Seven Decisions of Gandhi

By: Lori Goldstein

*Writer Lori Goldstein explores the history and philosophy of Gandhi with violinist William Harvey, sharing what inspired the World Premiere of *Seven Decisions of Gandhi* this March in Princeton.*

In 2017, William Harvey's reading of Mohandas K. Gandhi's autobiography inspired him to conceive of a violin concerto that would capture the pivotal decisions of the international icon's life. The resulting work, *Seven Decisions of Gandhi*, will be premiered by the Princeton Symphony Orchestra on March 11 and 12 with Harvey as the soloist.

The composition dramatizes such crossroads as his decision to leave India to study the law in London, his move to South Africa where he defended the legal rights of expatriate Indians, and his historic Salt March, a major act of non-violent civil disobedience against the British empire.

In 2017, Harvey was a guest concertmaster in Durban, South Africa, where Gandhi's 77-year-old granddaughter, Ela Gandhi, was still living in the first ashram (a community of different faiths and ethnicities) that her grandfather had built. Harvey got permission from Ela to compose the concerto, provided two of her grandfather's favorite hymns be incorporated into it.

At first, Harvey, an American born in Indianapolis, thought only a composer of Indian classical music should take on such a project. Yet when he reflected on the four years he had spent studying with musicians from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India, he began to think he was qualified to compose *Seven Decisions of Gandhi*. Moreover, while he was on the faculty of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music, he was given a directive from a member of the president’s cabinet to write a work that would be a fusion of Afghan, Indian, and Western classical music.

While composing the concerto, Harvey corresponded with colleagues who had helped him learn to play the Indian stringed instrument, the sitar. And to guide him in the selection of the seven decisions, Harvey read two important biographies of Gandhi written by Dr. Ramachandra Guha. On July 1, 2020, Ela’s eightieth birthday, he was able to present the concerto to her with this gift.
Harvey distributed the scores to various orchestras, and the Princeton Symphony Orchestra was the first to say they wanted to premiere it, with Harvey as solo violinist and Sameer Patel as guest conductor. (Currently, a recording of the concerto may be live-streamed on SoundCloud.com, with Harvey as the soloist, accompanied by a MIDI-generated orchestra.)

The concerto’s seven movements correspond in chronological order to the events that shaped Gandhi’s life and mission. “The first decision is the most incredible, because at 18 he is without his father, he goes to the elders in his caste and says he wants to study in London,” explains Harvey. “They say it is forbidden for you to sail across the kala pani (polluting ocean). If you do this you will be outcast, you will be dead to us and we won’t help you…He listened to them respectfully, he didn’t argue with them, and he went to London anyway. It just blows my mind that I think 999 out of 1,000 young men would not have done that.”

Having completed his degree in law, Gandhi returns to India, and “he is indeed an outcast. That is why when the opportunity to go to South Africa came up, he took it, and he was there for 22 years and really made a name for himself. He was brought for a very specific reason: to attend to the legal interests of the Indian community in South Africa,” Harvey explains.
“What makes Gandhi so interesting to me is how very easy it would have been for him to have a very sort of different life,” says Harvey. “Even the decision to build an ashram was important—he could have just lived in an apartment and done the job he was hired to do. He had to think very intentionally about how to live.”

“What strikes me about the Salt March, he knew that a short walk from the ashram to the sea wouldn’t make an impact, so he decided to walk 149 kilometers to the sea.” There the Indians would defy the law that prevented them from collecting or making their own salt. “People thought he was crazy, but he was insistent and it worked. He got international attention and the New York Times showed up. It would cause the world, and particularly Britain, to consider whether the current engagement was working.”

Throughout the concerto, the solo violin is the voice of Gandhi. Sometimes it supports or listens to other voices. For instance, in the fourth movement, the violin section represents the Indians in South Africa. Harvey explains in his detailed program notes, that on September 11, 1906, to a packed audience at Johannesburg’s Empire Theatre, Gandhi issued his first-ever hartal, meaning withdrawal or non-cooperation—a call to Indian expatriates in South Africa to defy the government’s unjust demand that all Indians must re-register.
William Harvey with Mohanda Gandhi’s Grand-Daughter, Ela Gandhi. Photo Credit: Contributed.
“At a specific point in this movement, the orchestral violins stop playing... they represent that sudden withdrawal of the Indian community, but Gandhi keeps dialoging with the British imperialists, you’re going to have to treat us fairly.” The solo violin confronts the brass, representing the imperialists, as Gandhi peacefully continues his **hartal** against the white South Africans. On later occasions of civil disobedience, Gandhi would use the term **satyagraha**—literally translated as holding fast to the truth.

Different instruments signify various religions in the third decision, titled Phoenix. Gandhi built the community of ashrams, in Phoenix, near Durban, South Africa. In this movement, the tuba, flute, and solo violin sing a Hindu hymn while the violas and cellos intone a Christian hymn. The clarinet plays notes of the Muslim call to prayer, the muted trumpet recalls the sound of the shofar.

“Most of the movements have a distinct orchestration so that you can easily tell them apart,” says Harvey. For example, during the movement titled Khadi, the solo violin voice is accompanied by only the harp; the harp represents the spinning wheel, from which **khadi**, the homespun cloth that Gandhi himself wore, was made. He encouraged all Indians in South Africa to do the same, to deny the British Empire income from imported English textiles.

Harvey composed **Seven Decisions of Gandhi**, partly to defend the revolutionary activist’s legacy, which he feels is currently being challenged by leftists in this country and by rightists, Hindu nationalists, in India. To him it is a very personal piece, with the premise...[that] we are defined by our decisions... you can apply this to your own life. “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” Harvey believes Gandhi’s important motto has multiple meanings. For Harvey, it is a reminder to improve the decisions he makes in his own life. “If all of us are conscious at all times that our decisions do in fact define us to the rest of the world, perhaps we’ll all be a little more careful.”

---

Photo Credit: Princeton Symphony Orchestra
Harvey hopes that *Seven Decisions of Gandhi* will be performed by other orchestras and other soloists. The composer has written over fifty works, the latest being his fourth sonata for violin. He is currently the concertmaster of Mexico’s premier Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional and professor at the Universidad Panamericana. Since 2005, he is the founder and director of Cultures in Harmony, a non-profit that promotes cultural understanding through music with over 40 projects from Belize to Zimbabwe. Born in 1982, he grew up in Indianapolis and now lives in Mexico City.

Tickets for the March 11 and 12 concerts at Richardson Auditorium may be purchased at princetonsymphony.org. During the week leading up to the concerts, Harvey will give a Masterclass on March 8. On March 9, Harvey and Tabla musician Dibyarka Chatterjee will introduce traditional instruments of the Indian Subcontinent. PSO’s Listen Up! Program for middle-school aged children features a performance of *Seven Decisions of Gandhi*. Harvey will also visit with the Youth Orchestra of Central Jersey and the Greater Princeton Youth Orchestra. For more information about each event, consult the Princeton Symphony Orchestra website.