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Music on the West Coast

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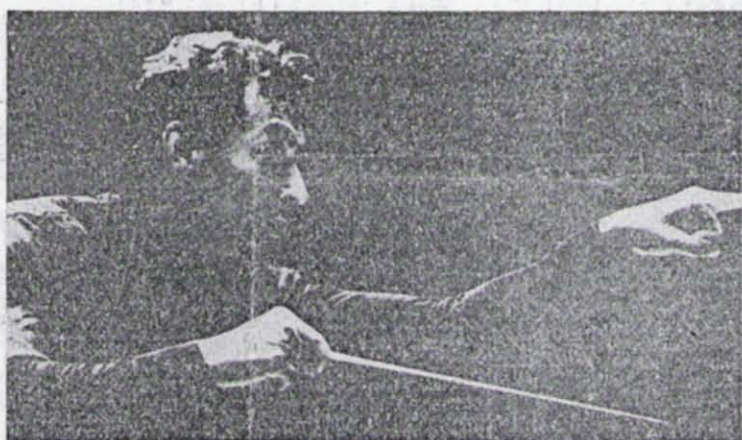
When Zubin Mehta took over the musical directorship of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra in 1962 at the age of 26, he also took his place as the youngest permanent conductor of any orchestra in the U.S.A. The appointment was intentionally a provocative one. Mehta was young; if he did not have years of experience, he had enthusiasm, and plenty of young, strong ideas. Enthusiasm at that time was badly needed. The fortunes of the Philharmonic were at their lowest ebb: programmes were dull, audiences waning, standards generally decayed.

If enthusiasm can sometimes accomplish the impossible straight away, miracles, and in particular orchestral miracles, do usually take a little longer. A bad conductor may be able to ruin a good orchestra in six months; but a good conductor, working full time, may take five years or more to bring a failed orchestra back to strength. In Los Angeles, the process of regeneration has been a long and complicated one. There have been finances to establish; desks to reorganise; concert halls to build. Europeans should remember, too, that though the West Coast of America is 2,000 miles from Cleveland, Philadelphia and Chicago, and 3,000 from Boston and New York, the musical gap between the coasts has traditionally been measured in years, not miles. Even to-day, in West Coast concert programmes, there is frequently noted that curiously self-conscious, self-deprecating category of "West Coast premiere"—another place (like dear, near Ireland), another land.

But the gap is closing fast. The musical scenery of California has changed, in ten years, out of all recognition: what is remarkable to-day about "West Coast premieres" in Los Angeles under Mehta is not any particular degree (or otherwise) of self-consciousness, but the fact that they happen almost every week. And of the decade, the most exciting years have probably been the past three, since the arrival in 1969 of Ernest Fleischmann (late of London and the LSO) to work with Mehta as the Philharmonic's Executive Director: a time, everyone agrees, of success and failure, of chances taken and missed, but always of vitality, of forward movement and experiment.

The orchestra's year is typically more than 200 concerts long: a winter season of six months at the new LA Music Center, followed by eleven weeks of the summer at the Hollywood Bowl; a tour of the campuses during October and May; and for the remaining two months, 40 to 50 concerts around the State—a gruelling but challenging schedule, within which Mehta and Fleischmann have been able to experiment in a variety of ways.

In home-county Hollywood style, there have been Mammoth events: a six-hour avant-garde programme in the Bowl, and a 12-hour Beethoven bicentenary celebration. There have been trips to give free concerts for black and Mexican-American communities, and programmes for the Chicano community at the Music Center; concerts for schoolchildren; workshops for young composers and conductors; and two *Contempo* series, which presented such



Zubin Mehta

widely different aspects of the 20th century as Frank Zappa's *Concerto for Mothers and Orchestras* and the first U.S. performance of Weber's op. posth. arrangement of the *Five Pieces* op. 5. But a look at the staple programme for the 1972-73 winter subscription season is likely to impress a Londoner, used to the same revamping year after year of the same old routine, most of all: only two programmes can be found in the whole series of 60 concerts without a 20th-century work—one of these *The Messiah*, and the other an unusual all-Beethoven evening which combines the triple concerto with scenes from *Egmont*. A standard provincial repertoire list for one season—mark you, London!—that includes music by Xenakis, Hiller, Penderecki, Ruggles, Shostakovich, Bloch, Erb, Schoenberg, Messiaen, Nielsen, Nordheim, Chihara, Martinano, Stravinsky, Copland, Henze. . . .

In place of *Contempo* this year, a new LAPO series called *Music for the Seventies* offers three different themes: "Music of Black America," "Women in Music" (Women's Lib aghast!), and the first of the series, which I heard last week, somewhat ominously entitled "Look Forward—Look Back." Happily, coyness was only in the name: the reality was a tough, invigorating event some five hours long, which might better have been called "Piano and Wind," held on campus at the University of California LA.

At first sight, campus or garden city? Physically one of the largest in America, the campus of UCLA is a huge estate on the edge of Beverly Hills, set out on a broad 19th-century plan, with tree-lined drives, lawns, villages, handsome stone buildings—and inevitably (in this City of the Car) car-parks: acres of them, to cater for students, nearly all car-owners, for whom the average commuting journey may be anything from 20 to 60 miles a day. It has the atmosphere of a friendly, spacious, hard-working place—more gentle, less anxious, than the sister campuses of Berkeley or Santa Barbara, and with fewer of their radical militant traditions.

But this week-end was different. Squads of black-suited, black-booted riot police, rigged in their riot hardware of knives, whistles, guns, gas-grenades, heavy nightsticks swinging, stood around the driveways, ready to charge from time to time—for no other perceptible reason than an impulse of sheer boredom—into whichever group of onlookers was nearest at hand. My arrival on campus coincided neatly with one such charge: the cab driver who had brought me gave one look at the crowd bearing down on us, and drove away fast without his fare. A peaceful outdoor assembly gathered to protest against the war in Vietnam: I ran with the rest. "When UCLA starts to demonstrate," a student remarked in a brief minute before we were chased round another corner, "man, it shows how deep this thing goes."

In Royce Hall, at the centre of the campus, Mehta and the Philharmonic were already rehearsing—Mehta also nursing a back bruised as he had come in by a glancing blow from one of the eager nightsticks outside. Musically, too, it was a programme of fierce contrasts: a full-length pre-concert piano recital of three modern works and Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* sonata, followed by an orchestral concert that began with Venetian brass music, moved through Aurelio de la Vega and Xenakis back to Bach, and ended with Messiaen's *Et Exspecto Resurrectionem Mortuorum*. Messiaen himself, on holiday recording birds in Utah, heard of the programme and attended every rehearsal as well as the concert: a quiet presence, quietly commanding, another ingredient of the paradox of the day.

By the next evening the crowds and the cops had gone; Royce Hall was packed. The two stars of "Look Forward—Look Back" were the young Australian pianist Roger Woodward, now living in London, making his American debut; and the section that is currently the glory of the LAPO, the wind, both wood and brass. Woodward's pre-concert recital was, by any standards, a spectacular success. The three modern works he had already played in London: these performances

were finer still, more finely wrought, brilliantly coloured. Richard Meale's *Coruscations*, highly articulated, very fast, glittered with energy and light. The three sweet, and pieces of Takemitsu's *Undiscovered Rest* made a grave prelude, time suspended, to the Cuban composer Leo Brouwer's strong, wilful (and also powerfully nostalgic) graphic score, *Sonata Pim'e Forte*. And finally the *Hammerklavier*: steel on stone, a fierce driving edge that marked every counterpoint, every dramatic turn, with utmost clarity. You could disagree passionately, as I did, with Woodward's adagio: yet be drawn in, compelled to admire. The whole was consistent, the authority undoubted.

After the Beethoven, four short cantatas by Guami, Frescobaldi, Lippi and Gabrieli cleared the air, sung out boldly by two brass choirs in either balcony of the hall. The premiere followed of *Entrata* for full orchestra, by the expatriate Cuban Aurelio de la Vega: a useful, straightforward essay in orchestral colour, well organised, neat and attractive. Woodward returned to complete his *Marathon* with two more works, Xenakis's *Eonta* for piano and brass—a whirlwind of energy marvellously released and consumed—and Bach's F minor harpsichord concerto with a ripieno only of double bass and two quartets of strings, a moment of calm recollection. And at the last, Messiaen's *Et Exspecto*: Mehta's tempi were fast but not hurried. The music unfolded in good time, the woodwind superbly tuned, the brass clean and bright, the single tuba, like a deep bell, tolling the edge of abyss: as the final chorale, *enorme, unanimo*.