

International travels

CSO travels to Persia with music inspired by Shahnameh



JoAnn Falletta and Behzad Ranjbaran

Story by Matthew E. Campbell | Staff writer

Photo by Caitlin M. Prarat

Guest conductor JoAnn Falletta will present a Persian-flavored program with the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra at 8:15 p.m. tonight in the Amphitheater. The program opens with Iranian-born Behzad Ranjbaran's *Seven Passages*, a work from 2000 inspired by *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, an epic poem made up of tens of thousands of couplets that is to Iran what *The Iliad* is to the West. The program also includes Rimsky-Korsakov's beloved *Scheherazade*, based on *One Thousand and One Nights*, another keystone of Persian literature. Pianist William Wolfram will join the orchestra in a sidestep to Hungary with Liszt's *Piano Concerto No. 1* in E-flat major.

Ranjbaran was born in 1955

and entered the Tehran Conservatory of Music at age 9. At age 16, his studies were interrupted by several months in a political prison, prompting him to decide to leave Iran, which he did a few years later in 1977. He moved to the United States, studying at Indiana University before earning a doctorate in composition at Juilliard, where he was classmate to Falletta and played the violin in an orchestra under Falletta when she was a fledgling conducting student.



Wolfram

become an ardent champion of Ranjbaran's music. She commissioned and gave the world premiere of *Seven Passages* in 2000 with the Long Beach Symphony Orchestra, and then recorded it and the entire "Persian Trilogy" (of which *Seven Passages* is one part) with the London Symphony Orchestra. *Seven Passages* was also performed this past March by the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Ranjbaran's music has many champions: Joshua Bell gave the world premiere of his violin concerto in 2003, and pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra under Robert Spano premiered his piano concerto this past June.

Over the years, Falletta has

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Falletta performs Ranjbaran's music frequently. Last weekend, she conducted the entire Persian Trilogy with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra to celebrate *Shahnameh's* 1,000th anniversary, according to *The Toronto Star*. The concert also coincided with the Seventh Biennial Conference of the International Society for Iranian Studies. That performance included Ranjbaran's music, a traditional dramatic narrator from Tehran and Persian miniatures, small book-size paintings that illustrated the fantastic images described in epic poems like *Shahnameh*. The art form peaked between the 13th and 16th centuries.

In *Seven Passages*, a lavishly orchestrated 13-minute work, Ranjbaran took his inspiration from Rostam's seven trials. In this part of *Shahnameh*, the hero Rostam undertakes a perilous quest to save his king, fighting witches, dragons and demons along the way.

For Ranjbaran growing up in Iran in the 1950s and '60s, the fantastic stories in *Shahnameh* were incredibly inspiring and enthralled him. From an early age, he knew that he wanted to be a composer and write music inspired by those stories. He heard the stories, which mix history with legend, but didn't start reading the massive work until he was 10, when his mother won a copy of the book.

"I still have that [copy]," said Ranjbaran, now in his early 50s. "It's about 650 pages, and on the cover of that book was an incredibly dramatic picture of the main hero, Rostam, in battle with the White Demon. That picture had a profound impact on me."

The impact of the image of the fight with the White Demon — one of Rostam's trials

— was so strong that years later it would become part of *Seven Passages*.

Although *Shahnameh* is a national book and holds great significance for Iran, Ranjbaran appreciates it because it's a great piece of literature and its author, the poet Ferdowsi, was a master of imagination. "My approach to this book is strictly from the literary merit ... the dramatic nature and the wealth of character in those stories," Ranjbaran said. "If it was written in Indian or English, I would have had the same response to these wonderful stories."

The stories occupy a central place in Ranjbaran's childhood. In the summers, his family would travel from Tehran to the small villages where his father was born and where the legends of *Shahnameh* were part of the cultural fabric.

"In the summertime, in the evenings, because the air was hot, we would take the beds into the back yard, which was a beautiful garden surrounded by jasmine and roses. As we slept at night, I would stare at the stars, really brilliant stars, millions of them in the sky, surrounded by the aroma of jasmine and roses. So to me, that experience is always present in my music."

As a young boy, Ranjbaran believed the stories. He recalls nighttime vigils, waiting and watching for the genies and fairies to come down from the mountains as the locals said. He also remembers standing on the rooftop, staring at the Alborz Mountains in northern Iran, hoping to catch a glimpse of Simurgh (the phoenix), who lived there, according to *Shahnameh*.

Ranjbaran worked with Falletta on the recording of the Persian Trilogy and was in Toronto for the performance on Aug. 2. Accompanied by his family, Ranjbaran also came to Chautauqua for

the rehearsals and will attend tonight's CSO performance of *Seven Passages*.

Ranjbaran's presence has been exciting to Falletta.

"The closest I can get to the creative process is to work with composers on their work," she said. "That's very exciting for me because having a live composer there and having him want to try different things, or be present and be able to actually tell us what he was thinking or what he would like ... that's thrilling, because we are then part of his creative process, and that for me is something that I love."

Although Ranjbaran is well acquainted with the music of Iran, he composes in a Western idiom, with no Iranian instruments to be found in the scoring of *Seven Passages*. Iranian classical or traditional music is rich and centuries old, and Ranjbaran didn't feel a need to translate it from traditional Iranian instruments to the Western orchestra. However, he says his music is a "fine fabric of these elements," and it contains some of the color, melodies and ornamentation characteristic of Iranian music. *Seven Passages*, he says, could not have been written by a composer not of Iran.

Shahnameh serves a function similar to that of Western fables: to pass down lessons from generation to generation. While *Seven Passages* focuses on a remarkable hero's valiant efforts, Ranjbaran notes that common people who perform good deeds are unsung heroes. *Seven Passages*, he says, is a "tribute" to them.

After "Seven Passages," Falletta and the CSO with Wolfram will travel to Hungary for Liszt's first piano concerto. Wolfram loves the variety in the concerto, which ranges from moments of bravura to great delicacy.

"There's great extroversion and great introversion and

all things in between in this concerto," Wolfram said. "It offers a tremendous variety: it has a lot of physicality, a lot of flashy technique and very intimate, beautiful melodies. I think for the audience it has a menu that's very varied and satisfying."

Wolfram has worked many times with Falletta, who is excited to collaborate with him in tonight's concert.

"Bill is one of my favorite pianists," Falletta said. "He's really a powerhouse. He's a big guy, strong, incredibly dramatic on the piano. He's a very physical, visceral pianist."

Wolfram has performed with orchestras across the United States, including those of San Francisco, Baltimore and St. Louis, and abroad with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and the Warsaw, Moscow and Budapest philharmonics. He has recorded two discs of Liszt's solo piano music for Naxos, and collaborated with the July 31 CSO soloist, violinist Philippe Quint, in recordings of Corigliano and Rózsa.

The program concludes with Rimsky-Korsakov's colorful *Scheherazade*, a work filled with solos that will allow the CSO musicians chances to shine individually. The work isn't narrative or programmatic, although several themes belong to characters. According to the story, *Scheherazade* (represented by a recurring melody on the solo violin) has just married the Sultan (represented by the stern theme heard at the beginning of the work), who, jaded by an unfaithful wife, tends to execute his wives the morning after marrying them. *Scheherazade* tells the Sultan fascinating stories to postpone her execution, until finally, after 1,001 nights' worth of stories, the Sultan decides not to kill her.