

The Harmony & Dissonance of Daniel Barenboim

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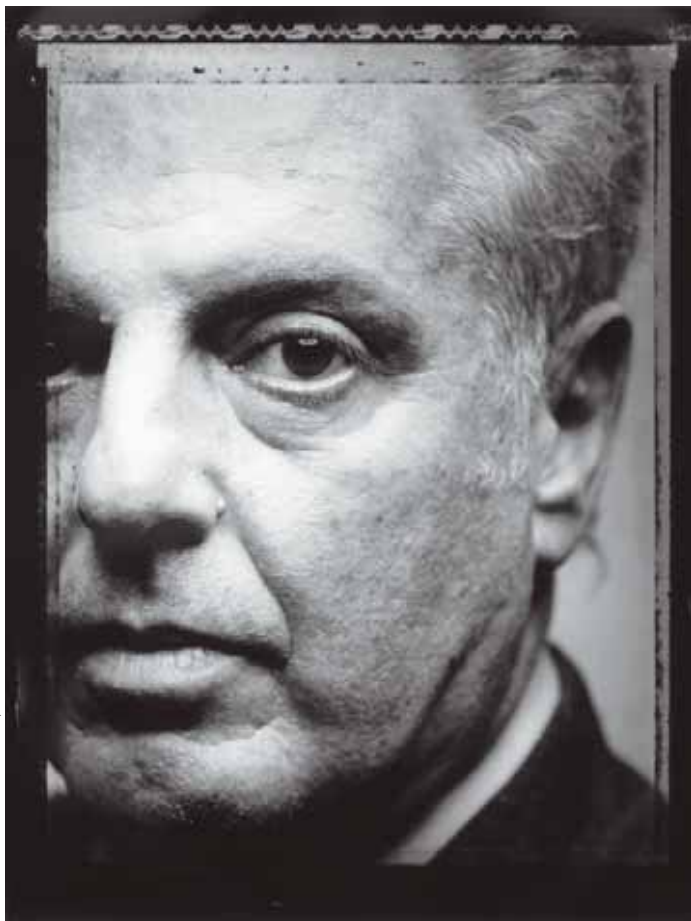


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When Daniel Barenboim strides onstage to thunderous applause at Carnegie Hall, I am struck by a profound transformation. The Israeli conductor is a slight man, shorter than most of his musicians, but as he directs the music of Richard Wagner, he becomes titanic. To make the strings swell, he flaps his arms slowly like an enormous bird. To cue the brass section, he jabs his baton straight ahead as though challenging the French horn player to a duel. The effect is mesmerizing—all the more so when one remembers that Wagner, a 19th century German composer, described

Jewish musicians as “a swarming colony of insect life” who had infested classical music “merely to destroy it.”

“Wagner was a virulent, horrific anti-Semite,” Barenboim remarks as we chat shortly before the concert. “There’s no question. No discussion about it.” The conductor, who’s visiting New York with his Chicago Symphony Orchestra, is relaxing in a dimly lit anteroom of the Maestro’s Suite on Carnegie Hall’s fourth floor. Dressed in a casual striped shirt unbuttoned at the neck, he sips a double espresso, fueling himself for his third performance of the weekend. For the past two nights,

none of his selections has been provocative: a Bach suite, a Mahler symphony and several pieces by Bartók. But on this Sunday afternoon, he will open with the Prelude to Wagner’s *Parsifal*, an opera the Nazis adopted as the unofficial soundtrack to their Third Reich.

As a musical prodigy growing up in Buenos Aires during the 1940s, Barenboim was sheltered from the work of Hitler’s favorite composer. His parents, both children of Russian-Jewish refugees, exposed him to classical music and taught him to play the piano but saw no reason to introduce him to Wagner. The year he turned 10, his family immigrated to Israel where Wagner’s work was, for all intents and purposes, non-existent: no orchestra had performed it there since the birth of the Jewish State.

By the time he discovered Wagner at the age of 20, Barenboim was an international star. He had played in Vienna and Paris, mingling with luminaries like Arthur Rubenstein. He had conducted the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra in Tel Aviv. In 1954, at the age of 11, he had even been invited to perform with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra under legendary maestro Wilhelm Furtwängler, although Barenboim’s father declined the offer on his son’s behalf, telling Furtwängler it was too soon for a Jewish child to visit Germany.

Barenboim and other Jewish musicians began performing in Germany during the 1960s, but the taboo on Wagner remained in place. Although the composer died in 1883, six years before Hitler was born, the two men are inextricably linked in the minds of Holocaust survivors

who recall hearing Wagnerian overtures blaring at Nazi rallies or drifting from an SS guard’s concentration camp window. Wagner’s libretti, too, are laced with anti-Jewish themes: gleaming Germanic heroes pitted against swarthy Semitic villains.

None of this, however, kept Barenboim from admiring Wagner’s musicianship. Upon his first hearing of *Tristan and Isolde*, Barenboim was segueing from piano *wunderkind* to world-class conductor, and he credits the German composer for teaching him how to push an orchestra to its limits: stretching out tempos, intensifying volumes, adding color by assigning various instruments to a single melody. Over the next several decades, Barenboim performed with the world’s greatest ensembles—including the Orchestre de Paris (which he led for more than a decade) and the Staatsoper Berlin (which named him Chief Conductor for Life). Yet he found time to appear regularly at the annual Richard Wagner Festival in Bayreuth, Germany, where he conducted all of Wagner’s major operas in a concert hall of the composer’s own design.

That a Jewish conductor would develop such an affinity for an artist whose thinking Hitler described as “intimately familiar to me” has baffled everyone from the director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center to the late Edward Said, the controversial Palestinian academic. Said first met Barenboim in a London hotel lobby and subsequently pressed the Israeli maestro to address Wagner’s “extremely problematic” ideology. “Given the history of association between Wagner and National Socialism,” Said

observed when he interviewed Barenboim at Columbia in 1997, “and the horrendous results of that association in the Holocaust, there is a massive weight there that one has to deal with somehow in looking at the work.”

it can be a tool that allows you to cut bread and feed somebody. Music is what the human being makes of it.”

Barenboim put his brand of music theory into action when he and Edward Said co-founded a youth orchestra for Arab

mentary magazine, which had dubbed Said “Professor of Terror” in 1989, speculated that “Barenboim has never troubled himself to read some of the more lethal things that Edward Said has had to say about Israel.”

Barenboim, meanwhile, had already alienated segments of his Jewish audience with his unorthodox solutions to the Middle East crisis. An article Barenboim wrote for the German paper *Die Zeit*, for instance, suggested that the money stolen from Jews during World War II should be bequeathed to the Palestinians once the last Jewish survivors passed on, sealing his reputation as a potential liability to Israel.

Arabs found the partnership equally unsettling: Said, who was born in 1935 to a highly cultured family, had aroused hostility within much of the Arab world by acknowledging the Holocaust and condemning suicide bombing. According to *Al-Aharam Weekly* in Cairo, Egypt, Said’s collaboration with Barenboim was “greeted with suspicion on the part of Arabs opposed to normalizing relations with Israel.”

Because the youth orchestra was so controversial, and because its participants came from warring societies, the East-Western Divan convened outside the Middle East—first in Goethe’s native city of Weimar, Germany, and later in Seville, Spain. More than a multicultural summer camp, it was envisioned as a world-class performance group that would go on to play at leading concert halls. During the day, the young virtuosos would spend hours together in the rehearsal room. In the evenings, they would gather to discuss politics and philosophy.

According to Barenboim, the first five-week session got off to a dissonant start as the musicians, ages 13 to 26,

struggled with personal differences. “This is why we need to stay in the West Bank,” he says, mocking all-too-familiar conversations in a jaded monotone. “And this is why you have to end the occupation. And I want to sleep with her. Why doesn’t she want to sleep with me?”

During evening discussions, Barenboim and Said employed musical terminology to help their students make sense of the tumult that surrounded them. “For instance, in any performance, there is a relationship between content and speed,” Barenboim points out. “Look at a process like Oslo. Whether it was right or wrong, why didn’t it work? The main reason is that there was not enough preparation. If I would play it as a Beethoven symphony, it would be as if the introduction was so fast that you couldn’t hear the content, and then the main movement was so slow that it completely broke down.”

Many of the youthful virtuosos returned to the East-Western Divan the following summer and the summer after that, joined by a steady influx of new members. After years of rehearsal and debate, Barenboim proudly notes, the group cohered both artistically and socially. In reviewing a 2003 performance at Royal Albert Hall, London’s *Guardian* called the East-Western Divan “a great orchestra in the making” and highlighted “the tangible pleasure the musicians take in playing together.”

Barenboim does not claim that the orchestra holds the key to Middle East peace. He acknowledges that Arab members of the East-Western Divan come from unusually worldly families, as did Said, who attended British schools in Cairo and earned his degrees from Princeton and Harvard. “Of course,” Barenboim says. “This kind of education has to

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In the Maestro’s Suite at Carnegie Hall, Barenboim descants on this theme, leaning forward in his cushioned armchair. “This touches on a very important question,” he tells me. “How does sound allow us to express everything that has to do with the human condition? And how is it that this understanding doesn’t continue into our everyday lives when we are not making the music?”

To Barenboim’s mind, music is “neither good nor bad, moral nor immoral.” Sounds can stir up pure emotions like melancholy, rage or euphoria, but they have no literal meaning; they can’t tell listeners how to think or which leader to elect. It’s only when music is connected with culture—scored behind a movie scene or roaring at a political rally—that it takes on the ability to harm or heal. “It’s like a knife,” Barenboim explains. “A knife can be a murder instrument, or

and Jewish musicians in 1999. It was not the first of Barenboim’s high-profile collaborations: In earlier years, he had joined forces with Isaac Stern, Itzhak Perlman, Yo-Yo Ma and Jacqueline du Pre, the celebrated cellist who was his wife from 1967 until her death in 1987.

But the Barenboim-Said project, named the East-Western Divan Workshop after a poem by the German writer Goethe, provoked ire even as it won accolades. Some Jewish leaders had a deep-seated distrust of Said, a Columbia University professor of literature who promoted the concept of a Palestinian homeland. Said’s essays and books, including *The Politics of Dispossession* and *The Question of Palestine*, equated Zionism with colonialism (albeit a colonialism spurred by the Holocaust) and called Israel “an illegal occupying power.” On hearing of Said’s project with Barenboim, *Com-*

happen in the villages. And it has to start much younger.” After Said’s death in 2003, Barenboim inaugurated a musical kindergarten in Ramallah where Arab children will receive early lessons in orchestral and intercultural harmony.

As we talk, a shaft of light cuts through the shadows as Pierre Boulez, one of the world’s most celebrated living composers, cracks open the door of the Maestro’s Suite. The two musicians exchange greetings in mellifluous French. After decades of living in France and Germany, Barenboim has a continental air about him; he speaks at least five languages with near-native fluency and travels in the highest echelons of the European music world. Yet he hasn’t lost his earthy Hebrew accent, his forthright Israeli gaze or his willingness to put forth provocative opinions.

When Barenboim makes public appearances in Israel, he inspires both respect and disdain. In May 2004, the Israeli Knesset awarded him the highly prestigious Wolf Prize “for achievement in the interest of mankind and friendly relations among peoples.” President Moshe Katsav and others were disgusted, however, when Barenboim used his acceptance speech to reproach Israel for its treatment of the Palestinians. A few government ministers, including Knesset speaker Reuven Rivlin, had boycotted the ceremony altogether, protesting Barenboim’s choice of finale at the 2001 Israel Festival: a selection from *Tristan and Isolde*. Although most of the audience had stayed for the piece and delivered a standing ovation, the performance enraged Holocaust survivors, and Barenboim was lambasted in the press for breaking the longstanding taboo on playing Wagner in the Jewish State.

In America, too, the Jewish

community perceives Barenboim as a mixed blessing. He has lived here since 1989, serving as music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (a position he will leave next year to free himself from “non-artistic activities” such as fundraising), and his concerts invariably draw large numbers of Jews, some wearing *kipot* with their dinner jackets. But when he ventures beyond music, the outspoken maestro regularly infuriates Jewish listeners. This past January at Columbia University’s first Edward Said Memorial Lecture, Barenboim likened Wagner to Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism. “Wagner recognized that Jews were separated from society,” Barenboim told the Columbia audience, and Herzl, too, “recognized that the Jews were a distinct and foreign group in Europe.” He went on to argue that the ban on Wagner was based on “Diaspora thinking,” a mindset of victimhood that was also responsible for Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians.

Ari Goldman, the dean of students at Columbia’s School of Journalism, believes that Barenboim should never have been allowed to speak on a campus that has been painfully divided by the Middle East conflict. “I found his politics so objectionable that I walked out when he started to play piano,” Goldman told me. “The music, as beautiful as it sounds, is ruined for me by the man’s anti-Israel and anti-Jewish rhetoric.”

For his own part, Barenboim feels his statements about Israel have been misinterpreted, particularly on this side of the Atlantic. “When you have your own state, you have to be responsible for your own destiny,” he explains. “And it’s no easy thing that, only 19 years into its nationhood, Israel found itself in control of another minority. This brought a new kind of responsibility that

Jews never had to think about when we were living in the countries of others.”

Barenboim is among those who use the term “Palestinian narrative” to describe the Arab version of Middle East history. Some Jewish scholars reject this phrase, arguing that it opens the way for Arab nationalists to rewrite Israeli history. “I’m not saying that everyone has to agree with the Palestinian narrative,” Barenboim says carefully, “in the same way that Arabs don’t agree with the whole Jewish narrative. But both sides need to learn how to listen.”

Rising to his feet in one swift motion, Barenboim excuses himself and retreats into the dark interior of the Maestro’s Suite to don his conductor’s tuxedo. Outside, the hallway is buzzing. Violinists practice arpeggios, voices call out instructions and crowds rumble in anticipation. Just after two o’clock, Barenboim ascends the conductor’s platform and begins his colossal performance. Wagner and an overflowing Carnegie Hall have been waiting for him. ●

Music

Like a lyre my head moans
for the girls who are taken, the young
wives—and I cannot decide
if I too want to be a wife,
bound and also protected,
or if I would rather be a lone
yeller in the wilderness,
there not by choice but by something
wiry, aflame,
a pillar, a force of earth?
Art is a religion, some say,
with a sad nod of their heads,
but I think it is also a wife
and a husband, a God and a servant,
friend and sweet master, music and moan.

Aviya Kushner

Poem based on Isaiah 16:11—“Therefore, / Like a lyre my heart moans for Moab, / And my very soul for Kir-heres.”
(Translated by H.L. Ginsberg, Jewish Publication Society.)