

The Sound of Silence

A recent protest during a London concert of the Jerusalem Quartet raises questions about cultural boycott – its reasoning and effectiveness

→ RACHELLA SANDBANK

Everything seemed quite ordinary at Wigmore Hall in London on March 29, 2010, as the audience gathered to hear the BBC's lunchtime recital. That is, until the Jerusalem Quartet started playing the second movement of Mozart's quartet in D major, KV 575. Suddenly, somewhere in the audience, a woman stood up and started singing "Jerusalem is occupied." The concert stopped, the woman was escorted out of the building, the concert resumed and, soon after, was stopped again by another protester. This happened throughout the performance, while the four musicians tried to resume playing. At some point viola player Amihai Grosz spoke to the audience: The musicians are not supported by the state of Israel, he said, they served in the army as musicians, and some of them do not live in Israel today. (Grosz himself has recently won the prestigious position of First Viola for the Berlin Philharmonic orchestra.) Also, Grosz and cello player Kyril Zlotnikov play with conductor Daniel Barenboim's West-Eastern Divan orchestra.

A concert, four artists, a protest and a whole bag of paradoxes and questions.

Image

The Jerusalem Quartet

Photograph by Keith Saunders

The protesters were organized and bought tickets to the sold-out concert way ahead of time. They are members of a Jewish organization supporting the Palestinian cause, who reject Grosz's claim that he was not a representative of Israel. The protest, which was scheduled during a live broadcast of the concert on channel BBC3, is part of their campaign to boycott Israel, in an attempt to force it to change its ways. The issue of a cultural boycott on Israel has been debated among British intellectuals for a while now. The British philosopher and writer John Berger announced in December 2006, along with other prominent British intellectuals, that he supports a cultural boycott of Israel. In his short letter published in the British Guardian, Berger stated that "its application should not be systematized; it has to come from a personal choice based on a personal assessment. [...] An important mainstream Israeli publisher today is asking to publish three of my books. I intend to apply the boycott with an explanation. There exist, however, a few small, marginal Israeli publishers who expressly work to encourage exchanges and bridges between Arabs and Israelis,

and if one of them should ask to publish something of mine, I would unhesitatingly agree."

The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic & Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) – the same organization supported by Berger and his peers – recently announced that the West-Eastern Divan orchestra mentioned above was in violation of the Palestinian cultural boycott because of its dialogue-based approach that promotes a false symmetry between the two sides. Berger, it seems, while supporting the idea of boycott, tried to make subtle distinctions, but those – alas – do not get much attention in populist political discourse. Following PACBI's reasoning, it seems Berger himself is "in violation" of the boycott as he talks very clearly about supporting publishers who "encourage exchanges and bridges between Arabs and Israelis." Meanwhile, in Israel, the press hardly mentioned the Wigmore Hall incident, which resulted in few people outside of the music community knowing about it at all (which goes to show how easy it is to ignore cultural boycotts, as was the case when Israel boycotted Wagner's music, which aroused much



public attention, but actually hurt Israeli music lovers and no one else). And among those who did hear about it, many expressed a "holier-than-thou" patriotism in response to Grosz's stance. This is just the tip of the boycott iceberg, and it goes to show how complicated and ambivalent this tactic is and how many unresolved questions it raises: The question of one individual's responsibility for his government's actions (can one choose when to be part of a nation and when to relieve oneself from the burden of nationality?), the question of drawing the line (when is a cultural boycott justified and can it be nuanced? Is the difference between state-sponsored cultural activity and an individual artist's work always obvious and does it matter?), the question of its effectiveness (most analysts agree the cultural boycott of South Africa was not a major instigator in ending apartheid, as opposed to the economic boycott, which is a completely different story).

Not to mention, that the view from there is never the view from here. Here, in Israel, many feel that cultural activity might be the last frontier where real humanistic values are expressed.

No, not all culture; like anywhere else on earth, the most popular culture is the one promoting gladiator-style reality shows that encourage a loud, aggressive, racist, celebrity-worshipping and extremely shallow discourse on our current lives. But at the same time there is another culture, trying to be the voice of sanity and reason, using art as a wake-up call, as a way to keep alive a dialogue, of taking responsibility, encouraging questioning of dogmatic thought and, ultimately, negating the tendencies of the nationalistic-paranoid society that has evolved in Israel.

The power of art lies in its ability to undermine popular assumptions, promote an ethical discourse and, maybe, at the risk of sounding naive – make people think and even better themselves. Artistic activity that might promote these tendencies is generally not supported by the Israeli government. One might say less and less so. Artists look for ways to survive, and one of those ways is finding a larger international audience. If – in the name of boycott – the voice of these artists is silenced, the promoters of the boycott will find themselves, ironically, siding with the Israeli government. →