Notes from the Podium: Benjamin Zander on Beethoven's Symphony No. 9

Interviewer: Dr. H. Baxter

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Benjamin Zander is the conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra and the Boston Philharmonic Youth Orchestra. He is also a guest conductor with orchestras around the world and is a three-time Grammy nominee. For the past fifty years, Zander has occupied a unique place as a master teacher, deeply insightful and probing interpreter, and as a profound source of inspiration for audiences, students, professional musicians, corporate leaders, and politicians around the world. He has persistently engaged well-informed musical and public intellectuals in a quest for insight and understanding into the western musical canon and the underlying spiritual, social, and political issues that inspired its creation.

His performances have inspired thousands of musicians, renewed their sense of idealism, and shed fresh, insightful, and sometimes provocative light on the interpretation of the central symphonic repertoire of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Critics and the public have been united in their praise of Zander's interpretations of the central repertory.

Zander enjoys an international career as a speaker on leadership, with several keynote speeches at the Davos World Economic Forum, where he was presented with the Crystal Award for "Outstanding Contributions in the Arts and International

Relations." The best-selling book, *The Art of Possibility*, co-authored with leading psychotherapist Rosamund Zander, has been translated into eighteen languages. In 2019, Zander was presented with a Lifetime Achievement Award at the ABSA Achievement Awards in Johannesburg in recognition of his contributions in the spheres of Music, Culture and Leadership. This is the first time that the award has been given to a non-South African. Previous recipients of the Award include Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu. Zander's TED talk on The Transformative Power of Classical Music has been seen by almost nineteen million people. He has a widely viewed series of internet classes called 'Interpretation of Music and Lessons in Life' that can be seen on YouTube.

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In 2018 Zander released a recording of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with the Philharmonia, along with a two and a half hour discussion of Beethoven's score.

This is referenced throughout our conversation below. Zander's meticulous attention to detail sets the piece alight in ways I'd not previously experienced. I strongly encourage you to listen to the recording as well as the entire discussion to really get the most out of the interview, and truly open your eyes/ears to Zander's unique insights, coming from decades of experience, study and passion for the composer.

If Mr. Zander is correct, we have been listening to the music of the greatest composer only in misrepresentation. Andrew Porter, The New Yorker Magazine

The distillation of a lifetime investigating composers' truest intentions….this account of the work heaps revelation on revelation. Paul Driver, The Sunday Times (London)

Zander's reasoning is consistently sensible, scholarly and compelling… in explaining his efforts to take the composer at his word, Zander gets to the crux of musical interpretation. Gramophone

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It was great to listen to your recording[1] – which I LOVE by the way.

Great. I am delighted. I'm so happy it's out in the world, although it's quite an effort for people to take in the two and a half hours of discussion.

Well, I sat there taking notes.

Wonderful!

First of all I wanted to ask you about something you said on a trailer for 'Following the Ninth'.[2]

Yes, a man went around the world filming performances of the Ninth. He filmed a performance I was doing with the Cape Town Symphony.

Yes! You said 'if given a chance to meet one person in history, for me it would be Beethoven. And the question I would ask him – if I only had one question – would be the Ninth Symphony'. So now I'm itching to know exactly what this question is, and why you'd want to ask it.

[1] Beethoven Nine, (CD) Performed by Philharmonia Orchestra, Philharmonia Chorus, conducted by Benjamin Zander (2018) London: CD Baby
[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I90_deaEFus (3.00mins)

Let me just step back for a moment. Any performance of the Ninth is an occasion. It's always a grand event and the many recordings and performances haven't dulled its impact.

So the question is: does it make a real difference if it's played one way or another? Are all the performances by the great conductors equally valid?

Ferdinand Ries said Beethoven was adamant that his students play his music in the way he dictated. So, if I met him, I would ask if he meant everything he wrote. I would expect the answer to be 'yes', but I would like to check up.

I would especially like to know about the sections that have created so much controversy. If he doesn't approve of my performance of the second movement's Trio, [3] or the March in the last movement, then I would have to question the very basis of my approach. And then there's the additional problem of the controversy over the mistakes that Karl [von Beethoven – Ludwig's nephew] made that I hope I've been able to put to rest.[4] It would be nice to hear it from the horse's mouth.

It is a pity that most of the critics have focused on the Trio [starting bar 412][5] – they can't seem to let it go because it's so unusual and shocking when you hear it for the first time.[6]

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[3] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjiAnPnkpFY for Zander's full discussion of the controversy surrounding the tempo of the Trio. Evidently, Karl wrote Presto 116 but instead of a whole note, he wrote a half note.
[4] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0W4QqGYQoM for Zander's discussion of the mistakes made in the metronome marking of the Presto's opening (8.00mins).
[5] All bar/page numbers refer to the Eulenberg edition (see Bibliography).
[6] Zander added 'If you find yourself too shocked by the Trio played at 116, you might, as a transition to accepting Beethoven's startling vision, appreciate this earlier take, for which we were just shy of Beethoven's tempo'.
https://www.dropbox.com/sh/n4jpk5imuxmrwic/AAAOlkNU3p3GvqmkAuoFgBDpa?dl=0

I wanted to ask you about the trio. You spoke about the solo at bar 454 that the oboist[7] didn't think was going to be possible at Beethoven's tempo…

To be accurate the oboist didn't say it wasn't possible at Beethoven's tempo, he said "I can't play it musically at Beethoven's tempo". As it turned out he played it really beautifully on the recording. One of the oboists in my youth orchestra recorded it on his phone with a metronome ticking at 116 and sent it to me with a note attached: 'it's no problem at all. Here it is and I can do it just as well at 120'. It sounded quite natural to me. Here is Rodion Belousov as recorded on his cell phone, you can judge for yourself:

https://www.dropbox.com/s/8viij56cpk96kgm/mm454-475-at-116-1.m4a?dl=0

Imagine waking up one day and finding a message from Beethoven saying: 'My metronome marks, are correct. They are counter-intuitive, so you may have some difficulty getting used to some of them at first and you will probably have to practice like the Dickens to get the very fast ones to sound natural and convincing.' You can be sure you'd just accept them and get on with it. The problem is that there are so many revered musicians who have told us that they are nonsense, and others who have come up with all sorts of fake news about broken metronomes or telling us that that we shouldn't trust them because Beethoven was deaf and so he couldn't see the metronome. We haven't given them a real chance.

What I set out to do in this recording is to play the entire piece at the tempos Beethoven indicated (correcting a couple of mistakes along the way) so that people

[7] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjiAnPnkpFY (16mins28s).

can hear it that way for once. They may not like it as much as their favourite recording (or their own recording!) – I am simply asking them to listen.

One thing I've discovered is that although Beethoven sometimes asks for extremely fast tempi, he never asks for a tempo that's impossible. NEVER.[8] It is always playable. Not necessarily playable by everybody, or playable the first time through, and it may not have been playable by musicians in his own time. There's the famous story of the violinist who protested 'I can't play it!' and he snapped back, 'what do I care for your lousy fiddle? I'm looking to future generations'. Our job as performers is to make ourselves available to whatever challenge the composer sets us.

Beethoven lived at the extreme edge of virtuosity and expressiveness. Everything about him was extreme. This piece, the last great piece he wrote for orchestra, is bound to have explored extremes. To take a comfortable view of the piece, and make it comfortable or familiar in a way that we like to do with the music we love – 'the songs my mother taught me' – is insufficient, given what he said about it and what he seems to have demanded. This approach is uncompromising in every way, including the two and a half hours that I'm talking to the lay listener about it. (It's not aimed at professional conductors, though I think they owe it to themselves, and to Beethoven, to at least think through these arguments.)

A young conductor came to visit a year ago just after the recording came out. He heard the Trio once through and said, 'right, I'm going to do that in my performance in June'. Just like that. It was no hurdle for him. Some older conductors and players have looked askance, as if to say, 'we know how Beethoven's Ninth is supposed to go

[8] The matter of the Hammerklavier Sonata remains a question to be discussed another day.

– leave us alone'. I'm saying, 'no, I won't leave you alone, because I don't think Beethoven would have left you alone'.

Obviously your primary focus was to deliver Beethoven's wishes, but for you, as the conductor, were there any tempi that really didn't feel natural?

Interestingly there was one and it wasn't because it was too fast. Beethoven's tempo for the double fugue 'Seid umschlungen Millionen' [the Andante maestoso p.221][9] was slower than I wanted it to go. I found that I kept pushing it towards the tempo that most people have found works best (i.e. around MM = 96. Both Furtwangler and Weingartner did it over 30 points faster than Beethoven marks it!). But what persuaded me was the contrabassoon player. He said to me, 'I've played this piece I don't know how many times and I've never been able to get all those notes to sound clear at the tempo that most conductors take it. But at the tempo that you're doing it (i.e. Beethoven's tempo) it's perfectly natural to play'. At Beethoven's tempo (MM=84) the unwieldy contrabassoon (and the double basses) have enough time to actually play those notes rather than fake them and at that tempo the intense grandeur of the Joy theme is fully realised. So, when I find myself wanting to push the tempo, I just imagine myself playing the notes on the contrabassoon or singing the alto part in bar 675 and it makes me hold back. And when those Philharmonia tenors come in with 'Seid umschlungen Millionen' at that tempo, it makes your hair literally stand on end, it's so exciting.

All the other tempi I have come to feel as completely natural. I can't hear the slow movement (actually I can't hear any of it) any other way. When the Ode to Joy is sung like [sings 'Freude, schöner Götterfunken, Tochter aus Elysium' at a very slow

[9] Discussion of tempo at 15mins. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0W4QqGYQoM. Also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ym6UO-ma9-U at 15mins20s.

tempo] it just sounds too slow. Beethoven didn't want it to sound lugubrious and pompous, it must soar with gentle joy.

As a general rule I start with the tempo that the composer writes down. I only abandon it if I'm absolutely sure that it's a mistake or a misjudgement. In the end I've almost always learned something important about the piece or brought out something that is lost in performances that ignore the composer's intentions.

I watched a half-hour masterclass that you did with a young student conductor on Beethoven's Fifth.[10] Many people don't think of Beethoven as much of a melody writer and yet there you were showing us that there is, in fact, a great melody at the beginning of Symphony No. 5, it's just being passed between the voices. I thought that was fascinating.

There is something quite funny about that – when I conducted the Fifth with the Israel Philharmonic, at the first rehearsal I sang the opening phrase between the violas, second violins and first violins. A cellist said, 'I've been in this orchestra for thirty years, and nobody has ever pointed out that melody!' They had no idea it was there.

Are there any particular moments where you think there's a melody that has been missed in The Ninth?

There is the famous example in the 12/8 section of the slow movement [starting at bar 99]. When it is played at too slow a tempo (often as much 30 points slower than Beethoven's marking) the audience perceives the melody as being in the first violins,

[10] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCkQ138sg6M See also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3orZA9kpiU for Zander's discussion of tempi in Beethoven's Symphony No. 5.

whereas it is actually in the winds. The violins meanwhile are playing an elaborate, filigree, extremely virtuosic decoration around the cantus firmus in the winds.

The very opening phrase in the first two bars, between the two bassoons and two clarinets all too often sounds like four separate events, instead of one flowing phrase, like the opening of a flower, or human arms outstretched. That suddenly becomes apparent when it is played at Beethoven's 60 to the quarter (or rather 30 to the half note – or ideally 15 to the bar!), as one ecstatic, flowing phrase. It's hard to do with four players – they have to feel the whole phrase as one. I call that One Buttock playing!

The main melody of the movement [sings and plays on the piano the following opening melody from bar 3] only works if you feel it in two, even if you actually give four beats for clarity – particularly when you get to bar 15. Beethoven must have imagined a great aria with free, flowing eighth-notes like Florestan pouring out his love.

One of the apparent mysteries of the slow movement is that Beethoven's tempo of the Adagio molto is 60,[11] while the tempo of the Andante moderato is 63. I remember a conversation with Colin Davis who used that to argue that Beethoven's metronome markings were nonsense. "An Adagio molto can't be the same tempo as an Andante moderato". But once we know that 50 was the lowest number on Beethoven's metronome all becomes clear. He meant 30 to the half note, but he didn't write it because he didn't have it on his metronome. The difference between 30 and 60 is indeed the difference between Adagio and Andante. And 60 to 63? Yes, it's a tiny

[11] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bph5JU9UCxI for Zander's full discussion of the tempo of the Adagio.

little difference. But so is the difference between a D and an Eb. Beethoven had a very fine ear.

There are often complaints about Beethoven's ill treatment of sopranos. They have to sing so high – those high As and Bs. Antony Hopkins wrote 'it is worth remarking that the pitch that he would have remembered from the days when he could hear was a full semitone flatter that what we have become used to. I have read of a performance given a semitone down in which the alleged difficulties all but vanished' (2011:277).

Well, the people who have dealt with that head on, of course, are the Historically Informed Performance conductors like John Eliot Gardner and Roger Norrington. I'm sure there's truth in that, and that's a very interesting point. Antony Hopkins was brilliant and I love everything he did.

Oh really?

I think he's fantastic. In a way I'm a little bit of a follow-on, because like him I try to make music understandable to non-musicians. I always give a talk before my concerts and I include explanation discs with all my recordings, so that lay audiences don't feel left out. But my approach is not HIP ('historically informed performance') in the sense of reproducing the conditions of the time. It has nothing to do with early instruments. This is the way the music goes!

I do, however, love to confront the issue of whether to add the crucial timpani notes in the Fanfare in the slow movement (2 bars before A). It is so clear to me that Beethoven would have added them if they'd been available. He would have been very

impatient with someone who was so deferent that they wouldn't help him out at a crucial moment like that! I'm not at all purist in that sense.

So to go back to your point about the Philharmonia Chorus (especially the sopranos) feeling strained. Several of them told me that they found the tempi extremely helpful in reducing strain. Those singers have sung that piece hundreds of times (some told me they were secretly dreading doing it yet again). I heard from so many of them afterwards how thrilled they were with this new approach, and how much easier it was to sing.

It is amazing how observing the tempi totally transforms the piece.

It really does totally transform the experience for performer and listener.

There are many tracks on your CD where you discuss the tempi in the symphony and they are listed from the 'least controversial' to the 'most controversial'. But in the 'least controversial' section there was something that I thought would be in the 'most controversial': the fact that you wrote the viola part into the horns in the fourth movement![12]

Let's be clear here – the 'least controversial' to the 'most controversial' titles were to do with metronomic tempi only. This is quite another matter. It's a question of another hidden melody. At bar 25 of the Andante Maestoso in the Finale you'll see the violas have a rather striking figure [sings the melody].[13] It's very original. It's worth hearing, but it never is. The reason is that the chorus is singing *forte* and so the violas are buried. The poor man was deaf, for goodness sake! It's hardly surprising that he

[12] I also recommend listening to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gosniseqF3E (from 9mins 10s) where Zander states his reason for adding a piano for impact to all of the louder passages throughout the recording sessions.
[13] Covered in discussion https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0W4QqGYQoM at 17mins20s.

occasionally made mistakes of balance. It's clearly an original and worthy idea. It ought to be heard, and on my recording it is!

If I ever could have that conversation with Beethoven, I'd say: 'that melody in the last movement isn't audible in the violas. Would you mind if I supported it with a couple of horns to make sure that it's heard?' He would undoubtedly have said 'by all means'. It's just the same as with the Fanfare without the added timpani. It sounds silly without it. No composer would ever invent an original phrase and then allow it to be buried. But it doesn't mean you have to go around changing everything and adding trumpets and horns all over the place. Mostly the Ninth works perfectly well. It's just that in that one very special moment, Beethoven didn't have the notes available. So we're helping him out, and I think that's perfectly appropriate. It's like how you'd help an old gentleman across the road.

Evidently Wagner did the same thing.

Generally speaking I found it unnecessary. At bar 93 in the Scherzo it is traditional to add horns. But I told just one horn player to play lightly to give a little bit of added strength, but not to allow the horn timbre to draw attention to itself. I doubt anybody could perceive it.

That's very interesting.

What is so interesting is that four of the fourteen metronome marks in the Ninth are followed by virtually everyone. That's why in my explanation I begin with those four uncontroversial ones and then move out to where there is the most controversy. The two most extreme ones (the Trio in the second movement and the March in the Finale)

have few fans, but if they can't be included in the scheme then the intricate pattern of relationships crumbles.

When I approached the piece for the first time I took the stated tempo of the March in the Finale literally, the way Karl had written it down as a dotted quarter note = 84. I am embarrassed to say I actually performed it that way in Carnegie Hall with my Boston Philharmonic. However, it is much too slow for an Allegro assai vivace, and made no sense.[14] But a glance at the Conversation book shows that it was noted simply as 6/8 84 – there was no mention of the note-value to which the 84 applied. Karl, knowing no better, just added the wrong note-value. It's perfectly understandable given the newness of the process of notating metronome marks. He should have written dotted HALF. Once that is realised all that remains is for everyone to work like the devil to be able to play it at that speed, but there's no more controversy, just terrific excitement. The words fit perfectly: 'stars flying across the firmament'; 'thus brothers you should run or race joyfully like a hero, going to victory'. And off they go into a wild battle!

Another thing that I think people have found very exciting about this recording is that the dynamics are followed literally. So when the tenor comes in singing 'Froh, froh' [bar 45], he is singing it piano, as it is marked. He is standing in awe, spellbound, excited by the beauty and wonder of God's starry plan. Everybody is marked *pianissimo*. It is almost breathless, like a whisper. At that tempo and played softly it is magical, like the starry sky itself. Beethoven's wonder is palpable.

It's lamentable that singers and choruses have been allowed to bellow in the last movement, and then they blame Beethoven! But Beethoven is meticulous about the

[14] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ym6UO-ma9-U for the full discussion of the controversy surrounding March's tempo, and the errors made resulting in the misconception.

difference between *forte* and *fortissimo*. I must have pointed it out a hundred times during rehearsals. It's just another of those bad habits. When the chorus doesn't have to sing *fortissimo* all the time it becomes much more enjoyable to sing and the textures and words become clearer for the listener.

Incidentally, another aspect of Beethoven's tempi is that each bar is to be experienced as a beat in a four bar phrase: 'Freude, schöner Götterfunken, Tochter aus Elysium'[15] is two four bar phrases with one impulse on 'Freu' and another on 'Toch', not eight equal beats (with heads in the choir bobbing on each note). I myself often conduct four bars phrases in Beethoven, as if they were normal four beat bars. It is obvious that Beethoven is thinking that way when in the Scherzo he marks a series of three bar phrases: *Ritmo di tre battute* i.e. rhythm of three bars, meaning a hyper-rhythm of three bars, each bar being one beat.)

That can even be true with slow tempos. The Andante moderato in the third movement works perfectly at Beethoven's tempo and yet so ineffectively if it is played even a bit too slowly [sings and plays from bar 25 of third movement]. At MM = 63 the first bar (F#) can be felt as one beat. Then the following note (G) in the rising scale is the next 'beat' and then to 'A'. You wouldn't want to conduct it in one, but at that tempo (MM=63) you can indicate to the players that they should feel it in one. Is it too fanciful to think that Beethoven, sensing the need for a little more fluid movement at that moment, and having perfect time, as well as perfect pitch, moved the metronomic indication up from 60 to 63?

[15] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjiAnPnkpFY for the full discussion and demonstration (20mins50s).

The next section, Variation 1, Tempo 1 at bar 43, works the same way. When felt (and conducted) in 2 the melodic structure behind the fanciful decoration becomes clearly audible.

This way of hearing music reveals the structure by clearly distinguishing the melody from the decoration. Beethoven's faster tempos, harnessed to a style of phrasing, which treats the bars as beats, is designed to help reveal that structure. The second movement of the Beethoven Violin Concerto is another prime example of a melody often submerged, by a too slow tempo, behind what should be a delicate Irish lace-like decoration. (Click below for Boston Philharmonic's recording with Liza Fershtman).

Beethoven's music is full of amazing modulations. When you're preparing the score on your own before rehearsals, do you ever delve into harmonic analysis?

I do, but I can't think of anything that doesn't make perfect sense in the Ninth. Generally speaking I don't think that has been an issue that has held back the interpretation of this music like the issues of tempo and the carelessness with dynamics.

I just asked because sometimes conductors say they like to analyse the harmony because it gives an understanding of a piece (as if studying the contours of the map). However, more often (so far) I'm told they will find it interesting, but not fundamental. They let it speak for itself. I just wondered, as Beethoven is King of modulation.

Well I've never found a modulation in that piece that I didn't love! (laughs)

The conductor Andrés Orozco-Estrada (Music Director at Houston Symphony) has said that he thinks that the Beethoven Symphony Cycle is the best way to get to know a new orchestra. Do you agree with that?

Sir William Glock, who was the head of the BBC when Colin Davis joined it as conductor of the BBC Symphony, would make him conduct the 'Eroica' every single year. I remember being amazed by that at the time, normally you try to get variety and you don't do a piece more than once every three or four years. But I think he thought (like Orozco-Estrada) that it's the best training there is for both the orchestra and conductor.

The Ninth Symphony also calls on every single possible gift and capacity.

Beethoven wanted the Ninth to be on a par with Bach's B minor Mass and Haydn's *Creation*.

Yes.

It certainly poses, a lot of big issues. An example is that shattering diminuendo in 'to God' [bar 94 of the Allegro assai].[16] My late friend Stuart Young (the South African Beethoven scholar) told me about it. He took me off to the London Museum, where we got out the score (it was quite a ritual to bring it up from the basement!). We opened it up, and sure enough – clear as a bell – there it was. Beethoven must have had second thoughts about it. When I heard the chorus do it, it sent shivers down my spine – so different from what we are used to. He never wrote a letter about it and we don't have the kind of evidence we need to be absolutely certain, but it's very clear in

[16] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32chycKC5z4&list=OLAK5uy_mI5prpNqxXcUgUN_tg1UgOwYyhRhv9k90&index=12 (4mins48s) for more information.

the score, there's a diminuendo on the right hand side on the timpani part and at the top of the stave. On the left there's a sign that he put whenever he made a change in the score. So I said 'OK I get it, let's do it'. We did it. You have to hear it to believe it.

I absolutely love that moment, and think the whole recording is really thrilling. It's very technicolour.

Great, that's beautiful. That's exactly what we were looking for. That's the reason I took the extreme decision to have three three-hour rehearsals and five recording sessions. Beethoven's Ninth is so familiar to a world class orchestra like the Philharmonia. They could have dispatched it in a single rehearsal. But I wanted to be sure that every one of these thousands of details was fulfilled and it took that amount of time for it to be rethought and absorbed. It was a revelation.

I'm still in touch with some of the players. They were *thrilled*.Well, of course, I can't be sure that every single player was thrilled because professional musicians tend to keep their feelings to themselves, but the timpani player was having a fit of excitement all the way through. He was just beside himself! Other players said they just couldn't believe what they were learning about the piece and the revelations came one after another after another after another. When you have a piece that you think you know so well, it's really exciting to make new discoveries.

I would like to think that this recording will end up in every record library because there is nowhere else to find this information.

Absolutely. I think it should be required listening/study if you're going to be researching or conducting Beethoven.

Yes!

It's a joy talking to you since you've obviously thought a tremendous amount about the piece and have done the work that needs to be done in order to have such a thought-provoking conversation. And that's a wonderful thing.

Ah thank you very much.

I'm absolutely delighted that you managed to fit me in, and also that you might be open to chatting again sometime.

Absolutely. Let's do it.

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