

Historic: After global acclaim, Zubin to lead an Indian orchestra

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Legendary conductor Zubin Mehta is slated to lead the Symphony Orchestra of India (SOI) in two concerts in August. This will be the first time that Mehta — who is 87 and the preeminent Indian exponent of Western classical music — would conduct an orchestra formed in his homeland.

Last November, the maestro was set to perform in Mumbai with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, but the tour, which included other south Asian countries, had to be cancelled due to Covid. “It was then that (NCPA chairman) Mr Khushroo Suntook called me and requested that I persuade Zubin to conduct

the (NCPA-based) SOI in November as he had a window free due to this cancellation,” says Mehroo Jeejeebhoy, founder-trustee, Mehli Mehta Music Foundation (MMMMF). “This was the genesis of the concerts with the SOI. These were scheduled for November 21 and 22, 2022, but had to be postponed out of



health concerns for Zubin. As he is the ultimate professional and has never cancelled concerts in his career, he wanted to fulfil his commitment to conduct the SOI, and as a result the two concerts will take place on August 19 and 21 this year.”

Orchestras nowadays — including the venerated Vienna and Berlin Philharmonic orchestras, with which Mehta worked closely



HOMEWARD BOUND: Zubin Mehta will fly in from Los Angeles to conduct the Mumbai-based Symphony Orchestra of India in a programme of Mozart, Schubert and Mahler on August 19 and 21 at the NCPA

and extensively and which till not so long ago used to be hermetically sealed institutions almost exclusively comprising Austro-German male musicians — have a multicul-

tural composition, and the SOI is no exception. “I conceptualised the SOI in 2003, which was founded three years later as India’s first and only professional orchestra,”

says Suntook. At last count, the almost-100-member orchestra had musicians from over 30 countries, with over a quarter of the musicians from India. The SOI is not a wholly resident orchestra, with many of the members flying in for its spring and autumn seasons (usually in February and September) each year, but it has a substantial residential core, including its Indian members and the foreign experts who teach at the SOI Music Academy (which follows the rigorous Russian system of classical music education).

This year, the SOI’s forthcoming season will effectively be an extended affair. “When we founded the orchestra 17 years ago, little did we realise that in a short span of time (in terms of the longevity of orchestras), we

would plan a season from August to December, which would have 15 major concerts, two of them led by our very own Zubin Mehta, who will be specially flying to Mumbai to conduct the SOI,” says Suntook. “We are co-presenting the two Mehta concerts with the MMMF.”

Mehta’s connection with the MMMF goes back to 1995, when it was established and named after his father. A pioneering Western music figure in India, Mehli Mehta founded the erstwhile Bombay Symphony Orchestra in 1935, and was its concertmaster (the person who leads the orchestra from the front row of the violinists). The Mehta family lived at Cuffe Parade.

“We share a close relationship with Zubin, as a result of which the foundation has exclusively presented over 35

concerts in Mumbai and Delhi, led by him,” says Jeejeebhoy. The pinnacle was in 2009 when Mehta arrived in India with the Vienna Philharmonic, the orchestra’s first visit to the country since the erstwhile Bombay Madrigal Singers Organisation brought them under the great Karajan’s baton in 1959.

“Every Western music connoisseur in India knows that this will be perhaps Mehta’s last visit to the country, at least for performance,” says Arnab Banerjee, a music enthusiast who works at a reputed bank in Worli. “Mehta is pushing 90 and is no longer in prime health. Him with SOI should have happened a long time ago... But it’s never too late. By conducting an orchestra cradled in India, he couldn’t have been hitting a more consonant chord.”