

# Meet the maestro of music magic

CPO's dynamic guest conductor charms city audiences

Guest conductors who work with the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra usually elicit sterling performances, but by general consensus, the first in a series of concerts this month under the baton of visiting luminary Benjamin Zander was electrifying for its drive and vitality.

It was apparent from the outset that this was to be no ordinary symphony concert: before the first note was delivered, Zander addressed the audience for 30 minutes, explaining and analysing what they were about to hear, ensuring an informed reaction to the three works on the evening's programme.

The maestro was witty, relaxed and articulate, showing no sign whatever of the gruelling day behind him, with several hours of rehearsal and nine sessions of motivational lecturing at various venues.

When he reappeared on the podium 15 minutes later, he had changed from head to foot, and was now immaculately clad in the formal tails prescribed for a performance such as this. The magic began as he lifted his baton for the opening bars of Beethoven's *Coriolan Overture*. A generous response from the CPO resulted in playing of superlative calibre, and throughout the evening, Zander's slight figure crackled with energy as he took orchestra and audience with him on a journey of enlightenment, culminating in a memorable performance of Ravel's arrangement of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

Sharing Zander's limelight was the charismatic Venezuelan pianist Gabriela Montero, whose impeccable rendition of the popular Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No 2 was followed by some dazzling improvisations on themes suggested by members of the audience, all offered with deprecating charm and complete lack of affectation.

The latter quality is also a Zander hallmark: he stepped forward after interval to do the unthinkable, namely acknowledge a mistake he had made in the *Coriolan Overture* (skipping a bar) – “and this wonderful orchestra did likewise to retrieve the performance! They are an amazing body of players,” he said.

After a marathon concert and a hectic day, Zander still found the energy to mingle with the audience in the Artscape foyer until a late hour, then agreed to a brief interview shortly before midnight.

It turns out that this is not Zander's first visit to the Mother City: “I've visited

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South Africa seven times already, and of those, five have been to Cape Town, which I absolutely love. It's not only an exciting city; it's also the most open-hearted one I know. The warmth I find here is unlike anywhere else,” he says. He is lavish in his praise of the CPO, which he considers above average in its response to his particular brand of motivation.

“An orchestra is about the least effective vehicle for generating energy, and you have to teach its members to get out of the negative spiral of competition and anxiety. Instead, they should focus on contribution, on radiating energy and achieving the possible. To succeed, you have to be willing to give of yourself unconditionally,” he explains.

“It's a theory I've worked on with my partner for 25 years, and bringing it to an orchestra has become my life's work.”

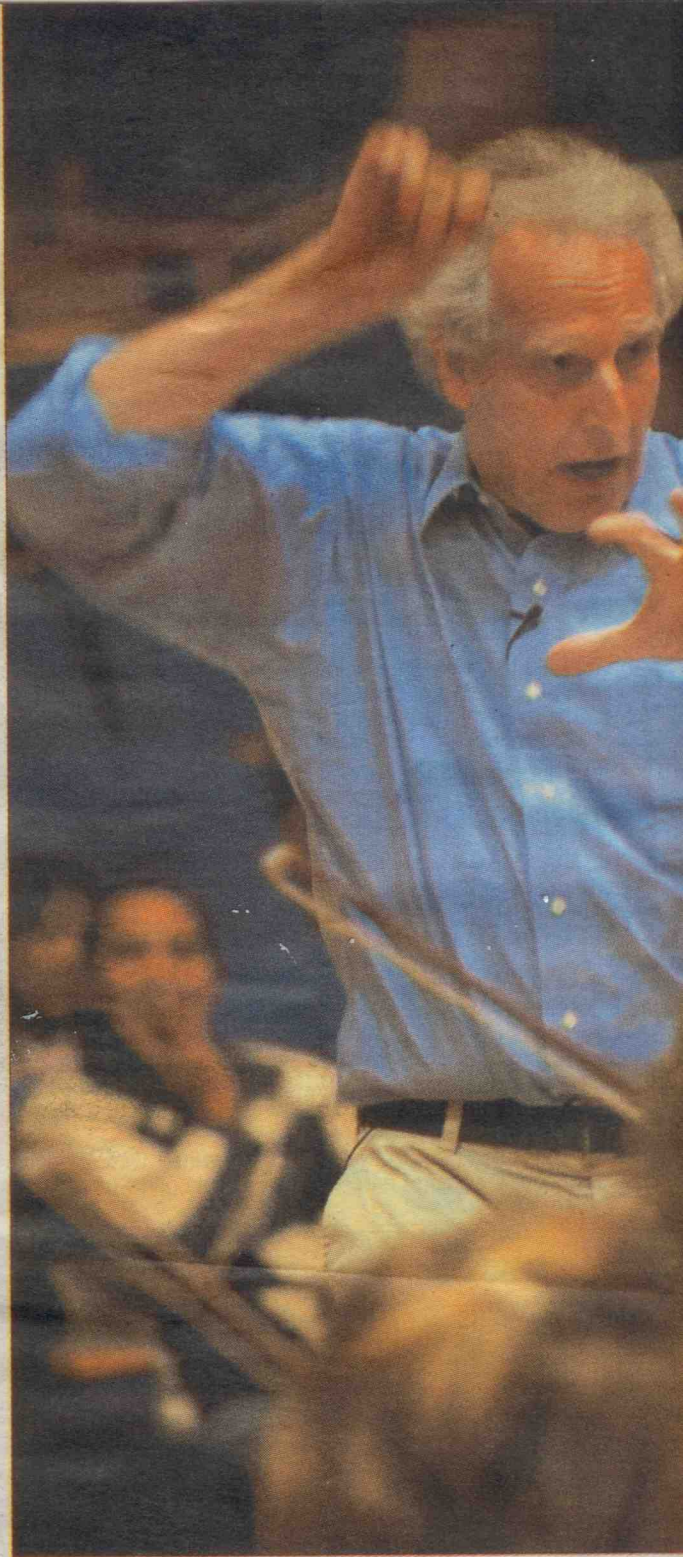
Another life-long passion is interpreting the works of Mahler and Beethoven (“they have been central to my life for 35 years”), and it is no surprise that Beethoven reappears in all the concerts conducted by Zander in this series.

He regards the concert held to mark Nelson Mandela's 90th birthday “not so much as a regular concert, but as a coming together on a special occasion. Mr Mandela started a new conversation with the world and became a symbol of all that is good; we wish to bring back the spirit of 1994 for his 90th birthday.”

They played Beethoven's 9th, and will do so again tomorrow, prefaced by the *Egmont Overture*.

In addition to filling the post of conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra and teaching in the faculty of the New England Conservatory, not to mention international guest-conducting of orchestras too numerous to list and recording discs that have earned him awards and a Grammy nomination, Zander finds the time to travel the world lecturing to organisations on leadership.

He has been keynote speaker on more than one occasion at the World Economic Forum, where he will be featured this coming January as the opening speaker. Moreover, he has received the Crystal award for “outstanding contributions in the arts



VITALITY: Benjamin Zander puts the Cape Philharmonic through its

and international relations”, and his best-selling book, *The Art of Possibility*, co-authored with his partner Rosamund Zander, has been translated into 16 languages.

Asked about priorities in the South African context, he identifies training young conductors as imperative. “We must encourage young people of talent to take up the baton; without them, music has little future,” he says.

What is the secret of this septuagenarian's irrepressible vitality?

“It's a mental state that helps you find the positive aspect of life; there is always something positive in any situation,” he replies.

● The last concert of this series is at 3pm tomorrow in the Cape Town City Hall. Book through Computicket or Artscape Dial-a-Seat on 021 421 7695.