



Left: the orchestra rehearses with its conductor Daniel Barenboim. Below: the violinist Maria Aranout

STRIKING ACCORD

AN ORCHESTRA IS HELPING TO COMBAT ANCIENT ENMITIES. NINA LARGE REPORTS

FOR THE PAST six summers the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra — set up specifically for young Arabs and Israelis — has been leading something of a revolution. In playing together these young people have suddenly done the impossible — they have shared something positive with people who back at home are their enemies in war.

"Through the playing you share so many things with these people, and then your relations with them change for ever," says Maria Aranout, a Syrian violinist. Israeli violinist Daniel Cohen agrees: "A person growing up in Israel, with all his good intentions, would never have met a person his age that grew up in Ramallah. The people on the other side are just an abstract notion. Now, when you talk about the conflict you automatically see a face."

The orchestra was set up in 1999 by Daniel Barenboim and his great Palestinian friend, the late Edward Said.

This was no mean feat. A few years back some of the Arab authorities were less than pleased with the idea that their citizens might be "normalising relations" with Israelis, but today, as Barenboim says: "They recognise that it can be beneficial to their own musical life so they almost turn a blind eye — at least they put sunglasses on."

Each year the 80-strong orchestra meets in Seville, with its own history of peaceful co-existence between Jews and Muslims, for a month-long workshop before going

on tour (they're at the Barbican in London tomorrow). But while music is the linchpin around which everything revolves, it leads to something arguably more significant.

When the orchestra starts to play there is an intense energy which utterly absorbs anyone lucky enough to witness it. For Barenboim it only goes to underline what he has always believed: "Here, I realise on a daily basis what music actually is, and what it can mean for the human being. What we learn is that everything has to be integrated because whatever you say or whatever you play influences something else, the harmony, the balance, the tempo. And this is what our lives are about."

Some students are sceptical on arrival and take time to

open up to the others, and there are certainly difficult moments. Though Said was sorely missed this year, discussions remain an important element of the workshop and one evening the documentary *Route 181* was presented by its two directors (an Arab and an Israeli).

An emotional debate ensued when several Israelis walked out, protesting at what they felt was unfair representation. Many questioned whether it was appropriate to show the film at all. But Aranout, like Barenboim and many others, firmly believed it had been a good thing. "We don't come here to pretend that there is no problem," she said. "When we play I don't want to feel that it is just a gloss."

Despite having left the film, Cohen agreed: "You cannot really discuss these things without getting upset. They are about people who you love who are dead. But I am glad I saw some of it. Out of a potentially disastrous situation came something really wonderful."

There is a genuine belief that this workshop makes a difference; to their lives, to their music and to the way they see the conflict. "Music opens our hearts," says Palestinian violinist Tyme Khleifi. "When you see that everybody can do the same thing as you, that there is no difference between us. It's like magic. You start to look positively at everything and try to understand things. You can start to connect, to heal maybe."

Evenings seemed to last as long as days and the hot Span-

ish nights were never without the echo of animated chatting, a lot of laughing, and endless music. Instruments rarely appeared to be put away, whether jamming on the daraboka (an Arabian drum like the tabla) and violin or improvising Buena Vista-style jazz on piano and flute, impromptu chamber music sessions or picking out film tunes.

With so many engaging characters it is perhaps surprising that there aren't many couples, at least not openly. But Aranout reminds herself of the facts and admits that even if the chance presented itself she would be likely to hold herself back: "I don't know if it would really work with the background of all the pain. But we have to think that it's a good thing that we are even getting to be friends with each other."

One Israeli-Arab boy who fell for an Arab girl one year told me how things became difficult because, although an Arab, he lived in Israel. After a few months the girl's parents put pressure on her to end it and he had to agree that without leaving her country it couldn't really have a future.

If the war has a dehumanising effect then this workshop certainly helps to reverse it. As Cohen says: "When you are here you believe it. And when you go, you have to somehow take it back with you."

● *The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, conducted by Daniel Barenboim, perform tomorrow in a memorial concert for Edward Said at the Barbican, EC2 (020-7638 8891)*

