

Mr Jaap van Zweden, SBS

Honorary Fellow

Citation

At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning.

At thirty, I stood firm.

At forty, I had no doubts.

At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven.

At sixty, my ear was attuned for truth.

At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right.

This oft-quoted passage from the *Analects* came to mind as I considered how to pay tribute to Maestro Jaap van Zweden today.

Maestro van Zweden embodies the first two lines better than most. The young Jaap had already been playing violin for 10 years when he won the Oskar Back violin competition at 15 years of age, allowing him to study at the Julliard School in New York. Having proven he was “bent on learning”, he went home a few years later to serve as the youngest concertmaster in the history of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. Throughout his 20s, he earned increasing acclaim not only as a concertmaster but also as a soloist, giving high-profile performances and making award-winning recordings. At 30, he clearly demonstrated the Confucian ideal of “standing firm”.

But at this point a new planet swam into his ken when, one day during a rehearsal in Berlin, the legendary Leonard Bernstein asked him to conduct so that Bernstein himself could go out into the concert hall to test the acoustics. Mr van Zweden had never, in his own words, “conducted a note in his life”. When Bernstein returned to the stage, he told him: “That was very bad. Even so, there was something there. Take this seriously.”

How many of us would pursue something new if the response we received upon our first attempt was “That was very bad”? Even if we then heard encouraging words, who among us would make a big gamble based on that? Why risk the solid, the stable, the secure? Why risk status and success by diverting our energies, dividing our focus?

And yet this is exactly what he did. He spent his 30s not just by continuing in the arena in which he was already secure but also by exploring, or exploding into, the new arena of conducting. Without putting down the bow, he picked up the baton. At 40 he was free from doubt.

Overcoming doubt was part of his personal life too, as one of his children, diagnosed with autism, was uncommunicative. But he and his wife kept singing to their son, until one day, a breakthrough was made. This moment, and the incremental steps that followed, proved forcefully that music can bridge human beings when nothing else can. But van Zweden demonstrated something equally important: that when all you have is doubt, when you do not know if you are heard, you must still reach out to touch people and to fill the world with beauty.

At 50, Maestro could certainly be said to “know the decrees of Heaven”. His experimentation with conducting had flowered into appointments as significant as Chief Conductor of the Royal Flemish Orchestra and Music Director of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. The litany of his accomplishments as the Music Director of the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra since 2012 continues to grow long, as exemplified in the naming of the HK Phil as the “2019 *Gramophone* Orchestra of the Year” (the first time this honour has been bestowed on an Asian orchestra by the world’s leading classical music magazine) and by his appointment as Music Director of the world-renowned New York Philharmonic.

In recognition of his achievements and contributions to the performing arts in Hong Kong, Maestro van Zweden was recently awarded the Silver Bauhinia Star by the Hong Kong SAR Government. He has also extended his Music Directorship to 2024 summer, which will bring Maestro van Zweden’s extraordinary tenure as Music Director with the HK Phil to an impressive 12 years.

Now, weeks away from his 60th birthday, Maestro van Zweden certainly has his ear “attuned” to the music he brings to life with his now expert baton. Despite his constant trips and engagements, he remains attuned to a truth about the power of music. The Papageno Foundation he established with his wife promotes the practice and research of music therapy for autistic individuals. The Maestro aims to cut across the boundaries of genres and generations, demonstrating his openness to musical styles as diverse as Lady Gaga and techno. He seeks an ever-broadening sphere of impact and exploration, asserting that “if you want to have an international sound, you should go international”, and insisting on “just going places.... going. That will be the essential thing”.

At Lingnan, we define “liberal arts education” as a “transformation for life”. The easiest reading of this phrase is *transformation* as preparation: our students, almost all under 30, are not yet “standing firm”; our job is to prepare them to do so. But “transformation *for* life” also means for the duration of life: that, because life is continuously changing, we must continuously change with it. And this continuous change, this transformation, is for *life* — not just for a degree or a career, but for life — for curiosity, for connection, for excellence, for exploration. Maestro Jaap van Zweden has lived a life that exemplifies all of these virtues. Mr Chairman, I am honoured to present Mr Jaap van Zweden for the conferment of an honorary fellowship.

Citation written and delivered by Professor Grace Chou Ai-ling