

An Interview with Benjamin Zander

Conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra and the New England Conservatory Youth Philharmonic Orchestra

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INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Zander has been the conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra since 1979, and he has been on the Faculty of the New England Conservatory for the past 44 years. Recognized as one of the leading interpreters of the symphonies of Mahler and Beethoven, he is celebrated also for his charisma and famously unstoppable energy—on “60 Minutes,” Morley Safer called him the “Energizer Bunny of classical music.” Mr. Zander is also internationally acclaimed as a speaker on leadership and has introduced hundreds of thousands of people to classical music for the first time. Mr. Zander’s passionate message is the always the same: “Everybody loves classical music, they just haven’t found out about it yet.” He told the *Journal of Education* that, “great music is not an extravagance at the periphery of our lives, it is an essential expression of what it means to be a human being.” He has devoted his life to spreading that message.

In 2008, Mr. Zander was a presenter at TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design), a California conference that brings together the world’s most fascinating thinkers and doers and challenges them to give the talk of their lives in 18 minutes. More than 100 million people have watched the talks on the TED website, and Mr. Zander’s presentation, “Ben Zander on Music and Passion,” has been one of the 10 most popular TED talks. (It can be accessed at http://www.ted.com/talks/benjamin_zander_on_music_and_passion.html.)

Mr. Zander’s TED talk is a powerful demonstration of the qualities of great teaching that we discussed in our interview. He starts with a simple but extraordinary assumption: that everyone in his audience, no matter who they are, will come to love and understand classical music if they are guided in how to listen. One of his core beliefs is that a true leader never doubts the capacity of the people he is leading to realize whatever he is dreaming. “Just think,” he says, “if Martin Luther King, Jr., had said ‘I have a dream! but I am not sure if the people will be up to it.’” Mr. Zander is able to make classical music accessible and nonthreatening: “The job of the ‘C’ is to make the ‘B’ sad,” he explained. He liberally infuses humor into his talk and laughs at the tendency of people to nod off when listening to classical music, but blames the musicians, not the audience.

In addition to providing instruction on the technicalities of music, Mr. Zander teaches his audience how to listen with the heart. Just before playing a Chopin Prelude in his TED talk, he asked his audience to “think of somebody who you adore who’s no longer there.” Although the audience represented a wide range of

musical experience and skill, his music and his teaching brought everyone to the highest level of listening, moving many to tears.

Mr. Zander recalled a transformational realization he had well into his career as a conductor: “The conductor of an orchestra doesn’t make a sound; he depends, for his power, on his ability to make other people powerful.” The leader’s responsibility is “to awaken possibility in other people.” If the more than 250 comments by viewers of the TED talk are any indication, Mr. Zander has indeed awakened possibility in many, many people.

Benjamin Zander believes that everyone deserves the experience of hearing classical music played by a live orchestra. On the day the *Journal of Education* interviewed Mr. Zander, he was in the final preparation of a series of Boston Philharmonic concerts featuring Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*. Mr. Zander practices what he preaches: the publicity mailing noted that the concerts would be “thrilling for kids 12 and up,” and, instead of spending the time before the concert studying the score, he was on the phone for hours calling schools in and around Boston to persuade teachers and principals to bring their students to what he convinced them would be a shattering life experience. As a result of his efforts, more than 400 high school-age students came to the performances on a school night.

Despite the reduction in support for classical music education in American K–12 schools, Mr. Zander is quite bullish about classical music. He spoke enthusiastically about the miraculous social experiment in Venezuela, known everywhere as *El Sistema*, that has brought 700,000 young people from the poorest areas of the country into active participation with classical music—a program that is now being copied all over the world, including at the New England Conservatory, where they have just established *El Sistema USA*. When he visited China with his Youth Orchestra 3 years ago, Mr. Zander discovered that there are 30 million Chinese pianists and 10 million violinists. “Just think how many pianos and violins they are having to build over there, how much sheet music is being purchased, and CDs are being listened to!” He continued with the same enthusiasm, “And you should see what’s happening at the New England Conservatory Prep School these days. There are so many great players there simply isn’t any more room on the stage for them all, even after we have added an extension! With the easy availability of music on the Internet, we are about to enter a Golden Age of classical music with everything bursting out all over.”

Above all, it is this enthusiasm for life and music that Mr. Zander conveys to all who hear him speak or conduct. As he said, “I have huge faith in human nature and I have total faith in the power of music to move people deeply.” Mr. Zander reminds us of the

elemental value of the arts in all our lives, especially in the lives of children.

“I think of my life as being about lighting sparks. If you light a spark it shows up in someone else’s shining eyes. It’s all about enthusiasm, yours and theirs. Enthusiasm means, ‘being full of God,’ or, if you prefer, full of possibility. You pass on something that you are excited or passionate about and it gets passed on and on. And that is how all the worthwhile things in life are conveyed from one person to another. Winston Churchill said, ‘Leadership is going from disappointment to disappointment without losing your enthusiasm.’ The important thing is that we must never lose our enthusiasm.”

INTERVIEW

Journal of Education: Why is classical music important in our culture today?

Benjamin Zander: This is probably the first era in which such a question would be asked. Why are we questioning the value of great art? In past centuries, all educated people were exposed to the arts. In England when I was young, playing an instrument and singing at some level were a part of every child’s life. Think of the Renaissance, when every educated person was expected to sing, play the lute, and turn out pretty sonnets.

In the era of Beethoven, classical music came to be seen as the profoundest expression of the human spirit. It is as essential a part of being human to express oneself through music, as through language. Nobody would ask, “Is it important to read Shakespeare or the great works of literature?” You do not ask, “Is it worth going to school?” Obviously it is. The more educated you are, the more references you have, and the more points of contact you have, the richer your life, and the deeper your experience, and therefore the greater your capacity to contribute to the world.

But music has a special dimension beyond language. It has a direct path to our feelings and can unlock the soul and opens our emotional pores. That is not just good; it is essential. To make it possible for a person to feel connected, emotionally alive, and able to express him- or herself, music is an essential conduit.

I am doing a concert this week with *The Rite of Spring* and I find myself spending hours calling up headmasters and music teachers to persuade them to send their children to hear this concert because I believe that hearing *The Rite of Spring* live, played in a great performance, is quite simply one of the most exciting things a human being can do. It can change the way we experience our lives, and that is true of all the greatest music. What is fascinating is that people all over the world are discovering it more and more. Beethoven’s greatest popularity is now in Asia. In Japan you can hear a hundred performances of Beethoven’s *Ninth* between Christmas and New Year’s Day. The richness of the reward of this music is so enormous that it is hard to see how anybody could question or doubt the value of it.

Plato said, 3,000 years ago, that there are three essentials in the education of a child: mathematics for the mind, athletics for the

body, and music for the soul. I think the world will come to recognize this some day. I trust that it is a notion that is not lost forever. The fact that music has been cut out of the educational system in so many parts of the country is a travesty and a tragedy, but it is happily not true everywhere. I recently conducted the All-State Orchestra in Texas, and 25,000 music teachers attended the conference! Apparently there is an extraordinary flowering of music programs in the public schools in Texas these days because the people in authority down there believe passionately that music is an essential part of every child’s education. And at the New England Conservatory, the youth orchestra program is flourishing beyond anyone’s imagination, with 11 orchestras and so many string players there isn’t enough room on the stage for all the young people who are qualified and want to play. And of course there is another wonderful youth orchestra program over the road at Boston University, where hundreds more young people are discovering that music is an irresistible life-giving force. So how can one possibly be pessimistic? I know that there is a long way to go before it is generally recognized that great music is an essential part of our lives.

Journal of Education: Can you talk about your perspective on conducting and teaching? How can educators apply these insights to their work with young people and with parents?

Benjamin Zander: In the world of possibility, there are practices to live by. One of these practices is called “Giving an A.”¹ It came about when, after one of my graduate classes at the New England Conservatory, I complained to my partner Roz Zander that my students were stifled in their ability and willingness to take risks in their playing by their worry over competitions, grades, reviews, etc. Roz suggested that I give all the students an A, with the condition that they write me a letter in September dated the following May, that begins with the words “Dear Mr Zander, I got my A because . . .” and is followed by a description of who they will have become by the time the class ends.

We have found that when students are given an unconditional A in the first class of the year, and describe in a letter dated in the future who they have become over the year, it brings the students and the teacher together as committed partners on a fascinating and joyful journey, where, for the time being anyway, standards are in the background, and there is no striving—just engagement, participation, and expression. They are liberated from fear to do the work they have always wanted to do, and their performance, we have discovered, is likely to surprise and delight their teachers, themselves, and all who hear them. Obviously this practice works equally well outside the classroom. When I go to guest conduct a new orchestra for the first time, I give every player an A before the first downbeat. There are always a lot of shining eyes.

Another practice is “Lighting a Spark.” When we give something exciting or valuable to others,, their eyes light up with joy and so do ours. They then light a spark and pass it on to others. And that is how education and culture and all the worthwhile things in life are conveyed from one person to another. The way you know somebody is engaged is that his or her eyes are shining. And so,

after a concert, that is what I look for. I look for the shining eyes in the orchestra and the audience. I go to the staircase and I greet them as they are coming down, and if their eyes are shining then I know they have had a wonderful time. I even offer a money-back guarantee before the concert: if you do not have a wonderful time at the concert you can ask for your money back. No one ever does.

Journal of Education: You talked about *The Rite of Spring* earlier. What pieces of music do you introduce to young listeners to develop an appreciation of classical music?

Benjamin Zander: Bach is a great place to begin because of the energy in the rhythm and the exuberance and love that is expressed in his music, especially in the motoric movements. It seems to me that Bach's music is connected to the pulse of the cosmos, so all you have to do is join the dance. And then Beethoven is enormously gripping and exciting. Beethoven showed human beings a way of moving to triumph from suffering and despair. Every one of his pieces—with one exception, actually—ends triumphantly. Beethoven is irresistible. Just think of the opening movement of the *Fifth Symphony*, especially played at his breakneck tempo—it is terrifying and overwhelming. And then the Finale transforms it into unalloyed joy. Did you know that Beethoven invented rock 'n' roll?

Romantic music is great for anyone over the age of 12 or 13 because it touches our deepest emotions: Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Rachmaninov, Chopin, and Mahler. I have found that young people love Mahler. They love the complexity, the richness of the textures, the passion, and the deep, conflicting emotion. It gets people incredibly excited. *The Rite of Spring* is another piece that young people love. It brings us in touch with the most powerful, gut-wrenching, primitive emotions. On the same program as *The Rite* we are doing a piece called *Sensemaya*, by the composer Silvestre Revueltas. It describes the ritual sacrifice of a snake. It tells the story in music of the hunting and the killing of the snake by a tribe of primitive people. At the end the spirit of the snake joins the human community and gives them strength and hope. It is a powerful story, and the rhythms are appropriately intoxicating. In the pre-concert talk I had the audience divide into groups and sing and beat several of the complex Latin rhythms. It was a blast. So the trick is to find the music that fits the age. I always think the people who made the film *Fantasia* were extremely clever. Lots of people have found their way to classical music through that film. And *The Rite of Spring* is one of the sections in that film.

Journal of Education: What music is on your iPod?

Benjamin Zander: Oh, there is so much music on my iPod, I couldn't tell you all the things. There's the music that I am working on to prepare for the next concert. There may be 500 different pieces on there; there is some Billie Holliday, whom I adore and never get tired of listening to; there's Willie Nelson; and things that my daughter Jessica puts on my iPod, so that I can keep up with what my grandchildren are listening to. I have some songs by a wild pop singer whom I heard at a folk festival a few years back whose

name I can't think of. Lady Gaga has made a recent appearance, after I went to one of her concerts in Boston. Bach is always there. Beethoven, the complete string quartets, piano sonatas, and all the symphonies. So if I am in airports—and I am in airports a lot—and I am queuing up, I am listening. I have a vast choice. There are so many pieces I cannot begin to tell you. What an amazing world we live in that has all this incredible music available at the touch of a finger! When my father was young, the only way they could hear this great music was to play it for four hands on the piano.

Journal of Education: Do you think that today, because of the prevalence of the iPod, that there is a difference between listening to music on an iPod and a live performance?

Benjamin Zander: Yes, of course there is. It's like the difference between eating corn that has just been picked off the cob and eating it out of a can. Anything other than the actual experience of hearing it in a live space . . . it must be a room with the appropriate sound. It is no good listening to a string quartet in Symphony Hall. You must listen to a string quartet in a space that was designed for a string quartet. It is no good to listen to a symphony in a hall that was designed for a string quartet. So the space is very important. You cannot play classical music in a football stadium and expect it to make its true impact; you have to play it where it belongs. That is one of the great advantages of the Boston Philharmonic, we play our concerts in halls of a thousand people, and in a piece like *The Rite of Spring*, you feel the music like the visceral onslaught it was intended to be. Sitting in the balcony of Jordan Hall and listening to an orchestra at full throttle cannot be matched by even the best sound system. I know, because I have the best sound system!

There are some things that have to be experienced in person: food and wine, and a summer day. You can pump the smell of a summer day into an office, but it does not make it a summer day.

Journal of Education: Are you optimistic about American education today?

Benjamin Zander: There are things about American education that terrify me, but I have faith in human nature and I have faith in the power and beauty of the great works of literature and art. I am not certain that IBM or Procter and Gamble will still be around in a thousand years, but I am sure that Shakespeare will be performed and that Mozart and Bach and Beethoven and Mahler will be played. By then, far more people will have discovered all those great composers than know them now, which is a very exciting idea.

Journal of Education: Are there any last words that you'd like to add about music and education?

Benjamin Zander: I want people to experience music directly. It's not enough to study books and sit in classrooms. Keats said that no philosophical precept means anything unless you can feel it on your pulses. To fully experience music, you have to be there at the concert, not sitting in a library reading about it, not sitting and doing homework about it, but being in the audience and feeling

the heat of the people around you as a communal experience. And, if possible, with a good guide to point out the things to listen for.

Music is probably the most powerful form of communication known to man. It is why we have music at funerals, weddings, and when young people are marching into war. It can speak directly to our being and shift our molecules. Imagine a film without music. I cannot imagine life without music. It is just inconceivable. It is like trying to imagine life without air or water or light or food. It would not make any sense. Now we have to go out and share it with everybody.

Note

¹This practice and many others are fully described in the best-selling book, *The Art of Possibility*, co-authored by Rosamund S. and Benjamin Zander, published by Penguin in 2002, which has been translated into 16 languages.