

Bridging the Green Line: The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra

By Molly McParland

Cultural diplomacy, “the exchange of ideas, information, and other aspects of culture ... to foster mutual understanding”¹, is an increasingly important aspect of international relations. As Cynthia Schneider believes, “cultural diplomacy has the potential to create a unique atmosphere of openness ... through a shared experience of a cultural event”². This is certainly the idea behind the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra (“the Divan”). The Divan was founded in 1999, as the brainchild of Argentinean-Israeli pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim and the late Palestinian literary scholar Edward Saïd³. The players in the Divan famously include Israelis, Arabs, and Palestinians. Barenboim conceived the Divan as a method to encourage a dialogue between these cultures; with a particular emphasis on enabling Israelis and Palestinians to interact on a non-military basis⁴. He believed that this dialogue would help to “break down the ignorance and hate among the cultures of the Middle East”⁵. The idea of using culture, in this case music, to allow “peaceful collaboration” between young people from communities that are despairingly and violently divided, conveys cultural diplomacy in its purest form. Following the Divan’s first workshop in Weimar, Germany in 1999, the Divan found a permanent home in Seville, Spain, where it receives support from the government of Andalusia⁶. An equal number of Israeli and Arab musicians provide the base of the Orchestra, joined additionally by a contingent of Andalusian players⁷.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has gone on for decades, and peace talks have so far proven fruitless. A major feature of the conflict is a lack of unbiased information and a general ignorance on both sides concerning the others’ position. “Each side believes different versions of the same history ... [viewing] the conflict as wholly the fault of the other”⁸. “The other” being a key concept in military ideology, revolving around the representation of ‘your’ side as the side of ‘good’, coupled with the demonisation of the opponent as ‘evil’. This has been famously illustrated in cases such as the Cold War, where both the USSR and the USA fostered myths of the other’s evil nature. In the Arab-Israeli conflict, here are myths propagated on both sides that do not stand up to historical analysis, but are widely believed, and stand to aggravate the situation. Israeli history emphasises, and in some cases creates, an ‘historical’ Arab compliance with the Holocaust. Consequently, this historical view legitimises the right of the Israelis be compensated by taking Arab land. Partly as a reaction to this, there is evidence in the Arab world of a growing and worrying trend towards Holocaust denial⁹. Both populations rarely interact with each other in a non-military setting, and education serves merely to solidify the patriotic ‘anti-other’ attitudes of civilians on both sides.

It is this lack of free information and trust that Barenboim and Saïd were concerned with when founding the Divan. They felt that this form of cultural diplomacy could provide “a forum where young people from Israel and all the Arab countries [could] express themselves freely and openly, whilst at the same time hearing the narrative of the other”¹⁰. Barenboim is no idealist, and recognizes that it is highly improbable that the Divan will bring peace to this war-torn region¹¹. However, as a project, the Divan enables individuals to begin to understand each other, and appreciate the ability to work alongside “the other”. This has the potential, over

¹ SCHNEIDER, C. 2003. ‘Diplomacy that Works: ‘Best Practices’ in Cultural Diplomacy’, *Center for Arts and Culture*.

² *ibid*

³ <http://www.west-eastern-divan.org/the-orchestra/the-orchestra.html>

⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/jul/13/classicalmusicandopera.culture>

⁵ WASHINGTON, D. and BEECHER, D., 2010. ‘Music as Social Medicine: Two perspectives on the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra’, *New Directions for Youth Development*, no. 125.

⁶ <http://www.warnerclassicsandjazz.com/artistbiography.php?artist=7915>

⁷ http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Humanities_Center/events/orchestrabio.html

⁸ <http://www.mideastweb.org/nutshell.htm>

⁹ <http://www.truth-out.org/1112096>

¹⁰ RIISER, S., 2010. ‘National Identity and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra’, *Music and Arts in Action*. Vol 2, Issue 2.

¹¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/jul/13/classicalmusicandopera.culture>

time, to undermine the propagated myths, and to alter individuals' perceptions of each other; which can, at least at local level, reduce the levels of cultural conflict.

The Divan creates a safe, multicultural environment, where talented individuals can discuss their views and listen to the voices of their traditional enemies. The Divan is about listening, understanding and learning, with the final goal of acceptance of the others' point of view. Barenboim purports that the Divan is not about "trying to convert the Arab members ... to the Israeli point of view" or vice versa, but instead about providing a platform where "people can get to know each other, to understand what the other thinks and feels, without necessarily agreeing to it"¹². Encouraging an inter-cultural dialogue in this war-weary region, rife with political and cultural tensions, is no simple task. However, Barenboim believes that encouraging young musicians to get to know each other on a personal level, and through allowing them to hear the stories from the other side, this could potentially help relations between the two peoples, therefore aiding the peace process. As he states, "you can't make peace with an orchestra, but one can create the conditions for understanding and awaken the curiosity of each individual to listen to the narrative of the other"¹³. This is an area in which cultural diplomacy excels, by allowing individuals of different nations to learn about each other without pressure or fear.

Music in particular is noted as a remarkably powerful medium for promoting harmony in even the most devastated and divided regions. As argued by David Washington, "music begets human harmony". In a project establishing youth orchestras throughout impoverished regions of Venezuela, results show music to be "a social asset and cofactor of good health, as it provides social values and public works that not only enrich lives but also save lives"¹⁴. By encouraging "excellence, order, hard work and determination", as well as "the irrevocable personal and interpersonal education attained through participation in [an] orchestra", music is found to be "an efficacious agent of social health", as well as "providing purpose, hope and education" to the individual players¹⁵. Therefore, there is much reason to believe that the Divan could achieve its goal of encouraging intercultural understanding and appreciation in this war-torn and culturally divided region. The late Saïd believed that the orchestra was a particularly unique instrument for encouraging intercultural understanding, and that "music made people emotionally receptive. It also gives people a goal they could work towards in partnership, which opens the channels of communication"¹⁶. After all, "when you play music in an ensemble, you have to ... listen to the other, you have to understand with the others are doing"¹⁷.

The Divan has certainly made significant leaps towards intercultural understanding. As Emma Pomfret believes, "Barenboim certainly has performed a minor miracle by fostering enduring friendships among individuals who, on paper at least, remain enemies"¹⁸. As Divan Orchestra cellist Noa Chorin says, "when I am playing next to Dana from Syria I don't think 'she's from Syria', I think 'that's my friend Dana'¹⁹. It is this level of understanding that the Divan was conceived to create. An arena where Israelis and Arabs are forced to live and work together, and one where "the realisation that an "enemy" is much like oneself [brings] a new understanding and valuation of human life – one that may serve to undercut the prejudice and hatred propagated through war"²⁰. This is achieved both through daily, peaceful interaction, which encourages the normalisation of individuals who have been previously demonised by the respective media, as well as mediated discussion where both sides can talk about their

¹² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/jul/13/classicalmusicandopera.culture>

¹³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/jul/13/classicalmusicandopera.culture>

¹⁴ WASHINGTON, D. and BEECHER, D., 2010. 'Music as Social Medicine: Two perspectives on the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra', *New Directions for Youth Development*, no. 125.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/proms/6055045/West-Eastern-Divan-Orchestra-interview-with-Daniel-Barenboim-for-the-BBC-Proms.html>

¹⁷ RIISER, S., 2010. 'National Identity and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra', *Music and Arts in Action*. Vol 2, Issue 2.

¹⁸ http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/music/article4479155.ece

¹⁹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/jul/13/classicalmusicandopera.israelandthepalestinians>

²⁰ WASHINGTON, D. and BEECHER, D., 2010. 'Music as Social Medicine: Two perspectives on the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra', *New Directions for Youth Development*, no. 125.

personal views. As Daniel Cohen, an Israeli conductor and violinist remarks, “Mr Saïd spoke to us so eloquently about the conflict, and he forced us all to question the myths we are taught about our own country, both on the Arab side and the Jewish side”²¹. The Divan, even if it does not always result in mutual agreeance, promotes mutual understanding. Discussing these issues, and hearing them for the first time from the other side, is certainly a major step towards acceptance and possible reconciliation.

The Divan has also had a second arena of success, with regards to Palestine and the Palestinians. As well as allowing Palestinians to come into contact with Israelis in a peaceful, non-military setting, the Divan has also allowed Israeli-Palestinians to regain connections with their fellow Arabs. Palestinians living in Israel are forbidden to associate with residents of Palestine. As Israeli-Palestinian violinist Nabeel Abboud Ashkar explains, “I can play with musicians from Tel Aviv any time, I studied with them. What I could not do was play with my own people on the other side of the wall”²². The Divan has allowed Nabeel to reconnect with other Palestinians and embrace his roots, helping him to discover his identity. Furthermore, it has inspired him to teach Palestinian children about classical music, as he believes that “music could change the lives of our children”²³. He works with Divan violinist Ramzi Aburedwan, who runs a project across the West Bank that teaches classical music to children who would otherwise never have the opportunity to learn to play an instrument²⁴. As Montasser, a 16-year-old Palestinian clarinetist believes, without music “I’d be on the streets, watching TV, wasting time and maybe getting into trouble. Instead, music fills my life”²⁵. For Palestinian children, who are often forced out of school and on to the streets to support their families in the poverty-stricken region, music can offer a chance of self improvement and the possibility of a successful future²⁶. As David Washington argues, “through the discipline and self-perpetuating good habits that music practice imparts, the lives of the young musicians develop along these healthy principles”²⁷. This brings benefits both to the individuals involved and to Palestinian society as a whole.

There has also been an overwhelmingly positive effect on the branding of Palestine. As Yamen Saadi, an eleven year old Palestinian member of the Barenboim-Said Foundation School, reflects, “the outside world thinks that everything [in Palestine] is war”, “it is good for people to see us do this”²⁸. “A good country brand can open doors, smooth relations, and make it easier for government, companies or citizens to operate outside its borders”²⁹. The power of positive nation branding could pose itself to be a significant asset to the future of Palestine.

The Divan has received a host of awards and acclamations. Four successful CDs and DVDs later, and with a multitude of World Tours under their belt, the Divan has been awarded the Echo Klassik Special Award as “Ambassador of Music”, while a documentary depicting the Divan’s daily life, “Knowledge is the Beginning”, won the International EMMY Award in Arts Programming in 2006³⁰. As Anthony Tommasini suggests, “it is easy to poke fun at the belief that music can be an ennobling endeavor, a universal language to forge sympathy between peoples of profoundly different backgrounds. But it’s hard to remain so jaded when encountering the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra ... this is indeed an orchestra against

²¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/proms/6055045/West-Eastern-Divan-Orchestra-interview-with-Daniel-Barenboim-for-the-BBC-Proms.html>

²² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/jul/13/classicalmusicandopera.israelandthepalestinians>

²³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/jul/13/classicalmusicandopera.israelandthepalestinians>

²⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/jul/13/classicalmusicandopera.israelandthepalestinians>

²⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/jul/13/classicalmusicandopera.israelandthepalestinians>

²⁶ <http://www.globalissues.org/news/2010/09/14/6934>

²⁷ WASHINGTON, D. and BEECHER, D., 2010. ‘Music as Social Medicine: Two perspectives on the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra’, *New Directions for Youth Development*, no. 125.

²⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/jul/13/classicalmusicandopera.israelandthepalestinians>

²⁹ <http://www.hiltonbarbour.com/wordpress/?p=328>

³⁰ http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Humanities_Center/events/orchestrabio.html

ignorance"³¹. The powerful and moving message of the Divan has inspired, and continues to inspire, audiences internationally.

However, events have occasionally shown that, no matter the successes of the Divan, Arab-Israeli tensions remain rife among the musicians. This was illustrated by the reaction of the musicians to the Israel-Lebanon war in 2006. Musicians from Syria and Lebanon refused to participate in the summer workshop due to the fighting between Israel and Hezbollah³². On the other side, Israeli musicians like Divan Orchestra cellist Noa Chorin admits to suddenly feeling "the need to defend my country" at the outbreak of war with Lebanon³³. As Rachel Willson reported, the war "shaped the general mood and, judging from comments made by players, thus inhibited the cross-national social interaction"³⁴. It is evident that, in times of crisis, there is still a strong sense of patriotism amongst the musicians. Within the Middle East, the issue at heart is often survival, and it is this instinct to protect one's own people that remains the strongest instinct of all. This exemplifies how, as long as these countries are still actively at war, the Divan can only do so much to work towards a mutual understanding and peace. While a state of war persists, there will always be some level of tension between the musicians.

The Divan has also faced occasional political setbacks. For example, in 2007, the Israeli authorities prevented the Divan from entering the Gaza Strip to perform at a Baroque Music Festival³⁵. The Divan's sole Palestinian member, violinist Ramzi Aburedwan, was told that he had travelled to the crossing illegally, despite having secured prior coordination via the General Consulate of France in Jerusalem. He was detained by the Israeli authorities before being dispatched back to Ramallah³⁶. The Divan refused to perform without Ramzi, and stressed that they would "keep trying ... to enter the Gaza Strip"³⁷. The event highlighted the tension in the region between Israelis and Palestinians, the power of the Israeli authorities over freedom of movement inside Palestine, and how initiatives such as the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra remain dependent on political cooperation and support. Another example of this is the Egyptian government's 2001 decision to block the Egyptian players from attending the Divan. Egyptian citizens need to gain special government permission to play with Israelis³⁸, and therefore the government can, at any time, prevent Egyptian musicians from attending the Divan. The Divan is, at the end of the day, reliant on the good will of the respective governments. Issues such as these highlight the fact that achieving peace in the region firstly requires the political will of all governments and authorities involved.

However, by encouraging mutual understanding, the Divan is beginning to conquer the lack of intercultural interaction and understanding. As Barenboim maintains, "understanding is the beginning of any relationship. People must have the courage to accept the narrative of the 'other', or at least to hear it and understand it"³⁹. Barenboim realises that the Israeli-Palestinian "is not a political conflict. This is a human conflict, or two people who deeply believe they have a right to live on the same piece of land"⁴⁰. That is why there is no military solution, and instead one must endeavor to convince each side of the other's right to exist, so that we can move forward to a compromise and finally to peace. "The destinies of Israelis and

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<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D0DE0DB1031F932A15751C1A9609C8B63&sec=&spoon=&pagewanted=all>

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<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D0DE0DB1031F932A15751C1A9609C8B63&sec=&spoon=&pagewanted=all>

33 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/jul/13/classicalmusicandopera.israelandthepalestinians>

34 WILLSON, R., 2009. 'The Parallax Worlds of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 134:2, 319-347

35 <http://www.freemuse.org/sw23638.asp>

36 <http://www.palestinemonitor.org/spip/spip.php?article213>

37 <http://www.palestinemonitor.org/spip/spip.php?article213>

38 WILLSON, R., 2009. 'The Parallax Worlds of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 134:2, 319-347

39 <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=52505>

40 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/jul/13/classicalmusicandopera.culture>

Palestinians are inextricably linked⁴¹, reflects Barenboim, and they must learn to accept each other and work together if a lasting peace is ever to be realised. The intense cooperation required to play together in the Divan can foster this notion.

Furthermore, as both Palestine and Israel now have democratically elected authorities, the will of the people is extremely important in dictating the actions of the state. Civil Society is recognized as an increasingly important force in international relations and government policy. Democracy is, after all, a government "in which the supreme power is vested in the people"⁴². Therefore, by altering the opinions of society, it may be possible to begin to influence Government action. Though the Divan cannot directly enforce peace, it can begin to change the mindsets of the citizens, and hopefully through them, the actions of their elected representatives.

In conclusion, the Divan is an important example of cultural diplomacy in encouraging intercultural relations and friendship. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict will not be solved overnight, but through projects such as the Divan, a mutual understanding can begin to be developed. It is this mutual understanding that is a necessary component of attaining eventual peace in the region. As Nassib al-Ahmadiéh, a Lebanese cellist says "[through the Divan] we learn to tolerate and understand more, by listening to the other side"⁴³. After all, if Arabs and Israelis can accept each other as equals, who both have the right to coexist and prosper in the Middle East, we will be well on our way to realising a diplomatic solution for peace and harmony throughout this devastated region.

⁴¹ <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=52505>

⁴² <http://www.america.gov/st/democracyhr-english/2008/May/20080619223145eaifas0.5311657.html>

⁴³ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/proms/6055045/West-Eastern-Divan-Orchestra-interview-with-Daniel-Barenboim-for-the-BBC-Proms.html>