

Mahler and Inspiration: Benjamin Zander at Albany's Palace Theater

Posted by Seth Lachterman

It might seem paradoxical that one of world's most commercially successful "motivational speakers" and purveyors of Inspiration for the troubled masses is British-born conductor, Ben Zander. His musical specialty is Gustav Mahler, a manic-depressive genius who saw tragedy around every corner. Think of his Tragic Symphony (#6) written in the happiest days of his short life. While his music inspires us with its remarkable color and ineffable narratives, the world is always seen as through a glass darkly. Maestro Zander's recordings of Mahler's symphonies with the Philharmonia Orchestra have received wide praise, and it was a significant boon to have him work with the Albany Symphony Orchestra.

Mr. Zander, who leads the Boston Philharmonic, has leveraged his considerable communication and educational skills into creating something beyond the mere making of music. His pre-concert talks have become legendary; his recent recording of Bruckner's Fifth includes a lengthy analysis has received encomiums in *Fanfare* and *Gramophone*. He co-authored, in 2002, the book *The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life* with his wife, Rosamund Stone Zander; he keyed the World Economic Forum in Davos, and has appeared on much popular media (like Charlie Rose) as a protean artist equally at home with conducting, music teaching, music appreciation, and the corporate lecture circuit.

I mention this since it was everywhere apparent this evening at Albany's Palace Theater that we were to be treated to an evening of "Mahler Plus." The orchestra's board chairman made special mention of Mr. Zander's extra-musical talents in his introductory remarks—he even noted the "shining eyes" (a term of art in Mr. Zander's lexicon) of those present who had been exposed to the Zander Philosophy. Copies of his book, ready for signature, were up front for sale. The tickets were imprinted "Ben Zander CHANGE YOUR LIFE Albany Symphony Orchestra CLASSICAL CONCERT." Having traced Mr. Zander's interest in such matters since 2000, and having heard him prophesy a tri-decade of supernal achievement in our times, I'm led to believe by the baleful state of our planet, our upended economy, the cancer of corporate greed and widespread wilful self-annihilation, that Mr. Zander's rosy visions requires some circumscription. Yet, I'm sure many in attendance this night did so for the whole-package: Maestro, Mahler, and Motivation. Considering the transitional state of classical music economics and the atrophying of the arts in general, any charismatic figure that can attract a broader paying audience should be welcomed. It seems, though, more than the art itself is needed to gather interest, and, perhaps we must all be open-minded to whatever crossover is required to ignite a following. Indeed, Mahler's Fifth, with its funereal opening movement and its seemingly "triumphant" Rondo, might be perceived as a paradigm for Mr. Zander's world view of transformation. However, nothing in the implied narrative of the symphony—even the carefree contrapuntal beauty of the Scherzo—can be reduced to a simple and unscathed triumph of "one's soul" over tragedy, turbidity and melancholy. A self-conscious irony lurks throughout every seeming blissful measure.

The evening evoked a memory from 2007 in the Capital District of New York: an embarrassingly under-attended performance of the same great work with Riccardo Chailly, the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra at Proctor's Theatre-Schenectady. This performance of Mahler's Fifth was the best I ever heard and perhaps one of most thrilling concerts I ever attended. The paltry showing in Schenectady could be held in relief to the next night which sold out in Carnegie Hall when Chailly and his LGO repeated this very program. Yet, some hundred miles north of Carnegie, a third of the hall was filled the night before. Certainly the lack of marketing Chailly and

his ensemble would have attributed to this regional disparity. Couldn't the combination of Mahler and a great interpreter attract a comparable crowd in upstate New York?

Exposure and attendance were not an issue tonight at the Palace Theater. The hall seemed filled, and Zander with the ASO received a standing ovation from a crowd that probably had fewer Mahler addicts than well-dressed corporate young Turks and local professionals; it was notable, as well, for being a far younger demographic than one usually encounters in classical music venues. Undoubtedly too, the ASO has a loyal local following—justifiably so—which accounted for many in attendance. It was inspiring to see such community support for this concert, even if the focus was ultimately broader than the music itself. No doubt, much credit must lie with the professional shepherding of these musicians by David Allan Miller, the ASO's director. Having heard them in perform a fine reading of Mahler's Fourth in 2003, I felt confident that the Fifth, albeit more difficult, would be carefully prepared and transparent.

Mr. Zander's Mahler this evening was performed in a measured, elegant way, hardly tapping the neurotic core that makes this work so disturbing or so interesting. The refined lyric moments were wonderfully lavish and were the most memorable in the evening. The scherzo was an especial treat. He seemed to focus his attention towards the brass, winds, and lower strings. So much so, he ignored the violin section, which, at times, sounded pale and in need of tonal concentration. The brass and woodwind solos were excellent. Special mention must be made of the first horn whose delivery was warm and burnished in those marvelous solos in the Scherzo's trios. Zander's treatment of the beloved Adagietto was both ethereal and tender; the hushed dynamics and subtle color of the ASO's violins were here used to a lovely effect. However, the jittery agitation of the second movement, a piece more akin to outbursts of stuttering anxiety, was only hinted at with Mr. Zander's overly even-temperedness. One missed, in general, the edginess and precipitousness of Mahler's unique musical engagement. On the other hand, Mr. Zander's imparting of emphasis, weight and optimism to the chorales in the second and fifth movements became important unifying elements of his overall approach. While this might be Mahler on Zoloff, it does not deter from the transparency, technical competency and polish of the ASO as well as Mr. Zander's thoughtful and refined approach. Yes: inspirational and motivating.

A cagy choice for an opener was the *Emperor Waltz Suite* by Johann Strauss II. Linking the "K und K" of the waltz-king's carefree world to that of the complex undertows of Mahler's Scherzo was a striking touch. The Strauss also provided a false sense of ease before the military gloom of Mahler's opening measures.

Who knows?

After another decade of war, starvation, tragedy and decay, we might become inured to Mahler's acidity, and his later symphonies might become the future elevator music for our torn and tattered lives.