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After retirement, she has found a way of bringing her experience in diplomacy and passion for **music** together – by initiating a symphony orchestra that seeks to bind the region.

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Cooperation among the eight South Asian countries has acquired only a "very modest momentum", in the former Foreign Secretary's view. Given that nearly 35% of the region's 1.7 billion population is young, there is immense value in demonstrating that cooperation and not confrontation is the way forward. "In my official days it was all about negotiation and hard policy, but now I want to see if we can come together and quietly labour for peace, using music. And for this, political boundaries don't matter."

Colombo was an obvious starting point for Ms. Rao, who has earlier served as High Commissioner to Sri Lanka. A singer herself, Ms. Rao frequently collaborates with friends in the island. Recently, she released an album titled *Peace is My Dream*, along with Sri Lankan musician Soundarie David Rodrigo. The symphony idea followed soon.

"In a symphony, no artiste is more important than the other. You perform as a cohesive unit. It's about balance and equilibrium, that is what is most special," said Sharmini Wettimuny, chairperson of the Symphony Orchestra of Sri Lanka, one of the oldest orchestras in the region.

Linking artistes

Braving constraints of budget and logistics, Ms. Wettimuny, along with Ms. Rao, brought string players from Mumbai, in addition to two guest artistes – Indo-American conductor Viswa Subbaraman and Vienna-based Indian pianist Marialena Fernandes to Colombo – with the support from the Indian Council for Cultural Relations and corporate sponsors.

Comparing notes from their respective repertoires, the artistes decided to play classics, including compositions of Mozart and Beethoven. "Since they are classics we can't improvise too much. At the same time, each orchestra interprets them in a slightly different way, within the framework of the original piece. Conversations around that with musicians from India was really fascinating," said Tamara Holsinger, lead cellist in the Symphony Orchestra of Sri Lanka.

Some may wonder why Western music must be the chosen genre for bringing South Asians together, Ms. Rao said, adding: "It may be Western music, but it is sublime and has universal appeal. So why not!"

As a next step, Ms. Rao will set up a trust to give an institutional base to the initiative. "There are some wonderful musicians in Afghanistan. I want to explore the possibility of bringing them in." And gradually, she hopes that artistes from Afghanistan, Bangladesh,



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