

LUXE Chats –

Q&A with George Mathew, conductor and director



Talking benefit concerts, to-do destinations and New York’s best croissants with conductor extraordinaire George Mathew.

Baton-wielding philanthropist George Mathew is the founder and artistic director of Music For Life International. We talked to the Singapore-born, NYC (by way of India and the UK) resident

about his fave Gotham hangs and his upcoming benefit concert – *The Scheherazade Initiative: Celebrating the Resilience of Women and Girls in the Face of Violence* – at Carnegie Hall on October 19.

What’s your first memory of music?

I don’t have a first memory of music, but I have a memory of a sensation from [listening to] an interlude – the filler music that the television station in Singapore used to play. It was the aural equivalent of comfort food; the thing you go back to and everything will be alright.

How did Music for Life come about?

Ten years ago there was a major earthquake in Kashmir in which 90,000 people lost their lives. Watching this terrible thing on the news, I wondered if it wouldn’t be good to do something with music to help people, so I decided to organise our first humanitarian concert. I approached Carnegie Hall who said yes, and by word of mouth put together a community of musicians from top orchestras. It was huge and raised a great deal of money for Médecins sans Frontières.

There was no intention of there being a second, or third concert but a year later a friend working for the UN approached us about Darfur, so we held Verdi’s Requiem for Darfur.

In the interim I realised we really needed an organisation, and in 2008 Music for Life was founded and structured as a non-profit. It’s steadily grown and we’ve held concerts most years since then.



Why the name Music for Life International?

A great hero of mine, Leonard Bernstein, organised a concert called Music for Life for AIDS at Carnegie Hall in November 1987. I approached the Bernstein family and foundation and asked if we could use the name Music for Life International and they very graciously agreed. The idea

was music could serve all life on earth and not just humanity.

How would you describe the organisation now?

As we've grown we've started a training orchestra for young pre-professional musicians in addition to the big humanitarian concerts at Carnegie Hall. Music for Life has a strong community building element, we have musicians coming back each year and volunteering their artistry and time for the most vulnerable people.

What can audiences expect at this year's event?

The Scheherazade Institute focuses on the resilience of women in the face of adversity. Whether real or fictional, Scheherazade was an extraordinary character that employed imagination and resources to create beauty in a space that had previously held violence. And so we chose two pieces of music about Scheherazade by Rimsky-Korsakov and Ravel and juxtaposed the two. Both are great works of classical art, which distil the essence of human experience – that's what resonates.

What's your favourite journey?

In CS Lewis' Narnia Books the characters travel to worlds beyond our world and there's a place in-between – the wood between the worlds. For me, that place is Dubai. A few years ago we chose to fly Emirates and stuck with them, so we always route through Dubai. The airport is like an Arab concept of an oasis and I've come to value it a great deal.

Where would you like to travel to next?

There are, happily, no shortage of places I'd still like to go to. Australia and New Zealand are on my list, especially as we have lots of family there. South America too, as I've only been to Panama.

The best advice you've ever been given?

'If you have to ask the question, should I do music, the answer is no. If you want to do music, do and nothing will stop you.'

Where do you recommend for pre/post Carnegie Hall concert drinks?

The Knave bar, which has been converted into a medieval space with curtains that reach 80ft to the ceiling. The drinks are conventional, but it's a wonderful place where the street comes to you. The Robert restaurant at the top of the Museum of Arts and Design looks out onto Central Park and Columbus Circle and turns into a bar at night.



Where do you always take visitors in New York?

The High Line in Chelsea – the evenings especially are quite extraordinary and there are sometimes telescopes for planet watching and art installations.

Your top shop?

Rachel Schechtman's concept shop Story takes a word or an idea as its theme and completely changes every 4-6 weeks. The last theme was Donald – not Trump! – but cosmetics designer Donald Robertson. It's quirky and original.



Your favourite spots to sup?

La Bergamote is the best croissant shop in the city – they do quite an unusual variety. I think that the best coffee in the whole city is to be found at Gelato Giusto. Malaysian/Singaporean food is comfort food for me and a little hard to find in New York. Nyonya in Chinatown has a massive lunch following and the evenings are quite special.