Daniel Barenboim

Reith Lectures 2006: In the Beginning was Sound

Lecture 4: Meeting in Music

Recorded in Jerusalem

SUE LAWLEY:
Hello and welcome. For the last two in this series of Reith lectures we've come to the Middle East. Daniel Barenboim had intended to deliver this, the fourth lecture, in the Palestinian city of Ramallah, but because of the growing tensions in the West Bank, we've been advised not to go there. So both lectures will be delivered here in Jerusalem, but in different parts of the city. Today we're just outside the walls of the Old City, in an area mainly inhabited by Palestinians, who make up the bulk of our audience. Barenboim is a controversial figure in this part of the world. A Jew, whose family made their home in Israel when he was ten years old, he believes that the destinies of Israelis and Palestinians are, as he puts it, inextricably linked, and he's tried to exemplify this through that which he knows best - music. In 1999 he joined with the late Palestinian intellectual Edward Said to create an orchestra made up of young Israeli and Arab musicians. Called the West Eastern Divan orchestra, it's the living representation of its founders' central belief, that music has the power to bring people together. To explain why, and how, please would you welcome the Reith lecturer 2006, Daniel Barenboim.

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
Thank you very much. Edward Said said that music is a little bit subversive. That too of course speaks about how we perceive it, and not about the music itself. But he was unquestionably right. In music, different notes and voices meet, link to each other, either in joint expression or in counterpoint, which means exactly that - counter point, or another point. And yet the two fit together. Please allow me to give you some very simple, simplistic I would say, er examples of what I mean. The slow movement of Beethoven's Pathetique sonata - which I am sure many of you have heard many times and some of you probably even played - is a relatively simple melody.

(PLAYS FEW BARS OF SONATA)

Etc. When we examine it a little bit more closely we see that obviously there is a main voice that sinks its way through the whole passage…

(PLAYS FEW NOTES)

And the bass accompanies it, in the best sense of the word - not in a situation where he, the bass is only following, but having its own to say, and goes up when the melody goes down, and opposite…

(PLAYS FEW NOTES)

thereby influencing each other. And there is still the middle voice that gives a sense of continuity, of fluidity.

(PLAYS FEW NOTES)

This is relatively a simple example. I can give you one more perhaps which might be of use for us later, and that is the last prelude of the first book of Bach's Well Tempered Klavier.

(PLAYS FEW NOTES OF PRELUDE)

There the main voice is less obvious, because it could be:

(PLAYS FEW NOTES)

that, or it could be:

(PLAYS FEW NOTES)

with all sorts of possibilities. But you see in all that, that in music there is a hierarchy, a hierarchy if you want with equality. And that is what of course is much easier than in life. How difficult it is to achieve equality and yet to find a hierarchy. In times of totalitarian or autocratic rule, music, indeed culture in general, is often the only avenue of independent thought. It is the only way people can meet as equals, and exchange ideas. Culture then becomes primarily the voice of the oppressed, and it takes over from politics as a driving force for change. Think of how often, in societies suffering from political oppression, or from a vacuum in leadership, culture took a dynamic lead. We have many extraordinary examples of this phenomenon. Some is that writings in the former Eastern Bloc, South African poetry and drama under apartheid, and of course Palestinian literature amidst so much conflict. We only mention one important Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Dalwish, and many others. Culture brings contact between people, or, shall we say, culture can bring contact between people, it can bring people closer together, and it can encourage understanding. This is why Edward Said and I started the West Eastern Divan project, as a way to bring together musicians from the different Arab countries and from Israel, to work together, to make music together, and ultimately, when we realised how much interest there was, to form an orchestra. When we had the first idea, which was linked to the city of Weimar in Germany, being culture capital of Europe in 1999, we expected to have a small forum of maybe eight or twelve young people who would come and make music together and spend a week or ten days at a workshop with us, so you can imagine the surprise we had when there were over two hundred applicants from the Arab world alone. And this is how this orchestra was formed. Edward and I met by chance in London in 1993, in a hotel lobby. I had gone to London to give a concert, and ironically he was there to give the 1993 Reith Lectures, which explored the changing role of the intellectual in today's world. Now, thirteen years later, I have brought the Reith Lectures here to the Middle East.

We took the name of our project, the West Eastern Divan, from a poem by Goethe, who was one of the first Germans to be genuinely interested in other cultures. He originally discovered Islam when a German soldier who had been fighting in one of the Spanish campaigns brought back a page of the Koran to show to him. His enthusiasm was so great that he started to learn Arabic at the age of sixty. Later he

discovered the great Persian poet Hafiz, and that was the inspiration for his set of poems that deal with the idea of the other, the West Eastern Divan, which was first published nearly two hundred years ago, in 1819, at the same time, interestingly enough, that Beethoven was working on his ninth symphony, his celebrated testament to fraternity.

Goethe's poem then became a symbol for the idea behind our experiments in bringing Arab and Israeli musicians together. This orchestra consists of Arab musicians from Palestine, from the territories, and Palestinians from Israel, Syrians, Lebanese, Jordanians, and Egyptians, and of course Israeli musicians. Now, when you play music, whether you play chamber music or you play in an orchestra, you have to do two very important things and do them simultaneously. You have to be able to express yourself, otherwise you are not contributing to the musical experience, but at the same time it is imperative that you listen to the other. You have to understand what the other is doing. And the other may be doing the same as you, if he is sitting next to you if you're a string player, or he may play a different instrument and be in counterpoint to what you are doing. But in all cases it is impossible to play intelligently in an orchestra concentrating only on one of those two things. If you concentrate only on what you do, you might play very well but might play so loud that you cover the others, or so soft that you are not heard. And of course you cannot play only by listening, but the art of playing music is the art of simultaneous playing and listening. In other words, one enhances the other. And this is the main reason we started this workshop. Edward once said, separation between people is not a solution for any of the problems that divide people, and certainly ignorance of the other provides no help whatever. In this workshop we were trying to start a dialogue, to take a single step forward, and to find common ground. And we saw what happened when an Arab musician shared a music stand with an Israeli musician - both trying to play the same note with the same dynamic, with the same stroke of the bow if they were string players, with the same sound, with the same expression. They were trying to do something together about which they were both passionate, because after all you cannot be an indifferent musician. Music demands permanently, at all times, passion and effort. The idea in a sense was as simple as that, because once you have agreed on how to play one note together you can no longer look at each other the same way again. That was our starting point, and from the beginning Edward and I were filled with optimism, despite the darkening sky, as he called it, with what has turned out sadly to be all too accurate foresight.

In the West Eastern Divan the universal metaphysical language of music becomes the link, it is the language of the continuous dialogue that these young people have with each other. Music is the common framework, their abstract language of harmony. As I have said before in these lectures, nothing in music is independent. It requires a perfect balance between head, heart and stomach. And I would argue that when emotion and intellect are in tune, it is easier also for human beings and for nations to look outward as well as inward. And therefore through music we can see an alternative social model, a kind of practical Utopia, from which we might learn about expressing ourselves freely and hearing one another.

This, and many other things, you can really learn from playing music, so long as you don't view music only as a pastime, no matter how enjoyable, or as something to forget the world, but something from which you can actually understand the way the

world can, should and sometimes does function. In any case, from the beginning it was our belief, Edward's and mine, that the destinies of our two people, the Palestinian people and the Israeli people, are inextricably linked, and therefore the welfare, the sense of justice and the happiness of one has to eventually, inevitably be that of the other, which is certainly not the case today.

Of course the West Eastern Divan orchestra is not going to bring about peace. What it can do however is to bring understanding. It can awaken the curiosity, and then perhaps the courage, to listen to the narrative of the other, and at the very least accept its legitimacy. This, if you want, is the main idea behind this project. And people very often ask me, but this is a wonderful example of tolerance, and I say no I don't like the word 'tolerance', because to tolerate something or somebody means you tolerate them for negative reasons. You tolerate somebody in spite of the fact that he or she is ugly, you tolerate somebody er in spite of the fact that he or she is stupid. And therefore tolerance is used, and I would say misused in today's world, and in the press very often, is a very misleading word. The French Revolution gave us three much more important and powerful ideas, or concepts - liberty, equality and fraternity. But these ideas of the French Revolution are not only right in themselves, but they are so because they come in the proper order. You cannot have equality without liberty, and you certainly cannot have fraternity without equality. The importance of this I learnt from music, because music evolves in time, and therefore the order inevitably determines the content. And I have never had to ask myself the question, can't we have equality before liberty. And this underlines if you want a central problem of our conflict here in the Middle East. When young musicians from the opposite camp, as it were, come together, they have the liberty. They have the liberty or choice whether to come or not to play music together. They also however have something just as important, and that is automatically they have equality, because music gives everyone the same possibilities regardless of race, sex, religion, or where they came from. In front of a Beethoven symphony we are all equal. And although the fraternity does not have to be there, it is at least a possibility, whereas now in real life it is not.

I know, or rather I feel - no, I feel I suspect and I know - that some of you might think the idea of Palestinians and other Arabs and Israelis playing together is unacceptable. I know that this is unacceptable for many of my friends in Ramallah for instance. And I understand it, because it is seen as a form of normalisation - and by that I mean an acceptance of the status quo. And this is unacceptable to them, because the real problems of actual existence have not been solved. And when we played in Ramallah last August there were people who said, how can we look at Israelis, Palestinians and other Arabs playing together when the Israeli tanks are here, and when we have the situation that we have now. But, as Edward Said said - I quote - 'My friend Daniel Barenboim and I have chosen this course for humanistic rather than political reasons, on the assumption that ignorance is not a strategy for sustainable survival'. When Palestinians and other Arabs meet Israelis in music, the primary quality that is missing in the political life, namely the equality, is already a given. Therefore this may be precisely the starting point for them to show each other that what they have in music, the equality and the ability to converse with each other on equal footings, will lead them to look for ways to find that outside of music. Music in this case is not an expression of what life is, but an expression of what life could be, or what it could become. Music itself should not be used for political or any other purpose. But although you cannot make music through politics, perhaps you can give political

thinking an example through music. As the great conductor Sergei Celibidache said, music does not become something, but something may become music. Thank you very much.

(APPLAUSE)

SUE LAWLEY:
Daniel Barenboim, thank you very much indeed. So music is a great equaliser but only if the players are willing to listen to each other. Here in the Middle East, where the Israeli Palestinian conflict is as tense as ever, is it possible that this metaphor of music can describe a way forward? Let me remind listeners that our audience this evening is a predominantly Arab one. We're in a part of Jerusalem inhabited mainly by Palestinians. Next week in another part of the city we'll have a predominantly Jewish Israeli audience. So, to our questions, and the first is from Razan Kaloti who works for the Office of the British Council, which is responsible for the Palestinian territories. Razan, your question please.

RAZAN KALOTI:
Er as a Palestinian, and having to live under extremely harsh living conditions and daily humiliation, my question would be how would music really help?

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
Well, maybe you should go to Ramallah the day after tomorrow. In Ramallah the day after tomorrow, in the Palace of Culture, there is a concert by an all Palestinian orchestra, half, or more or less half, from Ramallah, and the other half from Nazareth. Now since you are Palestinian and you live in the area, you know that what I have said is practically an impossibility. How do you get twenty or twenty-five youngsters from Nazareth to go through the checkpoints and to get the permissions and to go to Ramallah to join other children who have the same passions and the same will to play together? This is not going to solve the problems, it's not going to solve the inner Palestinian problems, but it can do several other things.

First of all, I think it should be a day of great joys and pride to all Palestinians, to see forty or forty-five youngsters, as I said from Ramallah and from Nazareth, walking on stage to produce something which is not even something that one associates with Palestinian culture. Classical Western music is not exactly the quality that first comes to mind. And yet you have children, and very young people, most of them under sixteen, some of them ten and eleven, who have through their passion and the curiosity, found something that will give them a sense of pride, as I said, of dignity, all those things which Palestinians so rightly complain the lack of in their society.

SUE LAWLEY:
But I want… I mean are you in any way convinced by that? You sounded sceptical when you began. You're saying that the realities of everyday life make it quite difficult.

RAZAN KALOTI:
It's much different than… And it's, as they say, it's easier said than…

SUE LAWLEY:
Than done.

RAZAN KALOTI:
Than ……

SUE LAWLEY:
Easier said than done.

RAZAN KALOTI:
The salaries are not paid, er extremely hard living conditions, er even having to go to Ramallah to do some work we have to cross checkpoints, the humiliation, er so it's not that easy.

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
No I know, I never claimed it was easy and I didn't claim that it is a substitute for the other. I'm just saying that we have to find ways that each and every human being in life has achieved something that he doesn't want to lose.

SUE LAWLEY:
Is this… On this subject of, of, of music being the equaliser is very difficult when you're confronted with the harsh reality of everyday life in the occupied territories.

GEORGE SAHAR: My name is George Sahar, I am er from Care International. What I hear Mr Barenboim saying is that it doesn't necessarily have to be that er the guns have to be silent so that we can hear the music, and I feel that this is um, it's interesting but it's an added challenge for us as Palestinians, because we still are in a state where we have to prove our humanity to the world, and music is supposed to be an equaliser, so I'd really like to hear your perspective about it. Can we hear the music when the guns are still so loud? Thank you very much.

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
Well I think, you know you are perfectly right. There is an area where the music and the reality does not always go hand in hand, and I don't believe that music is an equaliser. Music is nothing except itself. What you can do is find the equality in the music. It will not silence the guns, and it will not do any of those things.

SUE LAWLEY:
But the…

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
Now let me tell you something else in a very con… Sorry. In a very constructive and positive way. I wish many Israelis could go to Ramallah on Saturday to hear this all Palestinian orchestra. Believe me, the Jewish people have played a major role in classical music over the last two or three hundred years. Some of the best musicians all over the world were that. And with what respect they would suddenly look at these Palestinians who are able to play this music in a way that is not only as good as some of the Israeli children, in some cases maybe even better. When I was a child, I came to Vienna from Argentina - I was ten years old, it was in 1952 - and Vienna was occupied by the four powers - the Soviet Union, the United States, Great Britain, and

France. And the Americans brought Coca Cola, and the whole of Vienna went on a Coca Cola feast. They had never seen anything like that. And a week or ten days later the Vienna Philharmonic played a concert with the great Soviet violinist David Oistrakh, and believe me that day the Soviets conquered a place in the hearts of all the Viennese - and not just the musicians - because of that. And I am sure you are such a talented people - and I am not saying this to flatter you, I know this, for many years I have been working with a lot of your people - you have such a fantastic strength, and force of talent that everything has to be done to allow all Palestinians to develop and express themselves in that. This is why I am involved in all this.

SUE LAWLEY:
I'm going to take one more point on this and then I'm going to move on.

SHIRLEY BENJAMIN:
My name is Shirley Benjamin, and I'm a Jewish Israeli, and from my point of view the terrible problem is to get the Israeli Jews to open their eyes to what's going on. I am on the internet every day and I have friends and I know what's going on. Can you not bring this orchestra to Israel, to the Jewish part of the country, to let Jews see what… that they're not everything that we see on the television.

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
Well Edward Said and I started this orchestra, and we saw what it can do and how it travelled. We realised that the full dimension of the project will only happen when this orchestra is allowed to play in all the countries that are represented in it - Israel, Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, etc. We are not there yet. We made the conscious decision to go to Ramallah last year because we thought this is the most obvious and clear humanistic attitude. It was not a political… Had we tried to go to Damascus, or to Tel Aviv, this would have been a very very clear political thing, which we didn't really want to do that. But I am sure that the day will come when we will play both in Tel Aviv and in Damascus. We are not quite there, but we will get there.

SUE LAWLEY:
And can you come to a question here on the front row now, from Tova Lesarov, who describes herself as an American Israeli - that's right isn't it? - and she's a journalist with the Jerusalem Post.

TOVAH LAZAROFF:
I had a couple of questions actually.

SUE LAWLEY:
No no no, give us one question.

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
She is bossy with me too - don't worry!
Not personally.

SUE LAWLEY:
No you can't, you can't ask a couple. Ask a question, and if it's good and if the answer rolls then we'll let you ask another one but…

TOVAH LAZAROFF:
Okay…

SUE LAWLEY:
…don't push your luck.

TOVAH LAZAROFF:
I, I'll, I'll start with this one then. Um can you think of a specific example where music in this area has actually changed the political process?

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
No, because neither the political leadership of Israel or from I know the Palestinian is musical enough.

(LAUGHTER & APPLAUSE)

SUE LAWLEY:
Go on, you can ask another one then.

TOVAH LAZAROFF:
Well, well…

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
No, ask the other question - maybe it's better!

TOVAH LAZAROFF:
I, I'm going to continue that. I, I mean is it people that you're trying to change here or the politicians?

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
You think politicians are not people?
Sorry! You know, I am not trying to change anyone, I am trying to work in an area which to me personally is very important, and that is the understanding of the narrative of the other. And I think that we can do that in our small Utopian republic, which has existed since 1999, where everybody's life has been to some extent changed by these experiences. This is what gives music making a quality that is lacking in so much of the music making today in the whole world, and that is its existential quality. We have now wonderful specialists on the violin, on the oboe, on the piano, whatever they are, really specialised workers that can do all sorts of acrobatics and things on their instrument. But this is not what we are talking about. We are talking of the expression in music as being something existential, which is more than pain or pleasure - it is pain and pleasure. And this is what this orchestra does.

SUE LAWLEY:
But I think that is the point, I think that is what people feel sometimes, Daniel, about this, that you are - and one understands why you're insistent that it's not any kind of a political thing that you have set up here with the West Eastern Divan, but nevertheless if you are setting up a Utopia that you hope is some kind of metaphor for how life could be led, how there could be some kind of equalisation and some kind of

harmony, you cannot say it is not political, whether you like the …… idea or not.

DANIEL BARENBOIM: (OVERLAP) But then you have to really… I am sorry but then you have to really define very clearly and very specifically what is political. Is political tactic or is political strategy? If political is strategy, then I take what you say about our project as a compliment. If you think political is tactical, then I will continue saying it is not that.

DR MAMDOUH AKER:
My name is er Mamdo Hakar, I am a physician, a Palestinian physician and surgeon. I'm very glad Daniel that you mentioned Mahmoud Dalwish in your er lecture. Just last week Mahmoud Dalwish and I were talking about the harsh reality we are facing as Palestinians. Maybe I need just to mention to you that to be here, it took me honestly two hours to get from Ramallah to here, in spite of ha, having all the necessary credentials, but what actually, what Dalwish was saying is that now am I, within all this er reality, focusing on culture is our chance to keep floating - this is exactly what he said - to keep floating in this world. Can music go to the open air and be a cry for justice and freedom, liberty, equality and fraternity as you mention? Why not to perform in the open air in front of the wall, not to make a political statement but at least to show the ugliness of the situation - can this happen?

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
Why not? Please, I, I mean I rather wish there were no wall and this would not be necessary, but since the wall is here, why not?

DR MAMDOUH AKER:
That's true.

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
But you have noticed I am sure that I have refrained from voicing too much criticism if you want er of the Israeli side today here, and if I have done so it is only because it would be very easy success for me here. I'd rather do that in Israel proper. I have never spoken a critical word about Israel in Ramallah, and I have no intention of doing it here today - not because I have nothing to criticise, I have been very vocal about this on many occasions all over the world. But allow me just only one sentence. One of the most important things in my view is it is imperative that a situation is brought about where the legitimacy of the Palestinian narration is accepted by Israel, its politicians and all its citizens. This has to be the first step. Until that moment has come, nothing will be real. And this is exceptionally important.

SUE LAWLEY:
Um I'm going to call in Ari Shavit, who's an Israeli and a senior columnist on Haaretz, um a leading national newspaper here.

ARI SHAVIT:
Mr Barenboim, I think that it, for me it's obvious that your project, the project you launched with Professor Saeed, is a benign project. I don't see any way one can contest the idea of an orchestra of the others learning to play together and to be in dialogue one with another. But what I would like to question is the metaphor there.

You have come with the BBC team to the land of tragedy, the tragedy being that there are two people here who have lost their own music. Don't you think that in order to move forward, in order to have a civilised peaceful life here, each people needs a time with his own music? Don't you think that if you try to put two peoples into one position where they are challenged with the music of the other in an intimate situation, that endangers the very project that you want to advance?

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
I think it's a very er um legitimate question, although based, if I may say so, on an erroneous understanding of the problem. Er it, this is not Israeli music versus Arab music, we're not talking here about Jewish music, we're not talking about Kletzmer music against the music of Beirut. Beethoven was German, yes, but he was much more than that, he was everything. This is something that we all draw from. It is not the privilege of the Israelis to say we are classical musicians, and therefore they are not forcing the Palestinians to accept something of their own.

ARI SHAVIT:
No I, I, I want to emphasise that the project itself…

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
Yes.

ARI SHAVIT:
…I find inspiring in every way. I just think that we all should think about whether we want to take the metaphor seriously and to translate it to a political goal, or where do we reach the more realistic idea which says that each people need some time with itself, to assert its own identity. And I think you've heard it in the questions here, among the Palestinians, many of the Palestinians who somewhat feel threatened by what they see as a cultural invasion of Israelis into their own terrain, which I think very much I…

DANIEL BARENBOIM: (OVERLAP) I'm sorry, I am sorry to disagree with you. I haven't felt that at all. I have felt some questioning and criticism of many other things, but I haven't felt that at all. And I think that anything that makes every single Israeli have to think for a moment that there is a legitimacy in the point of view of the other, even if they are uncomfortable for the Israelis, and I have never shied away from that, and I don't er really believe in that. And if anybody has the fear that er this is another form of Israeli invasion if you want, I can only tell you that this is a total misunderstanding of the nature of music and where it comes from.

SUE LAWLEY:
I'm going to call finally um Rudyar Shihada, who's a human rights lawyer and writer, based in Ramallah, which is where he was born. He was called to the Bar in London and then returned to um private practice in Ramallah and has been there ever since.

RAJA SHEHADEH:
I am very concerned about the destruction of the landscape, which I find to be a diverse ..?.. The rolling hills of the West Bank and the deep valleys are light music captured in stone. Er the beauty and the lives of the Palestinians who inherit them are being destroyed by the discordant wall, which is so out of sync with the nature of the

land. My question is, can music made by people from the different sides of the wall restore the harmony before it is lost forever?

SUE LAWLEY:
We come back to the same point again every time Daniel.

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
Rudyar, you're making it very difficult for me. You make it very difficult for me. I still believe that anything that people can share together, whether it is through music or through ideas or through friendship or whatever it is, cannot be negative. It cannot do damage. And what I wish, I wish for a much greater percentage of er Israelis to really concentrate and understand this part of Palestinian history. That's what I said earlier, that until Israelis accept the legitimacy of the Palestinian narration, nothing will move, not only in the way that you Palestinians want but in a way that is humanly just.

SUE LAWLEY:
Pick up please…

RAJA SHEHADEH:
Er I, I absolutely believe that this is true. I have heard the Divan orchestra on several occasions, and what struck me is not only that it's possible to have people form both sides play together but the fact that when they play together they can create something which is more beautiful than what either alone can produce.

DANIEL BARENBOIM: (OVERLAP) They inhabit each other.

RAJA SHEHADEH:
Yeah. And, and I think that's a very important message, because I think the Israeli experience and, and ideology is that we must have Jews only in Israel, so the, there were always Jews living in Arab countries, and, and now they don't, and that this is a better situation that Arabs live on one side, the Jews live on another side. And the possibility of hybridity is lost, and I think the Divan is showing that if it is restored it will be better for everybody.

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
Thank you.

SUE LAWLEY:
Music to your ears, as they say. That's it, thank you very much. Next week Daniel Barenboim ends his series with a lecture about the difference between power and strength. Music, like politicians, can have both. The art is knowing how to combine them. That's Barenboim in Jerusalem on music and political leadership at the same time next week. For now, our thanks to Daniel Barenboim, and goodbye.