

## Reviews & Insights

Andrea Parisini

'Giovanni Battista Martini' Conservatoire, Bologna

### Promoting Dialogue through Music

#### *Abstract*

In the long and intricate relationship between the Middle East and the West, music has always found a way to open channels of dialogue. This is true not only of folk music—always evolving, always absorbing new influences—but also of Western classical music, as exemplified by the dialogue between the Christian Palestinian writer Edward W. Said and the pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim. At the heart of their exchange is symphonic music, which centuries of Western rational thought have shaped into a shared repertoire and language, creating a sense of cultural unity within the West while also reaching places as distant as Japan and China. This is more than a discussion about music: it is a broader reflection on culture and society that weaves a tapestry of interconnected ideas. Brought to a premature halt by the untimely death of the Palestinian scholar, this conversation still encourages younger generations to think, question, and listen. The lasting success of Barenboim and Said's book-conversation *Parallels and Paradoxes*, including in its Italian translation, hopefully suggests that critical thinking—when applied to one of the most painful conflicts of our time, and to the prejudices and misunderstandings afflicting modern societies—can still do what it is meant to do: keep consciences awake, stir reflection, and, when needed, move people to act... even if only to the sound of a violin.

#### *Keywords*

Orchestra | Daniel Barenboim | Edward W. Said | Beethoven | Music-politics-society



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The 'G. B. Martini' Conservatoire of Bologna participates in the AFAM PNRR Project titled *Jerus-It-ArtS – Between Italy and Jerusalem: Retracing Music and Arts Networks, Enhancing Education and Promoting Cultural Heritage Preservation*, established under Ministerial Decree no. 124/2023 and funded by the European Union as part of the NextGenerationEU program (National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) – Mission 4 – Component 1 *Strengthening the provision of education services: from nursery schools to university* – Investment 3.4 *Advanced university teaching and skills*, sub-investment T5 *Strategic partnerships/initiatives to innovate the international dimension of the AFAM system* - CUP E33C24000160006). Its goal is to develop a range of innovative initiatives for the preservation and international promotion of Italy's artistic, musical, and dance heritage. Within this framework, the 'G. B. Martini' Conservatoire of Bologna explores and researches new approaches to music history and to musical exchanges between Italy and the Middle East, with particular attention to Jerusalem, Israel, and Palestine, drawing inspiration from the figure of Saint Francis and his presence and legacy in the Holy Land.



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### Vis-à-vis

During the conference *Sound Bridges: for a Musical Dialogue between Italy and the Holy Land*, held in November 2025 at the 'G. B. Martini' Conservatoire in Bologna,<sup>1</sup> we took a moment to reflect on the condition of those living in Palestine. The situation is too dire to permit a detached or fully objective assessment of the current state of the arts—and of music in particular. For this reason, our attention turned to a relatively recent book that continues to spark discussion, as evidenced by the fact that it has never gone out of print.<sup>2</sup> Published in Italian by Il Saggiatore under the title *Paralleli e Paradossi*, the book unfolds as a dialogue—something increasingly rare in today's world—and conveys a message that feels more urgent than ever: music does not exist in isolation. On the contrary, it is deeply embedded in reality, not merely as a mirror of the world, but as a living force capable of inspiring change.

<sup>1</sup> The initiative was held at the Bologna Conservatoire (Sala Bossi and Aula Respighi) between 25 and 28 November 2025 as part of the project entitled *Jerus-It-Arts. Between Italy and Jerusalem: retracing Music and Arts Networks, enhancing Education and promoting Cultural Heritage Preservation*. The project brought together a number of schools of performing arts and music (AFAM), as well as cultural institutions, including the 'Arrigo Pedrollo' Conservatoire of Vicenza, the 'Giovan Battista Martini' Conservatoire of Bologna, the Brera Academy of Fine Arts, the 'Claudio Abbado' Civic School of Music in Milan, the National Academy of Dance in Rome, and the University of Modena and Reggio-Emilia.

<sup>2</sup> D. BARENBOIM & E. W. SAID, *Parallels and Paradoxes. Explorations in Music and Society*, edited by Ara Guzelimian, Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, London 2002; Italian translation by Piero Budinich, with an essay by Claudio Abbado, Il Saggiatore, Milan 2004 (2015), p. 159. As Ara Guzelimian explains in the book's Preface: 'The friendship between Edward Said and Daniel Barenboim dates back a decade earlier to a chance meeting in a London hotel lobby in the early 1990s and has blossomed into an extraordinary collaboration. A passion for music and ideas is surely the binding force, but there is also the powerful underlying pull of parallel personal geographies. Both men come from a complex overlapping of cultures' [p. 13]. All quotations in the text and footnotes marked with page numbers are taken from the Italian edition of this book.

From this perspective, *Parallels and Paradoxes*—a meeting of minds between co-authors Daniel Barenboim, widely regarded as one of the greatest musicians of our time,<sup>3</sup> and Edward Said, a world-famous literary critic and scholar<sup>4</sup>—becomes an open invitation to read and to think. Page after page, the book encourages us to look at music in all its richness and complexity, not as an elite pursuit, but as a powerful force for change. The two authors repeatedly emphasise how rare it is to obtain a solid musical education even in Germany, where Barenboim, a Russian-Argentine Jew raised in Israel, worked for many years as music director of the Berlin State Opera and its centuries-old resident orchestra (*Staatskapelle*). For Barenboim, the orchestra is a space for civic engagement, a powerful metaphor for a harmonious society, one in which each individual can live with dignity. ‘If you wish to learn how to live in a democratic society,’ Barenboim remarks, ‘you would do well to play in an orchestra. For when you do so, you know when to lead and when to follow. You leave space for others and at the same time you have no inhibitions about claiming a place for yourself’ [p. 149]. At the same time, great music can offer a sense of freedom—if only we are willing to approach it with fresh ears. ‘This means playing Beethoven with a spirit of discovery, as though his music had been written today, and engaging with the works of Boulez, Carter, or Birtwistle with the same familiarity and openness we usually reserve for the classics of the past’ [p. 143].

Another important aspect of the symphonic tradition is the identity of the orchestra itself, which involves an ethical dimension that distinguishes between professionalism and conflict as a dialectical process:

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<sup>3</sup> Active in Italy on a regular basis since 2007, particularly at the Teatro alla Scala—where he served as Music Director from 2011 to 2014—Daniel Barenboim was born in Buenos Aires in 1942 to Jewish parents of Russian origin. After spending his early years in Argentina, he moved with his family to Israel, where he soon came into contact with some of the most influential musical figures of the time, including Edwin Fischer and Wilhelm Furtwängler, both of whom immediately recognised his extraordinary talent. Barenboim’s career is well known. Alongside his uninterrupted activity as a pianist, he worked with the world’s leading orchestras—the Philharmonia Orchestra in London, the English Chamber Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, the Berlin Philharmonic, and the Orchestre de Paris—and served as Music Director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (1989–2006), the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin (1992–2023), and the Teatro alla Scala in Milan. Barenboim was also made conductor for life of the Staatskapelle Berlin, to which he devotes several illuminating pages in the book. Despite his vast repertoire that ranges from Bach and Mozart to contemporary composers, the central figures in Barenboim’s musical world are undoubtedly Beethoven and Wagner, whose complete symphonic and dramatic works he has performed. His direction of Wagner’s *Ring des Nibelungen* at Bayreuth in 1991–92, staged by Harry Kupfer, remains a landmark achievement (see <https://danielbarenboim.com>). His love for Wagner’s music returns in reflective form in *Dialogues on Music and Theatre: Tristan and Isolde*, co-authored with stage director Patrice Chéreau and published in Italian by Feltrinelli in 2008. Feltrinelli also published his books *Music Awakens Time* (2012) and *Music Is Everything: Ethics and Aesthetics* (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Edward W. Said (Jerusalem, 1935 – New York, 2003) was a writer, critic, and professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University in New York. Over the course of his career, he taught at more than 150 universities and institutions across the United States, Canada, and Europe. His essays and articles appeared regularly in *The Guardian*, *Le Monde diplomatique*, and *Al-Hayat*. In Italy, *Il Saggiatore* has published a wide selection of his works, reflecting the variety and complexity of Said’s work: *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2007), *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (2008), *On Late Style* (2009), *The Question of Palestine* (2011), *La pace possibile* (2023). See <https://share.google/Ke2k3LFCbfXv2twCi>

Actually, one cannot talk about music as one talks about sports: the best or the worst. And I'm not saying that this is the best orchestra in the world (*Staatskapelle Orchester Berlin*). There are other very fine orchestras, too. But this orchestra has a natural way of standing in front of this music with a mixture of a sense of awe and a great sense of active courage. These are two things that don't often go hand in hand: a sense of awe and courage. A sense of awe, very often, brings human beings to a level of fear and inactivity; and courage, very often, brings human beings to extremes of, I would say, almost self-gratification—through the act of courage that you cannot have a sense of awe. And we always come to the same point of paradox as being, for me, really one of the essential elements to understand life. [...] And add to that the very solid and deep—in that respect, old-fashioned— musical education of Germany, with a much greater preoccupation with harmony and structure, and much less so with individual virtuosity of the instrument. And what makes this orchestra's Beethoven so special is that, first of all, most of them imagine the sound that they want to hear before they play it, in a very similar way, which has nothing to do with the individual quality of playing. This comes on top of it. But you cannot get eighty or ninety musicians, who all play very well but who each have different ideas of the sound, to play with this kind of homogeneity and, therefore, with this kind of inner strength. For this, you need them all to be able to imagine the sound in a very similar way. The combination of these two factors—the attitude to the profession beyond the professional and the fact that they have such a thorough musical education—makes each one of them play from the score and not from their part. [pp. 129-131]

This issue has deep roots and clearly sets the Berlin orchestra apart from today's celebrity-driven culture, which rests on the idea that 'the ethic of musicians is one of professionalism. It's not an ethic of conflict' (p. 129). 'In a way, it's the opposite of professionalism as an idea' (p. 130):

I believe that this orchestra has this quality for several reasons. One has to do with the fact that they [its professors] lived for nearly sixty years under totalitarian regimes: from 1930 under Nazism and then under Communism in East Germany. This certainly does not justify the need for a totalitarian regime. But music and culture, in general, has very often much greater importance in daily life under a totalitarian regime. At the same time, the darkest aspect of those systems was the climate of constant fear in which people were forced to live. There was an element of mistrust that was necessary for the regime to continue: mistrust between friends, between families, etc.; so that when these musicians went to play the concerts or the operas in the Staatsoper, they were really able to breathe and be free. And those who were against the regime felt that music was like a kind of oxygen, because this was the one place where they could really be free. And those musicians who were in favour of the regime were only too proud that such a wonderful institution existed under such a regime. Therefore, from both sides, you had a different attitude to the profession. [p. 130]

### *Setting the Tone*

A few words must be said about the context in which these conversations took place. Between 1995 and 2000, Edward Said and Daniel Barenboim met on multiple occasions, both in private and in public, in New York and at Columbia University—where the Christian-Palestinian scholar was teaching. During the 1999 workshop in Weimar, they brought together Jewish Israeli musicians and Arab Muslim and Christian musicians from various countries across the Mediterranean and created the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra—named in homage to Goethe’s poetry collection on the 250th anniversary of the German writer’s birth.<sup>5</sup> In 2005, two years after Said’s death, the Orchestra performed Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* and Mozart’s *Sinfonia concertante K. 297b* for winds and orchestra in Ramallah.<sup>6</sup> In 2012, the Barenboim-Said Akademie was founded in Berlin. Housed in the magnificent Pierre Boulez Saal, designed by Frank Gehry, it embodies the dreams and aspirations of the two friends.<sup>7</sup> The tone of their conversations could be described as warm—not because they display overt affection, but because they take the time and care to develop their ideas fully and to truly understand one another. Their reasoning is rigorous and tightly structured, yet the dialogue remains open and expansive, constantly branching into new directions, prompted by the parallels and paradoxes the discussion uncovers—or simply encounters—along the way.

One such paradox is that of Weimar and Buchenwald: the contrast between the cradle of German Enlightenment and the extermination camp located just a few kilometres away. It is undoubtedly one of the most painful chapters in modern human history, yet Barenboim and Said do not shy away from it, making it an integral part of their broader project of bringing the East and West together—as shown by the 1999 workshop in Weimar:

And that was the idea behind the experiment. And then, under that aegis, to bring the musicians together at Weimar, which is very close to Buchenwald, the terrible death camp. In fact, Buchenwald was *designed* to be near Weimar, which had been romanticised as the city at the very pinnacle of German culture: Goethe, Schiller, Wagner, Liszt, Bach all had lived there. Nobody could fully comprehend the proximity of such sublimity to such horror [p. 25].

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<sup>5</sup> This institution is especially dear to Barenboim, as evidenced by the words the Maestro chose on the occasion of his public announcement of illness—Parkinson’s disease—on 6 February 2025. ‘As ever, I consider the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra my most important responsibility. It is essential for me to ensure the orchestra’s long-term stability and development. I will continue to conduct the Divan whenever my health allows me to. At the same time, I will take an active role in ensuring that the Divan has the opportunity of working with other excellent conductors going forward’. See <https://share.google/IbjQcXYTVTfpc2UxS>

<sup>6</sup> Released on DVD the following year under the title *Live in Ramallah: West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, Daniel Barenboim conductor – Beethoven, Symphony No. 5; Mozart, Sinfonia concertante K. 297b* (Warner Classics EuroArts, New York, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> The Academy, located at 33D Französische Straße, 10117 Berlin, awards Bachelors and Masters of Music and is a fully state-recognised German institution. See <https://barenboim-said.org>

Yet the paradox of the Zionist–Palestinian conflict, which defies reason and shatters the hopes briefly ignited by the Oslo Accords of 1993–95, persists to this day.<sup>8</sup> Precisely for this reason, the Weimar experiment required the utmost care, as Said recounts:

It took quite a long time to prepare for the event. Of course it required auditions. And it was not surprising that, at least in some Arab countries, there was a question of whether the governments would allow the students to attend. They all did come in the end, including a group from Syria, a group from Jordan, one from the Palestinian territories, and others from Israel, Egypt, Lebanon, and maybe one or two other countries.

There was an assumption that this program might be an alternative way of making peace. The peace process, as I have said at great and turgid length elsewhere, doesn't seem to be bringing results. But I don't think saving the peace process was our main intention. From my point of view, the idea was to see what would happen if you brought these people together to play in an orchestra in Weimar, in the spirit of Goethe, who wrote a fantastic collection of poems based on his enthusiasm for Islam. Goethe discovered Islam through Arabic and Persian sources—a German soldier who had been fighting in one of the Spanish campaigns in the early part of the nineteenth century brought back a page of the Koran for him. Goethe was transfixed. He started to learn Arabic, although he didn't get very far. Then he discovered Persian poetry and produced this extraordinary set of poems about the “other” really, *Westöstlicher Diwan* (*The West-Eastern Divan*), which is, I think, unique in the history of European culture. [pp. 24-25]<sup>9</sup>

It was anything but easy, but there was a clear and shared determination to create something new:

So there was a very tentative atmosphere in the beginning. [However] it was also amazing to watch Daniel drill this basically resistant group into shape. It wasn't only the Israelis and the Arabs who didn't care for each other. There were some Arabs who didn't care for other Arabs as well as Israelis who cordially disliked other Israelis. And it was remarkable to witness the group, despite the tensions of the first week or ten days, turn themselves into a real orchestra. [...] All of them suddenly became cellists and violinists playing the same piece in the same orchestra under the same conductor. I will never forget the look of amazement on the part of the Israeli musicians during the first movement of Beethoven's Seventh where the oboist plays a very exposed A major scale. They all turned around to watch an Egyptian student play a perfect A major scale on the oboe—which Daniel had elicited out of him. The transformation of these kids from one thing to another was basically unstoppable. [p. 26]

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<sup>8</sup> Bill Clinton mediated negotiations between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat, the leaders of Israel and Palestine respectively.

<sup>9</sup> Hence the name of the orchestra that would later become the voice of the Barenboim-Said Akademie.

Barenboim recounts the anecdote of a young Syrian boy who had never met an Israeli before and harboured deep mistrust towards Israel as a nation. And yet:

This same boy found himself sharing a music stand with an Israeli cellist. They were trying to play the same note, to play with the same dynamic, with the same stroke of the bow, with the same sound, with the same expression. They were trying to do something together. It's as simple as that. They were trying to do something together, something about which they both cared, about which they were both passionate. Well, having achieved that one note, they already can't look at each other the same way, because they have shared a common experience. And this is what was really, for me, the important thing about the encounter. [p. 27]

But the matter is also unmistakably political:

The area that we're talking about—the Middle East—is very small. Contact is inevitable. It's not only dollars and political solutions about borders that are going to be the real test of whether a peaceful settlement will work or not. The real test is how productive this contact will be in the long run. I believe that in cultural matters—with literature and, even better, with music, because it doesn't have to do with explicit ideas—if we foster this kind of a contact, it can only help people feel nearer to each other, and this is all. [p. 27]

### *Conclusion*

The dialogue operates on two levels: on one side, there is a strong social, political, and historical awareness. On the other, there is a close look at music as a reflection of the inner workings of individuals and societies. The discussion also touches on sensitive issues, such as the informal ban on Wagner's music in Israel, where the first act of *Die Walküre* could not be played, whereas the performance of the *Prelude* and *Liebtestod*, from *Tristan und Isolde*, led to many audience members leaving the concert hall in Jerusalem in 2001. Other topics of conversation are Furtwängler's (and Barenboim's) interpretative style, which creates a gateway to inner exploration, emotional catharsis and dramatic breakthroughs, the difference between the written score and the actual sound and, last but not least, the performer's responsibility in deciphering the meaning of the musical work. Here are Said's thoughts on the matter:

The element of courage is the most important. Courage does not mean simply to play things in a different way but the courage to be completely uncompromising: on the one hand, like a great statesman, to have understood the reality, understood the text, understood the difficulties of doing it, and then, to have the vision of really going all out with utmost courage. In other words, if you have a *crescendo* in Beethoven that goes to the end, and then there is a *subito piano* that creates the illusion of a precipice, you have to do that. You have to go to the precipice, to the end, and then not fall, and not make a *crescendo* only halfway. [p. 66]

A video clip, also available online, bears witness to Barenboim and Said's commitment to peace during those crucial years, when there was real hope for a meaningful turning point in relations between Arab and Israeli communities in the Middle East. Their work and words continue to resonate as a reminder of the shared responsibility of all those who care about music, culture, and peaceful coexistence among peoples.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://share.google/0qUtb8LpngAJcYQIS>



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