George Mathew’s Scheherazade

Music for Life International, led by conductor George Mathew, is putting together The Scheherazade Initiative, a benefit concert celebrating the resilience of women and girls in the face of violence, Carnegie Hall, New York City, October 19.

The performances will be of the great Scheherazade-inspired works by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Maurice Ravel. The proceeds will go to the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women; Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, executive director and undersecretary-general of UN Women, is to deliver opening remarks.

Music for Life has addressed other humanitarian concerts, such as for children in Syria and, earlier, in the aftermath of floods in the Indus Valley. Mathew says this partnership came about partly due to interactions with an old friend, Fardad Deif, deputy manager at the trust fund.

As for Scheherazade, he says while the character may not be real, she is one who exposed herself to the most brutal kind of violence and created an extraordinary treasure in the bargain. Scheherazade, he adds, is an archetypal story of resilience against violence — one that does not give violence the frontal seat in the project.

“In the context of what we’re doing, especially in the Rimsky-Korsakov piece, we start with such a thing as male power,” Mathew explains. “Into that picture comes the female element, Scheherazade. The male identity is a linear one, a simpler one than the female. In Rimsky-Korsakov, the female envelopes the male one.

Ravel’s Scheherazade, he says, is a more complex character — not as sentimentally portrayed as in Rimsky-Korsakov.

The second piece was difficult, he adds, including poems set to music that reflects Scheherazade’s state of mind: “Also, the relationship between Scheherazade and her husband is complicated. Scheherazade is not just a pure victim; she has feelings; she has her own sexuality. It is a more sophisticated reading of the condition of Scheherazade and her emotions and psyche.”

“What we are excited about is that it enables us to clarify it doesn’t matter what a woman is wearing; violence against women is not justified whether women express their sexuality or not. We hear a lot about blaming the victim. This clarifies that victims of violence deserve to be treated as human beings, with a right to dignity; to dress as they wish. Their exercising their rights doesn’t make (violence) any more acceptable.”

According to Mathew, Music for Life, while working with organizations trying to end violence against women, is focusing on extraordinary women who have dissolved the violence. “An example that jumps out is (Nobel Prize winner and education activist) Malala Yousafzai,” he says.

“Stricken by violence, she resolutely stood her ground, and insisted that there is another way. That is the most powerful form of resisting violence. It’s poetic, transformative. Hearing the story transforms the listener. Malala is the ultimate Scheherazade. Scheherazade was only threatened with violence, Malala (who was shot for seeking education for girls) was actually the recipient of it.”

“The stories that Scheherazade tells are of women who create archetypes of wisdom and strength. Music for Life has claimed it as a characteristic of our concert. We look for resonances between music and the cause — whether music can generate the mission.”

Mathew admits Rimsky-Korsakov and Ravel may not have intended to make such a statement, but adds, “It may be how we’re reading it. Once pen leaves paper, music takes a life of its own. A composer has intentions but there is a way there are resonances composer could not have dreamed about. Because of the universality of human experiences, we can find these resonances in different spheres. We try to relate the music with the purpose of what we are doing.”

— P Rajendran

Sunjeev’s race to the Booker

From left, Sahota with the other shortlisted authors a day earlier — Chigozie Obioma, Hanya Yanagihara, Anne Tyler, Tom McCarthy and Marlon James — at the Royal Festival Hall in London. James won the Booker, becoming the first Jamaican to win the coveted literary prize.