

Music as a Vehicle for Change: The Folklore of “the Other”

David Eaton
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Having travelled to Israel on many occasions since 2003, it is heartbreaking for me to see what is happening there yet again as the bombings and reprisals for such are plaguing the Holy Land. There are many wonderful people being affected---so many lives impacted by the ongoing political impasse. Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu’s recent visit to the United States offers us once again the opportunity to examine the various paths to peace.

In 2008, I met Kitty Cohen, director of *The Folklore of the Other Institute*, an interfaith organization in Israel that seeks to create understanding and respect for people of all faith traditions. Kitty has been working for this organization for twenty years. She explained that in her early experiences doing interfaith work she produced seminars and conferences but quickly realized that these types of events had little effect in ameliorating historical antagonisms. The polarizing aspects of religious and/or political convictions were far too intractable to be resolved merely through dialogue. In fact, dialogue often led to greater misunderstandings and created deeper resentments. She then changed her focus to action---service projects, music, art and sports. Her experience has been that when people actually work together on a project for a common cause, the barriers of religion, ethnicity and race disappear more quickly.

She was especially laudatory of Daniel Barenboim's work with the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, an ensemble comprised of young instrumentalists from Israel, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. Maestro Barenboim and the orchestra have garnered major media attention for their efforts to promote understanding and reconciliation through music, including presenting concerts in the West Bank.

Dr. Bernard Sabella, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, wrote of Maestro Barenboim's initiative: "I was impressed with his emphasis on music as a joiner of hearts and transformer of personality, even of inherited culture. I was also impressed with his belief that

music can soften the unbridgeable political gulfs that separate peoples in conflict...but...I felt sad in the heart as I was torn by the question of how could music and other forms of art and culture, even when shared by musicians and artists of the two sides of the political divide, overcome inherent inequities and injustice in systems of dominance and separation?"

Obviously, Dr. Sabella is not fully convinced that intercultural ventures such as the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra can transform the situation in Israel and many share his scepticism. He went on to say, "The danger in 'peace music,' and I am sure that Barenboim is aware of this, is that it could become a complacent piece of the unjust system as represented by the political, social and economic status quo of the occupier – occupied." This may well be a caveat, yet I would argue, as Kitty Cohen does, that any effort to foster understanding and respect is better than no effort at all.

There is a wonderful DVD of the Divan Orchestra's sojourn to Ramallah to present a concert in which the ensemble was enthusiastically received by those in attendance. Still, some attempted to politicize the event. Barenboim addressed the audience and appealed to their humanity by paraphrasing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. saying that any attempt at trying to get along and seek peaceful solutions is a far better option than "drawing knives."

Maestro Barenboim explains that the name of the Divan Orchestra was taken from a collection of poems written between 1814 and 1819 by Goethe after the great essayist/writer was introduced to the Qu'ran. Goethe was one of the first European intellectuals to take interest in non-European cultures and even began to study Arabic late in his life. The 14th century Persian poet, Hafiz, had written a collection of poems (Divan) about understanding "the other" and Goethe was impressed with his writings on the subject. His own poems, *West-Eastern Divan*, express his thoughts and attitudes regarding understanding "the other." "To merely tolerate," he would aver, "is to insult; true liberalism means acceptance."

Of course, acceptance requires understanding. Some have argued, including Maestro Barenboim's controversial collaborator in the Divan Orchestra project, the Palestinian scholar, Edward Said, that one cannot fairly criticize any oppressed people unless one has experienced that people's suffering in the same manner or to the same degree. Though there may be some credence in that supposition, we can ascertain that one would not have to live through any particular horror, be it the situation in Gaza, or the Holocaust, or living behind the Iron Curtain or under Mao's brutal regime, to either empathize or critique these situations from a purely humane perspective. The justification for the use of terror, for instance, is problematic in that it violates the basic human right to life and creates conditions for moral equivocation. Our intuition tells us that this perspective is inherently inhumane.

Maestro Barenboim concedes that there are limitations as to what the Divan orchestra can actually accomplish in the peace process. Still, he believes the effort of bringing these musicians together can in his estimation, "create the conditions for understanding without which it is impossible even to speak of peace. It has the potential to awaken the curiosity of each individual to listen to the narrative of the other and to inspire the courage necessary to hear what one would prefer to block out."

Perhaps building bridges is the best one can hope for in this type of effort, but without bridges any journey towards peace remains highly problematic. As Maestro Barenboim points out, the process of coming to a better and more enlightened understanding requires sensitive speaking as well as painful listening, not to mention forgiveness.

When Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yassir Arafat shook hands on the White House lawn at the conclusion of their peace talks in 1993, many Israelis wondered how their Prime Minister could offer his hand to someone who had the blood of so many Jews on his. Rabin reminded his fellow Israelis that when attempting to make peace and reconcile historical resentments, you are not doing so with your historical friend, but rather with your historical enemy. Forgiveness may in fact be conditional, but without the initial steps, in this case a mutually agreed upon set of principles as well as that historic handshake and a willingness to forgive, there could be no hope for the resolution of the seemingly intractable problems that plagued these two peoples throughout their respective histories.



The band, Gaya, performing at the MEPI Interfaith Peace Rally in 2003 in Jerusalem.

In my travels to Israel I have met choirs, bands and dance groups that were comprised of Christians, Muslims and Jews. At a large interfaith rally for peace that I produced at Independence Park in downtown Jerusalem in 2003, the well-known Israeli band, Gaya, featured five accomplished Jewish instrumentalists and two Arab rappers who fronted the band on several songs and rapped for peace---in English! (Gaya's hit song, *A Song For Love* can be heard on the Peace CommUNITY site.)* [peacemusiccommunity.ning.com/]

Music as a vehicle for change is a concept that many artists in Israel consider to be very important. My dear friend and colleague, vocalist David D'Or, has been using his music for interfaith and intercultural efforts in Israel for many years. He considers this a sacred calling and is always seeking ways to work with "the other." The peace cantata that we composed together, *Halelu--Songs of David*, is our contribution to the process of peace building. (See and hear parts of the *Halelu* cantata on Youtube.) [www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3EuH1Kie_4 and www.youtube.com/watch?v=13yOUjk-vnI]

At a conference of the American Symphony Orchestra League in 1988, the iconic conductor/composer Leonard Bernstein shared his experiences from a recent trip to Israel and made an impassioned plea for love to be at the heart of any peace process. Bernstein would say, "This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before." Dr. King instructed that the first attribute needed to accomplish any non-violent approach to peace was courage. As musicians and artists we would do well to take to heart the advice of Lenny and Dr. King with great alacrity and to be serious advocates of altruism in our creative endeavors.

As we consider the scenario facing Israel it is gratifying to know that folks like Daniel Barenboim, Kitty Cohen, Gaya, David D'Or and others are committed to using their talent and resources to promote peace, understanding and respect of "the other." No effort is too small or insignificant.

Peace, Shalom, Salaam Aleikum.

Contributed by David Eaton, currently the Lovin' Life Ministries production coordinator. David Eaton has also been the music director for the New York City Symphony since 1985, with music performed around the world, including the production of events in Israel on 12 occasions.