

REVIEW

Mehta, American Youth Symphony: Thunder and lightning

By HILLARY HAUSER

Zubin Mehta and the American Youth Symphony not only conquered Santa Barbara on Sunday night at the Arlington Theater, they picked up the town and whirled us into outer space.

It was an unmitigated triumph. It was also a tribute to Mehli Mehta, Zubin Mehta's father, in that the elder maestro's training of his "kids," the AYS orchestra, had been so complete that when concert plans and rehearsals were thrown into last-minute disarray by Mehli Mehta's sudden illness they carried on with an amazing know-how in his absence.

They were ready for Zubin Mehta when he arrived in Santa Barbara.

The concert, sponsored by the Community Arts Music Association as a "75th Anniversary Gift to the

Next Generation," was designed to inspire the young musicians of Santa Barbara to pursue their art. The program consisted of a varied palette of works designed to fire the most youthful, uninitiated imagination: the Roman Carnival Overture by Berlioz, a Mozart concerto for two pianos and orchestra and the highly vivid "Pictures at an Exhibition" by Mussorgsky/Ravel.

Monday before the concert, Mehli Mehta was taken ill and under doctors orders to stay home. Zubin Mehta flew to his father's aid—in just enough time to give the orchestra one three-hour rehearsal before the doors opened at the Arlington for the performance. Under that sort of pressure, all sorts of things can go wrong. Mehta was also working with two unknown pianists from Europe, Hannes Keller and Theo Lieven, who admittedly

call themselves amateurs.

Reviews must be necessarily unbiased, that is the nature of the beast. This reviewer was involved in the concept of the concert and its execution, is also a friend of the pianists and the Mehta family, and as suspect as this report might therefore be, it is still an honest one.

The concert was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Yes, there were some bleating horns and missed cues. Keller and Lieven were nervous as hell, and it cost them some pianistic opportunities. But a review that would focus on these sorts of things would totally miss the point of what happened.

What happened was that the American Youth Symphony orchestra played with an astonishing energy and passion not heard in many professional orchestras, the European pianists played a straightforward, decent Mozart, and then Zubin Mehta brought the

house down.

Mehta is an atomic power plant, a titan among conductors, a giant, immensely powerful, mesmerizing, sensuous leader who on the podium storms with body and soul. He stomps, gives sharp signals for sharp attacks, he thunders. He also produces sheer poetry.

The program opened with the fiery and energetic Roman Carnival Overture of Berlioz, with its beautiful English horn love song (Jessica Hoffman) surrounded by a swift, impetuous saltarello, an Italian dance. The piece next up was Mozart's Concerto in E flat major (K365) for Two Pianos and Orchestra, which offered an interesting, marked contrast in the program for young ears (and old ears and middle-aged ears) to hear.

The composition is pure, poetic Mozart, a piece the composer liked to play with his sister Nannerl performing the second piano part. On Sunday night, Theo Lieven played piano one, Hannes Keller, piano number two, with a scaled-down orchestra to balance the soloists. From the outside the composition seems a light, happy little thing, but there are considerable technical demands, not the least of which is the soloists' entry being a dramatic unison trill, held for four beats. There are other nerve-wracking requirements, including additional trills and scales also played in unison, combined with delicately choreographed entries and exist with the orchestra that could throw admitted amateurs into disarray. Nevertheless, Lieven and Keller managed to pull the whole thing off with pure and satisfying moments of lyricism to spare.

Then came the thunder.

Returning to the stage with full orchestra after intermission, Mehta launched into the Mussorgsky/Ravel "Pictures at an Exhibition," a work consisting of 14 vignettes. It was written by Mussorgsky for piano (later orchestrated by Ravel) after the composer was inspired by a posthumous exhibition of paintings by his friend Victor Hartmann. The various sections are musical representations of different paintings as seen through the eyes of the composer.

Under Mehta's baton, the AYS players brought to the work an energy and passion not of this world. The first picture, "The Gnome," set the pace for things to come, with Mehta beating out hesitant, intense rhythms. There was the beautiful melody of "The Old Castle," the light, gay "Tuleries," and eventually the dramatic "Bydlo," with its robust solo tuba (Nathan McIntyre) suggesting the awkward movement of a Polish oxcart. The "Ballet of the Unhatched Chickens" was effectively capricious and the dialogue of two Polish Jews in "Samuel Goldenberg and Shmelye" smoldering and dramatic at the same time.

time.

Then came "The Great Gate at Kiev," which brought the Mehta storm to an astonishing finale. It was thunder and lightning, a musical rage. The orchestra exploded.

So did the audience, which was instantly on its feet for a standing ovation and repeated curtain calls.

Two things here: Very often one hears the word "Youth Orchestra," and imagines young students scratching away at their fiddles. The American Youth Symphony proves otherwise. It is a musical body to be reckoned with, and

Conductor calls for local performing arts center

By HILLARY HAUSER

Zubin Mehta is an outgoing, gracious man as well as being a giant among world conductors. Therefore I felt privileged to pick him up from his chartered jet on Sunday afternoon to take him to the Arlington Theater, where he was to rehearse the American Youth Symphony Orchestra until the doors opened for the evening performance.

Once the logistical details of the program were discussed, Mehta spoke of other things. He was fascinated that one of the pianists performing that evening, Hannes Keller, had been a world-recognized deep sea diver who had stepped out onto the ocean floor at 1,000 feet, and he talked with amazement about an oil pipeline now being built from Oman to India on the bottom of the sea at 10,000 feet.

He expressed additional amazement at being in Santa Barbara during the daytime. In the many times he performed here, he had always arrived at night. As conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic from 1962 to '77, Mehta had conducted in Santa Barbara many times in concerts sponsored by the Community Arts Music Association, formed in Santa Barbara at the same time as the Los Angeles Philharmonic, 75 years ago, for the specific purpose of bringing that orchestra to town.

Therefore Mehta was familiar with the Arlington Theater and with its limitations, which for him include a cramped stage. For the Sunday rehearsal, Mehta had a delicately orchestrated schedule for the moving around of the two pianos needed for the



Zubin Mehta

Mozart double piano concerto. As it was, there was not enough space on stage to move the pianos so that he could save badly needed time.

"You know," Mehta said, "it is amazing to me that with all the love of music in Santa Barbara, with all the money and all the patrons of the arts here, why is there is no decent performing arts theater here?"

He recalled an occasion some years ago in which he conducted a program in Orange County—in a theater he said was grossly inadequate. He turned to the audience afterward and told his listeners their theater was a disgrace. Orange County got a new theater for the performing arts in a hurry. Cerritos, even, has a new, high-tech performing arts center. How about Santa Barbara?

It's worth thinking about.

should, actually, be touring the country. Secondly, although the CAMA concert was designed to inspire young people, there were adults in the audience Sunday evening saying they had not known that classical music performances were like this, and had not known what they were missing.

This was the point of CAMA's gift to Santa Barbara. The whole thing was an awakening.

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