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## A jungle rhythm



The Hindu

Berthine Van Schoor, Albie Van Schalkwyk and Hanna Van Niekerk. Photo: R. Ravindran

Most of us grew up on Winnie the Pooh and Peter Rabbit. But we missed Babar the Elephant's birth in a comfortable country house one starry night in 1931 when Cecile de Brunhoff invented the little elephant in a story she told her children. The pachyderm inspired her husband Jean to write and illustrate *L'Histoire de Babar*. Francis Poulenc, a French composer who valued charm and wit over grandeur and complexity, set the story to music which has since opened the doors to a realm of magic for children.

At the Sir Mutha Venkatasubba Rao Concert Hall on a night of tropical thundershowers Babar and a host of animals came alive to the sounds of Berthine Van Schoor's cello, Albie Van Schalkwyk's piano and Hanna Van Niekerk's dulcet tones. The celebrated trio from South Africa performed at a concert in aid of NalandaWay, an NGO which works with children.

The opening piece was *The Story of Babar*. While Hanna turned out to be an urbane and engaging narrator, Albie employed Poulenc's music to evoke everything from the wistful lullaby Babar's mother sings to the honking bustling town Babar wanders into. The narrator and the pianist seemed the ideal couple to convince you that young Babar would prefer life in town, where he could buy nice suits and eat little cakes, to life in the jungle.

Albie's piano playing was crisply dramatic with rhythmic clarity of musical thought and it was obvious that he and Berthine, who stepped in for the second piece seem to agree on just about every note from Vevek Ram's 'Kriya', a work composed for the cello by a South African of Indian descent. Set to the raga Charukesi, the meditative piece invoked the deep strains of the sitar with the cellist bringing suitable clarity and bounce to the movement.

It was the final piece — *The Carnival of the Animals*, Camille Saint Saens' much-loved musical bestiary — that saw the musicians at their magnificent best. Originally written for two pianos and an orchestra, the music was set to delightful verse by Ogden Nash but it was the Philip de

Vos version that was narrated by Hanna. Her inflections of voice and manner brought alive the lion, the hen, the donkey, kangaroo and the tortoise.

As for Berthine and Albie they did more than perform the sounds of the jungle. They slapped the laws of gravity in the face. They didn't sit, they floated with rapture. So did Berthine's 160-year-old cello which managed to stay put though barely gripped between her knees and which Berthine claims she loves for its warm resonance.

Berthine can produce the sweetest sound with no vibrations and hold one note for eternity with an inch of bow. And when it was time for the swan song ('Le Cygne') the bow remained in the space close to the fingerboard suited to sweeter, softer sounds, rather than the gritty area near the bridge. The cellist captured the heroic optimism of the finale and tragic denouement.

The vibrant interplay between the piano and the cello explored luxuriant jungle paths with ease and for the young audience who listened way past their bedtime, the result more than met the trio's reputation.