

Observations: Proms brings Israeli and Arab musicians together in perfect harmony

By Jessica Duchon

Taking a stance: Daniel Barenboim's West-Eastern Divan Orchestra plays at the Proms

Expect queues across Kensington today and Saturday when Daniel Barenboim and his West-Eastern Divan Orchestra come to the Proms. The orchestra has been hugely lauded for bringing together young Israeli and Arab musicians in shared endeavour; their musical success is phenomenal, and Barenboim has always stressed that the organisation's *raison d'être* is artistic rather than political, not an orchestra "for peace" but "against ignorance".

Not political? Just look at the programmes. Tonight's Prom – Liszt's *Les Préludes*, the *Prelude and Liebestod* from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* – refers to the orchestra's founding in Weimar 10 years ago: Liszt, based in Weimar, championed both Wagner and Berlioz. Yet the first two pieces are laden with problematic associations. Wagner is still unofficially banned in Israel, a situation Barenboim has vigorously opposed; a bitter *furor* erupted when he presented the *Prelude and Liebestod* there as an *encore*. But the Liszt is even worse. This barnstorming symphonic poem was a Nazi favourite, used on German radio in the Second World War to present victory messages. Music, this programme seems to shout, should not be condemned for the connotations others have given it.

The orchestra's late-night Prom offers music by two Jewish composers, Mendelssohn and Berg. And Saturday night is Beethoven's *Fidelio*, in which a wife rescues her husband, the political prisoner of a corrupt dictator – the work is an operatic cry against oppression. If this isn't programming with an idealistic political subtext, I don't know what is.

'BBC Proms 2009: Barenboim & West-Eastern Divan' is tonight