

Violinist Ruth Rogers' blog from the Thai-Burmese border - [Part One](#)  
([Visit made in 2008](#))

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Ruth Rogers, Victoria Sayles, Rose Redgrave and Katherine Jenkinson are playing string quartets to Burmese refugees on the Thai-Burma border. This is their first blog entry for The Strad website, written by Ruth Rogers

So here we are in Mae Sot, a town in Thailand very close to the border with Burma. We arrived yesterday after concerts, masterclasses and workshops in Jakarta and Bandung, Indonesia, and Bangkok, Thailand. We had an amazing seven concerts with pianist Martin Cousin and some wonderful experiences at the British International School in Jakarta and the Shrewsbury International School in Bangkok.

We are now in a different world. Today we went to two children's homes on Thai soil, travelling in the back of a pick-up truck with the wind in our hair and the sun on our faces. We sped past lush vegetation, banana plantations and maize crops, marvelling at how liberating it felt. When we arrived at the first home, we were greeted by around 130 children of every age, looking at us with great intrigue. These are children who have either lost their parents due to the brutal situation in Burma or whose parents have decided to send them to the safety of Thailand where they may possibly have a future. These parents know that they may well never see their children again. Other parents may have had to flee the Burmese militia at very short notice, and were only able to carry one child each. These children are the ones that were left behind.

A little girl of around three was crying and we watched as the other children passed her around trying to comfort her and make her laugh. I was immediately struck by the obvious absence of a parent - something so many of us took for granted when we were small - and how there are only a few adults around to care for so many children. I was also instantly aware of how attentive and well-behaved the children were, sitting, while waiting for us to start playing, with great patience and composure. In my experience this is rare in such a large group of children.

Katherine started to play her cello, while the rest of us hid, and then we walked in one by one, playing as we walked, to join the musical ensemble. The children watched wide-eyed and listened as if their ears were on stalks. Imagine that these children have never seen a violin or a viola or

indeed a cello. Imagine the impact the sound of a string quartet had on them. We played several pieces to them and you could have heard a pin drop. When we played Faure's Pavane, we asked them to draw a picture of what the music made them see in their mind's eye. We handed out paper and pens. Many of them seemed to just sit and listen - I have never witnessed such attentiveness! We had to play the Pavane again while they drew their pictures. Several children came up to explain their picture to us - one spoke of a peaceful waterful and a lady looking at a beautiful view while longing for her home and her family, another of a starry night sky, and another of birds singing and lovers calling to each other. It was a wonderful thing to witness.

We taught the children Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes, much to their hilarity. We also played a game where one child covered their eyes while another hid a coloured scarf somewhere in the room. We then played music as the seeker wandered around the room; we got louder as he got closer to the hiding place and quieter as he moved further away. The children adored this game and giggled so much. We taught them the round Row, Row, Row Your Boat in four groups - they were so quick to learn and so easily absorbed a melody. We showed them pizzicato and played them the Pizzicato Polka by Strauss. Finally we played them some Gershwin while they all smiled up at us. Before we left, we handed out biscuits and watched as they filled their little hands with as many as they could fit, and munched contentedly.

How can I explain how wonderful all of this was? Life affirming and humbling at the same time. They wanted to sing to us before we left and I watched as all four of us struggled to contain the tears welling up in our eyes as we watched them sing. It is so brutally unfair that they do not have parents. Yet they are so full of hope and joy and sparkle that somehow the tragedy of their situation is over-ruled. They make the best of their situation, making a family out of friendships.

The second children's home was just as wonderful. They were just as responsive and their pictures just as expressive. We all feel exhausted by the emotional intensity of the day and I just hope we can maintain this level of energy. We are pouring ourselves into it all. But it is so enriching, rewarding and worthwhile, and I am already looking forward to writing tomorrow's blog.

Ruth Rogers

## Violinist Ruth Rogers' blog from the Thai-Burmese border - Part Two

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Today has been another extraordinary and remarkable day for us. We set off this morning for the Mae La refugee camp on the border, stopping off to buy 20 industrial-sized tins of biscuits for the thousand or so children we were going to play for! We were all a little anxious about how we would feel when confronted by a refugee camp - particularly one that has been there for 20 years and which provides a supposedly 'temporary' home for around 50,000 people. This was a potentially depressing place to visit. The reality was that it was full of hope and promise.

When we arrived, we were taken to visit the care-home for handicapped people in the camp. These are all people who have suffered horribly in landmine explosions and have lost their eyesight, or some of their limbs, or in many cases both. They greeted us warmly and we played to them, desperately trying to bring a little light into their dark hut. They sang for us, accompanied by a guitar and we all struggled not to cry. What has happened to these people seems so painfully unnecessary.

We then played to an enormous group of children of all ages from a school in the camp - there were around a thousand kids and it was a fairly chaotic event! But just like yesterday they really listened when we played and music seemed to grab their attention and hold it in an astounding way. They were quite shy to come forward to volunteer for the games but this may just be because there were so many people watching. Even as a performer I felt rather overwhelmed by the numbers, so frankly I don't blame them!

Later we were led to a theological college in the camp and as we arrived we witnessed the most fantastic rendition by the students of the 'Hallelujah' chorus of Handel's Messiah. It was heartfelt, full-blooded and musical and we all commented on how their chorus had such a fine core of sound. It was absolutely unaccompanied and I only realised this hours later - I didn't notice that anything was missing at the time. (Anyway, as a violinist I find Handel's Messiah far too exhausting to perform so would encourage all future performances to be 'a cappella'!) We played a small recital to the students, including the slow movement of Dvorak's 'American' Quartet and a movement of Haydn, as well as some 'lollipops'. When we played Faure's

Pavane I asked one young man how it made him feel. He described being on a long road on his own and then finding someone to share the journey with; it made him feel peaceful and hopeful.

We were presented with four matching pieces of Karen traditional costume and we all put them on straight away, delighted at the warmth and welcome of these people. We said goodbye and I promised myself that I would come back to see these people again. They are inspiring (I wish that I could convey how rewarding this is, but words seem so hollow when I try to express what I would like to say).

This evening we gave another short concert for leaders of the Karen National Union and for children at a migrant care-home. Everywhere we go, music is a universal language that everyone can understand without the need for translation, a language that reaches out to people who cannot otherwise be reached. The people we have met are full of hope and perseverance. The world would truly be a better place if everyone could meet these refugees.

Ruth Rogers

## Violinist Ruth Rogers' blog from the Thai-Burmese border - **Part Three**

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I would hate to sound like a broken record but today has been another wonderful day. After a long, bumpy, hot and windy drive with six of us crammed into the back of a pick-up truck, we arrived at an orphanage and college very near the Burma border. So near, in fact, that we could have jumped into a rowing boat to cross a river into Burma but decided it was an unnecessary risk without the correct documentation, and we also questioned whether we could fit a cello into a small boat.

We climbed out of the car with bruised ribs, windswept hair and sunburnt faces. Every day has been a test of our stamina; maintaining this level of intensity and emotion with such a busy schedule has not always been easy. But I am so proud of my dear friends and colleagues as they have been so brilliant. As all musicians know, when you have to produce the goods, you just do. Even when you feel very tired, the adrenalin kicks in and sees you through. This was one of those times when I felt battered and bruised by the journey, but somehow found fresh energy as soon as I saw the students.

There were about 40 young people in their late teens and early 20s, and there was a positive energy about this place that we were all immediately struck by. They seemed instantly ensconced by the music and listened intently. We explained the different instruments - their age, what they are made of and how long ago they were made; and about bowing and pizzicato. We also showed them an undone bow with its slack horse-hair and performed a very cheeky rendition of Strauss's Pizzicato Polka. We are becoming bolder every day in our performing! When we played the slow movement of Dvorak's 'American' quartet, one young man told us that it made him imagine a boat sailing on calm waters with birds soaring overhead. Another told us that he felt lonely, he felt marooned on a desert island and missed his loved ones. Many of them were reluctant to tell us how the music made them feel and I have subsequently learned that the Karen people do not like to talk about their emotions.

There was fun and laughter too. One man did the bowing for the cello part of Pachelbel's Canon while Katherine did the fingering and the others thought this was hilarious. We witnessed many smiles and cries of delight.

After we'd whizzed through a flamboyant finale of Haydn, we were treated to a song that they wanted to share with us. Then we handed out a bar of soap and a tube of toothpaste to each and every one of them and passed round an enormous tin of biscuits. I would like all the people who donated to this trip to know that not only were these young people able to enjoy biscuits thanks to their donations, but they were even able to clean their teeth afterwards!

After that we played to all the small children, who sat in lines in absolute silence before we started. They were immaculately behaved, almost worryingly so. We soon shattered the silence with musical statues, Row Row Row Your Boat, Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes and the hide-the-scarf game, and the kids were utterly adorable. Grubby little faces stared up at us, puzzled at first, then mesmerised, and later grinning from ear to ear. One little one fell over in one of the games and quietly cried until a teacher picked him up. We were all worried about him but as soon as we started playing again, he stopped crying and listened, wide-eyed and fascinated. I really have never seen such beautiful children with such extraordinary composure. Some of them were so young. I really struggled when we had to leave as I wanted to take them all home with me. Our time is going so quickly now and I don't want it to end. I feel so inspired by the hope that these people seem to have despite their extraordinary suffering and I feel so glad that music seems to have such an effect on them. For all of you who are reading these blog entries and taking an interest, thank you so much. It really matters.

Ruth Rogers

## Violinist Ruth Rogers' blog from the Thai-Burmese border - **Part Four**

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We are all exhausted after a busy and emotional day. This morning we played at the Mae Tao Clinic in Mae Sot, a clinic and hospital that was set up nearly 20 years ago to provide medical treatment for Burmese refugees. When it was founded it consisted of a wooden hut. Now it has expanded thanks to funding, and last year more than 100,000 patients were treated. Many of them get across the Thai border unnoticed and go back to Burma once they have received medical assistance. Others are given a day pass and hope that a doctor will be able to see them.

We played on a stage in the open air with a canopy for shade while people came and went. Some were medics, some patients - mothers with young children, frail elderly people and young men. The music may have helped them pass the time while they waited to be seen by doctors, or it may have provided some distraction from pain, and some of the medics told us that we had brightened their day. For all of the refugees and migrants the sight and sound of a string quartet was an absolute novelty. Children giggled, adults smiled. When we tried to finish, we were asked to play a few more pieces. So of course we did.

After the informal concert, we were given a tour of the clinic. There is a busy prosthetics department: the need for artificial limbs has trebled in the past year due to landmine accidents. There is a maternity ward where babies are born and mothers are given advice on how to care for them. We saw two tiny babies who were born earlier this morning. Outpatients come for dental care, and there is also a surgical department and a family planning clinic. Children are vaccinated against measles, hepatitis and other diseases. The Internally Displaced People of Burma (IDPs) would not have access to any of this kind of help if it were not for this clinic.

Our second engagement of the day was at the office of the AAPP, which stands for the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. This is an organisation that helps Burmese people after they have been released from unfair imprisonment in Burma. We met people who told us why they had been imprisoned - one for writing a poem about freedom, another for publishing a book on the history of Burmese students, and another for taking part in a peaceful protest. One of the former prisoners showed us

around a small museum and explained what prisoners go through during their detainment. The images we saw were barbaric and brutal and involved shackles, beatings, solitary confinement and other methods of torture. We were all crying by the time he finished talking. We all felt embarrassed for our emotion: these were the people who had suffered, not us. Yet this man's strength of spirit, his courage and his smile were utterly inspiring. We also talked to a woman who had been wrongly detained for seven years and she too had a radiant, genuine smile.

Yet again music spoke a universal language – one that crosses all boundaries. I was struck by the fact that for a string quartet to work, each and every player must work in harmony with the others. If only such rules could be applied to every aspect of life. We played Dvorak's 'American' Quartet (again!) and this time we dedicated it to the suffering people of Burma. Our performance was broadcast on a radio station that goes out to IDPs and refugees inside Burma, and a member of the audience wrote a moving poem inspired by the music. We all felt that the music reached out and touched people in a way that would otherwise be impossible in such circumstances. Even as I write this, I feel frustrated at how inadequate words can be when trying to express something.

Finally, we drove out of town to a small, impoverished, rural cluster of huts and performed in the middle of a cabbage patch! We played to migrant workers and children, with hills behind us, banana and coconut trees around us, the sun slowly sinking in the sky, the scent of coriander in the air, and a dog occasionally barking in the distance. It was definitely the most unusual concert we have ever given!

I just can't believe that we are leaving tomorrow. I also can't believe how much we have packed in every day, and how topsy-turvy my sense of time has become: it feels as though I have been away a long time and yet I can't believe how quickly the days have raced by. We all talked this evening about how we feel and what we have done. It has been inspiring, humbling and extraordinary. We all stopped playing for ourselves and thought only about giving to others through music. We all felt that music could reach people, and we hope that it brought joy and pleasure. Everywhere we went, we saw wonderful smiles. There is hope all around these people. And anything that transports them out of their world for a short while can only be a good thing. Most of all, we discovered that music can be much fun for children.

The experience has been exhausting, fulfilling and wonderful. Most of all it has been unforgettable. We are already planning a return trip next year and we are already discussing how we might be able to raise the money to make that possible. I would like to say an enormous thank you to all those who gave donations towards our trip - you made my dream come true; to Vicky, Rose and Katherine for being absolute stars as musicians and as human beings; and to all the readers that have taken an interest in this blog. Please tell the world about the plight of the Burmese people.

Ruth Rogers