and storytelling to Key Stage 2 (aged 8 to 11) school children. The project was led by myself and Patrick Bailey, Head of the Community and Education Department at the LPO, and brought together a number of partners including composer David Bruce, storyteller Sally Pomme Clayton, Iranian musicians Arash Moradi and Fariborz Kiani, and members of City University’s Middle Eastern Music Ensemble. In this chapter, I introduce this and a follow-on project and explore their impact through the lens of cultural diplomacy understood broadly as ‘the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding’ (Cummings 2009, 1).

The motivation for the project was rooted in my experiences as a child of parents who came from Iran to the UK as students in the late 1950s and early 60s, and this is where I begin the story. All academic stories are underpinned by personal ones, and this is the foundation on which the project described below rests. Growing up in a provincial town in the 1970s, I experienced my fair share of overt racism, including the inevitable ‘Paki, go home’, at a time when politicians such as Enoch Powell made people feel entitled to verbally and physically abuse those with a different skin colour, accent, religion, and so on. There were relatively few Iranians resident in the UK at that time and only a very small number of British born Iranians. By the time I reached secondary school, I was very aware that my experience of British society was quite different from almost every Iranian I knew. Indeed, in hindsight and though I didn’t think about it in those terms at the

time, I can see that I played something of a diplomatic role, mediating and explaining British culture to Iranian friends and family and vice versa. But whatever exotic caché might have attached to being Iranian (or ‘Persian’) was shattered almost overnight with the revolution of 1979, following which Iran became ostracised on the global stage and being British-Iranian something very complex. It is only with the distance of years that I can look back and reflect that much of my academic career has been about mediating between the different aspects of this identity, and always seeking common ground – for instance between Iran and the UK and between different areas of music study - as part of making sense of the relationship between self and other.

I now fast forward 20 years. In the early 2000s, I started attending family concerts with my children. The LPO’s ‘Funharmonics’ offered a fun context in which children aged 4 and above could experience a live orchestra and ‘have a go’ on instruments. The concerts were led by an amateur and included audience participation. One of these concerts was to prove particularly key in inspiring the project that later developed. The LPO often commissioned new music for the Funharmonics and on one occasion the orchestra performed such a piece based on a story from the Finnish epic *Kalevala* (by composer Brendan Beales). The audience was involved in singing along and at the same time learning about an aspect of Finnish culture. At the time, I didn’t consciously think of this as a form of cultural diplomacy, but I was intrigued and it struck me that this kind of setting could be an effective way of introducing British children to Iranian culture through the stories of the epic *Shahnameh*.

One of the questions I ask in this chapter is how we might understand grassroots, ‘bottom-up’ initiatives such as those described below as forms of cultural diplomacy. Music has of course been mobilised as part of public diplomacy initiatives by state and non-state actors for centuries, often as a means of accruing political or other capital. In this case there were no state actors and the project was not initially conceived as a form of diplomacy, although it arguably ended up functioning as such. Also, whilst the current volume is primarily about cultural diplomacy ‘in’ the Middle East, the case discussed here was led by a collective of academic, non-state actors and local communities in the UK, including but not primarily aimed at diaspora. This makes the project somewhat unusual: whilst many outreach ‘world music’ projects in the UK have focused on diaspora communities, here the target group was by contrast those with no or little prior connection to or knowledge of Iran.

As noted, much of my professional career has been about ‘low level’ cultural diplomacy and making Iranian music and culture better known and understood outside the country, and particularly as a counter to the negative portrayals of Iran in the Western media. Relatively little research has been conducted on the ways in which people with heritage connections to countries such as Iran that tend to be demonised by the media contend with such perceptions on a daily basis and the impact on their navigation of identity in diaspora contexts. For my part, I have experienced many times ‘hiding’ my heritage where I sense that this will generate a negative or even hostile response. The inevitable question that persons of colour or with a foreign accent regularly contend with in the UK, ‘where are you from?’, can open up a minefield such that it is often easier for me to simply say ‘from London’ (which is also not untrue!). Given all this, my academic work has offered a privileged platform from which to promote cultural understanding and make Iranian music and culture better known in the UK (where I am based) and beyond. In the late 1990s, I abandoned a project on music and identity among diaspora Iranians after my first visit to Iran as an adult revealed a wealth of music-making (particularly with the re-emergence of popular music into the public domain following the election of President Mohamad Khatami in 1997), which I felt was more urgently in need of exposure and academic writing in order to be better known outside Iran. In 2008, I organised and led an educational trip to Iran with 6 students from City University, which as well as visiting historical sites such as Persepolis, attending concerts and meeting musicians, also included a half-day in the Music Department at the University of Tehran where the City students met and interacted with Iranian music students and heard them perform. Such small acts of cultural diplomacy no doubt feature in the work of many ethnomusicologists, but for me have taken on particular importance in the face of both misconceptions about Iran and the chilly climate in which mentioning one’s Iranian heritage is often taboo.

Project 1: ‘Prince Zal and the Simorgh’, 2011-12

Background

It was with these thoughts in mind, then, that I approached the LPO in the spring of 2011, with the idea of commissioning a piece based on a story from the Iranian epic *Shahnameh* (‘Book of Kings’) by Iran’s national poet Abolqasem Ferdowsi (940-1020 CE), and with the support of Knowledge Transfer funds from City. I was put in touch with the then head of the Education and Community Department, Patrick Bailey, and we set up some initial meetings.

Patrick was keen to involve David Bruce, a British composer with an international profile who had previously worked with the LPO and whose recent children's opera had been performed at the Royal Opera House. Bruce was commissioned to write a piece for one of the LPO *Brightsparks* school concerts, aimed at children in Key Stage 2 (8- to 11-year-olds). Planning began in earnest in the summer of 2011, almost a year ahead of the concert. I had suggested that the story of Zal and the Simorgh would be particularly suitable for children, addressing as it does a number of 'universal' themes, including celebration of difference and forgiveness: born albino and abandoned as a baby, Zal is found and cared for by the magical and wise Simorgh bird; many years later he is reconciled with his family and returns triumphantly as the new king.

A number of partners joined the project, including storyteller Sally Pomme Clayton, who was already familiar with the *Shahnameh* and other stories from Iran and who was commissioned to adapt the story for a young modern-day audience; and the Bridge Project, part of London Music Masters,ⁱ a relatively young charity providing violin teaching in primary schools in deprived areas of south London. As such, the educational dimension of the project was strong from the start, as discussed further below. It was also decided to include a number of additional musicians alongside the orchestra: Year 1 violinists from Jessop and Ashmole primary schools, Iranian musicians Arash Moradi (playing *tanbur* and *setar* long-necked lutes) and Fariborz Kiani (*tombak* goblet drum and *daff* frame drum), and members of the City University Middle Eastern Ensemble playing *daff*. The school workshops also involved City undergraduate violinists (Beverley Cooper, Sarah Hayward, Rachel Hobby) and composers (Alice Jeffreys, Lucasz Kapraz and Christina Michael). By the time activities began in the autumn of 2011, the project was already multi-faceted with a number of partners involved. In this section, I will describe the project activities, culminating in the two *Brightsparks* school concerts. I will then discuss the impact of the project, including feedback from teachers, pupils and others involved and consider how one might understand the outcomes as a form of 'DIY', grassroots, non-state cultural diplomacy that is not part of any strategic cultural policy.

The first creative session of the project was held at the Royal Festival Hall in early November 2011 and brought together all of the project partners to meet and share ideas. This also included a practical workshop run by violin teachers from the Bridge Project to introduce their approach to string teaching (using some ideas from Suzuki method). This was followed

by a series of workshops in two primary schools in the London Borough of Lambeth, Ashmole and Jessop schools, in which London Music Masters teachers were already working.ⁱⁱ The aim was to introduce children to the project, to Iran and Iranian music, and for David Bruce to develop initial ideas for the composition. Each visit began with a whole school assembly at which Sally Pomme Clayton introduced the *Shahnameh* and the story of Zal, and performed the story accompanied by Moradi, Kiani, myself and City students. Children then had an opportunity to ask questions. Most had never seen or heard Iranian instruments before. Assemblies were followed by 40-minute workshops for Year 4 and 5 violinists (involving about 120 children), led by London Music Masters teachers with City student helpers. Children were introduced to Iranian melodies and rhythms, and were then asked to create musical ideas of their own to portray the different characters in the story, for instance what kind of music would suit the magical Simorgh bird? What might the mountain of gems (where she lives) sound like? (Figure 1). Bruce incorporated some of these ideas into the final piece. Indeed, the next stage of work was the composition of the music and finalising the narrated text. Myself, Moradi and Kiani worked closely with Bruce, talking with him about Iranian music styles, structures and creative processes, particularly in relation to modal systems and improvisational practices, and I lent him a collection of books, articles and CDs. Bruce also attended rehearsals of the City University Middle Eastern (percussion) Ensemble, to gain an understanding of rhythmic patterns and cycles. By early spring 2012, 'Price Zal and the Simorgh' was complete and those involved in the Royal Festival Hall performance began to rehearse.



Figure 1. Workshop at Ashmole School, November 2011

Educational Activities

As the project developed, I became increasingly aware of its educational potential beyond the concert hall, which is where I had primarily envisaged it. Besides the school workshops and the involvement of children in the concerts, in conjunction with the LPO team I wrote a classroom guide for those teachers who would be bringing pupils to the concerts; I also helped Patrick Bailey run two teacher training (INSET) sessions. The guide introduced Iran and the broader Middle East region, and included information on Iranian culture, storytelling, visual arts and poetry, as well as on Abolqasem Ferdowsi (940-1020 CE), the author of the *Shahnameh*, and on Iranian instruments, modes and rhythms, as well as ideas for practical classroom activities. The latter included cross-curricular work in literacy (children writing their own versions of the story), numeracy (exploring additive rhythmic patterns made from multiples of 2 and 3 beats), art (children painting their own Simorghs, taking inspiration from the beautifully detailed miniature paintings of the *Shahnameh* in old manuscripts, an example of which was included in the guide), geography, PSHE and citizenship education. The guide also introduced children to the instruments and layout of the symphony orchestra that they would be seeing live, thus presenting Iranian and orchestral instruments alongside one another and on equal terms in the same document. The guide was available through the LPO website, together with sound examples specially recorded by Moradi and Kiani.ⁱⁱⁱ

The INSET sessions took place on Wednesday 18th April 2012, with activities largely drawn from the teachers' guide. The sessions were attended by about 35 primary teachers and the aim was to support them in preparing pupils ahead of the concerts in order to get the most out of the experience. I was particularly struck by the engagement of teachers and their enthusiasm to introduce their pupils to a culture and music which most knew nothing about or likely would only have encountered in news media associated with negative and often frightening connotations around discourses of 'axis of evil', radical Islam, global terrorism, and so on. This enthusiasm was reflected in the feedback following the project, discussed below.

The planning for this project and the activities described above happened to take place soon after consultation that followed the 2008 UK Research Assessment Exercise,^{iv} as part of which it was proposed to introduce an element referred to as 'impact, to measure and assess the impact – defined broadly – of university research outside academia. Universities were to develop a series of 'Impact Case Studies' to describe particular projects (underpinned by

research outputs) and to evidence their impact on wider society. As the LPO project developed, it became clear that it was having an impact well beyond what I had imagined and that there would be value in conducting follow up interviews and questionnaires beyond the standard feedback being collected by the LPO. In the event, I was able to secure impact funds from City University to interview teachers and others involved in the project and to make a short film.^v Additional educational activities continued after the main project ended. For instance, in the autumn of 2012, Bruce conducted a series workshops with second and third year undergraduate composition students at City University who developed their own pieces based on the *Zal* story; one of the students who had shadowed Bruce on the main project (Alice Jeffreys) was also accepted onto the LPO Soundhub young composers scheme. In other words, the impact of this project rippled out in many directions.

The Concerts

The two Brightsparks schools concerts took place on Wednesday 23rd May 2012 at London's Royal Festival Hall. In all, the concerts were attended by 4,658 Key Stage 2 pupils and their teachers from 75 primary schools. The concerts were subsidised by Deutsche Bank so pupils and teachers were able to attend for free. Many of the children attending were from socio-economically deprived backgrounds and the vast majority had never heard a live orchestra before or attended a performance in a large concert hall such as the RFH, even though several of the schools visiting were located in the same borough (Lambeth) as the South Bank Centre, only a few miles away or less. The central theme of the concert was 'telling stories through music' and included a number of standard repertoire pieces and some film music.^{vi} There was also a surprise additional piece, the theme to the video game *Angry Birds*, which sent a frisson of excited recognition through the audience as soon as the orchestra started playing. To return to the point above, few of these children would have previously made the connection between video game and other screen music that is so much part of their daily lives, and a symphony orchestra.

The premiere of *Prince Zal and the Simorgh* was the centrepiece of the concert. As well as the full orchestra, also on stage were storyteller and narrator Sally Pomme Clayton, Moradi (*setar* and *tanbur*), Kiani (*tombak* and *daff*), 53 Key Stage 1 (ages 5 to 7) violinists from Jessop and Ashmole primary schools and members of the City University Middle Eastern Ensemble (Figure 2). The conductor was David Angus, and the presenter Andrew Barclay (principal percussionist at the LPO) introduced the music and led elements of audience

participation; Angie Newman provided sign language from the front of the stage for one of the concerts.



Figure 2

Prince Zal as a Form of Cultural Diplomacy

Whilst I had picked up on teacher's enthusiasm at the INSET events, I had not quite appreciated the impact of the project until we started to collect feedback. We were able to access responses to the LPO's own evaluation, both of the concert, the teaching training events and the teachers' guide. In addition, we recruited two research assistants, Stephen Wilford and Alex Jeffrey (both PhD students at City University at the time) to interview participants, as follows: Patrick Bailey and Alexandra Clarke (Education and Community Department, LPO), Rob Adediran and Rachel Wadham (London Music Masters), David Bruce, Sally Pomme Clayton, Arash Moradi, Fariborz Kiani, myself, and pupils and teachers from Jessop and Ashmole schools. Some of the interviews were also filmed, and as mentioned a short film was made about the project.

Beyond the wider educational benefits, such as pupils experiencing a live orchestra in a major concert hall, and the messages of the story itself (valuing difference, the importance of forgiveness), it was clear that teachers had embraced the opportunity and used project materials effectively. The wider value was articulated in interview by Rob Adediran:

'This was a very successful project on many levels. It was good for the children to work with adults and other young people outside their sphere; it's an encouraging validation to have young professionals come into their school and invest time in them and to have a piece written especially for them. The real value of having City University involved was bringing diverse elements to the collaboration in a way that we haven't seen before and which provided so many different types of role models for the children.' (July 2012)

Adediran also commented on the value of the project to the children in performing in a professional setting on stage and being able to:

‘experience making music in such a large ensemble and to feel that they’re contributing something of worth ... For these children from these schools and at this age it’s the kind of memory that will remain with them forever. They will also identify these experiences, and the people they are making music with, with Iran and as they get older and engage more in current affairs that will be for them a really positive memory of things Iranian.’

The teachers’ guide and INSET sessions received positive feedback, highlighting ways in which the project facilitated cross-curricular work, as well as developing music-specific skills in listening, performing and composing:

‘My colleague and I LOVED the Teachers’ Guide; coupled with the INSET training session. It is possibly the best resource we’ve ever been provided with for an educational visit. I played audio clips that were recommended in the pack, did the activities based around the map and Iran’s location and talked about oral stories and the children also painted their own Simorghs.’ [Figure 3] (class teacher, Lee Manor Primary School)

‘We used the drumming patterns from the resources pack in a mathematics lesson, working out which numbers could be made by adding strings of 2s and 3s. Lots of children subsequently identified the concert as their favourite trip of the year!’ (class teacher, Charles Dickens Primary School)

‘In the week before the concert we used the story in our literacy lessons, describing the Simorgh, using drama and role play to investigate character and writing diary entries for Prince Zal from the different stages of the story. The children were really engaged and produced some really good writing. This meant that they were familiar with both the story and music, which enhanced their enjoyment and engagement at the concert.’ (class teacher, Charles Dickens Primary School)

‘The background work to Iranian rhythms was an excellent introduction and proved a good basis for percussive activities in school. We composed our own music to the Prince Zal story using the Iranian modes and rhythms. Great fun!’

Pupil responses were also positive:

‘From the story I learnt that you cannot be cross with someone forever. You need to forgive. If you have something you should be grateful for it because you may regret it if you’re not.’

‘I liked the daff best. It was noisy. I wish they would come to our school.’



Figure 3. Artwork from the project. ‘Simorgh’
by Oscar Murphy, Lee Manor Primary School, south London

The Shahnameh project was rooted in a complex of imperatives, including long-standing personal ones described earlier. However, it was only as the work progressed that I began to think about it more specifically as a form of cultural diplomacy, particularly as I observed and appreciated the deep impact of the project on teachers and pupils. As such, it felt important to understand more about how the ‘exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture’ had led to ‘mutual understanding’ (Cummings). In some sense the ‘flow’ of diplomacy was in one direction, rather than being a ‘mutual’ exchange: this was about promoting a better understanding of Iranian culture and music in the UK. The hope was that children would take these ideas home and share with friends and family what they had learnt about Iran, as not just any country but one that has had a difficult and complex relationship with Britain (and with other European countries, Russia/Soviet Union and the US), particularly since the 1979 revolution.

Whilst the project was largely about offering children a different understanding of Iran, there was also an impact on those who already possessed that understanding but who struggled to make it known amidst the clamour of media and other negative representations. The following testimony from a teacher resonated with my own experiences:

‘We had an Iranian pupil, and her family were very excited about the chance to talk about their heritage. She was able to bring her own versions of the stories to read to the class’.

Not only did the project allow this child to share her culture, it opened up a space right in the heart of her classroom to validate an identity and heritage that she has no doubt at times sought to invisibilise, in ways that I recognise at a very visceral level.

The Shahnameh Project ended in autumn 2012, although it was hoped that teachers would continue to use the classroom resources and that further performances of *Prince Zal and the Simorgh* might be possible.^{vii} Soon after the project ended, Patrick Bailey left the LPO to take up a position in Cornwall and it was through his suggestion that the piece was later taken up by the Cornwall Youth Orchestra and performed at Launceston Town Hall and Truro Cathedral (12th and 15th April 2015), and subsequently at the Music for Youth National Festival at Symphony Hall, Birmingham (July 11th), from where it was selected for the Youth Proms at London's Royal Albert Hall on November 23rd.^{viii} In this version of the piece, the text was divided between four narrators in a very creative way. For the Youth Proms, the maximum age of performers was 22, so the orchestra was conducted by 16-year old Angus Webster and the *tanbur* and *setar* parts were replaced by Greek *bouzouki* played by City student Antonis Rousounelos. The Birmingham and London concerts included violinists from Bedfordshire Young Strings (see images on Bruce's website). As well as the concerts, school workshops were also held in Cornwall.

Whilst feedback was not collected systematically as it had been for the earlier project, it is clear that including this piece in the repertoire of a county youth orchestra and being performed at events aimed at young people had a similar 'ripple' effect. Programming a piece based on a story from Iran on a major concert stage as part of a national festival served to centre and to some extent to 'normalise' Iran as a country with its own rich history and culture, telling a rather different story from those more familiar from media headlines. And witnessing this piece being embraced so enthusiastically by the young people in the orchestra (as evidenced by the interviews in the film) was truly inspiring.

Project 2: *The Phoenix of Persia* Children's Book, 2017-2019

Background

The Cornwall Youth Orchestra performances took place three years after the end of the LPO project, and prompted me to start thinking again about the potential of this work and specifically whether there might be further educational mileage in the story of Zal. At the

time of the original project, it had occurred to me that the story would be well-suited to a children's book with music and with perhaps even greater impact due to the reach of a storybook, both in terms of numbers and a presence in people's homes. And so it was that from autumn 2016, I applied for funding to turn this idea into reality, and I also sought out potential publishers. The latter was not easy; many people I spoke to with experience of children's publishing were doubtful that any publisher would be interested in an unsolicited idea such as this. However, I was fortunate to be directed to a relatively young independent publisher, Tiny Owl, that specialises in beautifully illustrated children's books featuring stories from around the world and that also has a particular connection with Iran via its founder-directors Delaram Ghanimifard and Karim Arghandehpour. And indeed, Tiny Owl was an ideal fit. Discussions started in the summer of 2017 and planning continued for several months, during which time Amin Hassanzadeh Sharif, an illustrator based in Iran, was invited to produce the artwork and Sally Pomme Clayton to adapt the story. I secured financial support from Iran Heritage Foundation and City University, and Tiny Owl was also awarded Arts Council funding.

My original intention had been to adapt the music from *Prince Zal and the Simorgh*, but it soon became apparent that an orchestral score would not suit this particular project for a number of reasons; I also wanted to take the opportunity to introduce children to Iranian instruments and their sounds. To this end, I decided early on that each instrument would 'represent' a character in the story, rather in the manner of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*.^{ix} It was also important to me to include female musicians, in order to highlight the little-known wealth of talented musicians in Iran and in diaspora who have tended to be side-lined. After initial discussions with composer Soosan Lolavar, one of my PhD students at City, who became the Project Manager and Creative Producer (and later Assistant Editor), we decided that rather than a single composer, it would be interesting to bring together a small group of Iranian musicians to workshop ideas and create the music collaboratively. Four musicians were invited to take part: Arash Moradi, who had been part of the earlier project (*tanbur*), Nilufar Habibian (*qanun*, plucked dulcimer), Saedi Kord Mafi (*santur*, hammered dulcimer and *daff*) and Amir Eslami (*nei*, end-blown flute).^x Workshop sessions with the musicians and Sally as storyteller began in May 2018, the aim being to compose and shape the music around the story. The music became structured around individual 'chapters' (equivalent to book page spreads), with each chapter composed (and generally performed by) one musician, according to the storyline. In the early workshops, musicians brought their pre-composed

ideas, and others would listen and offer suggestions. A certain amount of the creative process was therefore collaborative and it was interesting to hear the music evolve organically and take shape over a period of months. The chapters were eventually ready for recording in the studios at City in autumn 2018, with editing, mixing and mastering taking place in January 2019. We were keen to involve students in the project and were fortunate to have funds to employ City undergraduates to lead on recording and production, in particular Julius Johansson who, together with Soosan Lolavar, edited the music files. The music is available using the QR code in the book, and can also be accessed via soundcloud.^{xi} *The Phoenix of Persia* was published in May 2019 and the official launch event, aimed at families with young children, was held at the British Library on 30th May 2019 with a live performance of the piece by Sally, Nilufar and Arash.^{xii}

Educational Activities

As with the earlier project, something that started off as a single event/product soon became much more multifaceted and richer than originally envisaged. And once again, educational activities became embedded in the project, largely due to the vision and enthusiasm of Sophie Hallam (at Tiny Owl) and the other partners, some of whom the publisher had worked with before: Tower Hamlets Schools Library Services (THSLS), Pop Up Projects and HEC Global Learning Centre. Sophie led on the production of a beautifully designed and wide-ranging cross-curricular teacher resource pack, covering subjects including history, art, geography, maths, drama, religious studies, PSHE and English, as well as music. I wrote the latter section, based on some of the material from the earlier LPO guide.^{xiii} To further support learning, 25 ‘Shahnameh boxes’ were created, each containing a copy of the teacher resource, *The Phoenix of Persia* book, another Tiny Owl book based on a different story from the *Shahnameh* (*Bijan and Manije*), a non-fiction picture book on Iran (*I is for Iran*, Adl and Adl, 2011), as well as objects related to the story and/or Iran: a piece of fabric, a *nei*, a small frame drum, miniature paintings, mosaics, feathers, coins and poetry. The boxes were distributed by THSLS to school library services across the UK and from there into schools. In the summer of 2019, *The Phoenix of Persia* also formed part of Pop Up Projects, a national festival programme bringing literature to schools across the UK.^{xiv} Schools received the Shahnameh Box approximately six weeks before the workshop so that children could explore the story and materials. The book and resources were also trialled in two Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools: one for children on the autistic spectrum and another for hearing impaired and deaf children (Frank Barnes School, London); a music workshop was also held at the

latter. I led music workshops in a number of other schools, together with Nilufar Habibian, including composition activities.^{xv} In addition, Clayton and Hassanzadeh Sharif led storytelling and art workshops (the latter during a visit to the UK from Iran in the summer of 2019), as well as events at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. As such, there was a great deal of educational and other public-facing activity, particularly in the summer and autumn of 2019. As well as formal project partners, through my role as music consultant to the major exhibition on Iran at the V&A Museum, *Epic Iran* (summer 2021, postponed from 2020), music from the book was used in one of the exhibition rooms.^{xvi}

Whilst many of the extended educational activities were suspended in spring 2020 due to Covid-19, some eventually resumed online; for instance, Clayton ran a storytelling session for Southwark Library Services in February 2021 that also resulted in follow up art work by children who attended. Partly as a result of the pandemic and the enforced pausing of workshops, I set up a project website, which also enabled me to share examples of classroom activities and feedback from teachers who had undertaken project work on the book.^{xvii}

As part of the educational activities planning, there had been extensive discussion about the legacy of the project in order to ensure that its impact would be sustainable and long-lasting. For instance, THSLS included training around the Shahnameh Box and other resources at INSET days and at Governors' conferences reaching over 200 teachers (and thereby potentially thousands of pupils) in 2019: 'We anticipate future usage from schools who run geography-themed weeks and request resources on various different countries. There is no reason why we should not still be lending out the Shahnameh box in ten years' time!' THSLS also planned to use the project model for a bid on local history resources. Music Masters (the organisation that was part of the Shahnameh Project) also became involved after the publication of the book and used the resources to extend their classroom musicianship teaching away from its primary focus on Western music. In January 2020, Soosan Lolavar delivered an INSET training day at City University for 14 Music Masters teachers working in 6 schools across three London boroughs. Since then, Music Masters has embedded *The Phoenix of Persia* materials into their core Year 4 and Year 6 musicianship curriculum (see below). Additionally, they now run a PGCEi course for instrumental teachers (in conjunction with Birmingham City University), and course materials include resources from *The Phoenix of Persia*, potentially taking this into hundreds of schools in the future.

But Is it Cultural Diplomacy?

‘I consider myself an open-minded person who doesn’t judge countries or people without having spent time with those I pass judgement on. However, I admit I also connected Iran with negative thoughts ... Now that I am aware of this, I will actively try to change this and share my experiences with others.’ (class teacher)

Due to the number of partners involved in *The Phoenix of Persia* project and the ways in which it expanded in different directions, it was possible to capture a wealth of feedback on its impact, particularly on changed attitudes towards Iran. A parent who attended the book launch described how the music helped him introduce Iranian culture to his son: ‘I loved that the ancient story was set in a modern setting so we got to engage with examples of modern-day Iran ... I don’t think it would have occurred to me to introduce him to Iranian music/culture without this book’.^{xviii} Following the school events, many pupils evidenced impact in areas such as appreciating and celebrating difference, and increased empathy and cross-cultural understanding: ‘I learned that everyone is different and it does not matter. We should celebrate differences’ and ‘I learned about a different country (Iran) and what their lifestyle is like’. In a survey undertaken by Tiny Owl of pupils and teachers involved in the Pop Up project, 58% of pupils said that they now wanted to read more books about other cultures and 100% of teachers agreed that reading the book and exploring the resources had supported pupils in developing positive associations with diversity and other cultures. Teachers also noted that both SEN pupils and reluctant readers had been ‘significantly more engaged than usual’ through the book and resources, bearing in mind the focus of the story on an albino child. Both in the survey and in conversation with teachers it was clear that pupils had increased their understanding of Iran and Iranian culture. One described how learning about music helped him teach pupils about the commonalities between cultures: ‘There are great benefits in children being able to see music from different cultural perspectives ... Learning about culture through music is invaluable and helps children to understand the wider world.’^{xix} Those who responded to the questionnaire agreed that the resource box and teaching pack had added value to their teaching and stimulated them to work more intensively with a book than normally. Further examples of feedback are as follows:

‘The teacher who borrowed the Shahnameh box last term used it for a display in school to promote different countries and cultures, and was pleased to find we stocked something representing Iran.’ (THLS)

‘I dimmed the lights, put on fairy lights and just let the magical story play using the QR code in the book. You could have heard a pin drop. The children were completely mesmerised and drawn into the story in a way I haven’t seen before. I observed children moving their hands and bodies unconsciously to the music and not one child spoke until it finished.’ (class teacher)

One of the most interesting outcomes of the project was the cross-curricular classroom work, with teachers using ideas from the resources and extending them in creative ways, including activities such as children creating their own comic strips based on the story (art), writing letters between different characters (literacy), composing their own music, and so on. Ceridwen Eccles, a teacher based in Leicestershire, posted on social media about her pupils’ work; for one session, they chose their favourite musical instrument to research and wrote about how the sounds made them feel. ^{xx xxi}

As far as the impact of the project on the next generation of teachers, the following from Katrina Damigos (Head of Teacher Training Programmes and Musicians of Change (PGCEi) Course Leader at Music Masters) is worth quoting at length:

At Music Masters we’ve been exploring the Phoenix of Persia with our musicianship and instrumental teachers to diversify teaching repertoire and the range of musical cultures we expose the children on our programme to ... It’s worth pointing out that these sessions happened in January 2020 shortly after the US assassination of Suleimani and subsequent missile strikes so there was a timely drive amongst our teachers to counter negative and dehumanising broadcasting in the media with expanding their knowledge of Iranian culture, which they could take immediately into lessons.

... In the summer we piloted a whole class KS2 Musicianship 5 week project through bi-weekly 45 min lessons supported by class teachers in the alternate weeks (10 weeks in total) and established the project as a permanent fixture in our KS2 curriculum for Y4 and Y6 in September 2021.

All of our teachers are Western classical musicians and as a team shared a common anxiety around representing a culture different from their own within their teaching ... Significantly however, it has been the nature of the contemporary music composed for the project which has bridged the initial gap of learning unfamiliar traditional instruments and musical language by putting a strong emphasis on creativity and living artistry within the resource. This has encouraged the teachers to find their own relationship to teaching it, some leaning more into the story telling aspect and some more into the composition, listening or improvisation as their comfort levels develop ... Within our schools, our musicianship team have reported a real enthusiasm from the

children, who love the book and connect strongly to the characters. (personal communication, August 2022)

Damigos also reported on the impact on children and families with cultural heritage in the region:

Perhaps most strikingly we were excited to receive a video from one of our violin students sharing her home music making with her family: Sarah Hill, Music Masters teacher who taught *Phoenix of Persia* in her KS2 Musicianship classes immediately recognised the student: ‘Amazing to see Zine playing violin with tanbur with her dad! She was in my *Phoenix of Persia* class and told me her mum and dad play the tanbur (one of the instruments that features in the story). She was so excited to talk about it and every time I mentioned it she was super proud. I said to her that I would love to see her play tanbur with her family and now I have!’ For us, this was a moment which demonstrated the power of sustained exposure to other cultures in our music lessons, leading not only to richer and deeper musical learning outcomes but making lessons a place where students feel proud, seen and able to share their multiple musical and cultural identities. (ibid.)

Clearly, experiencing their own culture in the context of a positive mainstream setting was significant to this child, as it was in the example cited earlier.^{xxii} Similar feedback was received from another at the launch event: ‘I love that it relates to my home country even though it’s so far away. I always feel a sense of comfort when I’m in, or listening to something in, Iran’. Another respondent described the reaction of her elderly Iranian father (who lives in the UK) to the book: ‘He was smiling away; he remembered stories from the *Shahnameh* and was really excited when he recognised words and could also read Zal’s name in one of the pictures’.

One of the resources developed as part of the project relates to global citizenship education and sought to measure changed perceptions of Iran among pupils.^{xxiii} As part of this, pupils are asked to identify what they might see in Iran and the UK, with the aim of establishing commonalities between the different countries, peoples and ways of life, as well as learning about difference. Teachers are asked to:

Complete this activity before exploring **The Shahnameh Box**, including reading *The Phoenix of Persia*, and the learning activities in the Teacher Resources. Then repeat the activity again, either at an interim period or at the end, and analyse any changes that have occurred by a comparison with the first activity results. Look for a greater balance in pupils’ responses, showing an awareness of

diversity, traditional and contemporary, greater awareness of Iranian culture, and note any other changes in awareness of issues surrounding Iran. For example, how there are rarely positive news stories about the country and how little we know about ancient civilisations outside a narrow curriculum.

Indeed, one of the challenges of these kinds of projects is to introduce children to different musics and cultures without essentialising or orientalising difference. For instance, drawing connections between the Iranian musical instruments that pupils learnt about and instruments that they are already with familiar is one way of doing this.

Concluding Thoughts: Towards a DIY Cultural Diplomacy?

‘I hope that the legacy of this project will be a generation of children and young people who have their first experience of Iran being a really beautiful story with really wonderful music rather than anything negative.’ (Soosan Lolavar, Project Manager and Creative Producer for *The Phoenix of Persia* music)^{xxiv}

It’s clear from the projects described above that music offers a valuable space in which to foster greater cultural understanding. To what extent, though, might this be framed and understood as cultural diplomacy, what are the challenges to operationalising music and other arts in this way, and in what sense might my role as project initiator and (co-)leader be akin to that of a diplomat? From time to time UK government organisations such as the British Council or major venues have run cultural engagement activities related to Iran, often including collaborations between British and Iranian artists. Such projects have tended to take place at politically expedient times, are often short-lived and most have had limited reach and impact on broader attitudes towards Iran. The projects discussed in this chapter might be described as ‘citizen-led’ or even ‘DIY’ in the sense that they are not part of any strategic cultural policy (although they should be) and the impetus came from very personal experiences of cultural dissonance and a desire to offer a different perspective on a country that has been negatively branded for so long by the Western political and media establishment. Indeed, it seems that the efficacy of such initiatives may lie in the very subtlety of their messages - feedback from teachers and pupils offered complex commentary on a range of benefits including the messages of the story, engaging with creative work and experiencing live music - in which the ‘diplomacy’ aspect was fairly understated and thereby perhaps more powerful.

In an increasingly polarised world of media disinformation, there is an urgent need for such grassroots ‘people-to-people’ soft cultural diplomacy that reaches into schools and homes. This is of course as important for people with no prior connection with Iran as it is for those for whom such projects open up a space to feel pride in their culture for a change. Certainly, in the current international climate, it’s hard to overstate the importance of such projects and indeed I have come to believe that there is perhaps no work that is more pressing for an educator-researcher such as myself.

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ⁱ Now renamed as Music Masters, <https://musicmasters.org.uk/> The project leads at London Music Masters were Rob Adediran and Anne Findlay.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.ashmoleprimaryschool.org.uk/>; <https://jessop.lambeth.sch.uk/> Workshop dates were as follows: Wednesday 23rd November, Monday November 28th and Wednesday December 7th 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Add link to guide

^{iv} The UK national research audit mechanism https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Research_Assessment_Exercise. On the topic of ‘impact’ in ethnomusicology, see the special forum in the journal *Ethnomusicology Forum* (2011), based on the autumn 2010 one-day conference of the British Forum for Ethnomusicology.

^v *Making an Impact: Introducing Key Stage 2 Children to Iranian Music* (2012, Stephen Wilford and Alex Jeffrey) See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BK10zcZHXUo>

^{vi} The concert programme is available here:

https://www.city.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/348325/Brightsparks-Concert-Programme,-23rd-May-2012.pdf

^{vii} Bruce had written the piece such that it could be performed without necessarily needing Iranian musicians, a *daff* ensemble or a group of young string players.

^{viii} For a video recording of this performance, see David Bruce’s website:

<http://www.davidbruce.net/works/prince-zal-simorgh.asp>. City University also produced a short film about the Youth Proms performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHMgBgaqKog>

^{ix} The Simorgh is represented by *nei*, the Mountain of Gems by *santur*, Zal by *qanun*, King Sam, Queen Aram and the royal court by *tanbur*, and the soldiers and wild countryside by *daff*.

<https://www.phoenixofpersia.co.uk/storytelling-through-music>

^x I was keen to include Amir, whose music I had previously written about and who I knew to be a wonderful composer and performer, but he is based in Vancouver and I wasn't sure how the logistics would work. The normalisation of the online environment due to Covid-19 was still two years away and although we had the technology to do so at the time, it wasn't yet part of normative ways of working. Had the project take place now, we would certainly have connected online with Amir and involved him virtually in workshop sessions. As it was, Amir collaborated from a distance, composing sections and sending them for feedback.

^{xi} There are two versions of the soundfile: (1) The complete story with narration: <https://soundcloud.com/user-89102112/the-phoenix-of-persia>; and (2) Separate chapters with music only, for teachers to use for creative work such as children writing their own versions of the story:

<https://soundcloud.com/user-89102112/sets/the-phoenix-of-persia-music-composition>

^{xii} Photographs of the book launch are available here: <https://www.phoenixofpersia.co.uk/the-story>

^{xiii} https://tinyowl.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/PhoenixPersia_TeachersResource_Final_LR.pdf

^{xiv} This included 20 performance and storytelling workshops, reaching over 680 children.

^{xv} The following short film about the project focuses on the book launch and a music workshop at Hugh Myddelton Primary School in Islington, London: *Phoenix of Persia Children's Book and Music Project*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMhfd2Q8XFc>

^{xvi} The original plan had been to run family events at the V&A focused around the story and music, but due to Covid-19 this wasn't possible. For more information on the Shahnameh Box and on the back page spread of the book, showing the instruments, see:

<https://www.phoenixofpersia.co.uk/shahnameh-box> and <https://www.phoenixofpersia.co.uk/instruments>.

^{xvii} See <https://www.phoenixofpersia.co.uk/>

^{xviii} The majority of feedback collected was via teachers and educational organisations; it was less easy to assess the impact of the book and music within domestic settings in the UK and beyond.

^{xix} Further feedback and social media posts are available on the project website:

<https://www.phoenixofpersia.co.uk/feedback-from-teachers-and-pupils>;

<https://www.phoenixofpersia.co.uk/reviews-of-the-phoenix-of-persia-bo>

^{xx} See the full blogpost here: <https://teacherglitter.wordpress.com/2019/05/17/music-and-storytelling/>

Among many examples of teachers posting on social media, see

<https://twitter.com/LacewingIOE/status/1144617139069997056/photo/1>

^{xxi} See also: <https://www.phoenixofpersia.co.uk/more-ideas-for-classroom-activities> and

<https://tinyowl.co.uk/phoenix-art/>

^{xxii} Judging from the name, the child is likely Turkish Kurdish, rather than Iranian, but the same principle applies.

^{xxiii} See 'What would you see in Iran?' <https://tinyowl.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Appendix-1.pdf> and 'Iran or UK?' <https://tinyowl.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Appendix-2.pdf>

^{xxiv} *Phoenix of Persia Children's Book and Music Project*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMhfd2Q8XFc> (4:34-4:45).