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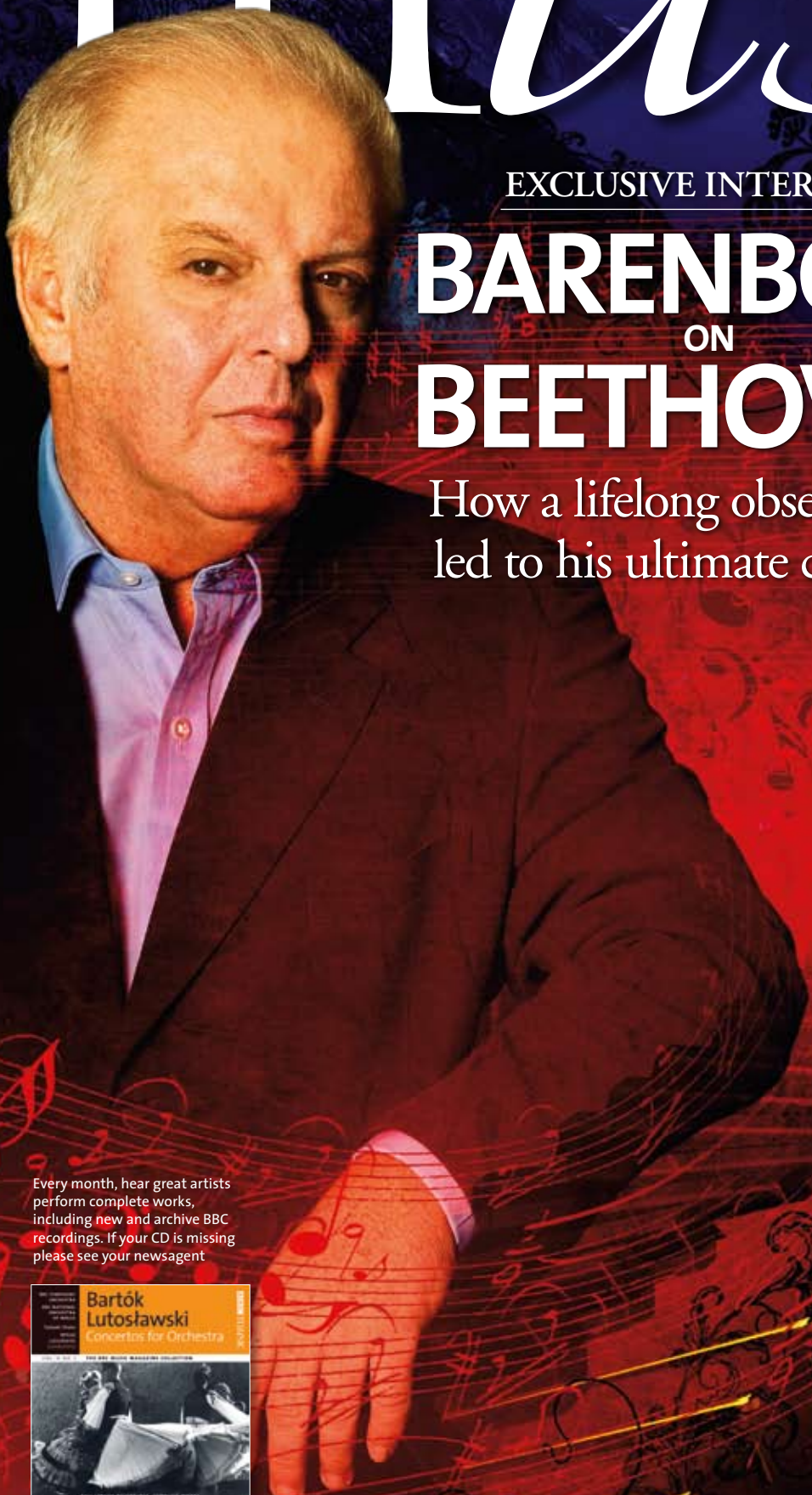
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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

## BARENBOIM ON BEETHOVEN

How a lifelong obsession has led to his ultimate challenge



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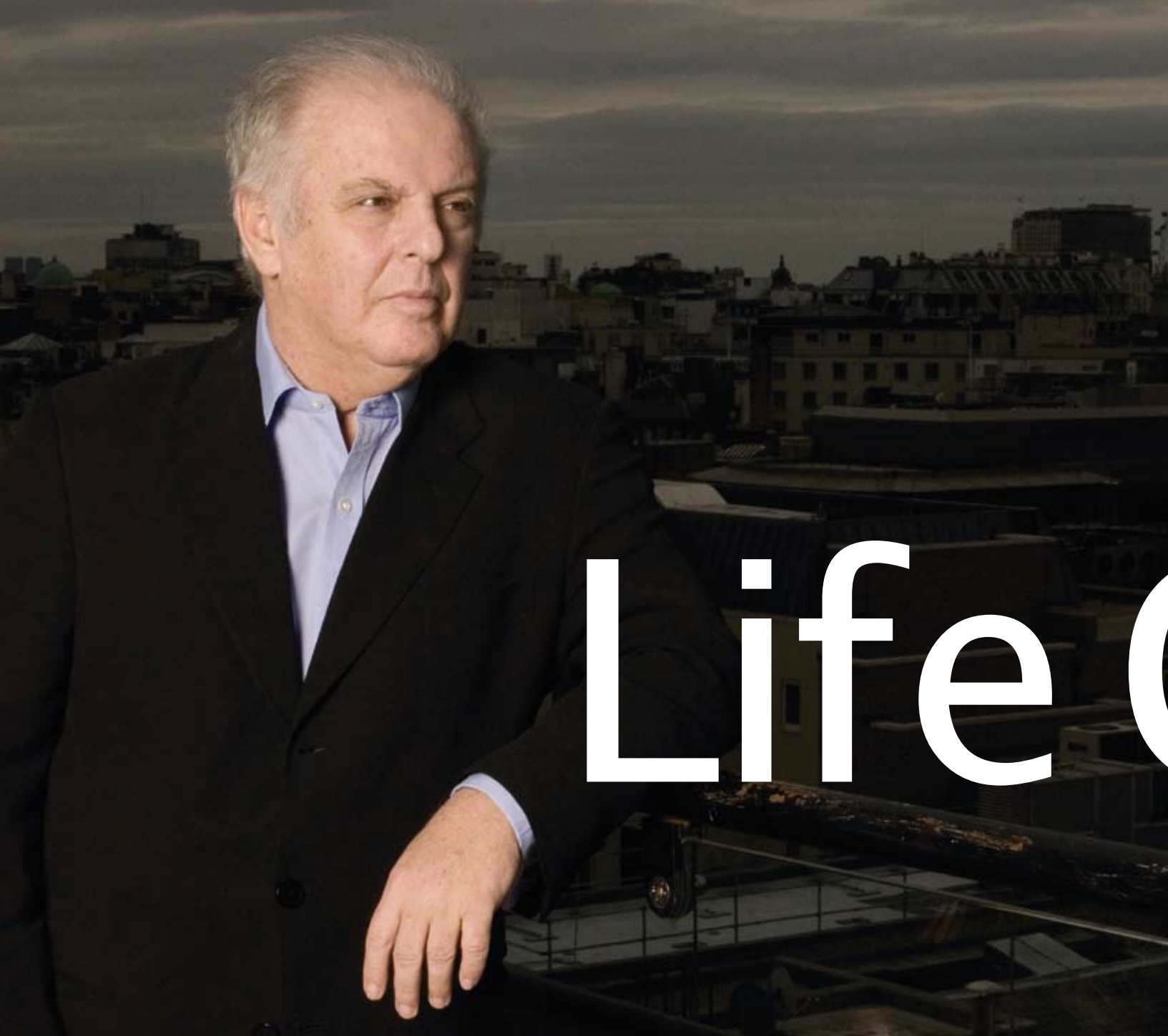
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# Life

Daniel Barenboim's lifelong admiration for Beethoven has returned him to the mighty piano sonatas once again. **Michael Church** meets a performing legend

**T**he ever-youthful Daniel Barenboim is celebrating his attainment of old-age pensioner status in fitting style – playing the full cycle of Beethoven's piano sonatas at the Royal Festival Hall, 50 years after he first pulled this stunt in an obscure venue in Tel Aviv. Initiated into Beethoven's world by his guru Claudio Arrau, whose trademark richness of sound he's made his own, Barenboim has recorded the cycle twice, and performed it many times: he may

have cut his teeth on JS Bach under his father Enrique's tutelage, but it is Beethoven's music which has framed his life.

To discuss this and other matters, he's set aside an hour in the foyer of a hotel in Lucerne. He's just touched down after conducting concerts with the Vienna Phil in London and Dublin, and he's due on stage again in two hours: puffing on a Havana, and punctuating his interview with chats with players, Barenboim manages to keep both his

ambulant empire and his complex train of thought under relaxed but total control.

Where to begin? With Beethoven of course, and his place in the firmament, which in Barenboim's view he shares with four other composers. 'There are composers,' he says, 'without whose works we would be poorer – Mendelssohn for example – but the history of music would have developed in the same way without them. And then there are those who have left an oeuvre that could be a résumé of



# Cycle



better himself  
– the struggle to  
change, and also  
to simplify. If you  
look at Beethoven's  
sketchbooks, you see

him struggling to simplify his ideas, which usually came to him in a form too complex for his taste – he worked to distil them. All his work moves from being complicated to being simple, and more concise. Whereas Schoenberg went in the opposite direction – starting with a simple idea, a tone row, and then seeing what he could do with it.

In Barenboim's view, Beethoven's sonatas form the most complete creative diary ever kept by a composer, but he's not planning to present them chronologically: that would mean some concerts were indigestible, and that people who only attended one or two would miss the full sweep of his output. On

**'Beethoven's music reflects the struggle of the human being to better himself'**

the vexed question of where the demarcations come between early, middle and late periods, Barenboim regards the borders as fuzzy. 'It's a matter of stylistic differences rather than chronological correlation. The early period shows that he was already a great composer, showing much greater scope and depth in his slow movements than Haydn and Mozart achieved in theirs. The slow movement of Op. 7 already gives an inkling of where he will arrive in the so-called late period. The middle period – which you start to sense in the *Tempest* Sonata, and which includes the *Waldstein* and *Appassionata* – is broader and more symphonic in form, without abandoning the early virtuosity. The late period starts with Op. 101, with Op. 90 forming the transition to it. But as for the conventional image of the older person who has mellowed and accepts what he cannot change – this is absolutely ▶

all that had been written before, and which also shows the path to the future: Bach, whose music looks forward to Schoenberg; Beethoven who looks forward to Brahms, Schumann, and Wagner; Wagner himself, and Debussy, and in our day, Boulez. Which doesn't mean to say that Mozart didn't write unique music. He was in some ways the greatest composer of all.'

So what's unique about Beethoven? 'We could start by saying what he was not. He was not carefree, there's nothing in his music that makes you think of acrobatics, as with Paganini or Liszt. No virtuosity for virtuosity's sake – his virtuosity served the experience he

wanted to communicate: of being human. Of being deep, humorous, thoughtful – and of being able to do things which other mortals are not able to do.' Watching the DVDs of his Beethoven masterclasses, one notes how frequently he reverts to the idea of struggle – of consciously pushing oneself to the limit, both technically and emotionally. Is that struggle the key? 'People have for centuries identified his music with this idea, and rightly so. But I don't want to cheapen it by saying he was struggling against his deafness, or Napoleon's autocratic nature – those things are totally unimportant. What his music reflects is the struggle of the human being to

not the case with Beethoven, because late Beethoven is anything but mellow. On the contrary, it's as if he's saying 'I've been through all that, and now I don't care any more. I'm going to break with all convention. I'm just giving you my outpourings, and it's up to you the listener to find a logic in them'. The logic is there, but it's hidden. The first movement of Op. 111 is pure sonata form, but you need to be a master of occult science to find it. What you get at first sight is a very abrupt breaking of all rules.' Late Beethoven, he adds, studiously avoids the piano's middle register, where it sounds most mellifluous: 'He wanted extremes. Everything breaks with the expected.' Barenboim says his interpretations are changing all the time, though he can't pinpoint specifically how.

Whatever his probing intellect touches gets drawn into the central drama: for example, he's often spoken of the 'courage' required to render Beethoven's characteristic crescendo followed by a sudden softening of tone. 'This is because you have to adopt the line of greatest resistance. It's much easier not to take the crescendo right to the end, so as to prepare yourself comfortably for the *subito piano*. Going right to the end is like going to the edge of a precipice. The easy option is not the best.' In his first 2005 Reith Lecture, he developed a concept he dubbed 'the tragedy of the dying sound', suggesting that there was a quasi-gravitational pull drawing every sound down into silence.

When did he start viewing music in this metaphysical light? He laughs: 'I've written my book, and just delivered the manuscript to the publishers!' But at what age did that particular concept form in his mind? 'My father always said "Before you play, think", so this was instilled in me from an early age.

And he initiated me into philosophy at 13. But that idea just evolved in my mind. Even when I was conducting the English Chamber Orchestra [in the mid 1960s], I was always asking them to sustain the sound more, to prolong it, though at that time I could not articulate in words what effect I was after. I just had an instinct for this idea.' The book's title is not yet fixed, but he inclines towards 'Sound and Thought'. 'But there is a quotation I like from Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg*, which translates as "Music awakens time" – "Die Musik erweckt die Zeit". Maybe that is what it will be called.'

The way he conducted those Reith Lectures was typical. Disdaining polished performances – and getting critical stick

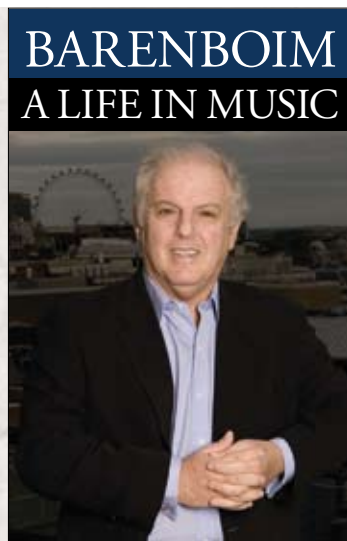
## 'The West-Eastern Divan is an orchestra against ignorance'

as a result – he insists they were not an academic exercise: his purpose was to set up a dialogue with his audiences in London, Chicago, Berlin, Ramallah, and Jerusalem. He's now focusing ever more closely on the Middle East, where the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, which he set up with his late friend the Palestinian-Arab historian Edward Said, is going from strength to strength. Barenboim's explanation of why a symphony orchestra should be the perfect template for democracy is nicely apposite: 'When you play in an orchestra you have to express yourself, and simultaneously listen to what others are playing and saying.' Under this scheme, young players from both sides of the Middle East's main political fault-line worked closely



together: at each desk an Arab was placed next to an Israeli; in the first half of their concerts, an Arab violinist would be leader, with an Israeli violinist taking over after the interval. When the orchestra played for peace in Ramallah in 2005, after rehearsals protected by heavily armed troops, a resonant gesture was made on behalf of young people in the region. Afterwards Barenboim made a speech: 'It is our belief that the destinies of these two peoples, Israel and Palestine, are inextricably linked... either we all kill each

CLIVE BARDA/ARENAPAL, CORBIS, TOPPHOTO



**1940**

**1942** Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

**1942** 

**1947** First piano lessons with his Russian-Jewish parents Enrique (above) and Aida, both of whom were accomplished pianists.



**1950** **1953** Moves with his family to Tel Aviv.

**1954** Plays for Wilhelm Furtwängler (below), who describes him as 'a phenomenon'.

**1955** Studies composition with Nadia Boulanger in Paris.

**1956** Receives conducting diploma from the Accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome.

**1957** New York debut as a pianist, playing Prokofiev's First Piano Concerto with Leopold Stokowski conducting.

**1960**

**1964** Debut with the English Chamber Orchestra, which he continues to conduct until the late 1970s.

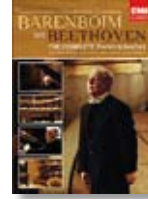
**1966** First performane with cellist Jacqueline du Pré (below), whom he marries.



**1968** Appointed music director of London's Southbank.



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See review on p82

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one-state solution that the Arabs have always wanted – with an Arab majority. And that would mean the end of the Jewish state, which would be looked back on as one very short episode in the history of the Jews. I don't want to see this, but it's within the realms of possibility.' Are his political views being listened to in the US? He shrugs: 'I don't go there much.'

Several of Barenboim's pianistic protégés come from outside the Western classical tradition, such as Lang Lang from China. 'Beethoven evokes in him a thousand reactions: he's extraordinarily sensitive to the music's moods,' says Barenboim. What does he see as his challenge in this case? 'To make



**GROWING UP WITH BEETHOVEN:**  
Barenboim performing as a youngster  
in 1956 (left); and as he is now

other, or we share what there is to share. It is this message that we have come here to bring.'

'But it's not an orchestra for peace,' he insists. 'It's an orchestra against ignorance.' He's now working on the idea of a Palestinian youth orchestra as well, and he outlines the other projects being pursued by the Barenboim-Said Foundation. Last year they opened a conservatoire in Nazareth for Palestinians living in Israel; they now do a lot of work in the occupied territories – they have 15 musicians who go there and teach. They are

also hoping to open an academy for orchestral studies in Andalusia, which is the base of the West-Eastern Divan. Last year Barenboim gave a €50,000 (£35,076) prize he won to fund a project at the Jerusalem academy on Arab music in villages throughout the region. 'Something similar,' he muses, 'to what Bartók and Kodály did in Transylvania.'

But he's not optimistic about a Middle-East peace. 'We're getting to the point where a two-state solution is becoming an objective impossibility. The worst-case scenario is the

1970

**1970**

Records  
Beethoven's  
*Ghost Trio*  
with Du Pré  
and Pinchas  
Zukerman.

**1973**

Debut as an  
opera conductor with Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (above, with Peter Ustinov)  
at the Edinburgh Festival.

**1975**

Appointed music director of  
the Orchestre de Paris, a post he  
holds until 1989, specialising in music by  
Lutosławski, Berio, Boulez, Henze, and  
Dutilleux, many of whose works he premieres.



1980

**1981**

Debut as a  
conductor  
at Bayreuth, where he  
goes on to conduct a  
celebrated annual *Ring*  
cycle starting in 1988.

**1987**

Artistic  
director of  
the new Opera-Bastille  
in Paris.

**1988**

Marries  
the pianist  
Elena Bashkirova (below).



1990

**1991**

Music director  
of the Chicago  
Symphony Orchestra  
(until 2006). Publishes  
his autobiography,  
*A Life in Music*.

**1992**

Appointed  
director of  
the Deutsche Staatsoper  
in Berlin where he conducts  
Wagner's *Parsifal*.

**1999**

Founds the  
West-Eastern  
Divan Workshop with  
Palestinian-Arab historian  
Edward Said, as a way of  
bringing together musicians  
from both sides of the  
Arab-Israeli divide.

2000

**2000**

Elected chief conductor for life  
by the Staatskapelle Berlin and  
receives the Wilhelm Furtwängler Prize.

**2003**

Conducts the West-Eastern  
Divan orchestra for the  
first time in an Arab country, at Moroccan  
King Mohammed VI's invitation.

**2006**

Appointed to a 'long-term  
working relationship' with La  
Scala (below), to include a *Ring* cycle in 2011.



him see how to structure it all, without sacrificing anything.'

Barenboim is delighted at the way Western classical music is catching on in the East. 'In continental Europe – I won't talk about England as I'm not that familiar with it – you can see opera houses and symphony orchestras closing down, you can see music disappearing from general education, and yet you see the same music flowering in Venezuela, in Palestine and in China! In Europe it's taken for granted, and in a harmful way it's professionalised – even the listeners are professionalised. It's regarded as an ivory tower containing both musicians and listeners – they would not make a connection between listening to a Beethoven symphony and reading Goethe, or listening to Schoenberg's music and looking at Kandinsky's paintings. Fewer people had access to music in the 19th century – but those who did connected it instinctively with the condition of being human, and with all the other arts. Now you get people who know every note of Schumann, but haven't read a word of Heine, and you get literary people who have read every word of Heine, and know nothing of Schumann. Music has been taken out of its place in the totality of culture. To find that we must go to Venezuela and China,



and to Africa.' In 2006, at Kofi Annan's instigation, he conducted what was probably the first major concert of Western classical music in Ghana, delivering Beethoven's Ninth to an audience of thousands. 'And they knew it was something important – that it had to do with humanity, not with a profession.'

What makes Barenboim unique among pianists is that he is so much more than a mere instrumentalist: his pre-eminence as a conductor, and his determination to set classical music in its social-political context, testify to a lifelong determination to keep the bigger picture in view. It's typical that he should be accompanying his Beethoven

performances with a series of lectures. And his tutelage of younger pianists is exemplary: Alessio Bax, whom we watch deconstructing and rebuilding his own performance of the *Hammerklavier* under Barenboim's guidance on one of those DVDs, is still astonished at what this genial maestro could achieve with him: 'He opened doors for me which I had always wanted to have opened. What he taught me in that lesson was so fundamental that I now find myself applying it to everything else I play.'

Barenboim's hands will never be big enough to let him play Bartók's Piano Concerto No. 2, and he admits to needing more practice: 'Physically, my muscles are not as they once were. I now do exercises to stretch the fingers – and the body. Somebody asked me "How do you want the world to remember you?" I don't think like that, I don't really care. But it gives me pleasure to think I can go to London and play at the Festival Hall, and people will come and listen.' The wheel has come full circle, and it's still turning fast. ■

*Daniel Barenboim performs the 32 Beethoven Piano Sonatas at the Royal Festival Hall, 28 Jan-17 Feb. For tickets call 0871 663 2500 (UK) or visit see [www.southbankcentre.co.uk](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk)*

## THE BEETHOVEN CYCLES

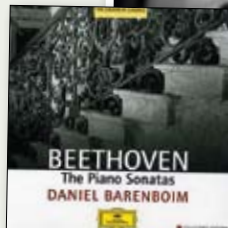
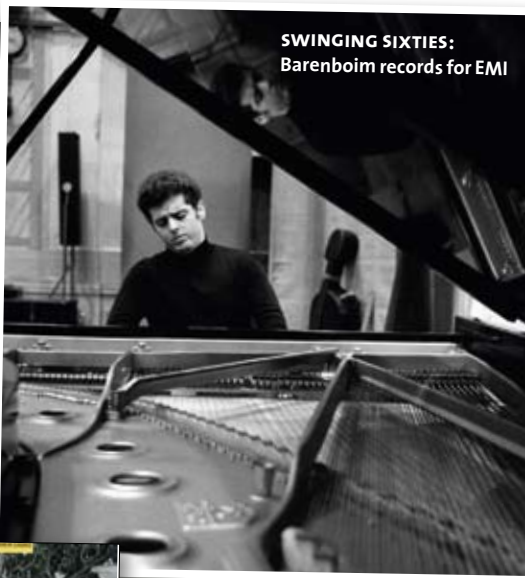
Michael Church revisits Barenboim's sonata recordings



WITH EMI'S SET OF BEETHOVEN piano sonatas recorded between 1966 and 1969, and Deutsche Grammophon's (DG) between 1981 and 1984, one

might expect substantial differences. And though the respective timings are often astonishingly close – 21:52 for EMI's *Hammerklavier* Op. 106 *Adagio*, 21:50 for DG's – differences there are, many reflecting an increased emotional and artistic maturity. In the first movement of the delightfully unassuming Op. 14 No. 2, EMI's version has none of the poetry Barenboim finds for DG, nor is his sound as delicately regulated; for EMI the grotesquerie of the second movement is overdone.

In several other sonatas, this lightening of touch is again noticeable: EMI's opening of Op. 111 has a perversely wilful



emphasis that the later recording sheds completely, to arrive at a gracefully organic solution. A similar process of refinement has gone on in *Les adieux*, where the ruminative preamble evolves from clumping slowness to a more urbane pace

in the later version, with the first movement proper getting a radical make-over. In the early

version this is passionately declamatory, but it's all in close-up: the later version gives a lovely sense of voices calling to each other across vast spaces. The first movement of the *Appassionata* is rendered for EMI in a spirit of muted control, but for DG it explodes into colour – honeyed, warm, or thunderous as the drama demands. And for EMI this Sonata's variations feel one-dimensional, while for DG they acquire singing beauty.

But one should not over-simplify this evolution: there are losses as well as gains. The opening movement of the *Hammerklavier* for EMI may have a bare charmlessness which is replaced for DG by a richer and more authoritative sound, but the version of the *Adagio* which I prefer is EMI's, just as I prefer the earlier version of the first movement of Op. 110, with its quasi-religious atmosphere. And in the first movement of that miniature masterpiece Op. 78, the younger Barenboim finds a breathless poetry that completely eludes his maturer self. Recording these works in 2006 for a series of EMI DVDs, he's clearly reworked his ideas again: here we can note how intently he studies the movement of his graceful hands – no glances to heaven for inspiration.