

Madness of religious persecution ought to end, says maestro

Updated on: 19 August, 2023 07:17 AM IST | Mumbai
A Correspondent |

Share: [f](#) [t](#) [in](#)



Text [AA](#) [AA](#)

In the city for twin performances, Zubin Mehta gets candid discussing the personal, political and the power of music



Zubin Mehta, who will lead Symphony Orchestra of India over two concerts, at NCPA on Friday.

Pic/Pradeep Dhivar

Thursday night saw 87-year-old legendary conductor Zubin Mehta, who returns to the city of his birth for concerts with the [Symphony Orchestra of India](#), let his guard down during an intimate conversation and dinner evening hosted at the Taj, Apollo Bunder, where he regaled guests with his early memories of the city. Mehta was at his unbridled best, both, when speaking of the personal and the political.

'I still count in Gujarati'

This quaint revelation from conductor extraordinaire Zubin Mehta, 87, in response to a question posed by senior journalist Karan Thapar was one of the many gems that an audience gathered at the [Crystal Room](#), Taj Mahal Palace & Towers, on Thursday night, were treated to as part of the Rendezvous series of conversations; Courtesy, The Chambers, the evening saw Dr Pheroza Godrej, Shobhaa De, Monica Vaziralli and the city's well-heeled celebrate one of Mumbai's tallest talents in music. Young musicians from the Mehli Mehta Foundation set the tone for the evening, including presenting a special choral tune created for the legend titled, Dear Maestro Mehta.



Mehta with young talents from the Mehli Mehta Foundation

What followed was a short, intimate chat aptly-titled Reminiscences of Bombay, which saw Mehta regale the room with memories from his childhood spent at Cuffe Parade. He credited his grandparents for keeping him grounded; his grandmother was a religious, traditional Parsi. Gujarati was spoken at home, and Mehta admitted that to this day, he is most comfortable counting in the language. His first musical education was under his father, Mehli Mehta, a self-taught concert violinist. We learnt that it was his father who had played the violin for the iconic All India Radio tune composed by Czech Jewish refugee Walter Kauffman in Bombay all those moons ago. Mehta said that when he and the family visited Amarnath for the annual yatra in the 1970s, a local was playing the radio, and his children got to hear the tune their grandfather had a hand in, at a height of seventeen thousand feet! "I am audio-taught," he told the audience about the hours spent every day listening to records. "By the time I went to study music at 18, I knew more than most of the other students," he said of the time spent at Vienna's Academy of Music.



Karan Thapar in conversation with conductor Zubin Mehta

The talk veered to his days as St Mary's ICSE School, Mazgaon, which he called a "secular, positive" institution, before sharing a fascinating anecdote about meeting some of the Spanish priests who taught him years later at a concert in Barcelona. They had arrived after learning that their student was going to be playing. Mehta's undying love for cricket was evident when the one-time medium pace leg spinner confessed, "I set my alarm to the wee hours back in LA, to catch a game in India!" Thapar was keen to hear his thoughts on the city's changing landscape, and Mehta lamented how the infrastructure maze saw him and his experienced driver get lost the previous day while trying to find his ancestral home in Cuffe Parade.

Not just the skyline, Mehta was concerned about another potent change: political intolerance. He was vocal about the tumultuous scenario in Israel, where he led the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra until 2016. He was irked that in an interview he recently gave to an Indian newspaper, a line was edited out where he said that he "hoped his Muslim friends would be safe in India". He told Thapar, "The madness of religious persecution ought to end." Mehta has often spoken of music's healing powers, narrated anecdotes of Jews and Arabs sitting side by side at concerts, and even conducted a special performance at the Gaza border to protest the imprisonment of a soldier by Hamas, denying access even to the Red Cross.

As the session wound up, and the guests turned to their reds, whites and hors d'oeuvre, in the ladies restroom were two guests exchanging quick notes over a handwash. "Gosh! Why bring up politics at an evening meant for music and culture? You know, very long ago I decided that I was just not going to discuss politics in a social setting."