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Extreme warmth and astonishing virtuosity

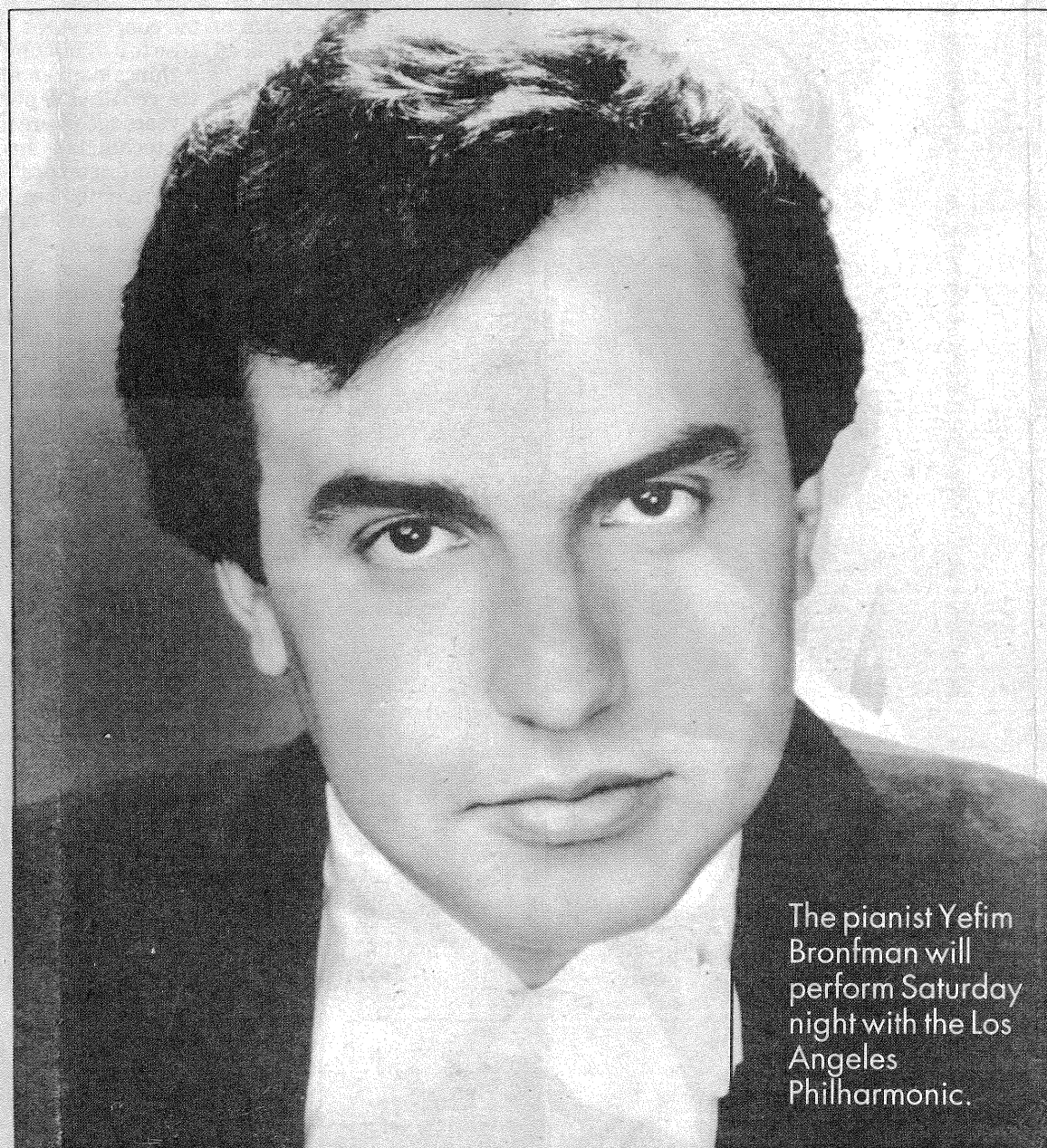
BY HILLARY HAUSER

In 1973, a war was on in Israel and Zubin Mehta was in Tel Aviv. The great conductor, known for staging special performances of the Israel Philharmonic for Israeli soldiers (and eventually appointed conductor-for-life of the orchestra), was in and out of the country a lot for musical business. When the maestro was there he had work to do, he was busy and he had little time for outside matters.

Nevertheless, the young 15-year-old pianist Yefim Bronfman had earned an audition with the maestro. Mehta would listen to him play for five minutes and that was it. Five minutes.

Bronfman, whose family had emigrated to Israel from Russia only months before, had been working hard with his teacher, Arie Vardi, head of the Rubin Academy of Music at Tel Aviv University. He had also been working hard to get this audition with Zubin Mehta. Knowing he only had five minutes to make an impression, he decided to play the Liszt-Paganini etude in E-flat major, a piece full of technical rough stuff — chromatic sixths for alternating hands, chromatic scales in tenths for crossed hands, boom and crash, with everything topped off by a climax of Liszt's favorite alternating "false octaves."

Mehta listened to this, and the five-minute audition stretched to 45 minutes. Who was this astonishing keyboard whirlwind? Mehta wanted to hear more.



The pianist Yefim Bronfman will perform Saturday night with the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

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Bronfman obliged with a Liszt concerto and a Scarlatti sonata. Mehta immediately booked Bronfman to play a concert with him in Israel.

Two years later, in 1975, Bronfman made his international debut with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, Mehta conducting, and in 1977 he performed with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. In 1978 he made his New York Philharmonic debut and in 1981, his Washington recital debut at Kennedy Center. Today, at the ripe young age of 36, Yefim Bronfman is an international star.

He will perform in Santa Barbara on Saturday night, Bartok's wild, demonic third piano concerto with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Esa-Pekka Salonen conducting. It is the Community Arts Music Association's closing concert of the season.

Speaking by telephone from his home in New York City, Bronfman is warm, easy, speaks impeccable English — and considering that he and fellow Russian pianist Evgeny Kissin are considered by some critics as logical heirs to the duo-throne once occupied by Rubinstein and Horowitz, he is remarkably unpretentious. He remembered the Mehta audition with gratitude, saying that it had kept him out of the horrors of competition.

"It changed my life," Bronfman said. "I worked hard to get the audition, but after that, things happened to fall into place so that I wasn't overwhelmed. I could deal with it. Competition finishes a lot of potentially great artists off. They

win something, then are flooded with dates. Career building should be gradual. One can try to break the pattern of competition if he can."

If Bronfman's performing schedule was easy and gradual in the beginning, it certainly isn't now. He had just performed in Boston the night before, the Rachmaninoff third piano concerto, and in a few days he was to play a chamber recital for the Lincoln Center's annual dinner. The following week he was performing with the New York Philharmonic (the Rachmaninoff third concerto again), then would fly to California for a recording session with the L.A. Philharmonic of the Bartok piano concertos number one and three. "And then, Santa Barbara," he said. Bronfman figured he does some 125 concerts a year — every three days a piano concerto, a recital, chamber performance, something — "I have to pay my bills," he said (surely joking).

How does he handle the stress of such a schedule?

"Well, stress is part of the profession," he said. "It's not a question whether you're able to deal with stress, there is stress in any field nowadays. The question is whether you can control it. There was a time I was miserable, but now I'm controlling it. I'm controlling it by not thinking about it."

The pianist, whose style is noted for its extreme warmth and astonishing virtuosity, said the most important period of his pianistic training was just after he arrived in Israel. Born in Tashkent, in the Soviet Union, Bronfman was 14½ years old when his parents announced they were leaving the country. "I was a kid in high school," Bronfman recalled. "My parents said, 'We're going to Israel.' I said, 'Fine,' and packed my bags. My parents took the burden of that move themselves. I had a very



D. DIETZ

The music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Esa-Pekka Salonen.

wonderful teacher, wonderful human being, an intelligent man with many skills and ideas," Bronfman said. "It was good to be growing up under his guidance."

As his career moved into full steam, the pianist moved to New York and studied at the Juilliard School, Marlboro and the Curtis Institute — and with stellar artists like Rudolf Firkušny, Leon

Fleisher and Rudolf Serkin, he became an American citizen in July 1989.

Bronfman's smooth, unruffled demeanor has served him well in the share of wild experiences he has had on the concert stage. "I try to keep those to a minimum," he said, "but things happen all the time." He recalled a performance two years ago where in concert piano technicians had forgotten to set the brakes on the piano. Somewhere in the beginning of the Rachmaninoff third concerto Bronfman found the piano rolling away from him. "The cellist stood up and held the piano while I finished the first movement," he recalled.

During a more recent performance in Denver with the noted violinist Isaac Stern, there occurred a "famous accident" that was widely reported in European publications after it happened. During the first half of the program, the two musicians had finished a piece, taken their applause, gone backstage for a momentary bow-out, and when they returned to play the next piece they found that the audience was gone.

"The intermission was in the program in the wrong place," Bronfman said. "We just waited for everyone to come back."

In addition to his active performing schedule, Bronfman is making numerous, important recordings as an exclusive Sony Classical recording artist. With Esa-Pekka Salonen and the L.A. Philharmonic he has recorded the second and third piano con-

certos of Rachmaninoff, and the two are currently recording the three Bartok piano concertos for release later this year. Of Salonen, who is now concluding his second year as music director of the L.A. "Phil," Bronfman said, "He's wonderful!"

And of the third Bartok concerto the two will perform in Santa Barbara, the pianist said, "It is among the most advanced sounding music of the 20th century."

"If you're looking for a melody, this is the wrong piece," he explained. "Look for other things that make it interesting. One has to be open-minded. I love playing it, it's such a wild, exciting piece with barbarian elements in it. The second movement is one of the spookiest sounding pieces of music, quite astounding."

Also on the Los Angeles Philharmonic program are two magnificent works by Beethoven — the epic Fifth Symphony in C minor, and the Overture, "The Consecration of the House," which Beethoven wrote for the celebratory inauguration in 1822 of the remodeled Theater in der Josefstadt in Vienna.

(For tickets and information to Saturday night's concert at 8, call CAMA at 966-4324.)

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