
TALK SHOW

By Gavin Nazareth

ORCHESTRAL MANOEUVRES

On a whistle-stop in Bangkok, baton-wielder Zubin Mehta speaks about his greatest love.

He was 15 when he first 'conducted' at a rehearsal for a concert in Mumbai that was to include violin great Yehudi Menuhin. And since that day he has been making people play to his tune. Eight years after he wielded the baton for the first time, he was appointed Principal Conductor and Music Director of the Montreal Philharmonic, and a year later was also appointed Music Director of the Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra. Major appointments like these became a part of his life. In 1978, he was appointed Music Director of the New York Philharmonic, a tenure that lasted 13 years, the longest in the history of the orchestra. In 1961, he conducted the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra for the first time, and seven years later was appointed its Music Advisor, which in 1981 was extended for life.

In between he has found time to make sublime music for one and all: from the ruins of the Bosnian National Library in war-torn Sarajevo to Tel Aviv during the Gulf War, in Moscow's Gorky Park during the twilight of the Soviet era, in India with his Israeli musicians breaking a decades-long absence of cultural dialogue and diplomatic ties. In 1999, his sheer passion for music brought together for the first time the Israel Philharmonic and the Bavarian State Opera Orchestra for a historic performance of Mahler's *Resurrection* Symphony No. 2 in what had been a concentration camp in Weimar. He has together with his friends and fellow soccer fans José Carreras, Plácido Domingo and Luciano Pavarotti created a classical music success story when they performed at the Baths of Caracalla in Rome on the eve of the 1990 FIFA world Cup (It holds the Guinness Book of World Records for the bestselling classical album).

He has also led major operatic productions at the Metropolitan Opera in New York and at Milan's La Scala among others. Among his many operatic recordings are several that count among the finest of all time, including a transcendent version of *Turandot* which put both Joan Sutherland and Luciano Pavarotti together for the first time in the leads in Puccini's masterpiece. A second recording of *Turandot* is his historic performance of the opera in China's Forbidden City.

Today at 72, he still wows audiences around the world with one of the three orchestras he leads, and a tour schedule that keeps him on the road all the time (one wonders at the number of frequent flyer miles he racks up).

And while the critics have not always been kind to him, especially in the US, there is no denying his burning intensity, manic dedication to the score, and the charismatic showmanship. His rich and still growing discography also pays tribute to the breadth of his musical genius.

The Author's Lounge at the Oriental Bangkok seems to be an appropriate place to meet the maestro, and despite the fact that he is not amused that his baggage has been misplaced on the flight from Sydney to Bangkok he agrees to a brief interview.

How would you describe Zubin Mehta in brief?

For a travel magazine? I never travel, I never go anywhere (*laughing*). I was last in my home on Christmas Day [last year], if that gives you any idea how much I am outside. I have not been home since. I left for China with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra (IPO) on Christmas Day. We played in Shenzhen on the 27th and since then it's been one big tour.



Any hope of going home for Pateti (Parsi New Year)?

No, but in the first week of October we come with the IPO to Mumbai [for him Bombay is obviously still home]. From October 7-12, we play four concerts, with the last one in the Cricket Club of India featuring Plácido Domingo, a very great Italian soprano Barbara Frittoli, Daniel Barenboim (piano), and Pinchas Zukerman (violin). So musically I am extremely satisfied, I just hope nobody's baggage gets lost.

Your 1994 concert in Bombay was ground-breaking, did it match up to your expectations.

Yes, yes, very much so. Not only was I welcomed warmly, but also it was the first time for my orchestra in India. India and Israel had had no diplomatic relations since 1967. In 1992, the first Indian ambassador returned to Jerusalem. Until then the Israelis called me the unofficial ambassador. I asked Mrs Gandhi [Indira] on a few occasions, 'Why do this, why not make contact, the Israelis are longing for contact'. But she wouldn't listen; there was no debate. She wouldn't even want to talk about it. On the other hand, I was quite close to her. Her Parsi husband had introduced her to Western music, so she loved it. When I went down earlier with the New York Philharmonic, she had garlands for every member of the orchestra. She was very large-hearted about those things. She ordered a special garland for me from South India, made of sandalwood balls, which I still have. So it was not difficult for either of us to speak, but this subject was taboo. I don't exactly know how it happened, but in '92 the ambassador arrived. I was with the Israeli President when Indian ambassador presented his credentials, and it was a very touching moment for me. I had been to India already with New York, the LA, also with the European Youth Orchestra. In '94 was the first time with the IPO, so it was dream come true. We did some



good, because all the money collected went to charities; the IPO and the soloist Itzhak Perlman all played for free, and I was very grateful for that. They are doing it again this October. Neither the orchestra nor the soloists are asking for concert fees. So I hope this time the funds go to the Mehli Mehta Foundation [instituted in honour of his father] as we want to build a school in the future.

So how does it feel to be one of the most recognisable Indians ever?

No, that's not true. I'll tell you what, not only am not recognisable, but no Indian knows that I am Indian. This is my great frustration. Just two days ago in Sydney, I see a young Indian girl, I talk to her and she doesn't know I am Indian, leave aside recognise me, who cares about that.

Music has dictated your life. How does it make you feel?

Well, it's almost my first language. I started singing probably before I spoke Gujarati. I'm not sure, but it probably happened that way because music was always in my home. I listened to it before I woke up in the morning, because my father used to start teaching it at 8 o'clock in the morning.

The Bombay Symphony Orchestra used to practice in your house.

A part of it. My father who founded it would call sections over to my living room and practice with them. So this was the way we grew up, in a culturally Western atmosphere.

Did you really conduct at the age of 15?

My father was rehearsing the orchestra for a concert with Yehudi Menuhin. He did this by playing Menuhin's solo part on the violin, and I took his place on the podium after he had taught me the score. He, of course, conducted the actual concert.

Do different orchestras bring a different energy to the same piece of music and how do you work with that?

Well, orchestras are made up of different musical minds. They are not robots just following a piece of music. They are thinking people and thinking people interpret it themselves. Of course, all our music is completely written out; nothing is improvised like in Indian music. To the last comma, things are written on the page of music, but still it has to be interpreted. And in any given symphony you have different instruments being given solos by the composers. These solos differ a little bit from one orchestra to another, because the person playing it, it is his own conception. If it diametrically opposes what I think it should be then I

respectfully disagree and control it. But I usually let the position have his or her say in whatever they are playing at the moment within my general conception of the piece. That is very important. So that's how it differs from one orchestra to another.

Your schedule is so tight, is that out of choice or habit.

Not only tight, but it's organised at least three years in advance.

I believe you are booked out till 2010?

2010? More 2012. If you asked me what I am doing on March 23, 2011, I could tell you immediately if my calendar was with me.

And how does it feel to have your future planned out in advance?

That's our life. It's not that we insist on it. We have to plan it in advance because we go on tours. On tour the hotels have to know, we have to book the hall, soloists have to be booked also. You don't think Placido comes to Bombay knowing it the day before yesterday. We have been talking to him for over a year about it. And over a year is too late, we should have talked to him three years ago, because a year ago he already knew what he was doing on the 12th of October. He's moving some rehearsals in Washington in order to come.

What always goes with you when you travel?

A valet (*laughing*). This is too short a trip, but when I go an extended tour, I need one. Every concert ends around 11 o'clock, after which we have dinners or receptions. Then we have to leave around 8 in the morning, so somebody has to pack the bags.

What about your box of chillies?

Chillies are always there [he is known carry a box of chillies with him and is not averse to taking them out and adding them to his food]. Since we flew in from Australia we couldn't bring in any vegetables, and I had to leave them on the plane. Today I got some Thai chillies.

Your favourite city in the world to play and why?

I would start with Central Europe because the audiences are so receptive. The central European capitals are a joy to play. To play in my country has special meaning. In Israel I am so much at home that the minute I land I feel at home, so that's a favourite place. And then South America is wonderful. South America has beautiful halls... from the old Italian tradition, and the audiences are adoring, and so receptive.

I believe you said of Tel Aviv the first time you stepped out that it smells like Bombay...

Yes, because after seven years in Vienna, living in this temperate zone, to suddenly go to this place... it was May and very hot... I felt at home immediately.

In life what is most important to you after music?

Well, my family, and I'm rather obsessed with it because I am never with them. I have one child in Montreal with her two children, one son in Philadelphia with his son, another daughter in California with her three children, and then I have a son in Israel who is going to join the army. They are strewn all over the place, so I sort of wait for a moment to be with one or the other.

You have tackled numerous composers and projects... anything you'd like to do in the future?

As I said my future is planned until 2012 (*laughing*)... there are so many projects. I really can't single out one. My first loyalty today is to the IPO, then I have job in Florence with the Maggio Fiorentino. Then my third project is in Valencia in Spain where I opened a new opera house two years ago and I am doing the *Ring Cycle* of Wagner. That's a huge project. It's a co-production with Florence too, so I have to prepare it twice, same singers and same production, but the orchestra is different. /