INTERVIEW

A MUSICAL AND PERSONAL COLLABORATION: DANIEL BARENBOIM TALKS ABOUT EDWARD SAID

Although we learn from his memoirs that Edward Said renounced his thoughts of a career as a concert pianist in his late teens, music remained a lifelong passion. For many years opera critic for The Nation and author of numerous articles on musical theory as well as a book, Musical Elaborations, he gave informal concerts until the last decade of his life and played until the very end. Said’s intense intellectual engagement with music, and his particular interest in “performance,” laid the ground for his close friendship over more than a decade with Daniel Barenboim. Born in Argentina and raised in Israel, Barenboim is one of the leading concert pianists and conductors of the second half of the twentieth century. He is currently music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (since 1991) and of the Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin (since 1992).

The two men were united by a common humanistic vision and a mutual optimism in the face of an increasingly depressing world, mediated by the caustic wit and playful sense of humor that they shared, as well as by their abiding love of music. Together Said and Barenboim in 1999 founded the West-Eastern Divan, an annual summer workshop for young Arab and Israeli musicians. In doing so, they managed to overcome daunting human and bureaucratic barriers, enabling gifted young musicians from both sides of a widening political divide to benefit from master classes taught by some of the most accomplished performers and musicians of their era, and to meet and learn from one another in ways that would otherwise have been unthinkable.

A book of conversations between Edward Said and Daniel Barenboim about music, culture, and politics, Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society, was published in 2002. They were working on another book at the time of Said’s death.

Rashid Khalidi, Edward Said Chair of Arab studies at Columbia University and the editor of JPS, interviewed Daniel Barenboim in Chicago in October 2003.

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Khalidi: Every time I saw you together with Edward Said over the eight or nine years since I first met you, I was struck by your humorous, easy, and
open interaction. Music was a central part of your relationship. I wanted to ask what drew you to each other in terms of music?

Barenboim: Well, you know, many people who love music, and even many professional musicians, see music as a separate entity. As a great art, obviously, but as something totally unrelated to other disciplines or other areas. The difficulty in music, of course, is that it is not just a collection of sounds—at least not in the case of the great masterpieces, because if they were only that, we would have forgotten them long ago. I think it was Adorno who said that a Beethoven symphony is a conception of life; in other words, that it has content, that it has a meaning. But the problem is that this meaning cannot be articulated in words—if it could be, then music would be unnecessary. But the fact that it can’t be articulated is what leads many musicians and music lovers to see music as something totally outside the real world, outside the human realm. And I think that this, unfortunately, is more and more true today. We have become blind slaves to technological developments and to a sort of athletic, professional, and efficient way of doing things, but at the cost of creativity, indirect approaches, and fantasy. From this standpoint, I’ve always felt myself outside the mainstream. And when I met Edward, I met somebody who thought and felt in a similar way. I think this is what drew us together as far as the music was concerned.

Khalidi: Given your affinities through music, do you have any thought on how Edward’s love of music may have influenced the other aspects of his life and work and personality? Because people may know that he was a serious amateur musician and a music critic, but may not see the connection to the rest of his life and work.

Barenboim: Well, people don’t see the connection because of what we said earlier. In terms of performance, Edward was actually at a fairly high amateur level. As you know, we played Schubert four-hand pieces together; he was perfectly capable of playing difficult pieces. Even when his technical phrasing was not as perfect as a professional’s would be, you felt in his playing a richness of expression precisely because of these connections. In fact, his whole way of thinking was very much influenced, I think, not by his political ideas, but by his understanding of the human being. By his understanding of what it is to possess power, what it is to feel, what it is to command, what it is to feel in sympathy or empathy with others. All this, I think, made him understand music in a certain way. You felt his humanity and his understanding of human nature in the way he played the piano. This is what I’m saying.

There is always this relationship between music and other areas. Because when you play music, for instance, when you are at the moment of nearing a climax, you ask yourself whether you should yield in the tempo to some tension in the music, or whether you should try to impose, or command the music to fit into the objective tempo, which is the clock, the metronome in fact. In music you are constantly aware of the subjective clock and the objective
clock. The best way to explain this is the banal example of the way two hours seem like two minutes when you are enjoying what you are doing, whereas if you are bored or dislike what you’re doing, it’s the opposite. So when you have a tempo in a piece of music, the objective clock is the metronome. But as a musician, you can sometimes pull and push the music forward or backward. And therefore, what do you do? Does the objective clock yield to the subjective clock, or do you sacrifice the subjectivity in favor of objectivity?

Khalidi: In *Parallels and Paradoxes*, the book you and Edward Said did together in the form of a dialogue, one detects areas of musical disagreement. For example, you seem to have disagreed with regard to Glenn Gould.

Barenboim: Well, we both recognized that Glenn Gould was a uniquely talented musician. Edward greatly admired the clarity of his playing, the texture. Of course I admired that tremendously too, but I didn’t feel that it served the final purpose of the music to the degree that Edward did. Anyway, I don’t think “disagreement” is the right word. There weren’t really disagreements. Sometimes, you know, there was a kind of sparring, poking fun, or joking with each other. Which was an important part of our relationship.

Khalidi: Some people have commented disparagingly on what they see as a disconnection between your professional lives—your music and Edward’s literary criticism—on the one hand, and the fact that you both speak out politically on the other. The implication is that a musician, say, or a critic, does not have the right to talk about politics. How do you see the relationship between politics and these other areas?

Barenboim: I can only speak for myself. I don’t feel that I am a political person, even though some of the things that I do are considered political. I don’t get involved in the political process. In other words, were I to use the fame that I have achieved through music to make specific, concrete comments on political things, I don’t think that would be right. I limit myself to trying to understand the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the different narratives, the human dimension, the need for social and human justice, as I see it. And not just to have opinions, but to act in keeping with them. This is why I go to Ramallah, this is why I am involved in the West-Eastern Divan. And if I criticize the government of Israel, (which I have done on many occasions), it’s not in order to interfere but because I feel that what the government of Israel is doing now is catastrophic for the state and for the Jewish people from a historical point

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2 This summer workshop for young Arab and Israeli musicians was started in Weimar, Germany in 1999 by Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said with the support of the German government, and is now ongoing in Seville, with the support of the regional government of Andalusia. Its name was derived from a poem by Goethe about the essential unity between East and West.
of view and from a human point of view. I think the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is well beyond politics—there's a real sense of injustice and inhumanity. You cannot be a musician or an artist and remain removed from such a big human problem. It's no longer about politics on the Right or Left—it's really about a moral corruption in the Israeli mind that comes as a natural result of the occupation and of not being able to deal with the results of 1948.

Khalidi: What can you say about the influence you had on each other, starting with your musical influence on Edward?

Barenboim: Musically speaking, we talked so much about music and sound. We often discussed the connection between the physical and the metaphysical in music, and that maybe influenced him and made him see things in other areas from this point of view. Our discussions certainly had an influence on his thinking about music, especially about the connection between the phenomenon of sound and the musical content. As far as the political aspect, I think that it was a two-way influence. He obviously made me very much more deeply aware of the Palestinian narrative, while I think I was able to articulate for him certain aspects of the Israeli perspective that he might not have seen before. In general, I felt like a student with him. I felt so often inadequate, because of his knowledge and his capacity.

Khalidi: What other influence do you think he may have had on you?

Barenboim: There is another thing that, in a way, relates to his music. He was multidimensional in his thought process. He had this very rare ability to see a thing and its opposite at the same time. It's very easy to see something and its opposite sequentially. But when you look at a process, or when you analyze a piece of music, it's not easy to hold two things simultaneously. It is hard to be both mainstream and counterculture, both active and contemplative, to be both masculine and feminine, and to see all that at once. Edward was a living example of the existence of contrast and contradiction in every human being and in everything that human beings do in whatever field.

Khalidi: I think he derived that from both literature and music, and it was certainly present in everything that he wrote. In that same sense, he could see a contrapuntal narrative of both sides. Do you have any other observations about Edward personally?

Barenboim: Edward had a phenomenal memory. I mean if he had been a musical performer he would have had no difficulty whatsoever in that sphere. A phenomenal memory. The amount of knowledge that he had at his fingertips was astonishing.

Khalidi: I want to ask you about the West-Eastern Divan. The last trip of Edward’s life, during the summer of 2003, was to Seville to participate in the Divan, which was then in its fifth year. I saw him just before he left, and it was clear how important he felt this trip was to him, even though he
was gravely ill, and how much importance he attached to this endeavor. I recall your saying that it had become the most important thing in his life. What do you think it was that made this extraordinary experiment and this collaboration so important to him?

Barenboim: He had become more and more disenchanted with conventional political solutions. As you very well know, he was not happy about Oslo. He was not happy about anything that was happening politically, really. He was very critical of the various Israeli governments and yet he was also extremely critical of the Palestinian Authority. He saw the moral weakness of the PA, the corruption of those who led it, and the fact that the real interests of the Palestinians were not taken to heart by Arafat. He saw also the diabolical, unspoken, and unwritten alliance between Israeli hardliners and the PA at the expense of the Palestinian people. He saw all this from the point of view of human and social justice. For him it was not just a question of territory, of course, but also a question of human and social justice, so he would get more and more distressed as he saw that if things continue as they are, in the end it would be a very, very tragic development both for the Palestinians and for Israel. He saw that, and he found in me somebody who felt similarly about many of these things and who felt the necessity to do something about it, you know, for our own sake.

As for the Divan, this is one area where everyone is equal—they can be Syrian, Palestinian, Jewish, from Antarctica, wherever. Where everyone is equal, on the same footing, and willing to work together for something that is really very positive and important. And he felt that this was the only area where this was happening. And this also, of course, was an indirect way of criticizing the Arab governments that were paying lip service to the Palestinian cause while making all sorts of deals with Israel and not really doing anything for the Palestinians.

Khalidi: I wanted to read you something you wrote in Parallels and Paradoxes. It goes like this: “I think that in every process whether it is a cultural process or a political process, there is an absolute innate relationship between the content and the time that it takes. And there are certain things where if you don’t give the time or if you give too much time, it dissipates. I mean, the Oslo Accord for me is an absolutely clear example of that. … The main reason for me that it didn’t work is because the momentum—in other words the speed, the tempo—of the process did not go hand in hand with the content.” I find this very accurate as a description of Oslo, and a very interesting insight. And I wonder if you could say more about such parallels between political process and musical form.

Barenboim: Well, in a piece of music, let’s say you have two voices—a piano and some other instrument, or a violin and a cello. If one voice starts before the other, you have counterpoint. You have a statement by one voice, and then you have a statement by the other, even while the first voice continues. So
you always ask yourself whether a given voice is making an afterthought of the statement, or whether it is already a reaction to what the other voice is saying. And it is usually both. And therefore you have to achieve a situation where even when they are in counterpoint, and in opposition to each other, they are also keeping in touch in order to continue. If you don’t have that, then not only does one voice collapse, but both voices collapse.

There is an obvious parallel here with politics. And this “collapse,” because both voices are not keeping in touch, is what I’m afraid of now. Because there is a sort of general myth developing which is false and very dangerous, and which goes beyond the sort of conventional, primitive myth of the Israelis saying the Arabs are not ready for peace, and the Palestinians saying the Israelis don’t want to give them their rights. This dangerous new myth is that, “Well, maybe we are not yet ready for peace. Maybe it will take another three or four generations.” This is where the counterpoint comes in, the need to keep both sides in touch. The present situation is very dangerous because it might take another three or four generations for Israelis to understand their recent history retrospectively and look at 1948 and everything that has happened since then—including of course the aftermath of 1967—in a different way. Maybe. But in the meantime, the other voice, the Palestinian voice, will in three or four generations have an even deeper hatred, and therefore more reluctance to try and find some understanding for the future. This is why it is very dangerous to think that time will do its own work, and that the new generations will solve this problem, because I think that the new generations are developing in opposite directions, growing farther apart rather than closer together. Giving it more time might be right if they were developing in the same sense, if they were in touch, but they are not, which is why I am so distressed about the situation.

Khalidi: These things are not well understood in the American public sphere.

Barenboim: No, but I’ll tell you, they relate to one of the last things that Edward and I started. We were in the process of writing another book. One of its main subjects from the political side was the need to make clear to the rest of the world—and when I say the rest of the world, I mean outside the Middle East—that in the long term Palestinian and Israeli interests go hand in hand; that the future of Israel is dependent on a just arrangement with the Palestinians, and that the Palestinian future is dependent on exactly the same thing. And therefore, that it is essential for public opinion everywhere, but especially in the United States, to see that doing something good for the Palestinians is not harming the interests of Israel, and vice versa.

Khalidi: In other words, it’s not a zero sum game.

Barenboim: Right. I mean, I try to do something in my own small way by going there and helping the Palestinians develop a music education program. I don’t think that I am hurting Israel by doing that. Do you understand?
Khalidi: Exactly. It’s a very good example.

Barenboim: And this is really a problem in America, since American Jewry in general has great difficulty seeing it this way. In order to achieve peace we will have to bring the necessary pressure from the outside world to work toward a solution of the conflict. As long as people think that their interests are in contradiction, we will not achieve that.

Khalidi: I think that is a very profound thing to say. You’ve had this insight from wrestling with this problem in your mind, but sadly, people who spend their whole lives involved with this conflict, and that’s all they’ve ever done, do not seem to understand it. In conclusion, I wanted to ask you for your final reflections about Edward and your friendship with him.

Barenboim: Well, we have just talked about our relations from an intellectual, moral, and personal point of view. But what I can really say is that Edward’s disappearance creates a void for me, one that is really impossible to fill. On top of everything else, we were fundamentally so similar. I so enjoyed his sense of humor. There was this very subtle mixture of charming vanity and self-deprecating humor. It is very rare to find such opposite traits in someone. Even in that, you see his way of seeing, and of thinking in opposites, contrapuntally. We had so many happy moments, moments of laughter. For me it is really like a whole world has disappeared.