

DANIEL BARENBOIM AS CONDUCTOR

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Daniel Barenboim has completed a series of the Beethoven symphonies at the 2012 London Proms in his capacity as conductor and it appears that they were well received by the audiences. This being so, it is clear that the public does not want to accept any adverse criticism of these performances. The BBC kept advertising these performances in advance presenting them as performances that must not be missed thus, presumably, anticipating great performances.

Is this all part of the BBC telling us what we should hear, what are going to be great performances and that Barenboim is a great conductor?

Often the orchestral playing was fine and one admires this West /Eastern Divan Orchestra made up of Jews and Arabs playing in the same orchestra and that is a highly commendable idea. Barenboim's vision and humanitarian stance is applauded, but that does not make him a good conductor.

We can understand his constant use of a handkerchief to mop his brow during the performances and the problems caused by being under BBC lights.

But his conducting was awful. He kept pinching his nose and rubbing a finger under it. In the Choral Symphony he kept tugging at his open neck shirt.

In all performances, he would stop conducting for short periods of time and the orchestra coped well without him and did not miss a cue.

He often had a hand in his trousers pocket for a few minutes at a time. Sometimes he was conducting with his baton pointing to the floor whereas the baton should always be visible to the performers. Often he made inane gestures as if he were effeminate or a ballet dancer. His facial expressions varied from distortion and ugliness to silly Cheshire cat grins and these have no bearing on the music. His ridiculous pointing at soloists in the orchestra reminded us of scenes from Carry on Teacher and their school musical concert.

Members of the orchestra were laughing at Barenboim's weird gestures.

The gaps between movements were far too long and the orchestra showed their consequent irritation. Some of his tempi were erratic. The finale of the Symphony no 2 was an uncontrolled race in which the musicality was lost. Like Rattle and Dudamel, he did not get the opening of Symphony no 5 right.

The Symphony no 9 was dreadful. The scherzo had serious balance problems; the timpani was slightly out of tune and often too strong. There were false entries such as was the case of Dudamel murdering Mahler in last years Proms. The choral finale did not hang together and showed up Barenboim's weaknesses even further.

Some of the playing was rough and exaggerated to the point of ridicule. The double basses were sometimes so aggressive that they seemed to be frantic fireman trying to put out a fire.



His performance of the Symphony no 8 was dire failing to capture the character of the piece. The Symphony no 7 was routine. Listen to the Vienna Philharmonic under Carlos Klieber to see how it should be played.

Many critics complained about Barenboim's performances being lack-lustre, uninspiring and not having the essential spell-binding Beethovenian effect.

Barenboim will always do things his way. As his first wife found out, he was a control freak and ruthless with it.

Why do we make flawed musicians out to be celebrities?

But it happens in other areas. Elton John is said to be a musician and gets a knighthood: Wayne Rooney is a bad tempered footballer but said to be a good role model; the BBC has Eastenders and Dr Who as flagships, the alleged most impressive products or assets of their organisation, and so on.

Barenboim, Rattle and Dudamel are praised to the heights and yet there are far, far greater conductors who do deserve adulation and yet do not receive it.

Daniel Barenboim was born of Russian-Jewish descent in Buenos Aires on 15 November 1942. He was an exceptionally gifted child and a pianist to be reckoned with. Later, he won many awards for his music, campaigning for peace in the Middle East and his recordings. One award was an OBE.

I regret to say that he was not a nice man and, among other things, he was a control freak. He married the cellist Jacqueline Du Pre having converted her to Judaism. You could tell by looking in his eyes how he lusted after her. He treated her very badly and hid from her, his long-standing illicit affair with Elena Bashkirova while he was married to Du Pre.

I met Barenboim and Du Pre many times in the 1960s. Du Pre had a very, very naughty repertoire of filthy jokes but, apart from that, she was an extremely friendly and engaging personality.

His other many disdainful and disgraceful treatments of Du Pre led her into serious health problems and she craved love and attention because he did not give her the respect she deserved. He controlled her to the point of what some observers said was cruelty!

That Barenboim was not a decent man should not affect our judgement of him as a conductor and sufficient evidence has been given here about his recent conducting of Beethoven at the 2012 Proms

However, to return to Du Pre. She was not a great cellist by any means, but loved by many and, often, for the wrong reasons.

Barenboim's Beethoven? Ugh! Bring back Colin Davis... please!