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In Case You Missed It: Princeton Symphony's 'Seven Decisions of Gandhi'



William Harvey on stage at Richardson Auditorium.
Princeton Symphony Orchestra

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Princeton, NJ –Having once lived in India, I was intrigued by a recent listing in TAPinto Princeton's "weekend update" compilation of upcoming events, including a Princeton Symphony Orchestra (PSO) concert featuring a composition entitled "Seven Decisions of Gandhi." Fortuitously, I decided to attend what turned out to be a spectacular performance, which proved to be a catalyst propelling me to a personally delightful, emotional, and psychological high! The orchestra was led by visiting conductor Sameer Patel whose profound musicianship and passionate communication inspired a level of performance I had not recently heard from the PSO.

The Gandhi signature piece was book-ended by two classical masterpieces: Alexander Borodin's rousing "Polovtsian Dances from Prince Igor" with its familiar, romantic melodies considered by some to be Borodin's most significant

work and one of the most important Russian operas. It brought the audience to its feet in sustained applause.

Tchaikovsky's "Symphony No 6 in B Minor, Op. 74 "Pathetique" was equally well received. The work is primarily somber both in tempo and dynamics, but, of course, pathetique in Russian means melancholy.

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As Patel said in a pre-concert talk, "if you don't clap after the third movement (which normally is not good form before the orchestra completes the composition), I haven't done my job!" They did.

It is probably no coincidence that this movement, with its energetic character through active strings, whistling woodwinds, and resounding brass instruments, was one of the most popular pieces played in its time. Tchaikovsky's only comment about the piece was "Without exaggeration I have put my whole soul into this work."

Being present when a piece of music is brought to life was memorable. In this case the memorable world premier was William Harvey's "Seven Decisions of Gandhi," which was dedicated to the granddaughter of the visionary Gandhi on the occasion of her 80th birthday.

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Harvey, who is a superb violinist, is also a composer, conductor and educator. From 2010 to 2014 he taught violin and conducted an Afghan orchestra, which toured to sold-out audiences in the U.S., including Carnegie Hall. His study of Afghan and other Eastern music made it possible for him to create this unique work that combines Western and Eastern musical traditions and seamlessly included Dibyarka Chatterjee playing the tabla and Snehesh Nag playing the sitar. As the founder and director of the non-profit "Cultures in Harmony," Harvey has led over 40 cultural diplomacy projects in 16 countries.

Gandhi's message, which pervaded the composition, was that the decisions you make during your life shape who you are. The concerto highlighted the fact that all of Gandhi's decisions throughout his tumultuous life were important steps towards Indian independence. Gandhi created an ashram outside Durban, South Africa, which proved to be many things to many people.

In the third movement of the concerto, the tuba, flute, and solo violin are Hindu, the violas and cellos are Christian, the clarinet is Muslim, and the muted trumpet is Jewish. Together they blended harmoniously as Gandhi would have wanted. In response to the crowd's enthusiastic approval of the concerto, Harvey and the orchestra played as an encore an Afghan folk song entitled "Give me another glass since I'm drunk already" -- an artful rebuke to the Taliban.

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