

Terror of the Baroque

You might have seen his picture on the poster:
an eight-year-old boy arm poised,
prepared to hurl a rock at an Israeli tank.
But that was decades ago during
the first Intifada. Today Ramzi Aburedwan
has grown up and, like some other
Palestinian youth of the same era, learned
to wield a genuine instrument of terror:
his viola, which he plays in a small orchestra
called "West-Eastern Divan." Probably
you did not know that the viola
could be considered an instrument of terror.
I did not know this either until I heard
what happened when West-Eastern Divan
was scheduled to perform in Gaza,
mid-December, 2007, as part of a baroque
music festival. At the Erez checkpoint, despite
having secured all the necessary papers
and carrying nothing more dangerous
than his viola, Ramzi was denied entry,
arrested. The other nineteen musicians
refused to travel further, stayed
with their only Palestinian member
until he was released,
their Gaza concert cancelled.

If someone were to take a survey
of every viola section
 in every orchestra
 from every nation
I'm sure we would discover each
of the world's many peoples represented.
Still, I do not think myself presumptuous
to assume that there would be more
Jewish viola players on the list
than might randomly be expected based
on our numbers in the general population,
which reflects the importance of science,
art, philosophy, music, and similar disciplines
in the history of a race once known
more for our contribution to culture
than for bulldozed homes,
 checkpoints,
 tanks.

Today, however, the state of Israel informs us
that a concert of baroque music
on the territory of Gaza, with this Palestinian
instrumentalist present, is too subversive,
cannot be allowed to proceed. And I decide
that since Israel has decreed one concert less,
I will compose one poem more, propose
to others descended from the same tribe
that each of us who would like to restore
a Jewish culture based on art
 as our alternative to war
sign the following declaration: "Any nation
that fears Ramzi Aburedwan and his viola,
feels a need to treat them as its enemy,
may make no claim to speak for me."

Steve Bloom
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