

A Noble Cause

Violinist Levon Chilingirian Crusades for Armenia's Musicians

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

With all the pomp and regalia of royal ritual, Queen Elizabeth II, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Canada, and Her other Realms and Territories, Head of the Commonwealth, has bestowed upon violinist Levon Chilingirian, 52, the title of Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for his "contribution to music" during a ceremony at Buckingham Palace in February. OBE, established by King George V in 1917, is awarded to British subjects for their "outstanding work."

Chilingirian is not the first Armenian to be so honored. Among former recipients are Sarkis Kurkjian (deceased) for services to the Armenian community of Britain, to George Kurkjian for services to the City of London, to Haro Bedelian, a civil engineer, for his work supervising the building of the Channel Tunnel, and to Professor Eileen Vartan Barker for her contribution to education. Chilingirian was commended as a "key figure in the music world."

Born in Nicosia, Cyprus, Chilingirian was raised in a family of musicians, including his parents His church choirmaster and composer grandfather (after whom he is named) published the first three-voice Divine Liturgy in 1898 in Smyrna and introduced the organ in the Armenian Church for the first time in 1907. Chilingirian's great uncle, Vahan Bedelian was choirmaster, music teacher and a well-known violinist in Cyprus. "He taught the violin to every Armenian child, including myself, when I was five years old," remembers Chilingirian. He emigrated to London with his parents at the age of 12. "When I turned 18, I had to make up my mind, either to go to the university to study economics or to go to music conservatory." He took the entrance exams for both, but the prestigious Royal College of Music gave him a scholarship. "My violin teacher said since they have so much faith in you, you can't say no. So, I decided to follow a career in music."

Since then Chilingirian's career has soared. He has played on the world's most



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distinguished stages.

Levon Chilingirian is the founder of the renowned Chilingirian Quartet. Since its first concert at Cambridge University in 1972, the Quartet has traveled to more than 50 countries and is kept busy with a schedule of 80-100 concerts a year around the world. For the last 12 years, the Chilingirian Quartet has been a resident quartet at the Royal College of Music, one of the best music schools in Europe and Chilingirian's alma mater.

In addition to his busy schedule with the Quartet, Chilingirian has also been active in the Armenian music world. He helped local musicians and producers with the Autumn Chamber Festivals held in Yerevan several years ago. He spearheaded several aid concerts in London for earthquake relief to Armenia, featuring world famous musicians including flutist Kim Kashkashian and Mvslav Rostropovich.

These days, he is busy with the First National Violin Competition for young musicians (ages 15-28), which will take place early this month at the Aram Khachaturian Home-

Museum in Yerevan. He has brought together a distinguished panel of judges, including French violinist Philippe Griffin, composer Edward Mirzoyan, pianist Svetlana Navasartian, and the Artistic Director of the National Chamber Orchestra of Armenia (NCOA), Aram Gharabegian.

In the final round of the competition, the finalist (in addition to receiving a \$1,500 prize), will play with the NCOA. "I believe, playing Mozart, playing it well, is the most difficult thing to do," explains Chilingirian based on his experience. "I suggested that whoever is the finalist, should play Mozart with the NCOA. This would be different from other competitions, because he says, "normally, the finalists do not play with an established orchestra at the end."

Over the years, Chilingirian has established close personal and professional relations with Armenian composers. He has had the "privilege of meeting composer Aram Khachaturian, a year or so before his death," and has come to know closely the "next generation" of Armenian composers, such as Mirzoyan,

Alexander Harutiunian, Arno Babajanian, Ghazaros Sarian and Tigran Mansourian. But Chilingirian is concerned about the current state of classical music and musicians in Armenia. He is careful about stating his opinions. "My observations are those of someone at a distance, even though I have been to Armenia many times and have frequent contacts with musicians there. I could be wrong, but my personal view, having discussed the issue with my colleagues there, is that the situation is very critical and dangerous." He says the majority of music teachers have left Armenia. "Those who remained, some of the best ones, are advanced in age." Chilingirian recalls that during Soviet times, Armenia had one of the best and most advanced music schools. And, arguably, "the most spoiled artists because state authorities treated them like Olympic athletes. Winning competitions was everything."

While confirming that there are still very good classical music teachers and students still in Armenia, they are without jobs. Chilingirian laments, "They don't know what to do. Even those who are very good musicians do not play anymore." "If we do not restore these schools, help the teachers and the students, especially in terms of finances, then Armenia is in danger of being completely cut off from artistic creativity," he says with concern.

What can be done? "I believe, we, the Diaspora, should create opportunities in Armenia as much as possible. We need to find ways for musicians in Armenia to work, to teach and continue developing their talents." Chilingirian's personal efforts in this direction have focused on the organization of the Violin Competition and two other major projects for next year. He is already thinking about organizing a large Chamber Music Festival in Yerevan, which will bring together local and international talent. "Our aim is to expand the project beyond competition and invite both Armenian and non-Armenian musicians to come to Armenia and play with local musicians. We will invite important musicians from around the world to come see Armenia and to play and be introduced to the talent there," he explains. Chilingirian is also thinking about organizing a Cello Competition next year in Yerevan. He says the Armenian community in Britain has shown great interest and willingness to help these projects financially.

"We want to open opportunities for musicians in Armenia to be invited and play at other festivals in Europe or elsewhere," says Chilingirian. "In this way, they could have work and something that would keep them in the field."

But, Chilingirian adds, "Musicians in Armenia should also have the opportunity to go around the world to see how difficult it is to

make it in the music industry. They need to see how much effort it takes to be successful." While networking with others and making friends are very important, "Most important," he says "is to play well, to play chamber music well."

Still, given the current socio-economic difficulties in the country, chances of Armenian musicians traveling to Europe or North America and not wanting to return to Armenia is very high. "That's always true," grants Chilingirian. "But at least if possibilities are created in Armenia, where they can work or teach, and at the same time have the opportunity to travel for performances, then they might choose to return."

Indeed, the world of classical music has changed enormously, especially in the last decade. Being a top musician is not enough any more. "Nowadays, not only must you have an agent, but the agent keeps reminding the musician that we need to hire someone for public relations," laughs Chilingirian. "Classical music has become just like advertising cars, chocolate or laundry detergent. These PR people tell us about 'packaging,' 'selling angles,' and so on. Today, it is not enough to play excellent, beautiful Beethoven. They say, fine, forget that you are an excellent player, can you play or present Beethoven in a way that's different from everyone else? Can you play 16 Beethoven quartets in one night?"

Chilingirian views the Diaspora's role as crucial in the process of bettering Armenia's musical environment. "As Diaspora Armenians, if we don't make Armenia strong, we will lose something, too. It is important that our musicians and students are happy in Armenia and feel that they are really worth something. Any nation that grows without music will see a major void in its collective life. Fortunately, Armenia didn't and doesn't have this void." But, he adds, "We have to make sure that both the Diaspora and the government of Armenia appreciate the arts and finance it. This sphere of our national life should not be neglected."

He realizes that the task of strengthening Armenia's music "industry" is a huge task. "I know it is difficult," he admits, "but if we have a wider circle of musicians in the Diaspora thinking about the problems and their solution, I believe more opportunities can be created for musicians in Armenia." Already, a few Armenia-born young musicians have been very successful in the West. One such musician is recently graduated cello player Alexander Chaushian, who lives in London. Like Chilingirian at the beginning of his career, Chaushian was sponsored by the Young Concert Artists, a New York-based organization that pro-

vides exposure to young and promising artists in the US. "The future is very bright for such musicians," affirms Chilingirian with pride.

The pride is justified. In the past Chilingirian and his wife, anthropologist Susan Pattie, and several others in the British community, have helped young Armenian musicians to come to London to study. They provided contacts, a home environment, invaluable learning tools, helpful hints and plenty of support. "We brought a few young musicians to London and helped them. Everything went well," he explains, but notes two problems that has made them rethink this approach. "First, it's very difficult for the kids to leave their families at a very young age and live in a foreign country.

Secondly, every day and every year that they live in a foreign country makes it harder for them to return to their motherland." Chilingirian believes that the hard-to-find financial resources can be put to better use in Armenia than spent on a few students studying abroad. "The money spent on just one student studying in London, I wouldn't be exaggerating if I said that we could run an entire conservatory in Armenia with the same amount," he observes.

He says with limited funds and high demand, "The question is: to help one student study abroad or help 100-120 students in Armenia?" When financial resources are limited, he says, "We have to think well and decide the most efficient way of spending these resources." Chilingirian believes that successful Diaspora musicians can create new channels of cooperation and opportunities for musicians in Armenia. He says Diaspora musicians and music industry professionals should visit Armenia more frequently and work with their counterparts there. "Perhaps, many professional musicians think it's a sacrifice for them to do it, but they have to do it, they can make the time if they want to," he adds emphatically.

Indeed, in the last few years, this "in-bound" assistance trend has become prevalent among Diaspora organization and individuals helping Armenia. Unlike in the early 1990s, more attention is being given to locally administered programs in Armenia than bringing individuals out of Armenia for further training or specialization. While appreciating the value of travel, living and learning abroad, the advocates of "Armenia-based" programs say their energy and resources are better spent in the country, where a larger number of people benefit directly, while at the same time, much-needed local infrastructure is developed. "True, there are many difficulties in Armenia, many more important priorities perhaps, but let's not forget that art and music are very important for people's soul," says Chilingirian. ■