

ecbatan

The piece is formed around one guitar arpeggio. I had first used this arpeggio about fourteen years ago (in 2005), during a White Comedy¹ recording at Kargadan studio in Tehran. It was discarded from the album's final mix. For the purposes of *ecbatan*, I retrieved it from a recording that had been made during one of the bands' jam sessions at Kargadan. Working with this material, recycled from an old archive of discarded recordings, I sought to somewhat reinstate a spatial and material connection with an environment to which I had lost physical access.

I played the arpeggio repeatedly for eleven minutes without a metronome—while meditating and focusing on the memories of a specific spot in a place where I lived the biggest part of my life: Ekbatan (in the west end of Tehran)—and recorded the whole session. I wanted all the irregularities of breathing and playing an instrument that I had abandoned when I left Iran, and with it a mode of musicking—one that for me was representative of music-making in Iran—become woven into the work's fabric. To that end, I used the recording entirely in the piece with no further adjustments to enable a context through which my physical and conceptual 'distance' with that 'place' (and/or 'time') and that previous state of being and mode of musicking, could be experienced sonically through the juxtaposition of field recordings made in Ekbatan (in 2005) and a mistimed (or misplaced) guitar arpeggio, that was also initially made there.

I also used sounds that were accidentally captured during the pre-recording set-up of White Comedy's jam session—while the band were messing around with different objects and instruments in the studio's 'dead room'—and samples from a series of field recordings that I produced eleven years later (in 2016) in Belfast. The sonic palette was completed with the addition of some synthesised sounds and noises that I programmed for this piece in NI Reaktor and Pure Data. The main function of the latter sounds/noises was to disrupt the 'meditative' flow of the ambient parts and, as such, to further challenge the regularities of ambient aesthetics. Such instances happen mainly in two places (or times); at 03:03 and 07:59. It began, therefore, as a self-referential dialogue between two places (Tehran and Belfast or Iran and UK) and/or times (2005 and 2016), also between two approaches towards musicking—the one that I had abandoned after White Comedy's recording and the one I developed subsequently and as a

¹ White Comedy was a 'post-punk' band founded by two of my friends and myself around 2003–2004. It dissolved in 2006. See 1.2 (page 3 and 4) for more context.

result—*ecbatan*'s final form sought to comment upon and constructively critique EEMSI's more dominant aesthetics, through music/sound.

Refraining from correcting the timing 'imperfections' was also a strategy to challenge the mechanistic regularities of genre music, which, in the context of electronic music produced in Iran partly occur as a result of intuitive engagement with the affordances and limitations of music production software such as Ableton Live. Ableton, in particular, allows for an easy and intuitive production and playback of 'perfectly'-timed loops. Investigating what impacts interfaces such as Ableton may have had on the practice of electronic music producers in Iran (or anywhere else for that matter) and, by extension, on the sonic aesthetics of EEMSI in encouraging certain forms of creativity while suppressing other possibilities, could be a direction for further (ethno-)musicological inquiry into this 'field'.

Sonically, *ecbatan* follows a trajectory that starts from an 'open field' and ends with placing the listener (as if) 'inside the speakers'. The sequence of events within the piece follows a reversed-time logic; as the piece advances on the 'timeline' it gradually moves towards 'older' events while constantly oscillating between the two places (Tehran and Belfast). It is, as such, a meditation on time, place/space, and memory, not so much in order to remember as such but to let new connections emerge from the superimposition and juxtaposition of material coming from those times and places/spaces; from different cultures and ecologies; as belonging to different states of affairs; from the intersection of abandoned musical worlds and emerging ones. Simon Frith's observation regarding music's function to 'shape [...] memory, to organize our sense of time' (2007, 266)—'by both intensifying a sense of the present, and by managing our attention to time passing at every level from milliseconds to decades' (Waters 2015, 26)—seems an accurate account of what *ecbatan* sought to explore and evoke.

Expanding on Frith's observation and drawing on *Music, Sound and Space* (Born 2013), I would add that music also situates us by offering suggestions of space/place and, as such, (re-)organises our memory in relation to indications of space/place. These indications manifest not just as direct references—sounds that explicitly refer to a certain place—but also in terms of aesthetical and/or metaphorical references—sounds that indirectly evoke a sense of place. As DeNora has observed: '[M]usic's specific properties may contribute to or colour the shape and quality of social experience, self-perception and emotion.' (1999, 53) Due to its capacity to manipulate affect, the impact of music in this regard is particularly well documented through studies that have engaged with music/sound therapy, for instance in relation to individuals who

live with dementia.² As a radically new phenomenon, experimental electronic music's function in Iran can be investigated from this perspective as well. From this angle, EEMSI can be viewed as having penetrated the social process in particular niches of the society in which EEMSI has relevance, disrupted their repetitiveness and, as such, affectively punctuated time for its audiences, staining it with 'events', aesthetics, behaviours, orders, (im)perfections, and new relations. In so doing, it not only makes association between those events and 'spirit' of a certain period—which is marked by certain struggles and enjoyments both in social and individual levels—but also through such a mediation EEMSI 'events' also enable new relations with the place (venues, street corners, and cities), people, technologies, and imaginaries.

Viewed in the context of broader trajectory of my practice during the course of this research, *ecbatan* was a pivotal piece as it marked the beginning of a transition between two different approaches to composition: a familiar one according to which pieces were carefully planned and written and an emerging one that tended towards more performativity and was open to accidents. In my earlier works one of the main concerns was to figure out ways of exercising precise control over sounds and their spatial manifestations within a piece, in order to make them subservient to my compositional needs and aims. In my later works, however, these concerns increasingly shifted towards finding creative ways of giving up the precise control through more spontaneous and performative approaches to composition that involved improvisation. In *The Lived Experience of Improvisation* (2017) Simon Rose notes: 'The immediacy required for composing in the process of performing calls for a particular presence in time within engagement in the world, an intervolving.' (161) Through a retrospective reflection I would note that composing in and through performing became a focus, perhaps because it increasingly felt relevant to the new conditions of my life as I transitioned between the two societies (Iran and UK). This change took place organically and through an ongoing exchange with the practice of my interlocutors and that of my colleagues and friends in the UK, especially in SARC, where I have been based since summer of 2014. In this context, *ecbatan* can be viewed as the sonic/musical articulation of such a transition as well; one that marked the flow of time and embodied an experience of place and a mode of becoming—transitioning between a state of being refugee to a state of becoming permanent resident (and then citizen); from a state of insecurity and float to a state of relative stability and 'grounding'.

² See for instance Hsu *et al.* (2015), Ridder *et al.* (2013, 67–68), Pavlicevic *et al.* (2013), Ueda *et al.* (2013, 628–641), and Brotons (2000, 33–62).

The piece was finalised for a quadrophonic speaker configuration, transducers, and plywood, and was presented as a multimedia installation in SARC on the August of 2017. Four months later (in December), it was presented in Tehran at TADAEX 2017 as a 4-channel sound installation. Presenting my work in Iran marked the first phase of engaging more directly with producers and audiences inside the country. Such feedback processes during the course of this PhD opened new channels for further collaboration and new possibilities for research, dialogue, and exchange. It is ironic and a reality of the ‘digital age’ that material can travel at the speed of ‘light’ beyond the regulatory reach of the governments. I cannot go back to Iran, but my work can. It did—‘in the blink of an eye’—and was presented to the diverse audience of the major digital arts festival in the country.

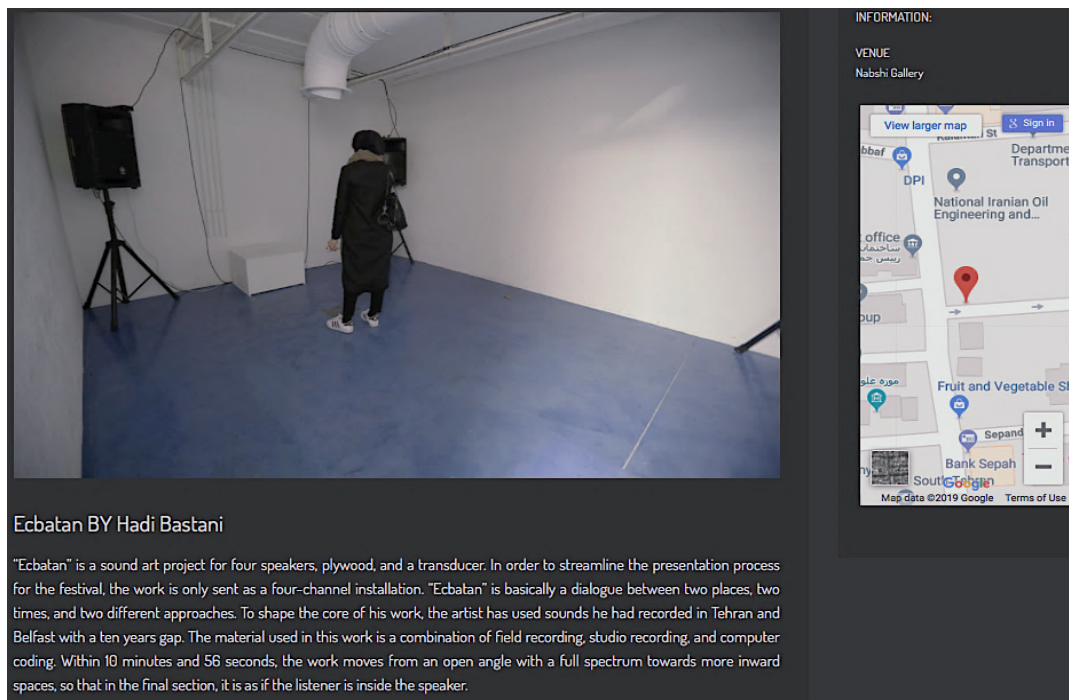


Figure 6-3. Screenshot from TADAEX 2017 programme³

³ The programme as well as the and the photo are accessible via the following link (last access 31 Jan. 2019): tadaex.com/2017/work.php?id=9