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# Zubin Mehta Masters Brahms at Disney Hall

R. Daniel Foster · Tuesday, December 10th, 2024

As I watched maestro Zubin Mehta take the stage at Walt Disney Concert Hall for a Brahms program in early December, 70 years of history swirled. Mehta first picked up the baton to conduct the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 1961. He was a last-minute substitute. The next year he became LA Phil's music director, a post he retained for 16 years.

Mehta was just 24 years old. By contrast, Esa-Pekka Salonen was 34 when he took the post. Gustavo Dudamel was 28. The average age of the orchestra's new music directors is 48, according to the LA Phil.

The wunderkind mastered the classics and introduced innovative programming, drawing younger and more diverse audiences, crucial to keeping the orchestra relevant. Dudamel has done the same in his own way, augmenting the effort.



Zubin Mehta and rock musician Frank Zappa, preparing for a concert at UCLA's Pauley Pavilion. 1970. Photo: Mary Frampton, Los Angeles Times. Via Wikimedia Commons, license.

Mehta collaborated with Carlos Santana, Frank Zappa and John Williams. He expanded the Los Angeles Philharmonic's reach through tours and burnished its prestige with recordings. The documentary film *Bolero* (featuring Mehta and the philharmonic) won an Academy Award for Best Short Subject in 1974.

## Mehta's Teenage Debut in Bombay

During the December 7 Disney Hall concert, Mehta began with Brahms Violin Concerto concerto—the first piece he conducted at age 16. Standing before the Bombay Symphony Orchestra, which his father Mehli Mehta had formed, the teenager was apparently out of his element. And with violin virtuoso Yehudi Menuhin as the soloist, it must have been a memorable moment.



Zubin Mehta conducting the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra at the Jamshed Bhabha Theatre (NCPA) in Mumbai. Photo: Apoorva Guptay, via Wikimedia Commons license.

"The whole thing proved to be rather disappointing," Mehta said in a 2023 interview with Forbes India. "I was severely reprimanded because I had apparently forgotten to give the third horn or the oboist his cue."

Replacing Menuhin at the Disney Hall concert was Leonidas Kavakos who delivered matchless technique.

With decades of experience and an abiding sensitivity to the romantic repertoire, Mehta, 88, once again proved why he remains one of the world's most celebrated conductors.

The concerto, modeled after Beethoven, is a vexing blend of technical virtuosity and symphonic structure. The dialogue between Kavakos' strings, Mehta, and the orchestra was compelling and seamless.

Brahms Second Symphony closed out the evening, its first LA Phil performance was in 1923 with Emil Oberhoffer conducting. Of course, Mehta has undertaken both the violin concerto and the second symphony numerous times, the music seemingly embedded in his DNA. It showed.

Seated, Mehta's conducting was economical but always deeply expressive. During the finale, *Allegro con spirito,* Mehta seemed to appear decades younger as he propelled the orchestra through jubilant themes. Among Brahms' four symphonies, the finale is the most cheerfully vigorous. The audience was beyond enthusiastic, enveloping him with wild applause throughout the night.

Altogether, the evening was a treasured moment in Los Angeles history.

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**Zubin Mehta Conducts *Gurrelieder*, December 13, 14 at Disney Hall.**

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