

Monash Alumni Spotlight Series Podcast

[Music]

Hello and welcome to the Spotlight Series from the Faculty of Arts at Monash University, home to arts changemakers and disruptors. I'm Matt Mitchell, a Senior Lecturer with the School of Media Film and Journalism here at Monash.

Our Spotlight Series connects you with diverse alumni from Monash Arts as they continue to succeed against the critical global challenges of our age. This series also showcases our faculty's cutting edge research and innovative teaching, committed to helping change the world for the better.

Today we kick off the Spotlight series with a one off podcast where I'm joined by Monash alumni and ethno-musicologist, Dr. Ahmad Sarmast, founder of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music. And later, we'll hear from Dr. Ben Wellings, Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations.

So Ahmad, tell us about the Afghanistan National Institute of Music. What is it, and where did the idea come from?

[Ahmad Sarmast]

Afghanistan National Institute of Music was the only music entity in Afghanistan, which has been providing quality general and music education to all Afghan children, regardless of their agenda, ethnicity or social circumstances. The school has been established in 2010, after the collapse of the Taliban regime, and the idea was, bring music back to the life of Afghans through music education, but at the same time, to make a contribution to the musical rights of Afghan people.

And tell us what Afghanistan was like when the Institute was founded back in 2010. What was the music situation like in Afghanistan at that time?

First, I went to Afghanistan towards the end of 2005, to see what's happened with the music scene of the country as the consequences of the Civil War. So when I returned, I faced a huge disappointment, there was nothing happening in the field of music. Even in 2007, still, in Afghan Parliament, there were elements advocating for the ban of music in Afghanistan again.

So in such circumstances, I begin promoting the idea of establishing a dedicated music school, not just to provide music education, but at the same time, to use the soft power of music for transforming Afghan communities. For building bridges between different Afghan ethnic groups. To making a contribution towards gender equality. So I'm a strong believer in the power of music. But a country like Afghanistan, which has been now over 40 years in war, they need it to benefit from the healing power of music.

So, I believe that music can play a significant role in the conciliation of Afghan people, in the unification of Afghan people. And that's why I always give this as an example: When you bring in a huge orchestra, students from all different ethnicities of Afghanistan, sitting together, making music together. In this manner, you can teach them, also they can respect

each other's differences outside of the orchestra. Whether it's a linguistic difference, in the same way that they forget about the differences in the orchestra. They're playing different musical instruments. But by the end of the day, they're working together creating a piece of beauty. So that was, I was giving all of it as an example that that will help Afghanistan to overcome the ethnic division and move towards nationhood.

And for those who maybe don't know, what type of role does music play within Afghani culture?

Music was always a significant part of Afghan culture. If you're going back deep in the foundation of the land, which is today known as Afghanistan, it's been laid down by music, because the Afghan historians indicate that the establishment of Afghanistan or the land where we are today where Afghanistan is located, is closely associated with the migration of audience to Afghanistan. In that culture, the singing of Vedas [*singing*] have a significant part. A country in which foundation is laid down by music. It was always music an important part of Afghanistan. Never ever music was banned in Afghanistan until the first reign of the Taliban and the second reign of the Taliban.

And when you talk about the Taliban, are we talking about a complete ban, no music whatsoever?

During the fresh reign of the Taliban, and the second reign of the Taliban, anything, which is called music is banned in Afghanistan. It's not just singing, it's not just instrumental playing an instrument, it is also learning music, playing music, listening to music, making a living through music. Absolutely everything is banned in Afghanistan.

Which now begs the question, why does the Taliban ban music?

Taliban are trying to prove that it is banned by Islam, but there is sometimes a dilemma between different scholars of Islam. It depends on their ideology, whether music is banned or permitted. But in reality, there is no explicit reference in all the Quran for banning music.

[News clip]

Afghans are thronging to Kabul airport, desperate to get on planes and leave the country at any cost. They're scaling the airport's walls this morning, rushing in. There's no screening, no security checks, just for some numbers. When they do manage to push aboard planes, they're so crowded pilots won't take off.

And no one agrees to disembark. It's all happening just a few 100 yards from the military side of Kabul airport, now separated by a row of barbed wire from the civilian side.

The Taliban then come back to power in August 2021. What impact did that have on the Afghani National Institute of Music?

It was clear, I know that there was a lot of speculation before the return of the Taliban, people who decided to bring back the Taliban into power and impose it on the Afghan people. There was a lot of speculation and promoting that idea that the Taliban of 2021 is different than the Taliban of 1996. But within Afghanistan, it was always clear to the Afghan people that the Taliban are not ready to change. Even in the last 20 years, when the Taliban were fighting the republic in Afghanistan. It was clear when they were a tiny village was coming under the control of the Taliban, they were immediately implementing the policies of 1996.

[News clip]

The Taliban have ordered an immediate and indefinite ban on university education for women. 1000s of Afghan girls sat university entrance exams just three months ago, the ban is the latest of many restrictions on women's rights, most girls are already barred from secondary school education.

So therefore, it was clear for me when the Taliban going to come into power music will be banned. And that's exactly happened. Today, when I'm talking to you, Afghanistan National Institute of Music is shut down. And Afghanistan National Institute of Music was the only institution or school or university that's been brought under the firm military control of the Taliban and the first day of the Taliban returned to Afghanistan.

So your campus was shut down, take us through what it was like.

Both campuses were shut down. But in the first day of the Taliban returned to Afghanistan, the first group who went to the campus of Afghanistan National Institute of Music, the one group belong to Haqqani group, which brought under their control the old campus of Afghanistan and turned it into a military barrack. And even until today, this campus is under the firm control of Haqqani group and it's used as a military barrack, a place which has been called the happiest place in Afghanistan to be there. See this place and witness the shadow of the Taliban going around the school. They went in every building, in every room. In the orchestra room, they destroyed a piano, cello, whatever musical instrument was in that room. It's been destroyed in that day. They took the photos of our students to the floor. There was one historical instrument used in our school, which was the first classical guitar brought to Afghanistan by the first classical guitar player of Afghanistan. This gentleman gives this instrument to our school as a donation. But of course for us it had a huge cultural value, historical value. It was in a nice box, so they destroyed that instrument in that day.

You had about 240 students I think at that time at the campus, one third of which were women I believe, what happened to them?

As I noted, so for me was clear, that the days of ANIM is finished, and the kids who have been studying with us, some of them for money, is a lost opportunity. So, I tried my best I work around the clock with an international team to evacuate my community out of Afghanistan and to give them another opportunity. And eventually, I was able to begin the regression on the third of October. And by the events of November, the entire ANIM community all students from grade six to grade 14 have been evacuated from Afghanistan, boys and girls.

[News clip]

Now that the plane has landed, they have their wings. Lisbon, Portugal, will be the brand new home of the Afghan National Institute of Music. The first charter flight offered to them all the remaining students, staff, some families now finally safe, their beloved instruments in tow.

The government of Portugal positively responded to my appeal for giving asylum to us and the Afghanistan National Institute of Music settled down in Portugal and now they continue their musical education and music making there.

And tell us today, how are they? What are they doing? How is ANIM today?

I'm very grateful to the god. I'm very grateful to the people of Portugal. I'm very grateful to the government of Portugal. In spite of all challenges that we faced and the government faced because every country have their own legal system, receiving 273 people at once, that was a huge burden for the government of Portugal, but they decided to take it. Making sure that we stay together, and we are able to make music together, that was another challenge, Because in the group that I have evacuated, there was about 70 minors travelling with the group. And according to the Portuguese law, we had to solve that problem, who will be the guardian of the kids, whether they will be given to foster care, are they going to stay with the school, with us, what will be the our role. But we've been very, very lucky that with the support of a legal team, as well as with the support of the government of Portugal, eventually a solution has been found. And that the solution was that we could move north of Portugal in the city of Braga, which is the third largest city of Portugal, to begin our activities there. We begin there now every member of the ANIM student body are enrolled in conservatory. ANIM, an ensemble of the orchestra has been established, including this whole orchestra held our first gala concert in exile, which has been live broadcasted to Afghanistan by the Voice of America, so Taliban watched it. *[Music]* I made sure that the Taliban gonna watch that concert. So the concert was also broadcasted by the national TV of Portugal. Plus it was live streamed on the social media. So, we played our large concert and now we are slowly returning back to the world stages. So, up until now, we played about 10s of concerts in other European countries. And we've got many large and small concerts planned for the coming months and year.

Are any of your students or anyone at ANIM, they obviously want to go home? Do they feel threatened? Do they feel safe and secure in Portugal or do they feel in any way threatened, or their families for example?

Portugal is one of the is the third safest place in the world. So in terms we don't feel any threat from the Taliban in Portugal especially. They don't have any presence there. So the members of the Afghan community and communities sympathetic to the Taliban who might be, they practically do not do not exist in Portugal. To the best of my knowledge, my students and their families who are still in Afghanistan, they did not receive any threat or they were in no way in danger. In one moment, I remember there was a lot of messages I was receiving from the community member from the parents. Because during the COVID-19, we lended instruments to all students so they can practise in their homes. But when the Taliban returned back to power, the instruments stayed in their homes, they were not able to take the instruments out. So when the Taliban began going home to home, such as in Afghanistan, I was getting a lot of messages from the community from the families, "What we should do Dr. Samast with the school instruments? What we should do with them?" And it was tough for me it was painful, because those instruments, a lot of energy and time has been spent to get those instruments to Afghanistan. But my advice was destroy them, burn them, don't keep them, anything that's gonna give you a tough time and put you in trouble with the Taliban. Get rid of it. But the community generally is in a good shape, but I also saw very soon they'll be reunited with their children. So the government of Portugal just this month made an announcement to us, and now they're working to assist with the unification of all families left back in Afghanistan.

Amazing. So the families themselves will come to Portugal as well?

Yes.

What do you want to achieve with ANIM moving forward? Where would you like to see it positioned? What goals would you like it to achieve?

When I was working on ANIM, every question of ANIM, my top priority and goal was to give another opportunity to my students, to give them safety and another opportunity. Now that my students and my community are safe, we all aim to preserve the Afghan musical heritage in exile. But also not just preserving Afghan musical eras in exile, but also using every concert opportunities to raise awareness about what's happening today in Afghanistan. It's not just the musical rights of the Afghan people that are denied. Today, half of a population of Afghanistan are deprived from every single rights of theirs. The women of Afghanistan, they're denied rights to education, rights towards rights to freely move within the country, even rights to leave their homes. Rights to travel, rights to get with their kids to go to a park to enjoy the time with the kids. So I want the world to know that what's happening in Afghanistan and all this speculation and whitewashing of the Taliban turned out to be wrong. And I will also like to call on the international community, please definitely understand that Afghanistan is facing a huge, human catastrophe. But at the same time, make sure that anything that goes back to Afghanistan, for humanitarian purposes is not ending up in the hands of the Taliban. This will prolong the presence of the Taliban in power and the tyranny of the Taliban.

I want to talk now about that whitewashing that you were talking about and bring in Dr. Ben Wellings, who is a Senior Lecturer from the School of Politics and International Relations at Monash University. Hello, Ben.

[Ben Wellings]

Hello.

Cultural diplomacy, we're sort of hearing about that here, and even to an effect, I guess, the Taliban in some way is exerting cultural diplomacy as well. But then when we look at ANIM, we see that that's probably a better example of soft power, where music is actually being used, for example. What exactly is cultural diplomacy?

All right, well, first of all, just let me express my admiration for Professor Sarmast, and all that he's done, and all the personal risks that he's endured. With ANIM to come to a question about cultural diplomacy. So if I go back one step and say, well, what's diplomacy? and we'll add the culture. So diplomacy is what we really think about interstate relations, or traditionally, we've thought about it like that. It's the human interactions that govern interstate relations between, say, one nation state and another. Diplomacy, we sort of think has been around for about 400 years or so, when we've got a system of states that we can recognise today, but it's probably a little bit older than that, too. And it's really about peaceful persuasion, well it should be. And diplomacy is sort of, you know, the stuff that you do before the fighting starts. And hopefully you don't get to that stage. But obviously, we know in human history that you do, and it's really about trying to get other people to agree to what you want them to do. So that would be diplomacy.

Cultural diplomacy is a specific element of that which uses culture, either high culture or popular forms of culture, to do basically the same thing. To try and convince people that the position of a government, or the existence of a state, or the actions of a state are actually beneficial. Either to everyone in a small part or to be justified in some particular way. So, if we think in terms of high culture ballet, opera, Ahmad has talked about the amount of touring that ANIM has done. I mean, that's sort of a feature of cultural diplomacy, obviously, that

there can be cultural institutions or orchestras that can travel and present a good picture of a particular country, in other parts of the world. We can also think in terms of more popular forms of cultural diplomacy and sport comes to mind here. And if we think about, you know, what we might think of big global sporting events you know, noting that these international competitions are about a little over 100 years old these days, if we think about the origins of the modern Olympics, or the Soccer World Cup, they always had like some element of making a particular country look good. You know, we might think of the Berlin Olympics in 1936, that's a sort of classic of the genre. But we had the Football World Cup in Qatar, the very end of last year. And you see that there's a process there of hosting particular major sporting events in particular countries. And usually, it'll kind of generate a few issues around in Qatar's case, it was about human rights, in particular with LGBTQI communities. And we might think of the 2018 iteration of the football World Cup in Russia, where, you know, there were authoritarian regimes. But the focus is not necessarily on the regime, it takes a step backwards, but it gets reflected glory. People are there having a good time, so they might then associate Russia or Qatar, not with human rights abuses or authoritarianism, but with having a nice time. So that is kind of the function of cultural diplomacy.

But listening, of course, to the example of ANIM, there are grey areas around here because, of course, ANIM is not categorically representing the current government of Afghanistan, it's actually presenting a different view of Afghanistan to the world. And it's doing that through a medium that everyone can understand, which is music. And of course, every form of music has sort of different inflections, and it's very recognisably from Afghanistan, or it could be recognisably from Latin America, or wherever music could come from, we can recognise its form, but everyone can access it. So in that form, something like music is a very translatable form that cultural diplomacy can, can exert. And then we can see that the power of persuasion, that something like ANIM could say, well, you know, Afghanistan is not defined by the Taliban. Here is another view of Afghanistan, here is an Afghanistan where young girls can play music, they can travel the world, they're not banned from school. So public perceptions matter, cultural diplomacy has a way of affecting that. And high art forms, music, things that don't involve spoken language, sport, music, dance, are very translatable when it comes to cultural diplomacy.

When we talk about impact, which is a very difficult thing to measure, what impact do you think something like ANIM could have in terms of maybe shaping people's perceptions about the Taliban or about Afghan culture, for example.

I think the word perception is really important there. They're very difficult to measure the impact of a cultural form. In diplomacy, perceptions matter. So, diplomacy and diplomats, very intuitive people. And they actually have quite a different view of the international system than most academics. Most academics would say, well, the problem in Afghanistan is that it's been between great powers, you know, between Britain and Russia and Persia, the Soviet Union, United States, and its geostrategic location means that it's been the site of very many conflicts over many centuries. Sometimes referred to as the graveyard of empires, this would be a way of sort of seeing international relations as just a kind of like what happens between the material forces of various different countries and where good fortune or bad fortune finds a particular state. But diplomats are very intuitive people, and they put a great deal of store on agency that what they do matters and can make a difference. So I think in terms of, you know, like measuring the impact of cultural diplomacy as a form, it's very difficult to sort of imagine like, well, you know, we had 50% success. But in terms of a broadcast performance,

that's a lot of perception. It's still available on the internet, you can still see it, it's in that sense, it's a resource that is sitting there that is challenging the Taliban rule every day, right, just by being on the internet. And so in that sense, it is absolutely aiding the perception of that there is a different Afghanistan, out there, there is a different Afghanistan possible.

And why is that important, ANIM? And why is it so important to ensure that there is that different perception of Afghanistan, that it's not the version that the Taliban would want the world to believe?

[Ahmad Sarmast]

Afghanistan is with a very deep and vibrant history, even when we're talking about the musical history of Afghanistan, music was always an important part of social and political life of the country. Even before the return of the Taliban. The first strain of the Taliban, and the years of civil war already depicted a very negative picture of Afghanistan in the minds of the international community. And the image of Afghanistan normally was with a man with a kalashnikov and whose face is totally covered. So when I established Afghanistan National Institute of Music, one of the objectives behind the establishment of the school was also to build bridges, not only between different ethnic group of Afghanistan and to assist to music with the unification of Afghanistan, but at the same time to build bridges with the rest of the community. With Afghanistan to music, culture, arts and culture can play a significant role in building these bridges and the different ideas that we've been using to the soft power of arts and culture. We saw that, we saw that power in practice, I can give you a week's examples. For example, when in 2013, we travelled to the United States with the Afghan Youth Orchestra and we had a sold out concert in Carnegie Hall. And we had a sort of concert in Kennedy centre. Before the tour, the perception about Afghanistan was with that stereotype. But after the tour, there was also a documentary someone made that they had been interviewing people in the audience, the world they've been expecting from this performance. I'll never forget that one lady was sitting saying in an interview that, for me, Afghanistan was always a country much stuck in that time. So I come here to see that if in reality, this is happening, and I did not expect such a high quality music also. But after the concert, the perception was such, and because of the coverage that they received, but of course, also, Kennedy centre houses over 3000 people. So, these 3000 People also will be speaking about that event, the same in Carnegie Hall.

As you said, there were 3000 people there at the Kennedy centre, who would have spoken to 3000 more people and that definitely has a resonance that then seeps out from there, which is incredibly important. When we go to let's say, Monash University itself, Ben, about how it involves itself in the geopolitical challenges of our age, through soft diplomacy. How does Monash University do that? How do they help in trying to, I guess, address those geopolitical challenges?

[Ben Wellings]

If we just give a quick sketch of what those might be, and of course, tensions I mean, aside from Afghanistan, but we know that there's a war in Ukraine, and despite our geographic distance from that, we're still very involved. We know that we're sending material over there and munitions, as well. And, of course, really, that the kind of the shifting hegemony in the Indo Pacific. And by that I mean, who's in charge, and we've got used to the idea that the United States is the what we call the hegemonic power, this part of the world and that's being challenged, and it's being challenged, of course, most obviously, by China, but there are other rising powers in South Asia and India. So those are kind of some of the more

immediate security risks, but then there's a general economic shift. And this is where a country like Indonesia might come in, and then we need to, you know, not forget old and establish relations with Japan, South Korea, and so on. So what we're seeing is a general shift of economic and hence political power to this part of the world, and contestation over who's in charge. So what can Monash do about that? Right, you know, because we're just a civil society actor, right.

So I'll come back to this idea of diplomats. And I'm going to shift it slightly to the notion of ambassadors. Because ambassadors we would have typically thought like top of the tree of the diplomatic hierarchy, but we've got a kind of a, the term has become slightly more diffuse now and understood, you might think of the term brand ambassador is just someone who tries to make a particular brand look good. And through their endorsement, right, promote some particular product. At the university level, I often think that Monash's students are ambassadors, there's two ways of thinking but I guess there's input and output. So we have got used to in the last, say, the last 20 years in particular, that Monash along with other Australian universities would be a place where students from outside of Australia would come and be educated. And we know that the two largest donor countries for Australian students are China and India. But I think something's happening in reverse now. And I think Monash is positioning itself very well to begin to send students into our region. Monash has a global footprint in terms of other campuses and partners, and so on. And whilst there are significant parts of that in Europe, we're very well represented in the Indo Pacific region. And more and more, we're sending students across the university on study trips, and exchanges. I'll mention the global immersion guarantee, in particular, because this is where Monash actually guarantees an overseas experience to students at the end of their first year in their undergraduate degree. So Monash has a lot of students. We have a large alumni network.

And I think we'll go back to that very important element of diplomacy, which is people-to-people exchanges. And this is where we come back to cultural diplomacy as an element of soft power. And I think that those people-to-people contacts actually matter and we also have some students from Afghanistan who came and joined us after the fall of the Republic of Afghanistan in 2021 and they're with us now. But what I think more more generally, is that Monash students will be going out into the world and inputs in particular to the region, and foster those kinds of people to people links that we know, last, and we know make a difference. You know, students who've been to one country generally go back to that country at some point later in their life, whether in their professional career or personally. And so when you build those people to people links together, it actually makes it more difficult for tensions to boil over, right, because there's a kind of a ballast, there's sort of a people-to-people ballast, they'll actually just makes it easier for or a little bit harder for governments to act without considering that. We can actually go to Europe, post war Europe, for an example of that kind of integration we've seen in the European Union, part of that has been people-to-people links through tertiary level education, the so called Erasmus scheme. And Monash is, is now doing something that is similar in terms of bringing it'd students into the region.

And what role do you think alumni, for example, graduates, play a role in being ambassadors for both the University and I guess, you know, as a form of a tool of soft power themselves, what role do they play?

Yeah, well, of course, I mean, the students in some ways are directly ambassadors for Monash and indirectly for Australia, right. Because then they're making an impression they're doing the thing about the perceptions, in other countries. And I've been with Monash students in several countries, and they're all fantastic, right, they all present a good image of the university and of Australia more broadly, because, you know, whether we like it or not, people are going to see these as, as Australian students, and, you know, they're going to form opinions and impressions. So alumni are slightly different, we have a kind of a relationship with them. But we don't have a direct relationship with them, like we do with students, or when the alumni were students, but certainly alumni networks and just maintaining those people-to-people links. And I think there's probably a kind of an arc of engagement, you know, people might start to sort of, you know, maybe in the first 10 years or so it's not front of mind for them, but after that, they start to sort of think, well, I can now sort of see the value of the education I got at Monash in a medium term light, and it starts to kind of like, fit together, you know. It's that, "Oh, okay, I remember so and so saying that," or "I learned this from doing that particular unit and that particular course," and so it starts to come together. So I think that, that those alumni networks, just staying in touch, you know, creating networks is in some ways, an end in itself, but it can also go further in that it can open up opportunities for other people that come into contact with those individuals too.

[Ahmad Sarmast]

I remember when, when I was in Afghanistan, I thought Australia and Afghanistan was too far from each other, and this story of diplomatic relationship is not very deep. But I remember that for the first time when I established Afghanistan National Institute. So the first time, I invited Australian musicians to come and teach in Afghanistan. I've got that privilege that for the first time the *Waltzing Matilda* was performed in Afghanistan, by Australian musicians, joined together with Afghan musicians with Afghan instruments. And at the same time when I went to Afghanistan back in early in the 20s, to negotiate with the Afghan government, but again, it could not happen without the support of Monash. I remember the first receiving of funding I received from Monash to go on to see how we can help. So the idea of the establishment of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music itself, also began in Monash. Sometime I was calling it in Afghanistan a Monash baby. So there are always alumni and students who are applying relationships to build bridges between different nations and Australia. But in our case, we invited in many occasions many Australian musician come and volunteered and was teaching in my school in Afghanistan. But at the same time, a wonderful example of people-to-people diplomacy between Afghanistan and Australia happened thanks to the support of Monash University hosting, that all women are guests of the Zohra Orchestra here in 2019. *[Music]* And that was a joint project of the Afghan embassy and Monash University, but it clearly showed us how much music can play together to bring people together. It was not diplomats, it was just Afghan musicians, Monah scholars, Monash community, that facilitated that concept. It was a full house concert hall here but thanks to that support also, it was not limited to Monash here in Melbourne but also Sydney Opera House. It was again a sold out Sydney Opera House. I will say it also changed the perception about Afghanistan, the relationship between Afghanistan and Australia. And the contribution of the people of Australia in removing the Taliban during the first round and bringing peace and stability and also freedom to Afghan people.

Tell us now what would be your dream for ANIM and for Afghanistan?

My biggest dream right now is a free Afghanistan. An Afghanistan, where the people once again can enjoy their freedom. For me a dream is to once again return back to Afghanistan, but this time not, but we all must do this, go back to Afghanistan, bring back music to the life of the Afghan people and reassure that the musical rights of Afghan people are respected, and Afghan people are freely able to express themselves through music.

[Music]

Many thanks to our guests today, Dr. Ahmad Sarmast and Dr. Ben Wellings.

To read more about Ahmad's inspiring story and other changemaker arts alumni, go to: monash.edu/alumni.

And if you'd like to come along to our upcoming spotlight series live talks which will be held in person, please check out the alumni events calendar at: monash.edu/arts/alumni/events.

We hope to see you there.