

'DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF MUSIC'

Maestro Zubin Mehta speaks to Agniva Banerjee ahead of his August 19 & 21 concerts in Mumbai, the first time he will conduct an Indian orchestra

For Zubin Mehta, time is sacred. Few callings are as severely an imposition on time as his pursuit: classical music. In the Western tradition, transcribed on paper in extraordinary detail, in fractions of a second, lie the thoughts and feelings of some of the greatest geniuses: Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner, Mahler... Conductors are the conduits of these thoughts and feelings, ones who give voice to entire philosophies expressible in sound through the means of orchestras. Thus, much of their lives, in a way, is lived within the bars of delicately layered, painstakingly rendered compositions. It is for this reason, because the demands of the profession leave him with very little time, that Mehta rarely gives interviews.

Yet, this is the second time in eight years that he spoke to TOI. At 87, with a full and exciting life behind him—one that has seen glamorous women swoon over him and world leaders chuckle in admiration—the maestro spoke on phone on Saturday from his sprawling seaside Los Angeles mansion, which once belonged to Steve McQueen and where he lives with his wife, yesteryear Hollywood actress Nancy Kovack. Continuing to divide his time among some of the world's best ensembles—primarily Vienna, Berlin, Israel and Los Angeles Philharmonic orchestras—just over a week from now, he is set to conduct for the very first time an orchestra nurtured in his homeland. With indeed much to look forward to, Mehta spoke at length about his hometown Mumbai, about India, the world, and his muse, music.

'There's no ocean in front of my Cuffe Parade house...'

Q Western classical music continues to be a niche, somewhat esoteric, pursuit in India. What inspires you to keep returning here?

A Well, I'm still an Indian citizen. I spent the first 18 years of my life in Bombay. (Laughs) I still back the Indian cricket team, wherever it plays. I'm 100% Indian. And, of course, I love to come back to my country.

Q What do you make of the change that has come about in Mumbai? There's now a coastal road which has radically altered the city's famed coastline...

A You mean the growth of the city?

Q There's new infrastructure. There's a coastal road. Breach Candy, for example, is no longer by the sea. There's a big road now, right next to it, and then lies the sea.

A Well, go to my house on Cuffe Parade, and look across the street. There used to be the Backbay reclamation. Now it's a fishing village. It's very depressing when I see that. But, of course, those fishermen have to make their living, I guess. My house on Cuffe Parade still exists, but in front of it we don't have the ocean anymore.

Q Does it sadden you? Or do you think it is inevitable for a city that is by the sea?

A Well, you know, my father [violinist and conductor Mehli Mehta] grew up in Bombay also, and he and my grandfather never stopped talking about how Bombay was spoilt in their (time), before I was born! So this is how the history of Bombay has been. This reclamation of several islands that became a city of now, what 18 million or something?... Well, you can't stop that. That happens in all the world.

Q Since you mention your father, you helped set up a foundation in his name in Mumbai...

A Ya, well I did that with my brother, and thanks to Mehroo Jeejeebhoy and her colleagues, her volunteers, it has been a successful venture and I'm very proud of it. And I'm very grateful to them to have brought me to India this time also, together with the NCPA.

'Hope to conduct Parsifal one day'

Q You are in the seventh decade of your career. Is there anything in the repertoire that you still wish to do?

A Well, there's one Wagner opera that I've not conducted, and I don't know if I ever will, at my age, and that's Parsifal. Because I've really done the entire Wagner repertoire, including his early opera of Rienzi. Parsifal is still there for me to conduct. I hope I do it one day.

Q Even dictators are not known to wield the absolute authority that conductors do. Also, few positions of power come with as much prestige, as much aura. How would you assess the profession of the conductor?

A Well, I don't think we are dictators at all. We are democratically elected, artistically forwarded, and, we have the fortune of conducting some of the greatest musicians in front of us. Whether it is the Vienna Philharmonic or New York Philharmonic, et cetera. I have learnt so much from the people in front of me, that I have never felt myself a dictator. As a matter of fact, when I first started in Los Angeles, in (1962), one of the first things I told the orchestra was, 'Listen, if you have any suggestions, my door is always open'. I spent 16 years of complete artistic happiness with them. Then in New York, and don't forget, 50 years with the Israel Philharmonic. Over 4,000 concerts in Israel... Over a thousand in New York, and Los Angeles I never counted. So I don't know how many I did in 16 years. But must have been at least 2,000. I was 16 years here. I did four concerts a week. For 20 weeks a season. You figure it.

Q Your first visit to Mumbai was with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, right?

A Yes, '67.

Q Where had you performed then?

A It was in...it was called Shanmukhananda. We had to build a special room to play in, on the stage, a special acoustic shell. In those days, we were sponsored by the Time and Talents Club.

'I have the sacred green card, but passport is Indian'



'For many years, I tried to convince Indira Gandhi to open an embassy in Israel'

Q In your autobiography, you compare orchestras to parliaments. Could you please elaborate?

A I don't remember that. No, no, no. Parliament has, parliament has different parties, an orchestra doesn't have opposition parties. Not at all.

Q You had meant, there are sections, there are section leaders, and then, you know, they coordinate, like the segments of parliament. That's what you had sort of written...

A Maybe. But, believe me, an orchestra is made of approximately 100 musicians, and they are... they have committees, they argue amongst themselves, but there's no real opposition, like in parliament.

Q Right, right... You also write in your...

A By the way, by the way, can I just interject? In today's newspaper in Los Angeles, I read that Rahul Gandhi has been acquitted* by the Supreme Court. I'm very happy to hear that. That he may join parliament again. I just read it this morning.

Q Yes, it happened yesterday (Friday).

A Well, I was very close to his grandmother... I didn't know his great-grandfather, although I met him once, in New York, but I was quite close to Indira.

Q In what circumstances had you met Nehru?

A He came to the United Nations, and I was very friendly with his nephew, his sister's son, Hutheesing.

ing. His sister, Krishna Hutheesing, her son, we went to school together in Bombay, at St Mary's. He passed away, unfortunately. But we were very good friends, when he was in New York... His sons are still in touch with me. His name was Ajit Hutheesing [one of the first Indians in Wall Street].

Q How often did you meet Indira Gandhi?

A Well, I used to meet her when she came to New York, and I met her every time I was in Delhi. In those days, I also tried to convince her to (open) an embassy in Israel. But I was not successful in that. Because India had no relations with Israel for many many years. And as soon as they opened their relations, I brought the Israel Philharmonic, I think in '92 or '93 [1994] to Bombay and Delhi.

*Stay on conviction in the criminal defamation case over the "Modi surname" remark.

Q You had begun the concert...I think it was in 2013, and you had begun the concert with a fusion, with local Kashmiri musicians.

A Yes. '13. I don't remember. Maybe it's '13. Yes.

Q And it began, with, with a fusion... You had also collaborated with Ravi Shankar... Why didn't you do more fusion music? Because Raga Mala, the Second Sitar Concerto, was very warmly received...

A Yes, and then I, I've played the same piece with his daughter also.

'I've never felt unappreciated by India...I've been given Padma Vibhushan of which I'm very proud of'

Q Yes, yes...

A Ya, Well, I did a concert in Florence recently with Zakir Hussain. Very successfully.

Q I wanted to ask you a couple of more questions. Let me ask you this first. You are...everyone knows, you are intrinsic to German high culture (which is as rarefied, as exalted as any culture can be). The German-speaking world sees you as one of their own, and people know that. And you, you reached that place of high respect decades ago, when the German-speaking world was rather conservative. And yet, you never gave up your Indian citizenship, for let's say German citizenship or American

for brief moments. So, if that happens, how does the orchestra keep up?

A I'm distracted, how?

Q Briefly distracted, if you would think about some philosophical thought or something while you are performing.

A No, no. I don't think about too many things while conducting. Except the music. No way. There's, there's too much to think about the music, and the musicians also.

Q Right, right...

A Ya, we go on tour, especially with the Israel Philharmonic, we go through a lot of soul-searching. Once, we were, for instance, in Sao Paulo, in Brazil, and we heard that 12 [11] Israeli sportsmen were murdered in Munich, at the Olympic games.

That, that evening, the orchestra played the concert with as much concentration as if their lives depended on it. I never heard them playing with more, with more power and emotion.

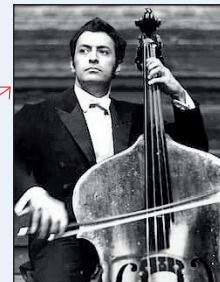
'Will never forget Kashmir concert'

Q Would you term that to be your most inspiring concert? Or, could you tell us which has been your most inspiring concert?

A No, no (laughs). I can't tell you. I'll tell you what...you heard that in 2011, I went with the Munich opera orchestra [formally known as the Bavarian State Orchestra]...to Kashmir. (Coughs.) And we played the concert with Kashmiri musicians, and the audience sat, Hindus and Muslims, sitting free of charge. That was one of my most emotionally packed concerts. Because there was great opposition within Srinagar, and still, people came, and the Kashmiri musicians came, without any fear, to play with us on stage. I'll never forget that.

THE SCORE OF HIS LIFE

- 1936** Zubin Mehta is born on April 29 in Bombay (as Mumbai was known till 1995) Receives first musical lessons under his violinist and conductor father, Mehli Mehta
- School** | St Mary's, Mazgaon. **College** | St Xavier's (studied science, aiming for a career in medicine, for two years, before giving it up)
- 1954** Leaves for Vienna. Studies conducting with Hans Swarowsky. Also studies double bass.
- 1958** Wins Liverpool Intl Conducting Competition
- 1961** Has already wielded baton over Vienna, Berlin and Israel Philharmonic orchestras, marking the start of lifelong associations with the ensembles
- 1962** Becomes music director of Los Angeles Philharmonic, a post he would retain till 1978
- 1967** Finishes six-year stint as music director of Montreal Symphony Orchestra, the quality of which he famously raises to world standard
- 1978** Music director of New York Philharmonic, to be a 13-year tenure (longest in its history)
- 1981** Mehta inherits the Nikisch Ring, willed to him by the great conductor Karl Boehm—testimony that he is at the vanguard of the Wagnerian tradition. It is an extraordinary honour
- 1985** Chief conductor of Florence's Maggio Musicale Orchestra. To hold post till 2017
- 1990** Becomes a household name around the world by conducting the first of the Three Tenor series of concerts featuring Pavarotti, Domingo and Carreras in Rome on the eve of the World Cup football final. Would repeat act for the 1994 World Cup football final in Los Angeles
- 1998** Artistic director of Bavarian State Orchestra. To hold post till 2006
- 2019** Honoured as conductor emeritus of Los Angeles and Israel Philharmonic orchestras
- 2023** To conduct for the first time an orchestra based in his homeland: Symphony Orchestra of India, housed at NCPA, Mumbai



citizenship, that might have made travel very easy for you. Do you think you have been honoured by India, by your country, as much as you should have?

A Well, listen, I have never once given a thought of changing my passport. Never. I grew up in Bombay and then in Vienna. But it never struck me to change my passport either to Austria or Germany or America. America has been very good to me. I've been living here since 1962...I have, I have residency in California, of course.

Q Right, right...

A I have the (laughs) sacred green card! But passport is Indian!

Q My question was that do you think for all that you've done—and you've also been a diplomatic, soft power for India, for world peace. Do you think India has honoured you formally as much as she should have?

A Yes, I think so. I've never felt unappreciated. I have been given Padma Vibhushan, which I'm very proud of. Very proud of.

Q Your career has been marked by special concerts for peace. The world right now is very, very disturbed. What is your message for the world? How can music save the world?

A Well, don't underestimate the power of music. We have played in war-torn areas, and people have turned up and given us standing ovations. And especially with the Israel Philharmonic, I've been to countries that are not very favourable, and you know, Israel is not everybody's favourite cup of tea. Yet we go to countries that are politically not friendly with Israel and play there and we have transmitted only positive feelings. As a matter of fact, right now, I am completely against the present government of Israel. I hope things will change there very soon. I hope. I speak to friends in Israel who are in a state of depression. Of what's going on in their country. Yet, I will go next year again, to perform there. (Excitedly) Hopefully, there will be a new government by then.

Q You have always believed in the separation of politics and culture. Not a lot of people understand that. For example right now, Russian artists have been cancelled. I think you wouldn't appreciate that, right?

A Yes, I know. That's very...it's very unfortunate because they are all my friends. Valery Gergiev, the great Russian conductor, is a close friend of mine. I hope this Ukrainian madness [the war] will change soon.

Q Right, right...and I think your message...if you would like to give a message? Separation of culture and politics, perhaps?

A Well, this morning I read that Mr Navalny [jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny] has received a longer sentence...in Russia; I don't know how those things can go on. I am completely in support of Mr Navalny. I was in Berlin when he was in the hospital there. Unfortunately I didn't... I wasn't able to visit him. But I hope, I hope soon, things will change in Russia too. That people will think a little bit more logically and diplomatically.

Times Special page designed by Sandeep Soni



THEN... Zubin Mehta makes his electrifying presence felt during the Los Angeles Philharmonic's 1967 world tour. India was among the stops

Q That was a historic visit. A lot of the elderly remember it...

A Ya, but I've been...since then with so many different orchestras. Also I've brought so many wonderful soloists, like Daniel Barenboim, Lang Lang, Placido Domingo, and also Bocelli. And you know, they all came and played for nothing. All of them. I'm very grateful.

Q Your 1994 visit with the Israel Philharmonic, your first of four with them, was historic too...

A No. A lot of Russians came in in the '70s and '80s, but today, they have all retired again, and today it's again completely full of musicians born in Israel...When I was there, over half the orchestra was from Russia.



WEB STORY

Scan the code to find out how an Indian orchestra got the opportunity to be conducted by Zubin Mehta

Q Do you, do you speak Russian by any chance?

A No. I speak about 100 words, but no...I don't speak it.

Q You are fluent in German, of course, English, Gujarati, and...Italian perhaps?

A And Bombay Hindustani! Well, German, Italian, Spanish, et cetera...But that comes with the profession.

Q You write in your autobiography that it can happen, while performing you are distracted



NOW... Pushing 90, Mehta is still going strong. But he no longer conducts standing. On the podium is always a chair