

Recognized by Karajan, trusted by Gergiev

Alexander (Ali) Rahbari's 50 years at apex of world music

I'm glad Iran 'standing up' to criminal US, Israel



By Ali Reza Sepahvand
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INTERVIEW EXCLUSIVE

Among Iranian conductors, few have succeeded in making the name of Iran resonate in the world's most prestigious musical venues as much as Alexander (Ali) Rahbari. Having been invited by more than 130 symphony orchestras around the world, including the Vienna Symphony Orchestra, Berlin orchestras, London, Tokyo, Toronto and many other major ensembles, Rahbari is now a permanent guest conductor at the Mariinsky Opera in St. Petersburg, one of the world's most renowned opera houses.

In this exclusive interview with Iran Daily, conducted during his rehearsals with the Mariinsky Orchestra, Rahbari talks about his five-decade international career, his historic encounter with Herbert von Karajan, his cooperation with Valery Gergiev, the challenges facing Iranian classical music, the condition of the Iranian Symphony Orchestra, and his hopes for the future of music in Iran. As such, this is a conversation that goes beyond personal memories and achievements, and becomes a reflection on the position of Iranian musicians on the global stage. First, it is only appropriate that we better acquaint ourselves with who he is and what he has done.

Alexander (Ali) Rahbari, globally-renowned Iranian composer and con-

ductor, is currently a permanent guest conductor of the Mariinsky Opera in St. Petersburg. He graduated from the National Higher Conservatory of Music in Iran and the Vienna Academy of Music and Performing Arts.

At the age of 25, he became the director of the National Higher Conservatory of Music and the Tehran Conservatory for three years. He won the Gold Medal for Iran at the Concours International de Jeunes Chefs D'Orchestre (The International Contest of Young Conductors) in France. He won the Silver Medal for Iran at the Geneva International Conducting Competition in Switzerland. He has been invited by more than 130 symphony orchestras around the world, including Vienna, Salzburg, Berlin, London, Amster-

dam, Brussels, Toronto, Tokyo, Mexico and many others.

He has been a permanent guest conductor of the Czech Philharmonic, Belgrade Philharmonic and Brussels Philharmonic. He has served as permanent conductor and artistic director of symphony orchestras in Brussels, Prague, Zagreb, Málaga and twice in Tehran. He has more than 250 albums released on the international market, some of which include works by six Iranian composers. He has received the highest artistic honors of Belgium, the Czech Republic and Spain.



IRAN DAILY: After all these years, after conducting so many orchestras and experiencing so many performances, what is the most important thing life and music have taught you?

RAHBARI: Perhaps what I have learned is that the more you remain yourself, the better it is. From the very beginning, when I started conducting and composing at a very young age, at 21 or 22, until today, I believe that my character, which is very Iranian — truly Iranian — has never changed. Neither in my work with musicians, nor in my behavior, nor in my expectations. I think perhaps the most important thing I have learned — if I do not make a mistake in choosing the word — is that I have never regretted remaining the person I was. I have never regretted that I stayed true to myself. This is perhaps one of the most important things I have understood throughout my life.

You won international conducting competitions in France and Switzerland and attracted the attention of one of the greatest conductors of the 20th century, Herbert von Karajan. Could you tell us about that period?

The two international conducting competitions in France and Geneva took place one year apart. At that time, they generated some attention in European newspapers and media because, until then, it had never happened that someone from the East, in general, or from Iran, in particular, had participated and reached the finals of such competitions. This drew considerable attention. Afterwards, I received a letter from Mr. Karajan's office saying that he wanted to meet me. I later asked his secretary in Salz-



Alexander (Ali) Rahbari (L) is seen assisting the legendary conductor Herbert von Karajan in Salzburg, Austria, in 1980.
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Alexander (Ali) Rahbari (L) poses for a photo with Valery Gergiev, an internationally-respected conductor who has invited the former to work together at the Mariinsky Opera in St. Petersburg, Russia.
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burg about the reason. They told me that he was surprised that an Iranian conductor had reached the finals of two major competitions in Europe, two years in a row.

First of all, I must say that Mr. Karajan was undoubtedly one

of the greatest figures in the history of conducting in the 20th century — and he still remains one of the greatest. Even after his passing, his recordings remain among the finest. Apart from being invited several times to conduct

the Berlin Philharmonic and becoming his assistant, which was a great honor for me, I spent a great deal of time attending his rehearsals and recording sessions.

At that time, he was around the same age that I am today,

meaning that he had enormous experience, and I was able to learn many things from him. I learned from him especially how to prepare an orchestra for major operas and symphonies in a very short period of time. In fact, this is something he taught me directly: how to prepare an orchestra within a very limited time. This is something I still do today. Most of my concerts are prepared with only two rehearsals. This method comes from him. I should say that in the 20th century, the fact that Mr. Karajan knew me and trusted in my capabilities was the greatest honor of my life.

A similar incident happened in the 21st century as well. In my estimation, Valery Gergiev, by virtue of the extensiveness of his repertoire and his singular characteristics, even surpasses Karajan in certain respects. Approximately five years prior, he likewise extended to me an invitation to commence my collaboration with the Mariinsky Opera.

He later told me that he had followed my career from a distance for years, but the time had come for us to work together. This was the second greatest honor of my career: to be recognized for my capabilities by another one of the world's greatest conductors and to be invited to collaborate.

For an artist like me, who throughout all these years has worked almost without any support from his own country and who, in many periods, has faced many difficulties simply because of being Iranian, this trust has a very great value. Fortunately, there are still figures in the world who, regardless of nationality, recognize the talent and merit of artists.

You have conducted more than 130 orchestras around the world. If you were to



Alexander (Ali) Rahbari poses for a photo inside the prestigious Concert Hall of the Mariinsky Theater, St. Petersburg, Russia.
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Afterwards, I received a letter from Mr. Karajan's office saying that he wanted to meet me. I later asked his secretary in Salzburg about the reason. They told me that he was surprised that an Iranian conductor had reached the finals of two major competitions in Europe, two years in a row. I learned directly from him how to prepare an orchestra for major operas and symphonies in a very short period of time. This is something I still do today. Most of my concerts are prepared with only two rehearsals.