

Daniel Barenboim calls for European unity in Proms speech

Venerated pianist and conductor speaks out against nationalism and ‘isolationist tendencies’ at Royal Albert Hall concert



Monday 17 July 2017 17.47 BST

Pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim gave an impassioned speech at the BBC Proms, calling for European unity and warning against the dangers of nationalism and “isolationist tendencies”.

Barenboim was directing Orchestra Staatskapelle Berlin on Sunday night at the Royal Albert Hall and ended the evening with a speech expressing his fears about the political climate across Europe.

The 74-year-old, who remains one of the most venerated classical musicians in the world and was married to British cellist Jacqueline du Pré, said his affection for the UK had made him feel moved to speak out.

“When I look at the world with so many isolationist tendencies, I get very worried,” said Barenboim. “And I know I’m not alone. I was married in this country and I lived here for many years, and I was shown so much affection whilst I lived here that this kind of gave me the impetus, if you want, to say what I would like to say.”

The issue, he said was not “the policies of this country and of that country. The main problem of today is that there is not enough education. That there is not enough education for music, we’ve known for a long time. But now there is not enough education about whom we are, what is a human being, and how he is to relate with others of the same kind.”

Barenboim, who was born in Buenos Aires in 1942 and moved with his family to Israel in 1952, chose entirely English compositions for the Proms performance, including including Elgar’s Second Symphony and the UK premiere of Sir Harrison Birtwistle’s Deep Time.

He pointed to it as an example of how music and musicians never confined themselves to national borders – that no one batted an eyelid at an Argentine-Israeli conducting a German orchestra playing English music – and that a similar spirit should be embraced across Europe.

“This is why music is so important,” he said. “And these isolationist tendencies and nationalism in its very narrow sense is something that is very dangerous and can only be fought with a real, great accent on the education of the new generation.

“The new generations, they have to understand that Greece and Germany and France and Denmark all have something in common called European culture.

“Not only the euro. Culture. This is really the most important thing. And also in this cultural community called Europe there is a place for diverse cultures, for different cultures, for a different way of looking at things. But this can be done only with education.”

Barenboim has never avoided politically contentious issues. He has been outspoken of the actions of the Israeli government, particularly the occupation of Palestinian territories, and set up the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, made up of Arab and Israeli musicians, in 1999.

He also touched on the issue of religious fundamentalism at the Proms on Sunday. “The fanaticism that exists in the world, with religious backgrounds, can also only be fought with education,” he said, addressing the crowd directly. “Religious fanaticism cannot be fought with arms alone. The real evils of the world can only be fought with a humanism that keeps us all together. Including you.”

Since you’re here ...

... we have a small favour to ask. More people are reading the Guardian than ever but advertising revenues across the media are falling fast. And unlike many news organisations, we haven’t put up a paywall – we want to keep our journalism as open as we can. So you can see why we need to ask for your help. The Guardian’s independent, investigative journalism takes a lot of time, money and hard work to produce. But we do it because we believe our perspective matters – because it might well be your perspective, too.

