

Benjamin Zander – Mahler specialist and exponent of the possible talks to Kirsty Harris

Business as usual

Sydney classical music audiences are generally quite spoilt with the great array of international soloists and conductors visiting our shores every year. So what makes this month's visiting conductor, Ben Zander, different from other prominent musicians? Well, for starters, he is quite possibly better known to our business community than to our musicians.

Ben Zander has a passionate approach to leading and developing young musicians; so much so, that he is much sought after by corporations for his talks on leadership and creativity. Zander's leadership of the Australian Youth Orchestra (AYO) in Mahler's *Symphony No.2* this April will be his second trip to Australia - but his first as a musician. Zander's first professional visit to Australia was to address a group of corporate leaders on unlocking possibility within their organisations. This line of his work derives from his great success in developing young musicians and 'unlocking' the artistry within. 'I receive enormous satisfaction from working with young musicians. I have heard that the AYO is extremely good and so made the decision to take the long journey to Australia as I think conducting them will be very exciting.

'My approach with youth orchestras is to assume they can do the ultimate. I assume they can play the work. They sense that in me and so respond. Young musicians of course play with precision and exactitude but they will also perform with a frightening intensity, subtlety and awareness if encouraged to do so.

'I always encourage youth orchestras

to perform with pride, to know the music as if they wrote it. Another joy of working with youth orchestras is that the conductor always has a longish period with them. I will spend nine days with the AYO whereas recently I performed Mahler *No.1* with the London Philharmonic and we had just two rehearsals - that was it. Of course, they were marvellous as they are a wonderful orchestra but having a longer period with an orchestra does make for a different experience as a conductor.

'I also love teaching, introducing

**'Mahler...is a giant
in our world.'**

young musicians to a work they have not yet played. The process of exploration, inquiry and unleashing capacities for joy and expression is extremely stimulating and satisfying. 'It is exceedingly gratifying working with a group so ready to give up inhibitions of expression.

The chorus accompanying AYO in the Mahler symphony is Sydney Philharmonia - an amateur choir. Zander has a great deal of experience working with amateur groups - his home orchestra, the Boston Philharmonic, has a mixture of amateur and professional positions and has been lauded for the quality of its recordings, some of which are considered to be definitive.

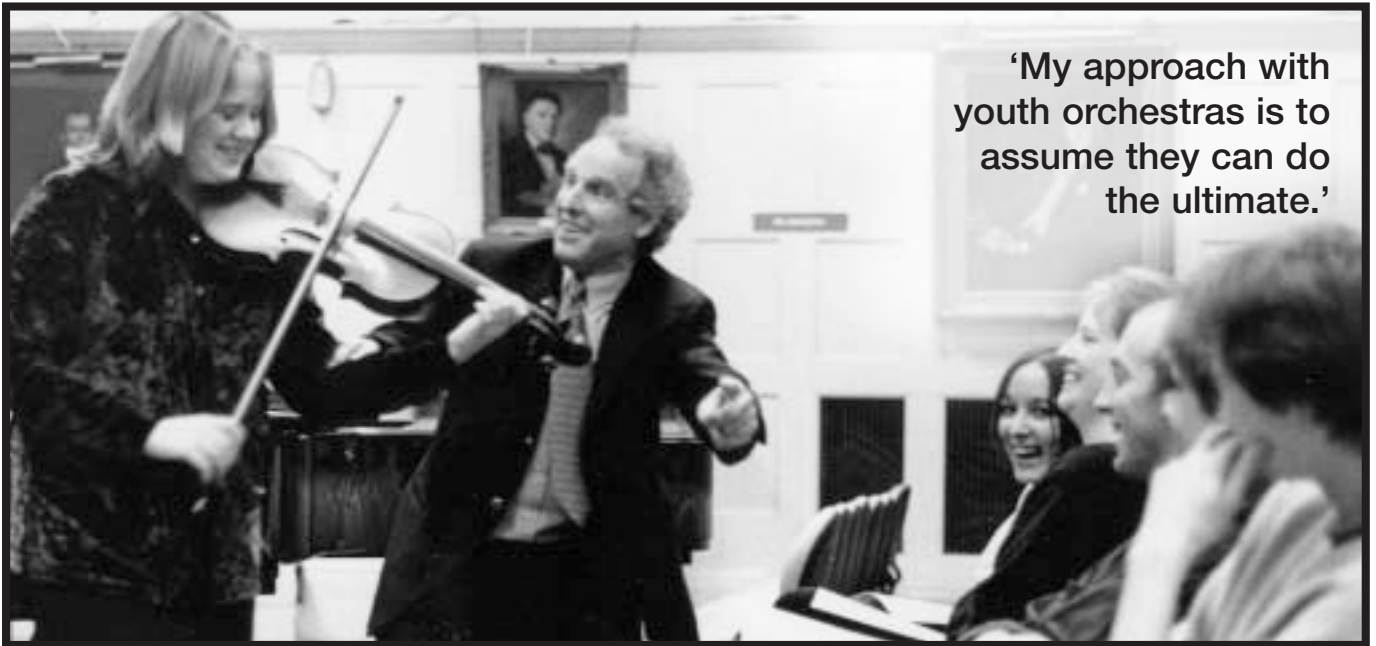
'I take a similar stance when it comes to bringing out the best performances from amateur groups. Amateur is from the word for love and that is how I approach amateur groups. They are

singing and performing for the sheer love of it - if one conducts to that passion you can achieve the most extraordinary performances. Amateurs and young performers can be inspired to give everything in a way that professional players often do not. One needs to coax that attitude out of professionals sometimes.

'I believe the AYO has not performed Mahler *No.2* before. It is such a long intense work; it will be tremendously exciting introducing this work to the orchestra.

'I suppose I could be considered a Mahler specialist but I like them all! I perform everybody: Beethoven, Brahms, Britten, Bartók. However, I feel comfortable in Mahler's world. The extremes of emotions feel natural to me. He is a giant in our world. I do think I bring something special to Mahler though and perhaps this is why I find myself performing Mahler so regularly.

'In addition, people like specialisations - they want conductors to specialise, so to a certain extent my specialising in Mahler has been selected for me. I am in the process of recording the whole Mahler cycle, which is enormously absorbing. The discs for Telarc require a booklet and talk - they are substantial discs. This takes an enormous amount of my focus and, when it is known that a conductor is in the process of recording a cycle, they are often asked to perform those works - and so I have just been in London performing Mahler, will be performing shortly with the Boston Philharmonic and then Sydney. 'I do see my tastes, skills and interests as particularly broad-ranging though. Any specialising



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has been chosen for me rather than of my selection.

‘I have a great interest in all the arts: music, visual, poetry, literature and sculpture. Roz (Ben’s wife and co-author of their book *The Art of Possibility*) and I just recently gave a talk at the Museum of Fine Arts in which we discussed all these areas – not just music. After all, I have a degree in English. I love this side of my career as it proffers wonderful opportunities to travel and meet people. The work I do – whether it is conducting, teaching, writing, recording, or speaking – often places me at the centre of such outpourings of self-discovery, creativity and emotion. People are always contacting me to let me know they heard a recording, read the book or came to a concert and how the experience affected them.

‘I find that in my career I have kept working in all the areas that I have explored along the way. A while ago an Italian journalist was sent to spend a week with me and write one of those “a week in the life of...” features. It was for a glamorous women’s fashion magazine. The journalist said to me at the start, “Oh Mr Zander, you do too much, you’re going to have to give something up.” Of course, I responded that I could not possibly give any aspect of my work up. So she came with me to a rehearsal and at the end of that, she said, “Well that was marvellous, you can’t give that up.” In addition, the next day she came to one of the lessons I give at the conservatorium and at the end of the lesson she said, “Well you can’t give that up.” The following day I had a talk scheduled that she came along to. At the end of the talk, she

said, “Well clearly you cannot give this up either.” At the end of the week, I was given her permission to continue with my busy work life and not cut back.

‘I do feel I have a perfect life. I certainly would not give up any aspect of it. One of the most stimulating aspects is bringing on the next generation.

‘I think it is a great mistake to not encourage, teach and to share experience and knowledge. There is sometimes a hesitancy to do this - particularly when work is scarce, through fear of losing opportunities to others, but that is a mistake. The more one generates, the more opportunities become available.

‘Shops are a good analogy – there used to be legislation that a certain-sized area

‘Amateur is from the word for love...’

would only support one chemist shop – there would never be two chemists next to each other – but now look at what we have – the shopping mall! I have always worked on that principle – the more one gives, the more abundance there is. Some people don’t pass opportunities, knowledge, experience to others through a need to keep power to themselves but power is no use until it is given away – power needs to be used to enliven people, not just to shore up one person’s sense of self.’

So how do we do this? How do we enliven and inspire? ‘Well, I may be getting this wrong; Roz has done much more work on this than I have but it has been shown that humans function on a very small degree of conscious capacity.

For example, something like 16 bits of conscious capacity to 1,000,000 bits unconscious (that is probably wrong but I know it is a very big gap). The arts have been shown to be the main way to enable us to take in more – use more than the 16 bits and experience life. Through engaging with the artistic, we become more aware than we can be through just using conscious logical thought. So, the language of art brings us to an understanding and experience of life that we are shut out from without the arts. Until we engage with the arts, we do not know what life is. This is a powerful idea.

‘Given this, the arts have an enormous role to play. The arts and music particularly should be at the centre of the education system. Artists understand and are aware of so many connections that people in other fields can miss. The arts do not simply represent frivolous entertainment. They give access to possibility, creativity and inventiveness – qualities without which we stagnate and die. It is possibility that in the first instance unglues this stagnancy and the arts are a great pathway to possibility.

Ben Zander will be in Australia for 10 days (which characteristically he speaks of as a long time). He will even manage to fit in a return presentation to our business leaders. Let us hope he speaks with them regarding the central role the arts need to play to stimulate an enriched society.

