

PERSONAL DIMENSIONS

# *Discovering the* **Eighth Note**

*An orchestra  
conductor's  
journey*



Israel  
Edelson

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BY DOVID MARGOLIN

*“Conducting an orchestra is your vocation; if you are a conductor, then this is your divine service. This is how you serve G-d,” insisted the world-renowned conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein as he sat in conversation in the mid-1980s with his young protégé, Israel Edelson. Added Bernstein, “You must understand that if you insist on being Shabbos-observant, it will be the end of your professional career.”*

*Unmoved by his teacher’s pleas, Israel Edelson, who had served as the legendary maestro’s assistant conductor on the Vienna State Opera’s American tour, was determined to continue on the new road that his soul had rediscovered. His ultimate path, he had decided, would be different from the one he had so recently envisioned, his goals unlike the ones he had spent so many years trying to achieve.*

*On a recent sunny afternoon, Mr. Edelson — whose wife, Mrs. Lora Finkelman, was profiled in Inyan (“The Unlikely Lamplighter,” by Rebbetzin Faigie Horowitz, March 20, 2013) — sat down with us to share his riveting story.*



### A Trace of Judaism

"I was born in Leningrad in the USSR," begins Mr. Edelson, referring to Russia's former imperial capital, today known once again as St. Petersburg. "Both of my parents came from Ukraine, and both of my grandfathers were rabbis. My maternal grandfather was the rabbi of a *shtetl* called Kalinovka in the Vinnitsya region, and growing up I heard many stories about him. My paternal grandfather was a *shochet*, *mohel*, and a fine *baal tefillah*."

"Because of my parents' background, although we were secular, we always had some remnants of Jewish customs in our home, mainly from my grandmother. She always lit Shabbos candles, and every year we would gather for the Pesach *Sedarim*. But as a child I really didn't know much about Judaism, so to me it was all actually quite puzzling."

"My mother was only ten years old when her father passed away from the rampant famine that swept across Ukraine in the early 1920s as a result of Stalin's agricultural policies. My father's father was a religiously very strict man,

so my father ran away from home at the age of fifteen and lived as a secular person. Even so, until his last day my father preserved his love for *chazzanus*, and I have memories from my childhood of him singing and practicing *chazzanus*; he had a beautiful baritone. This was his hobby, and he was a part of the choir of the Leningrad Choral Synagogue for thirty years."

Israel's father was not only a *chazzanus* enthusiast, he also worked professionally as the head of the percussion section in a theater orchestra. Israel's soon-to-be-discovered musical talent came from his mother as well, who was also musically talented although she had no formal training.

### Growing Up as a Musician

At five years of age, young Israel began to take private violin lessons in preparation for enrollment in the elite Leningrad Choral School for Boys, where he went when he was seven. The Choral School was a regular school that also

taught music, with a concentration on skilled choir performance.

"There I began to study piano as well — it was obligatory in the school — and eventually I developed a flair for piano because you can play harmonies as well, whereas on a violin you can only play the melody itself. Because I was so drawn to harmony, piano became a natural tool of self-expression for me."

Growing up in the Soviet school system proved difficult for the young Jewish boy, as it was for millions of other young Jews behind the Iron Curtain. "As I grew up, my experience with Judaism was very negative, because starting in kindergarten I suffered from manifestations of anti-Semitism. This school had a very small number of Jews



Israel Edelson, Vienna, 1976.

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Israel Edelson conducting in Vienna in 1976.



because they were very selective about whom they accepted; there were not more than one or two Jews in each class."

When Israel entered the eighth grade, the school began teaching choir conducting, but in his heart he knew that what he really wanted to do was conduct orchestras.

After Israel completed the eighth grade in 1966, he and his mother received a personal invitation from his uncle and aunt in Eretz Yisrael to join them there. (His parents had divorced when he was five.) The Soviet authorities rejected their request, but on their second try they were allowed to leave, a very rare occurrence in those years before the mass emigration of Russian Jewry.

"Our leaving Russia had nothing to do with Zionism or Israel; it was simply to join our family. The only thing I knew about the country was something I once learned in geography — that oranges grew there. That was it."

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#### **An Israeli in Jerusalem**

Once in Eretz Yisrael, Israel and his mother settled near their family in Yerushalayim, and he was enrolled in the city's only music high school, the Rubin Academy of Music. "At that time, the school was not even close to the level of professionalism of the one I attended in Russia, so I became the school's musical star," he said.

The high school was a part of the larger Rubin Music Academy, and while in high school Mr. Edelson was already attending the more advanced university-level academy music classes. After he graduated, he was immediately accepted into the third year of the academy and completed his university degree after only two years instead of the four years demanded of most.

"By the time I was in the academy, I was very seriously interested in orchestra conducting. My teacher there was one of the best and best-known orchestra conductors in Israel, Mendi Rodan.

Originally from Romania, at the time he was my teacher he was the conductor of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra. I appreciated and learned many things from him."

I ask Mr. Edelson whether he developed a stronger connection to Judaism once he arrived in Israel.

"During that period I considered myself an atheist because that was my upbringing in Russia. Coming to Israel actually lessened my connection to Judaism because in Russia I was an outcast Jew — I was never accepted. But in Israel I became an Israeli. My peers welcomed and accepted me, so I became more of an Israeli and less of a Jew."

After graduating from the academy, Mr. Edelson was drafted into the Israeli army, where he served for three years. Initially on track to become a paramedic, he was "borrowed" from the army to become part of an air force band, where he remained for the duration of his service.

#### An International Figure

Conducting is a highly specialized profession, demanding many years of hard work and devotion. When Mr. Edelson was a student at the academy in Israel, there were only a few others in the entire school who were on this track.

Mr. Edelson explains, "To become a conductor, it is absolutely necessary to study musical form and theory, orchestration, note reading, solfège — a singing technique used to teach pitch — harmony, and score-reading. A conductor needs to read the score of thirty instruments simultaneously, and it takes much training to acquire that skill."

After the army Mr. Edelson headed to Europe to continue his professional journey, quickly shedding his Israeli identity and becoming a self-declared international persona. He attended seminars and courses in Salzburg, Vienna, Rome, Stuttgart, and London,

studying under some of the greatest conductors of the day.

"I had the opportunity to observe some great conductors and watch them work; that's how you learn. It's how you are *mekabel* the *mesorah*, so to speak; it's not what you learn in school but what you learn in practice. I became fully engrossed in this education, and there was no other dimension in my life; it was all music."

Ironically, around this time Mr. Edelson became somewhat interested in spiritual matters. Through a woman who was friendly with his mother, he first heard of a spiritualist named Rudolf Steiner, the founder of a spiritual philosophy called anthroposophy. After reading some of Steiner's books but not feeling particularly moved by them, he returned them to his bookshelf.

"One of the great conductors under whom I studied was Sergiu Celibidache. Celibidache was a great Romanian conductor who worked mainly in



Mr. Edelson conducting the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, May 31, 1981.



Leonard Bernstein with Israel Edelson in the summer of 1979. (Inset) A recommendation from Mr. Bernstein.

LEONARD BERNSTEIN  
 To Mr. H. H. May: *Edelson*  
 I write with real pleasure on behalf of Israel Edelson, whose conductorial gifts I have been privileged to observe over some years. Edelson is one of the most dedicated, serious, studious (without being didactic) and gifted young maestros of the many dozens with whom I have worked in various parts of the world. I feel he deserves every encouragement, and will prove highly rewarding to his efforts, as well as a boon to musical art.  
 Sincerely,  
 Leonard Bernstein  
 28 April 79

Germany and was unique musically and philosophically. In the lectures he gave after the rehearsals, he often spoke about spiritual matters, linking the spirituality of the Eastern religion he followed and music.

"I once had a conversation with an orchestration teacher in Vienna, and I told him about the spiritual books I had been reading. 'Oh, yes,' he said, 'those books are very good. But you are Jewish. Why don't you look up *Kabbalah*?' I had never heard of *Kabbalah* before; for all I knew it was a receipt, which is what the word means in modern Hebrew. A short while later I noticed a book about *Kabbalah* in a bookstore window, but after buying and reading it, it did not make much of an impression on me either.

"After two years in Vienna I transferred to London, where I was accepted into a one-year conducting program at the Guildhall School of Music, one of London's three major music schools. In London, for the first time, I had access to a real student orchestra and we were able to practice together two or three times a week, which was an invaluable experience."

Mr. Edelson found himself spending a lot of time reading in the religion and philosophy section of the famed Foyles Bookstore. "I decided to try another book on *Kabbalah*, and this one I understood. I read it from beginning to end, and I became excited because it opened up a new world of wisdom to me that I had not known existed in Judaism; it was a revelation for me. Suddenly, I became very proud of being Jewish."

#### Meeting the Maestro

When Mr. Edelson speaks about the great conductor Leonard Bernstein, he refers to him as "the maestro." Born into an immigrant Jewish family living near Boston, Bernstein burst onto the world music stage in the 1940s. He was the assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra when the conductor came down with the flu shortly before a major concert. Without even one rehearsal, Bernstein conducted the entire concert to rave reviews, catapulting him into classical music superstardom.

"I first met Bernstein backstage at a concert when I was studying in Austria,"

Mr. Edelson recalls. "To me he was the epitome of a conductor, and I idolized him so much that the first time I met him I was dumbstruck. It must have been a strange sight, but I was simply speechless.

"After my year in London I went on to Rome, where I took a spring course with the great conductor Franco Ferrara. At the end of my time in Italy he wrote a beautiful recommendation letter for me.

"While there, I applied to Tanglewood, which is a summer music festival in the Berkshire Mountains in western Massachusetts and the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. They also have a summer music school for gifted young musicians, which is very prestigious and difficult to get into. I had been rejected twice earlier, but this time I was invited to their audition in Paris, and I was accepted that summer of 1979.

"Part of Tanglewood's program was being coached for one week by Leonard Bernstein, and for me that was the peak of my life until that moment. Each of the four student conductors, three others and I, got to perform with Bernstein and

with the great Russian conductor Gennady Rozhdestvensky, who was also there.

"Bernstein told me privately that he had been surprised to see my name among the Tanglewood students. I had been so shy around him before that he never thought I could do anything on my own. But we got along very well; it was an exhilarating experience to learn from him.

"That summer ended, and a few weeks later I received a phone call from Bernstein's manager asking me if I would like to assist the maestro when he conducted the Vienna State Opera on its American tour that fall of '79. It was a dream come true for me, all I had ever wanted to do.

"The Vienna State Opera is a world-class orchestra, and I spent three weeks with Bernstein and the orchestra in New York and Washington. For me, the main privilege was to be around the maestro, to observe and watch and absorb the way he worked. It was an incredible experience."

#### Subway to Brooklyn

It was not long after his assistantship with Bernstein concluded that Mr.

Edelson was invited to participate in the BBC's Rupert International Young Conductors' Competition in London, which was to take place in January of 1980. As he set about preparing for this world-class competition, a friend invited him to come and meet some "interesting people" in Brooklyn.

"So one Friday I took the subway to Brooklyn, actually to Crown Heights. I saw these black-and-white-clad people rushing around, and it was all quite strange. I was introduced to a few people, among them Rabbi Yoel Kahan and the musician Avi Piamenta.

"That evening I went to the Kahans' home, and I immediately felt very comfortable. Rabbi Yoel's wife, Leah, and I spoke in Russian and Hebrew while Rabbi Yoel was still in shul. When he arrived home from shul very late, he appeared to me just as I would imagine Eliyahu Hanavi to look. I asked a few questions, and then we sat down for the meal. There were stories and *niggunim*; the *niggunim* touched me very much, and the whole scene was very interesting to me.

"As I sat there, I suddenly remembered that I had made an appointment with the maestro at his home in Manhattan

that very evening at ten p.m. He had been away in Europe for a while and I had finally gotten an appointment with him, yet here I was at Rabbi Yoel's table in Crown Heights! As I looked around, I realized that these people didn't travel on Friday nights; what was I to do?

"So I invented some funny excuse that I had to go visit an aunt of mine, and they all looked at me and said, 'Oh, of course, no problem. Whenever you need to come or go, please feel comfortable here.' I was very impressed by their reaction, and I had a strange feeling as I got on the subway to Manhattan.

"After my assistantship with Bernstein I had no other plans, so I had made that appointment with him. We sat together for four hours. Although he was a great musician he had many personal problems, and I found myself mostly listening to him, in the funny position of being a shrink to this world-famous musical genius.

"I walked out of the maestro's house at two a.m. and took the train straight back to Brooklyn. It was a very cold November night, and I had no place to go because everyone was sleeping. I remember standing in the lobby of a building, cold and tired.



Being coached by Leonard Bernstein in Tanglewood in 1979.

"At six a.m. I saw Avi Pimenta walking down the street, and he greeted me excitedly: 'How are you? What are you doing here? Come with me to *mikveh*.' I had no idea what a *mikveh* was, but when I got there it was such a *mechayeh* to enter the hot *mikveh* after such a hard night. Afterwards he took me to his home, where I slept for a few hours. For the meal I went back to Rabbi Yoel's home, and they accepted me as if nothing had happened the night before. I was simply amazed.

"I became a more frequent visitor, and soon Rabbi Yoel proposed that if I wished, I could move into his basement as I prepared for the competition in London and simultaneously continue learning Torah. I accepted his offer, and he taught me to put on *tefillin* and about Shabbos. He also arranged for me to study some *Chumash* and *Tanya* with some *bachurim*, all as I prepared scores and listened to recordings in his basement.

"The *bachurim* suggested that I write a letter about myself to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, *zy"o*, which I did. I did not get a response, which left me disappointed. As I prepared to leave for London, I reluctantly agreed to write another letter asking for a blessing for the competition. The next day Rabbi Yoel came from the Rebbe's secretariat with the Rebbe's response to my letter. The Rebbe wrote that I should check my *tefillin* and that I should give this five-pound note [that he had enclosed] to charity in London, and he said he would mention my name at the gravesite of his father-in-law, the Rebbe Rayatz.

"We were all very surprised because my *tefillin* were brand-new, but when Rabbi Yoel took them to the *sofer*, he found three mistakes inside! So with *tefillin* repaired and five pounds in my pocket, I left for the competition. Right before I left, Rabbi Yoel gave me a cassette tape and told me, 'Listen to this if you have a chance.'"

#### A New Perspective

The weeklong competition in London was extremely intense and demanding, and Mr. Edelson spent day and night



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studying the difficult pieces that were assigned to him. Slowly he advanced through the rounds until he was one of the four semi-finalists.

Mr. Edelson remembers the amazing feeling that came over him when he rose to conduct at the semi-finals and felt the Rebbe's blessing materializing in front of his eyes. To him it felt as though the orchestra was playing on its own and that he was just moving his hands to the music. Sure enough, he was chosen to move on to the next round.

The next day at the finals he and one other competitor conducted the BBC Radio Orchestra in front of a live audience. At the end of the show the judges left the room to deliberate, and when they returned, they announced the name of the winner: Israel Edelson.

"Everything after that was like in a dream," he says. "I remember returning to my room very tired, excited, and worn out. The next morning I woke up late, with nowhere to rush to anymore. I felt empty after two months of intense daily preparations. Suddenly my eyes fell on Rabbi Yoel's tape, which was lying in my open suitcase. I put it into the tape recorder, and suddenly I heard the Rebbe's voice singing, '*Tzama lecha nafshi...*' The Rebbe's voice filled my small room and was answered by hundreds of voices singing together.

"To describe my reaction simply as being deeply moved would be an understatement. I was at first baffled by the *niggun's* simplicity, and then I heard it again and again, feeling increasingly defenseless and unable to oppose its overwhelming power. The singing somehow pierced my soul.

"Suddenly I broke out crying like a lost child, sobbing bitterly and unable to control myself; I don't know just how long. The competition, my career, my whole life suddenly seemed so irrelevant, so illusory, compared to the truth of this *niggun* and all it stood for."

#### The Return

With Mr. Edelson's world suddenly meaningless, he began re-evaluating his life. "In a way, after that moment the

musical world never occupied the same prominence in my life. I still think music is great, that it is a Divine gift to mankind, but I could no longer see myself worshipping at the altar of music.

"The music profession takes so much struggle and so much ego. A conductor is always at someone else's mercy. I saw it with Leonard Bernstein himself. Even at the peak of his career, with recognition as one of the world's greatest conductors, he was still so vulnerable, so concerned with what critics said about him. I thought that at some point you would stop caring what others said about you, yet he could sometimes be thrown into a depression because someone in the orchestra said something negative about him.

"On the other hand I saw the Rebbe, whom I viewed as the perfect conductor and who personified greatness without the ego. It was real greatness in its own right and not dependent on what others said or thought. It's almost impossible to find greatness that comes without ego. Yet with the Rebbe you saw greatness with humility, and when I saw that, it blew me away."

During the following year Mr. Edelson became increasingly observant, despite the disapproval of his beloved maestro.

"At first he told me that it was my Divine service to G-d to conduct on Shabbos and Yom Tov, that this was my unique worship. He actually took this very seriously himself and had a difficult time understanding why I was choosing a different spiritual path from his. He told me that when he stood on the podium conducting, he saw himself as the High Priest, the *Kohen Gadol*, entering the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. This was something that he had been taught by his teacher, the great Jewish apostate conductor Sergei Koussevitzky. Yet I remained stubborn.

"In late 1981 Bernstein invited me to join him in conducting Richard Wagner's\* opera *Tristan und Isolde* in Munich with the Bavarian Radio Orchestra. When I received the schedule, I saw that the performance was split into three parts, one in January, the second in



Mr. Edelson conducting at a recent Colel Chabad dinner.



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April, around Pesach time, and the third and most problematic in September, around Tishrei. I sent the schedule to the Rebbe, asking what I should do, and the answer I received was completely unambiguous: '*Harei zeh chillul Shabbos b'farhesia*, this is a public desecration of Shabbos.' This reply left very little room for me to maneuver.

"I went to Munich, and in the first segment my new lifestyle wasn't so

\* Editor's Note: Richard Wagner, a noted anti-Semite and a hero of Hitler, is boycotted by many. None of his works should be listened to, due to their inherent impurity.



Mr. Edelson sits down to play the piano after our interview.

noticeable; on Shabbos they had someone filling in for me while I only observed. In April it was more difficult because of Pesach. When I returned to Munich in the fall, I received a phone call from the manager asking me if I had received their message; they had sent a telegram telling me not to come back. That was the end of my active collaboration with Bernstein, and I found myself unemployed. We remained friendly until his death in 1990, but nothing more."

#### **The Eighth Note**

In the years since that time, Mr. Edelson has dedicated himself to recording and arranging *niggunim* and other quality Jewish music. Does he miss the exciting world that he left behind so many years ago?

"I can view it as a sacrifice," he



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says. "On the rare occasions that I get to conduct, it's like getting resurrected for a short while. That feeling of conducting is something that I miss very much — I love it. But I do not miss all of the red tape that came with it, and in life you must take the whole package.

"But I concentrate on the future, not on the past. *Chazal* say that when Moshiach comes, an eighth musical note will be revealed, thus changing the face of music. Aside from giving lessons, I'm currently composing new music and arranging authentic Jewish music for an orchestra format, and I am always looking for new opportunities to do this in a professional way. I like to think that, G-d willing, when the Beis Hamikdash is rebuilt, I will conduct the orchestra there." □