



The East-West Inquirer

An online monthly that strives to bring East and West closer
Vol. X, No. 112, April 2011

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Beethoven Symphony Soothes Pakistan's Flood Victims and Sends Them Succor By M.P. Prabhakaran



George Mathew conducting “Beethoven for the Indus Valley” at Carnegie Hall, New York, on January 31, 2011. The orchestra he put together was a wide spectrum of musicians – young and old, novices and stalwarts, students and teachers, famous and not-so-famous. They came from the New York Philharmonic, MET Orchestra, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Emerson Quartet, Orchestra of St. Luke’s, Brooklyn Philharmonic, Youth Orchestra of the Americas, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, the Juilliard School, the Manhattan School of Music, and other major music schools.

The concertmaster of the event was the famous violinist Glenn Dicterow, who is also the concertmaster of New York Philharmonic. Other musicians who participated in it and made the evening a memorable one included Christopher Shepard, music director of the renowned Dessooff Symphonic Choir, soprano Laquita Mitchell, mezzo-soprano Margaret Lattimore, tenor

Sean Panikkar, and bass Morris Robinson. *(Photo is by Chris Lee)*

Beethoven's "Ninth Symphony" once again resonated in New York's Carnegie Hall, on January 31, 2011. Like many a concert held at this storied music hall before, this one also was dedicated to a humanitarian cause: It was held to raise funds for the millions of Pakistanis who are still suffering from the ravages caused by floods, in the summer of 2010.

It was the worst flooding Pakistan witnessed in 80 years. It began on July 22, 2010, in Baluchistan, and soon spread to three more provinces – Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab and Sindh. It destroyed roads, bridges, schools, health clinics, and electricity and communication lines. About 62,000 square-mile area – nearly one-fifth of Pakistan – was under water for several weeks. Nearly 20 million people, most of them poor, were uprooted from their homes. The death toll was estimated at 1,500.

Farming is the main occupation of people who lived in the flood-affected area. They lost their livelihoods when floods submerged their farmlands. More than 200,000 head of cattle were killed. Large quantities of commodities stored for future use was also destroyed.

Governmental and humanitarian agencies from Pakistan and around the world have been doing their best to help the victims. Even individuals with means have been dipping into their resources to help out. But the problem is so gargantuan that the aid that poured in proved to be too inadequate to meet the needs. Most of those who lost their homes are still living in makeshift shelters and tents, in unhealthy conditions. They are in dire need of help – food, shelter, clothes, medicine or whatever they can get that would alleviate their suffering.

Organized by Singaporean-born Indian

The musical extravaganza which New Yorkers were treated to at Carnegie Hall, on January 31, was held in answer to their call for help. Billed as “Beethoven for the Indus Valley, a Concert for Life and Renewal in Pakistan after the 2010 Floods,” it was the brainchild of George Mathew, a Singaporean-born Indian music director living in New York. It was also the fruit of labor and dedication of scores of like-minded musicians in the U.S. They all decided to send a message to the flood victims living half the world away that they have not been forgotten, that help is on the way.

As founder and artistic director of Music for Life International and Ubuntu-Shruti, George Mathew has already become a respected musician in the U.S. and elsewhere. Through his association with humanitarian causes, he has already earned a reputation as a “conductor and ambassador for transformative action through music.”

Music for Life International takes its name from the legendary Music for Life concerts, which the late Leonard Bernstein used to present at Carnegie Hall in the 1980s. Mr. Mathew created it to conceive and present music concerts and related events with a view to promoting awareness of major humanitarian crises and of other issues of concern throughout the world.

“Beethoven for the Indus Valley” was Mr. Mathew's fourth humanitarian concert at Carnegie Hall. He first appeared there in 2006 as artistic director and conductor of “Beethoven's Ninth for South Asia.” He conducted the musical legend's “Ninth Symphony” to raise funds for the 2005 earthquake victims in Kashmir and

Pakistan. His second appearance at Carnegie Hall was in 2007. He was the artistic director of "Requiem for Darfur," which he organized in collaboration with Mia Farrow, the UNICEF's goodwill ambassador at the time. "Requiem for Darfur" was indeed a requiem for Darfur victims. But Mr. Mathew called the benefit concert as such for another reason: Verdi's "Requiem" was the main item he presented that evening. Its purpose was to raise funds for, and highlight the plight of, the survivors and refugees of the conflicts in Darfur and Chad. He made his third appearance, in January 2009, with "Mahler for the Children of AIDS." He conducted Gustav Mahler's "Third Symphony." Its mission: "to raise public consciousness and funds for global Pediatric AIDS and the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV."

As one can tell, when it comes to organizing benefit concerts, Mr. Mathew has a predilection for Beethoven's "Ninth Symphony." He explains it this way: "Beethoven himself makes a musical statement in the finale of the 'Ninth Symphony' that goes to the heart of our mission with this concert. Writing in an earlier era of tension between East and West, Beethoven uses the music of the Turkish military, music of the Islamic world, to provide stability, and indeed possibility, for the German (Western) setting of the famous 'Ode to Joy' tune. In that moment, Beethoven seems to become the voice of a whole civilization.... Two hundred years later, it appears we have still much to learn from this great, wise man of music and the world.... In gathering together as a community of musicians, listeners and supporters, we send a message of solidarity and human support to our fellow human beings in Pakistan who have been so hard hit by these devastating floods, in addition to whatever financial support we muster."

The anti-apartheid activist of world renown, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, is in full agreement with that view. In a message sent to the organizers of the January 31 event, he says: "'Beethoven for the Indus Valley' broadcasts Beethoven's call in his Ninth Symphony to 'Be embraced, Ye Millions!' At a time when the world needs urgently to focus on our common humanity, your community of musicians and humanitarians is a musical beacon calling us all to embrace each other, in the service of the neediest and most vulnerable among us. I will be there with you in spirit."

The orchestra Mr. Mathew put together reflected the theme of "Ninth Symphony." It had a wide spectrum of musicians – young and old, novices and stalwarts, students and teachers, famous and not-so-famous. They belonged to different nationalities and ethnic groups. They all came together to give their talents and time for a worthy cause. They lived up to the principle that music transcends all man-made divisions. They also conveyed the fact that natural calamities don't discriminate on the basis of nationality, ethnicity and religion.

And that was also the fact that motivated a person of Indian origin to use his talent and resources to help the victims of a natural disaster in Pakistan. If only the leaders of India and Pakistan could emulate George Mathew's example!

American Pakistan Foundation and Acumen Fund

"Beethoven for the Indus Valley" was jointly organized by Music for Life International which, as stated above, was founded by Mr. Mathew, and American Pakistan Foundation, of which Dr. Nafis Sadik is chairperson. Dr. Sadik is also special envoy of the UN secretary general for HIV/AIDS, in Asia and the Pacific. The proceeds

of the concert would be channeled to the flood victims through Acumen Fund. Acumen Fund is a nonprofit organization that uses entrepreneurial approaches to solve the problems of global poverty. It has been active in Pakistan since 2002, building affordable houses, providing drinking water and medical help, and improving agriculture. It has already invested over \$11 million in that country. The fund has undertaken various projects to rehabilitate victims of the 2010 floods.

The 2010 floods have posed new challenges to Acumen Fund, says Jacqueline Novogratz, its founder and CEO. She witnessed first-hand what the victims have been going through. She addressed the audience at Carnegie Hall, before the concert began, and gave a heart-rending picture of what she witnessed. She also praised the relief work done by various agencies and individuals. But the victims' needs are enormous. They need our help badly, now, she said. "If not us, who? If not now, when?" she asked.

Those who want to help the victims can do so through Acumen Fund. Its Web address is www.acumenfund.org.



The floods that ravaged Pakistan in the summer of 2010 affected 20 million people, most of them

poor. Several million of them, like those in this picture, were uprooted from their homes and are now living in makeshift shelters and tents. (*Photo is reproduced courtesy Acumen Fund*)

(First published on February 4, 2011. It has since been slightly edited.)