

# Where Israelis, Palestinians and Iranians Must Listen to One Another

Students from the Middle East come to Berlin to study music with the star conductor Daniel Barenboim. Now the Israel-Hamas war is testing their ideals.



Students at the Barenboim-Said Academy come from around the Middle East and the world. Clockwise from top left: Kristina Georgieva, a Bulgarian violinist; Itamar Carmeli, an Israeli pianist; Katia Abdel Kader, a Palestinian violinist; and Roshanak Rafani, an Iranian percussionist. *Andreas Meichner for The New York Times*



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Reporting from Berlin

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The young musicians, in jeans and fuzzy sweaters, had just finished rehearsing a Prokofiev symphony in an empty concert hall. Then they put away their instruments and settled back into their orchestra chairs to talk about the war.

It was a recent afternoon at the [Barenboim-Said Academy](#), a sleekly modern music conservatory in Berlin founded by the renowned Argentine-Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim with the intention of [bringing together students](#) from across the Middle East, and the musicians were wrestling with the Israel-Hamas conflict and their raw emotions.

An Israeli music student described the trauma of the Hamas attacks. A Palestinian spoke of feeling voiceless and vulnerable. An Iranian described fears that violence could spread across the entire region.

“It takes courage for you to be here,” Mr. Barenboim, 80, who has worked almost 25 years in pursuit of the elusive goal of Middle East peace, said from the podium. “We have to listen to each other,” he declared, giving voice to what might be the academy’s unofficial credo, both for music-making and politics.

The academy, like other peace projects, has long had to deal with the volatility of the Middle East, navigating bursts of violence, unrest and shifting politics.

But the Israel-Hamas war has tested these efforts in new ways, as became clear during a visit to the academy earlier this month when Mr. Barenboim and the students were preparing for their first concert together since the fighting began. The scale of the conflict, the rapid spread of images of death and destruction on social media and the ubiquity of misinformation have made it harder to promote civil debate and to find common ground.



The conductor Daniel Barenboim. Andreas Meichner for The New York Times



The students performing for the first time since the war began. Andreas Meichner for The New York Times

In an environment where Israelis, Palestinians, Iranians, Syrians, Egyptians, Lebanese and others study and live together, the war has prompted a reckoning. Some students, after heated debates with classmates over who is to blame for the carnage, have questioned whether they should even play music together in a time of war. Others say that music has brought them closer.

“We will not bring peace, and we will not solve the world’s problems, as much as we might want to,” said Katia Abdel Kader, 23, a Palestinian violinist from Ramallah who is in her fourth year at the academy, which offers music degrees and courses in the humanities. “But we create a space, and that’s what is missing in the world, not only in the Middle East. Places for people to be accepted by the other.”

Itamar Carmeli, 22, a pianist from Tel Aviv who is in his third year, said it was impossible to escape the conflict because “our families are there and our childhood is there.” He said he had learned to accept his classmates’ views even if he disagreed with them, partly because music had taught him to listen more deeply.

“There is no harmony,” he said, “without dissonance.”

The current conflict has even tested the idealism of the school’s founder, Mr. Barenboim, who makes a point of noting that he holds both Israeli and Palestinian citizenship. He and Edward Said, the Palestinian-American literary scholar [who died in 2003](#), founded the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra in 1999 to bring Israeli and Arab musicians together.

The academy, which is rooted in the same principles as the Divan, now has 78 students — about 70 percent from the Middle East and North Africa — who study in a well-appointed building in the heart of Berlin that [opened](#) in 2016; its concert hall was designed by Frank Gehry.

Mr. Barenboim, a titan of classical music who led the Berlin State Opera for three decades before [stepping down this year](#), has drastically reduced his commitments because of a serious neurological condition. But he has made a special effort to be with the students in recent weeks for rehearsals and discussions.



The academy, which opened in 2016, has quotes about peace by the philosopher Baruch Spinoza on its glass doors; practice rooms; and a vibrant humanities program, led by Roni Mann, bottom right.



In an interview after a recent rehearsal, Mr. Barenboim said he worried the latest war could morph into a “world catastrophe” in the absence of more efforts to bring Israelis and Palestinians together.

“There’s no use saying, ‘We the Jews have suffered more than anybody else,’ or the Palestinians’ saying, ‘We suffered more than all of you,’” he said. “This has been a very difficult century with little rest. I think we have to keep going, and forget our own positions, and get along with a sense of equality.”

The school year at the Barenboim-Said Academy began this month with the usual orientation sessions on Israeli-Palestinian tensions, how to respect differences and ways to see beyond stereotypes.

Then came the deadly Hamas-led attack on southern Israel on Oct. 7 and the ensuing Israeli strikes on Gaza. Many students, their phones buzzing with frantic messages from friends and relatives and displaying images of devastation, were too disturbed to practice their instruments. The school’s leaders, including Regula Rapp, the rector, and Mr. Barenboim’s son, Michael, who serves as dean, brought in counselors fluent in Hebrew and Arabic.

The students made a point of checking in with each other, and they organized meetings to try to work through some of their differences. Unsure of what to say, they sometimes offered only hugs. At one point, they gathered for a start-of-the-semester dinner, sharing homemade dishes: hummus, baba ghanouj, labneh and bulgur salad.

Their conversations were sometimes tense, as musicians from Israel spoke of losing a sense of security and the Palestinians described life under the [suffocating blockade](#) Israel has imposed on Gaza for 16 years. The conversations were also deeply personal, with some students sharing stories of losing loved ones during decades of violence in the Middle East.

The students tried to support each other as they faced new difficulties in German society; the authorities banned many pro-Palestinian gatherings, and a synagogue in Berlin was [attacked](#) with firebombs. They met at their dorms or went out for beer and cigarettes and talked about how they felt guilty being away from their families.

Roshanak Rafani, 29, a percussionist from Tehran who is a member of the student government, said the tumult in the region could be shattering; she has at times contemplated abandoning her studies.

“Imagine that people are dying, and now I’m just practicing to see which hand I should put here or there,” she said. “We all feel this inner conflict.”

She added that the young musicians had gotten beyond their differences by embracing the idea that “we’re all students, and there is no side now for us here.”

“We’ve all accepted the fact that we cannot really convince each other about many things,” she said. “People talk and raise their voices and yell and cry, but two hours later, they are hugging each other.”

The war has hung over classroom discussions as well.

In a recent philosophy class, the topic was Plato’s allegory of the cave, a metaphor for contemplating the divide between ignorance and enlightenment.



At a horn lesson, Andrej Zust teaches Kandil Mohammed. Andreas Meichsner for The New York Times



At a cello lesson, Frans Helmerson, from Sweden, teaches Naor Zadickario, who is from Israel. Andreas Meichsner for The New York Times

“There is this undeniable and evident and visceral pain in response to horrors,” said Roni Mann, who taught the philosophy class and also serves as the academy’s founding director of humanities. “They are in this together. They cry on each other’s shoulders, and they hold each other up.”

The war has posed one of the biggest challenges to Mr. Barenboim’s vision since the founding of the Divan orchestra, which many of the academy’s students will eventually join.

The Divan has survived previous periods of strife, including the war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006, which [caused stark divisions](#) within the orchestra and led some Arab musicians to drop out.

The Israel-Hamas war has already tested friendships in the Divan orchestra and led some members to question whether they will take part when it reconvenes for its concert season next summer.

Samir Obaido, a Palestinian violinist in the Divan, said he was uncertain about the role of music in this moment. In recent days, he has posted a flood of comments on Instagram defending the Palestinian cause. Some of his Israeli colleagues in the orchestra have said they respect his right to speak out, while others have accused him of spreading lies, he said.

“I can’t imagine how I will feel onstage,” he said.

Shira Majoni, an Italian-Israeli violist in the Divan, recalled arguing with a Lebanese colleague recently because she felt her friend had not adequately denounced the attack by Hamas. Ms. Majoni told her friend that she heard her pain, even though they disagreed.

“We’re all humans, and like in our orchestra, we all have a place,” Ms. Majoni said. “We’re not going to get rid of each other over there. If we don’t learn how to live there together, none of us is going to live there.”



Mr. Barenboim, who has been scaling back his appearances, made time to rehearse and perform with the academy's students this fall. Andreas Meichsner for The New York Times

Mr. Barenboim's efforts, which also include a music school for Palestinians in Ramallah, have not been without controversy. His projects have been denounced by Israelis and Arabs alike, and musicians in the Divan sometimes face displeasure from their families.

But Mr. Barenboim, who has described his work as not political but as a "project against ignorance," said he was confident that the Divan orchestra and the other programs would endure, even if he was no longer at the helm.

"No question," he said. "Otherwise I wouldn't be doing it. But it's not easy."

Mr. Barenboim is [visibly weaker](#) now. But there are still flashes of his spirited self at the podium, as when he chastised the students the other day for fumbling a bit of Beethoven: "Do you want me to buy a metronome for everybody?"

Or his rejoinder to a horn player who complained that he was tired: "At your age, you're tired? I'm 80 years old, and I would never say in company like this, 'I'm tired.'"

In the days leading up to the academy concert last week, the strains of the war were evident.

Some Palestinian students were having doubts about performing, concerned that they would project an aura of harmony at a time of deep division and suffering. But after prolonged debate, they decided it was important to embrace the spirit of the institution, announcing their decision to Mr. Barenboim at rehearsal.

Image





The academy was built in an old opera warehouse in the heart of Berlin whose exterior was preserved while its interior was gutted and rebuilt. Andreas Meichsner for The New York Times

At the concert, the student body released a statement making clear that they all had felt the impact of the war.

“Our hearts are heavy; our minds are elsewhere with every single person affected by the devastating situation in Palestine and Israel,” the students said in the statement. “May our music bring us together, may it heal a little piece of our hearts.”

When Mr. Barenboim took the stage to lead works by Prokofiev, Wagner and Beethoven, he praised how “wonderfully and generously” the musicians played together before asking for a minute of silence.

“The situation is inexplicable, and my words cannot change it,” he said. “But we are happy to perform for all of you today.”

After their performance, and a standing ovation, the students embraced onstage. (A few days later the war would enter a new phase, with Israel beginning its ground invasion of the Gaza Strip.)

Mr. Carmeli, the Israeli pianist, recalled before the concert that he had not spoken to Ms. Abdel Kader, the Palestinian violinist, for 18 months after joining the academy. But when he heard her play, he approached her and discovered that they had once lived only about 20 minutes apart.

“The landscapes and the smells and the tastes and the flavors that we grew up on is all shared,” he said.

Ms. Abdel Kader said the experience of getting support in a difficult time from “the other side — the side you learned to hate” had moved her.

“Now is the time to remove the walls and look at each other,” she said. “The moment you just look in someone’s eyes and you understand we’re just the same — that’s what matters for me.”