

**Written Statement of
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Silk Road Project**

**Government Reform Committee
United States House of Representatives**

**Concerns with Nonimmigrant Visa Processing and the Chilling Impact on Global
Cultural Exchange**

April 4, 2006

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I'm 50 years old. I've played the cello for 46 years. Of the last 30 years of being a professional musician, I've spent the equivalent of 20 on the road. Music and travel are constants for me. In my mind, they stem from the same fundamentally human sources: an eagerness to explore new territory and a passion for learning. They also both require guides, to reveal the beauty and meaning of a place or piece of music.

But while travel and performance are similar, music has one crucial advantage: it is eminently accessible. You don't need a passport or a plane to visit some place new. Music provides a shortcut, allowing you to be transported thousands of miles away and back during the two hour span of a concert.

It is this quality of music that is so powerful. And it is the ability to bring this music and these guides, whether musicians, dancers, or artists, to audiences here in the U.S. that I hope we will always support and encourage as a country. And it is on behalf of these cultural guides that I am here today to urge you to simplify the visa process.

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My personal experience with the visa process stems from my work with the Silk Road Project, an organization I founded in 1998 to bring musicians from all over the Silk Road region together, both to perform contemporary and traditional works and to inspire new compositions.

I am proud to say that the organization has been successful: we've performed on four continents in venues ranging from the Hollywood Bowl to the Washington Mall and in cities across the Middle East and Central Asia.

In the ensemble, we now have over fifty musicians from fifteen countries.

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However, the barriers to bringing these musicians, these cultural guides, to the U.S. have become extraordinarily high. We at the Silk Road Project, along with other organizations like the World Music Institute, have found it increasingly difficult to facilitate this cultural exchange, because of high financial costs, uncertain timelines, and countless logistical hurdles.

Two Iranian musicians, Siamak Aghaei and Siamak Jahangiri, with whom we have been playing since 2000 and who have visited the U.S. almost ten times must wait months before getting their visas. With no embassy in Iran, they must fly to Dubai in order to sit for an in-person interview and then fly back a second time to get the visas. This past year, they required a third visit to Dubai, as the printer for the visas was out of order and it was unknown when it would be repaired. All told, for these two musicians to participate in their ninth U.S. tour with the Silk Road Project, the process cost \$5,000 and lasted three months.

Sometimes, the process never gets underway. Both Zola, one of the prodigies of the long-song tradition in Mongolia, and Wu Tong, the virtuosic Chinese Sheng player and singer, often cannot even get through the gates to the U.S. embassy. Despite having completed all the paperwork, they are frequently shut out because of language barriers or cultural differences.

With fewer of these barriers, our culture has the potential to offer so much. Truly American artists, like Duke Ellington and George Gershwin, sprang from the intersection of international musical styles. In fact, it is worth noting, that both Duke Ellington and George Gershwin's teachers were students of the great Czech composer, Antonin Dvorak, whose time in the United States is a concrete example of cultural exchange. Our cultural strength has always derived from our diversity of understanding and experience.

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The benefits to a simpler visa process extend beyond the cultural progress and revitalization we can expect in the future. There is a real desire, even a need, for this cultural richness and diversity today. American audiences are thirsty for new cultural experiences and are eager to understand the inside of these foreign places.

At first, we at the Silk Road Project were nervous about the audience's reaction. We feared we would find people uninterested, indifferent or even hostile to the foreign sounding music. I vividly remember going on stage in Dallas with the Silk Road Ensemble on October 11, 2001, wondering whether an audience would want to hear a program focusing on the music of Iran, a country so closely associated by many at the time with the attacks one month prior.

Quite to the contrary, audience reaction has been overwhelmingly supportive. In Dallas, audiences leapt to their feet, spurred on not only by the music, but also by the signal the music sent – the overwhelming power of culture to connect individuals and create trust.

I am proud to say that all American performances by the Silk Road Project have been sold out, whether in large cities like New York, Washington D.C. and L.A., or in smaller ones, like Sarasota, Florida, Flint, Michigan, or Columbus, Georgia. Rather than rejecting unfamiliar musical instruments and sounds, people have demanded and embraced them.

Perhaps this is a reflection of our global era in which no one grows up listening to just one kind of music. Perhaps it is also a reflection of the growing cultural awareness and curiosity of the American audience.

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While very few Americans have the opportunity to travel to rural India, and even fewer to rural Kyrgyzstan, the arts allow everyone to catch a glimpse into these other worlds through their music, their dance, and their art. Encouraging artists and institutions to foster these artistic exchanges—bringing foreign musicians to this country and sending our performers to visit them—is crucial. But the high financial cost and the lengthy timeline make these programs difficult to execute and to maintain.

Trust is fundamentally at the center of this discussion. Do we trust people to come into this country to do good or not? In any musical ensemble, you have to trust your fellow musician in order to succeed in creating something beautiful on stage. The musicians in the Silk Road Ensemble have earned the trust of each other and of audiences around the world. I sincerely hope that they and the many other musicians from foreign countries will be able to earn your trust so that they can continue to be ambassadors from their cultures and countries, and so that they can carry our message of trust and open exchange back to theirs as well.