

## Aitken brings a taste of the musical world to Millikin students

By JIM VOREL - H&R Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, October 28, 2010 4:00 pm



DECATUR - Music students at Millikin University are about to receive a shot in the arm when it comes to their understanding of foreign musical education.

Gene Aitken becomes Millikin's artist-in-residence for a week beginning Monday, and he brings with him a vast wealth of experience in educating overseas - and recommendations that students consider a similar path.

"I want students to think about traveling the world, and I will be presenting on jazz education in the Middle East and Asia," said Aitken, who has

visited schools and small communities in Afghanistan, Iraq, Nepal, China, Taiwan, Lebanon, Syria, Myanmar, Thailand and more in recent years, conducting symphony orchestras and championing American jazz. "Now is a good time for students to learn a second language. There are so many places to go where the arts are very highly valued."

The importance placed on the arts in many Middle Eastern and Asian curricula was one of the major factors that drew Aitken abroad after retiring from the University of Northern Colorado vocal jazz program in 2002, a role for which he was nominated for a Grammy award in 1985. In countries like China, Aitken has observed programs where the arts are not only suggested, they are required.

"Some places actually require band or orchestra participation in seventh and eighth grade, and I think we're shortchanging our students by not requiring it," he said. "Music is part of a total education, and the students abroad are very involved in wanting to learn, which makes it a joy to teach."

"Wherever we go, the students are really anxious to learn about American jazz and European classical music. For some of the students, all they know of American jazz is what they've seen on TV and in movies."

Aitken is equally at ease with jazz and classical music, and he makes use of both in his extensive travels. Never knowing quite how long he will stay in one place and "winging it" when it comes to languages besides English and Chinese, Aitken has taken on assignments like conducting the People's Liberation Band of China and a jazz residency at Kabul University, to name but a few.

When entering a new country, he is not even entirely sure what kind of programs he will become involved in.

"You go in to work with students and then find yourself working with a military band or police band the next day," Aitken said. "The level of musicianship is absolutely first class. One of the most memorable moments was when we went into Lebanon this July and all of a sudden we're planning the first-ever band camp for students held in that country, in the mountains of Lebanon."

In some geographical areas, Aitken's musical education can also have positive political ramifications.

"Our specific objective in the Middle East is trying to bring together all of the different factions with music that people of every sect can identify with," he said. "We always carry a lot of music with us into a new situation so we can adjust very quickly. It is remarkable the way learning and playing together can break down barriers."

"Some of the players come in kind of distrusting each other, and when the program ends a few weeks later they're the best of friends, hugging goodbye and crying because they're so sad to go. It's incredible."

When he does make brief trips back to the United States, Aitken comes bearing stories of the road and a constant, gentle prodding for students to expand their horizons.

"The work is so exciting, and each place is so different that it never gets tiring," he said. "In areas like rural China, there is a great need for music teachers with professional training. The opportunity for a graduate student in the Middle East or in China is enormous. I have done it hundreds of times now, but I'm always excited to go to the next place because of the challenge of never knowing what will happen when I get there."

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