

Hoping Music Is the Food of Peace, an Orchestra Plays On

By MELINE TOUMANI

BATUMI, Georgia — Two years ago, Uwe Berkemer, a German conductor working in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, had an idea that seemed simple, even sweet: create a chamber orchestra with musicians from all over the Caucasus, a region between the Black and Caspian Seas that separates Europe from Asia and is home to ethnic groups that speak more than 40 languages.

The orchestra, he imagined, would demonstrate that music is a unifying force. And it would symbolize the potential for peace among groups that are engaged in intractable conflicts over land and sovereignty: Russians and Chechens, Georgians and Abkhazians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis, to name a few.

Inspired by the momentum for change in Georgia following the 2003 bloodless revolution that ousted the former Soviet republic's longtime leader, Eduard A. Shevardnadze, Mr. Berkemer set out on a mission that mixed music and politics: his Caucasian Chamber Orchestra would be a permanent, full-time performing group, based in Tbilisi, bringing together the best musicians from Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and the North Caucasus areas of Russia. But when Mr. Berkemer sought the support of cultural ministries in each country, he discovered that not ev-



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The Caucasian Chamber Orchestra, made up of musicians from all over the Caucasus, at the Batumi Music Festival earlier this month.

five musicians from Armenia, ten from Georgia and one from Dagestan, a Muslim-populated region of Russia bordering Chechnya. A chamber orchestra should have 16 to 19 musicians, "so we are saving three seats" for the Azerbaijanis, he said, "whenever they are ready to join us."

The next problem for the orchestra was how to make a proper debut. Mr. Berkemer and his staff decided to organize a festival in Batumi, the capital of the Ajaria region, on the Black Sea.

Batumi looks peculiar even before an onlooker learns of its history: thanks to its seaside location, tall palm trees line the streets, and a mild, wet climate creates a relaxed, tropical feeling. But large blocks of shabby Soviet-style apartment buildings loom over the beach cafes, reminding visitors that this quiet resort town has been through tumultuous changes in the last century, the last decade and even in the last year.

Until a year ago, Aslan Abashidze, who ruled Ajaria for 13 years, ran the region as though it were his private kingdom. When Georgia's new president, Mikhail Saakashvili, took power early last year, one of his first moves was to assert national sovereignty over the region, forcing Mr. Abashidze to flee the country.

According to Ajaria's newly reinstated minister of culture, Alexandre Gegenava, local cultural life was transformed. "For 13 years, Abashidze controlled all performances to suit his own interests," Mr. Gegenava said. "Normal people could not attend concerts. It was al-



The New York Times

Batumi, capital of Ajaria, was chosen for the orchestra's debut.

ways just the same people: his ministers, his bodyguards and his slaves. Everybody knew whose seat was whose."

Mr. Gegenava, who also worked in cultural administration during the Soviet era, said that he himself would not have been able to enter the theater during the Abashidze years.

Learning of this detail rather late in the planning process, Mr. Berkemer wondered whether his orchestra's debut, and the Batumi Music Festival over all, were doomed to echo in empty halls. Although the town was papered with posters for the four-day festival and advertisements ran in local media, just hours before show time Mr. Berkemer called his festival "an experiment."

Opening night was encouraging. The Batumi Theater, which seats about 500, was two-thirds full, and

the diversity of the audience would have been notable anywhere in the world: a mix of children; 20- and 30-year-olds; middle-aged and elderly guests; dignitaries from Tbilisi, Germany and England; a local priest; and tanned tourists.

Mr. Berkemer led the orchestra through Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" and Tchaikovsky's Serenade for Strings. Marina Iashvili, a prominent violin soloist of the Soviet era, performed with the group. The young orchestra members — many of them fresh from conservatories in Tbilisi and Yerevan, Armenia — beamed as the audience demanded four encores. And in a move that won him many fans, Mr. Berkemer — standing out with pale skin and white-blond hair in a room full of black-haired, dark-eyed locals — sang an unofficial Georgian anthem, "Suliko."

For a Saturday night "Concert for Peace," Mr. Berkemer chose Britten's "Lachrymae" and Hindemith's "Trauermusik" ("Funeral Music"). He wanted to play Hindemith, he said, because the composer had been exiled from Nazi Germany after Goebbels denounced him as an "atonal noisemaker." The composer's experience as a refugee and the melancholy quality of his composition, Mr. Berkemer said, lent respect to Caucasian war victims, to whom the concert was dedicated.

Other festival events included late-night serenades in the candlelit art museum by a vocal ensemble, Largo, which presented songs from Chechnya, Ossetia and various regions in Georgia; and by the Batumi State Vocal Ensemble, which performed in the characteristic Georgian male a cappella tradition.

Batumi residents seemed enthusiastic about the Caucasian Chamber Orchestra, but retained mixed expectations for solutions to the ethnic conflicts in the region. Giorgi Masalkin, a deputy in the Ajaria Supreme Council and a professor of philosophy at Batumi State University, described the situation in culinary terms.

Dolma, he said, is a simple dish of vegetables stuffed with meat and rice. Every nation in the Caucasus region claims it as part of its national cuisine. "If we can't decide whose dish this is, how are we going to decide who rules a whole territory?" he asked.

Mr. Masalkin had taken his young daughter to see the orchestra perform. "I want her to see the similarities between people," he said. "Acknowledging what's common between you and your neighbors is 50 percent of good relations."

An orchestra seeks to unify a region where many conflicts rage.

everyone agreed that music should transcend ethnic disputes.

Georgia was quick to sign on. Armenia soon followed, despite rising tensions between Georgians and ethnic Armenians living in Georgia's Javakheti region. But there was no word from Azerbaijan.

After five months and many earnest overtures from Mr. Berkemer, European Union delegates and diplomats throughout the region, a letter arrived. Azerbaijan's minister of culture, Polad Bulbuloglu, who had been a Soviet-era pop star, wrote that Azerbaijani musicians would not participate. It would be inconceivable to place them alongside Armenian musicians, he wrote, as long as Armenian forces occupied the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Mr. Berkemer eventually hired