Encore

Posted on

Words Madhushala Senaratne Photographs Kesara Ratnavibushana

Lakshman Joseph De Saram is performing solo. His forte is perhaps As a young boy, the first organised known for his brilliance as a vio- when he plays together with others, sound he listened to, as he recalls, linist, in both the local and re- gional classical music arena. A virtuoso performer, teacher and composer, he is also the Artistic Director of the Chamber Music Society of Colombo, the critically acclaimed ensemble.

THE MUSICIAN: Strangely, Lakshman does not particularly enjoy as part of an ensemble.

Born into a family that valued culture, Lakshman was surrounded by music from a young age. His father was a writer, and his mother a sculptor and music teacher. His brother was the conductor of the American Philharmonic Orchestra.

As a young boy, the first organised known for his brilliance as a vio- when he plays together with others, sound he listened to, as he recalls, was Beethoven's Piano Sonata Opus 111. A classicist at heart, his reluc- tance to accept mediocrity is perhaps due to the influence of his father's absolute repulsion to anything middlebrow.

Lakshman started playing the violin when an uncle gave him the instrument – "a tiny 1/8 size" – as a present, when he was just four years old. "I used it mostly as a toy for about two years," recalls Lakshman, laughingly. At six, he began classes with Eileen Prins.

Excelling as a violinist, he per- formed his first concerto at 11, and then at just 13, he made his profes- sional debut with the Symphony Orchestra of Sri Lanka performing the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto. Thereafter, he travelled to New York and enrolled at the Manhattan School of Music and the School of Perform- ing Arts,

where he also studied trom- bone. He also attended the Juilliard Pre College.

New York, with its environment full of music and art, had a huge in- fluence on Lakshman. However, the defining moment came when a few of his class met the conductor, Sergiu Celibidache, whose attitude to music, especially at a time when it was becoming very commercialised, had a definite impact.

“Celibidache took us back to a time when people actually loved the art,” Lakshman recalls, adding that although, people still do love the art, and technique has probably im- proved over years, “what has perhaps eroded is the sense of the spirit – the soul of music, which was prob- ably more noticeable about 50 – 60 years ago, with the likes of Furtwangler.”

Upon returning to Sri Lanka Lakshman immersed himself in the arts in the country. He built contact with Dr Premasiri Khemadasa, an influential musician and composer who helped define the serious music of a post-colonial Sri Lanka. Becom- ing his apprentice for 12 years, Lakshman says, “the experience was invaluable, potent and essential on a personal level.”

Together with Khemadasa he worked on new music and travelled the world. Piriniwan Mangalya was perhaps the most significant of his works and his contribution to music of this region. Lakshman says, “I was there from the very beginning, and I learnt a lot.”

With time, he ventured into com- posing music for film, among them, ‘Mille Soya’ directed by Boodee Keerthisena, ‘Ira Madiyama’ or August Sun directed by Prasanna Vithanage, Vimukthi Jayasundara’s ‘Between Two Worlds’ and another Prasanna film, ‘Flowers from theSky’. Currently, Lakshman is working on a Hollywood film featuring some well-known actors. Of film music he adds, “most of us grow up watching movies. To me, and to many people, it’s a form of opera.” Lakshman’s interest in music varies from the sym- phonies of Bruckner to those of Haydn and Franz Schubert, as well as the songs of Hugo Wolf and the ballads of Tom Waits. In fact, he even listens to elevator music. This, he believes, helps him understand and appreciate music better. He goes on to say that for young musicians, it’s vital that they pay more attention to the technique of expression, the art will follow naturally.

CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF COLOMBO: Their repertoire is wide and exciting.

Their performance, gripping, defined and moving. An ensemble, consisting of dynamic and passionate musicians, the Chamber Music Society of Colombo has reached great heights in just two and a half years.

The Society was formed in order to give definition to music of the highest quality, in this region. Having identified the lack of classical music being presented in the way it should be – that is without compromise – it was created to give this kind of music its due place in society. The Society conducts outreach pro- grammes, where they aim to reach out to schoolchildren with the hope that the music they perform will gen- erate interest. The Society also en- courages new music, especially Sri Lankan music, for instance, the work of Khemadasa.

“What we found in this region is that classical music in general is presented in an ad-hoc manner, with not much definition, not much gravi- tas. The Chamber Music Society hopes to change that attitude and perception, where young people es- pecially, realise that this is an art form they need to aspire to,” says Lakshman.

Among their recent performances were, ‘Trouble Seas and Forest Paths’, which featured Stephen Allen’s song cycle for double string quarter and soprano, with Mary Anne David as soprano. In addition, works of W A Mozart, P Hindemith, A Vivaldi, G F Handel and J Haydn were also fea- tured. The Bicentennial Concert cel- ebrated the music of Handel, Haydn and Mendelssohn.

The ensemble has seen tangible growth over the years in the depth of its presentation, says Lakshman, and attributes this success largely to the players, whom he says, “are becoming more musically familiar with each other”. The ensemble is more unified, that they seem to know, without prior preparation, what’s to be done when playing a particular phrase, and via the clarity of expres- sion, the audience is also able to experience this homogeneity of ensemble.

Two public concerts are sched- uled to be held in October and De- cember, as well as several private concerts. The ensemble is currently working on a concert that would cel- ebrate the Bach family.

What stands out, apart from the intensity generated by the perform- ances and the credentials of the per- formers, is perhaps that the Society has been able to express a very posi- tive spirit to the audience. And with each exciting crescendo, it aims to

continue this positivism, which is often greeted by a standing ovation and a resounding encore.

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