

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Institute of International Humanitarian Affairs Partners with The Concert to Connect and the United Nations to Honor Musicians Affected by War and Disaster

International humanitarian aid and education communities joined together for a special evening of joy, hope, storytelling, and music.

NEW YORK — Fordham University's [Institute of International Humanitarian Affairs](#) (IIHA) collaborated with The Concert to Connect and the United Nations to host a special evening, The Ode to Hope, on UN Day, Oct. 24, 2026, honoring musicians worldwide affected by war and disaster. The event took place at Fordham's Lincoln Center campus.



From left: Sir Charles Petrie, Concert to Connect initiator, former UN Assistant Secretary General, and IIHA visiting research fellow; Sue On, orchestra conductor and music educator, Concert to Connect; Jasper Nelissen, communications, Concert to Connect; Lora Ksieniewicz, Concert to Connect founding member and IDHA alumna, IIHA; and Brendan Cahill, executive director, IIHA.

The evening kicked off with a classical piece, “The Universal Language,” followed by welcome remarks from Brendan Cahill, executive director of the IIHA: “It is my absolute pleasure to collaborate with The Concert to Connect on this event. Music sits at the heart of everything we should be doing in humanitarian assistance, which is giving people beauty and dignity at a vulnerable time.”

Fifty-five guests from the international humanitarian aid, music and higher education communities joined for the concert. They learned the meaning behind each performance through stories, anecdotes, presentations and film, which were woven in throughout the event.

Sir Charles Petrie, initiator of The Concert to Connect, was joined by Sue On, music director, and Jasper Nelissen, founder and chief strategy officer of MULTI Creative Agency, in sharing "The Human Story" and "The Wider Vision."



Petrie, who also teaches for the International Diploma in Humanitarian Assistance program, delivered opening remarks on the impact of conflict on culture:

"War does more than destroy lives and livelihoods. It isolates communities, threatens cultural identities and gradually erodes the connections that bind people to the wider world. Yet even in the most desperate circumstances, people continue to create, teach music and preserve the cultural traditions that define who they are. The Concert to Connect seeks to celebrate that determination, not simply through a concert and documentary, but through the development of lasting relationships between music schools and communities affected by conflict."

Special guest speakers included Elizabeth Spehar, UN assistant secretary-general for peacebuilding support, and Lora Ksieniewicz, Concert to Connect founding member and IIHA alumna.

“As a student in the [IDHA program](#), I learned humanitarian assistance is about restoring the things that make us human. This is the backdrop of The Concert to Connect,” said Ksieniewicz.



Musical traditions from Ukraine, Palestine, Myanmar and Central Africa were also incorporated into live performances of "Reimagining Beethoven Across Borders" and "Ode to Hope & Peace" to resemble musical expression and resistance.

On, an orchestra conductor and music educator who played violin during the event, shared a story from her time working with teenage musicians in Amman, Jordan. During practice one day, an airstrike hit nearby. While On froze, the teenagers continued playing through the interruption.

"Ode to Joy has been a musical expression and resistance," On said.

Originally composed by Beethoven, "Ode to Joy" symbolized humanity's shared aspirations for freedom, dignity and solidarity. The piece was a major highlight of the evening and remains central to [The Concert to Connect's mission](#).

Jim Stillwaggon, who teaches for Fordham University, reflected on the show: "The Concert to Connect was a very moving and effective evening."

War and disaster continue to threaten the well-being and safety of communities every day, and The Concert to Connect helps restore passion, dignity and hope, especially for musicians. The IIHA was pleased to partner with them on this special event.

Participating Musicians:

- Senja Hawken, violin
- Sue On, violin
- Patrick Page, viola
- Ani Kalayjian, cello
- Matthew Kolodzieski, cello
- Julie Lee, flute
- Spencer Reese, clarinet
- Kalie Foxwell, piano

To learn more about The Concert to Connect please visit www.theconcerttoconnect.org/.

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The Institute of International Humanitarian Affairs acts as a bridge between the University and humanitarian practice, hosts lectures and symposia on a regular basis, and is the US partner for NOHA, a consortium of 12 European universities offering humanitarian education. The IIHA at 2546 Belmont Ave, Bronx, New York also provides space for undergrad and graduate students to meet and gallery showings. In addition to our courses, the IIHA publishes on a wide range of humanitarian topics, such as A Skein of Thought. Media Inquiries: s.l.egan@fordham.edu.