



IN MEMORIAM

Mehli Mehta
Senior Lecturer in Music, Emeritus
Los Angeles
1908–2002

Energy. That is the best and most often used word to describe Maestro Mehli Mehta and his 60 year career in music. During his tenure as director of the orchestra at UCLA from 1964 to 1976 you would find him racing down the halls always in a hurry to get to a rehearsal or coaching. Like music, Mehli could not be stopped. He had a mission to accomplish and that was to share his passion and his art with students eager to learn the skills of great orchestral playing.

Born in Bombay, India he first heard Western classical music from his father's collection of recordings. His favorites were the violinists Fritz Kreisler, Jascha Heifitz and Efrem Zimbalist. He insisted on violin lessons and began study when he was five years old. After studies at the University of Bombay he went to England for further study at the Trinity College of Music in London. At the age of 27 he returned to India and founded the Bombay Symphony serving as concertmaster and, later, conductor. In 1940 he founded the Bombay String Quartet. "I should have been born in Europe," he said, describing the difficulty of developing an audience for Western classical music in India. "In all my 25 years of playing in India, not one Hindu, not one Muslim came to my concerts. Only the English and the Americans came." Recognizing the limitations placed on him by remaining in India, Mehli moved his family to New York City in 1945 to study violin with Ivan Galamian.

After further frustration on a return to Bombay, he moved to London in 1955. There he was concertmaster of the Halle Orchestra under the direction of Sir John Barbirolli whose influence on his own conducting he always acknowledged. Later, he joined the Curtis String Quartet in Philadelphia as second violinist and toured with that group until he moved to Los Angeles in 1964. His son, Zubin Mehta, had been appointed as conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic two years earlier and UCLA was looking for a conductor for their student orchestra. Mehli got that position, joining his famous son in Los Angeles.

At that time, the Music Department at UCLA was primarily focused on music history and ethnomusicology. Performance and performers were rarities on campus and the orchestra was an uneven group of instrumentalists, often from other majors, who played more for their love of music than for their dreams of a professional career. There were no private lessons given in the music department and Mehli often felt that he was back in Bombay. However, if the students at UCLA could not achieve full symphonic status, he would find a group of young musicians who could. The answer was to take over the leadership of the American Youth Symphony. This was a group made up of the best of university and college students from Southern California. Most of them came from schools (like UCLA) that did not have the resources for playing the big orchestral repertory of the 19th and 20th centuries. So, Mehli started a training orchestra designed to introduce these young talents to just that kind of music... the big stuff, repertory that these students only heard at professional concerts. "It takes a lifetime to learn symphonic literature," he often said, "The students know nothing and they must begin somewhere to dedicate their lives to learning this repertory. When they leave here they will have performed all the symphonies of Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky and Dvorak, plus the last six symphonies of Mozart, five of Mahler, two of Bruckner and all the Strauss tone poems. To be a musician, you must know these things..."

It was toward this goal that Maestro Mehta focused his unbounding energy. First with his own two sons – Zubin, who was formerly the music director of the New York Philharmonic, and Zarin, who is executive

director of that organization – and then with his “orchestral children” in Los Angeles, where more than 15 of his student performers have gone on to play in the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and another 80 or so in professional orchestras around the globe.

With his unfailing energy to browbeat or cajole young players to give their best, most concentrated efforts to communicate the passion needed for great orchestral playing, he was never one to mince words about the kind of commitment he expected from his players. “I make the effort... you make the effort or don’t play in my orchestra!” he said during one rehearsal. There was never any doubt that Mehli Mehta made the effort.

That energy, which was his basis for teaching and conducting, resonated through Schoenberg Hall. Whether leading the UCLA Orchestra or conducting the rehearsals of the American Youth Symphony on Saturday mornings, his energy was an integral part of the musical life of UCLA and Los Angeles. His colleagues, friends and students in the Music Department miss him.

John Hall