



Bera Mahli behind the bar of The Red Cow in Smethwick, below left

reviously struggling boozers into community hubs once more – serving p beer and curry.

"Desi means traditional and authentic to the homeland, the unjab, and that is what the food we serve here is all about. Most people, hether they are white, black, Asian njoy a nice beer and with Indian ood it's even better," he said.

Bera and his brother Gamy Hayre ok over The Red Cow in 2010. They urthered the rundown drinking hole s former glory.

He says: "I think most racism comes om ignorance more than anything. sians can be racist – we have ereotypes of other communities too.

"But in my pub no-one ever feels like they are not welcome. When I took over with my brother it was run by Asians but was on the verge of closing.

"We knew we could turn things around. We had previously managed the Red Fort in Smethwick High Street and made it a good community pub through introducing food and live Punjabi music.

"We knew food was key. And you have to appeal to sports fans!

"At the Red Fort, we had a lot of West Bromwich Albion supporters and I wanted The Red Cow to be an Albion pub too.

"And it is – every Saturday afternoon

when Albion are playing at home the place gets packed. We also own local taxi firm Heritage Cars and, on match day, we supply punters with taxis to the ground. Every home match day, you'll see a string of six seaters outside the pub.

"We taxi around 100 people. Our drivers are happy, our customers are happy and we're happy. You can't run a pub and see it as just a business, you have to provide a good service.

"Back when I was younger, pubs in the Indian community were for men only.

"These days, as they are no longer places just to drink, we have Asian girls, aunties and grandmas."



Sono Rull



Mikey Singh

THE NEW SOHO TAVERN, HOCKLEY

Pete Singh runs The New Soho Tavern with his sons Mikey and Danny. Mikey says: "Before my dad took over the pub five years ago, this area was quite derelict. And this pub was an Indian pub – for Indian men mainly, and did not serve food. My dad started serving Indian food – the kind we eat at home – and that changed everything. It brought new people in."

Pete adds: "I've run pubs all over the Midlands but never a desi pub. When we first opened up we just had a side room as the restaurant, where we tried to make everyone sit to eat our curries and grills, but the food just took off!"



Orchestra upholds friendships across the political divide

AN exciting new orchestra made up of 86 music students from conservatoires in the United Kingdom and Russia makes its UK debut at Symphony Hall, Birmingham on Tuesday.

The Britten-Shostakovich Festival Orchestra has been formed to pay tribute to the legendary friendship between those two great composers, brokered by the great cellist and conductor Mstislav Rostropovich, who refused to allow tensions between East and West to interfere with his message of worldwide musical companionship.

After inaugural concerts in Sochi, St Petersburg and Moscow the B-SFO crosses the North Sea for a UK tour beginning in Birmingham and ending at London's Cadogan Hall. They bring a delicious programme of Britten's Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes, Rachmaninov's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini (Pavel Kolesnikov the piano soloist), excerpts from Prokofiev's ballet Romeo and Juliet, Shostakovich's music from the Russian Hamlet film (Freddie and Edward Fox narrating) and Tchaikovsky's spectacular 1812 Overture.

Jan Latham-Koenig conducts. Jan is the first British conductor ever to have held a major appointment in a Russian cultural institution, as artistic director of the Novaya Opera in Moscow.

He tells me how he came to acquire this appointment, at last breaking the pattern of the Russian conductors who have come this way to major positions (not least Gennadi Rozhdestvensky at the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Valery Gergiev at the London Symphony Orchestra), but none going in the opposite direction.

"I was invited by Kasper Holten in 2008 to conduct Wagner's Lohengrin at Novaya Opera. This led to further engagements. In 2011, Eri Klas retired and the theatre approached me. I was of course thrilled to be asked. It was a welcome surprise, as I hadn't really worked extensively in Russia for 30 years – the last major tour was with my own ensemble in April 1987."

And I well remember Jan's own ensemble in an amazing programme at the Barber Institute here in Birmingham, yet he seems to have been more active as a conductor abroad.

"My career has been predominantly in Europe – Orchestra Nazionale de Strasbourg, Mexico, Teatro Colon, Opera di Roma, Teatro Massimo in Palermo, Vienna and Japan. Every country has a cultural style which involves adapting how one works according to the way each orchestra functions. Authority in Russia is more important than in the Western countries where collegiality is valued more."

Thinking about orchestras crossing the political divide, I'm reminded of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra

founded by the conductor and pianist Daniel Barenboim and the philosopher, the late Edward Said.

"We can't compare the orchestra's role to the one created for the situation in Israel and Palestine", says Jan. "The two orchestras aren't comparable."

"But I have huge respect for what Barenboim has done – choosing music as the best form of diplomatic language. I hope that ours will do the same. Twenty-five-year-olds in Russia in this globalised world have much more in common now (such as access to the same source of information) than they had 50 years ago. I hope that achieving the highest artistic standards with these talented musicians will contribute towards deepening the cultural relationship between these two great countries."

How did Jan come to choose this touring programme?

"The programme reflects the best of British and Russian music to reflect both nations – Britten's Sea Interludes, Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Shostakovich Suite for Variety Stage Orchestra (a Classic FM favourite) and Tchaikovsky 1812 Overture. We have excellent soloists such as Pavel Kosenikov and Jennifer Pike and actors Edward Fox and Freddie Fox in London and Nottingham for extracts from Shostakovich's film score to Hamlet, which underlines the British-Russian cultural connections.

"Russian composers' fascination with English literature, in particular Shakespeare, remained undimmed even from behind the Iron Curtain. Prokofiev was inspired to compose one of his most popular ballets – Romeo and Juliet – and Shostakovich created his finest film score for the legendary film Hamlet, by Grigori Kozintsev."

One of the players in the Britten-Shostakovich Festival Orchestra is Richard English, who lives and is studying in Birmingham, as a double-bassist and composer, and who is also a committee-member for the excellent Ripieno Players, one of the most exciting recent additions to the city's musical scene.

"I was very much a product of the Birmingham Schools' Music Service," he tells me.

"I had most of my music lessons throughout secondary school funded by King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Boys and was always involved with the service ensembles, starting with Birmingham Schools' String Sinfonia all the way to Birmingham Schools' Symphony Orchestra with whom I went on tour to Germany and Spain. I was also involved in the CBSO Youth Orchestra when I was in sixth form and returned last year to be principal double bass."

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY