

What lies behind the campaign against famed conductor Daniel Barenboim?

By Clara Weiss
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Over the past month, Argentinean-born Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim, the general musical director of the Berlin Staatskapelle—the resident orchestra of the Berlin State Opera—since 1992, has been the object of a vicious #MeToo-style campaign in the German and Berlin press.

The attacks, focusing on alleged “bullying,” are aimed at discrediting the noted musician, and have been accompanied by demands that he be removed from his post.

Barenboim, a noted pianist as well as conductor, is recognized worldwide as one of the greatest musicians alive, embodying almost a century of musical history. He is masterful in his interpretations of music from the 18th century to the present. He has also—unusually and courageously for someone in his position—been an outspoken critic of Israeli policies toward the Palestinian people.

The allegations of “bullying” were first advanced anonymously by several musicians who had worked with him in the Staatskapelle in the past. The first piece appeared in early February in the German classical music magazine *VAN*. It was sneeringly headlined, “The noisy ghost. Who’s afraid of Daniel Barenboim?”

The article depicted Barenboim as an almost uncontrollable tyrant, waiting for any opportunity to shout at and denigrate musicians and other staff. *VAN* quoted a Staatskapelle employee as saying that Barenboim had created “a climate of fear.” The composer was called “moody and dictatorial.” A former employee of the Staatskapelle alleged that the conductor’s behavior was responsible for the depression he suffered from at various times during his tenure with the orchestra.

The article went so far as to attack not only Barenboim, but also his first wife, Jacqueline du Pré, who died in 1987 at the age of 42. Du Pré, one of the greatest cellists of the 20th century, was struck down by multiple sclerosis, which first tragically deprived her of the ability to perform and then caused her premature death. Both Du Pré and Barenboim, the piece suggested, were cold elitists who considered their own lives to be of greater importance than those of lesser talents.

The anonymous charges of bullying were quickly picked up by the Berlin press, most notably in the *Tagesspiegel* and the *Berliner Zeitung*, which urged that Barenboim’s contract,

which expires in 2022 and is currently being negotiated, not be renewed. In late February, the *New York Times*, inevitably, chimed in on this campaign.

In an indication of some of the motives behind the current attacks on Barenboim, the *VAN* article dealt at some length with how the Staatskapelle under Barenboim has been able to secure significant funding from the German government, while other opera houses in Berlin have been forced to rely on local subsidies. There is no doubt that Barenboim has fought many battles over the years in an effort to secure maximum financial support for the Staatskapelle. He has been successful, however, not because of any underhanded maneuvers, but largely due to the well-deserved international reputation of the ensemble and of its conductor.

Only four musicians have openly criticized Barenboim. One of them worked under Barenboim for some 12 years. Another one, a current employee of the Staatskapelle, reportedly sent a letter to Barenboim after her statements were quoted in the press, apologizing and saying that she felt that she was being “weaponized.”

Barenboim, to his credit, has refused to give in to what he denounced as a “campaign” to prevent his contract from being renewed. He has stated that he was sorry for whomever he may have hurt, but that he did not consider himself guilty of running the orchestra in a dictatorial manner and that he had committed no crimes.

In an interview with the German weekly *Die Zeit*, Barenboim cogently answered the charges of “patriarchy.” “[T]o be old and experienced does not entitle you to anything. But if a person has created something and is also capable of conveying it to the next generation, he may expect that he will be listened to once in a while.”

Several musicians have also defended Barenboim. The world-renowned Mexican tenor Rolando Villazón wrote, in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, that “a rehearsal room is not a picnic, not a therapy session and not a joyful get-together. A rehearsal room is a place where everyone has to perform at their best to achieve excellence together. All share responsibility for this, but, musically speaking, one person has to shoulder the main responsibility for all—the conductor. And no one is shouldering this responsibility with greater passion,

respect, authority and love than Daniel Barenboim. He has dedicated his entire life to this responsibility.”

The attacks on Barenboim share definite traits with various #MeToo campaigns of the past two years. They are based on a mixture of mostly anonymous accusations that are difficult, if not impossible to prove, and have no legal bearing, and outright distortions and denunciations fabricated by journalists. The aim is to provoke outrage rather than careful thought to discredit and professionally destroy a major musical and intellectual figure.

The attack on Barenboim brings to mind the campaign against Swedish theater director and administrator Benny Fredriksson, the husband of renowned Swedish mezzo-soprano Anne Sofie von Otter. Fredriksson was anonymously charged with “bullying” and sexual and psychological abuse. The allegations led to his resignation from his post at Stockholm’s premier cultural center and theater and, eventually, to his suicide in March 2018. An investigation subsequently revealed there was no evidence of sexual abuse.

Barenboim has not been accused of anything vaguely criminal. The concerns raised by musicians, legitimate or not, are of a kind generally settled internally in a concert or opera house through the framework of arbitration and discussions. The director of the Staatskapelle has already announced that internal discussions and arbitration will take place, and Barenboim has agreed to participate.

It can be assumed that personal careerism, as well as longstanding rivalries between Berlin opera houses over funds and prestige, has been a significant factor in mobilizing disoriented individuals and layers in this campaign.

However, the question also has to be raised: What are the deeper motives behind these attacks on one of Germany’s foremost artists and public intellectuals?

This question cannot be properly answered without reference to Barenboim’s politics and the political and cultural context in which the attacks on him are taking place.

They occur amid an escalating campaign in Germany and internationally trying to discredit all criticism of the Zionist state of Israel as “anti-Semitic.” In recent months, this campaign has ever more openly been directed at defaming all left-wing opposition to capitalism as “anti-Semitic” and at creating an ideological and legal framework for criminalizing it.

Barenboim is regarded as a major obstacle to this campaign. In present-day Germany, he is arguably the most prominent Israeli intellectual taking a stand against the far-right policies of the Israeli government.

In 1999, he co-founded the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra [named after German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *West-Eastern Diwan* (1819), a collection of lyrical poems inspired by the 14th century Persian poet Hafez] with the late Palestinian writer and intellectual Edward Said to bring together young Israeli and Palestinian musicians. A few years

ago, he also founded the Barenboim-Said Akademie in Berlin to train a new generation of talented musicians from the Middle East. In 2008, Barenboim was awarded honorary Palestinian citizenship.

Most recently, Barenboim denounced the racist Nation-State Law in Israel, which enshrines Jewish supremacy as the legal foundation of the state. “I am ashamed of being an Israeli today,” he stated in the *Guardian*, denouncing the new law as “a very clear form of apartheid.” He wrote: “Does occupation and domination over another people fit the declaration of independence? Is there any sense in independence for one at the expense of the fundamental rights of the other? Can the Jewish people, whose history is a record of continued suffering and relentless persecution, allow themselves to be indifferent to the rights and suffering of a neighbouring people?”

As the WSWS pointed out nearly five years ago, after an Israeli attack on Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, “At a time when fascistic elements are mobilizing inside Israel with the slogan, ‘Death to Arabs,’ Barenboim’s sympathy for both ordinary Israelis and Palestinians makes him a target for hatred and even threats of violence from these reactionary forces.”

Barenboim has also been a consistent and outspoken critic of the growing promotion of anti-Semitism, racism and the far right in Germany and other European countries.

His views, which are informed by democratic and humanist principles, have provoked bitter hostility within sections of the German cultural and political elite and the Zionist establishment, as well as the anti-Semitic far right in Germany. There is little doubt that the current attacks on him are welcomed if not actively encouraged by such forces.

The campaign against Barenboim is aimed not just at the destruction of his character and career. More broadly, it is designed to intimidate and silence all those who dare speak out against both anti-Semitism and the far right in Germany and the right-wing policies of Zionism. It must be opposed by all serious intellectuals, artists, workers and youth.

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