

Harmonic Convergence

Nirupama Rao has been described as India’s “diva of diplomacy”: she was that country’s foreign secretary from 2009 to 2011 and served as ambassador to the United States, China, Sri Lanka, Peru, and Bolivia during her career. She also has a passion for music. Last year, she and her husband, Sudhakar Rao, embarked on a new mission: to create an orchestra of musicians from multiple South Asian countries—many of them from war-torn regions experiencing conflict—aimed at promoting peace and understanding. The orchestra is called Chiragh, a Hindi word for “the lamp that dispels darkness,” with musicians from nations including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. This spring, Chiragh debuted at Mumbai’s National Centre for the Performing Arts, led by American conductor Viswa Subbaraman.

Here, Rao shares her thoughts about the role orchestras can play in building bridges across geopolitical divides.



Nirupama Rao

we strive to realize a better future for the 1.5 billion people who inhabit South Asia.

Western-style symphony orchestras are not very common in our region. But the musical talents of our peoples are rich and outstanding. Our composers, such as the Oscar-winning A.R Rahman (*Slumdog Millionaire*), have won fame world-wide. Building a world-class symphony orchestra takes years of rigorous training, and our work has only begun. We will strive hard to build ties of cooperation with great orchestras around the world. We also want to build a repertoire for orchestras of music from South Asia, this crucible of rich cultures.

come from a region that is proud of its ancient and enduring civilization. This is a place of vibrant dance and song. It is also a place that has been open to influences from the world outside for centuries. We must uphold that spirit of openness because we, as human beings, are the better for it. Despite the political boundaries that divide the nations of South Asia, there is an urge to co-exist in harmony.

We created Chiragh—the South Asian Symphony Orchestra because we believe music speaks the language of peace. There is magic to music. It rises above the strife between nations. The right to music is a basic human right. Our musicians come from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the South Asian diaspora who have made their homes in the United States and Europe. Some of them are as young as thirteen, some are refugees from war, and they are drawn from different walks of life. One of our young Afghan members says that music has changed his world and that his aim in life is to “overcome the sound of war with the sound of music.” These are words spoken by a young soul who has



Viswa Subbaraman conducts the inaugural concert of Chiragh—the South Asian Symphony Orchestra in Mumbai, India, April 2019.

witnessed unspeakable horrors of conflict and terrorism.

In our first concert in Mumbai, India in April 2019, the orchestra demonstrated what South Asians can do when they collaborate with true commitment and discipline, through music. One of the pieces in

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this debut concert was an arrangement of songs from the region called *Hamsafar—A Musical Journey through South Asia*, composed for the occasion by the Afghanistan National Institute of Music’s Lauren Braithwait. “Hamsafar” means fellow-voyager or traveler—which we all are, as

Integration within South Asia and between South Asia and the rest of the world must become stronger. Music offers one way of doing this. Its language is universal. Cooperation and empathy can help us overcome many challenges: the threat of war, injustice against women and children, environmental damage, religious persecution, ignorance and racial prejudice, and much more. Music upholds the spirit of freedom against domination and oppression.

The happiest part of this whole experience has been to witness the passion, commitment, and discipline of our musicians in Chiragh—the South Asian Symphony Orchestra. They exemplify true generosity of spirit and the joy of giving. Strangers become friends. **S**