



PHOTO BY AKIRA KINOSHITA

# San Diego Symphony

The San Diego Symphony brings back violin luminary Itzhak Perlman

At age 3, he taught himself to play on a toy fiddle. He had perfect pitch, precocious musical ability and a preternatural interest in the instrument, yet the Shulamit Conservatory denied him entrance, pronouncing him too small

to hold a violin.

But that didn't deter Itzhak Perlman, who grew up to achieve superstar status as a violin virtuoso. He's about to make a return concert appearance in San Diego, courtesy of the San Diego Symphony, Feb. 18, 2012.

**Violin virtuoso Itzhak Perlman comes to the San Diego Symphony Feb. 18.**

Born in Tel Aviv in 1945, Perlman didn't let polio hold him back, either. During his lengthy convalescence, beginning at age 4, he continued practicing (his parents bought him a violin at a local thrift store), and he was finally able to attend the Conservatory. He played his first recital at age 10, just prior to moving to the U.S., to attend The Juilliard School.

Americans got their first glimpse of the musical prodigy on "The Ed Sullivan Show" in 1958. At age 13, Perlman had been discovered during a talent search and was chosen to represent Israel on "The Caravan of the Stars." By age 18, he'd made his Carnegie Hall debut.

His technique has been lavishly praised, as has his warm, lyrical sound, his impressive musicianship, his charm, humanity, jubilant showmanship and unparalleled rapport with audiences. He's won four Emmy Awards and 15 Grammys, in addition to the prestigious Kennedy Center Honors.

Legendary violinist Isaac Stern once said of Perlman, "His talent is utterly limitless. No one comes anywhere near him in what he can physically do with the violin."

Perlman remains one of the most popular instrumentalists in the realm of classical music. In addition to an exhaustive (and exhausting!) recording and worldwide performing career, he is a sought-after conductor as well as an educator. He's performed in innumerable countries and has appeared on American TV, from "Sesame Street" to "The Tonight Show" to two Academy Award broadcasts. He's even been a soloist for movie scores: "Schindler's List" in 1993 and "Memoirs of a Geisha" in 2005.

Perlman has played with all the greats, including violinists Isaac Stern and Pinchas Zukerman, cellist Yo-Yo Ma and opera singer Jessye Norman. And he's played *for* many greats, too: for several

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U.S. presidents, for Queen Elizabeth, and at the Obama inaugural ceremony, with Yo-Yo Ma. (Backstory on that performance: the two iconic musicians did not perform live that frigid, blustery day. They ‘played’ to a recording made a few days earlier, since string instruments don’t stay tuned reliably in sub-freezing temperatures).

### PASSING THE BOW TO THE NEXT GENERATION

One of the things that excites him most is the Perlman Music Program (PMP), founded in 1995 by his wife of 44 years, classically trained violinist Toby Perlman. What began as a summer camp for exceptional young string musicians has expanded to an impressive year-round program.

“It’s fantastic,” says the ebullient Perlman. “There’s the six-week program in the summer on Long Island for the 12-18-year-olds. There’s a two-and-a-half-week winter residency in Sarasota, Fla., for those 18 and up, and there’s a four-day mini-program in Stowe, Vt. And there are concerts throughout the year — Works

in Progress — for the young musicians to try out their repertoire for a small audience. We sometimes take them abroad.

“It’s a very unusual program,” he continues. “This is our 18<sup>th</sup> summer. The participants get coaching, chamber music and a wonderful social experience. Everyone plays in the string orchestra, which I conduct. And everyone — including my wife and yours truly — sings in the chorus: works by Handel, Bach, Mozart and Brahms. That’s unique. It was all my wife’s idea.

“We even have reunions,” Perlman enthuses. “Once you’re in, you’re part of the PMP family. We keep it small, no more than 40 students in each program each year. Many students come back year after year. And 99 percent of our alumni are making a living as professional musicians.”

More than three-quarters of the students are on “some sort of scholarship,” Perlman says. “It’s my wife’s dream to provide the program totally free. But we’re a nonprofit and we have to raise the funds, which isn’t easy these days.”

The Perlmans, who live in New York, have five children, one of whom, Rami, was a singer/guitarist in the rock band Something for Rockets. Perlman is a distant cousin of Canadian comic/TV personality Howie Mandel. This year, to honor his Eastern European ancestry, he embarked on a new venture.

### RETURNING TO HIS ROOTS

In March, Perlman played a concert in L.A. called “The Soul of Jewish Music,” a joyful celebration of the universal appeal of his musical heritage. His collaborators were klezmer maven Hankus Netsky and world-renowned cantor Meir Helfgot.

“I heard him sing,” says Perlman of Helfgot, “and he’s absolutely amazing. Phenomenal voice and terrific technique. I thought, ‘What a great

experience for me, and for the various Jewish communities across the country.’ We’re recording together and hoping to take the show on tour. I’m very excited about this.”

In fact, he recently said, “It’s a historic project, and it excites me to my *kishkas!*”

We won’t be seeing that concert when Perlman appears with the San Diego Symphony in February. He doesn’t yet know what he’ll be playing (he makes that decision about two weeks in advance), but he certainly knows with whom: Rohan De Silva, a Sri Lankan pianist who’s a Juilliard alumnus and teacher; he also taught at PMP and has played with many famous musicians, including Perlman for the past 10 years.

Perlman still teaches, too, at PMP and at Juilliard. He continues to support disability-oriented organizations like Rotary International, which is dedicated to the eradication of polio. He keeps advocating for better access for disabled people in theaters, concert halls and airports.

“Traveling has become such a *megilla*,” he laments.

The violinist extraordinaire, in demand all over the world, is a lifelong globetrotter — who hates traveling.

“I wish I could do that ‘Star Trek’ thing,” he says, “and beam myself everywhere!” ✧

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- Pat Launer