

Published: Monday, September 2, 2013

Adieu, Dr. Samuel Berthet

Musical farewell held at AFD

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(From right): Olivier Litvine and Mizan perform for Jérôme Charbonneau and Samuel Berthet.

It was an evocative evening for this correspondent to attend Dr. Samuel Berthet's farewell programme at Alliance Française de Dhaka (AFD) on August 30. I was happy meeting Samuel after a long time; at the same time, my heart was filled with sorrow that we Bangladeshis —especially the people of Chittagong — are bidding adieu to a pleasing cultural personality, a Tagore exponent and real friend of Bangladesh who made a cultural bridge bringing forth the exquisite artistic milieu and cultural elements of Bangladesh, Shantiniketan, India and France.

During Berthet's five year tenure (2008-2013) as the director of Alliance Française de Chittagong (AFC), the port city teemed with various vibrant cultural programmes, be it art or photography exhibitions, classical music, dance or fashion shows. Paris -based Bangladeshi mime maestro Partha Pratim Majumder introduced me to Berthet while The Daily Star Adommo Chattagram Festival was held last year.

I was amazed to see AFD director Olivier Litvine's saying goodbye to Berthet with musical performances at the programme. Olivier's deputy Jérôme Charbonneau's farewell too came along at the same musical session.

With guitar in hands, Litvine set off the event with the French number "Les Copains D'abord" (friends first) by Georges Brassens. The artiste next performed one of his favourite songs "Missing You", by Irish singer Christy Moore. His next offering was a recital of jazz guitar on a minor blues scale. A Bob Dylan song "All Along the Watchtower" came next and the singer wrapped up his part with swaying the small crowd with the song "Ah Si j'avais un Franc" by Boris Vian.

Bangladeshi singer Mizan also performed several songs including a French one "A Cause D'elle" by Alain Souchon.

In a spontaneous comment Berthet said, "It is nice to see the teachers of French in Dhaka together as a big family smiling, playing music and singing songs. There are different generations of teachers in an extremely warm atmosphere filled with arts. It is great! It is a facet of this very welcoming cosmopolitan and open-minded Bangladesh. It is obviously very hard to leave Bangladesh with all my friends here and the ongoing projects. I feel like I have so much more to give. By bringing people together one can truly achieve magic in Sonar Bangla."

Berthet discovered a treasure trove of hundreds of photographs, taken by French musicologist and indologist Alain Daniélou at Shantiniketan, from 1932 to 1940, while digging through the late photographer's archives at his house in Rome, Italy. Later, a unique exhibition titled "Tagore, the Universal Message", was held at AFC, AFD, ICCR Delhi, Tagore Centre in Kolkata and Shantiniketan, organised in association with the French Embassy and the Harsharan Foundation, showcasing a selection of photographs of Tagore and Shantiniketan that were believed to be lost, but came to light in August 2010, when Berthet rediscovered them in the Alain Daniélou and Raymond Burnier Photo Collection (DBPC), just a few months before Tagore's 150th birth anniversary. Berthet, who did part of his PhD in Shantiniketan, for the first time invited Shantiniketan artists of international repute, to perform in an exclusive programme titled "Milonmela" at AFC. The event only featured exquisite Baul singers, Binoy Banshi and his son Babul Jaldas (dhol artistes) of Chittagong, Chhau and Gotipua dancers and Kalaripayattu, a martial art of Kerala.