

# The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra at New York's Carnegie Hall

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A series of concerts a month ago at Carnegie Hall in New York City featured all of Beethoven's nine symphonies (composed 1799-1824), performed by the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra under the baton of Daniel Barenboim.

The ensemble was founded in 1999 by Barenboim and his friend and colleague Edward Said, the Palestinian-American scholar and critic who died in 2003. Barenboim, the Argentinean-born Israeli conductor who now lives in Berlin and is also a world-renowned pianist, is one of the most eminent musical figures active today.

The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra—its name derives from a collection of poems by Goethe (*West-östlicher Diwan*, 1819) exploring the idea of world culture—is distinguished by the fact that it brings together young Israeli, Palestinian and other Arab musicians. They attend an annual summer training institute that is followed by international tours.

The group long ago established its artistic abilities and has performed at major concert halls from Vienna to Moscow, London and New York. In 2011 the orchestra recorded all the Beethoven symphonies, and the performances at Carnegie Hall were an outgrowth of this project, called Beethoven For All.

The concluding concert at Carnegie took place on February 3, and consisted of the Second and Ninth Symphonies, a pairing that brought together one of the composer's early works with his last symphony, perhaps the most famous such piece ever created. The works are separated by 22 years, a significant period of time in the life of Beethoven, who died at the age of 56.

The Second Symphony was completed in 1802, at a time when the composer, already deemed a worthy successor to Haydn and Mozart, was coming to grips with his increasing deafness. He wrote his famous "Heiligenstadt Testament" during this period, a statement to his brothers spelling out his inner turmoil in the face of his condition. While the symphony conveys towering emotion and turbulence, it is certainly not dominated by the despair with which he was apparently wrestling. It shares many characteristics with works by Haydn and Mozart, but there are more than a few hints of the experimentation and daring that would distinguish Beethoven's later works.

The Ninth Symphony was the monumental climax of Beethoven's symphonic output. Completed in 1824, about three years before the composer's death, it was separated by a full 12 years from his previous symphony. For most of this late period, Beethoven concentrated on smaller scale works, which would culminate in his last string quartets. The latter pieces occupy an equally lofty place, in the field of chamber music, although one distinct from that of the Ninth Symphony, with its unabashedly popular appeal.

Musicologist Joseph Kerman, writing about the Ninth, stresses

Beethoven's "determination to touch common mankind as nakedly as possible. Never in the past had Beethoven reached so urgently for immediacy. There is something very moving about the spectacle of this composer, having reached heights of subtlety in the pure manipulations of tonal materials, battering at the communications barrier with every weapon of his knowledge."

This description expresses a profound truth. The Ninth Symphony, perhaps more than any other work in the classical repertoire, succeeds in reaching the broadest possible audience while scaling musical heights at the same time. The composer was so deaf by this point that he had no idea what the response to the symphony was at its premiere performance, and famously had to be turned around to see the thunderous audience reaction at the conclusion of the work.

Nevertheless, in defiance of his deafness, he was determined to communicate. The result was like no other symphony before it, not only for its choral movement, but also for the number of players and the length of the work—at nearly 70 minutes, twice the length of the typical symphony of the classical period—and also for its unusual form, in the second and fourth movements especially.

Beethoven, born in the same astonishing year—1770—as Hegel, Hölderlin and Wordsworth, and one year before Scott, was the consummate musical offspring and representative of the Enlightenment, part of a generation shaped directly and indirectly by the ideals and example of the French Revolution. The ideas Beethoven sought to convey, including opposition to political and spiritual tyranny, found most direct expression in the choral movement, the finale of the Ninth. Beethoven turned to Friedrich Schiller's *Ode to Joy* (*An die Freude*, 1785). The German poet, playwright and philosopher was a near-contemporary, and was also close to Goethe. Schiller's text, very much in the spirit of the Enlightenment, looks to human brotherhood ("Joy, bright spark of divinity, Daughter of Elysium ... All men become brothers, Under the sway of thy gentle wings.").

The February 3 performance of the Ninth lived up to expectations. Barenboim is especially close to this music, and his understanding came through powerfully. He assembled an unparalleled quartet of soloists for the choral finale: soprano Diana Damrau, mezzo-soprano Kate Lindsey, tenor Piotr Beczala and bass René Pape. The German-born soprano and bass are at the top of their professions, and the Polish-born tenor and American mezzo have also established themselves at the Metropolitan Opera. They had no problem filling the 3,000-seat Carnegie Hall with glorious sound.

Also contributing crucially was the world-famous Westminster Symphonic Choir. The Choir, consisting of students at the Westminster Choir College of Rider University in Princeton, New

Jersey, recently appeared in a powerful performance of the Verdi Requiem at Carnegie Hall. The general youthfulness of both the Choir and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra made for a stirring partnership.

Barenboim is known for his strong interpretive ideas, and not all of his performances have been universally acclaimed. Few would dispute, however, the fact that his passion and spontaneity make for extraordinary, if sometime unpredictable, concerts.

The February 3 performance of the Ninth emphasized both the work's mystery as well as its passion. This was nowhere clearer than in the final movement. In its first three minutes we listen to the surprising and gripping recapitulation of the main themes of the first three movements, as if Beethoven is examining them and putting them aside as a necessary stage, but finally insufficient, to express his ideas and feelings. Then comes what seems like a lengthy moment of virtual silence, followed by the emergence of the "Ode to Joy" theme. Barenboim took his time in shaping this theme into an impassioned climax, followed by the entrance of bass soloist Pape, initially with his recitative, then the first presentation of the main theme, and then joined by the chorus and the other soloists.

The conclusion of the performance was followed by an ovation that lasted some 15 minutes. The combination of program and performing ensemble on this occasion produced for many of those in the audience an unforgettable afternoon of music.

There is a certain resemblance between the roles of Barenboim and Leonard Bernstein, a generation older. The comparison rests not only on their dual careers as pianist and conductor, reaching the apex in both musical spheres. There is also Barenboim's role as an outspoken musical intellectual and politically engaged artist, like Bernstein before him. Barenboim is despised by right-wing Zionists and generally distrusted across the official Israeli political spectrum for his passionate defense of the rights of the Palestinian people and his attacks on the decades-long occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. He has often spelled out his hostility to chauvinism and his opinion that ethnic labels are inadequate if not harmful (see "Daniel Barenboim conducts Wagner in Israel," 1 August 2001).

Barenboim has also been criticized from a different standpoint, by those who discount or dismiss the significance of forming an orchestra of Arab and Jewish musicians, who "attack the premise underlying the orchestra: that Western classical music possesses an inherent elevating power," as music critic Alex Ross phrases it in the *New Yorker*. Ross indicates at least partial agreement with this conception, making the oft-repeated reference to the Nazi leaders' love of Wagner, Beethoven and others.

If this suggests that Barenboim makes a claim for the superiority of the Western classical tradition, that is not the case. The orchestra, as Ross also points out, will be performing contemporary works from the Middle East in the months to come. In forming the orchestra, neither Barenboim nor Said had any notion of the superiority of either West or East, but rather recognized and advocated their cross-fertilization. At the same time, they understood the enormous contribution that the classical Western musical tradition has made to world culture and civilization.

Behind these attacks on the orchestra is the postmodernist tendency to repudiate the ideals of the Enlightenment and beyond, to view the world as composed of racial and religious and tribal identities and to uphold the value of "difference." It is not Barenboim, but rather these critics, who pit East against West, and Muslim against Jew and Christian. The conductor, to his credit, rejects this reactionary outlook.

The February 3 concert program explains that "the West-Eastern

Divan Orchestra has proved time and again that music can break down barriers previously considered insurmountable ... Music by itself can, of course, not resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, but it can bring home the validity of life experiences and narratives on all sides. The only political aspect of the West-Eastern Divan's work is the conviction that there will never be a military solution to the Middle East conflict, and that the fates of Israelis and Palestinians are inextricably linked."

Barenboim and his colleagues deserve full credit for their efforts, which take more than a little courage and vision. The situation in the Middle East is rife with painful difficulties and there is the element of historical tragedy hovering over events. One can only applaud—and be heartened by—an artistic undertaking that angers the reactionary establishment in Israel and, by implication at least, cuts across the plans and aims of the American ruling elite in the region. The conductor's democratic instinct and sensibility stands out in the contemporary cultural world, dominated as it so often is by careerism and shortsightedness.

In the interests of intellectual honesty, however, the almost inevitable limits of the project, and the outlook on which it is based, also need to be pointed out. It would be a mistake to conclude that the goal of peace and human solidarity can be advanced decisively through the work of men and women of good will, or by art alone. The fight against chauvinism, for the rights of oppressed peoples, and against all forms of national exclusivism and division is a political one in which the working class must play the leading role.

Musicians and artists play a significant role in creating an atmosphere conducive to political and social change, but the history of Zionism and of bourgeois nationalism in the Middle East offers urgent and unavoidable lessons. Central to the fight to end the oppression of the Palestinian people and the trap that Zionism has produced for Jewish working people is the *struggle for international socialism*, which brings humanity's cultural and intellectual achievements to bear on its current condition in a progressive and world-changing manner.



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