



SMALLTALK

with Mehroo Jeejeebhoy

PIC: SACHIN HARALKAR



Mehroo Jeejeebhoy, founder trustee of Mehli Mehta Music Foundation, started the organisation to revive interest and appreciation for Western classical music in Mumbai

Keys to a legacy

Born from a wish by Zubin Mehta, Mehroo Jeejeebhoy's Mehli Mehta Music Foundation has, for 30 years, nurtured young voices and deepened Mumbai's love for Western classical music

| Jane Borges
jane.borges@timesofindia.com

At Banoo Mansion in Kemps Corner, an entire floor is home to the Mehli Mehta Music Foundation (MMMF), named after Maestro Zubin Mehta's late father—himself a legendary conductor—and today one of Mumbai's leading institutions for Western classical music. But as founder-trustee Mehroo Jeejeebhoy is quick to point out on a weekday morning, this is not where the story began. "We started out in my house in Kemps Corner," she says with a smile.

The foundation turns 30 this year, a milestone Jeejeebhoy never imagined they'd reach. A pianist herself, she first befriended Zubin Mehta when he toured Bombay with the New York Philharmonic in the 1980s. In 1994, during a holiday in Israel, she met him again as he conducted the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. It was then that he voiced his dream of bringing the orchestra to India.

"Diplomatic relations had just opened between India and Israel," she recalls. "Will you be able to handle this?" Zubin asked me." She was more than willing. Back in Bombay, she

gathered a handful of friends—many strangers to one another—to help organise the tour.

The 1994 concerts, featuring violin greats Itzhak Perlman and Gil Shaham, proved a roaring success, raising funds for charity and even leaving them with a modest surplus. Mehta often told her, "I wish there was something in this city in my father's name. He did so much for music here in the 1930s and '40s, and I owe him my entire early education." With those leftover funds, Jeejeebhoy set up the foundation in Mehli Mehta's honour.

"Even then, none of us imagined what it would grow into," she says. Next month, she and her team will release *Encore*, a book chronicling MMMF's three decades, while plans are underway for a major concert early next year to mark Maestro Mehta's 90th birthday.

From festival to education

One of the foundation's earliest initiatives was *Sangat*, the annual chamber music festival launched in 1996, which soon became a landmark on Mumbai's cultural calendar. "My idea was to reach out to musicians of Indian origin, who



Maestro Zubin Mehta, who has been quietly supporting the work of the foundation, seen during an interaction with MMMF's students in January this year

had gone abroad for lack of opportunities here, and invite them back for this festival," says Jeejeebhoy. Run on a shoestring budget with support from patrons like Air India and Dr Jamshed J Bhabha of the NCPA, *Sangat* proved that Indians, too, could hold their own on the world stage. *Sangat* continued till 2015.

The demand for formal music education followed quickly, sparked by the overwhelming response to the foundation's free masterclasses at the NCPA. "Students spilled out into the gardens, halls, even the toilets for want of space," she recalls. With funds raised from Mehta's visiting orchestras, MMMF finally bought a flat in Banoo Mansion, transforming it into an office and performance space. Classes began modestly with 12 children.

Today, the foundation's scope has grown exponentially. Its Discover Music programme trains children as young as six months to listen, sing and grasp rhythm, pulse and pitch. The Singing Tree and a system of six choirs nurture young voices at different levels, while instrumental classes in piano, violin, viola and cello round out the curriculum. More than 350 children now study music here.

Bringing music to all

Right across the road from Banoo Mansion is the St Stephen's municipal school. Jeejeebhoy remembers listening to the schoolchildren sing the national anthem from her office every morning. "And they were so out of tune," she shares. That's when the idea for their outreach programme came about in 2009. The foundation joined hands with the Aseema Charitable Trust to offer free music classes to children from low-income families. They currently work with three municipal schools in the suburbs as well as Seva Sadan Society in Gamdevi. "Many of these kids now perform professionally." MMMF also works with children and adults with special needs. "We have a qualified music therapist who conducts individual music therapy sessions for them," says Jeejeebhoy. "A lot of parents have come to us saying that this has made a huge difference to their children's lives."

Overcoming challenges

Over the years, MMMF has presented several exclusive concerts, conducted by Maestro Mehta. These include the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra, Maggio Musicale Fiorentino Orchestra, and Vienna Philharmonic and Australian World orchestras. They've even brought some of the world's leading artists to perform in India: Andrea Bocelli, Lang Lang, Midori, Diana Damrau, Placido Domingo to name a few. "Fundraising has always been a challenge," admits Jeejeebhoy. "We started this place with a few lakh rupees and have had to work and struggle to build the foundation, brick by brick."

Maestro Mehta, she says, remains a silent force. "Zubin has always had a very strenuous musical career, so he is not involved in the day-to-day running of the foundation. But his name has opened many doors for us," she says. He also ensures that money raised from his benefit concerts is sent to support the foundation. "I hope the work that we began doesn't end with me," Jeejeebhoy says, "And that we continue the legacy of education and concerts and get more people to appreciate and enjoy Western classical music."

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