

Composer Brings Persian Influence to St. Pete

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Composer Mehdi Hosseini relocated to St. Pete from Iran 10 years ago.

ST. PETERSBURG — Running a contemporary classical music center in Russia may seem like an unlikely occupation for a Persian composer brought up in the traditional and extremely intricate Oriental musical culture. This, however, has been the exact mission of 33-year-old Tehran-born composer Mehdi Hosseini for the past 10 years.

Hosseini arrived in town in 2002 to study at the St. Petersburg State Conservatory under composer Sergei Slonimsky and music historian Tatyana Bershanskaya, making Russia's northern capital his second home.

Hosseini, who originally studied drama, switched to classical music relatively late, already in his teens. He took private lessons from Farhad Fakhreddini, the man behind the Iranian national orchestra, for five years, and it was through his mentor that Hosseini came across his first-ever piece of the Russian classics — Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade."

Since that time, Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich and Stravinsky have become Hosseini's favorites. It is these composers that he would bring to Iran if he were to introduce local audiences to the Russian classics, he said.

"I would be interested in building up an evening of pieces by Shostakovich — a string chamber quartet, a symphony and a concerto all performed in the same evening," he said. "Some would criticize this approach for 'overindulging the audience,' but for me this approach feels right because it allows the listeners to get a full scope of the legacy of a master."

In St. Petersburg, Hosseini made supporting new music festivals one of the key priorities of his reMusik Contemporary Music Center, which he founded in 2010 and which runs new contemporary academic music festivals and publishes an Internet magazine on contemporary music in Russian and English. Through his work, the composer has established extensive contacts with St. Petersburg classical music ensembles, and local musicians are also keen to play Hosseini's original works.

The composer, whose opuses have been performed during some of the city's most respected contemporary academic music festivals, is now working on a new piece that will premiere during the forthcoming edition of the annual international Sound Ways festival in November.

"The orchestras simply need to play new music, otherwise there will never be an audience for it," Hosseini said. "The human soul is curious — during rehearsals I can feel the curiosity, which is much stronger than any prejudice or skepticism."

When the composer was rehearsing his "Concerto for String Quartet and Chamber Orchestra" with the St. Petersburg Academic Philharmonic orchestra in 2010, it was not clear until the very last rehearsal whether the premiere of the work would actually take place.

It was not at all the case that the musicians did not have the appetite for the unorthodox piece. Neither was it the case that the orchestra's rapport with American conductor Brad Cawyer was not perfect. "The work was very different from what the musicians had done before, and it required a drastically different mindset," Hosseini said. "Even three days before the premiere, the piece was literally falling apart. But at the very last rehearsal it suddenly came together in a mesmerizing, beautiful way."

The concerto has already been released by the Iranian recording label Arqanoon Records, and won encouraging reviews in the international press.

"In this piece, Hosseini reproduces the absurdity and multicultural aspect of societal and popular culture and conversations with the use of the orchestra. He represents the tumult of a society in which ethnic cultural elements are evident but cannot be easily heard. This society speaks in a language that is beyond understanding, even for itself, but the cultural identity of this disrupted society can still be found," Iranian critic Mohsen Saghafi wrote.

Over the 10 years he has spent in St. Petersburg, Hosseini's composing style has evolved dramatically. Originally, Hosseini relied strongly on ancient Persian music. "Iranian regional folk music has always been a crucial and vital source of inspiration for me," he said.

"However, now I seek to muffle the obvious Persian influences. What interests me at present

is exploring the possibilities of improvisation in classical Persian music and the transfer from these traditions to Western European classical music."

Hosseini admits that the situation for young composers is particularly problematic in Russia: Major orchestras show little enthusiasm when it comes to new music because general audiences express little interest in the contemporary repertoire, making it hard to sell these concerts; listeners, in turn, do not have enough exposure to this repertoire to be able to develop a taste for it.

The composer would like to see a friendlier attitude toward contemporary music projects from the state — and not necessarily in the form of generous grants. "Orchestras find it risky to perform contemporary works and experimental pieces because such concerts rarely attract full houses," he said. "However, with so many orchestras being state-funded, it would not cost anything to write a line in the orchestras' policies to have them perform, say, five contemporary works per season. Also, some tickets for contemporary music concerts could be distributed for free among students as part of an educational initiative."

ReMusik's next big project is a contemporary music festival to be held in St. Petersburg from May 23–30, 2013. "We are going to take a regional approach. For instance, for the Day of Switzerland we are bringing 10 aspiring Swiss composers to the city," Hosseini said.

St. Petersburg has always been a leading city in new music — since the days of Tchaikovsky and during the experimental period back in the 1920s, until Stalin ended this experimentation. After so many years of persecution and fear — not the fear of bad reviews, but fear for one's life — returning to an unrestricted state of mind can still pose a challenge to Russian composers.

"What I feel in St. Petersburg, is that overall creativity is tangible in the air, and if we support up-and-coming young talent, it will win through," the composer said.

For more information, please visit www.remusik.org.

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