

Staying Composed

By Shawn Stone

After months of isolated toil, SPAC's composer-in-residence Behzad Ranjbaran debuts his Saratoga-specific overture

It's a beautiful night to enjoy the Philadelphia Orchestra in concert at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center. Sure, it's a little humid, but patrons are undeterred: On this recent Wednesday (Aug. 10), the amphitheater is almost full. Couples in folding chairs or on blankets are spaced across the lawn with an almost mathematical equanimity, and the pleasing glow of citronella candles in metal holders dots the same landscape as dusk begins to settle in. The bell begins to toll, letting everyone know that the concert is only minutes away.

This is SPAC at its best, and a fitting backdrop for the world premiere of the *Saratoga* overture, specially commissioned from this year's composer-in-residence, Behzad Ranjbaran.

The orchestra, dressed down in what could be called "classical casual" (white shirts/blouses, black pants) has been onstage for a few minutes, tuning up. After the concertmaster does his bit and the musicians settle in, a man walks out onstage and the audience applauds.

The applause is somewhat muted, however, presumably because the crowd, expecting conductor and music director Charles Dutoit, doesn't recognize this guy.

It's Ranjbaran. He introduces himself, and tells a bit about how the overture was composed. The background is interesting, because Ranjbaran has combined the esoteric, the historical and purely musical to create the work. He explains that the notes of the main musical materials are "all drawn from these three names": Charles Dutoit, Saratoga and Philadelphia. He then sings a bit of the lovely hymn-like theme, which charms the audience into applause.

"The overture," he concludes, "comes to a big finale with a tremendous amount of energy."

He's right. The piece is alternately raucous and playful, with quiet moments of melodic beauty building to that big finale, complete with a blazing cannon. (Interestingly, the *Times Union* reported that the cannon fire drowned out the orchestra inside; on the lawn, the blend of musical and actual explosions was pleasing and effective.)

The following afternoon, Ranjbaran smiles as he reflects on the premiere: "It went really well."

He explains that after working in solitude for months, a lonely period when "people don't understand what you're doing," it's almost like the birth of a child.

And, he adds, getting audiences to accept new works can be difficult, as too often "people compare the most-loved repertory works with one new composition." Despite being paired with two such warhorses, Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 3* and Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 5*, this was not the case with his overture and the Saratoga audience.

Ranjbaran adds that he has been delighted with the entire experience of working with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Maestro Dutoit and the musicians, he says happily, understood the music quickly and embraced it with tremendous passion. The orchestra was "so warm and affectionate—I was touched by their expressions of support."

The rapport is easy to see. Just before sitting down for this interview, he was spending part of this sunny afternoon at the amphitheater, where Dutoit was rehearsing Ranjbaran's *Violin Concerto* with the orchestra. The atmosphere was convivial, and everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves—just as they seemed to be during the previous evening's performance.

Asked about this, Ranjbaran explains that musicians are "happy whenever we can see the trees," adding that SPAC's natural setting "enhances the experience."

Ranjbaran found out two years ago that he would be SPAC's artist-in-residence for 2005: "I was very delighted." Though he had never spent much time upstate, he was immediately drawn to the beauty and history of the area.

The Iranian-born, Juilliard-trained composer teaches at that venerable

Manhattan institution, and lives in Long Island. He has earned a wide variety of awards and honors, including the Charles Ives Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a Distinguished Artist designation by the New Jersey Council on the Arts. Always busy, he came to Saratoga Springs directly from South Korea, where his *Awakening* for string orchestra had its world premiere; he jokes that he's "still 13 hours ahead."

So far this season he's premiered two new works here, the *Saratoga* overture and the *Piano Quintet*; still to be performed are his *Violin Concerto* (on Saturday, Aug. 20, by the Philadelphia Orchestra as part of the Grand Finale) and his *String Quartet No. 1* (by the Fine Arts Quartet on Sunday, Aug. 21, on the last day of the Saratoga Chamber Music Festival).

The concerto has been chosen by Juilliard as the "required work" for next year's student violin concerto competition; this is considered a particular honor, as the school will be celebrating its centennial.

"The fact that they chose this for the competition," Ranjbaran notes, "is a vote of confidence."

Inevitably, whenever classical music is under discussion, the subject of attracting younger people naturally comes up. This time, a mention of the surprisingly diverse age-range of the previous night's crowd brings out Ranjbaran's take on this.

"The idea of repertory," Ranjbaran says, "is foreign to the younger generation."

It's an interesting point. If there's one thing American pop culture hinges on, it's the never-ending triumph of the new. Even if it's based on something old—like, say, movie remakes or samples of old songs in new music—it's packaged and sold as something wonderfully fresh. (Even if it isn't.) Consistently mixing new works in with the much-loved standard repertoire, Ranjbaran suggests, is a way to connect with this vast potential audience: "It shows, particularly to new audiences, that there is a future to this music."

Right now, he's enjoying playing to the friendly, receptive, actual audience here in Saratoga Springs. Ranjbaran smiles again, and explains, "I've been very encouraged by their support."