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# His Maestro's Voice: At 87, conducting legend Zubin Mehta makes a debut

Mehta, who was born in Mumbai and later trained in Vienna, will, for the first time, conduct the Symphony Orchestra of India, the country's first and only professional orchestra



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(File) Zubin Mehta conducts the Orchestra del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino in Bologna, Italy, in 2014 Image: Roberto Serra - Iguana Press/Getty Images

**Z**ubin Mehta isn't a big fan of the changing face of Mumbai. "My city has changed a lot, and I don't like any of that," says the venerated conductor who grew up in Cuffe Parade in the 1940s.

But Mehta isn't bitter about it either. "What can you do?" says the 87-year-old who now lives in Los Angeles with his wife, former actor Nancy Kovack, in a villa that was once owned by Steve McQueen. "When I was here, there were two and a half million people, now there are 18 million. That's the way all cities change, and you can't just criticise."

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There is one change to the cityscape, though, that Mehta quite digs—one that came through Khushroo Suntook, his friend of 80 years, as he points out, since they sat together as first standard students at Champion School in 1943. In 2006, Suntook, now the chairman of the National Centre of Performing Arts (NCPA), founded the Symphony Orchestra of India (SOI), the country's first and only professional orchestra. Mehta, who has led some of the world's most prestigious orchestras, including the Israel Philharmonic

for 50 years till 2019, will debut with the SOI in its 17th year, marking a homecoming of sorts for the Bombay boy who left the city in 1954 to go to Vienna to study music.

The two concerts, both sold out, will be performed at the NCPA in association with the Mehli Mehta Music Foundation (MMMF), a premier music education school named after his father, on August 19 and 21. They will also kick off the Autumn 2023 season of the SOI, which has been growing in stature over the years, touring internationally and also grooming a kids' orchestra. "The concerts will be simulcast at the Tata Theatre next door for those who haven't been able to score a ticket," says Suntook.

"I can't say how pleased I am to conduct the SOI," Mehta told a select media gathering ahead of the event. "I didn't expect the quality that I have experienced in the last few days at rehearsals. I hope I can come back very soon."

"My father was very proud that his name was used for the MMMF," an emotional Mehta says further. "I'm sorry my brother [Zarin] is not here. He is now in Chicago as a retired music administrator. I will phone him tomorrow and tell him about what's happening here. He'd be very pleased to hear."

The SOI is sure to bring in a rush of nostalgia for Mehta, whose introduction to western classical music came through his father Mehli Mehta, a self-taught violinist, who founded the Bombay Symphony Orchestra in 1935. "He grew up with performances and practices in the house, turning the pages for his father," says Suntook of his classmate. Mehta junior himself could play a bit of piano, but never considered a future as an instrumentalist as he was "too lazy to practise". "I preferred a game of cricket to a piano," he writes in his autobiography *The Score Of My Life*.

When he was 15, Mehta stood before an orchestra for the first time to "hold together" the Bombay Symphony Orchestra which was performing with violin virtuoso Yehudi Menuhin, touring India in 1951. "They were supposed to render Johannes Brahms's violin concerto... my father played the solo part," writes Mehta. "...the whole thing proved to be rather disappointing. I was severely reprimanded because I had apparently forgotten to give the third horn or the oboist his cue."



In three years, though, Mehta earned enough confidence from his parents, who allowed him to opt out of a medical course and set sail for Vienna—that his cousin Dady was also in the Austrian capital as a student of piano partly swung the decision in his favour.

Since then, medicine's loss has been a gigantic gain for music, as Mehta enriched western classical with his interpretation of the masters, leading multiple top orchestras for years with acclaim. From 1961 to 1967, he remained the music director of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, while assuming a similar title with Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra between 1962 and 1978, and in the later years with the likes of the New York Philharmonic and the Bavarian State Orchestra, among others. In 1969, he began leading the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, an association that lasted for half a century and of which he has now been named the music director emeritus.

In 1963, Mehta debuted as an opera conductor with *Tosca*, and has since conducted the marquee Metropolitan Opera and the Vienna State Opera, and at the Royal Opera House in the UK, among others. In 2022, a new concert hall of the Teatro del Maggio Musicale, an opera house in Italy's Florence, a city that has conferred him with honorary citizenship, was named after him. The Indian government, too, has honoured Mehta with the Padma Bhushan and the Padma Vibhushan.

Despite spending nearly seven decades abroad, his country of birth remains a leitmotif in Mehta's life. He still holds an Indian passport, drops by at his "ancient house" whenever in town, and keeps up with his childhood friends from the city, including the likes of Cipla Chairman Dr YK Hamied, who's three months younger to him and with whom he would meet every evening and on weekends to play cricket. During his current visit, he shared a Parsi Bhonu with the SOI musicians on Navroze, the Parsi new Year that was celebrated on August 16.

Mehta has also returned to India often in his career, bringing global orchestras to his home audience at least a dozen times in association with the MMMF. In 1994, for instance, he brought the Israel Philharmonic, after full diplomatic ties were established between the two countries in 1992. "A bunch of us ladies," recalls Mehroo Jeejeebhoy, founder and trustee, MMMF, "with little experience of producing concerts, learnt how to use cranes and forklifts and put up a stage at the Brabourne Stadium without making holes in the cricket ground." The result was historic as the orchestra's five concerts in Delhi and Mumbai "broke a political taboo", reported *The New York Times*.

In fact, Mehta has always leveraged music to attempt to heal wounds caused by social and political divides. In one of his later concerts in India, he performed with the Bavarian State Orchestra in Kashmir, braving separatist threats. "It was my dream to conduct a concert in India with Hindus and Muslims sitting together," says Mehta. "Despite great opposition from certain separatists in Kashmir, the concert took place. Kashmiri musicians were threatened with death if they came. And all of them turned up. It's one of those concerts that I can never forget."

Not just Kashmir, but through music, Mehta has often spoken to a world riven by inequities. In January 1982, he performed at the border between Israel and Lebanon for Christians living in south Lebanon in the aftermath of the civil war; during the Gulf War in 1991, he flew into Tel Aviv and conducted free concerts in the morning (since evenings were blacked out to avert missiles from Iraq); in 1994, he performed at Sarajevo, the then Bosnian capital wrecked by bombing during the Bosnian War.



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*(File) Mehta performs with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra during the New Year's Concert at the Golden Hall of the Musikverein on January 1, 2015. The maestro is an honorary conductor with the orchestra AFP PHOTO / DIETER NAGL. Image: DIETER NAGL / AFP*

“In one of the first concerts of my life, with students from the Vienna Academy, we went over to the Austrian-Hungarian border during the Hungarian revolution in 1956 to play for refugees coming over from Hungary. At the end of that concert, a Hungarian priest came out in front and blessed us, in Hungarian probably because we didn't understand what he said,” Mehta recalls. “But that blessing lasted a long time, which I appreciate very much.”

One of his regrets remains his inability to perform in the Muslim-dominated areas of China. Ahead in the year, Mehta is touring China but won't be able to visit Urumqi, for instance, [the capital of the Uighur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang in northwestern China], to conduct. “They don't send me there despite my request,” he says.

He glowingly refers to the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra co-founded by his dear friend and iconic pianist Daniel Barenboim and Palestinian-American academic Edward Said that is composed of Israel and Palestinian musicians, among others. Or one of his concerts for the Unesco in Paris where a Pakistani played Beethoven's Sonata with an Indian pianist, or an Armenian played with an Azerbaijani musician. “Israel doesn't have friendly relations with a lot of countries. Yet I have received standing ovations from the audience in those countries when I have gone with the Israeli Philharmonic,” he says. “Don't underestimate the power

Undoubtedly, it's music that powers on the maestro as well. At 87, he has his calendar blocked for the next several months—to Bucharest and Bangkok with the Florence Orchestra, then to Berlin and back to Florence. “In October, I'm going to do an opera and then will tour China,” he says. “I am not stopping. It goes on and on.”