

For Israel and Palestine, musical harmony in Tuscany

Judith Harris (July 22, 2014)



For a quarter century the bucolic Tuscan town of La Foce has been the focal point for one of Italy's many delightful summer festivals of the arts. This week's festival included a performance attuned to better times—the Polyphony Youth Ensemble under the direction of Saleem Ashkar. Even as the Israelis and Palestinians are at war, the young musicians performing Beethoven and Dvorak are both Israelis and Palestinians, and the goal is to help pave a way toward peace. Elsewhere Italians struggle to understand the vicious war on the not very distant opposite side of the Mediterranean, while some fear a revival of anti-Semitism.

LA FOCE, TUSCANY – This bucolic Tuscan country house, long the focal point for one of Italy's many delightful summer festivals of the arts, presented a performance July 23 attuned to better times—the [Polyphony Youth Ensemble](#) [2] with [Saleem Ashkar](#) [3] at the piano. What makes this timely is that, even as the Israelis and Palestinians are at war, the young musicians performing Beethoven and Dvorak are both Israelis and Palestinians; Nabeel Ashkar himself had been first violinist with the pioneering West-Eastern Divan orchestra. Created by musician [Daniel Barenboim](#) [4] and the late



writer [Edward Said](#) [5], the Divan was the first to bring together musicians from those two worlds, and this is an off-shoot.

The proper name of the festival, whose artistic director is cellist [Antonio Lysy](#) [6] of the University of California at Los Angeles ([UCLA](#) [7]), is “Incontri in Terra di Siena”, founded in 1989 in memory of [Antonio Iris Origo](#) [8], the famous author. The festival concerts and lectures take place as usual in scattered venues near the Origos’ home in the Valdorcia valley, near Siena, through July 27, when the season concludes. Ashkar’s group performed in a theater at [Citta’ della Pieve](#) [9] while other festival events, with music ranging from Rossini to Gershwin, Bach to Bartok, are held in villas, gardens and churches, at La Foce itself and other picturesque Tuscan towns, among them Montepulciano, Castelluccio and San Quirico.

Barenboim once explained that the Divan orchestra is neither a love story nor a peace story, but “a project against ignorance” whose aim is to promote understanding between Israelis and Palestinians and, as such, to help pave the way toward a peaceful resolution of a conflict that grows more tragic by the day. As Italians struggle to understand the vicious war on the other side of the Mediterranean, they fear its contagion and a possible revival of anti-semitism already visible elsewhere in Europe.

The newspaper headlines—and in Italy the printed word still matters-- are rough: “Gaza hospital bombed, new massacre of children, 7 Israeli soldiers killed” accompanied by dramatic maps and photographs of the tunnels which are the goal of the Israeli attacks (left-leaning *La Repubblica*). Under the heading “Is Israel immoral? The others exploit children,” no photographs (right-leaning *Il Giornale*).

As this suggests, most of the media here do not deviate from their customary point of view. The bulk publish horrifying photographs, with little need for comment, of atrocities—the destruction of Palestinian homes in Gaza, children bathed in blood, bodies carried through the streets. But most commentators here are also careful to explain the Israeli point of view. And virtually all give importance to pleas for peace from whatever source, including prominent Israeli intellectuals such as Nathan Englander, who defends both the Israeli and Palestinian peoples while condemning the leaders of both, and specifically Benjamin Netanyahu and Hamas.

In a thoughtful op ed piece popular TV personality Gad Lerner, who happens to be Jewish, analyzes the revival of anti-semitic violence in France. Nothing similar has occurred in Italy, yet the risk cannot be ignored; just as occurred in a synagogue in France, the words “Israel assassin” were scribbled on the wall of a synagogue at Vercelli, he wrote in [La Repubblica](#). [10] At the same time, “The sensation is that the war in Gaza is not only tragically useless in its aims of building Israeli security and giving the Palestinians dignity, but that it has become contagious. The notion of the enemy has been stretched, to become extra-territorial and fanned by fanaticism that once again spreads blame for being Jewish.... If you see every Arab and every Jew as an enemy, you must scare them wherever they are: [but] this is the ultimate wrong weapon in a war with no end.”

His conclusion: work together for peace; the religious authorities should develop a joint initiative in this sense. “In France as in Italy rabbis could be invited Friday to the mosques, and imams on a Saturday to the synagogues so as to recreate a sense of the sacred, trampled by a war of everyone against everyone else. Just who has the courage to do this?”

Writing July 22 in [Il Giornale](#) [11], Jewish journalist Fiamma Nirenstein interviewed a British think-tank consultant on terrorism, Col. Richard Kemp, who served in Afghanistan, Iraq and Bosnia. Nirenstein makes the point that the TV images of blood-soaked children plainly say, “These are the victims, and you are the evil one for striking them down.” Why, she asks, are manifestations of “authentic hatred” of Israel now visible all over Europe while the countless civilian victims in Syria and Iraq are ignored?

Col. Kemp’s reply: “The world leaders ought to be careful about what they say. Ban Ki Moon speaks of ‘atrocities’ in Gaza, but I’d also like him to give a hint of how devastating the Hamas attack is on Israel. This plays an important role in anti-semitism; in London, Berlin and Paris I’ve seen the Star of David transformed into swastikas.” And the death toll numbers— what effect have they? “None,” the Colonel replied. “Only the goal and the legitimacy of the objectives define the legitimacy [of a war].”



Political cartoonist Altan was the most succinct. In his drawing of two children lying dead on what we know to be a beach, one asks, “Why are we dead?” The other replies: “It’s a long story.” Indeed it is.....

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