

Daniel Barenboim, with the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra at last year's Proms: 'It's not just the playing but also their attitude and character we look for'



Chris Christodoulou

Across the divide

Daniel Barenboim has made a decisive gesture towards healing the rifts between Arab and Israeli by forming the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. **Nina Large** previews its forthcoming London concert

Hardly a night goes by when the ten o'clock news doesn't tell of yet more horror in the Middle East, whether it involves Palestinian suicide bombers or Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip. Yet on 4 August students from both these factions will be playing side by side on the Barbican concert platform as if nothing had ever come between them. This remarkable group of performers is the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, first put together by Daniel Barenboim and his great Palestinian friend and literary critic the late Edward Said, with the aim of giving young Arabs and Israelis the chance actually to spend time together and make music, learning with some of the world's best orchestral musicians.

Barenboim has never been one for following the crowd, and recently he seems to have made headline news as often for his words and actions away from the stage as on it. He has conducted Wagner in Israel (in spite of an unofficial ban on the composer whose works became a symbol of Hitler's regime), and is vocal in his belief that there is no military solution to the Middle East crisis. Most recently he upset Israel's president at the Wolf Prize ceremony by criticising the continued control over the occupied territories.

In sharing Said's vision of a peaceful co-existence in these war-torn countries, Barenboim has given a concert on the West Bank and master classes in

Ramallah, and supplies six teachers to collaborate with the expanding National Conservatory of Music of Palestine ('They are trying to make a Palestinian musical revolution and they will succeed,' he says, laughing with enthusiasm at the thought.) The West-Eastern Divan workshop is a similar initiative. 'We thought, "Why do we have to wait until the political situation is eventually settled?" In a sense it's a belief that contact between people and understanding of each other can make a difference. And I think it does.'

But he states emphatically: 'I don't set out to create provocation. The only thing I will tell you is that I have a special joy in unconventional and unexpected ways. You don't just do things in a certain way because this is how they have always been done and this is how it must be. If I find that there is something difficult but more interesting my inclination will be to do it that way.' He talks with energy, and despite being on a mobile phone on the other side of the world, late for a rehearsal, his conviction is absolutely clear. He despises apathy: 'Controversy has become a sort of negative word and it shouldn't be so. It is the role of artists and of the intellectual to ask questions and to criticise. Politicians today don't ask questions. I don't say I have the solution to anything, but I live my life according to the way I feel about things. If I didn't, I would never have been to Ramallah and I would never have shaken Edward Said's hand.'

Auditions (led by members of his Staatskapelle Berlin) have taken place in Tel Aviv, Damascus, Jerusalem, Beirut, Amman and Cairo and this year more than 250 people applied to join the 87-strong orchestra. Six students from the occupied territories will also come – officially to listen and learn, but with the hope that they might be able to take part in some of the pieces too. 'The level of players in the occupied territories is not yet that advanced, but they are beginning to come,' says Barenboim. 'There is a musical level which we do not want to compromise. It's difficult to make an ad hoc orchestra ready for a professional tour with young people (some only 13 or 14 years old) and varying degrees of talent and experience, but everybody is so enthusiastic. You cannot underestimate the energy that

"will" can have. When you have such strong will there are very few things in the world which cannot happen. It's not just the playing but also their attitude and character we look for.'

The orchestra's name is symbolic, being derived from a volume of work by Goethe, the *West-östlicher Divan*, which featured both Islamic and European poetry and was published as the Napoleonic wars were coming to a close. The word *divan* literally means 'oriental council chamber' and discussion forms an important part of the workshops. After a day's work with members of the Staatskapelle Berlin and Chicago Symphony Orchestra Said and Barenboim frequently ran discussion groups or presented lectures in the evenings. 'It's not just a question of getting young players and rehearsing so that they can play better,' says Barenboim. 'They can do that anywhere. It's a question of understanding the why and the what for everything. We might talk about sonata form with its two subjects, development and modulation – but what is development? Development is saying basically the same content at a different time with a different colouring. And this is not just a technical musical term – it is something that we see in human relations.'

Unsurprisingly the students are intrigued by one another, as Israeli pianist Shai Wosner admits. 'I was curious to meet people from what are essentially enemy countries. There is no way of knowing what happens in their day-to-day life, or what their classical music life is about, or what they think of Israel.' The music allows a kind of anonymity in a sense. 'When you sit down in the orchestra the music becomes totally the main thing, you don't notice who is from what country,' says Nabeel Abboud Ashkar, a Palestinian violinist. And of course the abstract content of music makes it possible for anybody who wants to participate to be on an equal footing. 'An equality between all musicians that they cannot have in real life, that was the dictum of Said,' comments Barenboim. 'It creates self-respect and self-esteem.' In this way it can perhaps start to shift the barriers of the mind, even while the boundaries of the countries are still so painfully in place.

Although this is not a political project as such it clearly has wide-reaching implications and the students are all acutely aware of this. 'We learn a lot because it opens doors to the things that we never thought possible – like building human relationships with people you never thought you could,' says Syrian Violinist Maria Aranout. 'If you don't know someone you can't think about resolving problems with them – ignorance closes all doors to the future.' Wosner echoes her sentiments: 'Things like this will make peace far more genuine when it is finally reached. When you don't have a cultural exchange between people the essence is missing,' he says. 'Everybody involved has been touched, everyone's life changed in a certain way.'

The fact that these young musicians have the chance to work with someone of Barenboim's stature is also hugely important to them as budding artists. 'He has influenced my whole musical perception – he is the one from whom I have learned the most about music,' says Aranout, who has studied at the Damascus Musical Conservatory, the Royal Academy of Music in London and the Manhattan School of Music. Abboud Ashkar talks animatedly of Barenboim's energy. 'To see a man with such vision and determination – someone who can carry these things out – it is amazing. The minute he starts to work with music he becomes the music in a way. He can take us into the music like no one else can.'

This year the orchestra will tour to Berlin, Barcelona, Geneva and London. The Barbican concert itself is being entirely underwritten by the *London Review of Books* as a memorial to Said, the magazine's long-time friend and contributor, and as part of its 25th anniversary celebrations. With a readership of 43,000 the *LRB* commands a strong following in the intellectual community and this concert creates a connection which Barenboim, who speaks often of his horror of the way in which music is becoming a specialised subject seen only as 'a string of notes' and as something increasingly ostracised from intellectual life, will surely be pleased by. *LRB*'s publisher Nicky Spice says, 'Our readers wouldn't necessarily take a lively interest in what's going on in the music world and it is very important to bring this project with its immense value to the attention of those who may not have yet noticed it. This concert is saying that there are things which can go on between people which are above sectarian strife. They need to know about it.'

When Said died last year it undoubtedly left Barenboim bereft. 'The *West-Eastern Divan* is exactly that – it speaks about the relationships between the two and it was made by both his and my presence,' he says simply. 'His death of course leaves us a little orphaned. For me personally a very major intellectual void has been created, because I have no other relationships on such a level. But we are keeping on and we will continue.'

After the first year in Weimar (as part of the European Capital of Culture in 1999) and one session in Chicago, the orchestra has settled on Seville for the annual month-long workshop. It is a fitting place, with its rich history of tolerance between Muslims and Jews, and the Andalusian government has become the principal guarantor of the project. As for the future, Barenboim is frank: 'The full dimensions of this project will be realised only on the day that the orchestra can play in all the countries that are represented in it. In Beirut, Damascus, Tel Aviv, Cairo, Amman, Jerusalem and Ramallah.' Abboud Ashkar and the others all hope that the orchestra might one day become full time: 'In one way it is a dream that has to do with the actual playing of music, but this orchestra also shows an example to the world. When people come to the concerts they leave the hall with some hope in their hearts.'

The half-hour standing ovation which followed last year's BBC Prom concert (the orchestra's London debut) is surely proof of this. 'People are simply in awe of the fact that youngsters have the courage to come and play music with the enemy – to put it bluntly. I sincerely believe that when the first note is played – all this is forgotten, and then you see what a talented bunch of people they are. There are better players in the world obviously but these people have a unique spiritual and emotional energy that they bring to the playing. And then all the other factors are forgotten.'

What Said and Barenboim have created is both symbolic and constructive. The 4 August concert cannot be simply another performance of Tchaikovsky's fifth symphony and Beethoven's third piano concerto played for the nth time. As Spice says, 'Suddenly Tchaikovsky will start to sound rather different. Suddenly everything starts to work together.'

The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra performs with Daniel Barenboim as conductor and pianist at the Barbican on 4 August. Box office: 020 7638 8891 www.barbican.org.uk

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