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Delivering music education in the Saharawi Refugee Camps

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RGT 2015
Guitar Teachers Conference

The RGT 2015 Guitar Teachers Conference took place on the 27 September at the University of West London and attracted a large number of guitar teachers to what has become the event of the year for anyone who teaches guitar. An extensive range of seminars was on offer, covering teaching and performance skills, exam preparation and much more.

The morning seminar sessions covered a varied range of topics, including the RGT Ukulele Playing Exams, teaching the guitar online, exam-orientated question-and-answer sessions and a lively seminar entitled 'Becoming a Full-Time Guitar Teacher'.

Fender sponsored this year's conference and conducted an entertaining session on their American Standard series of guitars and basses. There was also a 'Fender Room', which drew a lot of attention throughout the day, with a selection of must-have guitars on display.

The varied theme continued in the afternoon with sessions covering jazz guitar, fingerstyle and accompaniment techniques for acoustic guitar, an overview of the new Acoustic Guitar Concert Performance Diplomas and a seminar on Villa-Lobos for classical players. The highlight of the afternoon was, without doubt, a session by the legendary flamenco guitarist Juan Martin, who inspired and entertained attendees with his extensive experience and knowledge.

After a closing speech by RGT Director Tony Skinner, the event was bought to a close with a stunning flamenco performance by Juan Martin. Many teachers then relocated to a local pub where a few more hours were spent discussing the day and sharing experiences on both playing and teaching.

Delivering Music Education in the Saharawi Refugee Camps

February 2016 marks the 40th anniversary of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, a self-proclaimed nation based in refugee camps in south-west Algeria. Close to 200,000 Saharawis have been stranded in the Algerian desert since Morocco occupied their homeland, the ex-Spanish colony Western Sahara, in 1975. The 16-year war that followed the invasion ended with a UN-mediated ceasefire in 1991 and the promise of a Saharawi self-determination referendum. 24 years later, this referendum has yet to become a reality. Living conditions in the Saharawi refugee camps are harsh, especially after two weeks of torrential rain in October 2015 devastated the five camps, leaving more than 25,000 people homeless.

Although largely dependent on humanitarian aid to survive, the camps are self-governed by the Polisario Front. They have established a robust infrastructure with a functioning, if basic, administration, health service and primary education widely available. Children are sent away for secondary education to places such as Cuba or Algeria; however, there are opportunities for further education in the camps, for example the thriving film and art schools. There is also a music school, Enamus, although it suffers from a shortage of equipment and lack of trained music teachers.

Since 2005, London-based charity Sandblast has worked to empower Saharawi voices to tell their story through the arts. Starting in 2012, one of the main projects has been Studio-Live, providing training and material resources for sound engineering. LCM staff member Sara McGuinness has been part of that team. The project is largely funded through Run the Sahara, a running event that takes place every February in the camps.

Through extended discussions with Saharawi musicians and educators, Sandblast has also identified a need for help delivering music education, both within the primary education system and to budding musicians. LCM have pledged to support the Saharawi and donated their music exams to the camps. In addition, Stave House (an LCM partner) have generously offered to help train Saharawi educators in their music teaching method. Ethnomusicologist Violeta Ruano is currently fundraising to take Stave House to the refugee camps in 2016 to train a small group of teachers to be able to deliver the method.

To further help music education in the camps, LCM has gifted a considerable amount of equipment, including several computers, camcorders, keyboards and other sound equipment. We are currently looking for a second-hand donated van that can carry this equipment to the Sahara. The budding partnership with LCM is an exciting development, not only for Sandblast but also for the LCM community, with the possibility of collaborative projects and exchange of ideas and information.

You can find out more about Sandblast's projects, the Saharawi Refugee Camps, Run the Sahara and flood relief at **www.sandblast-arts.org**.

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