

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES AND THE ELEVENTH SEASON AT THE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA OF INDIA

by Zane Dalal

It is always a pleasure to write about the Symphony Orchestra of India, in part because I find myself looking back with a certain amount of personal pride. As we all know, there was a definite social, psychological and yes, cultural need to provide India with a professional orchestra. As I have previously stated, across the globe patrons flock to concert halls, theatres, art exhibitions and museums endorsing the idea that a stable and prosperous nation is reflected in the cultural life of its communities. A professional orchestral institution symbolizes this stability and prosperity and allows for an international and cultural diversity in the Indian context. In my opinion, given recent times, this show of stability has never been more vital.

The National Centre for the Performing Arts wasn't simply the only national location to allow for such a project. It is also governed by a certain vision and life force – the singular kind needed to create and maintain a modern orchestra. Our Music Director, Marat Bisengaliev and I have often considered what our task would have been like without the unflagging support of the NCPA, its facilities and the strong sense of vision from its Chairman, Khushroo Suntook. This is not supposed to be a self congratulatory *spiel* about how wonderful things are. This is simply recognizing a few facts, which are plain and undisputed. From this platform then, one can see the progress and the exponential achievement and be gratified, but not surprised. We, at the SOI, are indeed thankful.

How would one quantify this achievement with a sense of perspective. I can only proffer my own. In the early 1980's when I was at university, I had established a group of musically inclined friends. As Organ Scholar, I was the only one in our group 'reading' music - the others were there to try their hand at Modern History, PPE and Theology. Nevertheless, we were all drawn to being avid listeners, and through that process, avid critics. Between 1982 and 1985 I had become reacquainted with the legendary poeticism of Tamas Vasary's Chopin and the strength and mastery of Kovacevich through his Brahms concerti with the Royal Concertgebouw under Bernard Haitink. This, of course, led us to compare Claudio Arrau's versions with the same orchestral support and around the same time, Andrei Gavrilov burst onto the scene with his thunderous Rach. 3. The cult of Rach. 3 that we then founded, resulted in a steady pursuit of all the recordings we could find. Early, middle and late Horowitz. Pirated Gilels. Early Alicia de Larrocha, yes this diminutive lady with tiny hands had a recording. Rachmaninov himself and, if memory serves, a fine Moura Lympany – and literally dozens of others. Two of us tried to get our fingers around it. The others attempted to count the notes. We had judged them all, and found Gavrilov's rendition to be the most worthy. He was, then, still under the tutelage of the great Richter whom we idolized and were collectively ecstatic when Oxford University gave him an honorary doctorate, a short while after we had 'come down'.

The prevailing point is this. The Symphony Orchestra of India has already supported Gavrillov, in concert, and is about to host both Vasary and Kovacevich in piano concerti within the same season. Anyone who can follow the sentimental thread that I have written thus far, can also realize that in some small measure, SOI is creating its own history too. This forthcoming eleventh season at the Symphony Orchestra of India is clearly going to be different. Each season always is. We have always tried to push the limits of the orchestra and find new and interesting ways to provide Mumbaikers with a growing sense that, though nationally relevant, this is *their* orchestra, worthy of *their* time and support.

Maestro Evgeny Bushkov returns to us this season after a very successful debut with the SOI. He, like our two piano soloists, was also a child prodigy. He, like both of them, has translated the musical message he had as an instrumentalist into a fine conducting force. With Bushkov, an exceptional string player, as is the case with Marat, our string section attend orchestral rehearsals using the same antennae that serve them during master classes. This also proves that though we are a young orchestra, comprising largely of young people - there is an infinite capacity to be malleable and daring, which sometimes eludes more seasoned groups.

Now to the repertoire. It will come as no surprise to readers of **On Stage** to learn that repertoire building has been a major priority with our Chairman and Music Director. However, along with what we know to be right, we also have to account for the tastes and whims of our audiences, which as they are the world over, can be tricky to negotiate – even for the most seasoned Artistic Directors. How well would our audience sit through a long cycle of Haydn Symphonies? – A very good step for the orchestra but almost impossible to put on within our current set up. Similarly, how well would a cycle of Bach go down, the main stay of building close harmonic sound? Unfortunately, not very well.

Even so, we have managed to cover substantial amounts of Beethoven, with forays into Mozart and Haydn. We rely on the great romantic works to fuel our seasons, because that is what seems to be required of us, and that is what we have become better at performing. So we will step out this season to perform Dvorak's great 7th symphony. More resolutely Czech and less Germanic than the 8th and the often performed 9th – it is still quintessential Dvorak, though darker and perhaps more brooding – no less melodious and appealing. We give a nod to the *Romeo and Juliet* story both in the cleverly constructed narrative of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* Suite and also in the fiery, impassioned and ever popular fantasy overture by Tchaikovsky. I'm sure that both scores will find the SOI strings delivering that innately Russian temperament for which these pieces are so suited. When I had the pleasure of conducting the SOI in the *Carmen* Suites by Bizet recently, I thought quite strongly that the *L'Arlesienne* Suites should follow. I didn't realize that they would be programmed to follow quite so hotly – and this marvelous music will entice, cajole, lead and brim with all the pleasures that Bizet's music

brings. Similarly, our nod to the Liszt Birth Bicentennial that featured his First Piano Concerto – last season will feature his Second Piano Concerto in September. Maestro Tamas Vasary leads the SOI from the keyboard in this gigantically paced and improvisatory work. The Rossini overture ‘An Italian in Algiers’ and the ever popular Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony gets the season off to a grand start. Equally ‘not to be missed’, and grand to close, will be Beethoven’s Fourth Piano Concerto in the hands of Stephen Kovacevich. Perhaps the most poetic of the Beethoven concerti, and certainly ripe with all that is strongest and best about Beethoven, it has just the sort of dimension and scope that has given Kovacevich’s incisive style burnished wings over the last four decades. The Solo Recitals that make handsome bookends to this great season will provide a deeper insight into the rare musicianship of Tamas Vasary and Stephen Kovacevich on September 9th and 26th, respectively. The full orchestral concerts of the Symphony Orchestra of India are on the 14th, 18th and 24th September. I would urge you to buy tickets before they sell out.

It has been the goal of the NCPA to provide a growing and internationally recognized platform for classical music in India. It has been the goal of the NCPA to deliver off-season programming in the form of chamber music festivals and solo recitals of great stature. It has been the goal of the NCPA to become a first rate research centre that allows for scholarship, and provides lectures for the edification of the community. It has been the goal of the NCPA to foster all that is good about a nascent orchestra and to propagate it to the community and to the nation. It has been the goal of the NCPA to provide for the well being of the nation’s first professional orchestra and its musicians – and in so doing, deliver some measure of sanity to the task that our Music Director, Marat Bisengaliev and I have taken up. All these goals, and more have been met in a relatively short amount of time, providing for an ever expanding platform – **all for the benefit of Mumbai**. So in delivering yet another season to Mumbaikers, the question should be – as is sometimes posed during American Presidential Elections: - “Are we, as a cultural community, better off than we were four years ago?” The answer is obviously - a resounding “YES!”.

Zane Dalal, Resident Conductor of SOI, is also a contributing writer for ON STAGE and provides occasional lectures on musical topics for musically inclined supporters of the NCPA. There will be two lectures this season. Please enquire at the NCPA for details.

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