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Simone Barwisch demonstrating Bharatanatyam before her fiance Alexandro: NIE / P K Jeevan Jose

Dancing over seas

By Rekha Borgohain Dixit

What's a 27-year-old German, armed with a postgraduation in molecular cytogenetics, doing at the Dharani School of Performing Arts? It might come as a surprise, but Simone Barwisch is polishing up her art for her 'Arrangettam' or official debut on Sunday.

Simone, or Chandra as she prefers to be called, is quite a bundle of nerves. Falling prey to one of those debilitating viral attacks isn't welcome at any time, but when it precedes such an important show, you just don't know what to do, she says as she pushes herself up on the bed and tries to pep herself up with a cup of tea. "My mother has just arrived, my fiancée is due to arrive soon. The musicians are waiting for the rehearsal...How will I manage..." she rambles.

But the cuppa turns out to be quite reviving, and she settles down for a chat. Bharatanatyam in Munich, you ask. "The Orient has always fascinated me — especially its dance and music," she says. An exponent of Raqs Sharqi, an ancient Egyptian dance form, Simone got hooked onto Bharatanatyam after attending a workshop in Munich six years ago. She enrolled with the only teacher of Bharatanatyam in her town, only to discover that she wouldn't learn much from her.

"I was certain that I had to find a guru in India if I were to understand this beautiful form of dance, and the opportunity came when one of my friends wanted to visit India," recalls Simone. It was while she visited Kerala in the company of her friend that Simone stumbled on the Dharani School and became the disciple of Shyamala Surendran, three years ago.

Since then, she's been in Kochi off and on, taking classes for a couple of months at a stretch and then heading back to the university to tackle



Hailing from Munich, Germany, Simone Barwisch is preparing for her arangettam in Bharatanatyam to be held at Kerala Fine Arts Hall on Sunday

genes and chromosomes. "It hasn't been easy for me, as a foreigner, to learn Bharatanatyam," she admits frankly. For one, Bharatanatyam is a tough form of dance which requires total involvement, bodily and spiritually, unlike the Western dances, she says. "Also, since I come from a different cultural backdrop, learning the abhinayas was a big challenge. The abhinayas are picked up from gestures and expressions used in daily life. But our body language is very different, so I had to learn Indian gestures first."

The lissome dancer says her physical attributes have been a help and a disadvantage at once. At almost six feet in height, she says she often finds its awkward to strike certain mudras. "Also,

when your hand is 20 centimetres longer than that of the other dancers, you have to quicken your movements to keep in tune with the music," she adds. She's got over this problem by setting her own pace of dance. "And I've stopped trying to dance like an Indian. I'll dance in my unique way, and have my own style."

On the other hand, her raven hair and dark eyes gel well with her Bharatanatyam costume. "Yes, I don't have the typical European looks," she says, as the little diamond stud on her nose catches a sunbeam and sparkles. Why the name Chandra? "People didn't take it seriously when they heard that a girl called Simone was learning and teaching Bharatanatyam." The name change, she says, has opened new vistas for her.

Simone has already established a Bharatanatyam school back home in Munich where young Indian and German girls come to learn the dance. But she says she is 'still a student.' The 'arrangettam' is just the beginning — the point from which I shall have to infuse a greater seriousness and responsibility into my art, Simone notes.

But for the present, there are more material problems to tackle. "I'll be going back in January and will have to look for a job, since my bank balance is clean now," she says. "But I'll keep coming to Kochi to learn, as much as Auntie (Shyamala) can teach me. There is so much more to learn."

Simone has read a lot of literature on Indian dance, and appreciates other forms like Kuchipudi and Mohiniyattam too. "Odissi, however, is fascinating. Had I not pursued Bharatanatyam, I'd have taken up Odissi." Kathak, she says is different, but not her cup of tea. Simone makes her debut at the Fine Arts Hall on Sunday evening.