

Impulse | resonance

In resonance the inexhaustible return of eternity is played—and listened to.

Jean-Luc Nancy – Listening (2007)

The central element of this piece is a cell produced from two samples extracted from two songs with Persian lyrics. The first sample involves the word ‘Iran’, which is isolated from a song¹ titled *Baroon Miad* (Persian: بارون میاد), meaning ‘rain is falling’, produced by Fedai Guerillas² in 1970s. The second sample involves the Persian word *man* (Persian: من), meaning ‘self’ in the context of the song. It is extracted from a rap song titled *Kavir* (Persian: کویر) meaning ‘desert’ by Ali Sorena³, produced in 2017. Both samples are, however, processed in such a way that their semantic contents are concealed.

The first song was made with an anti-monarchy communist sensitivity, a romantic sense of duty towards (armed) resistance, and a belief in the power of the ‘masses’ for self-determination. The second, however, is a requiem for a painful longing for life; a ‘dark’ ode to solitude which expresses a rage against lack of individual autonomy. While the first promotes a sympathy among the ‘masses’ and is hopeful of a future in which an ideal of communist and just society is realised, the second presents an almost hatred for being stuck among the masses, also for war and violence. It ultimately laments for a ‘self’ that is not realised (and perhaps cannot yet be).

These two songs represent important concerns of two generations of, mainly, educated young people in Iran, four decades apart from each other: one that participated in the 1979 revolution and one that had to face its consequences without having taken part in it. The first engages with an idea of ideal *nation*. It refers to a time in which many groups with different and often conflicting ideologies converged in the fight against the monarchical system. The second, however, searches for its lost *individuality*. There is, nevertheless, common ground between the two. The latter can be described in terms of a struggle for freedom, autonomy, and a certain melancholy of *distance*—from a reality in which the struggle for ‘self’-realisation/identification

¹ The song is accessible via the following link (last access 1 Feb. 2019). The sampled word (‘Iran’) can be heard at 01:58–01:59. [youtube.com/watch?v=coOPfMqcPIs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=coOPfMqcPIs)

² Organization of Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas known as Fedaiyan-e Khalq, was a Marxist-Leninist underground guerrilla organisation in Iran founded in 1971. As part of their broader anti-imperialist agenda, they engaged in a revolutionary armed struggle against monarchy. Their activities were influential in preparing the ground for the 1979 Islamic revolution. The organisation as such dissolved in 1980, a year after the revolution, and were heavily repressed by the post-revolutionary regime.

³ The song is accessible via the following link (last access 1 Feb. 2019). The sampled word (‘*man*’) can be heard at 03:09–03:10 [youtube.com/watch?v=ZsNS-MmlrGA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsNS-MmlrGA)

is over; a reality in which the repressed and fuzzy self is reunited with its free, ‘authentic’, and ‘transparent’ other.⁴ Both songs are politically problematic in Iran. If discovered by security forces, even possession of these can potentially cause an owner trouble. The first song was denied public presence in both regimes due to its attachment to a communist ideology. The second has also been denied public presence as belonging to a genre (rap) that is labelled ‘morally deviant’⁵ by the Islamic Republic police and security chiefs—rap works cannot be released or performed publicly in Iran, apart from only a few exceptions who produce pro-regime songs—among the latter group some have been forced to do so under pressure from the security agents.⁶

As a medium that affords manipulation and juxtaposition of sonic events of any kind, electronic and electroacoustic music offer a context for a creative expression of the excluded; marginal sounds and dissident voices. Through decomposition, reprocessing, and recomposition, a material that is denied expression due to its semantic content or aesthetic features—in the case of the above two songs for ideological and political reasons—can be recontextualised and represented. As I have previously discussed, Iranian literature, music, architecture, art (including craft) is full of similar performances. This way of approaching composition does resonate with the practices of experimental electronic music in Iran as well. Although one may criticise such an approach as politically passive, in its disciplined creativity it nevertheless allows for dialogue. Also, in its aesthetic novelty, it allows easier negotiation with the political system, in times when the political system may be too intolerant of the nation’s direct critical expressions. Here, it is helpful to remember Hesam Ohadi’s comment on his experience of applying for a Permit. He had noted:

In one instance, they [Permit officials] listened to my heavily beat-oriented idm and Arash Akbari’s drone music and said: ‘These are just sound effects, not music.’ We are absolutely fine with this characterisation. It at least offers an opportunity for us to talk to each other. [...] Because our focus is sound, our works can be interpreted in many different ways, and I think that’s a good thing.
Interviewed on 22 Sep. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)

An indirect and metaphorical cultural expression and articulation of social-political matters, in a society in which direct political statement or social criticism is often suppressed by the

⁴ See 2.7 for a discussion that engages with an understanding of what this ‘distance’—a ‘cultural-specific’ embodied feeling of being alienated from the ‘source’—involves.

⁵ This is an expression used by former Tehran’s chief of police Hossein Sajedi-Nia in 2010. It is extracted from an article on the Telegraph titled ‘Why Iran is cracking down on rap music’, accessible via the following link (last accessed 7 Feb. 2019): telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/8123046/Why-Iran-is-cracking-down-on-rap-music.html

⁶ See these two articles in the Guardian that together narrate the story of an underground rap producer who, under pressure, turned into a pro-regime propaganda machine:

- 1- theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/03/iranian-rapper-website-arrested-amir-tatalou-narenji
- 2- theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2015/jul/20/iran-military-goes-hip-hop-for-youth-appeal-amir-tataloo

establishment, is both pragmatic and creative. Also, due to its ability to simultaneously afford new perspectives on thinking/doing and thus enabling channels for new forms of creative practice while allowing for discussion and debate, it is, in fact, radically political. Having a historical grounding in Iranian culture, such a ‘playful’ and pragmatic way of reforming material for aesthetic purposes through abstraction/metaphor, is, in fact, embodied in everyday social performances of Iranians. Aesthetics of EEMSI, as such, can be viewed in relation to, and perhaps as a recurrence of, similar social-historical-cultural tropes.

Let us go back to the piece. The two samples were processed separately and then mixed together as one audio cell from which the composition developed. The main techniques used in *impulse|resonance* involved time-stretching, pitch-shifting, and granular synthesis. These methods were applied in order for the piece to explore the ‘inner’ qualities of the extracted sounds—of ‘Iran’ and ‘*man*’ (meaning self)—as these were transformed into a set of drones and ‘controlled’ noises. The drones were then combined with the sound of a bell. The final material, as such, can be heard as the development of drones through resonance of the bell. The composition process involved identifying points of synchrony between the rhythm of the bell resonances and fluctuations of the drones, in order to play with the ‘beating’ resulted from the movements of their pitch contents against each other.

The piece also explored how social concerns could ‘resound’ in or find an expression through electroacoustic music. After it was shared together with a description with a number of my interlocutors, *impulse|resonance* triggered a conversation about ‘ideals’ and if/how experimental electronic music scene in Iran has any connection to those. It seemed that due to its relationship to ideology this term (ideal) divided the crowd. One of my interlocutors said in a private message on Facebook:

Music is what we love to do. It is the realisation of a dream of what we enjoy doing. It has nothing to do with politics. It is pure exploration, as a result of which a small society is shaped that is primarily concerned with sound and artistic expression.

Another one said:

Experimenting with sounds and making music in an environment that does not value music is purely idealistic, if not naïve or even mad. This mad idealism, however, should not be dissolved through discussions that focus on social aspect of everything, as it is a deeply personal, if not squarely anti-social endeavour.

Along the similar lines, Milad Bagheri and Maryam Sirvan of the electronica duo NUM from Rasht (capital city of a northern province in Iran), which has been based in Tblisi since around 2018 (or second half of 2017), told me:

We live in Rasht but sometimes we wonder what that really means [says Milad]. We have the physical experience of living here for all our life but mentally it's like we've never been here [says Maryam]. [She continues:] We are not involved in social processes here. Yes, we live in our own bubble, if you like [Milad says]. [He continues:] The only influence of Rasht in our work comes from its nature [Maryam agrees]—jungle, sea, mountains—that offers us an escape from the social environment. If this surrounding natural and musical world did not exist, there would have been nothing else left here for us to do and enjoy [says Maryam]. *Interviewed on 10 May 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

My interlocutors' accounts describe 'musicking', in its broad sense (Small 1998), in terms of 'love' of doing music/sound; as playful articulation of difference and of an imagined alternative sociality. In this context, musicking can be understood as enacting a suppressed individuality that has emerged as the consequence of a compromised sociality. Musicking, as such, seems to have offered the producers a 'space' for self-realisation and self-identification; a 'technology of the self' (DeNora 1999, 53). Why self-identification for these individuals often means a rejection of the social and its crucial role in shaping their practice, decisions, and preferences, has to be answered in relation to what music and society mean to them. To answer the former, Simon Frith's seminal essay *Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music* (1987)—in which he identifies four 'social functions' (or meanings) of (pop)⁷ music—provides us with significant insight. Frith views music's first social function in relation to its capacity in 'answering questions of identity' (2007, 264). He continues: 'The pleasure that pop music produces is a pleasure of identification—with the music we like, with the performers of that music, with the other people who like it.' In a society in which many forms of expression may be labelled 'immoral' and be confronted⁸—not just by the state but also by the larger society in which the state's repressive behaviour is, to varying degrees, internalised and transformed into mechanisms of self-policing—this function acquires a critical significance.

(Self-)identification with music, as such, functions, using Maryam and Milad's words (comment on previous page), as an 'escape'—from the melancholy resulting from a forced interaction with a filtered, staged, and imposing social space. In this context, musicking provides a locus for realisation of new understandings of identity through a rewarding activity capable of creating its own networks of sociality, that can be extended beyond the national borders in our 'digital age'. Attached to a more accessible community of producers thanks to the internet and digital technologies, that share similar 'tastes', ways of thinking and doing, musicking as such offers new affective modes of sociality. Drawing from Frith's observation, musicking, therefore,

⁷ I have put 'pop' in parentheses to suggest, drawing on Waters (2015, 22–32), that his observation is not limited to a certain form of practice and is applicable to music in general.

⁸ See for instance this recent example of a teenage girl beaten and arrested for playing water games with her friends in a public park: observers.france24.com/en/20190628-iran-teenage-girl-iranpolice-water-guns

affords experimental electronic producers in Iran ‘a way of managing the relationship between [their] public and private emotional lives.’ (2007, 265) Recalling Reza Kazemzadeh’s comment (2.7, page 53–54), made from the perspective of a clinical psychologist, will be complementary in appreciating the importance of these two functions in the context of practices under scrutiny in this text.

In Iran [...] the more one isolates oneself from the society the more s/he gains in freedom and autonomy, because the public domain is not the right environment to experience those. This [...] can provide ingredients for depression, however, paradoxically, it also offers space for experiencing autonomy and agency. *Interviewed on 26 Jan. 2018 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Through a blind search on google, I saw *impulse | resonance* as part of a mix of ‘Iranian’ electronic music on the-attic.net⁹, along with the works of Alireza Mashayekhi, Ata Ebtekar, Ali Phi (aka Elemaun), Kamran Arashnia, Javad Safari (Baaroot), and Hesam Ohadi (aka Idlefon) among others, all of whom contributed to the process of this research. Attic, a platform that claims to be dedicated to investigating cultures across the world, has paid a particular attention to electronic music in Iran, and especially to the activities of Ata Ebtekar.¹⁰ Appearing in collections like that, my practice has been consistently in ‘touch’ with the scene, feeding back into its processes, while developing through an exchange with it, which continued all throughout the research.

⁹ The mix is available via the following link (last accessed 1 Feb. 2019): the-attic.net/audio/2211/destinations:-improvised-soundscapes-in-iran.html

¹⁰ See for instance the article titled *Dinner with Sote* via the following link (last accessed 28 May 2019): the-attic.net/features/2260/dinner-with-sote.html or the Attic’s Staff Picks of April 2019: the-attic.net/news/2270/staff-picks--april-2019.html?fbclid=IwAR37CO0Hc1z12QziRvmUuTJ8xFhFEV24c6O6O9JjsPsI5J9SM8JrD8x1ymw

The underground scene in Iran is thriving on Soundcloud and other online platforms, with many artists publishing their works, with or without a record label. My intention was to completely avoid the mainstream and search for hidden gems and what I found, after weeks of digging, astonished me.

There are lots of contemporary Iranian artists composing (dark) ambient music, drone, electroacoustic experiments and also a bit of techno and eerie idm. Most of them rely on field recordings and on reinterpretations of traditional Persian folklore or ethnic instruments and they barely use voices. Listen with your eyes closed and let these ambiances haunt you and let you wander and wonder.

The third search result in Google when typing "Iran" is "Censorship in Iran". The Iranian Revolution from 1979 led by Ayatollah Khomeini empowered a very strict regime of censorship; all pop music was virtually eradicated from Iran. Many pre-revolution Iranian musicians in the 1970s had to hide their music once Islamic fundamentalists grabbed control and started burning down record companies and harassing musicians.

This mixtape wouldn't have been possible without the kind help of [Vlad Petri](#) (who also made the cover of this mix and brought me music from his latest photo-trip in Iran), [Raffaele Pezzella](#) (with his brilliant compilation "Visions of Darkness" focused on Iranian underground) and [Cedryk Fermont](#), with his extensive [Syrphe](#) database.

*Mixtape & words by [Miron Ghiu](#) / Photo by [Vlad Petri](#).

1. Anunnaki Signal - Father
2. Alireza Mashayekhi - Panoptikum
3. Elernaun - Xylow
4. Kamran Arashnia - The Field
5. Poo Yar - Buried Alive
6. Bushehr Dances - Track 01
7. Xerxes The Dark- Song of Dust
8. Ata Ebtakar - Micro Tuning
9. Hadi Bastani - Impulse Resonance
10. Tarxun - Follow me (Foamcut-mix)
11. Baaroot - Repetitious 2'F Ø1 (Kamran Arashnia Remix)
12. Alphaxone - A Dystopia
13. Ata Ebtakar - Miniature Tone
14. Ali Phi - Condition.III
15. Mahdyar - Iran Iraq
16. Idlefon (with Kamyar Behbahani) - Headless

Figure 6-2. Screenshot captured from the-attic.net, showing impulseresonance included as part of a mix of Iranian electronic music.¹¹

¹¹ Extracted from the following link (last accessed 1 Feb. 2019):
the-attic.net/audio/2211/destinations:-improvised-soundscapes-in-iran.html