

Maestro Alexander (Ali) Rahbari (c) lifts his hands before the Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra in 2019 to the roaring audience, sharing a wide, joyful smile as the concert hall erupts in appreciation.

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Why have Iranian symphonic works, despite having talented composers, still not achieved their deserved position in the world?

This issue has two main reasons. The first reason is that we have very powerful composers in classical music, but many of them, because they have not learned Iranian music deeply and properly, try to give their works a national identity only by adding some apparently Iranian elements. However, the result is not always successful because sometimes this effort causes their music to resemble an incomplete interpretation of Armenian, Turkish, or other regional musical cultures rather than a true Iranian musical language.

The second reason, which in my opinion is more important, is the lack of serious support for introducing these works at the international level. This support does not necessarily have to come only from the government; even the music community and musicians themselves should make more efforts to introduce valuable Iranian works. More than 40 years ago, around 50 years ago, I recorded six works by Iranian composers in the city of Nuremberg, Germany, and introduced them to the international market. These works were welcomed and are still present in the global market. But unfortunately, no serious support was provided by Iranian cultural institutions in this field. We have very good composers who can truly be introduced at a global level, but they lack support. Countries such as South Korea, China, and Russia support their composers and conductors. They try to introduce their best artists to the world, but regarding Iranian artists, such organized support does not exist.

Among your own compositions, which works do you consider closer to your Iranian identity, and which ones do you think are your most important pieces?

The works I have written for My Mother Persia, around 12 or 13 pieces, are very Iranian. The reason is that I learned traditional Iranian music from childhood, and this music became deeply rooted within me. Although my main success has been in Western music and conducting, the reality is that a very large part of my

childhood was spent with traditional Iranian music. Therefore, these Iranian elements naturally appear in my works. If I were to mention only one or two works among my compositions, perhaps the piece Persian Blood, which I wrote at the age of 19, is one of the most important ones. This piece is about 10 minutes long, and its first performance took place in Vienna.

Another work is Nohe-Khan (The Lament Singer) for violin and orchestra, which I wrote at the age of 20. A few years ago, I worked on it again, and it has now been released internationally and has received positive reactions. These two pieces are especially important to me. Of course, I have also written several operas that have not yet been performed, as well as other works that have not had the opportunity for public performance. Many people ask me why I have not conducted my own works. My answer is that throughout all the years when I was responsible for an orchestra, I never wanted to use my position to perform my own personal works. When you are the director of an orchestra, there are many composers waiting for their works to be performed, and I did not want to take that opportunity away from others. However, now that I work mostly as a guest conductor, I allow myself to conduct some of my own works as well. In recent years, several of these works have been performed, the most important of which was the performance of Nohe-Khan at the Mariinsky. I have also conducted the work Also Sprach Zarathustra (German for: Thus Spoke Zarathustra).

You have collaborated with many of the greatest opera singers and classical music artists in the world and have recorded more than 40 operas. Do you still have a particular dream in the field of music?

Yes, I have worked with the best tenors and the greatest singers in the world. I have experienced very good days and have made many valuable recordings. I think I have recorded more than 40 operas. But if I want to talk about my dream today, I must say that at the moment I am very satisfied with the programs I have. The concerts I conduct at the Mariinsky and the collaborations I have with five orchestras in China are very valuable to me. These orchestras are at a very high level, and I am very happy

about these collaborations. Under the current circumstances, I feel that what I am doing is enough for me.

Thomas Bernhard, the great Austrian writer, has a sentence that essentially claims that whatever you are at the age of 18, a few years or a few decades later, you will only become several times that same person; therefore, it is important who you are at the age of 18. If I want to answer this question from this perspective, I must say that if I were 20 years old again today, I hope I could do the same things that I did at that age: write pieces such as Persian Blood and Nohe-Khan, and at the age of 20-something become the head of two music conservatories and the director of two orchestras. I do not think I could follow such a path again today. Therefore, I believe that my 20s were such a powerful period that even today, it is difficult for me to imagine returning to that time. The experience I have gained during the past 50 years does not necessarily mean that if I were young again, I could write better or perform better. I strongly believe that the period between 18 and 25 years of age is a very important and decisive period for many people, especially those who have had greater talent, interest, and opportunities from childhood.

Despite your extensive international achievements, you believe that you have not been recognized in Iran as much as you should have been. How do you think history will judge your position?

I think that if one day, history of music looks back at the past, it will say that a great deal of neglect was directed toward me and that my activities were not given the attention they deserved. Of course, my work has received a great deal of attention in the world, but I feel that in my own country, they have not yet fully understood what I have done and what path I have followed. The day when my works are examined, my recordings are listened to, and my activities are studied in books and educational centers, they will see what has happened.

Countries such as China, South Korea, and Turkey have always tried to find their best artists and see how they can use their abilities to introduce their culture and enhance their country's reputation. But in Iran, unfortunately, in some cases, efforts have been made to pre-

vent successful artists abroad from having the opportunity to return and work inside the country. The result has been that the people of Iran have not been able to benefit from the abilities of their own artists. We have first-class composers, we have conductors, we have highly talented musicians, but a large part of the Iranian society cannot benefit from their abilities. The reason for this issue is the existence of several small and weak institutions that believe the presence of these individuals is not in their interest. But this neglect will one day attract a great deal of attention, and history will judge it.

How do you evaluate the situation of the Iranian Symphony Orchestra? Why, despite its long history, has this orchestra still not reached a global position?

Unfortunately, as I have always said, the Iranian Symphony Orchestra has faced a fundamental problem throughout the past 100 years. This orchestra has a history older than many orchestras in Asian countries such as South Korea and China, and it is even older than many orchestras in other countries, but it has never been treated as a professional and national institution.

The main problem has been that the Symphony Orchestra has not been treated like football. In Iran, people know football and can recognize its good and bad aspects. Even ministers and senior officials have knowledge about football, but regarding the Symphony Orchestra, which in many countries of the world has a position equal to football, such an understanding has not existed. In major countries such as France and Austria, a symphony orchestra has the same importance as an important football team. But in Iran, the selection of the conductor, artistic director, and manager of this institution has never been approached professionally. From the past until today, sometimes someone has been chosen to conduct simply because he was available, had time, or the conditions allowed his presence.

I have always emphasized that a good conductor is never unemployed because a professional conductor is always working somewhere. This mistake, with different levels of intensity, existed both before and after the Islamic Revolution, and the result has been that the Iranian Symphony Or-

chestra, despite having many talents, has remained stagnant for years. And stagnation ultimately leads to falling behind. If today we compare the Iranian Orchestra with the orchestras of China, South Korea, or Turkey, unfortunately there is a very large gap. Perhaps we are 50 or 60 years behind because that professional transformation that should have happened has not taken place in Iran.

However, I believe that the main problem is not the musicians themselves; rather, the musicians must want this situation to change. I know many very good Iranian musicians. When I came to Iran 22 years ago and then again 12 years ago, on both occasions, I observed that these same musicians were able, within one week to 10 days, to show themselves at an international level. This means that the talent exists.

Twelve years ago, when the Iranian Orchestra was invited to China, the reason for this invitation was that in a short period of time, we showed one of the great music managers in China that these musicians had the ability to perform at an international level. They were not only invited to China, but the possibility of their presence in Europe and Austria could also have been created. But unfortunately, because of wrong decisions and unprofessional management, individuals were sent to China by some institutions who did not have sufficient experience and knowledge. Even the Chinese wrote to me with disappointment and said that such an approach was not appropriate, and after that, no further invitation was made. With this method, it is impossible to build a world-class orchestra. I hope that one day a minister, a cultural official, or a professional music group will decide to create an orchestra at a global level. This can even be achieved in a short period of time. Perhaps within one month, the foundations of a powerful orchestra could be created. At that point, it can be shown that Iran's cultural identity is no less significant than football. Football may lose one day and win another day, but a symphony orchestra is the cultural heritage of a nation. Finally, I would like to say this as well: of course, it is not related to the subject and main focus of our conversation, but it remained in my heart and I had to say it: "I am happy that Iran has stood against the criminal United States and Israel."

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