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***Interview with Palestinian Composer Naseem Alatrash about his
World Premiere Musical Interpretation of Refugee Crisis***

For Immediate Release: April 19, 2017

To: On-line, Radio, TV, and Print Press

From: Episcopal Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, 8000 St. Martins Lane, Chestnut Hill

PHILADELPHIA – Palestinian Composer and Cellist Naseem Alatrash is finishing his 4-movement composition for the world premiere of the four “Bright Colors on a Dark Canvas” on Saturday, May 13 at 7 p.m. at Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in the Chestnut Hill section of Philadelphia. Featured at France’s Nancy Jazz Festival, Lebanon’s Beiteddine Festival, the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., London’s Royal Albert Hall, and Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw, Alatrash was twice named “string player of the year” at the Palestinian National Music Competition and he continues to be a voice for Palestinian culture and an advocate of its music through his global string quartet, the Four Corners Quartet. The full concert is a benefit performance for the refugee resettlement ministry at the church.

He is interviewed here, by a member of St. Martin’s Refugee Resettlement Ministry, about the background, purpose, and process of this premiere composition.

INT: You have been working intensely for the last six months on “Bright Colors on a Dark Canvas.” Tell us what is at stake for you in this composition.

ALATRASH: We live in a world that is facing a major refugee crisis at the moment. Syrian, Afghani, and Somali refugees are being forced to leave their home, seeking shelter in neighboring Arab countries, Europe, the US, and Canada due to war and other social and political reasons.

Many refugees face discrimination, and are not allowed to join the workforce. Refugees usually have to travel by sea or land, taking unusually difficult routes and relying on smugglers. Sometimes families have to be separated for long periods of time. As a Palestinian I am also familiar with what it means to lose your home and everything you own. There are more than 6.5 million Palestinian refugees around the world still carrying the keys to their homes since 1948 in hope of return. When you lose your home, you carry with you the good memories, the music, and the culture as the source of identity everywhere you go. This musical work is a reflection of the shared humanity that we have with those refugees.

INT: Yes, music can often help show how a particular experience feels.

ALATRASH: Imagine some of the simplest daily events disappearing from your life in a blink of an eye. Dropping your children off at school everyday. Or an elder walking by the neighborhood bakery and smelling the freshly baked bread. Or sitting at table for dinner with your family. Everything that means something to you just vanished and you find yourself taking a trip to a mysterious future. You leave everything you ever loved, and sometimes even your loved ones, behind in order to survive. Your achievements, previous education, future goals, social standing, and dreams mean nothing to the world anymore.

INT: How does your new composition work with this deep set of losses?

ALATRASH: The first movement of "Bright Colors..." is called, "Neighborhood Dance." It's a dance representing daily life in an Arabic town. Sounds of the market, a wedding, the prayer of the mosque, happiness and celebration before war takes place. It is based on a lively folkloric melody that reflects the daily life before war took place.

INT: Your second musical movement portrays war, and then in your third movement, the war takes massive toll on the civilian population. How do you achieve that musically?

ALATRASH: This piece is based on the journey of leaving home, the difficulties of travel, days of walking, crossing the sea. It is calm yet full of occasional memories of the lost home in the melody. The main character of the story is a musician trying to protect his cello.

INT: Since right now no real resolution to the larger refugee crisis around the world is in sight, how do you musically resolve your composition?

ALATRASH: “Homeland Within” is the name of the final movement. It is a reflection of the hope and the strength refugees have to be able to survive. They live with this hope that one day they will be able to return to their loved home and have a normal life again. I want to capture that perseverance in the music. This movement is also a reflection of the compassionate human spirit that is full of solidarity, when all people stand together and help each other.

INT: How do you think of your music in relationship to the social dramas unfolding in our time?

ALATRASH: Music is a healing source for the human spirit. It’s what we need the most, now that our human spirit has become so materialistic. I believe that with music we can transcend all barriers and set an example for people to follow. I hope that my project will bring people closer together and help refugees get a better future.

The World Premiere “Bright Colors on a Dark Canvas” will be performed during a benefit concert on **Saturday, May 13 at 7:00 p.m. at Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, 8000 St. Martin’s Lane, Philadelphia, PA 19118.** Other participating musicians include four-time Grammy Award winner Eugene Friesen, Jordanian-Iraqi violinist Layth Sidiq, Syrian oudist Kinan Idnawi, Palestinian kanunist Tony Barhoum, and award-winning jazz pianist Joel A. Martin. Tickets are \$40 for adults, and \$20 for students and seniors.

All proceeds will support St. Martin’s Refugee Resettlement Ministry. St. Martin’s Refugee Resettlement Ministry joins with leaders of faith communities, secular organizations, and citizens in the Philadelphia area to resettle refugees in a safe, secure, and welcoming environment. We resettle refugees as guided by the Bible, “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” – Leviticus 19:34. For more information or to purchase tickets please visit StMartinEC.org or call 215.247.7466.
