

Bangkok Post

outlook

Saturday 08 November 2003

Rostropovich at Angkor

'Greatest musician' to perform at world heritage site

Story and picture by USNISA SUKHSVASTI



Rostropovich in Angkor. It sounds almost too good to be true.

Yet this combination of Western virtuoso genius and Eastern archaeological wonder is about to become a reality when Mstislav Rostropovich, proclaimed in 2002 by the London Times as "the greatest living musician", performs a charity concert at the World Heritage Site of Angkor Wat in aid of the Nginn Karet Foundation for Cambodia (NKFC).

The unique concert is to take place on Sunday, December 14, under the High Patronage of Her Majesty Queen Norodom Monineath Sihanouk of Cambodia, and with the support of the Royal Government of Cambodia's Prime Minister Samdech Hun Sen and with the support of Unesco.

The link is obvious: Angkor is a Unesco world heritage site, while world-acclaimed cellist Maestro Rostropovich is a Goodwill Ambassador to Unesco. He will perform with the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Kees Bakels. Also joining the programme will be the Royal Ballet of Cambodia.

Behind this ambitious event is a small Cambodian lady with a big heart: her name is Ravynn Karet-Coxen.

"Everybody says I'm mad," she laughs. But then, so was Salvador Dali, the Wright Brothers and Richard Branson. Ravynn is on the last leg of the year-long preparation, drumming up sponsorship and promoting ticket sales in Asia after having done the same in London (where she is based), New York and Europe, the three centres where her foundation is also registered.

She is dressed in pale yellow linen Chinoiserie blouse and matching pants, with dark kohl liner as the only obvious make-up on her face. Her office? A woven straw basket holding her files and notes she carries with her everywhere.

She projects the image of a totally down-to-earth lady who is very much at home working with the villages under the auspices of the NKFC. Yet this is a lady who mixes with the elite of New York society, Hollywood names and European royalty with equal ease.

"I'm lucky because I have a lot of friends who support my work," she explained. These "friends" make up much of the committee members of the Nginn Karet Foundation for Cambodia, which she chairs,

and include the likes of Marisa Berenson and Lord Puttnam. Though she refuses to namedrop, guests at her previous charity fundraisers have included Princess Salimah Aga Khan, Princess Chantal of Hanover, Koo Stark, Marie Helven, Alexandra Guinness, Christopher Getty, Mary McFadden, Nan Kempner, Deede Blair, Princess Marie Chantal and Princes Pavlos of Greece, to name but a few.

She was born into a privileged status; her father held a government post with close connections to the Cambodian royal family. School was in Geneva, while France was almost a second home _ her maternal grandfather was the artist Gerard Schneider, a close friend of Picasso.

To escape the imminent danger of the Khmer Rouge regime under Pol Pot, she was packed off for Paris in 1970. Many of her friends and relatives were not so lucky.

It wasn't until 22 years later, in 1993, that she returned to her homeland, where she was shocked by the extent of the devastation, suffering and poverty of her compatriots. She set up the foundation in 1994 with the aim of promoting traditional culture, on which village life in Cambodia is based, within the context of sustainable development for basic needs.

As the initial fund, she sold her successful fashion empire under the KantaRavynn label, and put everything into the foundation.

"Fashion is vain and charity is down-to-earth," she laughed. "They are two opposite poles and I had to choose one or the other.

"I travelled in the provinces to understand how to help. I was so devastated to see the legacy of the Khmer Rouge. People had their souls amputated; their suffering was indescribable.

"They were too scared to express their feelings, and the sad thing was that a whole new generation of children were born with that fear."

She settled on seven villages in Banteay Srei district in the Siem Reap Province, practically in the shadows of Angkor Wat. These were the last seven villages to be released from Pol Pot, and were utterly poor. Here the foundation implemented water and hygiene programmes, vaccinations, agriculture and veterinary programmes and the construction of three schools.

"But the backbone of the people is the values, the culture and traditions," she said. "Development work is not lasting if we do not work on the backbone."

As a result, the foundation is developing a new programme of professional training in traditional craft skills _ vital knowledge to support the growing tourism industry through small businesses.

The Foundation, at the request of the local authorities, is in the process of expanding its activities to seven more destitute villages.

The Foundation has been funded largely through high-profile gala events organised by Ravynn in the world's social centres. In 1999, the first fundraiser was held in England at the Natural History Museum. The second was held at the Cipriani in New York in 2000, and last year a third charity event was held at the Senate in Paris.

For this particular concert, it was the Maestro himself _after being won over by the cause_ who suggested it be held at Angkor Wat. He also waived his performance fee, but set certain conditions, one of which was for the concert to raise a minimum of \$500,000 (19.5 million baht) for charity.

"This concert at the sacred temple of Angkor Wat, featuring Maestro Rostropovich, along with the 21 nationalities among the 85 musicians of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, will exude such an energy of healing, love and compassion on a truly worldwide scale," Ravynn said. "This is such a

timely event when the world is suffering from turmoil and conflict.

"I hope for the participation and support from our Asean brothers and sisters, as this concert, coming from such a site, exudes a tremendous energy, with a true healing message. It's a wonderful way for all of us to show the world the solidarity among Asean countries where main industry is tourism.

"I do appeal to all of us to come out with heart in hand to help make this event possible in the most magical way, on a purely humanitarian basis of achieving a sincere bond."

The evening will begin with a religious blessing for posterity followed by the Cambodian national anthem sung by Cambodian children to music specially arranged by the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, an orchestral overture, and a performance by Maestro Rostropovich.

Guests will then enjoy a cocktail and dinner, with a menu designed by HRH Princess Norodom Buppha Devi, who has also put together a dance repertoire with Angkor Wat as a spectacular backdrop.

Organising the logistics of such a major event has not been easy, and since the idea was conceived, Ravynn has had to face such obstacles as Sars, the war in Iraq, the Bali bombing and general global political tension. Yet she persists with dogged determination, her vitality never flagging.

"I'm still fighting to make this a successful event," she said. "It is my only messenger of love to my King and Queen, my government and my people."

It is undoubtedly a once-in-a-lifetime event, since Maestro Rostropovich has said he would retire from performance after 2006, and his schedule is already booked solid until then.

Tickets are priced at \$2,000 (78,000 baht) each. For ticket reservation and information, contact ravynn@dial.pipex.com.

© [Copyright](#) The Post Publishing Public Co., Ltd. 2003