George Mathew has won accolades not only as a top conductor, but also for his humanitarian work in organizing benefit concerts and championing causes across the world, **SHALEENA KORUTH** writes

MUSIC OF THE HEART

MUSICAL SPLENDOR George Mathew conducts at Carnegie Hall's Stern Auditorium/Perelman Stage in January.

CHRIS LEE

ON JAN. 12, at the Isaac Stern Auditorium in New York City's Carnegie Hall, an orchestra led by Indian conductor George Mathew performed Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 3 in a concert that was like any other, in many ways, and yet, completely unusual. The orchestra consisted of musicians from 59 orchestras and 13 schools across the United States and abroad, with the playbill including the acclaimed New York Philharmonic and the less likely Lion King pit orchestra. Joining this potpourri of musical talent were the women of the Dessoff Choir and two famous children's choirs.

This sort of mixing of orchestras and symphonies hardly ever occurs in the world of Western classical music. The New York Philharmonic and the New York Pops share little more than the name of their city; when it comes to performance and venues, their paths rarely cross.

At Carnegie Hall though, that night in January, students played alongside faculty, and musicians who had met only the day before shared the stage.

"It is very rare for musicians to collaborate like this," Ankush Bahl, conductor of the New Jersey Youth Symphony, says. "I think the musicians in the New York Philharmonic really enjoyed playing with their students and colleagues in other symphonies because they rarely get to. Generally, by contract, they play only with their orchestra."

"Mahler for the Children of AIDS" collapsed boundaries not just in the musical world but beyond by raising more than $170,000 for children and mothers affected by HIV/AIDS.

For three years now, since 2006, Mathew, who serves on the conducting staff at the Manhattan School of Music, has mounted the conductor's podium at Carnegie Hall and delivered to the audience the music of Beethoven, Verdi and Mahler. His achievement is more than satisfactory on a musical level, but most impressive in its humanitarian stance. Mathew's concerts consist of volunteer musicians culled from orchestras and schools, with students and stars per-

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forming together in support of a variety of relief organizations. Think Live Aid or USA for Africa, except that this time around the musicians are in black ties and gowns. They are not grooving at a stadium teeming with fans, but performing at their music stands, in that most storied and exclusive of venues – Carnegie Hall in New York City.

The Western classical music scene is intensely competitive. Musicians must adhere to very high standards of skill; add to that the high cost of staging a performance, and it is little wonder there are few benefit concerts in classical music. By tapping individual volunteers instead of expensive orchestras, Mathew's concerts provide musicians who are usually too busy honing their craft with a way to give back while doing what they love best.

"I think of George Mathew as a musical Gandhi with his ability to unify people and musicians for the cause of these worldwide tragic situations," says Glenn Dicterow, concertmaster for the New York Philharmonic and a star performer at the Carnegie benefits. "It makes you feel better as a person and what better way than to donate your art."

Four years ago though, in October 2005, none of this was on Mathew's mind. He was in Carnegie Hall one afternoon, at a Schubert concert. The Kashmir earthquake had struck only days ago, killing hundreds of people and affecting thousands more.

"I was listening to the Juilliard orchestra and thinking how amazing it was to be here in this beautiful space watching these people playing this incredible music," he says. "And the earthquake had been sitting quite heavily on my mind. It was not getting the kind of media attention it needed." Mathew penned on a program insert, "Concert for Kashmir."

A few days later he mentioned to a friend if only Leonard Bernstein – the renowned conductor and American legend who organized numerous humanitarian concerts for causes including AIDS – had been alive, perhaps a fundraiser would have been possible. Mathew's friend said, "Look, Bernstein is not here. You are. You feel about this, so do something."

When asked how it all came together, Mathew says his initial plan was modest – a concert in a church, for example – until his former teacher, Sir Colin Davis, president of the London Symphony Orchestra, suggested he speak to the head of Carnegie Hall. A few meetings later, Mathew had his venue, and from then on, the possibilities simply exploded.

A top venue needed a star cast to match. A friend mentioned Mathew's plan to Eugene Drucker of the world-renowned Emerson String Quartet. At a chance meeting in, of all places, an elevator, Drucker said he was interested. Returning home with a "spring in his step," Mathew met a former principal cellist at the New York Philharmonic, who offered his services, and promised to put Mathew in touch with other performers.

"Suddenly there was this buzz going through the orchestral world," Mathew says of how the first concert came together.

"People whom I'd known about and idolized from a distance," including Dicterow, whose prodigious musical talent led to his career taking off at the age of 11, were now interested. A net of talent, both American and international, was falling in place almost seamlessly. The administrative portion was less familiar but a New York law firm offered its services – pro bono – and on Jan. 23, 2006, Mathew stepped up to the podium to conduct "Beethoven's Ninth for South Asia."

Reviews of Mathew's concerts have been more tempered than laudatory. One reason is that such diverse groups of musicians can come together only at the last minute with time enough for just one or two rehearsals. The other is Mathew himself. He wears a conductor's hat, and wears it well, but as a visionary, with a zeal for communicating and bringing people together – that is the hat with feathers.

MUSICAL MOMENT Mathew addresses the audience at the Mahler for Children of AIDS concert.

CHRIS LEE

"Mathew works wonders. I believe he is a very special and brilliant human being with nothing but love in his heart for humanity; one cannot help but be affected by somebody like that."

Bahl, a colleague and conductor, says about Mathew, "I think people like to play for him because he's very inspiring. He's very articulate. He shows a clear love for the music and the causes."

How does Mathew balance his artistic side with the legwork involved in organizing the concerts? "It's difficult," he says, "and I am not sure I've done the balancing very well. But I am a conductor regardless, and one has to know how to drive the car."

Even Dicterow praises Mathew's passion for his music, but seems more struck by his humanitarian side. "Mathew works wonders. I believe he is a very special and brilliant human being with nothing but love in his heart for humanity; one cannot help but be affected by somebody like that."

This must have been the case for many of the people on the concerts' advisory boards. Their names read like a celebrity list on a global peace panel. They have included the world famous conductor Zubin Mehta, Newsweek editor Fareed Zakaria, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and actress Mia Farrow, to name only a few. One of them, Alexander Bernstein – president of the Bernstein Foundation – wrote in an e-mail response, "George Mathew is a shining example of my father, Leonard Bernstein's creed that art can 'do work in the world.' He has worked tirelessly through music to involve and uplift people. I salute George's heroic efforts."

Mathew was born in 1965 in Singapore. His parents moved to Trivandrum, Kerala, upon retiring and Mathew entered the 11th grade. The experience was tantamount to being locked up.

"I wanted to get out to a more cosmopolitan city in India. There were many things I was rebelling against – social structures, for one. If you didn't want to study medicine or engineering your life was a waste," he says.

"I was interested in music but it was clear that was something I would have to do as an avocation, because professional musicians had to be – to use the terrible word – talented."

Around this time, Mathew heard of Rishi Valley, a school run by the Krishnamurti Foundation in Andhra Pradesh, where education is conducted not with a view to conform but understand oneself and one's potential in relation to the world.

The school's philosophy appealed to him instantly and he convinced his parents, who reluctantly let him join. At the end of his last year in school, Mathew went to the Krishnamurti school in Brockwood, England. Only there did he hear his first live orchestra and set eyes upon an orchestral score.

It was as if the spark that was struck during his years learning piano as a child in Singapore, and later as choir conductor at church in Trivandrum, had suddenly met a match.

Soon after the Mahler concert, Mathew was optimistic and full of plans. He had just gotten married. He was about to visit India. More than one group had already approached him about doing another fundraiser for pediatric AIDS. "We struck a nerve with this concert," he says, but adds fundraising and humanitarian concerts are only the tip of the iceberg.

He is looking into bringing music education to impoverished children in Chennai in a program based on a similar Venezuelan program called El Sistema. Mathew is confident of convincing Western musicians to travel to India to mentor and teach the children. There is no funding yet, but he is not worried.

"India represents a watershed moment in history as billions rise up to take their place on the world stage," he says. He is excited about possibilities in the global village; possibilities that take him back 25 years. In 1984, Mathew watched the New York Philharmonic on television when it toured India with Zubin Mehta. Today, some of the same players are in his concerts, making, in his words, the world of that moment seem rather small.

MATRIMONIAL HARMONY: Matthew and his wife. The couple visited India, where Matthew hopes to start a music program for impoverished children in Chennai.

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