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Ideas, Appassionato

Daniel Barenboim's Norton Lectures ranged from the pianoforte to Palestine

by RICHARD DYER

DANIEL BARENBOIM'S prodigious musical career has generated both acclaim and controversy. In September, the pianist and conductor joined the prestigious list of musicians—including Igor Stravinsky, Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, John Cage, and Luciano Berio—who have been Charles Eliot Norton professors of poetry at Harvard. In his six Norton lectures on "Sound and Thought," Barenboim won applause and did not shy away from defending some of his controversial decisions and activities—conducting the first performances of Wagner's music in Israel in more than 60 years, for example, and creating with his friend Edward Said, the late critic, the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, made up of young Israeli and Arab musicians who rehearse and perform together (though not in all their countries of origin, including Israel).

Daniel Barenboim conducting the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, whose members are young Israeli and Arab musicians.

A few weeks shy of his sixty-fourth birthday at the time of the lectures, Barenboim remains indefatigable. In addition to delivering the Nortons, he conducted a rehearsal of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony with the Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra ("The best the orchestra has ever sounded," a player told the *Crimson*, summing up the consensus), presided over a master class, and held formal and informal meetings with students—as well as playing three performances and an open rehearsal of the Schoenberg Piano Concerto and Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto with the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Despite this whirlwind, he seemed chagrined that he was unable to fulfill one part of his ambitious design for the Norton lectures. He began each session by playing four preludes and fugues from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier,* covering all of book I. He had wanted to add the corresponding 24 preludes and fugues from book II at the end of each lecture, but this wasn't possible, he explained, because of the dining schedule in Memorial Hall. "I

Photograph by Alonso Gonzalez/Reuters/Corbis

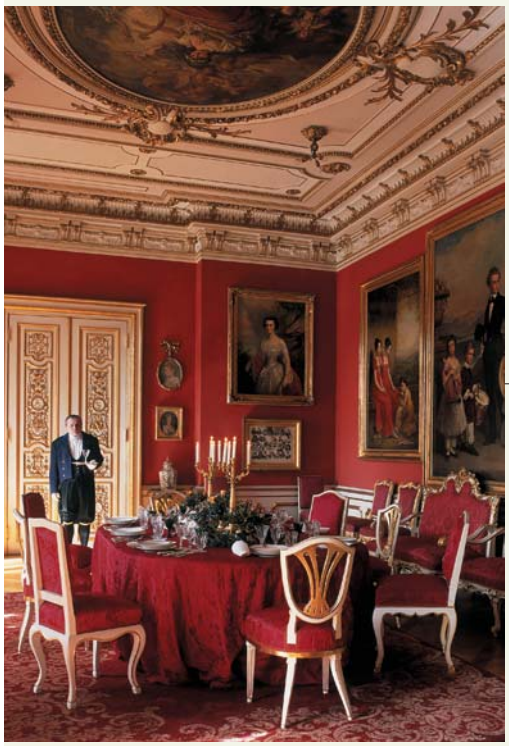
OPEN BOOK

Palace Indignities

Alexis Gregory '57 is a collector of Renaissance and Baroque bronzes, a member of the Harvard University Art Museums Collections Committee, and the founder of the Vendome Press in New York City, which he now co-owns with Mark Magowan '76. They publish about 15 illustrated art books a year, recently including one written by Gregory, *Private Splendor: Great Families at Home* ($50). He and photographer Marc Walter roam inside eight great European houses that have been owned by the same families since they were first built. They were permitted so close a look round not merely because the owners are friends of Gregory's, but because, one supposes, exposure is among the economic indignities facing palace dwellers today. As Gregory puts it:

Owning or, even worse, having to keep up a great ancestral home has always been a difficult proposition. Enemies once attacked with armies and cannon fire, revolutionaries stormed the gates, governments confiscated land or attempted to collect taxes and inheritance duties. Families fought for control while nature waged an unending battle and acres of roof constantly needed repairing. Many gardeners, cooks, maids, and footmen are needed to maintain the style of life for which stately homes were built, and one wonders why the descendents of the original owners do not simply give up and stop sacrificing their fortunes and peace of mind to continue a lifestyle that has been of the past for nearly a century.

The answer is undoubtedly ancestor worship. Palace building is the most fundamental expression of power. It can be seen clearly in the vast houses being built today in Palm Beach, Dubai, or in the suburbs of Moscow. It was once evident on New York's Fifth Avenue, which, in the 1890s, resembled a condensed tour through the châteaux of the Loire. But the houses of the newly rich have never been able to boast of a gloriously long dynastic history, and that is what the owners of the splendid palaces seen [here] do not want to give up. They will marry dollar or peso heiresses, dispose of the family jewels, auction off their furniture, sell entrance tickets, open zoos and cafeterias, put on pop concerts, petition ministers, beg the local government for support, rent out their rooms of state for company meetings, let in the local butcher for his daughter's wedding.... And the visitors imagine that somewhere, in an area of the house they will never be invited to, life goes on as it once did. In some houses, it does indeed, although the footmen are now hired by the day rather than for life, and often the hosts are entertaining tycoons who have rented the stately pile for a shooting weekend.



MARC WALTER/FROM THE BOOK

Schloss St. Emmeram, in the ancient city of Regensburg, Bavaria, is the largest private home in Europe still kept up by a princely family.

suppose if I did it," he remarked, "we'd all be here until breakfast."

Barenboim's playing was generally magnificent, within the terms of his chosen style, which represents a form of transcription for the full resources of the nineteenth-century concert piano capable of imitating a full orchestra. The performances were notable for their internal balance, for their clarity, and for the color, emotion, and strength of characterization he brought to each voice in the counterpoint.

The playing served as a musical analogue to points the pianist made in his lectures, whose real subject was less "Sound and Thought" than "Music and Life." Music, for Barenboim, not only expresses what life is, but is also "an expression of what life could be or what it could become"—not just a metaphor for life, but a model for it. Paradoxically, he said very little about actual pieces of music. Instead of resting on technical analysis, his argument pursued the phenomenology of sound and the perception of sound, the internal processes of the music, and what musicians must master in order to move music from page to performance.

For Barenboim, music presents an infinite range of simultaneous possibilities—"which we as finite human beings can use." Much of it, like the Bach, also consists of independent voices, each with its own indispensable function in fulfilling a design and communicating a complex, multi-layered message, full of internal contradiction as well as internal harmony. A performer, particularly an instrumentalist in an orchestra, must assert his individuality while listening to others and realizing his or her place in the larger picture—and at the same time achieve a poise between discipline and passion.

Simultaneously, a musician must integrate the constantly shifting claims of rhythm, melody, harmony, volume, and tempo. "Conflict, difference of opinion, is the very essence of music...our capacity [as musicians] is to bring all the different elements together in a sense of a proportion so that they lead to a sense of the whole." At another point, Barenboim compared orchestral performance to a "practical Utopia, from which we might learn about expressing ourselves freely and hearing one another."

From this it was only a short step for Barenboim to discuss some of his contro-

Off the Shelf

Recent books with Harvard connections

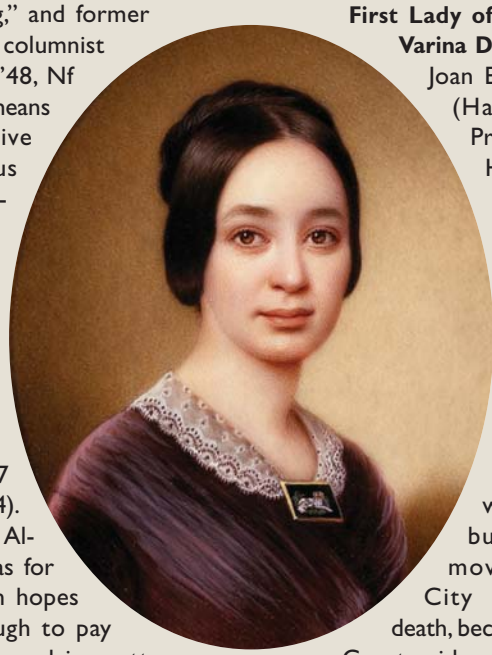
Modern Liberty and the Limits of Government, by Charles Fried, Beneficial professor of law (Norton, $24.95). Fried assesses individual liberty in the welfare state, its two most potent rival ideals—equality and community—and the government regulations that support and menace it. This accessible book is part of the Issues of Our Time series edited by Fletcher University Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. In book-jacket endorsements, Cogan University Professor Stephen Greenblatt, who disagrees broadly with Fried, calls the book "vexingly invigorating," and former *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis '48, Nf '57, writes, "He means to be provocative and is, making us think about profound issues."

Take Me to the River: A Wayward and Perilous Journey to the World Series of Poker, by Peter Alson '77 (Atria Books, $24). Seasoned player Alson goes to Vegas for the Big Game in hopes of winning enough to pay for his wedding, and is pretty funny about it along the way.

Men: Evolutionary and Life History, by Richard G. Bribiescas, Ph.D. '97 (Harvard University Press, $28.95). The author, an assistant professor of anthropology at Yale, came across an Ache man in Paraguay wearing a baseball cap that said, in English, "There are three stages to a man's life: Stud, Dud, Thud." That sums it up well, writes Bribiescas, offering insights into *why* boys will be boys.

American Islam: The Struggle for the Soul of a Religion, by Paul M. Barrett '83, J.D. '87 (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $25). Islam is now a U.S. faith, with six million adherents in a subculture torn between moderation and extremism, as emerges in this lively group portrait. Barrett, now at *Business Week,* was formerly a reporter and editor at the *Wall Street Journal.*

I Feel Earthquakes More Often Than They Happen: Coming to California in the Age of Schwarzenegger, by Amy Wilentz '76 (Simon & Schuster, $26). Wilentz moved to Los Angeles from Manhattan in 2003 and became "an expert on tremors real and imagined," as she tells in this account of her explorations of California and where it stands.



THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION; GIFT OF VARINA WEBB STEWART

First Lady of the Confederacy: Varina Davis's Civil War, by Joan E. Cashin, Ph.D. '85 (Harvard University Press, $29.95). Varina Howell Davis, portrayed at left before her marriage, was the devoted wife of Jefferson D., president of the Confederacy, who was stiff, much older, and demanding. A complex, conflicted woman, pro-slavery but pro-Union, she moved to New York City after Jefferson's death, became a friend of Julia Grant, widow of Ulysses S., and declared in print that the right side had won the war. Cashin is associate professor of history at Ohio State, writes well, and concludes in this first biography of Varina Davis that "her tenure as First Lady was for the most part a disaster."

God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time, written and read by Desmond Tutu, LL.D. '79 (Maui Media, a four-CD audiobook, $24.95). Love, laughter, and peace are his goals, as the archbishop offers an antidote to private suffering, the conflict in the Middle East, war in Iraq, and terrorism.

versial attitudes, decisions, and activities in the Middle East—views that arise from his understanding of how music functions. He prefers to describe the West-Eastern Divan project not as political, but humanistic in intent. The purpose of the orchestra is to "fight ignorance on both sides; for each side to recognize the legitimacy of the narrative of the other...You cannot make music through politics, but perhaps you can give political thinking an example through music."

The audience, too, has obligations: to listen with informed attention, to exercise what Barenboim called "the moral responsibility of the ear." He drew a distinction between hearing and listening: we can't help listening because we don't have earlids, but "hearing is listening with thought." "The audience needs to concentrate as much, as exclusively and fully, on the music as the performer does."

Overall, the lectures were intelligent, allusive, cosmopolitan (Barenboim was born in Argentina, grew up in Israel, and has lived most of his adult life in Europe and America), and mercifully short. But in addressing past controversies they stirred up a little controversy of their own. By contract, the Norton Lectures are supposed to represent new and previously unpublished material. But Barenboim simply spread out over six lectures the material he had already delivered earlier in the year in five presentations for the BBC's equally prestigious Reith Lectures. Those are available on the Internet, so the Norton audience in Sanders Theatre and Paine Hall could print them out and follow them like a music-lover reading a score at a concert.

The intellectual range and articulate vigor of Barenboim's previous writings made him a strong choice for the Norton post, and the things he has to say are important enough to say more than once. No one wanted or expected the leopard to change his spots, but he probably should have changed more of his words, and he will have to come up with something different when the lectures are published by Harvard University Press.

Barenboim followed his BBC lectures with question-and-answer sessions and repeated the strategy at Harvard, with less effective results. The BBC had selected many prominent and prepared respondents; the questions in Cambridge were often predictable (the new music

question, the crisis-in-classical-music question, the Toscanini-versus-Furtwängler question, and, repeatedly, the Palestinian question).

But the answers did display the maestro in a more informal mode, with touches of wit and some interesting jagged edges. At points he was disarmingly modest. "A conductor can inspire, teach, and cajole," he pointed out, but he does not produce the sound. Silently, Barenboim conducted the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. "Do you hear it?" he asked. "I don't." And he could make a joke at his own expense. "I was once a child prodigy," he said. "The prodigy is gone, but the child has remained."

It was clear that although the United States has been a major arena for his career, he has never felt entirely at home here. Much of his second lecture was about the corruption of the ear through the omnipresence of music not meant to be listened to; he, for one, doesn't want to be presented with the Brahms Violin Concerto in a hotel elevator, especially when he has to conduct that work later in the evening. Addressing a question about the problems of musical education in the United States, he grew angrier and angrier, saying that Americans live in a society without content and context, "an artificial world with artificial vegetables. Next to that, problems of musical education seem very small."

Barenboim was at his best in a postludial meeting with music students after the lectures had been completed; the questions were sharper, the answers wider-ranging, more genial, and far more personal. He described his stay in Cambridge as "not just a teaching experience but a learning experience."

And it probably was. After one of the lectures, there was a question about the decision of the Deutsche Oper to cancel a production of Mozart's opera *Idomeneo* because the stage director had created some images offensive to Muslims that had led to threats. Barenboim's answer began with a remark that won him a laugh ("I am the music director of the *other* opera house [in Berlin]"). Then he became serious: "I don't believe a performance should be canceled because it could be offensive to somebody not required by law to attend."

And within a few days he had written an eloquent and thought-provoking response to the situation, drawing on the thinking in the Norton Lectures. It was widely published in the international press and declared, "Both political correctness and fundamentalism give answers not in order to further understanding, but in order to avoid questions." Maybe, after all, the book of the Norton Lectures is something to look forward to.

—RICHARD DYER

Richard Dyer, A. M. '64, wrote about classical music for the Boston Globe *for 33 years.*

Iambic Imbroglio

Wrangling over the claims of readers—and dead poets

by LELAND DE LA DURANTAYE

In A.D. 19, the Roman noblemen Varius and Tucca were given an extraordinary task: destroy the *Aeneid*. On his deathbed, Virgil asked his friends to burn the manuscript that he had spent the last 10 years of his life working on and that, to his mind, remained unfinished. Tradition recounts that their dilemma was soon resolved: the emperor Augustus, eager for the glory it would bring his reign, demanded publication of the manuscript. Within a few days, dozens of scribes were at work copying out the poem.

A more modern version of this dilemma occurred in 1924, when Franz Kafka, who had published very little during his lifetime, died of tuberculosis in Vienna. He left his unpublished work—novels, stories, parables, epigrams, and fragments—to his friend Max Brod with the instructions that Brod was welcome to read as much as he liked, but had to burn everything when he was done. Brod sat before a fire reading page after page of brilliant, heartrending prose. When at last he was finished, he saw no choice but to disobey his friend's dying wishes.

Recently, the publication of *Edgar Allen Poe & the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments* by Elizabeth Bishop raised the perennial enigma of what to do with manuscripts a writer leaves behind. Alice Quinn, the *New Yorker*'s poetry editor, selected and annotated just over a hundred items from the more than 3,500 pages of Bishop's papers preserved at Vassar College. Many Bishop admirers were delighted to gain access to such a large store of unknown poetry, more than the poet had published during her lifetime. "For those who love Elizabeth Bishop, there can never be enough of her writing," proclaimed John Ashbery '49, Litt.D. '01, on the volume's back cover. "The arrival of this trove of unknown manuscripts is therefore a stupendous event."

BETTMANN/CORBIS

Elizabeth Bishop receiving the 1956 Pulitzer Prize for her collection *Poems: North & South—A Cold Spring*

Not all of the book's readers shared Ashbery's reasoning. Porter University Professor Helen Vendler was quick to point out, in the *New Republic*, that the volume's publication involved more than one questionable decision, beginning with its very title. "Uncollected" suggested materials strewn about in various reviews, periodicals, and the like, whereas what Quinn included were items that Bishop (who taught poetry at Harvard from 1970 to 1977; see "Vita," July-August 2005, page 34) had never published. "Had Bishop been asked whether her repudiated poems, and some drafts and fragments, should be published after her death," Vendler speculated, "she would have replied, I believe, with a horrified 'No.'"

Bishop was particularly sensitive to