



The Financial Times
January 17, 2003

Maestro unlocks corporate minds: INTERVIEW BENJAMIN ZANDER : The Boston-based conductor tells Peter Marsh about using music to help companies
By: Peter Marsh,

In another life, Benjamin Zander might have been a salesman. The US-based conductor and music teacher - who links this work to providing "transformational training" to company executives - is giving two concerts in the UK this weekend. But, in a highly unusual move, Mr. Zander has promised to refund the ticket price to any member of the audience who fails to be emotionally stirred.

The performances* of Gustav Mahler's third symphony, played by the Philharmonia Orchestra, will give the British public a chance to see in action a conductor who has won laudatory reviews from the music press and has also gained worldwide renown in the past decade as a "corporate motivator".

Mr. Zander dislikes this phrase, however. "Being a motivator gives the impression you are boosting people's morale under stress. Like eating Chinese food, it's never enough - you are always coming back for more. My real interest is transforming people, opening them up to a new way of looking at life."

These are heady claims. The British-born 63-year-old realizes that such talk pushes him perilously close to the world of fringe "management gurus", who make sometimes dubious assertions about their ability to influence people. When asked about the tradition of "transformation" - the term he uses to describe his activities - Mr. Zander says he is following a rich tradition that goes back to Buddha and Christ. He retracts the assertion almost immediately, once he realizes it makes him sound arrogant.

Against any idea that people might take him for a charlatan, Mr. Zander says his deep roots in music give him a strong basis for conveying messages. He has conducted the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, or its predecessor groups, for 30 years, has made guest appearances with other orchestras such as the Philharmonia and has built up a solid list of recordings. "You can't conduct an orchestra in a woolly or ineffectual way. Orchestral musicians - along with children - are unusual in being virtually impossible to con."

Furthermore, Mr. Zander is careful about how he presents himself. "I have been called a business guru but that's absurd. I don't know anything about business." Indeed, his operations are run by a small staff in Boston and he has few of the normal trappings associated with big-name management experts.

Since he started giving lectures to corporate employees 15 years ago, Mr. Zander estimates some 250,000 people have attended his talks, from senior executives at companies such as Compaq, British Airways and Glaxo-SmithKline, to groups of schoolchildren or priests. Last summer, he gave a four-hour presentation to 6,000 school teachers in Singapore. He has also addressed three meetings of the World Economic Forum in Davos, the global gathering for top people from business and government



In conversation, Mr. Zander radiates enthusiasm and energy, combined with a remarkable serenity. Such qualities are evident in his lectures to business leaders, as well as in the 45-minute talks he invariably gives to concert audiences before each performance.

His pitch to the business world is that listening and understanding music can energize people and release new thinking that would otherwise be suppressed. Some of these ideas are expressed in a book, *The Art of Possibility*, that Mr. Zander worked on with his wife Rosamund Zander, a therapist from whom he is separated but with whom he still has a close working and emotional partnership. The book has appeared in nine languages and has sold 200,000 copies. "Note the word 'possibility'," says Mr. Zander. "Possibilities are options. Possibility is open-ended and infinite."

In his lectures, Mr. Zander provides ideas and advice and often plays musical fragments on the piano or cello, or sometimes with a full orchestra. He has honed these musical skills in his academic base at the New England Conservatory, a leading music college in Boston where he has taught since the 1960s.

Mr. Zander asserts that opening the mind to the wide range of ideas conveyed in an orchestral symphony can have an immense effect. This, he says, is illustrated in the work of the 19th-century composer Gustav Mahler, one of his favorites, and specifically in the 90-minute third symphony. Its opening passages are marked by brutality, coarseness and anger. "This piece is like a journey, which is not all smooth. But when you get to the final movement, you are dealing with an anthem that is all about humanity coming together to celebrate the universal force of overwhelming love. I don't think that anyone, from the poorest child to the most sophisticated philosopher to the chief executive of a multinational corporation, would be resistant to having his or her life enriched by this experience."

In the business world, says Mr. Zander, companies are increasingly finding that employees perform better if they are able to recognize such emotions and act in harmony with them. "Each of us has a package of attributes to live our lives; they include education, stamina, intellectual capability. If people can add to this an ability to unlock the emotions inside them, they will make themselves more completely human. Everything they do will be enhanced."

Mr. Zander says he has had "thousands" of letters and confidences from people who say their lives have been altered by such a transforming process. "People who have been through this, and keep practicing it . . . will keep inventing and creating and resist the fall into the downward spiral that affects many people. You become tougher, clearer and more flexible."

The trend in business to companies being more interested in how their employees think and feel about events - rather than just telling them what to do - fits in with his approach, says Mr. Zander. "I could not have done what I do (with companies) 25 years ago, given the 'command-and-control' way in which a lot of companies were then run. It's odd that an approach which would have been considered quirky or extreme has now become part of the mainstream." Another change is that many companies have welcomed the notion of using metaphors from music to get across messages about "empowerment" and "growing employees" that are part of a lot of recent management thinking. "A lot of companies are tired of using images from war and sport to convey impressions that they think are useful. It's delightful to think you can use some of the most glorious music ever written to draw parallels that are helpful in a business setting."

99 Canal Center Plaza, Suite 250, Alexandria, VA 22314

