

Fiddler on the roof

BY HILLARY HAUSER

In the classical music world there are some fantastic stories about stars being born at the moment of need for last-minute replacements. When a scheduled performer calls in sick a day or a week before a performance, it can be the chance of a lifetime for those waiting in the wings — like Leonard Bernstein, who stepped in when Bruno Walter caught flu, or Esa-Pekka Salonen substituting for Michael Tilson Thomas on a few days notice.

Gil Shaham and the Santa Barbara Symphony

WHEN: 8 p.m. Saturday
and 3 p.m. Sunday
WHERE: Arlington Theatre
INFORMATION: 963-4408

In 1989, violinist Gil Shaham was 18 years old, living in New York and studying various subjects in school besides his music — just in case he couldn't get a job as a musician when he graduated. One day, ICM Artists in New York was on the phone, asking if he would fly immediately to London to perform the next day with the London Symphony Orchestra. Michael Tilson Thomas was conducting.

Shaham would replace Itzhak Perlman, who had an ear infection and could not appear. The young violinist flew to London, played the Bruch Concerto No. 1 for the first night's performance and the Sibelius Violin Concerto on the second. The audiences and critics went wild. Shaham's career was launched.

In a recent telephone interview with Shaham, who was in San Francisco early last week to appear in three concerts with Tilson Thomas, there was not only gentle humility but a great sense of humor. In talking with him, it was easy to believe the amusing reports of his reactions to that chance of a lifetime. Shaham had said that although he had played in London's Festival Hall before, had performed the two concertos before, and had played with the London Symphony before, he had never faced "hundreds of people who were waiting to hear Itzhak Perlman!"

The violinist, now well-known all over the world for his heroic, poetic and virtuosic performances, will play the Sibelius concerto for the Santa Barbara Symphony's concerts Saturday night and Sunday afternoon at the Arlington Theatre.

The Santa Barbara performance is a sentimental return. The last time Shaham performed here, in a brilliant Masterser-

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The violinist Gil Shaham and his Stradivarius.

For Shaham, right place, right time

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ies recital of Dvorak, Korngold and Sarasate, it was on or about his birthday in 1993. This time around, his birthday will take place on Sunday. He will be 23 years old during his Saturday night performance, and 24 on Sunday.

This time, too, he will be performing with Santa Barbara Symphony Conductor Gisele Ben-Dor. The two are related by country, by school and by scholarship. Both lived in Israel during their musically formative years, attended the Rubin Academy in Tel Aviv and received scholarships from the America-Israel Cultural Foundation. After the Santa Barbara Symphony's Saturday night performance, the Los Angeles chapter of the America-Israel Foundation will host a reception for Shaham and Ben-Dor in the Arlington Court.

Like Ben-Dor, Shaham's early musical training was enriched by living in Israel. His parents, both Israelis, both scientists, were visiting professors at the University of Illinois when Shaham was born in 1971. He possesses both U.S. and Israeli citizenships and passports. "I was in this country just long enough to get my passport, now I can run for president of the U.S. and prime minister of Israel," Shaham joked.

Shaham's parents returned to Israel when he was 2 years old. Five years later, he entered the Rubin Academy of Music at Tel Aviv University to study violin. Ben-Dor, who was 23 at that time, was there too, earning degrees in orchestra conducting. The two

did not meet until much later, in the U.S.

Shaham remembered his first teacher at the Academy, Samuel Bernstein. "He was great, he's now in his 90s. He came from Russia, the Lithuanian school, had great freedom with the instrument. I learned from him that this is the most important thing, freedom — pick up your fiddle and do anything and everything with it. This is what I try to do."

Shaham said that as a young boy he listened to recordings all the time. One old record he played over and over again was of the Russian violinist David Oistrakh playing the Sibelius violin concerto.

Of this wild, savage, romantic and sometimes melancholy composition (which is also enormously difficult, full of pyrotechnical octave passages and a whole battery of violinistic fireworks), Shaham said, "that's the piece that convinced me to play violin."

"Ah, that's a great, great piece! You know, Sibelius was a frustrated violinist, somehow he didn't succeed. So he wrote this to get back at everybody, and he made it especially difficult ... He wrote a cadenza that is outlandish, but there's so much in it."

Shaham had recently been to Finland ("I've been to Helsinki and back") to perform the violin concerto with the Helsinki Philharmonic. The occasion was the national celebration of the composer's birthday. "I saw Sibelius' home, I'm a big fan of his," Shaham said.

He had recently been to India, too, as a featured soloist in Zubin

Mehta's celebrated return to his native country with the Israel Philharmonic.

"It was great!" Shaham recalled. "We were in a huge cricket field, Zubin was going nuts, talking about cricket. He was beside himself with memories. He is a national hero there. I didn't have a visa, the consul was checking me out. I said, I have this show, this concert, to do tomorrow. He found it was Zubin, and said, 'Zubin! ... Oh! step right in!' They were so proud to have him back."

Shaham was in India all of 36 hours. He cannot calculate how many concerts he does per year. "I have 100,000 frequent flier points," he figured. His performance in Santa Barbara this weekend comes at the end of three months on the road. His parents, who moved to New York 15 years ago ("a happy coincidence. They got positions, I went to Juilliard. We were all together"), take care of his dog while he is away.

Does he get tired of being on the go all the time?

"It's a perfect life for me," he said. "I love music, and I love room service."

A very old friend that always travels with Shaham is his Stradivarius ("1699, plus tax and all you can eat," he said). "I was lucky to get it, its last owner, in Chicago, gave me the first option to buy it five years ago."

The very first owner of the 1699 Bein and Fushi Stradivarius, Shaham said, was Countess Polignac (a member of the ancient French family of nobility under Louis XIV and XV), and among its later owners was Benjamin Franklin's mistress.

"If that fiddle could talk!" Shaham said. "I was wondering, did he play violin? If you could, could you find out?"

(To date, it has only been learned that Franklin's father played psalms on the violin

when Benjamin was a young boy; as for his mistress, when Franklin was sent by the U.S. Congress to France to negotiate the 1776 treaty, he ended up spending much time in that country and, following the death of his wife, consorted with at least two French noblewomen.)

With all the travelling Shaham does, there appears to be no typical routine in his days. "Practice? I should practice!" he said. "I should, I should! It all depends on when the O.J. (Simpson murder case) testimony comes on!"

At the top of the violinist's list of hobbies is "sleep. That and bungee jumping and sky diving." The more serious answer is: his computer. "I got it about a year ago, it keeps me company. I use the Internet, look around and find friends. I found a friend the other day who had moved to Tokyo."

Shaham's fascination with computers has carried over to his love of music. For Deutsche Grammophon (for whom he has made many recordings, including one nominated for a Grammy), the violinist originated the idea of a video recording the "Winter" section of Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons" — with a separate CD-ROM video of windswept New Yorkers running around in last winter's many storms. While the music plays, computer viewer/listeners can also look at photographs and memorabilia by moving a computer mouse around on Shaham's violin case.

The CD-ROM "Winter" recording made international news when it hit the stands earlier this month in 50,000 immediate orders. Shaham simply likes the fact that the whole project might introduce many people to the beauty of classical music. His job, he said, is to keep fiddling.

Hillary Hauser is a freelance writer and classical pianist who lives in Summerland.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Conductor David Alan Miller.

Barnum of the baton

BY JOEL STASHENKO

ALBANY, N.Y. — Being boring is not one of the deadly sins, but David Alan Miller says it should be for an entertainer.

So Miller has adopted this credo as conductor and music director of the Albany Symphony Orchestra: Be funny. Be outrageous. Be unpredictable. Be entertaining.

"Being from Hollywood or just being an American kid, I learned very early that the worst thing you can be as an artist or a performer is boring," he said.

Hence, the costumes. Miller has conducted his orchestra dressed as Beethoven, as Haydn, as Superman, as a cowboy and a secret agent.

He uses the guises during his

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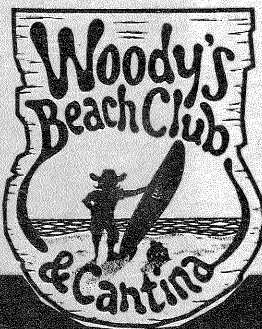
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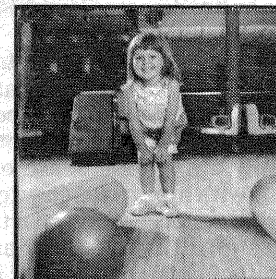
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