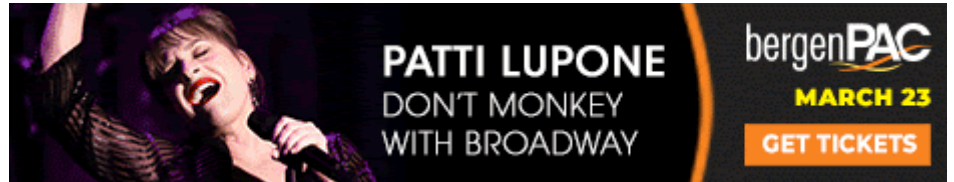


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Princeton Symphony premieres William Harvey's enthralling 'Seven Decisions of Gandhi'

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PRINCETON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Composer William Harvey played violin on his "Seven Decisions of Gandhi" with the Princeton Symphony Orchestra, March 11-12.

The Princeton Symphony Orchestra hosted the world premiere of William Harvey's "Seven Decisions of Gandhi" — featuring the composer as violin soloist, under the baton of guest conductor Sameer Patel — March 11-12 at the Richardson Auditorium at Princeton University. The instrumentation of Harvey's concerto for violin and orchestra includes a symphonic ensemble and traditional instruments of the Indian subcontinent.

At the performance I attended, March 12, the stage was arranged with a raised platform covered by an Islamic carpet, placed between the conductor's podium and the orchestra. Guest principal players Snehesh Nag on sitar and Dibyarka Chatterjee on tabla performed sans shoes, crossed-legged on the carpet.

The composition's narrative arc draws from the life and achievements of Mahātmā Gandhi, beginning with his move from Bombay to London in 1888 and ending with his 1930-31 Salt March in South Africa. The idea was sparked by the Gandhi biographies written by Indian historian Ramachandra Guha.

The work is chronologically structured into seven movements integral to Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent resistance that ended British colonial rule in India after nearly a century. Harvey wrote in an artist's statement, "The concerto will hopefully inspire us all to make decisions as well as Gandhi did, and to choose nonviolence and principled thought in all aspects of our lives."



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Tabla player Dibyarka Chatterjee.

He completed the work in 2020 in Mexico City, where he currently lives and works, and dedicated it to Gandhi's granddaughter Ela on the occasion of her 80th birthday that year.

The 30-minute piece is steeped in the folk and popular music of the far-flung places Harvey has worked and lived in over the last decade — Pakistan, Afghanistan, India and Oman — fostered by his Cultures in Harmony nonprofit that promotes interconnectedness of people and cultures through music.

Harvey wove these sacred and secular Western and Eastern works into his cinematic score. The "S.S. Clyde to London" first movement narrated Gandhi's sea voyage to London through strains of Vaughan Williams' "A Sea Symphony" and "The Lark Ascending." The second movement, "Selling the Violin," depicted Gandhi's arrival in London as a young man and his attempts to become an English gentleman through dance and violin lessons. Harvey showed the folly through whimsical, playful scherzos set to "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" and the Kreutzer violin Etude No. 2.

The third movement, "Phoenix," blended harmonies of different religions to narrate Gandhi's move to South Africa to open his first ashram of interfaith prayer. Some instruments played the Hindu devotional "Vaishnava Jana To" while the violas and cellos played the Christian hymn "Lead, Kindly Light." The clarinet affected the Muslim Adhaan call to prayer and a muted trumpet imitated the Jewish shofar.

In the violin-harp duo of "Khadi," Harvey planted himself in front of the harp for an intimate, sensitive duet that highlighted the strong lyrical passagework of his solo writing. The movement emphasized Gandhi's commitment to khadi, the natural fiber cloth he encouraged Indians to spin to become self-sufficient from the British Empire, with the harp representing the spinning wheel.

The final "Salt March" movement took its name from the massive 240-mile march to the sea to protest a British tax on salt. The Indians who marched with Gandhi sang "Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram" and "Vaishnava Jana To," both of which Harvey included in his joyous, celebratory finale built over Chatterjee's bassline pulse. The thundering climax included a vigorous, enchanting duet with Nag on sitar.

Harvey gave an encore with Nag and Chatterjee of the Afghan folk song "Paimana Bete Ke Khomar Astom," which translates to "Give me another glass because I'm drunk already!" The alluring folk melody was written in 7/8 time, the national rhythm of Afghanistan, which Harvey mastered as a teacher at the Afghanistan National Institute of Music with colleague and emeritus music professor Abhishek Adhikary, whom Harvey quoted as a big influence behind "Seven Decisions."

Harvey's lively, collaborative spirit complemented Patel in his PSO debut. The San Diego-based conductor brought the California sunshine with him through clear, pleasant readings that manicured the program into polite, majestic beauties. His conducting language was gracious and clean with an economy of gesture and a nice athleticism to his movements.

The program was rounded out by Alexander Borodin's Polovtsian Dances from "Prince Igor" and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's symphonic masterpiece, the "Pathétique."

Patel stirred up the hall with the invigorating ballet music from “Prince Igor,” Borodin’s 19th century opera about the 12th-century Russian prince’s battles against the Polovtsians.

He accentuated the warm, mellow, rich colors and tonalities of the orchestra in Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 6 in B Minor, the Russian composer’s final and most elusive work. When Tchaikovsky composed it in 1893, he added “Pateticheskaya” to the title page but didn’t provide an explanation, so its subject remains a mystery.

Endless interpretations range from surging, seething riots to dignified despair. It is tempting for conductors to overdo the nuance and emotion, but Patel kept it faithful with a well-disciplined, measured reading that was high on expression and low on emotion.

The opening adagio began with the bassoon setting down the theme, ominous and gloomy. The delicate woodwind interlude and the ferocious reprise built to the coda, which Patel took at a brisk clip, more urgent and driven than frenetic and fervid.

The second movement’s 5/4 waltz showed off the skills of the strings with flexible violins, tuneful cellos and pulsating bass, which led resplendently into the third movement’s fortississimo march with its full fireworks of brass, clarinets and horns.

The grandiose lamentoso was rich in sound and detail with the musicians underlining the expansive intensity of the score. Concertmaster Basia Danilow was all sound and fury with lofty gestures, leading her first row in the expressive, running passages against the second violins.



PRINCETON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Guest conductor Sameer Patel.

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