

Conductor's musical metamorphosis ran from Stones to symphony

Gareth Smyth
Special to The Daily Star

Harout Fazlian looks bleary-eyed an hour before practice but it's not because it's 8.30am on Monday morning. Three weeks ago, his wife, Nora, gave birth to their first child, Tia.

Being a father, like being a conductor, brings its responsibility. Not so very long ago Fazlian was a rock guitarist with long hair. On Thursday he conducts the Lebanese National Symphony Orchestra (LNSO) in Verdi, Bach, Mozart and Dvorak.

In his late teens and early 20s he was keener on the Rolling Stones. "I still have a black, 1976 Fender Telecaster," he says. "Maybe you can't see me like that but many people who know me as a rock guitarist can't see me as a conductor."

Beirut-born Fazlian first learned music at home. His father, theater director Berge Fazlian, and his mother, Sirvart, a pianist and painter, were musical.

"There's a picture of me playing an accordion and it looks very big, so I must have been tiny," he recalls. "I started on the piano at six."

The sounds around him were European classical music, Lebanese song and popular Armenian songs. Fazlian was not under pressure to settle for a

steady career he didn't like. "My parents were open-minded and have supported me in all my choices."

At 13, in 1976, Fazlian left with his parents for Canada. "My father thought that here I'd have two choices – join the kids on the street and end up with a gun, or be laughed at." The guitar was the alternative to the rifle.

In Canada, Fazlian's attraction to rock blossomed. He studied music – with piano – in the Outremont Academy in Montreal, seeing this as a way of learning how to compose better rock songs.

"My band and I were getting a lot of gigs and my father used to come to watch. But he hatched a plan with a friend of his, the actor Mher Mkrtichian, and a visa for Yerevan (Armenia) suddenly arrived. I thought, 'Great, I can conquer the USSR,' and off I went with my rock guitar."

When Fazlian turned up at the Academy of Music in Yerevan, he proudly played his potential teachers what he considered his best composition. "They didn't look too impressed," he says. "They were used to people playing Rachmaninov."

Some talent must have been evident, though, as Fazlian was directed into the school of choir conducting. He felt the culture shock. "The first six months were very difficult, and I kept

wanting to go back to Canada. The school was very strong – and I was taking piano, composition and extended harmony.

"My teacher, Ara Boghossian, was a tall, blonde lady and I gradually became very close to her and her family. That was important: I still think it's good in music for a teacher to become friends with a pupil."

Gradually, Fazlian began to get the conducting bug and the guitar began to gather dust. For his third-year exam – usually done with just piano and choir – Boghossian suggested he use a small ensemble.

"For my final, fourth-year

exam, I used a full symphony orchestra," says Fazlian. "I think this was the first time in the Soviet Union that anyone graduated with a full orchestra."

Fazlian moved on to the Conservatoire, now immersed in conducting. "I started to love Mahler, who I feel has the same temperament as me: there are so many climaxes in one movement. And I started to read books, widely. I really liked Dostoevsky: he opens the brain. I learned a lot in Armenia."

He never really settled after returning to Canada in 1990 and the death of his only sibling, Annie, at just 34 rocked the

family. Fazlian couldn't find a stable position conducting and his parents missed "home".

En route to Yerevan, his father Berge dropped into Beirut to see his old friend Walid Gholmieh, then in his fourth year of rebuilding Lebanon's musical life.

Fazlian's father was hatching another plan. "He took Gholmieh a video of me conducting Beethoven's 5th in Armenia: Walid immediately offered me a teaching post at the Conservatoire."

Fazlian returned to Lebanon – with his parents – in 1995 and has become an important cog in both the Conservatoire and the

country's first full-scale symphony orchestra, in which he has joined Gholmieh and musical director Wojciech Czepiel as one of three resident conductors.

Fazlian has also established the Horovel choir, which has a repertoire of Armenian pop and folk, Arabic and classical music. He has also recorded with, among others, Elias Rahbani.

Thursday's concert will be LNSO's fourth since its debut in February and regular orchestral performances are whetting the public appetite. Fazlian is looking forward to conducting the LNSO's first cellist, Roman Storojenco, in the Saint-Saens cello concerto in A minor on May 22. Further down the line there may even be some Mahler.

"Mahler's difficult of course," muses Fazlian, relishing the power that can make Mahler's symphonies – among others – so dramatic. "Hear the opening of Beethoven's 5th or 3rd. No amplification can beat that."

So he doesn't miss rock too much? "Maybe one day I'll write a concerto for electric guitar," he says. "I learned stage experience as a rock guitarist that I still use. I'm an attacking sort of conductor."

Lebanese National Symphony Orchestra performs Verdi, Bach, Mozart and Dvorak at UNESCO Palace, 8.30pm Thursday, admission free



"I'm an attacking sort of conductor," Harout Fazlian says of the influence rock has had on his work

GARETH SMYTH