

The Boston Globe

A conductor's legacy, in a new website



Benjamin Zander shown conducting the Boston Philharmonic Youth Orchestra at Symphony Hall on March 11.

By Zoë Madonna GLOBE STAFF MARCH 21, 2018

CAMBRIDGE — “I believe everybody can love classical music. Everybody, in fact, does love classical music,” conductor Benjamin Zander said during a recent interview at his home near Harvard Square. “They just haven’t found out about it yet.”

In Boston, Zander is an unmissable presence around town. Born in England, he helms both the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra and its no-longer-new youth offshoot, the Boston Philharmonic Youth Orchestra. The latter was established after his 2012 dismissal from New England Conservatory, where he taught for more than four decades and currently has the title of faculty emeritus.

Now his life's work is being compiled online at the Benjamin Zander Center, a project of the Boston Philharmonic, at www.benjaminzander.org. The site features performances, lectures, writings, and interpretation classes from throughout his lengthy career.

The conductor has been minimally involved with the project itself. It wasn't his idea, he said; Boston Philharmonic senior adviser Mark Churchill, a former student and longtime friend of Zander's, had the idea. "[Zander has] a huge body of work, and there are many people across the globe who really find it very inspiring and beneficial," Churchill said by phone.

That huge body of work to draw from probably has to do with the fact that Zander, 79, often has a lot to say. At concerts, his pre-piece talks provide an extensive guide to the music about to be performed, illustrated with musical examples and excerpts. Also, the non-conducting portion of his career is built on public speaking. He's lectured on leadership and communication to countless corporate groups, and his TED talk "The Transformative Power of Classical Music" has almost 10 million views on www.ted.com.

The TED site was one source of inspiration for Zander Center director John Helyar in designing the new website; others were the New York Philharmonic's digital archives and the Berlin Philharmonic's Digital Concert Hall.

"We've designed the site so someone can come in and specifically find an audio item or video item by searching," he said by phone. "But aside from that, Ben's ability to teach and educate goes beyond music. It touches on much broader topics. So we've designed this ability in the site for people to come in and explore collections based on concepts. Some are related to music, but there are others that are about 'one-buttock playing.'"

One-buttock playing? "That's a very simple idea! Instead of thinking of music this way, straight up and down," Zander gestured, square in his chair, "You think of it as flowing. As you do it, naturally, your body moves with the music," he explained, shifting so he was poised on the edge of his seat, turned sideways.

"I was working with a young pianist in a class in a business setting. I said to this young pianist, 'You're great, but you're a two-buttock player! You should be a one-buttock player!' And I pushed his body like that, and foom! The music took off." He said he then received a letter from a businessman in Ohio who wrote, "I was so moved, I went back and transformed my entire company

into a one-buttock company!' It's all about a way of being in the world. It's encouraging people to think and live outside the box and to develop a more open-hearted way of being in relationship to music, but also in relationship to life."

His tireless evangelism for music as a conduit of capital-P Possibility has gained him what the Boston Philharmonic website describes as "an intense, almost cult-like following." His mission at the youth orchestra, he says, is to train players "in life as well as in music."

"If you're not changing somebody's life, you're wasting your time!" he exhorts a young violist in an interpretation class of Bach's Courante and Bouree from Cello Suite No. 3, posted on the center's website.

This site, he hopes, will be part of his legacy. "I was visiting the Israel Philharmonic, and members of the orchestra came up to me saying, 'We follow all your classes!' So the idea was to gather it all together and make a central place. A playground, if you like, for music, and a way of being in the world that I really want to pass on to the next generation," said Zander.

But the establishment of the Zander Center doesn't mean the conductor is going to step back from his activities. "I've heard tell that old people have to slow down, but I haven't had any sign of it yet," he said. "Eventually, I'm sure I will have to do it. . . . But it has not happened yet. I have no need to do that. I'm not a hobbies person. I don't have hobbies. This is my life."