

Music Freedom Day, The Hague, 3 March 2010

Introduction by Arjan Hamburger, Human Rights Ambassador, The Netherlands

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good evening and welcome to you all. I am delighted you made the effort to come here this evening, even though there were election results and a football match on TV, and you can hear all kinds of election-night music elsewhere in town. This is the first Music Freedom Day to be organised in the Netherlands. Similar events are being held in other cities today – in Cairo, Kabul and New York, to name but a few.

On this day we draw attention to two freedoms that we in the Netherlands take for granted: artists' freedom to compose music and write lyrics, and the freedom to perform and listen to music.

In many countries, these freedoms are curtailed and suppressed. It is extremely important that we address this issue. After all, both freedom of expression and the right to your own culture are universal human rights.

I should like to thank Freemuse for taking the initiative to launch this special day. And I also want to thank Het Paard van Troje for staging this event, and the Filmhuis, which will be showing the film *Nobody Knows about Persian Cats* tomorrow. This is a film about underground music in the most literal sense, in a country with one of the most repressive regimes in the world, Iran. Thanks are also due to the musicians who are here today to call attention to freedom of music and musicians. They are Brainpower from the Netherlands, and Take it Easy Hospital from Iran. After my introduction, a little background information from Freemuse's Ole Reitov, and the presentation of the CD with the wonderful title *Listen to the Banned*, both bands will perform.

In the Netherlands, we take making and listening to music for granted. Every kind of music is accessible, and music itself is almost seen as innocuous. Music makes people happy, or sad, moves or impresses, calms or excites. Music makes you dream and fills you with inspiration. Who could possibly be opposed to that?

But we're not only talking about love songs. Here we accept that musicians and their lyrics may be critical and socially engaged. Perhaps artists need that freedom more than

anyone else. The law does impose a few restrictions – but only if a song incites its listeners to violence, hatred or discrimination.

But that is not the case in every country. Some regimes see music as anything but innocuous. They restrict musicians' freedom because of what they sing, and sometimes even for the mere fact that they sing. Take the Taliban in Afghanistan. They banned secular music because it made people feel happy. Some governments only permit music that glorifies the leader. This is the case with the beloved Kim Jong II of North Korea. But these are both weird extremes.

More frequently, musicians' freedom to perform their music and our freedom to listen to it are curtailed because regimes are afraid that they will indeed inspire people, or even worse, make them aware of their situation, prompt them to take action or stand up for their rights, and criticise abuses or their leaders. The same applies if leaders think that music contains a hidden message. They see that as harmful and threatening, because it is influential and undermines their authority. It is then that leaders intervene – through censorship, and outright bans. Musicians are prevented from working; they are arrested, tortured and jailed. Sometimes oppression takes more subtle forms: artists are intimidated so relentlessly that they censor themselves or leave the country. There are plenty of recent and not-so-recent examples of this kind of oppression: China, Cuba, Burma, Cameroon, Iran, and Fela Kuti in Nigeria.

Sometimes groups in society curtail artists' freedom. This happens not only in dictatorial developing countries. Take the boycott of the Dixie Chicks by conservative and religious – and sometimes not very conservative or religious – radio stations in the US when the group spoke out against President Bush's policies on Iraq. American 'patriots' took to the streets to smash the Dixie Chicks' CDs. This had nothing to do with music or lyrics. This was a threat to the freedom to express criticism, as an artist and an individual.

For us at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, freedom of expression (and thus freedom of artistic expression) is one of the most important human rights. And human rights are the backbone of our foreign policy.

Why are they so important to us? Partly because of the solidarity we feel with the many victims of the many serious violations occurring in so many parts of the world. But partly out of realism and self-interest. Countries that respect fundamental human rights contribute to a more stable world. That is in all our interests, as Dutch people, and as Europeans.

Our motto is: human rights for all people, in all places, at all times. No one may use their political or economic system, religion, tradition or culture as an excuse to contravene fundamental human rights.

That is easier said than done. And it is often an uphill struggle. Some governments believe that what happens within their borders is none of our business. They cite national sovereignty, or their own 'special circumstances'. This is their country, and they are the boss. For our part, we say that in signing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and various other UN agreements, and by becoming members of the United Nations they have made commitments, which we can hold them responsible for fulfilling. And they are, of course, entitled to do the same with us.

We are extremely active when it comes to freedom of expression. For example, we support media diversity so that people have access to more than just state-controlled broadcasters and publications. Burma, China, Russia, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Belarus, Zimbabwe and a number of Arab states are examples of countries where we have taken action. Music plays an important part in our efforts.

But neither the Ministry of Foreign Affairs nor the Netherlands can promote human rights on its own. We work together with the European Union, and with the United Nations. And we also work extensively with local non-governmental organisations, because change must ultimately come from within.

What can you do to help banned or oppressed musicians? Start by making them and their work known to a wider public. By listening to their music and lyrics, and by sharing them with other people, if possible in the countries where they are banned – through Hyves, Facebook and YouTube, for instance. Being known helps. It can provide protection, and it can increase musicians' and music's influence on society.

Ole Reitov from Denmark, Freemuse's programme manager, has more to say about the music of the banned. Let him tell you what Freemuse stands for, why an organisation like this is needed, and what we can do to help.

Let me end by wishing you a fun and inspirational time today.

Thank you.