

# Daniel Barenboim conducts Wagner in Israel

Fred Mazelis  
1 August 2001

A concert that took place in Jerusalem on July 7 produced an uproar in Israel and headlines around the world. The occasion was a performance by the visiting Berlin Staatskapelle orchestra under the direction of Daniel Barenboim.

Barenboim, who spent his teenage years in Israel, led the musicians in the performance of Richard Wagner's "Overture to Tristan und Isolde" as an encore following the regular program. This provoked angry outbursts and denunciations from some members of the audience, and heavy condemnation across the Israeli political spectrum in the following days.

An informal ban on the public performance of Wagner's music has been in place since the founding of the Zionist state more than 50 years ago. The nineteenth century musical revolutionary was also a notorious anti-Semite. Hitler's favorite composer, his fame and reputation were utilized by the Nazis some 50 years after his death.

For some Holocaust survivors, the music of Wagner is indelibly associated with the Nazi regime, which used it invariably on ceremonial state occasions. At the same time, the ban on Wagner's music is part of a nationalist agenda. It has been fostered by the Zionist establishment for its own political purposes.

Barenboim, 58, a world-famous pianist and conductor, is presently the conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as well as the State Opera in Berlin, and previously led the Orchestre de Paris and the Opera de Paris. A longstanding opponent of the ban on Wagner, he has tangled with musical and political authorities on the question in the past. Most recently, the Israel Festival in Jerusalem announced plans to include a performance of the first act of Wagner's opera "Die Walkure," under Barenboim's direction, in this year's program. After protests, Barenboim reluctantly agreed to change the program, substituting Schumann's Fourth Symphony and Stravinsky's "The

Rite of Spring" for the Wagner.

On July 7, however, when Barenboim returned for a second encore, he asked the audience if they wanted to hear Wagner. "Despite what the Israel festival believes, there are people sitting in the audience for whom Wagner does not spark Nazi associations," said Barenboim. "I respect those for whom these associations are oppressive. It will be democratic to play a Wagner encore for those who wish to hear it. I am turning to you now and asking whether I can play Wagner."

A 30-minute debate followed, with some audience members shouting "fascist" at Barenboim. Dozens walked out, banging doors behind them, but the great majority stayed, and gave the performance an enthusiastic ovation. Barenboim took full responsibility for the action, saying, "If you're angry, be angry with me, but please don't be angry with the orchestra or the festival management."

Barenboim was quickly denounced by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert, President Moshe Katsav and other figures. Olmert, a leading member of the right-wing Likud Party, called Barenboim's behavior "brazen, arrogant, insensitive and uncivilized," and threatened to exclude him from future cultural events in the city.

For his part, Barenboim has never minced words on Wagner and the issues raised by his work. In a conversation with the noted Palestinian writer and intellectual Edward Said, which is posted on Barenboim's [web site](http://www.daniel-barenboim.com/journal/wagner.htm) [www.daniel-barenboim.com/journal/wagner.htm], the conductor stresses the contradictions within Wagner and his work: "First of all, there is Wagner the composer. Then there's Wagner the writer of his own librettos—in other words, everything that is tied to the music. Then there is Wagner the writer on artistic matters. And then there is Wagner the political

writer—in this case, primarily the anti-Semitic political writer. These are four different aspects to his work.”

In a lengthy discussion which can only be partially summarized here, Barenboim goes on to insist that Wagner’s anti-Semitism should neither be ignored nor simply be equated with his music, and also that Wagner’s views, as “monstrous” as they were, were not identical to the use that the Nazis made of Wagner. He correctly insists that the contradictions in Wagner’s work must be actively considered, rather than imposing a kind of national or political straitjacket on the music.

“...I think it’s obvious that Wagner’s anti-Semitic views and writings are monstrous,” says Barenboim. “And I must say that if I, in a naively sentimental way, try to think which of the great composers of the past I would love to spend twenty-four hours with, if I could, Wagner doesn’t come to mind. I’d love to follow Mozart around for twenty-four hours; I’m sure it would be very entertaining, amusing edifying, but Wagner ... I might invite him to dinner for study purposes by not for enjoyment. Wagner, the person, is absolutely appalling, despicable, and, in a way, very difficult to put together with the music he wrote, which so often has exactly the opposite kind of feelings ... noble, generous, etc.”

Barenboim points out that Arturo Toscanini, the noted opponent of fascism who refused to perform at Bayreuth because of the Nazis, conducted the then Palestine Philharmonic Orchestra in performances of Wagner in the 1930s, without objection. It was only after the Kristallnacht pogrom in Germany in 1938 that the orchestra decided that it would not play Wagner because of his associations with the Hitler regime.

Pointing to this origin of the Wagner “ban,” Barenboim has suggested that Wagner be performed at non-subscription concerts of the Israel Philharmonic, so that anyone who wanted to hear his music could purchase a ticket for a specific concert—“the fact that this was not allowed to happen is a reflection of a kind of political abuse and of all sorts of ideas that again have nothing to do with Wagner’s music,” Barenboim declares.

The Argentine-born pianist and conductor is a major contemporary musical figure and an intellectual who has some interesting things to say about the relationship between music, history and society as a whole. In a recent article in the *New York Review of Books*, Barenboim attacks the current fashion for identity

politics and cultural nationalism.

“In my opinion, it is impossible for anyone at the beginning of the twenty-first century to believably claim a single identity. One difficulty of our times is that people restrict their concerns to ever smaller details, and that they often have little sense of how things are intermingled with one another, and together form part of a whole...

“I look at the question of identity both as a musician and from the perspective of my own history. I was born in Argentina, my grandparents were Russian Jews, I grew up in Israel, and I have lived most of my adult life in Europe. I think in the language that I happen to speak at a particular moment. I feel German when I conduct Beethoven, Italian when I conduct Verdi. This does not give me a feeling of being untrue to myself; quite the contrary. The experience of playing different styles of music can be remarkably illuminating...”

To his credit, Barenboim does not uncritically accept Zionist dogma. There are many in the Zionist establishment who cannot abide his outspokenness, made all the more unpleasant for them by his prominence in cultural and intellectual circles. His friendship with Edward Said is considered a black mark against him, and his liberal internationalist outlook and stated opposition to all forms of nationalism places him beyond the pale for many. Barenboim’s outlook is in some respects similar to that of the liberal humanism of the late Yehudi Menuhin, whose father was a noted anti-Zionist.

Barenboim has declared his support for a “two-state” solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He believes that the Zionist state can somehow be cleansed of chauvinism, and does not agree that the seed of this chauvinism is contained within Zionist ideology itself. Nevertheless, Barenboim is clearly out of step with the sharp turn to the right within Israel, and he has raised important issues with his performance of Wagner and his public statements on the subject.



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**