

जीवन शैली

# I Was Pleasantly Surprised By The Standards of the Orchestra: Zubin Mehta | Exclusive



By JARA News Media

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There's no stopping the 87-year-old ace conductor extraordinaire, Zubin Mehta, who still loves being on stage. He is back in Mumbai to flick his baton with the Symphony Orchestra of India (SOI), the country's first and only professional orchestra. The Padma Vibhushan recipient, who has led some of the world's most prestigious orchestras, including the Israel Philharmonic for 50 years till 2019, will debut with the SOI in its 17th year, marking a homecoming of sorts who left the city in 1954 to go to Vienna to study music.

The two concerts, both sold out, will be performed at the NCPA in association with the Mehli Mehta Music Foundation (MMMMF), a premier music education school named after his father.

In an exclusive conversation with News18, the maestro speaks about making his debut with SOI, throws light on his seven-decade-long career, and hopes that Western classical music keeps evolving in India.

**You are conducting three classics- Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Overture to The Marriage Of Figaro and Franz Schubert's Eighth (Unfinished) Symphony and Symphony of Mahler's Titan. Was there anything specific that you chose as your debut with the Symphony Orchestra of India?**

Well, no. I spoke about the repertoire with Mehroo Jeejeebhoy, (founder and trustee, Mehli Mehta Music Foundation) and Khushroo N. Suntook (Chairman, Symphony Orchestra of India) and we agreed upon these three classics. I was a little skeptical in the beginning as the Mahler Symphony is very difficult but the orchestra is prepared well. They are technically wonderful with good sound and have been very enthusiastic during the rehearsals.

**Where do you think the Symphony Orchestra of India stands when you compare it to any other place in the world?**

I was pleasantly surprised by the standards of the orchestra. For example, I was very pleased with the soloists in the orchestra. I hope that other cities in India take an example and take inspiration from what's happening in Mumbai.

**You spoke about the challenges that come along with Symphony of Mahler, especially the Titan which is the second original that you are going to play. What are the challenges that you face as a conductor?**

The challenges are the interpretation. Gustav Mahler was not very successful as a conductor when he wrote the symphony as a young man. But he was the music director of the Budapest Opera. So he had knowledge about orchestras and at that age, he composed this symphony which ended with a blaze of victory and he achieved what he was aiming for. Good musicians can sense the victory or pathos during Symphony's different movements. And Mahler's Jewish background comes out evidently in the third number, especially a song about a lime tree that is not Jewish which he has incorporated. As a conductor, you have to recognise that and bring out.

**In your seven-decade-long career, you have conducted many classics but one thing that is missing from your repertoire is German composer Richard Wagner's Parsifal. Any reason for that?**

I am a young man and it can still happen (laughs). I still feel young and will continue as long as I can and then I think this one might also happen. Also, there is always new interpretation of the old standard works and you will always find something new in masterpieces whether it is Mozart or Johannes Brahms. When you conduct them after a few years of absence, you tend to discover new aspects. These masterpieces are like old paintings and you always discover new things and that happens with music also.

**Growing up, you chose to study medicine but today, you are one of the finest conductors in the world. Looking back...**

(Interrupts). Growing up in a Parsi household, your parents choose your profession so I might have played with the thermometer as a child, so my mother must have said that he has to be a doctor (laughs). I completed two semesters at St Xavier's College and I realised this wasn't for me. I spoke to my father who agreed and later I went to Vienna to study.

**Did you ever imagine that your career would be an inspiration for so many generations?**

Never. I always wanted to make music. I grew up listening to the records at my father's home and helped him with the orchestra in Bombay. As a young man, I always wanted to do something with the orchestra, but I never thought that it would come this far.

**Your repertoire consists of many landmark performances including the one in Kashmir (in 2013) or during the Gulf of War (in 1991). Can you pick one of your best performances?**

No, I really can't pick one. I can't forget the first concert that I did in Vienna, Berlin, or Los Angeles. As a young man, I had no idea how the audience will respond to me, and thank god things happened positively.

**Western classical music is still a niche in India. Do you feel that the audience has evolved?**

In Bombay, I am certain they have. Maybe we will call it the Mumbai Orchestra one day. I hope cities like Chennai, Delhi, and even Kolkata which used to have an orchestra earlier also evolve with time. I remember my father used to visit Kolkata and play there. There used to be an orchestra in Hyderabad also. The Nizam had an orchestra that played once a year on his birthday but he paid those musicians for 12 months (laughs). Those were different times but they were really good as they had a conductor from Germany who used to train them. I believe things will change for good.

**A lot of technical aspects have come along in orchestra as well as composing music. As a maestro what kind of influence do you think it has on a symphony orchestra?**

An orchestra is an amalgamation of different ideas coming together. For example, we have many violinists and each of them has come from different schools, some from Germany or America and there are a few who are from India. All of them coming together and playing in complete harmony is probably the secret. So that is why conducting and building an orchestra is a very mystical experience. You lift your arm and you don't know what will happen and you hope for the best.