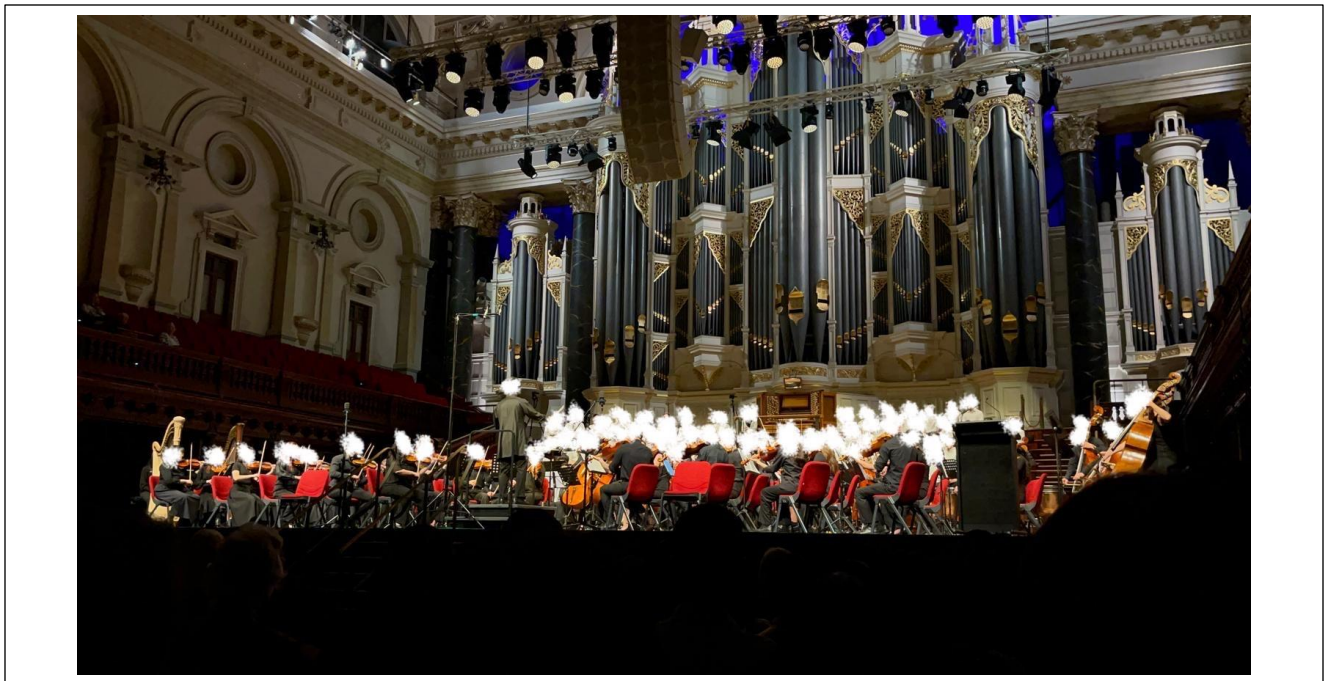


## **MEDIA STATEMENT**

On September 22, 2024, Voces Caelestium presented our 10th Anniversary Charity Concert featuring Mahler's 2nd Symphony at the Sydney Town Hall, to raise funds for the Palestine Children's Relief Fund's life-saving work in Gaza. 100% of proceeds raised in this concert will be donated to the PCRFB.

We were joined by over 200 musicians in the orchestra and choir combined. Every single one of those musicians volunteered their time and energy for this cause, coming together through the power of music to bring hope to the people of Gaza. The Town Hall, which seats around 1,500 people, was almost full.



The concert has been planned since November 2023 and was directed by Taesoo Kim, Korean-Australian conductor, and co-directed by Pavle Cajic, Serbian-Australian composer and pianist. The audience particularly included members from the Korean, the Palestinian and Palestine activism communities, as well as a wide variety of Sydney-siders.

We symbolically presented Gustav Mahler's 'Resurrection' Symphony with an ensemble from the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Opera Australia, the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, UNSW, and musicians from the greater Sydney area. Completed in 1894, the 'Resurrection' symphony presents a deep reflection on the meaning of life and death, a reflection that we undertook with the greatest degree of respect and humility in the face of the horrifying loss of life we are witnessing every day in Palestine. Beginning with funeral rites, progressing through memories of a once peaceful life, on to a grapple with the meaning of existence, and finally, a wish for eternal life, the symphony ends with a glorious call to resurrection. In Mahler's vision, it is the power of love that gives renewed life to everything that has perished. The symphony ends with the following words, sung by the choir:

Rise again, yes, rise again,  
Will you, my heart, in an instant!  
What you have conquered,  
To God shall it carry you!

The funds raised will support humanitarian aid that will save lives in Gaza in the face of a complete blockade of food, water, power, fuel, medicine, and relentless airstrikes by Israel, totalling a greater amount of destructive power than all the strikes on Dresden, Hamburg and London combined in the Second World War in what the International Court of Justice has said plausibly amounts to genocide.

As musicians, this horrific situation called to our humanity, and begged us to act as community-builders to bring people together in an act of collective witnessing, grieving and giving. The conductor Taesoo Kim describes the purpose of the concert as:

*"Music with a Good Purpose". It's the act of pointing towards something important, beyond the fanciness of the stage. Restoring faith in the absence of faith. Restoring hope in the absence of hope. Restoring love in the absence of love. I would like to express my deepest condolences and solidarity with the Palestinian*

*community, and I wholeheartedly pray that this horrific situation will soon ease in the land of Gaza, and for their speedy restoration and recovery.*

We originally planned to support the charity 'Save the Children', but had to change our charity to Palestine Children's Relief Fund due to our original choice not currently being able to get aid into Gaza as a result of Israel's blockade. PCRFB has teams inside Gaza that have been able to purchase aid within Gaza and distribute it. We faced some hurdles putting this concert on due to the censorship surrounding Gaza and Palestinian issues in the government. For example, the New South Wales Department of Education has a policy of 'complete neutrality' on the issue, meaning that any event that can be seen to support 'one side' over the other is not allowed to be promoted within schools.

Our organisation's leaders are ex-students of the Conservatorium High School, the state's only specialist music school. The school has partnered with us in the past to help advertise our concert, book rehearsal spaces for us, and invite their students to participate. This year, they initially committed the entire school to participate in our choir, which totals around 120 students. However, the Department of Education told them they could not participate in the concert due to the fact that the concert was not a neutral event. As a result, we lost about 100 choristers. We were also not allowed to advertise the concert within the school, or book rehearsal spaces for the concert through the school.

Another form of censorship was through Meta, which owns facebook and instagram, our two social media channels. We tried to advertise our concert through Meta, as we have done in the past. However, the advertisement was rejected due to the concert being about 'social and political issues'.

In addition, Meta took money from us multiple times, despite not running our ads. One of our singers received antagonistic comments when they tried to advertise the concert to other singers in a local choir.

However, apart from these incidents, there was a lot of support for our concert, as can be seen from the fact that around 1,000 people attended the concert, and over 200 musicians volunteered their time to participate.

In the concert, we introduced our lead cellist, Antonio Aguilar, whose family is from Haifa in historic Palestine. Antonio wore a keffiyeh and gave a moving speech about the genocidal Israeli assault in Gaza and Palestine, the historical background, and the Palestinian people’s struggle for resistance. He received generous and enthusiastic applause after his speech. Some members of the orchestra also wore keffiyehs.

Another special feature of the event was the display of paintings by a Gazan artist who arrived in Sydney 8 months previously, AbdulFattah Hashem. His moving paintings depicted various scenes symbolising Gaza, Palestinian resistance, and natural scenery, including one recently completed painting of Sydney Harbour. Many audience members viewed his 7 paintings on their way into and out of the concert.



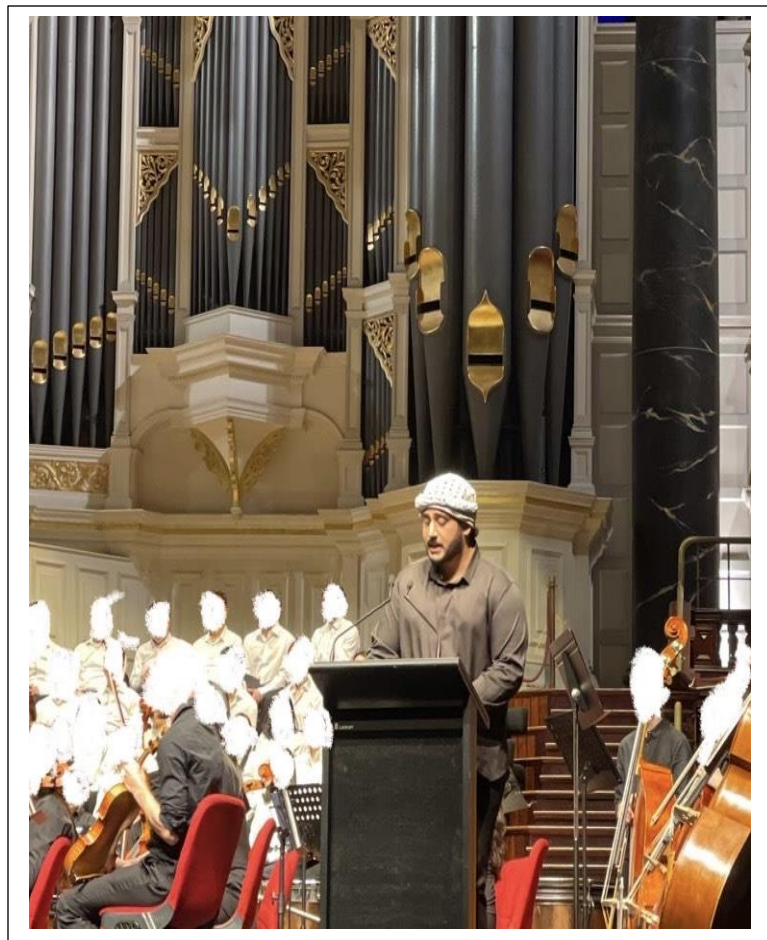
In summary, this concert was a very successful event in the heart of Sydney, in one of Sydney's largest and most notable performance venues, the Sydney Town Hall, involving a wide variety of musicians, from high school students to amateurs to the highest calibre professionals. The concert successfully raised awareness about the suffering of Palestinians and raised money for the Palestine Children's Relief Fund.

## **TEXT OF SPEECH BY ANTONIO AGUILAR**

Ladies & gentlemen, members of the Palestinian community, and other distinguished guests: Good evening and welcome to Voces Caelestium's 10th Annual Charity Concert.

We gather tonight on stolen Gadigal land to raise funds for the Palestine Children's Relief Fund, and support their efforts to bring much needed aid to the children of Palestine, amidst the horrors currently

unfolding in the Gaza Strip and the occupied territories. My name is Antonio Aguilar, and I have the utmost pleasure of participating with my colleagues in the orchestra for tonight's performance.



According to Gaza's Health Ministry, as of 21st September: 41,391 people have lost their lives in Gaza since the 7th October. This figure, which rises by tens and hundreds each day, are casualties that have been positively identified by the Health Ministry, and does not include those who are lost, presumed dead, buried under the rubble, or whose bodies are so extensively mutilated that professionals are unable to identify them.

A damning report published by Lancet details that a more accurate figure for the total number of deaths in Gaza since the 7th October is well over 186,000 - more than half of which are women and children aged 13 years or younger. Three quarters of all residential and public buildings in the enclave are completely destroyed, or beyond repair. These include homes, schools & universities, hospitals and places of worship - some of which dated back centuries and millenia.

The United Nations states that if a ceasefire were to be immediately enacted, and the blockade of Gaza was to end today - it will take the people of Gaza over 10 years to restabilise their economy. It will take 20 years to rebuild residential homes for those who have been displaced by the current genocide alone. The cost of repairing the carnage committed by the Israeli state is estimated to be as high as \$80 billion USD, and would require efforts only comparable to those at the end of World War II in 1945.

Prior to Israel's genocidal campaign, the Gaza Strip was, and still remains, one of the most densely populated areas on Earth. The distance between Beit Hanoun, the northernmost city of Gaza, and the Rafah southern border crossing with Egypt, is a mere 41 kilometres in length. To put this into perspective, it would take a person approximately 30 minutes to complete this journey by car. Gaza is, at its widest east-west point, 12 km wide - and can be as constricted as 5 km in the central portion of the Strip.

Within this area, 2 million people are overcrowded into conditions that have been labelled as an “open air prison”: Gazans do not have the right to access natural resources in their own land. They are entirely dependent on state approved imports of materials such as the food they eat, water, medicine, oil and gas; the rationing for which is determined by Israeli authorities. Israeli forces control all land and maritime regions in Gaza - so much so that simply fishing in waters off the coast of Gaza usually results in arbitrary detention, or being shot by Israeli soldiers patrolling these areas.

Israeli forces additionally exercise full control over who can enter or exit the only two points of entry into the Gaza Strip - the Erez crossing into Israeli territory in the north, and the Rafah crossing into Egypt in the south.

In a report from June, the United Nations Children’s Fund concluded what should have been obvious - that it is children who suffer the worst amidst the ongoing situation in Gaza: in that report, it was noted that approximately 14,000 children had been killed at that time, while those who were ‘lucky’ enough to survive were extremely malnourished and ridden with life-threatening illnesses such as polio. Due to the unprecedented level of indiscriminate killing, there is now a new medical and human crisis term that now applies to over 17,000 Gazani children: the acronym WCNSF (Wounded Child, No Surviving Family). It should also be noted that children under the age of 14 make up 40% of Gaza’s total demographic.

Therefore, every act of bloodshed by the Israeli government on the Gaza Strip is no less than a declaration of war on Palestine’s youth, and future generations of Palestinian thinkers, doctors, journalists, lawyers, artists and freedom fighters. If you were to turn 18 years old in Gaza this year, you would have lived through six military engagements by your occupying power, the current genocide having resulted in more death and destruction than the previous five combined.

To turn 18 years old in Gaza in 2024, means you have never known or understood life outside of a complete blockade of land, air and sea by a foreign government, perpetuated by the global elite, in blatant and flagrant violation of international law. To turn 18 years old in Gaza in 2024 means that for every 10 peers in your year group, 6 have either died, or have at least one family member who has, as a result of Israel's indiscriminate bombardment. To turn 18 years old in Gaza is to live one's entire life on the frontlines of the Palestinian struggle for justice and self-determination, and to do so by fate. Alas, to live to 18 years old in Gaza in 2024 may make you both the luckiest and unluckiest 18 year old in the world.

However, in any situation where diplomacy and words fail us - our only real hope for change in society is to turn to the arts. As a Palestinian, I am proud to inherit a long and rich history of music-making as an art form in my family. My mother is a pianist and music educator. My grandfather was an Oud and Qanun player who travelled the world with his band and performed traditional Arabic and fusion music. My great-grandmother was a singer, who through a passion for our ancient songs and philosophy, instilled in our family the depths of our identity, purpose and wisdom, so that her steadfastness and lessons will long outlive her memory - predating a time before there was ever such an idea as Israeli occupation.

Her father before her and his father before him were musicians, trained in the traditions of the Arabic system, and all native to the land of Falastin. Show me a Palestinian who isn't lifted up by their soul when they hear our songs of resistance, or moved to tears when songs of life and working in our homeland are recited. Show me a Palestinian who stays sitting down while Dabke is being performed.

Show me a Palestinian who isn't inspired to start their own revolution upon reading the works of Ghassan Kanafani, or enraptured by the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish.

Art is just as much a tool of resistance and change as any weapon - the only difference is that people will still sing our songs, recite our poetry, perform our dances, and reimagine the stories and history woven in our tatreez - long after we fight our last battle, or shout our last cry for justice. In a world where our right to existence is under threat - we must allow art to shine even brighter so that Inshallah our children are one lesson closer to the end of an occupied Palestine.

It is through this spirit that we honour the tireless efforts of Palestine Children's Relief Fund. Since the 7th October, PCRFB have worked around the clock to provide much needed humanitarian supplies such as food, water, hygiene items, and much needed medical supplies to internally displaced children.

As PCRFB is currently working on the ground in Gaza, operating from temporary shelters in public buildings such as schools and hospitals, these workers risk their lives to do whatever they can - in such dire circumstances - to aid those under bombardment. Tonight's performance of Mahler's Resurrection Symphony is dedicated to the unrelenting mission of groups such as the PCRFB to defy the illegal blockade of Gaza to provide relief to those who need it the most - and to the unwavering, unconquerable, and purely magical spirit of the children of Gaza.

Thank you for joining us this evening. We hope you enjoy tonight's performance of Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony. Free Falastin, and all oppressed peoples and lands, until it is backwards.

