



KNOWLEDGE IS THE BEGINNING: A FILM ABOUT THE WEST-EASTERN DIVAN ORCHESTRA

An interview with Paul Smaczny

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This interview with the German filmmaker Paul Smaczny explores what music can do to open up a constructive approach to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict –and how film can help spread the word.

The starting point of the West-Eastern Divan was a workshop for young musicians from Israel and various countries of the Middle East, held in Weimar in 1999. Conceived by two artists and intellectuals, an Israeli - Daniel Barenboim- and a Palestinian, the late Edward Said, the workshop allowed young musicians to build upon their musical knowledge while living side-by-side with people from countries that traditionally have been rivals and were engaged in conflict.

The West-Eastern Divan orchestra -not only a music project, but also a forum for dialogue and reflection on the Palestinian-Israeli problem- allows its participants to explore the role that they could play in overcoming political and cultural differences between their countries. Throughout its now ten years of existence, the project has proved that music can be a useful way to break down barriers usually considered insurmountable.

Paul Smaczny's film, *Knowledge is the beginning*, which follows the orchestra since its inception until their first performance in the Middle East, which took place in Ramallah in 2005, shows that bridges can be built that encourage people to get closer. The film communicates Western-Divan's core principle: that it is possible for people from different backgrounds to coexist peacefully, when provided the opportunity to share what they have in common –in this case, a passion for music- and the time and space which are necessary for the ability to listen to the Other to develop.

Smaczny is a film producer and director. Since 2000, he is Managing Director at EuroArts Music International. A winner of the International

ISSUE 12
April 2009

Emmy Award in 2006, he has produced and partly directed more than 150 films and TV programs throughout the world, capturing some of the most important musical events of the last twenty years. At the moment he is completing *El Sistema*, a film about the music education system in Venezuela that further explores music's potential to promote change that will premiere in Germany in April 2009.

During a phone interview, the director describes how *Knowledge is the beginning* came to be made as Barenboim and Said's project evolved:

"When the orchestra was founded in 1999, I was close to finishing a portrait of Daniel Barenboim for television, and he told me 'Why don't you come to Weimar, I have an interesting project there'. I didn't know the details yet, since at the beginning Edward and Daniel didn't want to have the media around, because they didn't know how it would all work. I realized pretty fast that the Weimar workshop was more than just a chapter for Daniel's portrait, and decided to stay over the entire meeting, collecting material. I continued documenting the project for two years, and then I slowly ran out of money. To bring some cash in, I proposed a 30' reportage to a German broadcaster, which was made in 2002/03, and from then on, it all grew".

Asked if he thinks that the film can play a role in facilitating reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians, Smaczny explains:

"Reconciliation work was taking place inside the orchestra. This was the most fascinating aspect to follow: how contact between the musicians developed from a very careful and distant behavior in the first years into really close relationships and friendship. Reconciliation was something that one could follow in the process of this incredible workshop. As regards the film as such, I think it can help open up people's minds, make them think and listen. It was one of Edward's main aims until he passed away, together with Daniel: that people listen to the narrative of the other; that they not only express themselves, but also listen to each other. That is something that in my view the documentary can help make possible. Even audiences that have a very strict opinion about the conflict have been ready to open up their minds and realize that not only approaching each other, but also working together, is possible between the two sides".

Smaczny notes that screenings of the film so far have been encouraging:

"My experience screening the film several times both in Palestine and in Israel is that the audiences' reaction was extremely positive. That came as a big surprise to me. In 2006, we had a big screening in Ramallah, on Christmas eve, then the same evening in Tel Aviv –Daniel attended both

screenings, which were followed by long discussions with the audiences, and the debate was extremely open-minded on both sides. We also had screenings in the Emirates also, in Beirut, in Cairo... All around the Middle East all around, the reactions were extremely positive. One month ago, in Dubai, in a small festival, after the screening the audience signed a petition to request that the authorities of the Emirates invite the orchestra to Dubai”.

Reflecting on the reason why the film's theme, the Western-Divan Orchestra, has the power to move people to consider things differently, the director states:

“If you are playing together in an orchestra, you cannot be against the other. If you share a music stand and have to follow the movements of a conductor, you must play together. Music is certainly the best possible art form to help with reconciliation, because it's non-verbal. It's a different kind of language, which doesn't immediately cause misunderstandings. As soon as discussions start, when words come into play, then it's difficult again -you see how different definitions are on either side”.

Asked what the most striking thing that he has learnt in the process of making the film is, Smaczny explains:

“The people who were part of the workshop in 1999 and who are now members of the orchestra were really young at the time. I learnt that if you bring young people together with a humanistic and artistic approach, and without falling into dogmatic political behavior, then you can not only make them change their minds, but also allow them to live together, work together and organize things together with positive results. Of course, I learnt many other things: there were meetings with Edward Said that were enormously important human encounters, and strong moments, such as Daniel Barenboim's speech at the Knesset... And the Ramallah concert. I learnt is that if somebody is really committed, and has the strong support of a group, such as the orchestra in this case, and then you can make things work”.

According to the director, “both the orchestra and Daniel Barenboim find that the film allows them to make people understand what the project means without explaining too much”.

Knowledge is the beginning, a production of Euroarts with a series of supporters and co-producers, has been broadcasted in 40 countries to date, and has been screened in festivals worldwide. To organize a screening, e-mail Frank Gerdes at f.gerdes@euroarts.com For



more information about the project and a trailer of the film, visit <http://www.knowledge-is-the-beginning.com/>.

2009-03-31

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FLORENGHEL(AT)GMAIL.COM
ISSN 1654-7985

