intra.view: A Collaborative Composition

The project started by selecting four participants at random among my interlocutors.[1] To my surprise, all the first four candidates chosen—Kiana Tajammol, Sohrab Motabar, Ramin Safavi, and Mo H. Zareei—agreed to participate. Finding a structure for collaboration was the theme of our initial conversations. The idea of working simultaneously via an online collaborative platform was rejected due to unpredictabilities of accessing the internet in Iran and the logistics of managing a timetable for five individuals to get online at the same time and write music or perform together in different time zones. We finally agreed that it was best if we compose individually, at our own pace, and share the result via a cloud-based file-sharing service such as Wetransfer or Dropbox. The participants also agreed that I had to kickstart the process myself.

I began by making a generative music patch using NI Reaktor[2], which involved a few noise generators, filters, sample players, a harmoniser, and a granular synthesis engine. Using this programme, a piece was written that consisted of two parts: a fully composed eight-minute section that involved my active engagement with the above-mentioned objects through performance, and a forty-two-minute 'generative' section produced through an exchange among the objects themselves according to a self-regulating feedback mechanism. While the first part was somewhat charged with my presence as composer, the second part involved a quasi-autonomous mechanism through which a fluid and rather minimal soundscape emerged without my direct intervention in its process. We agreed to consider the first eight minutes as the first composer's active response to the affordances and limitations of working with only a few source materials and modifiers, and the following forty-two minutes as a basis upon which everyone else could construct their response in relation to the first composer's (i.e. my) intervention (the first eight minutes). Everyone was allowed to sample any part of the piece (the whole fifty minutes) or to work with her/his own material while producing music/sound that reacted in some shape or form to my composition/intervention.

I received the responses consecutively on May 4 (Ramin), June 13 (Mo), June 22 (Sohrab), and August 9 (Kiana), 2017. Ramin sent me a video as well. It was captured from a live version of his response, which he had performed with a fellow producer in a private party in Tehran.

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[1] For selecting the potential participants, I assigned each of my interlocutors a number. The ordering of these numbers corresponded to the sequence of our interviews in the course of the research. For instance, the first person with whom I interviewed (the earliest interview in the course of the research) was assigned 1, the second 2, and so on. Then, using a random number generator in Max/MSP, four numbers were produced.

[2] Reaktor is a graphical modular software that allows for a visual, object-based approach to composition and sound design. For more information visit: native-instruments.com/en/products/komplete/synths/reaktor-6/

Listening back to the responses, an immediate remark can be made in relation to the length of the compositions. Except Mo who entirely disregarded the second part of the original piece, producing a remix of the first eight minutes in an idm style, the other three participants based their compositions on the entirety of the second part interacting in different ways with the forty-two-minute computer-generated soundscape. Sohrab's and Kiana's pieces, although very different from each other in their choice of material and sound manipulation processes, could be broadly placed within a tradition of electroacoustic music. Ramin's beat-oriented, concept-album-like response, however, had hip-hop influences. Mo's remix revealed an idm inspiration that manifested in his placement (or timing) of kick drums, use of digital delay, and heavy side-chain compression.

Sohrab's composition remained somewhat faithful to the generic form of the original soundscape, responding to its abrupt changes and gradual shifts. It presented a playful exchange with the original material. His recording sounded very much 'performed'; as if he had composed through performance. Although I could constantly distinguish the original sounds throughout Sohrab's piece, his interventions constantly challenged those, producing zones of contestation and tension, while occasionally releasing the pressure and dropping the listener back into the rather calm and familiar field of reference; that of the source material.

Sohrab graduated after this collaboration, in 2018, from a Master's degree at Institute of Sonology in Royal Conservatory of The Hague in computer-assisted composition using non-standard synthesis techniques. He is based in the Hague but travels frequently between Iran and Holland. He described his method of interacting with the piece as follows:

> I have used three drum loops and a virtual tape sampler with variable speed as parts of a bigger patch I had made in Max/MSP. The drum loops' tempi are determined by the speed with which the tape sampler reads the source audio that consists of samples that I had recorded from the first eight minutes of your piece. Then I coupled the output of the sampler with the drum loops in different ways using ring modulation, vocoding, sidechain compression, etc. […] Next, I listened to the second part of your piece again and realised that it somehow functioned as silence for me or like a background noise. So, I used this part as a basis over which I improvised with my Max patch, while trying to pay attention and respond to the overall shape and texture of your work in real time […] As you have noticed it too, my piece sounds very much performed. *Interviewed on 1 Jul. 2017 (2nd interview – translated from Persian by myself)*

I used the opportunity of speaking to him again to ask how he became interested in electronic and electroacoustic music in a country with almost no background in these fields. His response was illuminating as it pointed me in an obvious direction, which I had not previously considered—to the national TV and Radio. He replied:

> I grew up among people who were seriously influenced by the transformation in Iranian arts with modern influences. Shiraz Festival, for instance, was influential in spreading new forms of practice, I think. But even in the suffocating years of 1980s [the first decade after the revolution] and early 1990s one could still hear electronic music on TV and Radio. Many famous works of the 1960s and 1970s were used—of course all the copyright stuff was ignored [he laughs]—from Vangelis to Pink Floyd to Jean-Michel Jarre. I mean such aesthetics and influences did not suddenly disappear after the revolution. These kinds of stimuli in my surroundings certainly had an influence on the development of my musical taste.

Around two month later, a comment made by Javad Safari—the engineer who had helped my band (White Comedy) record and mix its debut, and last album in Kargadan Studio in Tehran—also pointed me in the same direction:

> Apart from a very few works published for instance by Ahmad Pejman and Naser Cheshm Azar—works like *Barane Eshgh* and *Hameh Shahre Iran* in which keyboard synthesisers were used mainly to mimic the familiar sounds of acoustic instruments—people could still hear electronic music in cinema, also on TV and Radio; mainly in the background of programs for instance during weather forecast, news, and documentaries. *Interviewed on 25 Aug. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

The comments made by Sohrab and Javad (above) provided the provocation for exploring Shiraz Festival (discussed in 2.3) and the impact of national TV and Radio, as well as the film industry, on the emergence of an experimental electronic music scene in Iran (discussed in 2.6, 2.7 and 4.2).

Let us go back to *intra.view*. Sohrab's strategy in responding to the general form and texture of the piece was shared among all the participants. However, his spontaneous, improvisatory, and performative approach in responding to the changes in the source material separated his work from the rest of the group's. Kiana told me that she had mainly used 'field-recording and samples recorded from playing with objects in her flat while listening to the original piece', in a more in-control way and cinematic style. (Interviewed on 5 Feb. 2018 – translated by myself from Persian) Her work is composed mainly using found objects and field recordings juxtaposed with highly processed or synthesised sounds, and a layer of pitch-shifted human voice with no semantic content, which sounds like a mixture of humming and delirious growling. The piece begins, rather abruptly, with a layered drone that sounds like a synthetic glass harmonica. After about thirty seconds, sound of fireworks (or fired bullets) and ambulance siren position the 'listener' in the middle of a field, where events had already been taking place. Before the 'listener' could find time to figure out what the origin of the sounds might be, s/he is dropped into a new synthetic-sounding environment where s/he would follow a voice; a female voice. Such abrupt cuts constantly introduce the 'listener' to new soundscapes. As such, the piece presents a dream-like environment in which momentarily-established events are repeatedly replaced and/or transformed by new ones. In the midst of this constantly-shifting soundscape,

the listener is occasionally transported back into an environment, where the clatters of familiar everyday life could be distinguished.

Kiana graduated from a Bachelor's degree in New Technologies in Art with a focus on video art from Brera Academy of Milan in 2015. She was based in Tehran when I interviewed her on February 2018, but moved back to Italy around 10 months later. She told me that she was initially introduced to EEMSI through her Italian partner who is an electronic producer. Regarding her experience of participating in this collaborative composition project and her methods, she said to me:

> I was listening to the news just before starting to work on the piece. So, I had all those images and sounds of Syria and other stuff in my head. I began by playing with and recording certain objects in my flat. Listening back to the recordings, I realised that I could hear TV news it in the background. After a few times of more careful listening, as I was composing with these sounds, I realised that I could also hear another distant noise that I had not been aware of when I made the recordings. It was from the near-by airport and an operation that I had recently made aware of; that of washing the plane engines. My previous flat, where I composed the piece, was in a residential complex [Ekbatan], which is located near Mehrābād [an airport in west-end of Tehran]. The field recordings that I mentioned were produced in Milan during a festive night with fireworks and ambulance sirens. It felt right to use them as they sonically invoked an environment close to that of the TV news [war in Syria]. I finished the piece by improvising a bit with my voice on top. *Interviewed on 5 Feb. 2018 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Ramin described the shape of the original material as 'wave-like', noting that:

> Like sea waves, the events in your piece come to the foreground of attention and fade to the background in varying intervals, both in big and small chunks. I decided to retain this characteristic in my response. *Interviewed on 25 Apr. 2018 (2nd interview – translated from Persian by myself)*

He was not otherwise interested to talk about his methods. He said: 'Whatever you want to hear is already there [in the music].' (Interviewed on 25 Apr. 2017 – translated from Persian by myself) He did not even send me the original file of his composition. Instead, he offered two live recordings from two performances of his piece, one that he had played alone in his bedroom/studio and another which he had performed with a fellow producer in a private gathering somewhere in Tehran. The former was an M4A audio file, recorded via his iPhone, and the latter was an MP4 multimedia file (audio and video), which was captured using a camcorder.

Ramin's response teases out two important aspects of musical practice, perhaps more clearly than other participants. Firstly, by recording sound via mobile phone and camcorder, it reminds the 'listener' of the mediatory role of technology in shaping 'music' and the way its

affect is communicated. Within the recordings, such a mediation manifested for instance in certain qualitative features that could be explored using an audio spectrogram visualiser. Viewed as such, the waveforms revealed 'traces' of Ramin's room as accentuation of certain resonant frequencies and suppression of others. This can be discerned from the picture on the next page, which offers a screenshot from the spectrogram of the recording made in Ramin's bedroom/studio, in the shape of an audio spectrum weighted to the low and mid frequencies (colourful areas) and sparse in higher ones (dark areas), indicating that the energy of low frequencies have 'masked' higher ones with shorter wave lengths. This can be heard as a recognisable 'hum' in the lower-end of the frequency spectrum, which is the result of bass frequencies' movement between the concrete walls coated with plaster in Ramin's room. Secondly, his response highlighted the fact that we always experience sounds as vibrations in the space. Through Georgina Born's perspective, which offers the view that that the 'most distinguishing feature of the auditory experience is its capacity to reconfigure the space' (2015, 3), Ramin's work could be experienced as an agent that reconfigured the space of his room, the place of gathering in Tehran, my studio in Belfast, and my research.

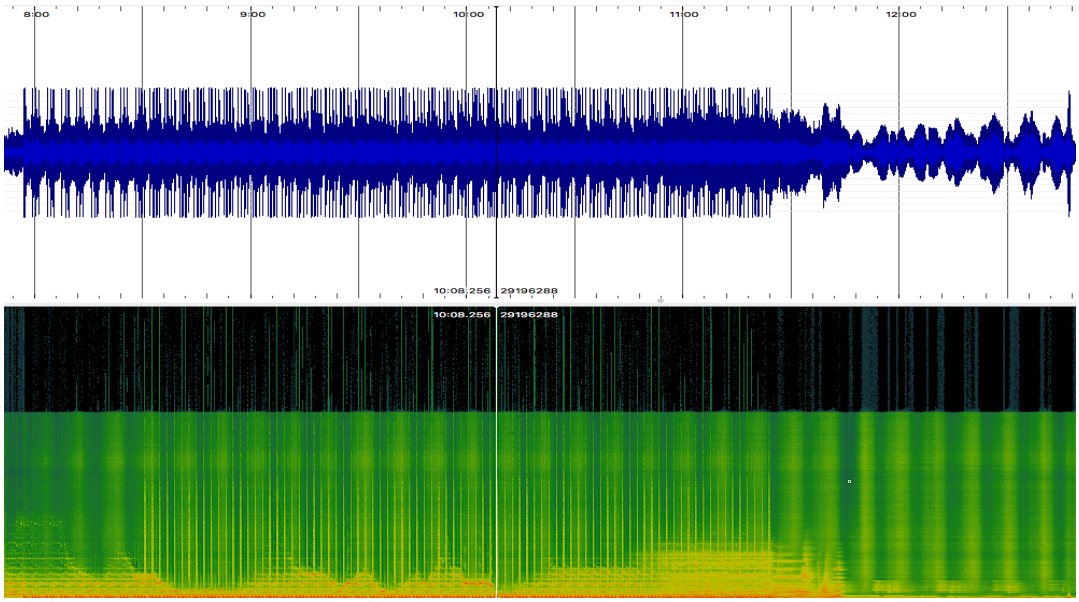

Figure 6-8. Screenshot from a part of the spectrogram of Ramin's composition produced using Sonic Visualiser

Ramin's response also shares with us a rather personal experience. It lets us 'in' his most private space, a place in which his musical journey had begun and developed. In so doing, it emphasises the relation of that space to his music/sound and reminds us of the distributed (or social) aspect of musical practice in its broader relationship to space, place[3], and affect. Lastly, by limiting us

[3] For an anthropological investigation of the relations between space and place see Feld and Basso (1996).

to 'low-quality' recordings, one of which articulates an experience of his bedroom/studio while the other involves a video that arguably foregrounds his image more than the sound, Ramin reminds us of his 'presence', his individuality, significance, and agency.

Mo is based in New Zealand, where he lecturers in Music Technology at Victoria University of Wellington. He also travels frequently to Iran. His descriptions similarly reveal a relationship between the sonic aesthetics of his practice in general, including his response in the context of this collaboration, to space/place. In his case, this space/place is Ekbatan; the residential complex where he grew up. He says:

> It was summer of 2014. I was walking in Ekbatan when something about the environment suddenly struck me. I discovered a close relationship between the 'modern' brutalist architecture of the place and the kind of aesthetics that interested me in music and design, for example those that were promoted through Raster-Noton [record label]. In fact, I simply realised that I had grown up in an environment that possessed distinct aesthetic features. I always loved Ekbatan and appreciated its orderliness. Any time I came back home, I felt a familiar sense of relief. This realisation led me to research brutalist architecture, which in turn made me increasingly see relationships between the sonic aesthetics and design philosophy of the Raster-Noton, brutalist architecture, and that of my own practice. So, an obvious connection was made between my environment and my practice in terms of an appreciation of order and structure. I later co-published a paper in *Organised Sound* [2016, Volume 21, Special Issue 1, 51–60] and discussed this in more detail. *Interviewed on 28 Sep. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Three out of four participants, which were selected at random for this project, lived at least a part of their life in Ekbatan[4]. This is interesting. Apart from Kiana, Ramin, Mo, and myself, I know that Siavash Amini and Sina Shoaei also lived periods of their lives in Ekbatan. There may be others too. A more local and focused investigation of the relationship between place and the aesthetics of experimental electronic music in Iran can potentially offer significant new insights into the workings of the scene. The relevance Ekbatan's architecture, spatio-material distribution, demographics on the emergence of particular styles of electronic music practice in Tehran, could in itself be a new direction for further research.

Juxtaposed with the interview material and participants' descriptions, the four compositions prove to be a large source of information and potential knowledge. In addition to what was discussed, Kiana's work with its references to Mehrābād airport and war in Syria, together with Ramin's sonic references to his claustrophobic bedroom, draws attention to the spatial aspect of sound/music and its relation to private-public continuum as a segmented and partitioned space; 'one with potential for generating multiple nestings.' (Born 2013, 25, citing

[4] Aerial view of Ekbatan (last accessed 28 Jul. 2018): wikimapia.org/1320963/Ekbatan-Residential-Complex#/photo/1195811

Gal 2002, 81). Ramin's and Sohrab's descriptions regarding the form and function of the original material, using terms like 'foreground' and 'background', also draw attention to the cognitive aspect of listening as a situated embodied activity.

To conclude, I would note that by highlighting the role of technology, space/place, and cognition, the responses evoke a discussion regarding the modality of musical practice as 'inherently mediational' in the sense that 'music is always (but variably) experienced through a constellation of aural, notational, visual, performative, corporeal, social, discursive, and technological forms—forms that mediate music (or sound)' (Born 2015, 9). It is in the light of this insight—of music as mediational practice—that, using Latour's concept of 'mediators' (2005, 39), meaning can be extracted and analysed as translated, distorted, and modified through music, helping us understand 'how music is transformed by its social manifestations or embodiments, as the social is being produced and transformed by music.' (Born 2015, 9) Presented in public venues, the initially private, personal, and dispersed manifestations of experimental electronic music in Iran have found a 'voice' and a position within the society. Equipped with a refreshed (or re-invented) sense of social identity, experimental electronic sound has reconfigured the public within particular niches of activity in the country (and beyond), offering a new 'sense' of spaces to those who experienced its unfolding 'on the ground'. The experimental electronic 'voice', as such, has been articulating an embodiment and imagination of the place, which has fed back into the society and catalysed new modes of practice, thinking, and sociality.

In the last stage of the project I recomposed the original work, based on all the four responses I had received, in order to add yet another layer of commentary and close the circle. The piece was presented as an audio-visual collaboration with the US-based visual artist Anna Weisling at Sonorities Festival 2018 in the Sonic Arts Research Centre, Queen's University Belfast. Unfortunately, none of the participants managed to come to Belfast to contribute to the performance of the work due to other engagements or difficulties obtaining visa. I contacted Narcissa Kasraï—electroacoustic composer based in Tehran—who I hoped would be interested in collaborating. She agreed. The festival's management team officially invited her to perform and provided support for her visa, travel, and accommodation costs for the period of the festival. Despite assurances and supports, Narcissa was unsuccessful in obtaining a visa. I recount this story to tease out another aspect of this collaboration in its inevitable entanglement with the political.

With a focus on the creative process and collective experience, *intra.view* offered an opportunity for coordinated artistic exchange and ethnographic research, the result of which influenced the discussions and arguments presented in the thesis. As such, this collaboration suggests a new form of ethnography; the one in which the familiar role of the ethnographer, who *observes* the activities of her/his 'informants' and/or *participates* in their performances, is reversed. Within the scenario put forward by *intra.view*, the ethnographer as artist-participant-collaborator sets up a context for collective art-making, the more precise conditions of which is negotiated and designed with the help of his interlocutors. This practice is aimed to encourage the 'informants' to get directly involved in the process of the research, codetermining its outcome and future directions. The task of the ethnographer, in this respect, apart from being a collaborator, becomes the examiner of the said involvements, their inter-relations, and their broader connections to the 'flows' that are often understood by the artists/musicians to be external, hence secondary, to the processes of making and, as such, ignored during informal conversations or formal interviews.

Figure 6-9. Kiana Tajammol (left) performing at Sayeh Art Galery, Tehran, 17 Sep. 2016. Photo by Behshad Tajammol.

Figure 6-10. Sohrab Motabar performing at Today's Art Festival, The Grey Space, The Hague, 22 Sep. 2018.

Figure 6-11. Mo H. Zareei aka mHz performing at SETxCTM Festival, Azadi Tower, Tehran, 26 Jul. 2018.

Figure 6-12. Ramin Safavi (left) performing his version of intra.view with a fellow musician in a private event, Tehran, 18 Apr. 2017. Image is a screenshot captured by myself from the video that Ramin has sent me of this performance.