

Interview: Harold Joseph

New Delhi symphony evokes orchestras of Beethoven's time

After attending the March 7-12 conference of the Non-Aligned heads of government in New Delhi, EIR correspondents Ortun and Hartmut Cramer remained in India for several weeks. They were able to hear the New Delhi Symphony Orchestra perform Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 1 and held discussions with members of the orchestra, learning that in the course of the past 20 years, more and more Indian musicians have entered the orchestra—from an 80 percent ratio of Western-trained musicians, that ratio is now less than 20 percent.

One difficulty for the orchestra is overcoming the mistrust of "Western" music, which is still widely considered part of the hated British colonial heritage. In the past 20 years, however, no effort has been spared, many concerts have been presented, and an ever-greater audience has been won. The members of the orchestra, all trained in Indian classical music as well, are all seeking to make the language of Western classical music comprehensible to a public which at first finds it very strange-sounding. In the program notes, for example, not only is the particular work elucidated, but also its form—concerto, symphony, and so on—and a short biography of the composer is provided.

The Cramers note: "From a technical standpoint, the orchestra does not compare with German ones—these are not professional musicians on the level to which we are accustomed—but in their aspirations to convey the content of the music they play, they are at least up to the standard of German orchestras. They almost seem like the orchestras of Beethoven's time, which performed brand new, never-before-heard music for the first time."

"We were delighted to be able to discover the work of the New Delhi Symphony Orchestra and to interview its conductor, Harold Joseph." Excerpts from the interview, which originally appeared in the German-language journal Ibykus, follow.

EIR: Could you tell us how the idea arose to create this orchestra, and how it came into being?

Joseph: Yes, this will certainly surprise you, but we are the

only symphony orchestra in the world that was founded by a general. In 1964, Gen. J. N. Chaudhuri, at that time the army chief of staff, originated the idea. At a cocktail party in, I believe, Jaipur, he was talking about it with an American who was working here in India, and the orchestra was launched; very soon we had our first concert. As the Chinese say, even the longest trip begins with the first step, and that's exactly how it was with us. I could tell you a lot of comical stories: at our first rehearsal—we were playing Haydn's "Clock Symphony"—I raised my baton and gave the down-beat, but only a few of the musicians paid attention. We began again, with the same result. Nothing happened the third time, either, so I asked what was wrong, and a violinist answered: "We're here to play our music, but what are you doing up there?" It finally dawned on me that most of them had never played under a conductor, or even in an ensemble. So I had to start from scratch, explain the baton beat, and why it must be followed. I should add that we had good support in our early days from a number of foreigners who played very well. Many of them were diplomats, their wives, or their children; a few were businessmen working here. All of them were gifted performers. Mostly they were Europeans, but we had a few Americans as well. Over the years, this helped us to create a truly good atmosphere in the orchestra. We are like a big family, in which everyone helps each other. The better the cooperation, the better the music. That means that, initially, care has to be taken that the right notes are being played.

EIR: Are your orchestra members professional musicians, or what other occupations do they have?

Joseph: Some of them are professionals, many of them play in restaurants or in the film industry. Others are businessmen and teachers, naturally also many students. They are all talented musicians, and so we just get together and play music.

EIR: What motivates them to be in the orchestra? We have heard that there are many sacrifices, especially financial ones, involved.

EIR: Most of them don't think about money at all—it is the love of music. Yet of course there are many sacrifices. When we are rehearsing for a concert, many of them lose income from their jobs. Nevertheless, most of them are happy to be members, from the sheer love of music.

EIR: How many of your musicians belong to the armed forces?

Jospeh: For some of the wind instruments, we depend on the military bands for musicians. There are practically no oboists or flautists in civilian life in India.

EIR: Can you tell us about the response of the Indian public? So much is always said about how "Western" music "doesn't suit the Indian ear." How many come to your concerts, and how do they react?

Joseph: A large following for Western classical music has

developed over the years, not only for my concerts, but for all concerts of this sort. And our public here in Delhi is very critically-minded. I really can't see where the difficulty is supposed to be, it is simply another language. If one loves good Indian classical music, it is not hard at all to take pleasure in a good Beethoven sonata or symphony, and vice versa. All that is required is to try it.

EIR: What criteria do you use for your programs, since there are so many different tendencies in Western music? Do you have pedagogical criteria? What role does the technical proficiency of the orchestra play?

Joseph: Those are good questions. In the first place, naturally a lot depends on the level of the performers. Then we have other limitations, too; for example, we absolutely can't play Debussy, because we don't have any harps here, and harps cannot simply be replaced by pianos. We can play Beethoven or Brahms, but if we need harps or, for instance, a contrabassoon, it won't work, no matter how good our musicians are. Therefore we have to tailor our programs correspondingly.

EIR: Has your orchestra brought young people into involvement with music? Are there many children who come and say, "I want to learn an instrument?"

Joseph: I'm not sure whether the orchestra has made that kind of contribution, but we have a music school here in Delhi which teaches classical Western music, and the number of its students has risen a great deal. As everywhere, the guitar is naturally the favorite, but there are also many students studying the piano, string instruments, and woodwinds. The problem is not the will to learn, but whether we have the teachers to educate the students. I get worried when I see how few gifted students can afford to buy a trombone or an oboe, and still have enough money left to pay a teacher. In some of the missionary schools, for example in Calcutta, they are trying to do something about the situation. They have a fine little string orchestra there. We could educate millions of professional musicians, but we don't have the financial resources, it's as simple as that.

EIR: We have heard that one of your best flautists is a Muslim, others are Hindus or Christians, and you all rehearse in the Jewish synagogue.

Joseph: We represent almost all religions; we have Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Jews, and a few years ago we also had a Russian soloist. One British newspaper put it this way: "The Indian orchestra has overcome boundaries." Our soloists come from every country in the world, every religion, every caste. We play splendidly together.

EIR: Do the performers in your orchestra have trouble obtaining instruments? Are they very expensive?

Joseph: In this country there is a very large number of old string instruments. There are problems with new instruments, they are not supposed to be imported. For example,

we would love to have a set of new timpani, but there is no chance of getting them or buying them in the near future.

EIR: Because they are too expensive?

Joseph: No, because there is an import freeze on luxury goods, under which instruments are classified. We have to save foreign exchange.

EIR: What is your own background? You began as a pianist?

Joseph: My own career began in a remarkable way: I come from a very beautiful city in the south of India, in the famous tea-growing region, the state of Tamil Nadu. I was a month old when an Englishman who was a very gifted music teacher visited my family, saw me, and said, "You look musical!" I was only a month old! "Send him to me when he is five years old." My family was poor, very poor, and my father thought, "Oh, how these people talk." But in fact, when I was five years old, the Englishman came back, and said, "In the morning, send him to me." That was the beginning of my career.

EIR: And then you were trained as a pianist?

Joseph: Yes, first I learned the piano, but I was always interested in other instruments, too. Later I learned the clarinet at the armed forces music school, where I came into contact with many woodwind instruments. By that time I had already learned something about string instruments.

EIR: What was your training as a conductor? Were you primarily educated in "Western" music?

Joseph: I went to the Royal College of Music in London, where I studied conducting, but as it is said, no one can really teach conducting or composing, only provide guidance.

EIR: Can you briefly

basic principles of Indian classical music?

Joseph: That is very difficult. The point of departure for Western music is the well-tempered scale. The octave is the same in Indian music, but the difference is that it is divided into 22 parts; Indian music has quarter tones. That is probably why it is so difficult for non-Indians to understand at first. . . . It is also interesting that Indian music is never written down, it is always extemporaneous. The same person who plays a *raga* with variations today will play it the next time with totally different ones. There is only one voice or monodic line, as was the case before the 15th century in Europe.

EIR: Can you comment on the efforts by Yehudi Menuhin, Ravi Shankar, and others to combine Western and Indian music?

Joseph: I myself tried to do it with military music, since only British music was being played, but the result was not very military. I then unearthed Indian folk music and set it as marches; that had greater success. There are a lot of people in India, mostly young people, who are trying to do this. There have to be such blendings, just as there is a blending of the former cultures.