

A POWER OF NOTE

Jeremy Daniels spent a few days on the trail of Benjamin Zander, the extraordinary conductor

When Benjamin Zander strides onto the stage in the Cape Town city hall this afternoon to conduct Beethoven's 9th Symphony, it will be the "final act" of an astonishing tour of South Africa that has touched the hearts and fired the imagination of thousands of ordinary citizens.

Ironically, it is also the end of Zander's yearly three-week holiday from his job as conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra.

After an exhaustive trip in which Zander (or Ben, as he is known to his fans) and Rosamund Stone Zander, his ex-wife and the writer/coach/therapist, have fulfilled 97 commitments, these gifted communicators will soon be heading back to "work".

The tour was organised by Symphonia, a group dedicated to leadership development and social change. The word Symphonia literally means "the sounding together of voices".

The Zanders have a unique ability to inspire individuals to break free of the barriers that are holding them back and to re-imagine the world as a place of extraordinary opportunity.

In their bestselling book, *The Art of Possibility*, they "portray a world in which the conflict between the individual and the collective, which is intrinsic to our every day reality, resolves".

And while many motivational speakers are content to simply offer that as vision, Zander goes one step further by stepping up in front of an orchestra and literally illustrating how it can be done.

His workshops and seminars merely unpack what one can intuitively feel during a performance.

The Zanders have been in Cape Town for only a few days but have managed to pack in a lot.

It might be nine o'clock on a Thursday morning and everyone might be wearing their work clothes, but the atmosphere is crackling with the energy of a late-night rock show. One thousand two hundred people are packed into Cape Town's Artscape Opera House.

A grand piano and two flipcharts are all that grace the stage.

The audience, perhaps expecting a bold entrance to the strains of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, instead feel the energy quietly shift towards a silver-haired man



Inspiring: Ben Zander, the conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, pictured in a recent workshop with youth development project Buskaid, Soweto PHOTOGRAPH: TILLEMONT

standing in the aisle, shaking hands and chatting to the crowd, signing books, cracking jokes and thanking people for coming.

He moves to the stage and immediately engages the audience with stories about how the back row is always full, yet the front row is practically empty, and it becomes clear that this is a man who has the touch.

Zander commands a room. Using simple stories and anecdotes with great humour and humility, showing his passion for South Africa and his deep love of music, he is able to transform the way that each person in the room sees the world around them.

He invites a young cellist on stage and asks her to play a Bach prelude, which she does with skill and confidence. Zander stops her at one point and asks

her to think about the opening in a different way: as one continuous phrase that bubbles with excitement.

She plays it again. Then he begins telling her about Bach, his 12 children, his devotion to God and his motives when writing this piece. Her eyes light up as she plays, diving deeper and deeper into the music, pulling new meaning from phrases she has played hundreds of times before.

Zander's focus shifts to the audience and he asks the cellist to give them the music as a gift. The audience is enraptured as the bond between it and the performer takes on more and more meaning.

It is a stunning moment of emotional and musical pathos. This is the very tone of the Art of

Possibility, the philosophy developed by the Zanders that gives people the tools to unlock the best in others.

"Classical music touches everybody's soul", Ben explains, "and it holds the key to transforming the relationship between leaders and their followers."

Friday night sees the first rehearsal with the Cape Town Philharmonic, and Ben is all business. He puts the orchestra at ease, introduces the world-renowned pianist Gabriella Montero and then launches into Rachmaninov's 2nd Piano Concerto.

The energy emanating from the podium is intense. Conductors must be able to feed on this music for sustenance. Men like Toscanini, Klemperer, Beecham

and Stokowski were able to work prolifically into their eighties and were said to be performing better at that age than ever before.

The same can be said of Zander. There are not too many men in their late sixties who can deliver a two-hour performance, having already given a two-hour workshop in the afternoon and a 30-minute introduction before the concert explaining the music to an expectant audience.

Zander was born in England and began writing classical works at the age of nine, which led to a period of studying composition under the great Benjamin Britten.

At the age of 15, Zander left for Florence to study cello with the great teacher Caspar Cassado before joining a chamber orches-

tra and touring extensively.

But an inability to develop the calluses on his fingers necessary for a performing cellist led to his abandoning performance and taking up the baton of conducting.

Next year will be the 30th anniversary of his leadership of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra.

According to Zander, "the relationship between the conductor and his orchestra is a powerful bond that can be replicated in the workplace".

The irony of being a motivational speaker/conductor is not lost on him. He recounts the moment, about 15 years ago when he realised that he was the only person on the stage not actually making a sound.

"My eureka moment hap-

pened the day I realised that a conductor does not make sound. He is silent. It is the players who play.

"My power is enormous, but consists entirely in my ability to make other people feel powerful."

Saturday night is performance night. As the music begins Zander the conductor comes to life.

He throws his arms out, whole body electric, delivering a crescendo here, a cymbal crash there, as if he is physically extracting the music from various members of the orchestra.

And then comes Montero, superb pianist. She leaves no doubt that she is one of the jewels in the classical music crown.

Over and above that, Cape Townians are given the gift of pride in their very own symphony orchestra, which rises to the occasion and performs splendidly for the home crowd.

Perhaps the only sorrow is how the orchestra seems strangely unable to acknowledge the adulation of the crowd, shifting uneasily and smiling thinly while the audience gives them ovation after ovation.

The tour seems to have captured the imagination of South Africans and fed a great hunger to hear Zander and his wife talking about South Africa, of great social experiment that cannot be allowed to fail, plead with us to have patience with young democracy and not to give up hope is a galvanising experience.

The audience is charged, filled up with the message of hope, the tools to see through the "downward spiral", to stand in place of infinite possibility, to assume the roles of leader on our daily lives.

It is hard to pin down the common thread in a tour with many aspects and moments, but perhaps it comes down to using classical music to empower and enrich each and every one of us to be the best we can be.

Hundreds of small moments with South Africans of all shapes and sizes are beginning to create waves of change and to form a shift in the tone of the South African dialogue.

Like a stone dropped in a pond, the ripples of possibility and promise spread further and further beyond music and the ways that we live our lives.