



# Orchestrating Harmony

Through turbulence and triumph  
the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra plays on





By Lynn Wexler-Margolies

**T**he history of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra (IPO) has been a tale of turbulence and danger; courage and commitment; aspiration and brilliance. By its own pedigree, never has there been an orchestra more inextricably relevant and extraordinarily entwined with its country's narration, and its global significance as ambassadors for peace. The IPO has the largest subscription base, upward of 26,000 worldwide, of any orchestra in the world.

Zubin Mehta, its defiant and luminous music director since 1969, declared with obvious pride in 2006 (at the orchestra's 70th anniversary celebration in Haifa), "Today, the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra is one of the 10 greatest orchestras in

the world!" And perhaps the only one whose concerts have been interrupted regularly by the sound of explosions and gunfire.

"Hezbollah rockets rained down nearly a mile from the town's concert hall," said Mehta. "But we played on, the audience stayed and everyone remained calm." It's something concertgoers in Israel apparently have grown accustomed to over the years.

The IPO is one of Israel's oldest, most influential and beloved cultural institutions, able to attract internationally lauded classical music stars. Founded in 1936 by Polish violin virtuoso Bronislaw Huberman as the Palestine Orchestra, the Jews of Palestine had an orchestra before they had a state. The IPO



represents the fulfillment of Huberman's dream "to unite the desire of the country for an orchestra with the desire of the Jewish musicians to have a country."

A favorite with audiences in Vienna and Berlin for most of the 1920s and early 1930s, Huberman fled the mounting Nazi regime for Palestine along with 75 other Jewish musicians, conductor William Steinberg among them. In doing so, Huberman created an "orchestra of soloists."



Zubin Mehta

They made their debut on Dec. 26, 1936, in Tel Aviv's Levant Fair Hall with Arturo Toscanini conducting a program of Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn and Brahms. Toscanini, America's highest paid conductor at the time, donated his services to demonstrate his opposition to fascism. "I did it for humanity," he later said. "It was the happiest moment of my life!"

When Israel got its statehood in 1948, the Tel Aviv-based ensemble changed its name to the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and aptly played, among other selections, the Hatikvah (Israel's national anthem and Hebrew for *the hope*) at the Declaration of Independence ceremony.

Huberman's conviction that "every authentic art, when all is said and done, has its roots in the national soil" continues to influence the IPO today. "We are cultural ambassadors for the state of Israel all over the world," says Avi Shoshani, the IPO's much-admired chief executive for the past 38 years. "At the same time, we are also the orchestra of the Jewish people all over the world. That adds another dimension to us that no other orchestra has."

The IPO's frequent world tours have unofficially provided a diplomatic function and are as much a part of its *raison d'être* as its concerts at home. The goodwill created by these tours, which have included historic visits to Japan, Argentina, Poland, Hungary, Russia, China, Europe and India, holds great value for the state. In 2005 the orchestra traveled to Berlin to commemorate 40 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Mehta, the orchestra's musical director for life since 1981, says

"consciously or otherwise, we carry a message to the world from Israel. A positive message. A message that is not necessarily on the front pages of the newspapers."

Shoshani, who stresses the orchestra's nonpolitical nature (while noting where its cultural and political identities intersect), insists the IPO is "about more than Gaza, Lebanon and Hezbollah."

Throughout its 75-year existence, the philharmonic often has found itself literally on the front lines of Israel's history. Its members traveled in armored cars to raise the morale of civilians and soldiers in a besieged Jerusalem during the 1948 War of Independence. The armies of six Arab countries attacked Israel the day after she received statehood.

Senior orchestra members recall playing with IPO laureate Leonard Bernstein – a title conferred upon him in 1988 to mark his 40-year association with the orchestra. It was during the 1967 Six Day War that Bernstein conducted Mahler's *Resurrection* symphony before 5,000 soldiers in the amphitheater on Mount Scopus – one of the seven hills of Jerusalem – and within earshot of retreating Egyptian forces.

The IPO played on during the Sinai War in the late 1950s; the Yom Kippur War in 1973; the Lebanon War in 1982; and during the Gulf War in 1991. As Saddam Hussein's minions launched Scud missiles over Israel, Mehta gave a memorable performance and the audience donned gas masks. Despite extreme adversity, the

IPO has given concerts that have become a part of Israeli folklore, as well as musical history.

Through it all, the orchestra boasts world-renowned associations that have helped maintain its high artistic standards. Among them: Emanuel Ax, Daniel Barenboim, Yefim Bronfman; principal guest conductor Yoel Levi, Yo-Yo Ma, Lorin Maazel; honorary guest conductor Kurt Masur, Itzhak Perlman, Jean-Pierre Rampal, Arthur Rubenstein, Gil Shaham, Isaac Stern and Pinchas Zuckerman.

It offers a discography of 100-plus recordings from 1954 to the present, for such labels as Sony and EMI, including conducting performances by Paul Kletzki (Mendelssohn, Schumann); Sir Georg Solti (Rossini, Schubert); Istvan Kertesz (Grieg); Itzhak Perlman (Bach and Vivaldi); Leonard Bernstein (Mozart, Dvorak and Stravinsky); Gustav Dudamel (Mahler); and Mehta (Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Verdi, Rachmaninoff).

Conspicuously absent from the orchestra's repertoire are works from Wilhelm Richard Wagner, a sore subject for Mehta. "Wagner was 110% anti-semitic, and there are still people in Israel with (Auschwitz) tattoos. While I understand the sentiments, Wagner is half my world and I would love to play it with my favorite orchestra, in particular the second act of *Tristan und Isolde*."

Born in Bombay in 1936 and trained as a conductor in Vienna, Mehta has enjoyed the longest and most regaled collaboration with the IPO, spanning 50-plus years. The maestro dismisses his IPO music director for life appellation. "It's just a handshake. There's no contract. I will stay as long as the players want me! For me it's been

concert after concert of internal spiritual satisfaction.”

Though he’s not Jewish, Mehta has become a part of Israel’s culture. He was introduced to the IPO in 1961 when he substituted for an indisposed Eugene Ormandy. Both Mehta and the orchestra were 25 years old at the time. But it was in 1966, when he stepped in for Carlo Maria Giulini during an IPO tour of New Zealand and Australia, that he cultivated a durable bond with the Israeli musicians that has grown into what he calls “a lasting marriage.”

During times of war and crisis in Israel, Mehta often has canceled other obligations to stand in solidarity with his musicians. He attributes his passionate allegiance to their mutual devotion to music, and the kinship he feels with the spirit and tradition of the Jewish people.

“When I started, it was an orchestra of the Hapsburg monarchy,” he said. “There were Poles, Hungarians, Viennese, Czechs and some German Jews, all basically Yiddish-speaking. Then the *Sabras* (Jews born in Israel) came in. Now, with the immigration of Soviet Jews, it’s become a Russian orchestra, though still continuing with the Central European sound.”

Las Vegas music aficionados can indulge their classical palates Oct. 29 when the IPO debuts at the Smith Center for one performance. Mehta will conduct a program of outstanding works by Schubert, Chopin and Brahms, featuring the much-heralded pianist Yuja Wang.

The *San Francisco Chronicle*’s music critic Joshua Kosman has anointed Wang, 25, “the most dazzling, uncannily gifted pianist in the concert world today.” She has become widely recognized for performances that combine the spontaneity and fearless imagination of youth, with the precision and discipline of a mature artist. Music reviewers extol her authority over the most complex technical demands, and her depth of musical insight and charismatic stage presence.

*New York Times* music critic Anthony Tommasini wrote that Wang’s performance of Prokofiev’s Piano Concerto No. 3 (one of her favorite pieces because it fits her “edgy and kind of sarcastic and naughty personality”) features tempos that are brisk to the point of breathlessness. “She dispatches bursts of chords and arm-blurring octaves with ease. She is a wonder.”

Born in Beijing in 1987, she began studying piano at age 6. Her classical training extends from the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing to Calgary’s Mount Royal College in Canada and The Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where she graduated in 2008.

Since her 2005 debut with the National Arts Center Orchestra, led by Pinchas Zuckerman, Wang has performed with the Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, San Francisco and National symphonies; the Cleveland, Philadelphia and Royal Concertgebouw orchestras; and the Los Angeles, New York, China, London and Hong Kong philharmonics, to name just a few.

She is an exclusive recording artist for Deutsche Grammophon. She has won several awards, including the 2011 *Young Artist of the Year* Echo Award; she was nominated for a Grammy as *Best Classical Instrumental Solo*; among her top performance highlights she lists

working with Charles Dutoit in Boston and replacing Martha Argerich; opening the Lucerne festival with Claudio Abbado; playing at the Mariinsky Theatre with Valery Gergiev; and performing with Gustavo Dudamel in Los Angeles this summer.

“It’s all about the intensity generated onstage ... the vibe. ... it’s quite an experience,” she says.

A grueling lifestyle is *de rigueur* for Wang. “I really love just living my life; doing the things I enjoy most, and finding inspiration along



Yuja Wang

the way.” When she’s not immersed in music she loves, there’s “... going to spas and suntanning. I enjoy my few good friends. We’re into fashion and movies.”

On her Twitter feed she quotes unlikely bedfellows Gustav Mahler (“Tradition is tending the flame, not worshipping the ashes.”) and Coco Chanel (“A girl should always be two things: classy and fabulous.”)

And so she is, seemingly unfazed by the attention she’s garnered both for her stage garb and her prodigious talent. Her sometimes scant attire has raised a few eyebrows in the hallowed world of classical music.

“This October will be my first time collaborating with (Mehta),” she says.

“We will tour Israel and the U.S. together for the whole month. We’ll have plenty of time to get to know the music and each other, which doesn’t happen often. I’m really looking forward to it.”

In addition to Mehta’s devotion to the IPO (including its subscription and Youth Concert Series; concerts as part of the *Arts for the People* project throughout Israel; and special concerts for IDF soldiers at their outposts), the orchestra also premieres works by Israeli composers, absorbs some new immigrant musicians and develops young talents from Israel and abroad.

Mehta also is dedicated to a music education program in Israel that involves its Arab citizens. “We have about 250 Arab kids in this program,” he said. “It’s absolutely my dream to have an Israeli-Arab playing in the philharmonic one day. It will happen. I see this as the future for Israel. Maybe music will help us come together.”