

MOTHER TONGUES

FOR TAPE

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PROGRAM NOTES [taken from the programs for the performance, in collaboration with Israeli cook Idith Meshulam]

Sounds, like flavors and scents, are powerful triggers.

In approaching our collaboration, we discussed our experiences growing up on either side of a rigid and threatening border that indefinitely tore apart a geographical region that had been much more united for most of written history. It is sometimes referred to as the Levant, and stretches the length of the eastern Mediterranean, across hills and mountains into the beginnings of the Syrian and Jordanian deserts, and covers forests, tall bare mountains, fertile valleys, narrow coastlines, and deserts.

The region presents some striking characteristics: first and foremost, it is hot. Not the heat of a desert or a tropical forest, but the dry heat that while it easily burns your skin recedes quickly as you climb the hills and hide in the pine forests or by its many springs. Lebanon is known for its mountains, its snow, its cedars, its water sources. Israel is known for its inland seas, its varying geography. Both are hugged by the Mediterranean, and many of their cities lunge towards it in the form of peninsulas. Birds are everywhere, coyotes howl into the night, and the passing hours of each day are regularly paced by the coexistence of the region's many church bells and its calls for prayer. Its people are hot-blooded and yet warm, impulsive and yet thoughtful.

We're not trying to paint you a pretty picture, we are both exiles after all. For the two of us, the airport is as crucially a part of the picture as our native homes. And yet, when discussing pairing food and music, we irresistibly found ourselves drawn to the Proustian notion of sensory triggers of memory. Put differently, and because memory is so closely connected to imagination, we hope that the pairing of sounds, songs, scents, and flavors that are deeply rooted in Levantine everyday-life would facilitate, for each participant, the capturing (or re-capturing for those who have been there) of a physical dimension wholly absent from our performance. In other words, through the smells and the sounds, the listener/eater will be able to see the place in their mind's eye.

The tape is constructed through recordings of voices, sounds, songs, all found online. Idith contributed several important “ingredients,” both personal and generally Israeli, for Michal to integrate into his version of the space. These include performances by Idith, who is a professional pianist, of Schubert’s *Der Wanderer* and a Bulgarian childhood song played on the accordion. Michal then contributed a valuable bag of Lebanese thyme brought back by his parents to Idith’s dishes through which she explores her own associations with her native land.

We aimed to create a rational, even-keeled representation of the Levant; not devoid of the violence that plagues it, and yet not summed-up by it.

ABOUT THE CONTENT

The piece is exclusively made up of recordings found online. These include conversations, songs, and ambient sound recordings. I have tried to use as balanced a collection as possible. For example, I have used recordings of birds both in Beirut and Jerusalem; recorded street conversations in the Holy city as well as in various souks in Lebanon; there are sounds taken from playgrounds both in Israel and in Lebanon; and so on.

The basic form of the piece is organized around a 24-hour cycle that begins around sunrise and ends just before dawn. I keep track of the time of day by featuring both church-bell sounds that ring the time (as is heard throughout the Lebanese mountains) and the calls to prayer which occur five times throughout a 24-hour cycle. These important cultural sound icons serve as natural indicators of the passing of time. The recordings that surround the “narrator” show him/her moving through crowds, in and out of different buildings such as restaurants, radio stations, playgrounds, woods, on both sides of the border.

In the following section, I have selected various moments, most of which are not in the English language, and translated them in order to help give the listener as much context as possible in order to grasp what is being said. On the other hand, most listeners’ inability to follow all conversations (given that few people speak all of Hebrew, Yiddish, Arabic, and French) is intentional on my part, and is meant to reflect the misunderstandings and alienation that divides humans who might otherwise agree with one another in more ways than they might imagine, were they equipped with the means to literally understand one another.

Selective list of memorable moments in the work

- 0'00" Fire crackling
- 0'18" *Salat al-fajr*: call for prayer before sunrise
- 0'38" Church bells ringing 5 am
- 0'39" Israeli radio introduction jingle and news excerpt
- 1'24" Recording of Marcel Khalife's *Jazal* for two ouds, bass, and percussion.
- 1'59" Lebanese dialect: "Good morning, how are you sweetie? Did you sleep well? Would you like to drink your morning coffee with me?"
- 2'20" Church bells ringing 7 am
- 2'40" Marcel Khalife's *Jazal* still playing becomes louder.
- 2'43" Recording of a dog in Lebanon.
- 3'00" Recording of dogs in Israel.
- 3'08" Excerpt from a famous Lebanese civil war film, *West Beirut*. It features an argument between neighbors early in the morning, in which the first neighbor reproaches Abu Khudr, her lower neighbor, of having a rooster in the city. Other neighbors object to how loud she herself is being.
- 3'37" Lebanese national radio introduction jingle and news excerpt
- 4'21" Church bells ringing 8 am.
- 4'22" Recordings of preparing coffee in a Lebanese kitchen.
- 4'35" Recordings of cars on Lebanese mountain roads
- 4'40" Focus on bird and cricket sounds in the Lebanese countryside.
- 4'54" Low explosion taken from a recording of a bombing during the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah.
- 5'02" Recordings of birds in Tel Aviv.
- 5'14" Recordings from cars in northern Israel.
- 5'37" Static sounds on the radio
- 5'43" Israeli radio news bulletin
- 6'04" Recording of coffee being prepared in an Israeli kitchen on a cold winter morning (with hands being rubbed together)
- 6'08" Church bells ringing 11 am
- 6'09" Recording of a discussion between Israeli men around the question: "what would you say if the Italians declared today that they wanted the land of Palestine returned to them? It was, after all, part of the Roman empire for 500 years..."

- 6'20" Recording of children in Jerusalem playground.
- 6'40" Recording of the train passing in Jerusalem
- 7'04" Call for prayer in a southern Lebanese mosque
- 7'10" Sounds of deep breathing in the narrator
- 7'20" Israeli man discussing the previous question about Romans.
 "I don't think we have more right than the Roman or than the British who were here, or the Ottoman. This is land. I think everyone has to live somewhere, and many years ago they divided this land. I think there are many problems but let's be free from what happened 70 years ago and create a new... There is enough land. There is enough food for everyone. We don't need to fight. We need to ease up on religion. It's religious, let's be real.
- That is the problem now."
- 7'54" "The state of Israel received independence in 1948. From 1948 until today, the Palestinians have not brought any proposals, nothing to improve their situations. Like they were in 1948, they stayed the same until today. They haven't improved in anything."
- 8'13" Recording of Marcel Khalife's song *On my Mind*
- 8'16" Overlaying of heartbeat and recording of Lebanese children playing in northern city of Amchit
- 8'23" Recording of Israeli pianist and cook, Idith Meshulam, performing a Bulgarian children's song on accordion
- 8'48" Recording of Jerusalem's train passing
- 8'50" Recording from a market in Israel
- 9'10" Overlapping of Israeli man speaking in English, Marcel Khalife's song *On my Mind*, call for prayer, and a recording of a Jerusalem market featuring Arabic and Hebrew side by side.
- 10'22" Recordings from Israeli and Lebanese streets side-by-side
- 10'40" Recording of Lebanese singer Fairouz singing a special Easter chant to the Virgin Mary. Backdrop of birds in Beirut and street sounds outside a Lebanese church in the capital.
- 11'14" Call for prayer together with the rest of the Easter chant, resulting in reharmonization of the two.
- 12'05" Radio static
- 12'10" Church bells ringing 8 pm
- 12'19" Israeli radio bulletin

- 12'42" Recordings of Lebanese and Israel restaurants side-by-side
- 12'58" Lebanese men speaking about food
- 13'07" Recording of Israeli military song *Giv'at Ha'Takhmoshet* (Ammunition Hill)
- 13'15" Recording of Lebanese man living in Norway speaking: "We try as much as possible to continue speaking our mother tongue. Because from time to time, you realize that you mostly speak someone else's tongue."
- 13'25" Overlapping of the Israeli military song and the call for prayer.
- 13'35" Same Lebanese man speaking: "I still remember him [my grandfather] describing this feeling that Lebanon is the soil, and the world is the stars in the sky. However long you roam, you will have to return home someday..."
- 13'48" Sound of Jerusalem train passing
- 13'53" Recording of Lebanese song *Beirut* sung by Umaina Khalil
- 13'54" Man asking a Palestinian man: "Are there many differences between Syrians and Jordians, Palestinians, Lebanese?" He answers in Arabic: "No, there is no differentiation." Woman interjects: "Differentiation or difference?" "Neither. Why, because if we keep thinking about differentiating, and how we're going to differentiate between one another, we're going to become divided." Woman adds in English: "because in Arabic the word differentiate and separate are similar [in that they have the same root]."
- 14'32" Recording of a Hezbollah war song, with recordings from Lebanese, Israeli, and Palestinian restaurants, street sounds from Israeli and Lebanese streets, and people speaking on an Israeli street.
- "What Middle Eastern countries would you make peace with?" Woman answers: "All of them, of course. We don't discriminate." "Is there a specific country?" "Lebanon, really. Mostly Lebanon and Syria." "Ok, why them?" "First, because they are close and we have borders with them. I think we are culturally similar to them. The foods are the same. It seems really natural to have peace with those two countries. There is an amazing music scene in Lebanon. I wish the borders were open with them. Ibrahim Maalouf [Lebanese trumpet player]. Beirut is supposed to be an amazing city. Let's start by just being able to enter the West Bank.

To go to Bethlehem." "Why do you think you can't?" "Because I know I can't, they won't let me in."

- 16'12" Recording on walking on a Lebanese street late at night.
- 16'21" Recording of Israeli pianist Idith Meshulam performing Schubert's *Der Wanderer*.
- 16'47" Recording of heavy breathing over the piano
- 16'50" Recording of cars passing on streets in Israeli and Lebanese towns
- 17'03" Mix of recordings of explosions from violent episodes in Israel, Palestine, and Lebanon, and fireworks
- 18'06" Excerpt from French news bulletin: "And here we arrive to a new edition from our special feature *Christian from the East*, with the Lebanese Christian community. Before the civil war, it was at the forefront of the country's political scene, very influential in the country, but since, the Christians leave by the thousands. Those who stay now join the opposition, and to hear them speak, the future looks bleak. In Beirut, our special envoys."
- 18'28" "Roman ruins, a church, a mosque, all beliefs and epochs stand side by side here in Lebanon. The country was always a place of mixing and openness." Inaudible bit here
- 18'45" Recording of fire crackling as in the beginning of the piece.
- 18'46" Excerpts from Mazen Kerbaj's 2006 work *Starry Night* recorded during the Israel-Hezbollah war from his rooftop, featuring his improvisation on his trumpet to the backdrop of bombs, explosions, fighter airplane sounds, and car alarms. I also added crickets and birds recorded on Lebanese hills.
- 18'59" Resuming of the French bulletin: "and so they leave, in large masses. 900,000 people have chosen exile, a quarter of the population." inaudible again, focusing on Kerbaj's *Starry Night*.
- 19'18" From the bulletin: "the political class is corrupt and will blindly obey who it is told to follow." "It is mostly the youth that leaves the country. We are on the campus of Saint-Joseph University, the largest francophone university in the near-east, created 127 years ago. An institution that forms the country's elites." Inaudible again, call for prayer.
- 19'50 Call for prayer, inaudible documentary, *Starry Night*, and recordings of coyotes from the Lebanese mountains. Woman speaking: "you get the impression that they make it easy for leave."

20'12" French announcer: "Of course, as is often the case in the east, appearances are deceiving. Life seems sweet, happiness real. It's the case for this young couple that is getting married this coming Sunday." Inaudible bit. "... the case of this phantom town at the south of Beirut, the city suffered massacres and exodus during the war. No one will come live here again. Higher up in the mountains, it's the same thing. Entire villages remain in ruins. The Christians of Lebanon disappear. 60% of the population 30 years ago, twice fewer today. On a Beirut wall someone has written a funny and terrible sentence: 'the last one to leave, turn off the light.'"

21'17" Recording of Israeli singer Shura Lipovsky singing the song *Shifrele's Portrait*, written in Poland in 1939 by Mordecai Gebirtig, shortly after the outbreak of World War II. Gebirtig's eldest daughter, Shifre, lived in Lvov, and was separated from her family when the Soviets annexed Lvov. In this brief song, Gebirtig, gazing at his daughter's photograph, imagines himself in conversation with her. She assures him that the war will end soon, and that parent and child will be reunited.

*On the Wall, to the left of my bed,
Hangs my daughter Shifrele's portrait.
Often, in the middle of the night,
When I think of her, and miss her so.
I see how she looks at me.
I hear what she says:*

*"Daddy dear! I know that you're sad,
But the war won't last too very long;
Soon I shall return to you —
Peace will soon knock at the door."
Smiling lovingly, so speaks
Shifrele's portrait.*

24'00" Recordings of coyotes from the Lebanese high mountains, right before sunrise.