

BOOKS

Musical unity across borders

JOHN GREEN discovers a musical route to Middle East peace

An Orchestra Beyond Borders — Voices Of The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra

By Elena Cheah (Verso, £10.99)

THE renowned Palestinian literary critic Edward Said and his friend Daniel Barenboim, the Argentinean-born Israeli musician, set up the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra in 1999. It was their attempt to put into practice what others had only preached or decried — a dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis to show that a genuine human understanding and dialogue between these two peoples was possible. Music, they quite rightly perceived, could achieve what politics was unable to.

Barenboim, in his foreword to this moving and illuminating book, writes: "Of course, the orchestra is incapable of bringing peace to the Middle East. We are musicians, not politicians. We wanted to create a human solution in the absence of a political one." He and Said, he continues, also believed in "letting opposing voices be heard at the same time; we were not interested in providing a line of thought to be followed by all."

Elena Cheah, a member of Barenboim's orchestra at the German State Opera, became involved with the Divan orchestra in 2006 and has produced this book of interviews with the young members of this vibrant orchestra.

The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra is made up of musicians from Israel, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, together with several professional musicians like Elena herself from elsewhere.

What you learn from her book is how

each member of the orchestra comes with preconceived ideas and cliché images about the "others" but, over time, through tears, tantrums, anger and prejudice, they each get to know each other through working together in the orchestra. It also communicates the fun they have playing and living together in this unique community, even if only for a few weeks or months each year.

Prejudices and shibboleths are slowly eroded, close friendships made across previously unimaginable divides, and political, historical and cultural preconceptions are deconstructed, all through the eyes and experiences of these young musicians.

The reader learns about the living conditions in their home countries. The stories are extremely moving, perceptive and illustrative of the intractable "problems" in the Middle East. If only one could bring together more groups like this — to overcome hatred, ignorance and prejudice — there would be no more wars and killings.

A deeper understanding of the "other" is helped by the fact that the orchestra doesn't just rehearse and discuss musical issues. It also organises debates about the Middle Eastern conflict and invites well-known personalities to give lectures. Participants are confronted with uncomfortable questions, facts and viewpoints for the first time in their lives. Over time they come to a realisation that, in the orchestra, they are leading lives and making friendships impossible in the "real world"

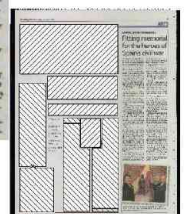
contexts of their home countries, but which should be taken for granted. Their lives become changed for good: when they return home it is with a very different perspective and with new ideas.

One Israeli participant says: "One month ago I was standing at the border [between Lebanon and Israel, as a soldier] and if this girl had been there or made the wrong move I might have shot her. And now I'm sitting here next to her and we are playing Beethoven with Barenboim. I just don't understand..."

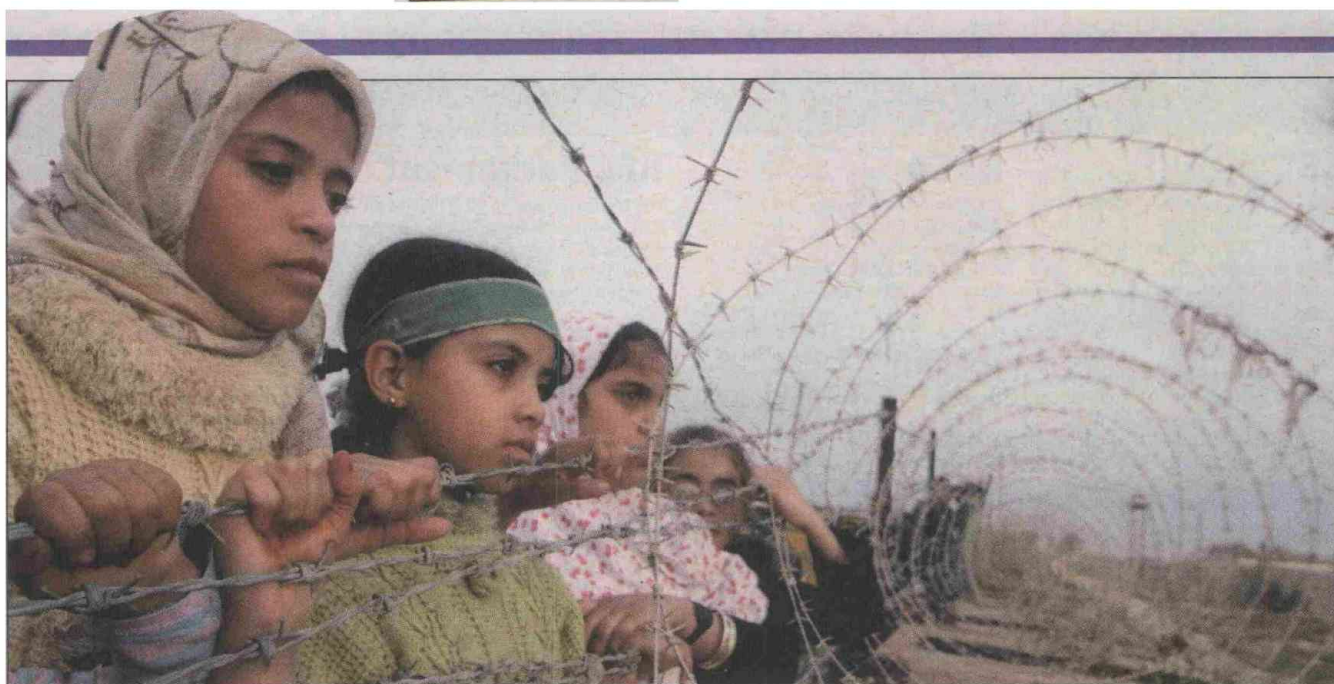
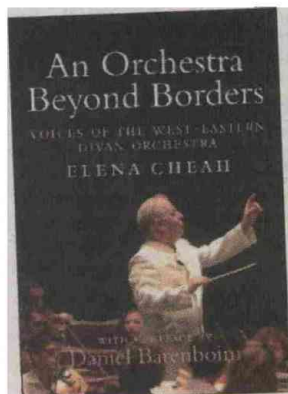
A Lebanese son of a construction worker says he spent his "childhood and early teenage years playing football in the desert of Kuwait" where his father was working and had never heard a classical music concert in his life. He is now a leading cellist and teaching other talented children in Lebanon about the joys of musical performance.

Music, more than any other art form, can unite people across cultural, religious and ideological boundaries. The sad reality is that both Barenboim and the Divan orchestra still have to struggle against considerable hostility and opposition, despite their world-wide renown. Some still see them as traitors, anti-Israeli or enemy collaborators.

Both Said's widow Mariam Said and Barenboim, who are the chief mentors of the initiative, are fully aware that the orchestra can only represent a beacon of hope offering a small example of what could be if people were encouraged to interact



and discover their common humanity, rather than being imprisoned



UNITY: Elena Cheah's book brings together interviews with the orchestra's members