

The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra

THE PHOTOGRAPH below (figure 1) was taken during the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra's performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in Seville in August 2006. The concert location is the stadium traditionally used for bull-fights, but here a select group of the audience sits within the ring, and the dazzling lights on the orchestra may remind us of a brilliantly lit altar, even a sacrificial blaze. Certainly the audience in attendance sought a different sort of entertainment from that more usually provided in a bull-ring: the orchestra's own message was "Music against Violence" in general, but more specifically, music against the violence of Israel-Palestine, even the war between Hezbollah and the Israeli Defence Forces that was ongoing at the time of the performance.

The tension between the dazzling entertainment in Seville and the shattering bloodshed in the Middle East is hard to miss. Co-founded by Daniel Barenboim and Edward W. Said in 1999, the West Eastern Divan explicitly addresses the political conflict in Israel-Palestine by bringing together players from either side of the divide, but stages its concordant social

relations through a model of what its press releases term 'universal' music – drawn to date exclusively from the European canon.

Dr Rachel Beckles Willson is a Reader in Music at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her current research is concerned with examining western classical music in the Middle East. As one element in her programme, she spent time with the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, founded by Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said. In the article below, she considers the impact of the founders' philosophies, and particularly Daniel Barenboim's concepts of the 'world of sound'.

Thus while the orchestra draws on historical associations between music and social harmony (as well as romantic ideas about music's transcendence) its Eurocentrism may undercut the comfort and spiritual elevation that it might otherwise bring.

The orchestra first came together as a one-off workshop within the summer events of

Weimar's Cultural Capital of Europe festivities 1999, and was named after Goethe's Persian-inspired poetry collection of the same name. On generating tremendous enthusiasm it reconvened in the same place in the summer of 2000, and then at North Western University, Chicago, in 2001. From 2002 until 2006 its base was in Pílas, where it was supported by the Junta de Andalucía (Autonomous Regional Government of Andalucía), since 2003 via the newly-founded Barenboim-Said Foundation. The Foundation's work is primarily educational, but the Divan also contributes to the image-building of Andalucía by serving as a gesture of remembrance to the region's Golden Age, the years between 912 and 1009 when a Muslim Caliphate ruled a tolerant society in which Jews and Christians had a firm place.

In the early years the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra was organised collaboratively by Barenboim and Said, the latter's renown in the Middle East assisting in the establishing of contacts for recruiting players. Since he died in 2003, his widow Mariam Said has

Figure 1: *West-Eastern Divan Orchestra performing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony conducted by Daniel Barenboim. Seville, August 2006. © Tom Fecht*



Figure 2: Daniel Barenboim rehearsing with the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, Pílas (near Seville), August 2006. © Tom Fecht

ensured that auditions continue to be held annually in Amman, Beirut, Cairo and Damascus. The orchestral membership changes each year, but there are players who have taken part regularly from the start, and although it is primarily intended as a youth orchestra, several are now well established professionally. Organisers strive for a balance between Israelis and Arabs, complemented by Andalucians, while selecting them on the basis of auditions in Europe, the Middle East, and the USA. In 2006, 43 Israelis and Jews, 37 Arabs (and half-Arabs), 21 Spaniards and 1 Turk were expected initially, but the war between Hezbollah and Israel that erupted just before the workshop began caused all but one of the Lebanese musicians to stay away, and the Syrians did too. Consequently there was an uncharacteristically impoverished mosaic of national identities.

Political realities that shape the lives of the players are largely silenced during the workshop and tour by the intense concentration on music. The resultant apparently depoliticised space might initially be illuminated by Barenboim's utopian 'world of sound', which he discussed in his BBC Reith Lectures 2006. The 'world of sound' has a tangible social function on the one hand, in that it places Arab and Israeli orchestral players on an equal footing (when their political realities are unequal at home), and compels them to have a dialogue: in music 'you have to be able to express yourself... [but] ... you have to listen to the other'. In this respect the world of sound is not what life is, but 'what life could be' (Reith Lecture 4), a sort of musical model for politics. Yet there is a problem inherent to the sociality, because it is enacted through musical sound alone, which, despite being a 'physical phenomenon', has an 'inexplicable metaphysical hidden power' (Reith Lecture 1). The latter quality essentially suspends the broader social implications of the 'world' and is open to (politically) obfuscatory discourse and mystification.

Barenboim's discourse about the 'world of sound', for example, has caught on among Divan players to the extent that it is understood by some as a remote realm that



is nonetheless legible on Barenboim himself. Barenboim 'looks like he is in *another world*', said one to a CNN reporter in 2006, 'in the world of sound that he always talks about'; indeed as Barenboim has himself said, 'sound ... doesn't live in this world' (Reith Lecture 1). Another player pointed out that Barenboim insists that 'the sound is always there, we are just participating in it [when we make music]', and he also suggested that Barenboim's 'body language reflects his theory'.

The way that such players talk about Barenboim enacts the hierarchy that structures their relationship, and the gulf between them can be approached through the concept of 'idolatry', now a commonplace in descriptions of celebrated performers but one with a specific and important heritage. As a religious object viewed from within the Christian, Judaic or Muslim tradition, the idol is not only sacrilegious, but also theoretically con-tradictory, for it gives visible and tangible material form to something that is by definition unearthly and invisible. But in Buddhism and Hinduism idols pose no contradiction, for they are earthly objects in which a deity is present. So Barenboim: he is accessible to the players in many ways (not only is he present at their rehearsals, but also shares many social events with them over a period of weeks); yet his musical capacities and professional standing render him distant, and his very physical

disposition is understood as marking his occupation of another dimension of existence.

His position as idol explains the impact he has on arriving at a rehearsal: as players describe it, Barenboim 'has an aura around him... when he comes in, you feel the direction, you feel the purpose in the bigger picture, which is really extraordinary'. To gain a sharper view on this we can shift away from the 'world of sound' metaphor, and reflect on it through the idolatrous metaphysics of *darśan*, the Hindu blessing of seeing. With *darśan* a devotee observes an idol and feels the eye of a deity upon her: she herself gains enhanced perception as a consequence. The appropriateness of *darśan* here is that it involves not just seeing, but also being seen (by the deity via either holy man or idol), and thus *seeing being seen*. As anthropologist Alfred Gell has argued, the nested and oscillating visions efface physical separation, so that a sense of union is created. For the Hindu, seeing is not a passive activity, but an active one: the eye reaches out and *touches* what it beholds, thus gaining knowledge and understanding. Thus exchange of seeing between devotee and idol creates what Gell has described as 'a physical bridge between one being and another', even 'a material transfer of some blessing'.

The experience of *darśan* can illuminate Barenboim's impact on the orchestra on three

levels beyond the general impact of his presence. First is the nature of his 'body language', the most important aspect of which is the behaviour of his eyes while conducting: they are rarely focused on the orchestra, instead, they seem entirely glazed over in a way that is emblematic of the fixed gaze of an idol. As photographer Tom Fecht wrote after attempting to film him in rehearsal in 2006, '[my] images often capture his face not only bare but beyond any kind of emotion. ... it seems like he does not really have a single muscle left for facial expression, he appears absent to me as the outside viewer, while his face is staring silent into nowhere...' (see figure 2.) Players imitate his glazed eyes among one another, and cite them as evidence that he is removed from the real world, and is in the 'world of sound'. Thus his impermeable gazing presence can contribute to the idea that he has the key to lead them to something on which his real attention is focused, well beyond the materiality with which they, as instrumentalists, are engaged.

Second, and perhaps more important, is Barenboim's regard for music as a vehicle of human learning. He argues this only occasionally with reference to social dialogue, intimating, rather, more hazily defined edificatory qualities: music offers 'formidable weapons to forget our existence and the chores of everyday life' (Reith Lecture 1) and 'there are so many things that you can learn from music towards understanding the world' (Reith Lecture 3). The implicitly religious attitude to this process emerges most strongly in his remark according to

which 'how ever much you learn ... the next morning you start from scratch' (Reith Lecture 1), and the questioning that he understands as an inherent part of music making: 'the world that we live in ... makes it ethically more and more difficult to make music, because it is a world which gives us answers, even when there is no question'. (Reith Lecture 3) Indeed one of his most-imitated statements at the Divan is an impatiently gesticulating 'Why?', because urging players to ask themselves the reasoning behind any of their playing is an almost mantric feature of his discourse.

Finally, this questioning path of musical learning, combined with a vacant gaze, is part of a discourse that has a specifically physical set of references. Barenboim compares the *absence* or *loss* of sound with the law of gravity: anything lifted above the ground needs energy in order to remain there, just as any note played requires further energy in order to resonate further (rather than 'falling silent'). By extension, the 'world of sound' is elevated above the ground, and is a place of immense power: when you play music, you get this peaceful quality ... because you are in control of something, or at least you are attempting to control something that you cannot do in the real world. You can control life and death of the sound, and if you imbue every note with a human quality, when that note dies it is exactly that, it is a feeling of death' (Reith Lecture 1).

But additionally, Barenboim draws on neurological research to argue that sound has a direct and even *penetrative* impact on the

body (Reith Lecture 2), asserting that the workshop could not function 'without the physical impact of sound'. He thus posits an elevated network of sonorous, interpenetrative bridges that are a neat correlate to *darśan*, for they offer crucial physical pathways towards enlightenment. Those who enter the 'world of sound', in other words, enter another – better – world (see figure 3).

The West-Eastern Divan's 'Information dossier' (2004) describes the potential of the cross-cultural contacts made by the artists in overcoming political and cultural differences, and suggests that the orchestra can in consequence be 'a good example of democracy and civilized living'. Its 'democracy' is rather obviously an enacting of western Enlightenment musical culture as it evolved in nineteenth century Europe, but in consequence it has a formidably strong hierarchical structure, and an omnipotent leader whose position is maintained by a mystified religiosity. Overcoming political differences may be provisionally possible in this worshipful context, but whether broader cross-cultural awareness can emerge from it is another matter altogether. Presumably because they sense the tension between their rhetoric and practice, the organisers now plan to introduce an oriental music programme into their activities. This will challenge the orchestra's musical Eurocentrism, while simultaneously bringing it in line with the poetry collection where its name originates. The aspect of Goethe that the orchestra ostensibly celebrates, after all, is his openness to, and creative dialogue with, Middle Eastern thought.

This is an extract from a longer study of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, which is part of a major research project examining musical Occidentalism in the Middle East.



Dr Beckles Willson received a Small Research Grant from the Academy to fund her fieldwork with the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra.

Figure 3: Daniel Barenboim rehearsing with the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, Pilas (near Seville), August 2006. © Tom Fecht