

Joseph-de Saram: Sri Lanka's Classical Conductor



A philharmonic orchestra, western classical music and operetta are not what you associate with Sri Lanka. Add an orchestral conductor of international repute and a team of enthusiastic local young musicians and keen sponsors and you have a powerful combination that intends to put Sri Lanka on the world's classical music map.

The name of the conductor, and the force behind the recently created Sri Lanka Philharmonic Orchestra, is Joseph-de Saram. The hyphen between Joseph and de is not a printer's error since the names are a combination of his father's (E.M.W. Joseph) and his mother's (Sita de Saram). Joseph-de Saram has chosen to be known solely by his surname as is the wont of conductors.

Born in Colombo in July 1953, Joseph-de Saram left Royal College, age 16, as an academic disaster and aspiring pianist. In 1970 he made his debut with the Symphony Orchestra of Colombo. Ten years later, age 26, he was conducting at Carnegie Hall, USA.

His conducting career in America, both North and South, has been highlighted by ecstatic reviews from music critics describing him as "a truly effective and inspired conductor" (New York Times) and "Joseph-de Saram conducted ... so fabulously that even the orchestra was

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stunned" (El Diario). La Prensa said "Joseph-de Saram is one of the greatest Bruckner conductors ever."

Joseph-de Saram conducts batonless with a great energy and sensitivity. Being a guiding light with the American Philharmonic Orchestra and a guest conductor in Mexico since 1981, has given him an awareness of the politics of classical music performing as well as of the problems of young musicians in third world countries who are denied opportunities to express their talent.

In 1989 the foundations for the forming of the Sri Lanka Philharmonic Orchestra (SLPO) were laid with a nucleus of 36 young Sri Lankan musicians and with Joseph-de Saram as musical director. The story might end there with a few concerts but for the enthusiasm of the SLPO's musician and supporters. This fledgling orchestra has set its sights beyond the Elphinstone Theatre to the international arena.

An International Festival of Operetta is planned for Sri Lanka in December 1991 with guest musicians, who will also hold master classes for local and foreign musicians, and guest singers from around the world. Since musical festivals are not normally held during the European winter, the festival is bound to attract foreign participants as well as tourists who love operetta.

The SLPO has also achieved the astonishing distinction of being invited to host an international competition for classical pianists and conductors in 1992. Cash prizes, gold medals and the presence of the international music press will draw attention to Sri Lankans' passion for classical music.

Meanwhile, Joseph-de Saram, is not neglecting his own career. In November he will be making what he regards as his greatest achievement to date: his recording debut as a conductor. He flies to London to record as guest conductor with one of the greatest orchestras in the world, the London Philharmonic. Very few conductors, and no Sri Lankan, have ever achieved such distinction for their recording debut. The record, the first of four recordings a year he will make, is being released in March 1991 (R.E.)

Music lovers who want information about the SLPO should contact the President, Sri Lankan Philharmonic Orchestra Trust, 6 York Street, Colombo 1; tel: 24431. fax: 589664. •