

National Identity and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra

SOLVEIG RIISER

Department of musicology | University of Oslo | Norway*

ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of national identity in the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, an orchestra consisting of young musicians from Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria and Iran. The article is built upon the idea that there are constant negotiations at play in the orchestra, including among the musicians internally, between them and the orchestra's founder and conductor Daniel Barenboim, and between the orchestra and its larger political and geographical context. This article unveils the inner dynamics of the ongoing identity negotiations in the orchestra, and the politics and power-mechanisms informing and defining these negotiations.

*P.O. Box 1017 Blindern, N-0315 Oslo, Norway

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE DIVAN ORCHESTRA¹

As a high-level orchestra of young musicians from the Middle East led by world-known conductor Daniel Barenboim, the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra has received considerable attention from the media, scholars, and political figures alike. It is often seen as symbolising hope for reconciliation and conflict transformation in the politically troubled area of the Middle East through the means of music and discussion. Founded by the late Palestinian-American scholar and music critic Edward W. Said (1935-2003) and the Argentine-born Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim (1942-), the ideas behind this ensemble represent a desire for peace in the Middle East through music. According to the official webpage of the orchestra, Barenboim and Said envisioned the group as a “forum where young people from Israel and all the Arab countries can express themselves freely and openly whilst at the same time hearing the narrative of the other”.² The organiser of the orchestra, the Andalusian Barenboim-Said Foundation (henceforth “the Foundation”) expresses the aim of the orchestra in the following words:

[Barenboim and Said] decided to create a workshop for young musicians [...] with the aim of combining musical study and development with sharing knowledge and comprehension between people from cultures that traditionally have been rivals. In this workshop, young musicians build upon their musical knowledge while living side-by-side with people from countries that may be engaged in conflict with their own.³

The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra (henceforth “the Divan”) is, according to its founders, not a peace project or a political project at all. The founders have regularly defined this non-political aspect as a central condition of the orchestra (cf. Barenboim and Said, 2002, pp. 7-8). At the same time, political interest is acknowledged as a possible consequence of the orchestra playing and conversing together. As Said argues:

Nobody is going to sign a declaration at the end. It’s just a kind of peculiar mix which has a cultural center to it, and all sorts of unforeseen and possible consequences that may be political. But, since none among us are politicians, we’re not really interested in that aspect of it. What we are interested in is the power of music and discussion and culture to create a sense of equality and fellowship otherwise unavailable to us in the anguish and tension of polarized life in the Middle East.⁴ (Said and Barsamian, 2003, p. 34)

Although this policy of being non-political is presented as a condition for the orchestra, alongside with its music, simultaneously the power of music to change or create something positive is simultaneously put forward as the aim of the orchestra. Moreover, Barenboim has argued that the orchestra has created understanding and cooperation among its musicians (cf. Barenboim [1991] 2002, 2008; Barenboim and Said, 2002). In this sense, we may well read the orchestra as a project aiming at conflict transformation; it certainly aims at the social transformation of its musicians,

¹This article is a revised version of a chapter in the author’s thesis, “Negotiating the Divan, A study of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra” (Riiser 2009). Subsequently, three publications on the Divan orchestra have appeared (Beckles Willson, 2009a, 2009b; Cheah, 2009). While these works add significant aspects to the overall understanding of the Divan orchestra and partly confirm some of the findings presented here, this article draws largely on the author’s own extensive fieldwork with the Orchestra.

² West-Eastern Divan Orchestra (2006): *Welcome to the new “West-Eastern Divan” website*. Retrieved 20 January 2007 from <http://west-easterndivan.artists.warner.de/>

³ The Barenboim Said Foundation (2008): *Call for Applications 2008*. Retrieved 28 February 2008 from <http://www.barenboim-said.org/index.php?id=190>

⁴ This quote is taken from an interview made prior to the first West-Eastern Divan Orchestra workshop in Weimar in 1999.

and through this transformation encourages reconciliation and mutual understanding on a larger scale.

Examining the existing literature on the orchestra, it is clear that the Divan has not improved matters when it comes to creating peace in the Middle East.⁵ Despite this, Beckles Willson (2009b) points out how a utopian vision of the orchestra remains forefront in the public domain. This vision is sustained by a range of agendas, the three most important being the Andalusian Government and their support to the Foundation, Barenboim's explicit criticisms of the Israeli government's foreign policy, and, finally, the Occidental vision of the Middle Eastern musicians. The latter is reified through the orchestra and the scholarships offered by the Barenboim-Said foundation. Beckles Willson's work clearly demonstrates the extent to which external (political) agendas are significant players in forming the public image of the orchestra, and suggest that the orchestra is a tool to strengthen the agendas of Andalusia, Barenboim and the Divan musicians. Although the present article draws on and reinforces similar ideas, I wish to focus more on the internal aspects of the orchestra and the ongoing negotiations therein. I will argue that the inner dynamics and socio-politics of the orchestra show that the road to reconciliation and transformation is both long and complex. The Divan Orchestra is a project where constant negotiations are at play; among the musicians themselves, between the musicians and conductor Daniel Barenboim (together with the Barenboim-Said Foundation, the administrative side of the orchestra), and between the orchestra and the larger political context of the Middle East.

To discuss the various levels of negotiation in the orchestra, I wish to carry out a discussion about the role of national identity in these negotiations. Although I will focus on the orchestra's internal negotiations, these should also be understood in reference to the politics and power mechanisms surrounding and signifying the orchestra itself. I will therefore start off by presenting what I term "a theory of the p-words", and from this highlight some parallels between the orchestra and the nation. I will present empirical data from my fieldwork with the orchestra in 2008 relating to the Divan musicians' sense of nationality, both in the orchestra and in exile.⁶ The discussion of national identity must be considered a core aspect in the negotiations within the Divan, carrying strong connotations to the overall situation in the Middle East. I suggest that the role of national identity has a much stronger role in the negotiations in the Divan than what the founders, the Foundation and Barenboim have recognized.⁷ My examination of the national identity issue will be done by posing the following questions: *What is the role of the Divan Orchestra in altering or negotiating the musicians' sense of national identity and belonging? What signifies the power relations and politics of these negotiations?*

⁵ This is also recognized by the orchestra administration and founders (cf. Barenboim in Cheah, 2009; Barenboim, 2006, lecture 4).

⁶ In order not to jeopardize the security of my informants, I have chosen to name all Divan musicians in the article "informants", and not include nationality, instrument, name or anything else that could reveal their identity. I have divulged the nationality of the musicians only when the context requires it. Although this may give the reader the impression of a de-contextualisation of the empirical material, some of the musicians may risk losing jobs, teachers, friends, etc., if their affiliation to the Divan is made public. I ask for the readers' patience and understanding on this matter.

⁷ In his opening lines in a discussion among the orchestra members held in Oslo on August 25, 2008, where I was present and that aimed to "look back in time in order to look forward", Barenboim stated that the founders "never aimed to change nationality as an identity marker for the musicians".

THE POWER OF MUSIC AND THE P-WORDS

The repertoire of the Divan orchestra is Western art music. And in the Divan, this “universal metaphysical language of music becomes the link, it is the language of the continuous dialogue that these young people have with each other,” (Barenboim, 2006, lecture 4). Barenboim presents a view on music’s power as an alternative force:

Music has another weapon that it delivers to us, if we want to take it, and that is one through which we can learn a lot about ourselves, about our society, about the human being, about politics, about society, about anything that you choose to do. (Barenboim, 2006, lecture 1).

The power of music to learn about these entities has been underlined by Barenboim several times in public announcements regarding the Divan Orchestra. According to him, the Divan Orchestra allows its musicians to express their narratives and, at the same time, listen to the narratives of each other.⁸ He argues that the power of music is different from power itself, which has only one kind of strength: that of control. The power of music does not work exclusively through control, but through “actual real strength, the accumulative strength that comes from the build-up tension” (Barenboim, 2006, lecture 5). Moreover, Barenboim argues that subjectivity is an integral and necessary part of music, because music is conceived of, and eventually delivered from, one individual’s point of view (*ibid*). He believes music has the power to speak to all aspects of a human’s being, and to allow that person to experience the connectivity of personal, social and political spheres, because in music there are no independent elements (*ibid*).

Referring to recent musicological research, Cohen (2008) argues that musical traditions are more dissimilar than similar. “When we emphasize music’s universality,” she writes, “we might mislead ourselves into thinking that musical elements can be borrowed from here or there, without paying sufficient attention to distinct cultural meaning” (Cohen, 2008, pp. 26-27). It should not be necessary to argue that music is not a universal language; individuals and groups can meet in music, and, by doing so, create a shared sense of identity. At the same time, music defines otherness towards groups that are linked to other values and norms (cf. Einarsen, 2002). For reasons of both ethics and efficacy, Cohen argues that music should not be dealt with as a universal language. She states that the sensibilities, relationships, attitudes, historical resonances, etc. that the musicians bring to the musical encounter contribute a large measure of its meaning (Cohen, 2008, p. 28). History also shows how German music in the 19th century metamorphosed into German universalism, and is hence an ideology part of a nationalist, romantic programme (Taruskin, n.d.).

Thus we find, not surprisingly, that we cannot refer to the formation of social relationships among the Divan musicians in terms of universality in music. Rather, the creation of a common identity and common social values occurs because a negotiation takes place. Hence music *can* have a formative role in identity creation while at the same time embodying prior identities in its production. The negotiations that this process entails should be understood in terms of power and politics, and not as activities in a “non-political utopia”. That said, even the “perfect world” (or utopia) has elements of control, diversity and contrasts (as shown also by Beckles Willson, 2009a). When we refuse to read the Divan’s music and musical

⁸ West-Eastern Divan Orchestra (2006): *Welcome to the new “West-Eastern Divan” website*. Retrieved 20 January 2007 from <http://west-easterndivan.artists.warner.de/>

appropriation in terms of universalism within a utopia, we are able to acknowledge and consider the distinct cultural meaning of the music's production, and can investigate the true power relations in that music.

What, then, signifies power and politics in the Divan orchestra? Mulhern (2000) argues that politics has been unspeakable in newer cultural theory (referring mainly to Cultural Studies); it has been "the P-word". It is critically important to recognize the politics of the Divan Orchestra, otherwise we risk overlooking the possible effects and results that this project may have for its participants. As sociologist Tia DeNora remarks:

If music is a device of social ordering, if – in and through its manner of appropriation – it is a resource against which holding forms, templates and parameters of action and experience are forged, if it can be seen to have "effects" upon bodies, hearts, and minds, then the matter of music in the social place is [...] an aesthetic-political matter. (DeNora, 2001, p. 175)

In the Divan context, I believe "the P-word" is not only that of (socio-) politics, but is also a term that could refer to *power* and the larger context of power notions. Several writers support my assumption by emphasizing the need to recognize the power of music in the social context it appears in.⁹ One interesting contextual framework to understand the power and politics of the Divan is nationality and/or the nation state. In one of his later works, Barenboim goes as far as naming the Divan a "Sovereign Independent Republic" (Barenboim, 2008, p. 182). According to Barenboim's theories, it is the "flat" structure that occurs through music, a point where everyone is interdependent while at the same time expressing their own narrative and subjectivity, that makes the orchestra a "utopia" or "alternative social model" (Barenboim, 2006, lecture 5).

THE ORCHESTRA AND THE NATION

"The nation continues to be the pre-eminent spatial construct in a world in which space is divided into national portions", writes Edensor (2002, p. 37). The spatial distinguishing constituted by borders separates one nation from another. Borders enclose a definable population under a hegemonic administration within the form of a political system. Furthermore, these borders are imagined to enclose a particular and separate culture (ibid).¹⁰ National identity, then, is both a matter of politics and of joint (ethnic) culture, forging a link between a cultural group and the state (cf. Eriksen, 2002). Both the political and cultural aspects of national identity make it an interesting aspect for discussing the internal socio-politics and negotiations within the Divan Orchestra. I will start by making a comparison between the orchestra and the nation state, focusing on identity creation within these constructions.¹¹ National identity draws its legitimacy from the nation as a spatial construct (and is hence an imagined community, as described by Anderson (1991). When researching nationalism, the term ethnicity usually comes up; however, here I deal with national identity without focusing on ethnicity. Eriksen (2002, p. 118) argues that nationalism is in fact possible without ethnicity, and the wider participation this allows can actually strengthen national identity. In parallel, spatially defined metaphors of both the orchestra and the identity creation that happens within the Divan make a

⁹ See, for example, Stokes (1994), Keil and Feld ([1994] 2005), DeNora (2000), and Born and Hesmondhalgh (2000).

¹⁰ Edensor (2002, p. 37) remarks that it is not that different cultures cannot coexist within any nation, but that they are subordinated to the nation, and conceived as part of national cultural variety.

¹¹ My usage of national identity is obviously an oversimplification of reality, as I focus on the majority groupings.

Notwithstanding this macro-view, I believe this parallel provides an opportunity to understand the Divan orchestra mechanisms in a fruitful way.

comparison to national identity possible. This parallel does not only exist on a metaphorical level; it is also reflected in the way the Divan musicians live their lives and play music together at the workshop as if they were in an alternative society.

Carter and Levi (2003) suggest two possible definitions of an orchestra: (1) a corporation of instrumental musicians, and (2) a corporate musical instrument. According to them, the difference is “that of the orchestra as an institution and as a sounding body” (ibid, p. 1). An orchestra understood as a corporation of musical instrumentalists, an institution with a cross-section of people from all kinds of social backgrounds, can be linked to the metaphors of a *microcosm* (Gillinson and Vaughan, 2003, p. 194) or a *civil society* (Spizer and Zaslav, 2004, p. 509). Barenboim also utilizes these metaphors as we have seen, arguing that the orchestra is a model for society, and naming the Divan Orchestra an *alternative social model* and a *utopian republic* (Barenboim 2006, lectures 1 and 5).¹²

Within the orchestra as an institution, we need to investigate what happens when people play together in an ensemble, based on the individual’s role within the orchestra. Barenboim argues in his BBC Reith Lectures that when you play music in an ensemble, you have to do two things at the same time: (1) express yourself, otherwise you are not contributing to the musical experience, and (2) listen to the other; you have to understand what the others are doing (Barenboim, 2006, lecture 1). Furthermore, music makes every Divan musician equal:

There is automatically a common terrain on the music, because in front of the Beethoven symphony they are all equals. In real life they are not. (Barenboim, 2006, lecture 1)

What Barenboim suggests is that the orchestra as an institution provides, through music, a democratic space where the musicians are equal. Thus, and still overlooking what in many orchestras is a hierarchical division both between and within instrumental groups, the musicians are not only in a ‘stand-still’ equality, rather, this equality assigns a possibility for narrative-expression, negotiations and the construction of relationships, leading to new notions of identity (see Small, 1998). A similar argument is also put forward by Bennett (2004, p. 4), who argues that music can “provide a shared sense of collective identity articulated by a symbolic sense of community”.

Barenboim and Said also emphasize the role of playing music together in the constitution of new relationships; “because once you have agreed on how to play one note together you can no longer look at each other in the same way again, because you then have shared the same experience” (Barenboim and Said, 2002, p. 10). In other words, they believe music holds a formative role in identity construction. The founders, thus, understand music as the musicians’ “abstract language of harmony” (Barenboim, 2006, lecture 4) or even a universal language. (I will return to this aspect later.) The musicians’ own narratives are told in this abstract language, which might, according to Barenboim and Said, lead to understanding, curiosity, and in the very end perhaps even to the acceptance of the legitimacy of the narrative.

I will argue that besides expressing and listening to one another’s narratives, the Divan musicians also create a new, shared narrative through music, from where the new notion of social identity draws its legitimacy. This is in line with postcolonial

¹² I will return to Barenboim’s naming the Divan a “utopia” below when discussing the politics and power relations within the orchestra.

theories, which acknowledge the formative role of music in the construction, negotiation and transformation of socio-cultural identities (Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000, p. 31). Through playing the same piece of music, everyone participates in and negotiates the creation of a more complex and nuanced narrative they can have in common, and having done that, the orchestra may have set the stage for conflict transformation amongst themselves. Frith (1996) emphasizes the role of music in the creation of a group; how a cultural activity is a way of living the ideas of the group:

It is not that social groups agree on values which are then expressed in their cultural activities (the assumption of the homology models), but that they only get to know themselves as groups (as a particular organization of individual and social interests, of sameness and difference) through cultural activity, through aesthetic judgment. Making music is not a way of expressing ideas; it is a way of living them. (Frith, 1996, p. 111)

Moreover, music informs our sense of place, and I believe the Divan musicians are also narrating a (new) shared sense of place. As Bennett (2004) notes:

Both as creative practice and as form of consumption, music plays an important role in the narrativization of place, that is, in the way in which people define their relationship to local, everyday surroundings. (Bennett, 2004, p. 2)

I will return to several examples on how the musicians in the Divan use music to negotiate a shared identity, which inhabits an aesthetic attitude that connects the musicians to Europe rather than to the Middle East. The Divan stands as an important arena for learning and networking for young musicians aiming at professional careers as musicians. This gives us another reason to follow the metaphoric parallels often used to explain the orchestra, namely the Divan as a “civil society”.

The definition of civil society is not consistent and has varied over time, and while a detailed discussion on the topic is outside the scope of this article, it is beneficial to quickly clarify my use of the term. For many, civil society refers mainly to voluntary associations and NGOs in the society, sponsoring what Edwards (2005) calls the missing link in the democracy. However, as Edwards (2005) argues, civil society should include all the places where learning takes place, and it can include the public sphere of society as such. My use of the term suggests a sphere where learning takes place, a space informed by its leadership and also a place with its own processes and negotiations. As for the orchestra, by playing together as a corporation of musical instrumentalists, the musicians are brought together in what we might call a ‘civil society’. Within this corporation the musicians negotiate a common ground based on their new relationships and a negotiated narrative informing a common social identity. With a wide variety of lived-experiences creating the musicians’ narratives, living their “shared values”, to use Frith’s (1996) words, requires negotiations.

LEADING THE ORCHESTRA

The second definition of the orchestra, as a corporate musical instrument and a sounding body (Carter and Levi, 2003), offers an interesting starting point for a discussion of the role of the orchestra’s leadership. At one level, Siepmann (2003, p. 113) argues that the conductor’s “first duty is to keep order, and the larger the orchestra, the greater his authority must be”. It is the conductor that interprets the musical pieces and defines the musical expression of the orchestra, making the orchestra the conductor’s corporate musical instrument and sounding body. What is

interesting in the context of musical leadership is Attali's ([1985] 2006) argument that the conductor is not only the "legitimate and rational organizer of a production whose size necessitates a coordinator", he also holds an enormous power over the orchestra as society (pp. 65-67).

Witnessing the arrival of Barenboim at the 2008 workshop made me realize the strong sense of leadership that reigns in the Divan. With strong leadership I do not only mean authoritarian leadership, but also leadership characterized by a strong sense of respect and admiration. Among some of the musicians this respect also led to a feeling of being afraid of Barenboim.¹³ Before he arrived at the workshop, I had been present at several tutti rehearsals, seeing how the orchestra responded to the assistant conductor's attempts to shape the musical expression and sound of the orchestra. The musicians often openly commented that they were not inspired, that the rehearsals were too long, that other instrumental groups required too much time at the rehearsals and so on. These comments were directed to me, to fellow orchestra members and even more to the assistant conductor.

When Barenboim came to the workshop and entered the tutti rehearsal, the orchestra as a whole changed drastically. Those who previously sat leaning back on their chairs now sat straight up, listened carefully to what Barenboim said, and concentrated on playing exactly how Barenboim asked them to play. From my interpretation of this situation, Barenboim exercised clear, strong leadership of the orchestra, and took (and was given) the position Siepmann has named *The conductor as evangelist*; he was "preaching to the converted" (Siepmann, 2003, pp. 122-125). My interpretation of Barenboim's leadership was supported by several of my informants who emphasized the strong leadership of Barenboim, and how this forms a central aspect of the Divan. One said:

Informant: I think the music-making is at the highest level possible. It is very interesting to work with Barenboim, and we work with him in a very special way. He has a lot of time to work with us; it's not like in a professional orchestra, where the conductor only comes for four rehearsals and then plays [a] concert. There he doesn't really have time to work and do everything he wants with the orchestra. With us he has time, so we play exactly how he hears the music. He explains to us exactly what he wants, and we try to do it as best as we can. This is very interesting I think.

A central question related to our discussion should be, 'what is it that Barenboim wishes to express, musically and ideologically, through the Divan Orchestra?' Making the orchestra as musically strong as possible might help Barenboim express both music and, as Beckles Willson (2009b) has argued, also his political ideas. Being a good instrument for Barenboim, the orchestra gives Barenboim an opportunity to use what he believes is a "universal language of music", and it offers a space to outwardly express his ideas. Notwithstanding the general problems of naming Western art music "universal", the very structure and hierarchy of a symphony orchestra suggests, rather obviously, that the musical narratives are not negotiated upon, but are in fact defined by the leader alone. Are the musicians only a tool to express the ideas of Barenboim and the foundation? And if so, what effect does this have in the negotiations of a new narrative informing the new social identity of the musicians?

¹³ This fear was connected to both an immediate anxiety of simply playing poorly, bad or even wrong, and on a more long-term, professional level the threat that followed from not being regarded as a "talented musician" by Barenboim himself – and through that risking to lose the chance to receive a scholarship from the foundation. This idea is examined in more depth under the subheading "Becoming German".

In a discussion of the conductor's role in the orchestra, Barenboim makes a parallel to a state and its leadership, arguing that: "You cannot separate the leaders from the people" (Barenboim, 2006, lecture 5). He continues:

And you cannot only criticize the leaders. You know, the same thing in the orchestra. [...] I make mistakes when I conduct. [...] When I make mistakes the musicians usually cover up for me.

Although Barenboim argues that you cannot separate the leaders from their people, and hence the conductor from its orchestra, in the following discussion I wish to examine the juxtaposition of negotiations that take place between the musicians, on the one hand, and on the other, the ideas of Barenboim (musically and orally) expressed through the orchestra as a sounding body. Or to use the earlier metaphor: are the participants in the orchestral civil society and their leader going in the same direction? What is the role of the leader in pointing out the direction for his or her people? And ultimately, what are the negotiations based on?

DIVAN NATIONALISM

Both Said and Barenboim have, through books with descriptive titles such as *Out of place. A Memoir* (Said, 1999), *Reflections on exile* (Said, 2001) and *A life in music* (Barenboim, [1991] 2002) contributed to the discussion about nationality as a core identity marker. In sum, they both present a picture of their own identity in a rather postmodern way, where individual markers such as music or friendship replace nationality as identity marker. In other words, place as identity marker is replaced or superseded by space. Bennett (2004, p. 3) argues that the contested nature of space and place in late modernity has been accentuated in recent decades by increasing global mobility (see also Edensor, 2002). Both Said and Barenboim are obvious examples of the human effect of growing global mobility, and I believe they are also a human example of the history of the Middle East and the British (European) influence in that area.

Based on Barenboim's statement when receiving honorary Palestinian citizenship in January 2008, one could thus argue that nationality has been subjected to his political *strategy*.¹⁴ Barenboim argues that holding dual citizenship demonstrates his politically loaded ideas of the linked destinies of the Israelis and Palestinians.¹⁵ Furthermore, Barenboim argues that the state of Israel is confronted with three problems that all have to do with identity: the nature of the modern democratic Jewish state and its very identity; the problem of Palestinian identity within Israel; and lastly the problem of the creation of a Palestinian state outside of Israel. Nationalism is indeed a theory of political legitimacy (see Eriksen, 2002, citing Gellner, 1983), but what is noteworthy about Barenboim's strategy is how he excludes individual identity when discussing nationalism (for him, cosmopolitanism has seemingly replaced nationalism). Consequently, Barenboim deals with nationalism purely as a tool to use in political statements about nation state identity and group identity.

While the two founders have quite explicit ideas about the role of national place-identity-markers in their own personal biographies, this can also be seen in how the two present the identities of the orchestra member. In talking about the first Weimar workshop, they observe:

¹⁴ In receiving Palestinian citizenship, Barenboim became the first Israeli to carry both an Israeli and a Palestinian passport. Additionally, he is a citizen of Spain.

¹⁵ Barenboim, Daniel (2008): Dual citizenship. Retrieved 3 September 2008 from http://www.danielbarenboim.com/journal_acceptance2.htm

One set of identities was superseded by another set. There was an Israeli group, and a Russian group, and a Syrian group, a Lebanese group, and a group of Palestinian Israelis. All of them suddenly became cellists and violinists playing the same piece in the same orchestra under the same conductor. (Barenboim and Said, 2002, pp. 9-10)

Subsequently, the orchestra itself, and the music played in the orchestra, are both seen to hold a formative role in creating a new social identity. This includes not only a breaking down of national stereotypes, but ultimately a breaking down of nationality as such. In line with the founders' personal experience in replacing the nation-state with space-notions of identity, they argue that the orchestra is a space that supersedes national identity. Nonetheless, during my stay in Pílas in July/August 2008, I found that ethnicity and nationalism serves as a central identity marker for the musicians. As one of my informants put it:

Informant: This is who I am. Especially here, because of this Arab-Israeli thing, so of course, it's more noticeable who's Israeli and who's Arab here. I mean, more than in normal time in Germany.

This is one example out of many in which musicians told me how the Divan in fact strengthens their sense of national identity rather than altering it.

When it comes to the identity discussion, it is important to keep in mind that the Divan Orchestra is not only an orchestra of musicians playing music together, but is also a place for discussion about topics such as art, literature, music and, to a certain extent, politics.¹⁶ The social activities and discussions among the Divan musicians need to be included in a discussion about national identity, as national identity also carries aspects of groupings and "otherness" with it, and serves as a "natural" social structuring among the musicians. When I asked if there were any unofficial discussions among the musicians after the arranged, official discussions, one of the informants of Arab origin said to me:

Informant: Usually we have talks, but not necessarily in the discussion. Usually we have another discussion after the discussion, outside. It's like a section of the discussion leads to another discussion.

Interviewer: This second discussion you talked about, is this between you and the other fellow citizens, or is it...

Informant: No. Sometimes it is with my [fellow Arabs] and sometimes with Israelis; it happened a few times with some Israelis and of course with Arabs. We would be complaining about things to each other, we would say for example, "Did you hear what this guy said?" Sometimes we discuss things with the Israelis.

The musician quoted above structured social groupings in three levels: first and foremost his national constituencies as a unifying, national identity marker, secondly Arabs (as a broader, "allied" ethnic group),¹⁷ and thirdly, the "real" other, the Israelis. This division is only true when it comes to the social activity and organization of the musicians; I saw tendencies towards such social structures for example during the meals at the workshop, where the majority of the tables were occupied by either

¹⁶ Edward Said's widow Mariam Said is responsible for the social programme. Beckles-Willson (2009a) and Etherington (2007) both point to findings that suggest that these social "discussions" are pitched too high, something I experienced in observing at the 2008 workshop. As an observer, I noticed that in some of the discussions, the Divan musicians seemed un-interested in the topic, and moreover, the low number of musicians participating in some of the discussions and film screening suggested that the musicians were either prioritized other activities (many underlined their need to practice), or they were not interested in participating.

¹⁷ Coherence among the Arabs has its roots in being viewed as one ethnic group. It also has its modern political roots in the Middle Eastern history of (Pan) Arabism and Arab nationalism as a political idea, which reached its peak with the formation of the United Arab Republic between Egypt and Syria in 1958, and again in 1963 with the establishment of a new super-state including Egypt, Syria and Iraq (Owen, 2000, p. 69; see also Choueiri, 2000).

Arabs only or Israelis only. But when in the orchestra, Barenboim and the Foundation make sure the musicians stand with “the other”.

National identity plays an important role for the musicians in the discussion. It may refer to how they serve as “ambassadors” for their country of origin, supporting the country’s actions with regard to the conflict. Or it may refer to what they have learned to believe is right through media coverage of the regional political issues, and through books and the education system. The informant above told me that the education system in his country emphasized teaching the students that Israel is the enemy; “and suddenly you are face to face with them [at the Divan-workshop],” he said. Another informant told me that in Israel he is usually regarded as “left-wing” in politics,¹⁸ but in the Divan Orchestra, when Israel is being criticized, he feels the need of to defend Israel, and hence never gets to present what he believes is “the whole picture”. In other words, this informant functions as an ambassador of Israeli actions and policies, rather than coming to the Divan as an independent young musician. This is one example of how the workshop may even be counterproductive for some of its members.

One specific situation from the 2008 workshop deserves a slightly more detailed presentation. It was the fifth official day of the workshop, still three days before Barenboim arrived at the workshop. After having watched the film *Route 181: Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel*, the musicians were invited to join the first official discussion of the 2008 workshop, a discussion of mixed identities that lead to a conversation of the key words *pain* and *suffering*, moderated by literature professor Jacqueline Rose. The Israeli writer David Grossman and the Lebanese scholar and writer Elias Khoury were also invited, and they presented and carried out a discussion based on their famous books (*Yalo* and *Gate of the sun* by Khoury, and *The yellow wind* and *The book of intimate grammar* by Grossman). In both Khoury and Grossman’s work, the “other” is imagined in a way that cannot be said to be common in the literature of either Arabs or Israelis.¹⁹

After a long discussion between the writers and moderator that shifted between literary and political emphases, the moderator opened the floor for questions. Many musicians participated in the discussion, asking questions related to literature and music, and identity and politics. Throughout, the moderator tried to lead the audience and the writers towards an intellectual discussion of literature; however, political questions from the audience seemed unavoidable.²⁰

One Israeli newcomer to the orchestra made a political comment that led to a long-lasting discussion that carried on that same night and the coming workshop days. First and foremost, this musician’s comment was clearly an emotional outpouring; he seemed nervous and he engaged personally in the debate rather than keeping the political ‘distance’ called for by many of the returning musicians and the moderator:

¹⁸ It was the informant himself that used the term “left-wing” about his own political views, particularly referring to his ideas about how the conflict between Israel and Palestine should be solved through dialogue.

¹⁹ Khoury’s book *Yalo* (2002, Archipelago Books) was controversial in its depiction of a former military man accused of crimes during the civil war and its portrayal of the use of torture in the Lebanese judicial system. Grossman’s book *The yellow wind* (1988, Picador) is a study of Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied territories, which was met with controversy in Israel. Both books have been translated into numerous languages.

²⁰ The writers also tended to include politically tense examples in their discussions, mainly related to their different views of the common history of Israelis and Palestinians. Even at a purely rhetorical level, politics seemed unavoidable; for example, where Grossman used the names “Israel” and “Palestine to be”, Khoury used the terms “Israel”, “Occupied territories” and “Palestine”. Although I will not undertake a discussion of these terms on either a theoretical or a political level, I believe this example clearly illustrates how politics are unavoidable in the context of the Divan discussions.

Mr. Khoury, I want to ask you whether you are aware that there are people in the Arab world who have vowed not to rest until they throw me and my family into the sea. There is no one who will rescue us if we don't help ourselves. Maybe it's wrong or selfish to say so, but there are many other Arab countries and no other Jewish countries. There is no place for us to go. My grandmother was in a concentration camp; she still has the tattoo on her wrist. We were persecuted for thousands of years and now we have finally come home. Why is it only our fault that the Palestinians are suffering? What about all these other Arab countries? There are many extremely wealthy Arabs who could have helped them; why do we alone have to be responsible for the Palestinians? (Cheah, 2009, p. 220)²¹

As I show in earlier publications (cf. Riiser, 2009), the comment from this newcomer fits into a pattern of differences between newcomers and old-timers in the Divan (this is also confirmed by Cheah, 2009). However, in this article I want to underline the impact of this comment, which clearly informs us about the roles of power, politics and national identity in the Divan. Firstly, the comment was initially met by applause by the newcomer's constituencies. Secondly, after the discussion, I was approached by numerous musicians who all in different ways felt the need to communicate to me what they thought had happened at the discussion and in one way or another attempt to modify what they thought my impression of the discussion was. Thirdly, and most importantly, after a few days, I found that the newcomer had been rebuked by the Foundation, who also "muzzled" him, as they felt that this kind of behaviour was not appropriate in the Divan context.²²

We can read from the quote that the musician presented himself primarily as an Israeli in this setting; he introduced his nationality into the discussion. After the discussion, many other musicians told me that the newcomer's outpouring would not have been possible had Barenboim be present at the workshop. In different ways, the musicians told me how they thought Barenboim controlled the narratives expressed by the musicians, and the fact that the newcomer was rebuked suggests the efficiency of Barenboim's control. The Israelis especially emphasized this aspect; Barenboim being 'left-wing' with regards to Israeli politics did not, according to several informants, leave much room for a nuanced Israeli narrative to be presented in the Divan.²³ Obviously, this creates an obstacle with regards to hearing the "other's" narrative; and for the Israeli musicians this means that the narrative they get to present is not always the narrative they themselves want to present or truly believe.

Barenboim and the Foundation call for the development of a culture within the orchestra based on shared human values (that in reality are not shared universally, but represents European and more specifically German values). This limits the possibility for political outbursts and directs all emotional expressions into the music. Hence, the Divan exemplifies a traditional way of understanding the movement from

²¹ I did not have the exact quote from my own fieldwork, but the same situation is quoted in Cheah, 2009, and presented here.

²² This last aspect is not part of Cheah's (2009) discussion of the same situation. She describes this young musician moving from discussing politics and being sure not to change his views, to becoming a more silent and relaxed Divan musician (Cheah, 2009, pp. 220-221). In my fieldwork, the newcomer musician did tell me that his emotional outpouring had a positive effect on him (as Cheah also points out); some days later, he said to me that his comment "well it was for me to drop a stone from my heart. [...] I felt better when I'd said what I said. It was very intense for me because I shared my personal experiences which I usually don't tell people" (see Riiser, 2009). However, the number of other musicians telling me that this musician was muzzled in response to this comment suggests that there are other reasons for the newcomer's silence than just the need for reflection in the aftermath. Moreover, Cheah (2009) notes that these words may not be the musician's own, but rather may be passed down from generation to generation. While this may well be the case, the emotions the musician described to me as a part of the incident suggests that he also had personal reasons for this political outburst.

²³ This also supports the idea that the public presentation of the Divan Orchestra made by its founders and Foundation is notoriously critical of Israel, as discussed by Beckles-Willson (2009b).

humanity to culture to politics, where politics has often been treated as the unmentionable “p-word”. However, within the Divan orchestra, as in the nation-state, politics are everywhere, and the “cultivation” of the Divan musicians that Barenboim and the Foundation put forward is yet another example of this. The term “cultivation” is a term closely connected to the nation-state, its civil society and the power relations therein. Cultivation is not always something we do to ourselves; it may also be done to us, as Edensor (2002, p. 6) writes. Furthermore, referring to Matthew Arnold as well as Friedrich Schiller:

This is done not least by the political state; in order for it to flourish it must inculcate in its citizens the proper sorts of spiritual disposition. [...] In a civil society, individuals live in a state of chronic antagonism, driven by opposing interests; but the state is that transcendent realm in which these divisions can be harmoniously reconciled. (Edensor, 2002, p. 6)

Given the parallels between the orchestra as a civil society and the conductor as the leader of the nation, the notion of cultivation becomes interesting when we look at how the process of narrative creation is controlled by the Foundation and Barenboim. Rather than expressing themselves freely, my findings show that several musician were in various ways subjected to Barenboim’s control; this either forced them to present a certain narrative not representative of their personal, political, intellectual and/or humanistic views and lived experience.

BECOMING GERMAN

There are some crucial aspects of the social organisation of the Divan that give Barenboim the power to exercise this control. Fear that they would not get a scholarship, not be invited to the next workshop, or more generally not be accepted as a musician by Barenboim, leads some orchestra members to self-censor themselves and their discussion comments in ways they think that Barenboim might approve. As one of my informants said, “Many people told me that they actually were afraid to speak when the maestro was present in the discussion”. One of the most central aspects in the discussion of Barenboim’s control is the scholarships awarded through him and the Foundation, which allow the most outstanding performers to continue their musical development.²⁴ The awarding committee, which consists of Barenboim and two teachers from the workshop, considers the student performances at the Divan workshop and on tour when granting scholarships. A total amount of € 150.000 is awarded every year, and in 2007/2008 a total of 27 musicians were able to study in Berlin with the Foundation’s support.²⁵

Granting scholarships for studies in Europe is also one of the objectives for the Foundation. In discussing this matter with several Divan musicians at the 2008 workshop, I found that while some musicians study abroad for a limited time, many of them actually study abroad for a much longer time and earn residence in their country of study. Moreover, many of the musicians told me that they did not intend to move back to the Middle East at all. Reaching a satisfactory level of musical skills by studying in Europe, the Divan musicians wish for a musical career as professional

²⁴ The Barenboim Said Foundation (2008): *Scholarships 2008/2009*. Retrieved 6 October 2008 from <http://www.barenboim-said.org/index.php?id=231>

²⁵ I never discovered the total number of musicians studying abroad, as this information was not given to me by the Foundation due to security concerns. Several of my informants told me they were also living abroad, though without scholarships from the Foundation. The figures presented here were retrieved from NRK P2 (2008).

orchestra musicians or soloists, which is not easily accomplished in the Middle East as there are fewer professional orchestras in the region.

In this discussion I would like to suggest that these scholarships not only promote a certain musical “brain-drain”, but that they also play an important role as an external source for negotiating the musician’s sense of national identity in the same way that exile played a role in negotiating Said and Barenboim’s national identities. The scholarships may function as tools for a Eurocentric mimetic strategy for the musicians; as another informant said to me, “Living in Germany makes it difficult for me to say that I’m 100% [Arab]”.

Given that the Divan musicians engage with music of European or Western heritage, the quote above requires a careful look at whether this musical genre is constructing a notion of identity not immediately coherent with the musicians’ native political sources for national identity.²⁶ The aesthetic attitude made available through Western art music (and as we have seen, also the structure of the orchestra) may invoke senses of identity that ultimately vitiate the musicians’ national identities and replace them with a sense of identity connected to another place and space. Stokes (1994) argues that the dynamics of politics and music should not only be regarded as something that happens in society, as a separate sphere or arena within society. This notion of society should also be seen as a thing that happens in music. Through music, we see society, and define our relationship to it. This becomes clear when we think about “how music creates or informs our sense of place” (Stokes, 1994, p. 3).

The ‘places’ constructed through music, and the narrativisation of place through music, help unveil and organise senses of differences between social groups. Similarly, with the Divan orchestra, we find that music narrates the values of Middle Eastern Orientalism, and is given the unique possibility to do so by the educational scholarships. Based on the information I gathered at the 2008 workshop, it seems that by offering scholarships to the talented Divan musicians, the Foundation contributes to informing new notions of, or to use Stokes’ (1994) term, “relationships” with a new place. This place may ultimately result in moving away from the Middle East as the primary place informing their identity. The Foundation’s web site describes the results of the scholarships as strengthening the orchestras of the Middle East, among them the Cairo Opera and the Damascus Symphony Orchestra. However, the majority of the scholarship recipients have not yet returned to the Middle East. This exemplifies a complex paradox between the Foundation’s ideology on the one hand, where the scholarships are meant to be tools to “continue the spirit of the project by supporting talented young people from the Middle East and Spain and to train them in and through music”, and the Eurocentric mimesis reality put forward by the scholarship receivers on the other hand.²⁷

One of my informants who has been living in Germany for several years told me that he believes that the assimilation process in Germany for a musician like himself takes place in a logical manner:

Informant: I think a wonderful thing about Germans is that they get protective about their culture, not by forcing you to adapt, but by setting a very strict and noticeable culture example. You know, there is a German culture, there is a German way of

²⁶ Beckles-Willson (2009b) states that, “although players also desire the vessel of Eurocentric elevation, they do so for different reasons. On the one hand, they desire to save themselves from Orientalist stereotypes, but on the other, from economic disadvantage”.

²⁷ The Barenboim Said Foundation (2008): *Scholarships 2008/2009*. Retrieved 6 October 2008 from <http://www.barenboim-said.org/index.php?id=231>

thinking, of eating, of behaving, and if you choose to be accepted in the society, or if you wish to be, you have to adapt. If you don't adapt you'll be neglected. I think that is fine. [...] I think it's logical. If you want to play Bach's music you have to either accept the way they play it and why, because they have absolutely very logical reasons for why you have to play this music that way. They even explain it to you, "This is how we play it." [...] If you want to impress people you have to understand this, and you have to adapt. Otherwise you will play Bach and they will say, "You play Bach as a foreigner" and they will treat you as a foreigner.

Furthermore, this informant told me that this idea of what signifies 'Germanness' was exactly what he believes is missing in his country of origin:

Informant: For me, as a classical musician, it's really difficult to adapt there, because there's no musical tradition there. The musical tradition is very subjective, everybody has their own opinion and you have to have luck to get in or to fit in somewhere because there's nothing concrete that you have to do, there's nothing clear what they are searching for.

This informant explains how moving to Germany has manifested his need for cultural belonging as a classical musician – something he gets in Germany and not in his country of origin. According to him, as a classical musician in Germany one is subjected to a set of "unwritten rules" or "procedures" connected to German culture, namely the cultural heritage of composers like Wagner, Beethoven and Bach. By accepting these "rules", he becomes assimilated. This constructs an identity notion that interacts with (and negotiates) his sense of national belonging to his country of origin. Wanting to be a professional classical musician with a place-connection to the music he performs, this informant may seem to have no other option other than to negotiate his primary national identity, because his professional goals are not coherent with the notions of national identity available in the Middle Eastern country in which he was raised. As mentioned above, music creates or informs our sense of place (Stokes, 1994, p. 3). According to this informant, for the Divan musicians moving to Europe (and Germany in particular for musical reasons), music inhabits exactly this formative force by informing a sense of place for the migrant musicians.

An inevitable result of the Divan musicians moving to Germany is that they no longer meet only in the Divan workshop and tour. The purpose of the Divan Orchestra, to create an arena for these young people to meet, is hence challenged by the Foundation's scholarships. Several musicians told me that they share apartments with other Divan musicians (regardless of country of origin) in Germany, and told me that they believe this interaction was made possible through the Divan Orchestra and what they learned in its the context.²⁸ Many musicians also called for more Divan activity throughout the year, wanting to make the orchestra a professional or at least a semi-professional orchestra, and argued that this is now possible because of the high amount of Divan members living in Germany.

For the musicians living in Germany, their diasporic condition becomes an interesting element of the Divan members' lives: the diaspora being in the sense that their "primary identity connects them to their ancestral country" (Eriksen, 2002, p. 152). Bearing in mind the parallel between the orchestra and the nation, we might see this as fomenting an even stronger sense of community than that felt by various other Middle Eastern diasporas in Germany. Through the Divan scholarship the musicians live and meet in Germany, they create social structures there, and what

²⁸ See also Cheah (2009) for examples on this theme.

they have in common is not being from the Middle East, but rather being Divan members (as discussed above with regards to the shared identity creation within the orchestra). In other words, they create a Divan diaspora, where the notion of national identity is replaced with a mixture of Divan identity (according to Cheah, 2009, many of the Divan musicians live on the same street in Berlin, which has been informally named the “Divanstraße”), and a German national identity available to them through music. Stokes (2004) shows how diaspora is often conceived in opposition to the theory and practice of authenticity. Although this is a vast discussion that needs addressing elsewhere, I believe we can see signs here of the inverse argument: the informant’s ideas of the processes of becoming German are available precisely through ideas of the canonized authenticity of western art music. We see here how music, as Stokes (2004, p. 59) puts it, “provides a unique key to the diasporic condition”.

A LIVED EXPERIENCE OF THE P-WORDS

Eagleton points out that the elevation of culture over politics (a point of view often promoted by Cultural Studies, and also favoured by Barenboim) is the opposite of the real movement in society, where it is political interests that usually govern cultural ones, and in doing so they define a particular version of humanity (Eagleton 2000). I will suggest that what is actually going on is a two-way movement. On the one side, the Foundation and Barenboim offers a space for musicians to meet, learn, and ultimately be transformed through culture and use culture to transform. The values and aims of the transformative space are rooted, as I read them, in the idea of a movement from the humanities to culture to politics; i.e., the Foundation and Barenboim wish to facilitate a movement from the humanity of the individual to a shared, cosmopolitan, music-based culture that can facilitate conflict transformation. The politics and power struggles of the project are then thought to occur only in the momentary transformative negotiations that take place in and through music or discussion. Then again, there are reasons to believe that the transnational meeting, as we might call the Divan Orchestra, has the effect of not only creating new, shared identities, but also of making the participants aware of their prior identities, (political) loyalties, and the hierarchical power structures informing their initial meeting with the transformative project. Understood this way, I believe that the Divan is a more complex system of binaries than what is initially assumed by the organisers. When Barenboim states that there is a “flat” structure that occurs in music, I believe he overlooks several things: both the power music has in its social context, the power and politics occurring among the musicians when participating in the creation of a new shared identity, the power he himself holds as a gatekeeper for the musicians, and lastly the power and politics of the Eurocentric mimesis strategy of many Divan musicians.

In sum, I will argue that the Divan Orchestra offers its musicians, besides high-quality music-making, a lived experience of the P-words. We find that there is a constant push-and-pull in all identity negotiations. There are constant negotiations among the musicians, when creating a shared Divan narrative. This process is heavily influenced by the leadership and the musicians’ idolatry towards their conductor. I have used empirical material to exemplify the role of Barenboim in defining the “shared” values of the Divan. As a cosmopolitan individual, he constantly underlines equality and (musical) universalism as core values, and uses his role as the leader to invite the musicians into what he believes is a utopian universe of music. But in real life, however, this equally takes form as a way into core identity markers within a

German national programme. The larger context of the orchestra – the political instability of the Middle East – has shown itself to hold considerable power in the Orchestra, and seems to hinder the creation of a Divan utopia in which transformation may take place. Ultimately, through the scholarships, the context of the Middle East ends up being juxtaposed with a new, European context. And throughout, it is the non-political aspect that is emphasised, the p-word is still unmentionable. Either way, this presents a true paradox for any type of conflict transformation. On the one hand, if we follow the ideas of Barenboim (which sees music's function as an identity marker placed in relation to the role of music as a universal means of communication, and the identity created is done within a Utopia), where will we then see conflict transformation? Or on the other hand, if what the Divan orchestra ultimately offers is the highway to German national culture and identity mimesis (and the creation of a Divan diaspora therein), we might well end up with a conflict transformation amongst some Middle Eastern musicians, but without any links to the political situation from which the Divan draws its legitimacy. These are serious paradoxes for the organisers and for Barenboim, and tough negotiations to make as a young musician.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Solveig Riiser holds a masters degree in Musicology from the University of Oslo. Her thesis is named *"Negotiating the Divan. A Study of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra"* (Riiser 2009). She is currently the Managing Director of the Norwegian section of *Jeunesses Musicales International (Musikk og Ungdom)*, and is a research assistant in the Department of Musicology, University of Oslo, working on the project *"Genre Cultures in the field of Music"*, lead by Director of the Department Svein Bjørkås. In 2010, she was awarded the *Babylon prize* for the best contribution in written by a pre-phd-researcher in the journal *Babylon*, Scandinavia's leading academic journal on contemporary Middle East and North Africa.

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