

“Every child is an artist; the problem is staying an artist when you grow up” – Pablo Picasso

Though forgotten by the present generation, it is no understatement to say that Charles Ambrose Lorenz was Ceylon’s most beloved son of the 19th century. The whole colony mourned his premature death in his prime in 1871. He was loved by people from all walks of life. This most accomplished and colourful personality wore several hats in lifetime. He was well-known as one of the earliest Ceylonese appointed to the Legislative Council where he fulfilled his duties with zeal and integrity. Being a lawyer, he stood for justice, never compromising his principles for glory or monetary gain. Though Burgher by race, the Sinhalese called him as *Lorenz Hāmuduruwō*, for he stood for all irrespective of caste, creed and race. A pioneering journalist, he



playing the flute is the 12-year-old Lorenz, while tapping his foot on the floor, to the beat. On the right of Lorenz is his other sister, Nancy Catherine Louise, sitting right-angled to the harpsichord, working her fingers through its fine strings. In the foreground of this illustration are their parents; Johan standing at ease on the left and the mother watching seated on the right. Truly this sketch is illuminating.

This kind of illustration of casual family gatherings of this era in Ceylon is very rare. Glancing through the fine details of the work of Lorenz, many intricate details are revealed. ‘The picture of the Lodge Harmony’ writes the author of Lorenz’s Centenary Monograph, “is not without some historic value, as illustrating the interior and furnishing of a room of the period...”. (Quoted from Blaze p. 14) Apart from the different styles of the chairs and the piano stool, a square window with glass panes and short draped curtains is depicted. Though Johan Lorenz was an art enthusiast, the *Lodge Harmony* walls are bare. Perhaps it was because paintings were

Charles Ambrose Lorenz: an unsung artist of the 19th century

founded *The Ceylon Examiner*. A prolific writer of letters and articles his was a fine balance of intellect, emotion, knowledge and virtue. Among the few who may have heard of him, not many are aware of what a fine illustrator, artist and musician he was in his day.

Lorenz hailed from Matara, where many Burghers had settled during their heyday. His father, Prussian-born Johan Freiderick Lorenz (1772-1845) was a traveller with little money when he settled in Ceylon and was fortunate to be appointed Magistrate of Matara by the colonial power. When Lorenz was born in 1829, Ceylon was going through a new phase under the British with the recommendations of the Colebrooke-Cameron Commission under implementation. This was a much-needed change in a colony that was spending much more than it earned. Charles Lorenz was the youngest (ninth) child of Johan. Anna Petronella Smith, Lorenz’s mother was Johan’s third wife. Lorenz and his big family lived in a spacious house called ‘Lodge Harmony’ by the banks of the Nilwala River. ‘Lodge Harmony’ was said to be so named because of the various musical instruments played by the Lorenz family. The whole of Matara was aware of the musical talents of the Lorenz’.

Johan Lorenz, who was an accomplished scholar himself, taught English, Latin and Euclid (Mathematics) to young Charles. The late Justice Percy Colin-Thome reveals that Johan taught each of his children the rudiments of poetry, painting, music, dancing and amateur theatricals. By the tender age of 12, young Lorenz was an accomplished musician, able to play the violin and flute. Similarly, Lorenz loved to do skits and caricatures of himself and the people he adored.

Musicians of ‘Lodge Harmony’

One of the earliest surviving sketches by Lorenz is that of a musical group of his family in *Lodge Harmony*. In this illustration, Lorenz depicts his sister, Henrietta Agnes (to be married to John Drieberg in a week) seated in the centre playing the spinet. On her left, John Fredrick Lorenz (Charles’ elder brother) is seated playing the violoncello. On Henrietta’s right and slightly behind her, standing and

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expensive or that he may have not been fond of displaying art. The floor is red brick or tiled squares marked out with white lime, a classic feature of old Dutch Houses in the South.

A lot can be observed by the style of dress depicted by Lorenz. The costumes of the boys were long trousers and a jacket. Evidently the customary schoolboy attire at the time. Johan Lorenz, lacking the wig, pigtail and three-cornered hat of the Dutch Burgher gentlemen of his day, seems to be quite modern for the 1830s. The gowns of the ladies illustrated are full skirts gathered tightly at the waist, billowing out towards the ankles. The sleeves are puffed and gathered at the elbows and tapers down to the wrist. A shawl is drawn over the mother’s shoulder. The older two ladies wear a day cap, covering their hair.

Rising musician of Colombo

After the Colebrooke-Cameron reforms, education in Ceylon made strong headway. The founding of many English medium schools took place during the time of Governor Robert Wilmot Horton. The Colombo Academy (Royal College) was the most important of these at the time. Realising this

was the best opportunity for his multi-talented son, Johan Lorenz enrolled young Charles in the Academy in 1841. Leaving Matara, he lived with his brother-in-law, John Drieberg, an upcoming lawyer and his sister, Henrietta. At the Academy, his many skills developed from strength to strength as did his talents in art and music. It was during this time that he met Hippolyte Silvaf, the art and music master, who had his own school not far from where Lorenz lived in Pettah. One day, the Driebergs with the young Lorenz accompanying, went to dine with the Prins family. As music was a must at Colombo dinners, Mrs. Prins played the piano, entertaining the guests. Soon she was accompanied by Silvaf (Violin), and young Lorenz (flute). This was the first time that Lorenz came to be known as a skilled musician. Unlike in Matara, the Harpsichord/Spinet was found to be old-fashioned in Colombo. Piano was the trend and Lorenz mastered playing it as well.

He would later start his own amateur band. Silvaf's son, Neapolian was its tenor/violinist. Other prominent young men in the band were Fredrick Kriekenbeek (second flute), Louis Nell (cornet), and the de Waas brothers (Soprano/violins). J. B. Siebel played second fiddle to Lorenz both then and later. The bass was provided by Gabriel Johannes Ohlmus, a music teacher. The group trained in Lorenz's long room in John Drieberg's House near Hulftsdorp. This band came to be in high demand in Colombo circles for socials, birthday parties and silver jubilee weddings. This was how Lorenz made his public debut, long before venturing into journalism, law and politics.

The performing artist

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Patronised by the educated youth of Colombo, especially the alumni of the Academy, the Grandpass Theatre was the best of its day. Encouraged by friends, Lorenz played his part

acting and directing. B.R. Blaze, the biographer of Lorenz states: "Lorenz's share was not limited to music. His bent for acting had full scope, as well as his gift for leadership and his organizing ability". It took hardly any time for those who were regulars at the plays to notice that Lorenz was the standout performer. One of his friends commented: "Lorenz was the life and soul of our Theatrical Company". His musical prowess also came into good use as he later composed his own musicals and directed them. Blaze comments: "He was Stage Manager, scene-painter, actor; and leader of the Orchestra besides". His popularity continued to expand as his versatility made him one of a kind. Even at that young age, he had by all standards reached the rank of pre-eminence.

One of Lorenz's plays, *George Barnwell*, was a popular three-act play starring Lorenz (Rich Banker), his friend from the Academy: Bernard Edwin Alvis (George Barnwell – spendthrift nephew of the rich banker) and Owen Morgan. The latter played a female part. This play revolves around the prodigal folly of young George Barnwell, who spends lavishly and gets into severe debt. Later, he forges his uncle's signature and swindles hundreds of pounds. Riotous in his spending, he goes bankrupt in no time. However, after this downfall, he makes ample amends and gets back on his feet. *George Barnwell* was well received in Colombo.

(To be continued next week)