

Meet India's first – and only – professional western orchestra

British audiences are about to get a taste of the Symphony Orchestra of India – a world-class ensemble that is encountering the western repertoire for the very first time

[Richard Bratby](#)



World-class: Symphony Orchestra of India in its tropical Barbican in Mumbai

It's a 31°C Mumbai morning, and on Marine Drive the Russian winter is closing in. The Symphony Orchestra of India (SOI) is rehearsing Rachmaninov's Second Symphony ahead of its first ever UK tour, and even on the campus of the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) — a

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palm-shaded tropical Barbican next to the Arabian Sea — this is still music to raise a shiver. Strings sigh; horns call across frozen steppes. Then the guest conductor Martyn Brabbins gives the signal for a break and players spill into the foyer, chatting and gulping tea. If the sky were more grey and the tea less sweet, it could be a general rehearsal anywhere in the UK. The most surprising thing isn't that this is happening amid the dust and taxi horns of downtown Mumbai, or even the emotional dissonance of hearing Rachmaninov in a hot climate. It's that this orchestra exists at all.

Whatever else the British might have left in India, they never really got around to classical music. Japan has orchestras of international stature. China is training new Lang Langs and Yuja Wangs at a dizzying rate. Yet India — with 125 million English speakers and centuries of cultural exchange with the West — never had a professional western orchestra until the SOI was founded in 2006. Thirteen years later, it's still the only one. But it's the genuine article, playing to capacity audiences and supported by a full-time staff who for all their professionalism — you sense — can't quite believe that this is really happening either.

Zane Dalal is the SOI's associate music director, and he'll be conducting much of its British tour. It's not unknown for Oxbridge organ scholars (he was at Oriel) to end up as orchestral conductors, but few can have taken quite such an unexpected career path. Dalal heard about the inception of the SOI through relatives in the Parsi diaspora. He flew out to India in 2007 and — against his own scepticism — found himself drawn into the project of creating both an orchestra and an audience from the ground up. 'I was having

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dinner with my uncle, and he said: “You know, they’ve started an orchestra in Mumbai.” And I was thoroughly unimpressed. I didn’t want to hear about it: “Oh, I know how it is in India. Don’t trouble me with these things.”

Understandable enough. I played in a short-lived professional orchestra in Colombo in the 1990s, and witnessed the near-impossibility of rooting this particular western tradition in subcontinental soil. A mixture of amateur expats and local pros, with brass players borrowed from the Sri Lankan army, and sponsored by an arrack distiller (public funding of western classical music is effectively non-existent in both Sri Lanka and India), the Lanka Philharmonic would begin concerts with half the horn section missing: ordered away to a military funeral after the latest Tamil Tiger atrocity. Monsoon damp stripped the varnish from my cello. If a C string snapped or a bassoonist fell sick, the closest replacement was in Singapore. We consoled ourselves that in India, Sri Lanka’s superpower neighbour to the north, they weren’t doing any better.

That was before Khushroo Suntook took over as chairman of the NCPA. ‘My uncle had been a friend of Khushroo’s since childhood,’ says Dalal. ‘He said, if this man is starting something, he’s going to start something properly.’ Suntook is one of India’s small but fiercely devoted community of lovers of western music. He’s a regular at the Salzburg and Edinburgh festivals, and his office is hung with treasured photos: Suntook with Zubin Mehta, Suntook with Placido Domingo, and Suntook with the Kazakh violinist Marat Bisengaliev, who helped him found the SOI and still serves as its music director.

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Like Dalal, Suntook's a Parsi — part of an enterprising and philanthropic community that includes the billionaire Tata dynasty, as well as the NCPA's founder Jamshed Bhabha. Mumbai's Parsis have a history of getting things done, and Suntook accepted the role as a retirement project on a salary of one rupee per year. Confronted by a new concert hall with no orchestra to play in it, he set about turning what he calls 'a very enthusiastic amateur show' into India's first credible symphony orchestra. Some problems could be overcome through fundraising and skilful management: the SOI has its own instrument repairer, a climate-controlled piano store and an impressive library.

Other obstacles demanded a long-term approach. Suntook asked Bisengaliev to oversee recruitment. 'I said, there must be some Indian players in the orchestra. I will not have a Symphony Orchestra of India unless there are Indian players. Marat said: "In that case, I'm the wrong man. I will only have players who are competent; I don't care about nationality." He auditioned hundreds, and it was "nyet, nyet, nyet"'.

It's a sensitive point. There's little western musical training available in India and local professionals — however skilled in Indian traditions — aren't necessarily at ease with the western idiom. 'You may be a little surprised at the make-up of the SOI,' commented an old Lanka Phil friend. In truth, in 2019 (and discounting the blood-and-soil closed shop of the Vienna Philharmonic) it's a rare orchestra that isn't multinational. The Berlin Philharmonic has players from more than 25 countries. In a city as kaleidoscopic as Mumbai, an orchestra containing 26 nationalities (including nine Britons and a sizeable Kazakh contingent) feels entirely appropriate.

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Still, around 15 of the 89 players are now Indian, and the NCPA has set up its own training programme, working with both child and adult musicians to create the nucleus of a music school that couldn't be more unlike China's hothouse model. The Mumbai film industry is one source of string players, and word is spreading: 'Now, funnily enough, if you've played with us, you're more likely to be hired back into Bollywood. The producers know that you understand what a note is,' says Dalal. Meanwhile, as he points out time and again, 'This is not a football team.'

Suntook echoes that sentiment. 'You don't get into Manchester United because you're from Manchester.' What matters is that the SOI sounds good. And no question, this band has character — rich but also refined, with smoky woodwinds, burnished brass and strings drenched in Bisengaliev's sticky-sweet Russian tone. Wouldn't those be exactly the flavours you'd choose if, parfumer-like, you were asked to mix a distinctively Indian symphonic sound?

Over 13 years, Suntook, Bisengaliev, Dalal and their team have had the joy of doing exactly that. 'A miraculous trajectory. I don't think we expected it when we started this,' says Dalal. To western eyes, the idealism — and potential — that surrounds the SOI looks enviable. The tour features a concerto with the great tabla virtuoso Zakir Hussain — a draw in itself. But imagine hearing Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, Bruch's First Violin Concerto and that Rachmaninov symphony performed by a world-class ensemble that is encountering them for the very first time. 'We've yet to play Schubert 9, Brahms 3, any of the Schumann symphonies,' comments Dalal.

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‘In Europe you’ve heard Beethoven for 200 years. We haven’t,’ says Suntook. British audiences are about to taste that sense of discovery. And then the SOI flies home to India, where an audience of 1.3 billion is waiting to be persuaded.

The Symphony Orchestra of India starts its seven-day UK tour on Tuesday at Symphony Hall, Birmingham, then visits London, Cardiff and Edinburgh.