

Backfire In Malaysia

By Robert E. Segal

Poor Zubin Mehta!

The music director of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and also conductor of the New York Philharmonic, this India-born maestro has been subjected to a second emotional artistic crisis. Fortunately, he has emerged from both battlefields with dignity and honor.

The first blow came in October, 1981, when he chose Richard Wagner's prelude to "Tristan and Isolde" for encore in Tel Aviv's Mann Auditorium. In recent weeks, he has been a central figure in the New York Philharmonic's decision not to buckle under the Malaysian government's demand that the scheduling of Ernest Bloch's "Schelomo: A Hebrew Rhapsody" be scratched as an affront to Malaysia's Moslem extremists.

Arched above these two battles over cultural censorship is attention drawn during the summer of 1984 to an exhibit on "Wagner And The Jews" as a feature of this year Bayreuth Festival.

Tracing these new threads, one gets insights on musical disruptions, Islam's fanatical contempt for Judaism, the wide differences between the 1981 Tel Aviv incident and the recent Malaysian episode, Mehta's devotion to his art -- above all -- the sordid story of Wagner's anti-Semitism.

Noted for its wide expanse of jungles and blessed with great sources of rubber and tin, Malaysia was to have been an early September stop on the New York Philharmonic's 12-city Asian tour. At first when asked to blot out the Hebrew Rhapsody number, the Philharmonic bowed. Outraged cries from Jewish organization spokesmen and from political figures obliged the music tour planners to reconsider. Instead of cancelling the Bloch composition, the Philharmonic, with Maestro Mehta's warm approval, dropped the Malaysian appearance altogether.

Long a champion of Jewish causes, Maestro Mehta left the podium in sorrow and anger in October, 1981, when insults and threats from concentration camp survivors greeted the Israel Philharmonic's encore selection of the prelude to Wagner's "Tristan and Isolde." Aware of Israel's ban on Wagner music, dating from 1948, Mehta met the challenge head-on: "I will not subject my musicians anymore to this kind of circus. The music of this great genius has got to be played

once and for all in Israel, which has the finest music-loving people in the world.

Soon, Menachem Begin wrote the Israel Philharmonic to disown criticism leveled at Mehta by a deputy and to laud Mehta as "a great maestro and friend of Israel." A statement issued by all but two of the Israel Philharmonic's 120 members and every member of the Board backed Mehta. On November 2, 1981, he was voted the orchestra's music director for life.

What then of the "Wagner And The Jews" exhibit in Bayreuth this summer? Having concluded that "the virus of anti-Semitism was always in Wagner" and taking note of the decision of Bayreuth Festival managers to resume the pre-Hitler custom of engaging Jewish artists, the Bayreuth's museum director, Manfred Eger, refers to the summer exhibit not as a plea for Wagner but as a plea for truth. Thus the glory of the art is separated from the poison of racism that infected Wagner's mind and soul.

During the centenary of Wagner's birth, 1983, several biographies were published dealing with Wagner and his second wife, Casima, the reportedly half-Jewish daughter of Franz Liszt. Her self-hatred fanned the flames of his contempt for Jews. A second and more potent anti-Semitic virus entered Wagner's being through his daughter's marriage to Houston Stewart Chamberlain whose pseudo-anthropological writing, especially "Foundations of The 19th Century," gave the Teutonic world credit for most modern achievements, fiercely denigrated Jews, and provided Hitler with underpinning for his Aryan supremacy rantings.

Jealousy of intellectual rivals, especially Jews, was a Wagner affliction. He loathed Meyerbeer whose early triumphs surpassed his own. He boasted that if he were emperor, he would close all universities. He rebuked the British for allowing Disraeli to serve as prime minister. He longed to see all Jews attending a performance of Lessing's "Nathan The Wise" perish in a fire.

In a letter to King Ludwig, he declared himself perhaps the last art-loving German able to triumph over "the Judaism that is already getting control of everything."

Actually, it is a Zubin Mehta and an art-loving Jewry that have shown how to win over both the scourge of bigotry and attempts to censor art.

Young Jewish Swimmers Score In State Swim Meet



Jewish members of the Las Vegas Sandpiper Swim Team, Left to Right: Helene Thill, Jay Bernstein, Vanessa Thill.

Jay Bernstein, son of Dr. Lee and Charlotte Bernstein, and Vanessa Thill and her sister, Helene, daughters of Gary and Rebecca Thill, are members of the Las Vegas Sandpipers Swim Team that won the Nevada State swimming championship in Reno.

Jay is on the 8-year-old boys relay team that set a new state record in the 200 meter free relay; earlier the same relay quartet shattered the state record in the 200 meter medley relay, with Jay swimming the butterfly 50 meters and lowering his previous best time by almost 6.5 seconds.

Helene and her relay team of 9-10-year-old girls also won both the 200 meter free relay and 200 meter medley relay, and in the individual events Helene finished second in 50m. freestyle and third in the 50m. backstroke, the 50m. breaststroke, and the 200m. freestyle.

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