

Daniel Barenboim

Reith Lectures 2006: In the Beginning was Sound

Lecture 3: The Magic of Music

Recorded at the Berlin State Opera

SUE LAWLEY:

Hello and welcome to the third in this year's Reith lectures. Today we're in another of our lecturer's homes, the Berlin State Opera, where Daniel Barenboim has been Music Director since shortly after the Wall came down. The Opera, here on Unter den Linten is older than Mozart. It was created by Frederick the Great, a man as much at home in the concert hall - he was a flautist - as he was on the battlefield. By contrast its present Director is a man of peace. Daniel Barenboim has seen it as his task, here in Berlin, to lead the Staatsoper out of the shackled world of its recent Communist past. He's used his talent here as he has in the Middle East, to make music a great reconciler, and a unifying force. In his first Reith lecture he explained how he believed music was a metaphor for life. In the second, he talked about how in the modern world the ear is either abused or neglected in favour of the eye, the visual. For his third lecture, his subject is what he's termed the magic of music. He'll argue that classical music is decidedly not an exclusive language, understood only by the musical elite, given the right attitude it's accessible to us all. Ladies and gentlemen, will you please welcome this year's Reith lecturer, Daniel Barenboim.

(APPLAUSE)

DANIEL BARENBOIM:

Thank you very much. Thank you very much. In London, I spoke and we discussed in detail mostly the question of the phenomenon, or the phenomenology, of sound, if you want, of the fact that when people very often talk about sound they talk about something to do with colour, whether it's a bright or whether it's a dark sound. And I maintain that this is much too subjective to be of great interest to us, because what is dark for one is bright for somebody else, or even for the same person in different moods, but there are certain elements of sound which are objective, and those we should examine very carefully, and that is of course the weight and therefore the duration of sound. I also mean that for me there is a permanent relation between sound and silence, because sound gets drawn to ..?.. the law of gravity which pulls the objects to the ground. In Chicago I then went on to speak, not only about the fact that we neglect the ear, the foetus in a pregnant mother begins to hear on the forty-fifth day of the pregnancy, and therefore has seven and a half months' advantage over the eye, and when the baby is born, basically what we do is only care about his eye and use every means we can to explain the fact that even his own survival is actually dependent on his eyes. When we teach a child how to cross the street, we say look to the left or look to the right, so that you're not run over by the car. Whereas the ear is neglected in today's world, what with muzak, and all sorts of noises, and hotel lifts, and aeroplanes, and all that, music actually forces us to close our ears. The first musical example I gave in London, then Chicago, and I would like to do today too, was the beginning of the prelude to Tristan and Isolde, ..?.. in London, from the point of view of silence becoming sound. The beginning of the Tristan prelude that starts

out of nothing, and unless the nothing is there the first note has a completely different significance. In Chicago, I used this to describe the accumulative effect of music, the accumulation, in other words repetition, so that the ear remembers what it has already heard. And by the way, I'm sure you all know what an important function ear plays for memory, to remember even daily chores, to remember telephone numbers, to remember all sorts of things. The ear is a very very intelligent organ.

Anyway, Wagner was obviously a great composer - we know that...

(LAUGHTER)

Wagner was a highly, highly intelligent human being in so many areas, and wrote what to me remains one of the most interesting books about music, on conducting, where he describes many of the bad habits of the orchestras of his day, which I must say are not that different from the bad habits of the orchestras today, and that is the difficulty to maintain this inextricable relation between sound and silence - how we start a sound, how we hold it, and what happens to the next note. When Wagner starts the prelude of Tristan, first of all what does he do? He starts the music out of nothing, on one note.

(PLAYS ONE NOTE)

So. If we listen carefully, and intelligently, we can imagine a thousand possibilities. We can imagine that as part of that, part of that, part of that, part of whatever chord where the A is in there.

(PLAYED CHORDS DURING LAST SENTENCE)

And then you have the F

(PLAYS TWO NOTES)

so that's ..?..

(PLAYS THREE NOTES)

Obviously not. So what is it? This feeling of ambiguity and expectation is absolutely essential before

(PLAYS ONE CHORD)

the famous chord comes. If the bar before that had been fully written out, harmonically based bar, the dissonance would not have the effect that it has. But it is this creation of a situation of being in no man's land, harmonically, melodically, and also from the point of view of the sound. If we go from the silence...

(PLAYS TWO NOTES)

this is almost a modulation, a feeling of modulation in there.

(PLAYS FIVE NOTES)

Silence. Now comes the repeat for the accumulation,

(PLAYS SEVEN NOTES)

Silence. But the most important conclusion in the end is that Wagner very cleverly does not resolve, and he leaves the chord in mid air. I have tried to imagine how would a lesser composer, who, although being a lesser composer, had the inspiration, for want of a better word, to imagine the Tristan chord. What I want to show you now, and I suppose this will make you laugh, and which is not something that you normally associate with Tristan and Isolde, but how would he come out of this chord and not have the genius of Wagner of leaving it in mid air, creating a half resolution, which is the tonality for the repeat of the mood. It's the next one already in the key, because if you remember, after this,

(PLAYS FOUR NOTES)

if you keep the chord the next one is in the key

(PLAYS SEVERAL NOTES)

What would a composer with less genius and with less understanding of this mystery, of music if you want, of the magical quality that brings all the instruments together, he would think I have created tension, I have to resolve it.

(PLAYS EIGHT NOTES)

(LAUGHTER)

Resolved. Next one:

(PLAYS EIGHT NOTES)

(LAUGHTER)

And therefore I'm only bringing this up because it is this tension of being left in mid air that allows him to create more and more tension as this goes on. And the fact that ambiguity in music, in real life ambiguity may be described as a doubtful quality, somebody who is ambiguous, not knowing exactly what he or she wants, how to react etc. But in the world of sound, in this magical world of sound, ambiguity means that there are many many possibilities, many ways to go. And the longer you hold back on the resolution, the more interesting the whole thing becomes. And, since we are here, maybe it is not out of place to spend a few minutes on the question of sound, on the question of this famous typically dark German sound. And should there be such a thing as a German sound, and does Beethoven or Brahms, or Wagner for that matter, do they need a German sound, whatever that may be, or are other influences in our modern world permissible, positive or negative? First of all I think I can take a second to share with you a personal anecdote, if you want, which is of very little importance except to me, and that is that my family and I moved to Israel when I was ten years

old, in 1952, and the Israel Philharmonic then consisted I would say about eighty-five or ninety per cent of Jewish musicians who had emigrated mostly from Central Europe - many of them from Germany, but also from Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia in those days. Most of them had come in the thirties, fleeing Nazism. And that is the orchestra that I heard most of the great pieces of the repertoire for the first time. And when I started travelling more and more, in the late fifties and the sixties, I heard for the first time other kinds of sounds, all kinds of sounds. And finally, having been in and out of Germany for many years, I came here to this house, with the Staatsoper, in the late eighties, and had an absolutely chilling experience hearing the Staatskapelle playing for the first time, because it was exactly the same sound that I had heard as a child in Israel. And there was something in the sound that so completely reminded me of that, and that of course was the moment that I fell in love with that and I decided that I wanted to participate in the continuation of the life of this orchestra. Anyway, this is just on a personal note. The sound, the German, the so-called German sound in many ways is less harsh at the beginning of the note. Probably - and this again is very subjective - probably due also, not only but due also to the fact that the German language has such heavy consonants. And on this particular subject, on the subject of the sound of orchestras and national characteristics, the question is often asked nowadays: but do we want all orchestras to sound the same? Do we want to lose the very particular sound of the French bassoon, if they play on the German instruments which are the accepted norm in the rest of the world, and of many others, or do we want to have national characteristics in every orchestra? And then these national characteristics are adaptable if you want, or useful, only in a certain repertoire, in the repertoire of that country. It's actually narrowing the question, because I think if we have the possibility to acquire the knowledge and the virtuosity of playing in many different styles, I think it is the duty of each great orchestra in the world to have, if you want, a sound of its own which consists of understanding the different styles of sound that it has to adopt and adapt when it plays different kinds of music. In other words, this of course, the question is not, do I have an orchestra which has a wonderful personal sound, immediately, unmistakably recognisable, and I distribute it generously to Mozart, Boulez, Wagner, Verdi and Tchaikovsky and Messiaen, or do I find a way to nurture this very specific sound, understanding the different stylistic necessities and adapting and changing this sound so that it is at the service of the music that is being played. American musicians of course have in that way much easier, because everything for them is imported. I have yet to find a German musician who feels the same degree of closeness to La Mer of Debussy as he does to the fifth symphony of Beethoven. And in the opposite direction as well. For fifteen years I was conductor of the Paris orchestra, and believe me it was very difficult to get the French musicians to feel the kind of, not only enthusiasm but atavistic attachment to the fifth symphony of Beethoven which they did perfectly naturally with La Mer. But the question remains the same - do we all want to sound the same or do we want to develop in each and every one of the great orchestras. Every orchestra cannot do that, but in the great orchestras of the world, develop the capacity to have both an unmistakable personal sound and a sound that is flexible enough to change according to the style that we are playing. All these questions are nothing else but the musical equivalent to the questions that we are asking ourselves in the world today about economic globalisation, about cosmopolitanism. We don't live any more in a world that has accepted standards of judgement, or taste, as was in the case in Greece. For me one of the greatest enemies of humanity, to be politically correct means of course means to be able to hide your dislikes. It's fine, I can live with

that, but political correctness means of course also not to have any responsibility for any judgement. And I think this is where we are in today's world very often that we only see the rights that come with democracy but we don't really see the responsibility. And that shows itself in the music making too. The personal investment of each player, be it when he plays alone or in chamber music or in an orchestra, the courage to have a point of view. And then I ask myself, why the courage of having a point of view? It's absolutely elemental. Why play music if you don't have a point of view? Why? In other words, the world that we live in, if you want, makes it ethically more and more difficult to make music, because it is a world which gives us answers, even when there is no question. My point is that music, classical music as we know it, European classical music that we have today, will not survive unless we make a radical effort to change our attitude to it and unless we take it away from a specialised niche that it has become, unrelated to the rest of the world, and make it something that is essential to our lives. Not something ornamental, not only something enjoyable, not only something exciting, but something essential. Some of us are more fanatic about music, more interested than others, but I think we should all have the possibility to learn not only it but to learn from it. It is perfectly acceptable throughout the world that you have to have acquired a lot of life experience in order to then bring it out in your music making, but there's so many things that you can learn from the music towards understanding the world, if you think of music as something essential.

I was very lucky, I grew up in a musical home, I grew up in a, in a, in a small flat in Buenos Aires where both my parents taught piano, so whenever somebody came to the house it was for a piano lesson - it was for me the most natural thing. I learned to think in music. and I still do to this day. And the first thing that I think of, having lived all these years in this terrible conflict that we live in the Middle East, because I grew up there and I feel part of it, and to live daily with so many horrible things that happen, I have been always every day asking myself since I was a very small boy, why is it that so much of the day goes by and nothing happens and then something happens at a certain moment of the day that influences not only everything I think and feel after the event but everything that I have known and felt before. And I'm sorry, but I learned this in a much stronger way from the music.

I have here on musical example which I would like to play for you, of exactly that, of the moment where there comes a fantastic vertical pressure on the horizontal floor of the music, and that that moment you know that the music cannot continue any more the way it was before, such as the world was not the same after the 9th November of 1938, or the 9th November of 1989, or the 11th September of 2001 - events that have changed everything both towards the future and towards the past. And I have this one little excerpt - it is probably, you will, might find it or not comparable to the incredible experiences that any of these events have been. My point is that I learned the fact that there is a vertical pressure on the horizontal floor, that there is something that shows at a certain moment that we have to accept the inevitability of something that has changed our life both to the future and to the end. And it is the moment in a passage in the last movement of the ninth symphony by Beethoven where the text is: 'And the cherub stat for Gott, for Gott, for Gott'.

(FEW BARS OF RECORDING OF 9TH SYMPHONY PLAYED)

And there are of course many other examples of this.

One of the questions that preoccupies many intellectuals today is why is the music of the past of such relevance to us today? And what about the music of today? And it's evident that the music of today could not have been created, and therefore cannot exist, without the music of the past. And there is a necessity to be able to play the music of today with a feeling of familiarity that seems to us perfectly natural when we play the music of the past, as it is necessary for us to have a sense of discovery from the music of the past as if it is being written today. And I will give you two very small and very simple examples of that. There's a wonderful sonata of Beethoven, Opus 81a - Les Adieux - which starts in a very clear settled way, of two chords, slow moving, in a very specific key, of E flat, and on the third chord there is a modulation.

(PLAYS 3 CHORDS)

Seems very simple today after all of the nineteenth century, but this is a...

(PLAYS 3 CHORDS)

The ear really expects this. And therefore if the ear is as intelligent as I, I think it is, that's what the ear expects,

(PLAYS 3 CHORDS DURING REST OF SENTENCE)

and the ear gets a shock when there comes the modulation. That's what I mean by sense of discovery. And the beginning of the first sonata of Pierre Boulez, you know if you really played it as a collection of notes...

(PLAYS FEW NOTES)

But if you had the connection

(PLAYS FEW NOTES)

you find the elements of familiarity. When I play those first two notes in the Boulez sonata I am sure, I am positively sure he did not think of that as part of a harmonic.

(PLAYS FEW NOTES)

He didn't hear that in his, in his ear when he wrote that. But it is my duty, when I play something new, something that is not familiar, to play it with understanding it as if it had been here for many many years and for many many centuries in the same that it is necessary for me to find a sense of discovery in the music of the past. And this is of course - and this brings me to the end of this lecture - this is of course the most important point. Of all the different things that I believe we can learn from music, and each and every one of us obviously learns different things, the most clearly definable is the fact that music teaches us as human beings that everything, without an exception, has a past, a present, and a future. Very simple to say, but we all know how difficult it is to live. When we have a pleasant present, we want it to last, we think it will last forever, but in fact the fluidity of life is for me best expressed in music.

Coming out of nothing, the past, the present of the first note, which is nothing but a transition. And what I have learned from music, and have of course not been able to apply to my daily life, is accepting the fluidity of life and the fact that nothing, absolutely nothing, is completely independent and solid, but everything that I think and feel is dependent on this fluidity of life. Thank you very much.

(APPLAUSE)

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
Please ask good questions!

(LAUGHTER)

SUE LAWLEY:
Daniel Barenboim, thank you very much indeed. We're coming to question time, and obviously we want to know if you feel you have access to that magical world of sound that's been described, or we hope you're not hidebound by political correctness. The woman here?

JOYCE HACKETT:
I'm Joyce Hackett, I'm a novelist here at the American Academy. Much of what you seem to be talking about today is that we live in an era that's kind of... in which we're addicted to resolution. Your comments about the Tristan prelude talked about how much more interesting it was that Wagner did not resolve, and you could look at muzak as a kind of music that excessively resolves all the time. And I just wonder, um, if you have any thoughts on why we're living in an era that seems to be almost allergic to mystery and allergic to ambiguity. Do you think it's a result of secularisation, or...

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
No.

JOYCE HACKETT:
...whether it's just because of society moves faster?

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
I think it's a, it's a result of the fact that technology has advanced so much, and that we have... we and our ancestors have not done enough to make sure that the thinking capacity develops at the same speed, and is very much easier in technology or in sports to define progress. Somebody who runs a hundred metres today quicker than last year is obviously a better runner, but is Boulez a better composer than Mozart? I don't think so, I just think he himself would... he has learned a lot and he writes in a completely different style, but there is not the easy definition of what is better. Are we better human beings now than there were three or five hundred years ago? In some aspects yes. We don't have slavery, we accept so many things now that we were not able to accept even fifty years ago. But in our own individual private self we are still subject to the same pressures that our ancestors were five or ten thousand years ago.

JOYCE HACKETT:

Do you think one of the things that music teaches us to do is to question the notion of progress?

DANIEL BARENBOIM:

Yeah, of course.

JOYCE HACKETT:

Thank you.

VIGALUF:

Hello, my name is Vigaluf(?) and I'm part of the managing committee of the Association of German School Musicians, in Berlin, and my question is, now you were referring to Pierre Boulez, and he is of course in the tradition of classical music. Is there ever a chance of avant garde music ever to become or ever represent the beliefs or aesthetics or ideas, thoughts, of the majority of people? Because you say classical music has to come out of its niche, and a modern form of classical music...

DANIEL BARENBOIM:

(OVERLAPS ABOVE) Yeah, well I would not make a distinction. Wagner and Liszt were also avant garde musicians, but the avant garde of today is fighting two losing battles. First of all, that some of it has no contact with the past, which was never the case at all, but more important, it is fighting a losing battle in the sense that music is not part of society. And therefore anything that is not immediately accessible is very difficult to make part of our society. I think that a new work, the work of avant garde, has to have the possibility to put itself in the same programme with a symphony by Beethoven or whoever it may be, and, and then you see whether it stands on the same, if you wanted, the same league or not. I don't believe in making a niche, a separate niche for anything at all.

SUE LAWLEY:

But people resist it don't they Daniel...

DANIEL BARENBOIM:

People resist it because, because...

SUE LAWLEY:

...because it is, because it's atonal and it doesn't appeal to them...

DANIEL BARENBOIM:

No no no no no no...

SUE LAWLEY:

...and their ear yearns for consonance, not dissonance.

DANIEL BARENBOIM:

No no no no no no no, I don't, I don't believe that at all. People resist a lot of things. People resist every... a lot of music that requires er listening with thought. It's not only contemporary music. I played a concert in Chicago a few years ago with Yo Yo Mar, where we played two of the, the last two Beethoven sonatas and inbetween the sonata

by Elliott Carter. And you know what, many people, including musicians of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, which are very experienced musicians both with the music of Beethoven and in the last twenty years the music of Elliott Carter, they felt that Beethoven Opus 102 was more modern. There was... I don't think that this is the point. The point is that there is no music education to speak of, and when there is, it is only as a specialised profession. And music was never a profession, music was always a way of life. I am sure Mozart and Wagner and Strauss and all the composers, as well as Pierre Boulez and Michel Guilan, who is sitting here, and all the great musicians, don't consider themselves that as a profession. They do that in a professional way, but this is not a profession, it's a way of life, and therefore you cannot make a niche for that.

SUE LAWLEY:

A question here?

VLYMAR BALCON:

My name's Vlymar Balcon, I work for the Goethe Institut, the German cultural institute. I'd like to follow up on the question that... or of the answer you just gave concerning the power of music. Briefly touched upon the Wagner issue, which of course immediately comes to mind, but I was wondering if you could further elaborate. Do you really think that music can be totally innocent of any kind of political use, if the music itself cannot bring across a message, or, on the other side of the spectrum as it were, do you think that music could formulate a universal message to all in the spirit of the ninth symphony maybe, if that's possible?

DANIEL BARENBOIM:

I think, I think that everything is made human by the way we do it and the way we look at it. Of course music does not have to have those qualities, of course music is subversive. I'm sorry, but when I conduct a Mozart opera and I, and the first violins play the, the, main melody, and the second violins and the viola, they are already providing the subversive element. What music teaches us is not that it is all beautiful or that it is all subversive, or that you can use it or that you can abuse it. What music teaches us is that all of those things can be made one. And this is what music does, and in that way it is not unlike religion. Not in an institutionalised way of religion, in the physic... or of the coming one - this is what music is about for me.

SUE LAWLEY:

But can you, Daniel, separate the composer from his music? I mean we... you've mentioned Wagner, and he was known to be deeply anti-Semitic, and there are a lot of people in Israel, as you know yourself, who cannot stand to have his music played there.

DANIEL BARENBOIM:

Yeah but there's no

SUE LAWLEY:

They cannot hear Wagner's music.

DANIEL BARENBOIM:

Yeah but that's not because he was anti-Semitic. This is a very dangerous sentence you just said now, because we will be here for the next two hours now. The reason that Wagner is not being played in Israel, the reason at all is that, it's not because he was anti-Semitic. To be anti-Semitic was a part of the normal make-up of an intelligent thinking person in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. This was the very first...

SUE LAWLEY:

Well he was Hitler's favourite composer.

DANIEL BARENBOIM:

Think of the - sorry let me finish - the problem with Wagner is that he was used and abused because his writing, his prose, is vociferous, and horribly anti-Semitic. The music is not. Even the characters in the opera, there is not one anti-Semitic character in a Wagner opera. That you can use it to make of it, this is something else, but it is not. The reason for the Wagner problem for many Jewish people, for whom I have complete and total sympathy and understanding, is that many of them have seen members of their families being taken to the gas chambers in the concentration camp in Germany to the sound of The Meistersinger overture, and you ask yourself, how could they ever listen to this music again? This is the, the, the problem. My contention is of course that they can't, and of course they shouldn't, and of course there is no reason to make them do that. And - not but - and at the same time one must not give these people the right to stop other people, who fortunately do not suffer from this association, from hearing this music. This is the Wagner problem in embryo.

SUE LAWLEY:

I'm going to move it on, because we're running out of time. Gentleman here?

PETER JONAS:

Peter Jonas.

DANIEL BARENBOIM:

Sir Peter Jonas!

PETER JONAS:

Peter Jonas from the Munich Opera. Um...

SUE LAWLEY:

Who we should probably say used to run the English National Opera.

PETER JONAS:

Yes. There are about twenty questions I would like to ask but...

DANIEL BARENBOIM:

Start with the...

SUE LAWLEY:

Could you just ask one Peter?

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
Start with the nineteenth.

PETER JONAS:
I'm only going to ask one, and it seems to me that the words 'lack of understanding' and incomprehensibility between nations, between beliefs, there's a constant theme here also in relationship to Munich. After all... Music! After all when....

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
(LAUGHS) What was his name? Sigmund Freud, no?

(LAUGHTER)

PETER JONAS:
When we were born we were lifted up by our feet, and the first thing that comes out is not a fully formed sentence or a political speech, it is a cry, a scream, a sound which is very akin to singing. And it seems to me that people can sing before they can form logical sentences, without even Freudian slips. Is it your belief that the magic of music could be more than just an aid to un-, understanding, but could be an Esperanto for future communication?

DANIEL BARENBOIM:
Well there has to be a real revolution in that I think, because I'm rather disturbed very often by the concept of communication. Musicians today more and more are actually communicators who happen to be musicians, and they use music to communicate, and that the real communication of music comes when music is the communication itself. Not that music makes people feel good, and we know many horrible people who love music - we talked about two of them earlier, Wagner and Hitler and Stalin and... - but if Wagner had been able to be convinced by some force, a king - your er Ludwig - or, or or...

(LAUGHTER)

or, or, or some other force, that the nobility that he expresses in the music can only really come to being - if he is able to maintain that in his other thoughts and in his daily life maybe he would have been a better human being, maybe a lot of things would have happened. I think that the reason that we are in the situation that we are in is, I come back to the fact that music is more and more an ivory tower that is being er underdeveloped, and when developed, only as such. What it would do if suddenly the iron tower is removed and it becomes open to everybody is anybody's guess.

SUE LAWLEY:
That's it. There will be more, but for now, Daniel Barenboim, thank you very much indeed. Next week... Next week we travel to the Middle East, where in 1999 Daniel Barenboim created the West Eastern Divan Orchestra in which Jews and Arabs co-exist, and it's there that the maestro will deliver his fourth lecture. Its theme, quite naturally, will be how music can bring understanding, patience, and the courage to listen to the narrative of others. That's Daniel Barenboim in the Middle East, same time next week. Until then, from the Berlin State Opera, goodbye.