

In perfect harmony - (BA Business Life November 2001)

article on the work of Miha Pogacnik

In perfect harmony

What can business leaders learn from Beethoven's Fifth? Top violinist Miha Pogacnik is on a one-man mission to get managers to think out of the box by letting classical music into their life.

Miha Pogacnik is no ordinary virtuoso violinist. As well as being one of the world's greatest musicians, he also happens to be Slovenia's roving Cultural Ambassador, a composer, an Entrepreneur, business consultant and visionary extraordinaire.

His company literature also lists one of his occupations as "genius". His mission in life? To give a wake up call to the world's business community. He believes the high-earning managers and CEOs of this world are sick of making money and living in the lap of luxury. Deep inside they are aching to find meaning. "managers spend half their lives in these Hilton hotels. They yearn for reality," he booms, striding across the courtyard of Castle Borl, the run-down national treasure which plays host to Pogacnik's Art and Business conference every July: "Great entrepreneurs should be like knights. They should live in a castle."

For most of the year Pogacnik, 52, tours the world giving lectures on how art can influence business, jetting between his homes in Hamburg and Cuernavaca, Mexico. He has given presentations for Microsoft, Ericsson, IBM, Proctor & Gamble, Mitsubishi and Nike, and scores more. Several international business leaders swear by his advice. As Ged Davis, head of scenario processes and applications at Shell International, puts it "Miha is a unique explorer who is bringing music to business, not as entertainment, but to enhance understanding."

Richard Myers, executive creative director worldwide at Saatchi & Saatchi, recently engaged Pogacnik to speak for a group of clients And for his company's European financial directors: "I first saw Miha at a worldwide advertising congress last year and was completely bowled over by him. I have never seen

anyone so successful at bringing two seemingly opposing concepts together - classical music and business school theory. When you hear a piece of music deconstructed by him, his message takes on a very powerful form. I would really encourage anyone to listen to him - it is difficult to imagine the power and the impact.

Pogacnik's approach is simple: "If we learn to listen to music then we acquire new capacities of looking at the world. His performances fall halfway between a violin master class and a leadership seminar, with a touch of Rolf Hares thrown in (he stops playing halfway through a piece to 'draw' the music in felt-tip squiggles all over huge posters taped to the walls).

In return for these skills, he currently commands in excess of L10,000 an appearance. He has spoken at conferences of the World Business Academy, UNESCO and the World Economic Forum. He has performed everywhere from Tibet to the Amazon, Beijing to South Africa, in front of tanks in Bosnia and, floodlit, in front of the pyramids. On the occasion of his 43rd birthday he insisted on playing the violin in 43 European cathedrals on 43 consecutive days because he "needed to find new inspiration".

ONCE A YEAR, HOWEVER, MIHA Pogacnik (pronounced "poe~gotch-nik") comes home. Born in the western part of Slovenia in the mountains, he has organised events in his home country for almost two decades as part of his other quest in life: to put Slovenia on the map. The first country to break away from the former Yugoslavia, Slovenia has maintained an identity and prosperity its war-torn neighbors envy. But, says Pogacnik, "we missed the chance to capitalise on the publicity we got in 1991 when 99 per cent of the country voted for independence. The whole world was looking at us then and we wasted it."

He is determined, instead, to create his own opportunities for his country. The Castle Borl conference started in 1994 and attracts several hundred self-dubbed "truth seekers": this year many Germans, as well as Danes, Americans, British. Many are from business; others have an arts background and, like Pogacnik, are looking to influence big business into adopting more arts-friendly approaches.

There are workshops in painting, movement and drama, discussion rooms and brainstorming sessions. Pogacnik's method, however, is the most simple and popular: he sits you in the midst of music which, he says, will make your thinking clearer and more insightful. In the conference's first year he got a 50-piece orchestra to play in the castle's open courtyard. "We played Beethoven's 5th and the ceiling came down on the second floor," he shrugs.

This year he's using a hall in a part of the castle with more stable ceilings to try out "the surround method", his preferred experiment for larger venues. The orchestra are seated among the audience, checkerboard fashion, "to promote

active listening". The 30-strong orchestra (with Pogacnik on lead violin at the front, bow in one hand, felt tip in his top pocket) are playing Beethoven's Violin Concerto.

"Art gives us the capacity to handle fire - and that capacity can be used in business," Pogacnik proclaims, before striking a high note, his eyebrows pumping up and down almost faster than his bow. Running to his drawing board and back to the orchestra, he shouts: "We live in a polluted time of hearing! In this fog of noise, it is difficult to hear!" As the conductor waves her baton angrily, Pogacnik is so busy drawing a mess on his posters that he almost misses his cue. As the music rises he cries, "Now we are in the heavens!"

Bryan Wills, 34, is seated right in the strings' line of fire. He is manager of integration programs at T-Mobile International in Bonn, the branch of Deutsche Telekom that owns One 2 One in the UK. This is not the first home he has seen Pogacnik speak. The approach Pogacnik recommends is useful in certain aspects of running a business, says Bryan Wills, because "it helps people see there are different ways to solve problems. It changes attitudes. My job is to bring different companies together and to get them to work together, especially when there are different nationalities involved."

With interests in Austria, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Russia and Poland, Wills' company is interested in finding ways of communicating at conference level that can involve all his international colleagues at once and on an equal level. "We are constantly looking for new vision and new ways of interacting. This theory seems to get to the core of things, the driving force."

This is textbook Pogacnik stuff. One of his core speeches is centred around Bach's Fugue in D minor, where he demonstrates that business, like music, has major and minor moods (illustrated by smiley and sad faces on the Rolf Harris chart). Business, like music, has, according to Pogacnik, "competing voices that end in post-merger integration" (he demonstrates this by playing a passage that turns from discord to harmony).

He likes to point out that chaos in music is a good thing, usually leading to a brighter tune: "In the art process you have to create chaos to get anywhere. Many people in business are afraid of chaos.

But crisis is the best thing. The worst thing is if you are in crisis but don't know it," Pogacnik says with a smirk, his shoulders shaking under the trademark waistcoat.

The advantage - and the downside - to this philosophy is that it can be applied to virtually anything. It can be as precise or as vague as you want it to be. After playing the Bach fugue recently at a corporate event (and drawing its cycle on the board), Pogacnik recalls: "One chairman of a German communications company going through a merger pointed to the pictures I had drawn and said,

'Ah! Yes! We were here on December 15th, we got to here on December 22nd and then on January 5th we went back to here!'"

For other companies, the idea of getting more creativity and passion in their work is radical enough. 'I once gave a talk at British Aerospace," Pogacnik says, "And I was saying, 'How is it with love in your company? Is there love? 'And they said, 'What is this about love? We are making bombers.'" He guffaws.

POGACNIK DOES NOT REALLY MIND what people take away from his performances, as long as it makes them think about the one issue close to his heart: that business is taking over our lives, not just at work but in every other sphere.

"What are we heading for culturally if we have a business-dominated society? Business has its place, but now it is in all walks of life. We run prisons like businesses, we run our families like businesses. It's not the best way. I don't see why people shouldn't make money, but this money system is so all-absorbing and only 10 percent of it is tied to the real economy. It is not possible to replace it - that would be utopian - but it is possible to set up complementary systems, where art and culture also have a place. After all, there is a massively powerful chemistry between creativity and business."

He may not be able to get every business leader around the castle's nightly campfire, to celebrate their new-found active listening, but if he can just get a few dozen around the world thinking the same way as him he is happy. And as one of his Slovenian colleagues points out, 'Imagine if Bill Gates started to believe in Miha's philosophy. It would change the history of the world.

By Viv Goskop ©
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