Singing a different tune: After four decades in diplomacy, Nirupama Rao has released a music album

The former foreign secretary gave a concert in Delhi to mark the release of ‘Peace Is My Dream’.

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Nirupama Menon Rao was 12 when she decided that her life’s mission was to join the Indian Foreign Service and become a diplomat. She achieved that goal to much acclaim – she served as India’s foreign secretary from 2009 to 2011, and was India’s Ambassador to the United States, China and Sri Lanka. Sixteen years ago, at 51, Rao decided it was time to rekindle her other love – music. She went on to perform at concerts and, in December 2017, the month she turned 67, Rao became quite possibly the first senior diplomat to release a commercial album, Peace Is My Dream, for which she has turned singer, writer and composer.

“I decided to take some lessons in Western classical music in late 2002,” she said. “That brought music back into my life after an interregnum of over two decades. I was and I remain undaunted [by age]. I wanted to sing, and I set myself a goal of learning better voice and breath control, song
interpretation and widening my song repertoire. It was an adventure, a new mission that I set for myself.”

A lifelong love for music

One of Rao’s earliest memories is of the time a college friend of her mother’s came to visit the family in Lucknow and introduced Rao and her sisters to the world of American folk music with songs like *Swanee River* and *Oh Clementine*. “Music was a hobby we pursued, listening to the radio, writing down the lyrics in long hand, learning new songs,” she said. “We learnt about faraway places and different English accents through the songs we listened to.”

Growing up, Bob Dylan and Joan Baez became an inextricable part of Rao’s life. She learnt how to play the Spanish guitar and, soon, was singing for her parents, friends and at college events. “*Leaving on a Jet Plane* and *Those were the Days* were particular favourites,” she recollected.

After securing the first rank in the Indian civil services examination in 1973, Rao and her guitar made their way to the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration in Mussoorie. However, the growing demands of her career eventually meant that music began to take a backseat. “Music just brought me a lot of joy,” she said. “I never let it interfere with my career obligations and duties.”
Making time for her passion

But music remained important to Rao and during her ambassadorial tenure in Washington DC, she was actively involved in the staging of the revival of *Lalla Roukh* (an opera composed by Felicien David, based on a poem by Thomas Moore) together with Opera Lafayette director Ryan Brown and Kalanidhi Dance's Anuradha Nehru. It was when she was the Indian High Commissioner in Sri Lanka from 2004 to 2006 that her musical career gained new ground. She came into contact with several like-minded people, including popular Sri Lankan musician Soundarie David Rodrigo. Several late-night music sessions followed and gradually Rao was more inclined performing publicly.

Post her retirement in 2013, Rao has been doing a great deal of writing, lecturing and teaching – all connected with her professional experience as a diplomat. “When there is time, I [turn to] music,” she said. She has performed at concerts in Bengaluru, Chennai, Lucknow and Delhi. “Nerves are normal,” she said, of her first concert experience. “But when you are on stage it is just you, the song, the microphone and that space beyond.”

In late December 2017, Rao held a concert in Delhi that also marked the release of her album, *Peace is My Dream*. “My preference or vision, if you wish to call it that, is to choose songs that stand out for the beauty of their lyrics, the magic of their melody and their dramatic and emotional content,” she wrote on her debut album. “I am attracted to songs that message harmony and speak of simple, elemental things that are the warp and weft of human existence.” Rao has included semi-classical songs, songs from western musical theatre, a composition by Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi’s favourite song, *Vaishnav Janato*, which also happens to be one of Rao’s personal favourites.

Rao has sung all the 14 tracks in the album and has written two of them. Rodrigo has accompanied her on the piano. “I started work on the album in the summer of 2016,” she said. “It involved
recording in Colombo. The finished tracks were then sent to Peninsula Studios in New Delhi which recorded the music videos of the various songs.” The album was then produced under the Peninsula label and released by Universal Music Group. The whole process took a little over a year as Rao had to make time for it between her various commitments.

The two original songs on the album written by Rao are *Peace Is My Dream* and *We’ll Walk Free*. The music for the first was composed by Bob and Martha Hanrott of Washington DC and the music for the second was composed by Rodrigo.

The Sri Lankan connection with her album is strong – most of the arrangements for the tracks were done by Soundarie, Neranjan de Silva, a Sri Lankan sound recordist and musician and Rao herself. “Songs like *Ah Tiewlarun* [a song from Meghalaya] and *Song of Youth* have never been recorded before and have come from a 1950s songbook that I found in an old bookstore in the American Midwest,” she said. “These songs have a strong India connection – they formed part of the repertoire of an Indian choir that toured the United States at that time.”

Throughout her diplomatic career Rao was a strong proponent of dialogue and communication. Music, according to Rao, matters to all of us and helps in building bridges. “The album is called *Peace is my Dream* because I believe as Nelson Mandela, said human beings are intrinsically wired to love rather than hate,” She has begun work on what she describes as her “somewhat ambitious next project” : to create a South Asian Symphony Orchestra as a peace building initiative for the region. An inaugural concert involving Indian and Sri Lankan musicians will take place in Colombo on February 7.

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