

THE MAESTRO: Conductor Zubin Mehta, musical director of Bayerischen Staatsorchesters, performing at the Olympiastadion in Munich, Germany, in June.



ODE TO JOY

BY GEETA BHATNAGAR-NOVOTNY

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THIS DECEMBER, ZUBIN MEHTA WILL BE HONORED BY THE KENNEDY CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS IN WASHINGTON, D.C., ARGUABLY THE HIGHEST RECOGNITION IN THE AMERICAN CULTURAL ARENA. HERE IS A TRIBUTE TO LIVING LEGEND AND A PROUD SON OF INDIA.

CELEBRATED CLASSICAL music conductor Zubin Mehta will make all South Asians exuberantly proud Dec. 3, when he receives the prestigious Kennedy Center Honor.

Along with Mehta, musical theater composer and producer Andrew Lloyd Webber, country singer and songwriter Dolly Parton, singer, songwriter and producer Smokey Robinson and film director and producer Steven Spielberg are being honored for a lifetime of extraordinary contribution to the arts and to American culture.

These honorees will be hailed by stars from the world of performing arts at a gala performance in Kennedy Center's Opera House in Washington, D.C. President Bush and First Lady Laura Bush will receive the honorees at the White House prior to the gala performance. The Kennedy Center Honors will be bestowed the night before the gala at a State Department dinner hosted by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Mehta apparently has music and success inherent in his DNA. His father had already carved a place for himself in Indian musical history when he was born. Much of Mehta's early musical education came from his father, Mehli ▶



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THE MAKING OF A LEGEND: Top, Mehta with a double bass in 1969. Inset, Mehta during a tour of Stockholm, Sweden, in 1975. Bombay-born Mehta joined the Vienna Academy of Music at the age of 18.

◆ Mehta, a violinist and the founder and conductor of the Bombay Symphony Orchestra. Mehli Mehta then went on to become the music director of the American Youth Symphony in Los Angeles.

Zubin Mehta was born in Mumbai on April 29, 1936. He initially intended to study medicine, but, at 18, joined the Vienna Academy of Music as a student. In 1958, he made his conducting debut in Vienna, went on to win the International Conducting Competition in Liverpool and became the first Indian to appear with a major British orchestra – the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic.

PRECOCIOUS YOUTH

He went on to conduct the Vienna Philharmonic, the Berlin Philharmonic and the Philadelphia Orchestra, all while still in his mid-20s. Mehta's meteoric rise in the musical world is unprecedented; he has enjoyed extremely successful tenures as music director of the Montreal Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the New York Philharmonic.

Mehta grew up at a time of national dissension in India – the nation's difficult struggle for independence, its eventual win that came with partition and the birth of Pakistan and Mahatma Gandhi's assassination and its aftermath. All of these events encompassed a time of bittersweet peace. Growing up in these times fueled the fire in Mehta to use music as a



PEERLESS: The renowned pianist Arthur Rubinstein rehearsing with Mehta for a concert at the Royal Festival Hall in London.

tool to promote peace and humanity.

In 1969, Mehta was named music director of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra; the appointment was extended for life in 1981. Believing in, and supporting, Israel's struggle, he has conducted more than 2,000 performances and toured across the five continents with his musicians, including in India – in New Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai.

Mehta knows how to unite humanity with the beautiful language of music. He has performed in the ruins of the Bosnian National

Library in war-torn Sarajevo and also in Tel Aviv during the Gulf War. He has performed in Moscow's Gorky Park during the Soviet era. In 1999, he brought together the Israel Philharmonic and the Bavarian State Opera for a historic performance in what had been a concentration camp in Weimar, Germany.

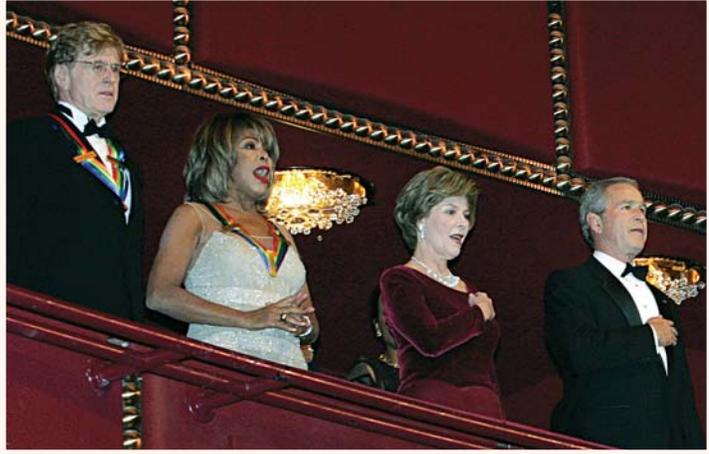
And on December 26, 2005, the first anniversary of the Indian Ocean tsunami, Mehta conducted the Bavarian State Orchestra for the first time in Chennai at the world-famous Madras Music Academy. This spe- ▶



KING OF MELODY: Mehta during a concert at the Palau de les Arts in Valencia, Spain, in 2005.

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INDIA'S BELOVED: Mehta, who received the Padma Vibhushan award from the Government of India, performing during a European tour. Inset, President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush at the Kennedy Center honors last year with awardees Robert Redford and Tina Turner. The first couple will be present when Mehta is honored on Dec. 3.



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◆ cial memorial concert raised money for tsunami relief organizations.

Mehta has mastered other genres of Western classical music as well. He made his operatic conducting debut in 1964, and went on to conduct major productions with the most prestigious companies all over the world. He also helped create, and conducted, several of the acclaimed Three Tenors concerts. He has released many recordings of his work, including a collaboration with Ravi Shankar, the Sitar Concerto No. 2 with the London Philharmonic.

Since 1998, Mehta has been music director of the Bavarian State Opera in Munich; he completes his successful eight-year tenure this year. He splits his time with the Israel Philharmonic and the Orchestra del Maggio Musicale in Florence, Italy. Mehta also makes guest conducting appearances with orchestras around the world. High achievement obviously runs in the family – his brother, Zarin, was appointed executive director of the New York Philharmonic in 2000.

Even though his career has taken him all over the world, Zubin Mehta has performed many times in India. He started a foundation in his father's name in Mumbai to fund the first school of Western classical music in his homeland.

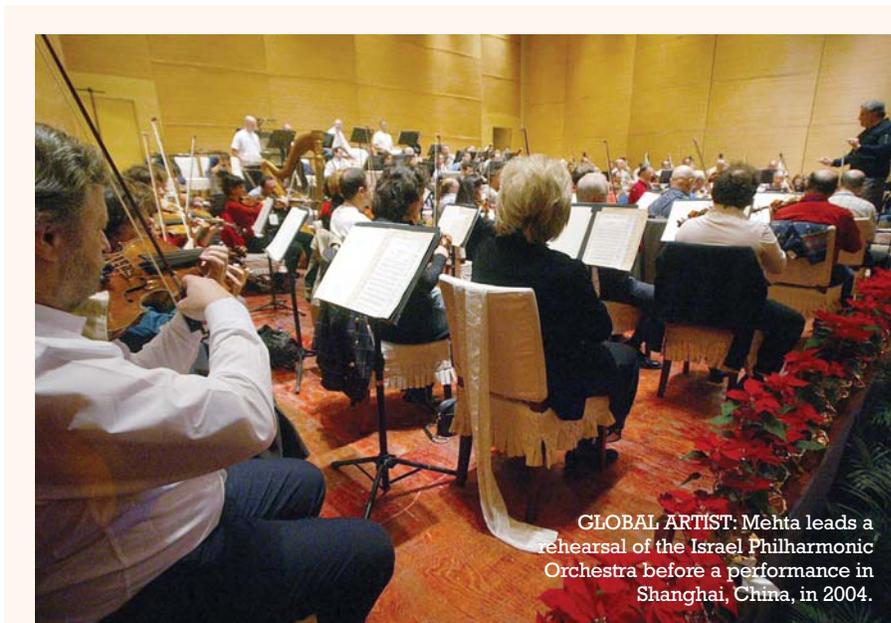
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

All the words in the world cannot capture Mehta's many glowing accomplishments. Several biographies have been written about him, but in his 70th year, Mehta has decided to have his say with the publication of his autobiography, "Die Partitur meines Leben: Erinnerungen" ("The Score of my Life: Memories"). The book has been published in German, and we can only hope it will eventually appear in English.

Robert Page, one of my past professors, who was director of choral activities at Temple University in Philadelphia during the late '60s and early '70s and music director/conductor of the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, had the opportunity to work with Mehta on several occasions when the maestro was guest conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Page, currently Paul Mellon professor of music at Carnegie Mellon University and music director emeritus of the Mendelssohn Choir of Pittsburgh, recounts his experience of working with Mehta:

"The most memorable time was when my Mendelssohn Club sang the Mahler II Symphony ('Resurrection') with Zubin and the orchestra. It was one of those unforgettable times. The chorus sings during the last movement with the text 'We will rise again.' After a huge orchestral segment, there is almost com-



GLOBAL ARTIST: Mehta leads a rehearsal of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra before a performance in Shanghai, China, in 2004.

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES



PERFECT NOTES: Mehta conducts the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra as Chinese pianist Lang Lang plays in the Austrian capital in June 2005.

plete silence, with only an off-stage instrument or two, and the choir (still seated) sings pianissimo (very, very quietly) 'Auf erstehn.' ... The chill bumps still are there when I remember it."

"Fast forward a bit. ... At the end of the season, the separate arts critics of the Philadelphia Inquirer wrote about the most significant, memorable moments in the arts that particular year. The drama critic wrote that the single most thrilling event to him was the entrance of the Mendelssohn Club in the Mahler II Symphony! And that was Zubin."

"Maestro Mehta was such a charismatic figure: He had a certain magic and immediacy that was most appreciated by the orchestra and singers. I still use as benchmark performances some of his work as the music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. The Brahms

'Academic Festival Overture' he recorded with them is the very best, in my opinion."

Russell Steinberg, director of music at Stephen Wise Music Academy and artistic director of the Los Angeles Youth Orchestra, reminisces about growing up in Mehta's Los Angeles, "watching him conduct the LA Philharmonic as a kid."

Steinberg says a film on Mehta and the orchestra, based on a performance of Ravel's "Bolero," was a "tremendous inspiration." He says he was unable to get Ravel's tune out of his head for months after.

"I must have seen him conduct hundreds of concerts," Steinberg says. "I remember back then, he conducted with an extremely long baton. And he stood ramrod straight, with unbelievably straight posture. His ability to memorize scores was legendary." ◆



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MASTER AT WORK: Top, Mehta rehearsing with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra in Shanghai in December 2004. Inset, Mehta rehearsing before a concert at the Palau de les Arts in Valencia, Spain.



A GLORIOUS LIFE: Mehta performing with directors of two other orchestras, Christian Thielemann and Mariss Jansons, at an open-air concert in Munich in June.

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◆ Steinberg recalls the time he took students to watch Mehta conduct the Israel Philharmonic in Disney Hall performing Beethoven's Violin Concerto and Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring."

"I noticed how much more relaxed he was as a conductor (also, that his baton was shorter!)," Steinberg says, adding he met Mehta's father, Mehli, shortly before he died. "One piece of advice Mehli told me was to be sure to completely memorize scores before rehearsing the orchestra – both to impart command and to create a strong bond of musical communication."

I first heard the name "Zubin Mehta" from my father, a New Delhi-born doctor, who educated us about Mehta. I also heard the name from my American-Irish mother as she, too, educated us about the achievements of this musical master.

In fact, when my siblings and I were younger, our proud mother constantly threatened to write Maestro Mehta letters boasting of the talents of her two classically trained musician daughters. To her threats we would reply in embarrassing tones, "No Mom, please!" Now that the teen angst has worn off, I sometimes wish my mother had written that

letter. And here is what I know it would've said:

Dear Mr. Mehta,

I hope this letter finds you well. I realize that you are a very busy man, but please take a moment to read this letter. I have two wonderfully talented daughters who I know will contribute greatly to the world of classical music. I must thank you for being an inspiration to them.

In their world, where "coolness" is embodied in McDonald's and MTV, you are a role model to them by showing them that having a passion for Western classical music is "cool." Through your achievements, you have encouraged my daughters to stay true to themselves and to love "their" music. Most importantly, you provide them the support to bear their conflicted minds and hearts by that; in the midst of their strict South Asian upbringing, you demonstrate to them that pursuing Western classical music is a noble profession.

I believe in my daughters' unique talents, but sometimes that isn't enough. Thank you for motivating them through your victories.

Sincerely,
Colleen Bhatnagar

AWE-INSPIRING

Now that I am a professional classical singer, I have had the opportunity to work with prestigious conductors of Mehta's stature. Through these experiences I can only imagine that working with Maestro Mehta would be nothing less than awe-inspiring. And I would like to say:

Maestro Mehta:

I am honored to be your colleague in this noble world of classical music. Thank you for advocating true humanity and bridging gaps with your music in the inimitable way that only music can. Thank you for bringing Western classical music into our homeland and promoting this art form from within those borders and beyond.

Thank you for growing and changing with the times. Thank you for demonstrating the utmost longevity in your career. Thank you for reinforcing my perseverance within this art form. Thank you for touching millions upon millions of lives with your music. Thank you, Maestro, for your powerful talent and your music.

With all my heart,
Geeta Bhatnagar-Novotny