

A WORLD OF Infinite Possibility

Image Tony Rinaldo

Founding conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, Benjamin Zander, is driven by a clear vision of a world of possibility. The inspirational conductor spoke with CLASSICFEEL's Camilla Lloyd about his philosophy of leadership and how it is epitomised in the work of Mahler.

It is two weeks after my interview with Ben Zander and I am sitting in a room with 1 500 'conductors' from a number of different organisations and companies. The audience is visibly intrigued by Zander – if not by his philosophy, then at the very least by his engaging enthusiasm. Although the imposing stage is set up for Zander's presentation, the conductor prefers to stand just before the front row and speak, filmed by cameras, and bounds up the stairs to the stage only to illustrate a point.

Benjamin Zander is the founding conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra and has been the Music Director of the New England Conservatory Youth Philharmonic Orchestra for 33 years. Much in demand as a guest conductor around the world, Zander appears regularly with the Philharmonia Orchestra in London, with which he has produced a number of successful recordings. A teacher and motivational speaker to boot, Zander has co-authored a bestselling book titled *The Art of Possibility* with therapist Rosamund Zander which outlines a unique philosophy of leadership drawn in part from his experience as a conductor. It is this that informs much of our interview and the basis of his talk.

The base word of 'conduct' in Latin means 'to lead', Zander tells me at the very outset of our interview, suggesting there are valuable lessons about leadership to be learnt from the example of conducting. The fundamental lesson is that a leader is someone who unlocks and then directs the potential or possibility in others. Describing conducting as 'the last bastion of totalitarianism',

Zander counters the traditional model of the conductor as an inaccessible 'maestro' with a new one in which the conductor is a 'teacher'. 'Essentially my premise,' Zander explains, 'is that I am faced with a group of people who have immense capacity and desire and ability to play the music, but what they need from me is the unlocking of that spirit which is inside them and to let it loose on the world.'

But, in order to do this, the conductor must bring to the table a very clear vision of the future. Zander's initial visit to South Africa in July coincided with the 90th birthday of that epitome of positive leadership, Nelson Mandela. The conductor describes Madiba as the first leader to truly practice 'symphonia', a type of leadership that calls on 'all the different voices' in pursuit of a common vision. But behind this, Zander argues, was 'his absolutely rigorous attention to the far distant point on the horizon... a clear idea of the possibilities that he was living into'. 'He was sitting in jail for 27 years, what was he thinking about? Was he thinking about lunch? No, he was thinking about the possibilities for South Africa and for the world,' Zander maintains.

Returning to the art of conducting, Zander asserts that part of the vision that must be realised is the vision of the composer. Too many conductors, Zander complains, pay no notice to a composer's particular instructions, finding instead excuses to justify a particular whim. Using Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, which Zander recorded with the Philharmonia Orchestra, as an example, the impassioned conductor draws our attention the metronome mark on the score, which speeds up the tempo of the



piece to 108 beats per minute and which, Zander asserts, most musicians simply dismiss as too difficult to play.

But, Zander says, barely able to contain his excitement, 'Beethoven meant that as an attack on complacency, on the status quo!' Beethoven's Fifth is, according to Zander, a meditation on the very nature of possibility as he understands it.

Turning to Gustav Mahler's symphonies, Zander says that Mahler, in his frenetic use of individual players within an orchestra, suits his hallmark style of conducting and his theory of leadership. Mahler engages in 'emotional counterpoint', as Zander terms it, borrowing from the term that describes 'different voices going at the same time' to describe 'different emotions going at the same time'. 'In Beethoven if you look at the score, essentially everyone is doing the same things... But in Mahler's score nobody's doing the same thing!' It's 'spectacular', Zander enthuses, going on to describe the

reaction of one player who told Zander that 'I feel like the most important person on stage.' 'She was the fourth flautist!' Zander notes. 'Isn't that wonderful?!'

Zander has released a series of CD recordings of Mahler's symphonies recorded with the Philharmonia Orchestra. The unique selling point of these CDs is the recording that accompanies them in which Zander explains the context of the music, never dumbing down or patronising, but providing a platform from which to enjoy the music, whether the listener is an avid classical music fan or a relative newcomer. Zander most recent release is that of Bruckner's Fifth Symphony, which includes just such a 80-minute explanation of the music. Noting that not one of the many recordings of Bruckner's symphonies has ever sold more than 2 000 copies, Zander is determined that this recording, backed by his unique style of leadership, will break the record. **CF**