

Conductor most becoming

PORTRAIT: BARRY LEWIS

Once nicknamed 'the playboy conductor', Zubin Mehta is now one of the world's most acclaimed performers. On the eve of the Proms, he talks about money, marriage – and his illegitimate child



Interview

By Helena de Bertodano

ZUBIN MEHTA is the most informal of people. At one point during our meeting, he walks over to a basin, lathers his face with foam and starts shaving. All the while, he continues to talk energetically, waving his razor around as if it were a baton, the better to express himself.

Exuberant and friendly, he seems far removed from the clichéd image of conductors as terse and dictatorial. We see each other in Munich, where he is musical director of the city's Philharmonic Orchestra and the Bavarian State Opera. The previous night I had seen him conducting Richard Strauss's *Alpine Symphony*, which he will repeat in Birmingham on September 7, and for the Proms at the Royal Albert Hall the following evening, as part of the commemoration of the 50th year of Strauss's death. On September 9, he will conduct Bruckner's *Symphony No. 8* and Chopin's *Piano Concerto No. 1*, also at the Proms.

Although Mehta lives in Los Angeles, he spends five months of each year in Munich. He lives in a suite at the Rafael, an opulent hotel in the middle of town. But we meet at the Opera House, which, he says, has become his second home. Here, he also has a private suite, dominated by a huge television screen, on which he watches cricket: his entire schedule revolves around cricket, his passion for which almost matches his love of music.

Dressed in a purple aertex shirt, black trousers and Salvatore Ferragamo shoes, Mehta leans back on a leopard-print cushion. He was born in Bombay 65 years ago, the son of the founder of the Bombay Symphony Orchestra, and his voice still has a faint Indian accent. He is tanned, a little corpulent but still good-looking. It is a hot day, and the window is wide open, so the sound of the traffic punctuates our conversation. He offers me a chocolate truffle from a large box. "Zürich airport," he says, by way of explanation.

Although he has his detractors, particularly in this country where some consider him to be more a master of publicity than a maestro, Mehta is one of the most sought-after conductors in the world. He became famous in his early thirties as the youngest person ever to be appointed musical director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. In those days, he was nicknamed the "playboy conductor" because of his smouldering looks, his lavish lifestyle and the beautiful women he was

always escorting. "I was a bachelor once upon a time," he says when I ask him if he minded the tag. "Now, after a concert, I love to go home with my wife [the former actress Nancy Kovack, whom he married in 1969]."

Recently the Mehtas found their marriage under an unwelcome spotlight. They had employed Susan McDougal, President Clinton's business associate in the Whitewater deal, as their accountant — but sacked her after claiming that she had spent \$150,000 of the Mehtas' money after signing cheques in Nancy's name. When the case came up in court, McDougal — trying to prove the Mehta's *laissez-faire* attitude towards their own money — revealed all sorts of details about their alleged profligacy. She said that their borzoi dog, Tarras, was fed on six prime steaks a day; that Nancy used to take Susan on exorbitant shopping sprees; and that once, when the lawn sprinkler had developed a fault at the Mehtas' Italian home, Nancy had her favourite plumber and his wife flown over first class from Los Angeles.

All exaggerated nonsense, says Mehta. "He's an Italo-American who says, 'I'm coming to Italy, can I come and visit you?' My wife says, 'No, stay in my house for free, just do my lawn, that's all. We didn't pay for his trip, but of course you can blow things up and manipulate them [so that] it sounds terrible.'"

He says that he is well aware that his wife spends a lot of money. She runs a property business renting out six houses they own in Los Angeles. "She spends a lot of money improving the houses. I know that. If I sell the houses, I'll get it all back."

Did the details of the court case make him feel that he ought to be a little more involved in his own financial affairs? "No, because I trust my wife implicitly and, as I said in court, if I earn a lot of money and if I don't mind that my wife spends it on the houses, then what is it to anybody?"

He blames the American legal system for transforming McDougal into a heroine when she refused to incriminate Clinton in the Whitewater scandal. "The judge asked her, 'Is the President's account factual?' She refused to answer. If it was factual, she would have said yes. So the judge said, 'You will stay in jail until you answer,' and she said, 'I would rather stay in jail'. In other words, she stuck up for her former boss and, from what we know, her former lover... Her husband's already said in all the papers that his wife slept with Clinton, so I'm not telling you anything new... They put her in jail with murderers. It was too much... She came into the courthouse a national heroine."

Mehta says that he and his wife have had no contact with McDougal since the case. "I'm sure she's writing a book with all the lies in it. She is so quiet, you know. They could be making a mini-series. She has a *real* following in America."

Although badly burnt by the experience, the Mehtas still employ an accountant. "We have to have a person to look after our property. I earn in 15 countries."



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get my half-million back. And, you know, what I objected to was that the half-million dollars was *net*: I have to earn more than a million dollars to make that. It's a lot of concerts, it's not money that I got from my father or by buying and selling shares. No. It is money I worked for, and I object."

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It is often reported that Mehta earns \$8 million a year. "I wish, I wish. I earn less than half that." He once said that, however much he earned, he always felt as though he were living on the breadline. Renowned for his huge generosity, Mehta will often invite everyone in sight out to dinner after a concert, ending up with a bill for 45 people.

The only aspect of his life he does not seem to direct is his marriage. Here his wife is the boss. She arranges bizarre

holidays for them: a recent one involved trekking through mountains in Rwanda to find gorillas. "Her vacations are very strenuous. Now she's cooking up another one to Thailand. I say, 'Wherever you go, I go.'"

When they went through a rocky patch in their marriage and he wanted to divorce her, she flew a Christian Science counsellor half-way round the world to try to persuade him otherwise. This was one of the details that emerged during the McDougal case and which Mehta now confirms. "Like every 30-year marriage, we've had a crisis and she sent a friend to talk to me, yes."

Although Mehta does not have any children from this marriage, he has two by his first wife, Carmen Lasky, a Canadian voice student. Carmen is now married to Mehta's younger brother, Zarin, an eccentric arrangement which apparently works very well. Mehta professes himself delighted that his children's stepfather is also their uncle. "It turned out to be wonderful because my brother brought my children up, my children have two fathers and they [my brother and former wife] have two beautiful children as well, my nephew and niece... The whole family is very close."

It is often reported that Mehta has a smattering of illegitimate children from affairs during his long marriage. I ask him how many children he has and he says, quickly, "Two." But I have read, I start to say. "Oh, we

don't want to talk about that," he interrupts. "No, I have only children from my first marriage." He pauses thoughtfully, then adds: "There is a child in Israel." Are you close? I ask cautiously. "I am getting to be close. I couldn't communicate with him because I don't speak Hebrew, but he's starting to speak English." How old is he? "He's eight."

Mehta has always had a particularly strong attachment to Israel. He conducts the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and does a lot of charity work there. During the Gulf War, worried that Iraq might bomb Tel Aviv, he flew out to show his support by playing a series of concerts. Why is he so fond of Israel? "I grew up there [professionally]. I handpicked 95 members of the orchestra, so I feel very close to them... and I work for the Israel Philharmonic for about a twentieth of my regular salary."

Just watching him conduct is exhausting. At one point, as he led the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra through the *Alpine Symphony*, he was head-banging so hard that I feared for his brains. The next day I ask him, ignorantly, if the art of the conductor is based on instinct. He roars with laughter. "No, no. Nothing is instinct. It's pure knowledge of style. You have almost to feel that you know the composer intimately as a person. You have to know his entire work to interpret one work."

Having finished shaving, he goes next door to change into a black silk open-necked shirt and jacket. None of this is for my benefit; it is for the Minister of Culture, whom he is about to visit. He explains that he is going to appeal on behalf of the grandson of the king of a Third World country (which he asks me not to name) to return a 19th-century work of art languishing in a Munich museum. "I'm always doing somebody a favour," he says immodestly. "Come in the car with me if you want to continue to talk."

SO I accompany him in his chauffeur-driven car to the minister's office and sit outside. He reappears 20 minutes later, saying breezily that he thinks he has won the minister round. It is not hard to believe. The combination of his easy charm and absolute conviction in himself must mean that he is a man who usually gets his way.

Yet he does not seem to have too inflated an ego, insisting that conductors are put on too high a pedestal and should even be hidden during concerts. "I've never had the guts but I would like to put a screen behind me and let the orchestra play and see how the public reacts. Why don't I do that?"


The image of conductors as dictators, he says, should become a thing of the past. "Some of my predecessors took advantage but things have changed. The conductor automatically became less autocratic with the rise of the unions. These men were

great conductors but their dictatorial attitude is making us suffer today."

What about you, I ask, do you see yourself as a great conductor? "I," he says with a twinkle that belies his words, "am just a simple musician."

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