

# The Maestro Returns

Zubin Mehta on growing up in Bombay, being conductor of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and why he doesn't perform in Delhi

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IN 1971, when Zubin Mehta, then music director of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra (IPO), performed in Berlin, he chose Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No. 1 (Titan)*, an ambitious piece by the famed Jewish composer from Austria. The crescendo and its dramatic finale got a standing ovation from the audience, who called for an encore. Just after Mehta took a bow, he hollered, "Hatikvah (The Hope)". Soon, he was conducting Israel's national anthem, barely half a kilometre away from the Reichstag.

In Mumbai last week, Mehta, 86, chose the Mahler piece to conclude his two concerts with the Symphony Orchestra of India (SOI) at Mumbai's Jamshed Bhabha Theatre at NCPA (National Centre for Performing Arts), his first collaboration with an India-based orchestra. And it came two days after his conversation with senior journalist Karan Thapar in a public programme, where he mentioned that he was miffed about a national publication trimming his interview in which he said, "I hope my Muslim friends can live in peace forever in India". In Thapar's interview, he added: "The madness of religious persecution ought to end".

For Mehta, a committed Mahlerite, playing the composer's works is routine. But *Titan* was also a reminder of the power and context that



music can hold when examined years apart.

"When my friend Khushroo Santook (NCPA chairman and SOI co-founder) asked me to come and play Mahler, honestly, I was sceptical (if the orchestra would manage). But I was surprised at the first rehearsal. They (musicians) were lovely," says Mehta.

On August 21, Mehta treaded slowly on the stage with a cane. He climbed the podium and opened with the Indian national anthem and conducted the rest of the concert — Mozart's *Overture to The Marriage of Figaro*, Schubert's *Symphony No 8 'Unfinished'*, and Mahler's *'Titan'* — sitting in a chair. But it is never easy to sit back and not be Zubin Mehta. "I have some of the most complex musical scores to interpret and conduct. I have to know when to lead (the musicians) and when to let them play (on their own)," he says.

Born and raised in Mumbai in a Parsi family that spoke Gujarati, Mehta knew he'll be a musician. His parents persuaded him to be-

come a doctor but music was far more fascinating for Mehta, whose Cuffe Parade home resonated with Western classical music. In 1935, his accomplished violinist father Mehli Mehta founded the Bombay Symphony Orchestra comprising Goan folk musicians and members of the Navy band. But Mehta heard a "real orchestra" only when he left home at 18, in 1954, and moved to Vienna to study music at the Academy of Music. He conducted his first orchestra at a refugee camp outside Vienna with seven students soon after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. By 1961, he had conducted the Vienna, Berlin and Israel Philharmonic. He was 25 years old. Recently, he retired from IPO after a 50-year association.

While Mehta is seen as one of the greatest music conductors in the world, he has never shied away from taking a political stand. Be it an attempt to play Wagner in Israel, where the German musician's music is considered anti-Semitic or the time an IPO concert in London was disrupted by protesters. "Pro-Palestine disruptions have happened when we played at American universities too... But, London was a complete surprise. We were at the Royal Albert Hall with 4,000 people, I was in the middle of a piece when a guy started singing, holding the banner 'Free Palestine'. I didn't stop... There are a lot of people who were absolutely in agreement with a positive future and a separate state, they too, were against the concert being disturbed," says Mehta.



## ONE LOVE

(Above) Zubin Mehta conducts the orchestra at Mumbai's Jamshed Bhabha Theatre; younger days with childhood friend, KN Suntook, NCPA chairman and SOI co-founder

The protest also alleged that IPO had close links with the Israeli army. "Every single Israeli has been in the army. There was a time when some musicians would sit on stage with pistols in their pockets. It doesn't happen anymore," says Mehta, who often visited Ramallah on the West Bank and has worked with many Arab musicians in the hope that the orchestra will have artistes from both communities.

After travelling the world, it's Los Angeles that he calls home now, where he lives with his wife Nancy. Mehta's return to Mumbai has also been a reminder of urban densities. "The seven islands now have two million people," says Mehta, who remembers his childhood and conversations with school friend Yusuf Hamied, the founder of Cipla.

Mehta rues about the lack of patronage

for Western classical music in India. "Children are learning... but it's not proper. The government doesn't give enough opportunity for tax deduction like the US does. There should be more public support. Just coming to applaud at the end is not enough. They have to open their pockets so that an orchestra can buy better instruments and train better," he says.

However, Delhi is not a destination for Mehta. He did perform at the JLN stadium's weightlifting auditorium in 2015. "I will come when there is a proper concert hall. I have asked many governments, many times. They agree. But there still isn't any concert hall," he says. Mehta hopes to return and perform Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. "There are no plans yet though," he says. But there is the promise of a next time.