

## Zubin Mehta is back in Mumbai to perform for the first time with the Symphony Orchestra of India

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There's no stopping the 87-year-old ace conductor, who still loves being on stage and waving the baton

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Zubin Mehta during rehearsals at NCPA in Mumbai, in 2016. He conducted three concerts of Israel Philharmonic Orchestra as part of his 80th birthday celebrations. | Photo Credit: PRASHANT NAKWE

After arriving in Mumbai earlier this week, celebrated conductor Zubin Mehta has spent a good amount of time on stage. He has been rehearsing with the Symphony Orchestra of India (SOI), with whom he is performing for the first time. "I am quite impressed with the musicians I have interacted with," he says.

Zubin will conduct two shows at the Jamshed Bhabha Theatre on August 19 and 21. The line up for both shows will be the same, beginning with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's 'Overture to The Marriage Of Figaro', the famed operatic comedy, and continuing with Franz Schubert's Eighth (Unfinished) Symphony, for which the early 19th century Austrian composer completed only two movements.



Zubin Mehta with the Australian World Orchestra performing at the Music Academy in Chennai on October 28, 2015. | Photo Credit: RAVINDRAN R

## Screening of the concert

The shows are being organised by the NCPA and the Mehli Mehta Music Foundation (named after Zubin Mehta's father). For those who can't make it to the Jamshed Bhabha, a simultaneous screening has been organised at the neighbouring Tata Theatre on August 19.



Zubin Mehta | Photo Credit: Sooni Taraporevala



Zubin Mehta | Photo Credit: The Hindu Archives

Zubin Mehta was scheduled to perform with SOI in November last year, but the shows were cancelled as doctors had advised him to take three months rest. Despite health issues over the past few years, the 87-year-old maestro is as sharp as ever, displaying a quick sense of repartee. For instance, he talks about the successful The Three Tenors concert and album of 1990, featuring singers Luciano Pavarotti, Placido Domingo and Jose Carreras, with him as conductor. "The record label Decca made lots of money from the album. But we didn't receive anything. The only thing I got from them was a Christmas card, but I hope they made good use of whatever they earned," he says.

Born in Mumbai on April 29, 1936, Zubin Mehta showed an inclination for music from an early age. His father, Mehli Mehta, was a well-known conductor and violinist in Mumbai, and his mother Tehmina supported his love for music. Once Zubin realised his future lay in music, he left for Vienna at the age of 18 after completing his schooling at St Mary's School in Mumbai.

Naturally, he developed a fascination for the Viennese style, including composers Josef Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, Mahler and Arnold Schoenberg, besides Johann Strauss Jr's waltzes. He studied the work of many other non-Austrian composers in detail, including Johannes Brahms, Richard Wagner and Igor Stravinsky, though his concerts have also included Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade. He also closely followed the contrasting styles of conductors Arturo Toscanini and Wilhelm Furtwangler.

## Musical bonding

Later, Zubin developed a close friendship with sitar maestro Pt Ravi Shankar, with whom he worked on the Sitar Concerto No 2: Raga-Mala. "This was a prime instance where Indian and western classical music came together. I have also performed with Ravi ji's daughter Anoushka and with Zakir Hussain. We adapt to each other's styles beautifully."

In his illustrious career, Mehta has had many firsts. *Time* magazine featured him on its cover in January 1968, when he was just 31. He was one of the youngest to lead the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonic Orchestras, and the first to simultaneously conduct two major North American orchestras — Montreal Symphony and Los Angeles Philharmonic.

His most memorable association has been with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, which accompanied him to his 80th birthday celebrations in Mumbai in 2016. The different shows featured guests like tenor Andrea Bocelli, violinist Pinchas Zukerman and cellist Amanda Forsyth. In 2019, he retired from the orchestra after 50 years.

## Political repercussion

Among all his shows, which one does he consider his most memorable? He responds, "There are so many. But some concerts are remembered for the impact they had politically. These include the one in 1982 when Israel was at war with Lebanon. I and a few Israeli musicians actually crossed the border and played for a few Lebanese citizens. The concert ended with Arabs and Jews hugging each other."

Besides his regular classical shows in Mumbai, one of Zubin's most talked about concerts was with the Bavarian State Orchestra in Srinagar in 2013. Despite separatist threats to disrupt the event, he went ahead with his programme of Beethoven, Pyotr Tchaikovsky and Haydn, besides a collaboration with santoor artiste Abhay Sopori and his folk group. "The Kashmiri musicians were warned not to play but all of them turned up. It may not be my favourite show musically, but we accomplished what we wanted," he recalls.

## The journey continues

Zubin is happy with the way audiences have become more appreciative of classical music across the world. The one challenge the genre faces, according to him, is the increasing number of star soloists who demand exorbitant fees. "Most organisers can't afford them and so don't consider them. But there are some who do and that affects the balance," he explains. On a concluding note, he says, "Talking of challenges, every time I go up on stage is a challenge for me. It's always been like that but I've enjoyed it. I still love being on stage, waving the baton. Things move on and I hope to come back again. There's no stopping." The enthusiasm is evident in the way his face brightens up.

### From Zubin's repertoire

\*Gustav Mahler – Symphony No 5, with New York Philharmonic Orchestra, 1990

\*Frederic Chopin – The Piano Concertos, with Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, and soloist Lang Lang, 2008

\* The Three Tenors in Concert – with Luciano Pavarotti, Placido Domingo and Jose Carreras, 1990

\* Pyotr Tchaikovsky – Violin Concerto, with Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and soloist Pinchas Zukerman, 1985

\* Pt Ravi Shankar - Sitar Concerto No 2: Raga-Mala, with London Philharmonic Orchestra, 1982