

After Gaza flotillas and a suicide bomber in his art, all Dror Feiler wants is peace

At 70, avant-garde musician Dror Feiler is best-known as one of the organizers of the Gaza aid flotillas and an art installation featuring a Palestinian suicide bomber. But the Israeli artist who lives in Sweden stresses that despite all the controversy, all he hopes for is a peaceful Middle East

David Stavrou | May 18, 2022 | 5:17 PM

STOCKHOLM – When Haaretz met experimental musician, artist and political activist Dror Feiler at his home in the Swedish capital in January, he was composing a new work for an 80-piece orchestra. This task involved no small amount of optimism, since no one had commissioned the piece and European concert halls were shutting down at a rate of knots in those COVID days.

If the piece is eventually performed, then, like most of the 70-year-old's works, audiences will likely describe it as "avant-garde," "experimental," "noncommunicative" or just "noise." And while there may be some truth to these descriptions, over the decades Feiler's work has included biographical elements from his kibbutz childhood, his military service as a paratrooper, his emigration to Sweden and his experience as a European expat. His works are ideological and artistic statements combined with personal elements.

In Israel, Feiler is famous – some would say notorious – for his political activism, mainly because of his role helping organize the flotillas attempting to bring aid to a blockaded Gaza Strip. Then there was the controversial art installation "Snow White and the Madness of Truth," which he made with his Swedish artist wife Gunilla Sköld-Feiler and which the Israeli ambassador to Sweden attempted to deface.

Feiler's arrest in Israel, his support for the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement and his well-publicized views, which sit well outside the legitimate boundaries of Israeli discourse: all these have attracted attention, sometimes at the expense of the music. Nonetheless, Feiler's work is still performed around the world with some success – as much as noncommercial art music is able to enjoy success, at least.

Feiler was born in Tel Aviv in 1951. In eighth grade he left home to study at

the Mikveh Israel boarding school, where he clashed with teachers due to his being so opinionated and was expelled two years later. He returned to his parents, who were now living at the Yad Hana kibbutz that had split from the United Kibbutz Movement to become the only kibbutz to support the Israeli Communist Party.

Feiler's parents were party activists. His father, Eliezer, who died in 1993, was the personal assistant to the party's general secretary. His mother, Pnina, who recently died at age 98, was an activist into her 90s.

Feiler's childhood memories are political in nature: he recalls demonstrations and handing out flyers; spraying anti-occupation graffiti with his father as early as June 1967; the heated arguments his mother had with the party leadership; and joining a demonstration against Arab land grabs with Uri Avnery and Dan Ben-Amotz.

Feiler was a member of the Alliance of Israeli Communist Youth, where he once again fell out of favor due to his opinionated independence and refusal to automatically toe the party line.

This was in the late 1960s and Feiler was at the heart of Israel's radical left. Years later, in 1986, his father met Palestine Liberation Organization representatives in Bucharest when it was still illegal to do so.

"This was significant," Feiler says. "They went there despite the ban and spoke about coexistence. I was happy and proud that my father took part in this. It was not the first time he had met with Palestinian leaders, but on this occasion it was out in the open – in an attempt to challenge the stupid law that banned speaking to an enemy about peace."

He joined the military at the end of the '60s. "Every communist knows that political power grows from the barrel of a rifle, as Mao Zedong said, and as was written on my tent in the 50th Battalion," Feiler says, more than 50 years after he joined the Paratroopers Brigade.

"The Communist Party was not against the military; on the contrary, it fought against its co-optation by the right. Joining the military was important to me. I was a pale child who sunburned easily, was small, weak and had a big mouth. I wanted to express a little more machismo and masculinity. This was also the first time I encountered a broad section of Israeli society up close – religious people and Mizrahim, for example."

These encounters and his time in the military did not influence Feiler's worldview. In 1970, while serving in Gaza, he refused a direct order to fire into a crowd from which someone had thrown a grenade, arguing that the order was illegal. He was sent to military prison and eventually discharged from the battalion, finishing his service in his kibbutz.

“When I spent time in solitary confinement in jail, the cell was tiny, the light was on the whole time and there was no one to be seen,” he recounts. “I could only hear my own heartbeat, the grumbling of my stomach, and a high-pitched sound that maybe came from my own brain or maybe was just in my imagination. My music contains these elements: rhythm, chaotic movement and high-pitched sounds.”

Feiler's music is not easy on the ear. It is frequently chaotic, loud and turbulent. It is not concerned with sounding beautiful, and is the enemy of banality and cliché. Feiler once complained that Swedish pop stars ABBA were destroying the soul of music. “I make music that appeals to me, that I feel in my body, not just my ears. It is a total physical experience,” he explains.

Not everyone finds Feiler's noise easy to play, let alone listen to: the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra dropped his piece “Halat Hisar” (“State of Siege” in Arabic) ahead of its 2009 premiere, despite having commissioned and paid for the piece. Some musicians complained about the work's volume, which they said caused headaches and ear problems. (The piece was eventually performed six months later.)

“I find anything that has become too mechanical hard to deal with,” Feiler says. “I don't like things that are formulaic and compositions where you can predict exactly which chord is coming next, and which all follow the same beat.”

You told me you love melodies. Why don't you write more of them?

“I also like salt, but I don't add it to every dish,” smiles Feiler, who has written a considerable amount about his musical approach in the Swedish press. In one story he asks: “Is dissonance still possible today? At a time where the music of artists like Jimi Hendrix or the Sex Pistols, who once symbolized alternative lifestyles, are used in soft drink or car commercials, will noise music find its way into the mainstream?” Feiler's answer? No; this music will always cause discomfort.

Do you make political music?

“My music is not political by nature. It isn’t written to cause a revolution. I make free music, but the job of the listener, the way they must approach this unknown thing, the very act of listening – this is the political act.”

Art and political struggles

Feiler is full of stories about previous concert tours that combined art and political struggles: from performances in front of FARC guerrillas in the jungles of Colombia to saxophone performances at demonstrations against the far right in Sweden.

He has toured in Russia, Japan, Europe and the United States, where he met with and collaborated with musicians such as Frank Zappa (this was in 1983 and Feiler does not remember much, except that the meeting took place in Zappa’s basement late at night), the saxophonist Anthony Braxton, the German free jazz musician Peter Brötzmann, Japanese noise project Merzbow, and many others.

Alongside his wife Sköld-Feiler, he makes sculptures and runs the Tegen2 gallery near his home in central Stockholm. One of the artists whose work he has displayed is David Reeb, whom Feiler considers a friend. Reeb was at the center of a controversy recently after his artwork “Jerusalem” was removed from an exhibition at the Ramat Gan Museum at the mayor’s behest. Reeb even drew a portrait of Feiler.

Another renowned artist who has focused on Feiler in his work is Blixa Bargeld, a founding member of the German experimental group Einstürzende Neubauten and former member of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. In 2019, Bargeld made a film about Feiler for Arte’s Square Artiste series, dealing with Feiler’s life, his views and his music. It goes without saying that Feiler was against Bargeld’s performance in Israel with Einstürzende Neubauten in 2016.

Marxist literature and memorabilia can be spotted among the artwork, books and musical instruments that litter Feiler’s home. Books on Che Guevara and Leon Trotsky rub shoulders with beautiful Hebrew literature and ancient Jewish texts – including a Talmud from 19th-century Moscow and Feiler’s father’s Passover Haggadah from ’30s Dusseldorf. The main living space features a large collection of unique bells and music boxes, some of which Feiler restored himself. Pride of place goes to the music boxes that play

variations on “The Internationale.”

His own musical career was set in motion when he left Israel about 50 years ago. Six months after being discharged from the army, after spending a few months on the Continent he moved to Linköping, southern Sweden, following a Swedish kibbutz volunteer who lived in a women’s collective there.

“Thirteen days after arriving here, I saw [Israel’s then-Defense Minister] Moshe Dayan on TV declaring that ‘total war’ had broken out. It was October 6, 1973, and I, Dror Feiler the communist, immediately called the Israeli embassy and asked how I could help.”

The embassy inquired if he was a medic or belonged to a tank unit. When he replied that he was a paratrooper, they asked him to leave his contact details so they could get back to him if they needed him. “I’m still waiting,” he laughs.

Feiler remained in Sweden. He was forced to give up his Israeli citizenship because it was still illegal to hold dual citizenship at the time, learned Swedish, bought a saxophone and met Gunilla, whom he would later marry.

In 1975, he moved to the capital, where he was accepted for musicology studies at Stockholm University and went on to study composition at the Royal Swedish Academy of Music. His experience as a migrant who lives in the Diaspora is an integral part of his music.

“For me, life as a migrant is like noise in a musical context,” he says. “It’s music that generates panic and fear, something that sounds like the screech of a dentist’s drill, a helicopter crash or the thermonuclear scream of the sun’s core. It sounds like musical machines are swallowing the Earth, and we’re listening to the waste being cleared as nature is devoured by technology. This fear resembles the experience of the Other, the migrant.”

Especially when it comes to a migrant who is an intellectual, Feiler says. Or at least this was the situation when he arrived in Sweden. “Foreigners, exiles and migrants make noise and disturbance for their new society,” he explains, “and the migrant intellectual is especially bothersome. He doesn’t become a street cleaner or delivery man, but participates in a social sphere the locals don’t think he should belong to. They’re happy for him to make hip-hop music or play basketball, but concert halls are a bit too much for them.”

Feiler demonstrated this performatively at a festival in 2008 when he placed a garbage truck at the front of the stage to make noise along with an orchestra

and singer Meira Asher. American composer John Cage “talked about opening a window to the street noises. But compared to my truck, John Cage made lite noise.”

One gets the sense that anyone is lite compared to Feiler. “I am radical in my politics and my personality,” he admits. “I say what I think without thinking twice, and I’m an intense person. I used to argue with my mother even when she was in her 90s, and when we had a disagreement, I acted up. I can listen to and entertain other opinions intellectually, but I struggle when people talk in slogans or talk about things they don’t understand.”

The ‘Snow White’ affair

Public awareness of Feiler peaked in 2004, but not only because of his music. Instead, it was an art installation he and his wife created, which generated headlines worldwide and was a turning point in the Swedish artistic discourse and even diplomatic relations between Sweden and Israel.

“Snow White and the Madness of Truth” – shown in the snow-covered courtyard of Stockholm’s Swedish History Museum – was an installation consisting of a pool filled with blood red liquid, illuminated by three lighting rigs, with a recording of Bach’s “Mein Herze schwimmt im Blut” (“My Heart is Bathed in Blood”) church cantata playing in the background. On the liquid drifted a boat named “Snow White” carrying a portrait of Hanadi Jaradat, the Palestinian suicide bomber who had killed 21 people at the Maxim restaurant in Haifa a year earlier.

The installation didn’t receive much attention until Zvi Mazel, Israel’s then-ambassador to Sweden, visited the museum. He cut the power and knocked one of the lighting rigs into the water, causing a power surge. He refused to leave until he was ejected by museum security personnel.

The incident caused an outrage and Feiler appeared on news programs around the world.

“The museum commissioned the installation from us as part of an exhibition called ‘Making Differences,’ which was scheduled to coincide with an international conference about Holocaust commemoration, and initiatives to combat genocide and antisemitism, convened by Swedish Prime minister Göran Persson,” Feiler explains.

“The inspiration for the work came from the cover of Haaretz newspaper’s

weekend supplement featuring an image of Jaradat with black hair, a white face and red lips. We asked for the installation to be placed outdoors, in the cold and snow, to make it difficult to stand next to while enjoying a cocktail. Following the incident, a Swedish journalist who came to our support received death threats and was assigned a bodyguard. Gunilla and I received thousands of threats, 24 hours a day. The Swedish prime minister received 40,000 emails. It was an orchestrated campaign. I received a phone call from a man claiming to be from [the Israeli] police, saying my mother's house was on fire and she was in hospital being treated for burns. He called back a few minutes later and said it was not actually true, but that it may well happen. This went on for weeks."

"It was awful," says Gunilla, who has entered the room and briefly joins the conversation. "It was much harder for me to shake off the accusations of antisemitism than it was for Dror. Beyond the threats," she adds, "I really struggled when I realized that the work's meaning had been already decided upon, had been disseminated widely and would be very hard to challenge."

Gunilla strongly rejects the interpretation that "Snow White and the Madness of Truth" glorifies the murderer and supports Palestinian terrorism. "We tried to construct something to shed light on how someone can commit such an atrocity," she explains. "We have to try to understand – not to forgive, but we must understand. How can we prevent such things if we don't understand them?"

"The installation explicitly objects to violence and conveys sorrow for the blood that was shed," she says. "And there was something there, in the Stockholm cold, in the music and text alongside the installation, that made people reflect."

When the strong reactions and threats started, Gunilla left town for a while. Feiler stayed and visited the museum daily, where he instructed visitors about the installation and became the subject of international attention. "When CNN called, after Prime Minister [Ariel] Sharon applauded Mazel, I thanked the ambassador for all the attention my work received due to him," Feiler recounts.

Is it possible that you were also eager to provoke, just like the ambassador? I mean, you didn't have to focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as part of an exhibition on genocide and the Holocaust. There are plenty of other violent conflicts around the world.

“First of all, I’m Israeli and I care about what happens there. And in any case, the ambassador claimed he hadn’t heard about the installation before he visited the museum – but obviously that isn’t true. He came with the intent to do what he did. He was calculated: he headed straight to the installation, pulled the plug, knocked the lighting rig into the water, caused a short power surge and the pump stopped working so the water froze.

“In my opinion, this was part of a deliberate effort by the Israeli government. Israel wanted the exhibition to only deal with the Holocaust. They demanded that Sweden refrain from raising the Palestinian issue in this context, and Israel applied diplomatic pressure and threatened to pull out of the exhibition if our installation wasn’t removed. Once the Swedes made it clear that they couldn’t prevent art from being exhibited in a museum, Israel used the incident to try to show that Sweden and the Europeans are anti-Israeli and antisemitic.”

Death threats

Feiler has always engaged in numerous political issues – from the struggle against the far right in Sweden, the anti-apartheid and anti-Vietnam War campaigns, to support for leftist movements in South America and the Belarusian opposition movement. But the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been closest to his heart. He joined the Swedish organization Jews for Israeli-Palestinian Peace after the first Lebanon war in 1982, and now serves as one of its spokespersons. In the early 2000s he was involved in forming the European umbrella organization Europeans Jews for a Just Peace, for which he also serves as president.

One of Feiler’s best-known actions occurred following Israel’s Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip from December 2008 to January 2009. According to him, it started out “with a few people from the fringe of the Stockholm left” who were inspired by the Ship to Bosnia campaign – a humanitarian aid campaign in Bosnia during the ’90s – and culminated with the Israeli military raid on the [Turkish ship] Mavi Marmara and the other vessels that took part in the Gaza flotilla in 2010.

“We didn’t have any boats, money or experience,” Feiler recalls, presenting his version of events. “But we thought that if the politicians won’t do anything about the blockade of Gaza, we will. We heard about a Greek organization called Ship to Gaza that knew more about boats than we did. We raised donations from thousands of people – just normal people, no major donors –

and traveled to Greece to buy a boat. After we already closed the deal, the seller called it off because he received another offer for twice the amount.

“We realized we needed to keep the whole thing secret and wait until another offer presented itself. Once it did, we left for Greece and on a dark night arrived at an unfamiliar place. We didn’t bring our mobile phones. They showed us the boat and even though we knew nothing about boats, we bought it. Later on, once the Mavi Marmara – a boat belonging to the IHH [the Turkish-Islamist group recognized as a terrorist organization by several countries, including Israel] – joined, this led to additional participants joining from England, France, Norway and other countries. And so the Freedom Flotilla was born.

“This wasn’t the first time overseas boats had sailed to Gaza in support of the Palestinians – we were preceded by some smaller boats in 2008-2009 that carried tens of activists. But the 2010 flotilla was on a different scale and included over 600 people, including journalists, lawmakers, members of international organizations, human rights activists and trade union representatives.”

Tell us about the events of May 31, the night Israel Defense Forces commandoes raided the boats.

“It was the middle of the night, we were 85 kilometers [52 miles] from shore, within international waters, and I saw the attack on the Mavi Marmara from about 300 meters away. There was helicopter fire, apparently to destroy the searchlights; we saw the soldiers descending onto the ship and later some soldiers boarded our ship as well. They led us one after the other to the captain’s deck, and I was first. There was an Israeli officer there. He took my passport and cameras, and I asked him to guarantee that my gear was safe, and he refused to answer so I took everything back. Then he instructed two soldiers to lead me outside. They knocked me to the floor, kicked me and broke three of my ribs, and bruised my head. Later they tied my hands and threw me under a bench in the galley, still bleeding from my ear.”

Feiler said that when he and his associates were taken to the Israeli port of Ashdod, a bearded soldier with sidelocks and a skullcap, carrying a submachine gun, separated him from the group. Then, he added, the soldier ripped the earring from his ear and the necklaces from his neck, and ordered him to undress in front of hundreds of people. “While the rest of the detainees boarded buses, I was put in a caged vehicle. I, a 60-year-old

Swedish composer, with broken ribs and a bruised head – an enemy of the Israeli state,” he recounts. “They said that because I was an Israeli citizen, even though I am not, that I will be tried for treason and aiding the enemy during wartime.

“In the end, they let me join the other detainees and we were sent to the new prison they built in Be’er Sheva. I was put in solitary confinement, separated from the others who were all together. They even refused me a book. I told them I didn’t care which book they gave me, even if it’s the Bible, but they refused that as well.”

“Eventually, [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdogan sent three planes to transfer all the detainees to Istanbul, and said the planes would not take off unless every single one of us was released. Everyone gathered at the airport, waiting just for me. I finally got there and they tried to get me to sign a document and keep me back on the basis of a claim that I had used force. They also tried to keep Bülent back [Fehmi Bülent Yildirim, president of the IHH]. A violent clash between Bülent’s guards and the soldiers developed at the airport. I was sitting there, on a plastic chair inside Terminal 1, surrounded by soldiers with batons and one of them says to me ‘Go ahead, just try, make my day – just make one move.’ They released me eventually with the last detainees and I boarded the plane.”

In hindsight, Feiler believes he should have pressed charges against Israel. However, he says he was in such a state of shock from the solitary confinement, the violence and the fact that his family had not been notified about his circumstances that it never occurred to him at the time. For him, the entire episode remains traumatic.

The Mavi Marmara affair has been investigated by the IDF and the Turkel Commission, which ruled that the IDF soldiers acted appropriately and that Israel had complied with international law. The heated debate that took place in Israel following the affair was between sides talking over each other, possessing two incompatible versions of reality. Regarding the violence used against Feiler, the IDF Spokesperson’s Unit chose not to comment.

After the 2010 flotilla, Feiler took part in three additional ones and was arrested each time – finally being banned from entering Israel for several years. He was not even permitted to visit his mother, only being granted a temporary, restricted entry permit in 2019-2020. The Mavi Marmara affair served as inspiration for his composition “32°, 43’ North, 33°, 31’ East,” after

the exact coordinates in the Mediterranean Sea where the ship was raided. A relatively recent composition, “Epexegeesis,” for two soloists and orchestra, includes a text by the Palestinian-Syrian-Swedish poet Ghayath Almadhoun, and was performed by Norway’s Stavanger Symphony Orchestra in 2019, with Feiler and Bargeld as soloists.

“We, who are strewn about in fragments, whose flesh flies through the air like raindrops, offer our profound apologies to everyone in this civilized world, men, women and children, because we have unintentionally appeared in their peaceful homes without asking permission,” Almadhoun is quoted in Feiler’s piece. “We also apologize to the Israeli soldiers who took the trouble to press the buttons in their aircrafts and tanks to blow us to pieces, and we are sorry for how hideous we looked after they aimed their shells and bombs straight at our soft heads, and for the hours they are now going to spend in psychiatrists’ clinics, trying to become human again.”

A very dangerous individual

As a committed leftist and Marxist, Feiler still sees himself as having a Jewish identity. Together with his band Lokomotiv Konkret, he released the album “A Voice Still Heard” in 2011, which is full of Jewish influences stemming from his long-held admiration for Jewish liturgical music. He celebrates Jewish holidays, his family members speak Hebrew, and his home is stacked with Jewish texts and Jewish-themed artworks. He says he became a real Jew once he emigrated to Sweden.

His political activism and views may strongly antagonize many Israelis, but he sees it as part of the tradition of Jewish cosmopolitanism, in solidarity with the sufferings of all people everywhere. To him, the connection between the Gaza flotillas and his installation “Snow White and the Madness of Truth” is clear, even if many in the Jewish state would claim he is misguided and working for the enemy.

“At the end of the day, the siege of Gaza generates hatred of Israel and strengthens extremists on both sides,” he claims, “and this is the reason we wanted to bring humanitarian aid to Gaza. To show the Gazans that someone cares, that they don’t have to be so desperate to have to commit atrocious things, like Hanadi Jaradat.”

With all your criticism of Israel, aren’t you also disappointed with the Palestinian national movement?

“Of course I am. I consider Hamas to be a fanatical religious movement and it saddens me that so many Palestinians support them. But one of the reasons they do support them is the impotence of the PLO, which collaborates with the Israeli occupation. [President] Mahmoud Abbas visited Stockholm a few years ago. I was invited to meet him and [chief negotiator] Saeb Erekat at their hotel. I entered the room, they greeted me and I told them: ‘Excuse me, Mr. President, I am not a politician, I am an artist and a composer, and I speak truthfully. So I have to say to you, I am more of a president than you. I am president of European Jews for a Just Peace; I can travel to wherever I want for whatever I need. You cannot. You need to ask Israel for permission to travel. I suggest you head over to the United Nations and declare that you do not have a state, don’t have a government and don’t have a parliament. Tell them: We are under occupation and our sole demand is one person, one vote [voting rights for all Palestinians]. No one in the world would oppose this.’ Erekat looked at me and said, ‘You’re a very dangerous individual.’”

Do you still support a two-state solution? Do the changes in the Middle East, the Arab Spring, the regional wars and the Abraham Accords not require a change of perspective about the optimal diplomatic solution?

“I don’t care how many states there are. I care about the kind of states. If we have two democratic, egalitarian states, with equal rights and responsibilities for Jews and Palestinians, that’s fine. Even if we have seven states, or one state, or a federation or confederation, that’s fine. As a citizen of the world, I want to see equal rights over there as well – civil and equal rights for everyone.”

Is the existence of a Jewish state important in and of itself?

“No. It depends what kind of state. If it will be a Jewish state led by an extreme right-wing dictator who supports genocide, is that an important state? That’s an awful thing. What does a Jewish state even mean? Who is a Jew? These ideas about racial purity make me feel a certain discomfort – and that’s an understatement.”

Feiler writes tough music and when it comes to his worldview, there is also little room for sentimentality. Yet, at 70, he can reflect on life with a degree of optimism. “Even after 49 years in Sweden,” he says, “all I wish for is that people living between the [Jordan] river and the [Mediterranean] sea can have a good life without killing each other, and that they have equal rights and can establish paradise in the region.”

Ultimately, despite being banned from entering the country for years and the fact that many Israelis regard him as a traitor, Feiler – through a mixture of stubbornness, toughness, burning faith and uncompromising struggle – remains far more Israeli than Swedish. “Gunilla keeps telling me that you can take yourself out of Israel, but you can’t take the country out of you,” he concludes.