



Eastern Harmony

Daniel Barenboim's West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, uniting young Israeli and Arab musicians, is courting controversy this year by appearing at Ramallah on the West Bank. **Daniel Jaffé** went to see them on the eve of their tour

PHOTOGRAPHY: NINA LARGE

It's a perfect, hot summer's day with intense blue sky at the Lantana Seminary, just outside Pílas near Seville. Here for the past three weeks conductor Daniel Barenboim's extraordinary youth orchestra, the West-Eastern Divan, has been busy rehearsing, attending tutorials and seminars and generally preparing for its most ambitious tour yet.

This, of course, is no ordinary youth orchestra. Indeed, it seems an inadequate description for an ensemble – albeit one that has an upper age limit of 26 – which includes many of the world's top players, such as the principal double bass from the Berlin Philharmonic (Nabil Shehata), the cellist and violist from the Jerusalem Quartet (Kyryl Zlotnikov and Amihai Grosz), and

the principal timpanist from the Israel Philharmonic (Dan Moshayev). What is truly extraordinary, though, is its bringing together of musicians who would otherwise have had nothing to do with each other: for the largest proportion of the orchestra is made up of virtually equal numbers of Israelis and Arabs from Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and the occupied territories.



FEATURE WEST-EASTERN DIVAN ORCHESTRA

WEST-EASTERN DIVAN ORCHESTRA: (clockwise from left) Daniel Barenboim rehearses in Seville; Syrian violinist, Maria Arnaout, confers with the principal cellist; backstage tuning up; orchestra leader Michael Barenboim



difficulty went one step further'. Last year's showpiece was Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony, chosen particularly to display the orchestra's now excellent group of brass players.

After holding workshops in Weimar for their first two years, the orchestra reconvened in Chicago in 2001, then finally settled on this former seminary near Seville as its regular base. It is a richly symbolic choice. Southern Spain is fondly remembered in Jewish history as a rare haven for the Diaspora during medieval times: under Moorish rule from 711 until the mid-14th century, Jews were not only tolerated but well-treated, and lived peaceably with Muslim rulers and Christian neighbours alike.

The orchestra's profile has been increased in recent years by well-received tours; an impressive CD-cum-DVD recording of their concert in Geneva last year – including the Tchaikovsky Fifth – has been released by Warner Classics (favourably reviewed last month). It is typical of Barenboim, after last year's successful tour, that he should decide this year to take this showcase of Arab-Israeli

harmony into the heart of the occupied territories, making their final concert in Ramallah. This is a provocative gesture, since back in 2002 he roused Israeli ire by appearing at the Ramallah Conservatoire, playing Beethoven to students and holding masterclasses in defiance of official warnings that the Israeli army could not offer protection.

BREAKING THE ICE

Here in the Lantana Seminary, the atmosphere among the musicians is casual and friendly. I join a group seated in a common room. One of the young men decides to break the ice by doing his *Mr Bean* impression – a comically long-delayed sneeze. That done, he attempts to excuse himself on the grounds that he has a violin practice to do. He is thwarted by cries of mock dismay from his colleagues: 'Aw Misha, stay!' (It is only later that afternoon, at the Teatro de la Maestranza in Seville when I see Misha on stage in the leader's chair, waiting for the rehearsal to begin, that I recognise the family resemblance and the penny drops: he is Barenboim's 20-year-old son Michael.) ▶

Six years ago, inspired by conversations with his friend, the Palestinian spokesman Edward Said, Barenboim recruited around 80 musicians from Israel and neighbouring Arab states and had them attend a two-week course in Weimar. 'Many of these kids had never played in an orchestra before,' he recalls. Initial moments of suspicion and friction were overcome, and he succeeded in making them co-operate to perform Beethoven's Seventh Symphony and other works. 'I try to choose works which I feel I can work with them on fundamental problems of music-making,' explains Barenboim. The following year the main work was Beethoven's Fifth Symphony; the next, the *Eroica*; 'each time the technical



BARENBOIM & THE WEST-EASTERN DIVAN ORCHESTRA

THE STORY SO FAR



STRIKING ACCORD: Barenboim with Edward Said

1999 Barenboim co-founds with Edward Said the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra: the name is taken from a volume of poems by Goethe, 'divan' signifying a 'meeting room'. The first workshops, involving Yo-Yo Ma, are in Weimar

2000 Divan workshops held again in Weimar

2001 Barenboim causes furore by conducting Wagner as an encore in Jerusalem. The Divan workshops held in Chicago

2002 Barenboim defies Israeli authorities by appearing in Ramallah. The Divan, funded by the Three Mediterranean Cultures Foundation, makes its regular base in the Lantana Seminary near Seville; stages its first public concerts after the workshops, initially in the US, in Spain and Germany

2003 Second tour, to Spain, the UK, France, Germany and Morocco (the orchestra's first appearance in a Muslim country). Edward Said dies of leukaemia

2004 The Divan tours Germany, Spain, Switzerland and the UK. The Geneva concert recorded on CD and DVD – released by Warner Classics this year

2005 Tour Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, UK, Germany and Ramallah

I strike up conversation with Mina Zikri, a violinist from Egypt now resident in Chicago, who tells me he has gone to almost every session with the Divan orchestra since its launch in Weimar. He had already studied in Germany and Austria, but leapt at the chance to work over an extensive period with Barenboim. Mina enthusiastically describes the Divan Orchestra as 'unique'. 'I think it is most important above all for the friendships we make there,' he says, adding that in the six years since he started to play with the orchestra, the atmosphere has become even more friendly. 'Most of the musicians originally came because they wanted to make music and it was a unique opportunity to study under Barenboim. But now many of us know each other and we keep in touch throughout the year.'

For Mina, the experience of working and performing with Israelis and other nationalities

CORBIS



FEATURE WEST-EASTERN DIVAN ORCHESTRA

SOFTLY SOFTLY: Barenboim encourages his Israeli and Arab musicians to listen to each other

from the Middle East has revealed more common ground than differences, and not just in music: 'we have more "temper" than you would find in musicians from America or England' he says; 'both Israelis and Arabs have a fiery passion. We actually have a lot in common in the way we think and how we feel emotionally. And this informs the way we play our music. I think we bring something to the music which is different from what a musician from Europe or America brings.'

I suggest to him that having this emotional rapport with colleagues from Israel and other countries means that political differences and issues are cast into perspective and no longer seem to be personal issues between the musicians. 'It's interesting, because this year we studied Wagner's Prelude and Liebestod from *Tristan*; it was very interesting because Daniel Barenboim showed how the music was put together and explained all the themes. And there was an Israeli cellist who left in the middle of the session. But she came back for the play-through and she tried to play the music. And I could see tears running down her face as she played this music; I could see she wasn't just making a scene – it really was painful for her to play this music. And I felt for her: even though I didn't share her history I realised there was a genuine pain there.'

By chance, I later meet that cellist, Noa Chorin ('I'm 21 in August'), who comes from a kibbutz in north Israel. It is her first time with the orchestra: 'a friend of mine who had already played with the orchestra three times told me I *must* go, just three days before the audition!' The attraction was not only the reported friendly atmosphere of the orchestra and the opportunity to work with Barenboim, but also the chance to meet

musicians from countries she would otherwise scarcely encounter: 'I am very happy that I am musical,' she says, 'because I don't think otherwise I ever would have met Arabic people from Syria and Jordan and Egypt if I wasn't here.' She agrees with Mina that Jews and Arabs have a lot in common emotionally ▶

THE CONDUCTOR SPEAKS

Barenboim on taking the Divan Orchestra to Ramallah

'What is extraordinary about these musicians is their fearlessness. When a professional musician tackles a technically difficult passage, he will take the safe way, through fear or professional experience. But these youngsters have neither fear nor professional experience: they take every risk in the book. But this is a really fantastic lesson for me: how to go 100 per cent for a musical idea and its realisation without any fear or hesitation.'

'It's amazing, too, to see what a role music has in the lives of people in Ramallah. There's a world of difference between a Palestinian child who has to go to their violin lesson, going through check points and under the threat of bombardment; and a child travelling from Hampstead to get to their lesson. When you live in fear and it's only when you play your instrument that you are free to express yourself, music matters. That's why it's so important to bring music to Palestinians – it gives them a sense of dignity, something positive to live for.'





COFFEE BREAK: musicians relax outdoors in the Seminary; Daniel Jaffé (far right) with Pablo Martos Lozano and Alberto Martos

and temperamentally: 'they're very warm people. Like in Israel – people are very warm, open, and not exactly polite!'

Indeed the only fly in the ointment was that Wagner session: 'Before we played the Wagner, Barenboim told all of us – I knew this before – but he told all the Spanish and Arab people about the Holocaust. Wagner was playing when the Jewish people were all sent to the gas chambers. And after that I just couldn't play because I... couldn't stop thinking about it; that maybe the brother of my grandfather and all his family were going into the gas chambers to *this* music, so I was

'Wagner was playing when the Jews were sent to the gas chambers'

crying throughout the piece.' For all the pain, Noa felt she had to try again at the second play-through. 'If I want to be a cellist I need to play all the pieces. You know, I want to go to Germany after I finish my degree in Israel, and it's not professional not to play this piece. It's a very beautiful piece, I know. But after what Barenboim said, it was so close, you know...?' Noa is not crying, but there is a shine to her eyes and I cannot refrain from touching her on the shoulder and telling her that I think her very brave. And I am moved, too, that Mina felt that as well, though the standard line of Arabic nations has been to deny the Holocaust.

There are not only Jews and Arabs in the Divan orchestra, of course, but also a number



of Europeans, including Germans who have played with the orchestra since its creation, and naturally a number of Spaniards. Violinist Pablo Martos Lozano and cellist Alberto Martos agree that its greatest attraction is the chance to meet other musicians, but they are also clearly inspired by what the orchestra represents: 'it performs at a very good level' says Alberto (a tremendous understatement, I realise later); 'and when we go on stage we know we are setting an example to the audience, and we want to play as best we can to show what can be done by the cooperation of musicians from so many different nations.'

BARENBOIM IN ACTION

With so much idealism on show, it's a salutary shock to see Barenboim himself in action that afternoon. He's not only terse, but in a foul mood. It transpires he's had very little sleep the previous night, and is deeply unhappy about the fact the stage was invaded by cameras even before all the musicians had filed onto the platform. However several of the principles on which he founded this orchestra are clear from his reprimands: 'Don't look at me!' he tells the flutes at one point; 'I've nothing to offer. He's giving you very good body language,' he adds, indicating the lead bassoon; 'you must give the same body language!' He then caps his argument: 'It will give you the greatest pleasure as a musician to prove that the conductor is useless!'

Barenboim is, of course, far from useless. But he's determined that the members of the orchestra should pay attention to their colleagues and work as a team before referring to him: his main job is to let them know if the balance is wrong, or to give a clear beat for the most complicated passages.

That evening it's a full house. The concert kicks off with a sprightly account of Weber's *Abu Hassan Overture*. But it is with Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* for four woodwind soloists that I suddenly realise that I'm witnessing and hearing something extraordinary: specifically at the first movement cadenza. It is not simply that the four soloists are excellent players who all phrase beautifully, but there is an empathy in their playing that goes well beyond the usual 'teamwork'. I listen, enthralled. (Over breakfast the next day, I learn from a tutor from the Staatskapelle that the oboist is Egyptian, the clarinetist from Syria, and the bassoonist and horn player from Israel).

The performance of this year's showcase symphony, Mahler's First, demonstrates this impressive level of collaborative musicianship at all levels. Every colour and texture in Mahler's extraordinarily wide-ranging palette has its realisation, most striking in the third movement with the subdued double bass and timpani contrasting with the rough sound of a village (or klezmer?) band. And in the second movement the entire orchestra seems transformed into a super-sized peasant string band. Even the rasping brass add to the aural impression of clouds of resin flying from the instruments.

I emerge not only a true believer in this exercise in harmony between Jews and Arabs: my faith in the power of music-making itself has also never been stronger. ■

FURTHER LISTENING & READING



THE GENEVA CONCERT WEST-EASTERN DIVAN ORCHESTRA/DANIEL BARENBOIM

Warner 2564 62190-5 DVD plus CD £14.99

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PARALLELS AND PARADOXES DANIEL BARENBOIM & EDWARD W SAID

Bloomsbury,
ISBN 0-7475-6385-3, £7.99

'Two creative and intellectually rigorous minds in fascinating conversations' *July 2003*