Commentary on Portfolio of Compositions

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Abstract

This commentary is submitted along with a portfolio of musical compositions and is mainly formed around the notions behind each project. The text draws attention to works by various philosophers and musicians in order to elucidate the ideas and motives behind the musical and audio-visual pieces presented. First, the influences of Edgard Varèse on the compositional ideas of the pieces are illustrated. Subsequently, Gilles Deleuze's interpretations of paintings by Francis Bacon are employed to define the qualities of sensational music and how such music can impact the listener's nervous system rather than his brain. The difference between the 'idea' of a piece of art and the 'concept' behind a piece of art is examined through Roland Barthes' definition of the 'obtuse meaning'. More personally, the traumatic events in the history of Iran and their impacts on traditional Iranian music are explored. The reflection of these impacts on the presented compositions is demonstrated. Furthermore, the approach towards structure in the pieces is delineated to clarify the sense of great tension and displacement in the sound-space. Finally, detailed analysis of the submitted projects further illustrates the particular ideas and personal motivations behind each work.

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iiii. Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is written by me, Pouya Ehsaei, and is the result of my research and practice in Music Research Centre of University of York. This thesis and the accompanying portfolio are not submitted for any other examination in University of York or elsewhere before. The text is written by me and only me and no paper based on this thesis is published anywhere.

1.Research Aims

This thesis consists of a portfolio of compositions and an accompanying commentary. In this commentary, I will give a personal account of the works presented in the portfolio. I will discuss thinkers, artists and musicians who have altered my perception of how a piece of artwork can be conceived. The paradigm shift in my personal approach to art concerns moving away from viewing art as a concept-driven process and towards viewing the process itself as a space where the material is structured into a piece. This text outlines the thinking that underpins my practical creative portfolio. I will present the past four years of research and practice chronologically in order to demonstrate the contextual process of this shift and the resulting changes in my research methodologies, my practice in music, and in art more generally.

First, by discussing my understanding of the philosophy of music and the aesthetics of art I will outline a map of my interests, influences and research. I will detail my fascination with the works of Edgard Varèse, a musician I have always admired and will then move on to discuss how Francis Bacon's intellectual/creative pursuits have influenced my own. Next, I will discuss the works of Christian Fennesz in relation to textural sound and the use of technology in music.

Second, by illustrating the historical and contemporary state of Iranian music through historical facts and personal experience I will put the material that I work with into perspective and indicate the reasons why I think it is important to refer to Iranian music in my own work. Finally, I will give details about each project included in my portfolio in relation to the background ideas given in the previous sections.

2. Background

2.1 Edgard Varèse

Much has been written about Edgard Varèse that is of relevance to my work. In particular, the way he considers his 'music' as 'Organised Sound' (Varèse, 2004: 20) is perhaps the most pertinent for me. The description brings with it meanings that deviate from classical and established definitions of music.

With Varèse's definition one would abandon the conventional rules of music, such as melody, harmony and counterpoint, in order to create a soundscape. By using 'Organised Sound' instead of 'Music' he redefines sound as an object. As a note of clarification, by 'Music', in this context, I mean any form of organised sound that has been created based on the analysis of the sound in order to create a harmonically and rhythmically correct relationship between different elements of the sound.

Thinking of music as organised sound reduces the gap between music and pure art; it opens up a horizon for musicians to go beyond the "entertainment for the ears" by making pieces that can be considered as self-contained pieces of artwork without the need for explanation or external references.

Thinking of music as organised sound, Varèse emphasises the movements of 'sound-masses' and 'shifting planes', instead of how each particular note sounds with another one. Moreover, organised sound has a spatial dimension to it. It is as if the composer organises sound by placing each sound object on defined points in space and time. Varèse explains:

> We have actually three dimensions in music: horizontal, vertical, and dynamic swelling or decreasing. I shall add a forth, sound projection—that feeling that sound is leaving us with no hope of being reflected back, a feeling akin to that aroused by beams of light sent forth by a powerful searchlight—for the ear and for the eye, that sense of projection, of a

journey into space. (Varèse, 2004: 18)

This is an accurate definition of musical space—a space in which sound *happens*. It is almost as if everything else apart from the space is self-generated; what we hear is a 'melodic totality' in a sound-space, and 'The entire work will flow as a river flows' (Varèse, 2004: 18). Ultimately, there are no compositional or 'musical' rules to obey; there are just natural and physical rules. The composer wrenches the sound from silence and projects it into space, where he controls its interaction with other planes of sound, deciding how it will change in time and then observing how it decays back into silence and never reflecting back. He can create retrospective or prospective exceptions whenever he wants. There is no predefined form; the tension and release cannot be separated explicitly and can even interact with each other simultaneously. Each listener might perceive these moments differently, and each of them might get something completely different 'after' each listening experience. The music does not end with the song; the feelings it inspires can remain with the listener long after. The listener's conception would extend beyond the 'frame' of the song—just as one would think of what is happening outside the frame of a painting. This serves to justify the claim that the 'experiment' in experimental music should not be considered solely as a component of the composition process. The listener is there to experiment as well.

2.2 Francis Bacon

In this section, by using Gilles Deleuze's analysis (Deleuze, 1981) of Francis Bacon's paintings, I will explain my understanding of the 'Sensational' and the difference between abstractive and narrative, and then apply the idea of the Sensational to music. Further, I will explain what I think an 'idea' of a piece of artwork is and how it affects the way I work on my material.

In his detailed analysis of Bacon's paintings, *Francis Bacon: The Logic Of Sensation* (1981), Gilles Deleuze defines the Sensation as something beyond abstraction. Sensation is whatever we feel and sense through any of our senses. He talks about how Francis Bacon despises narrative and figurative paintings and how for Bacon, painting does not represent a subject nor tell a story. Deleuze explains:

> There are two ways of going beyond the illustrative and the figurative: either towards abstract form or towards the Figure. Cézanne gave a simple name to this way of the figure: sensation; the figure is a sensible form related to a sensation. It acts immediately upon the nervous system … whereas abstract form is addressed to the head, and acts through the intermediary of the brain. (Deleuze, 1981:34)

Any work of art that has this characteristic of being Sensational, instead of being narrative, conceptual or abstract, confines the process of the realisation of the work— the process in through which the work comes into being — to the moment in time when it is confronted by an audience. However, there is a tendency amongst art collectors, music industry experts, art critics and artists themselves to put conceptual meaning behind every aspect of a piece of art, since this makes it easier to sell it as a product. I deliberately try to avoid this, yet the demand for showcasing your music is so strong that it perhaps would have helped me if I had conformed from time to time in order to progress in my career as an artist. What is important for me is the 'idea'. Idea has

different meanings in different contexts; for me, an idea is a thought that occupies your brain and nervous system and resists being put in a harness. It is a wild state of mind in which things are spontaneous, serendipitous, and at the same time fragile. Each wave of thought comes to your mind with more strength than the one before; it cannot be conceived of, only experienced. You cannot put it into a conceptual framework; and that is what I really want to achieve through the way I work. I want my work to go beyond the music and beyond conceptualisation and analysis, so that it represents my state of mind and my surroundings at the time of composition *and* realisation. Thus I try to eliminate anything that plants my ideas in audiences' heads and prevents the audience from projecting their own ideas and feelings into my work. By trusting the audience in this way, I tend not to force them to perceive any meaning in my work and let them have an experience of their own in their confrontation with it. Roland Barthes calls the meaning that is extracted from an audiences' personal experience of a text (in this case, including artwork) as 'Obtuse meaning'. He writes: Obtuse Meaning is 'the supplement that my intellection cannot succeed in absorbing, at once persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive' (Barthes, 1977:54) and 'it seems to open the field of meaning totally, that is infinitely' (Barthes, 1977:55). Barthes' explanation of the 'Obtuse Meaning' is close to Deleuze's definition of 'Sensational'. 'Obtuse meaning' acts on the nervous system and cannot be absorbed by the 'intellect'.

We can ask, therefore, whether there is any way for an artist to put this 'Obtuse Meaning' into his work, bypassing the audience's intellect in order to affect their nervous system. As explained above, in my opinion one can attempt to get closer to this 'Obtuse Meaning' and 'Sensational' reception through 'experimentation'; the only way that one can create, without conceptualising, an idea is through experimentation. While experimenting, the artist is the first audience of his work. There should be room for the audience to experience this 'infinity', and it will not be achieved when they see the so-called 'creator' of the work directing them how to feel. When composing, I try to start with an idea and experiment with different possibilities of that idea through the material at hand. But as soon as everything is flowing—when the idea and the material work well

together—there necessarily follows a series of painstaking edits and additional ideas in order to disguise the main idea. With this way of working I try to conceal my initial idea, and it becomes just a starting point that holds together the integrity of the compositional process; I still like to think that the starting-point idea is vaguely perceptible, still there for the audience if they want it, although submerged enough to be safely ignored or overlooked. When I speak of audience in this context I mean my ideal audience, one that would find my work an inspiring and pleasurable tour-de-force. Personally, while listening to music or seeing any other form of art, whenever I can grasp the concept of the work and the idea behind it, I unconsciously stop enjoying it, be it during my confrontation with it or after it. Hence, I try to play with my material in a way so that the idea behind the process is not vivid but is still there, something that glues the material together and makes a coherent sound-space out of them.

There is another important aspect of Deleuze's analysis of Bacon's paintings that can be applied to the realm of sound and how sound is manipulated and structured. Deleuze defines two different movements in Bacon's painting. The first of these movements is from the space or the material structure towards the 'Figure'. Deformation of the figure is a result of the force that the surrounding space has put on the isolated body. In music, it can be considered that the sound-space affects each sound object. Sound objects come in to being in a certain space and will be affected by the forces in that space. To represent different layers of sound as one integrated sound, all of the layers should be surrounded and isolated by one musical space.

The other movement in Bacon's painting, highlighted by Deleuze, is that of the subject of the painting towards the material structure. The figure tries hysterically to escape from the body and disappear into the material structure. These waves of forces from outside and inside the figure result in the deformation of the body or subject. Bacon casts these forces in his paintings. This is very similar to Varèse's notion of 'the movement of sound-masses and of shifting planes' (Varèse, 2004: 17) and also to that of the collision of the sound masses and interaction between each plane of sound.

Deleuze further explains the relation between music and painting and how representation of these forces and movements are important:

> From another point of view, the question concerning the separation of the arts… loses all importance… In art, and in painting as in music, it is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces… Paul Klee's famous formula—"Not to render the visible, but to render invisible"— means nothing else… Likewise, music attempts to render sonorous forces that are not themselves sonorous. (Deleuze, 1981: 56)

In my opinion there is no other way of applying the idea of 'sonorous force' other than experimentation, whereby one would define these forces and let them interact and deform the sound objects. It is through experimentation and different phases of process that musical elements would reveal their inner forces and interact with each other as if they have come into being by themselves and not by a creator.

2.3 Christian Fennesz

Ever since I have come to England my intellectual and creative pursuits have been influencing my frame of mind and altering my tastes; I have found myself attracted to more 'unmusical' sounds. One of the very first confrontations I had with a piece of art that has changed my perception of music was when I first listened to the music of Christian Fennesz.

What was most fascinating for me about Fennesz was his use of massive sonic textures. Besides this, his transformation of the electric guitar into a multi-dimensional instrument is impressive and inspiring.

Before his last album, *Black Sea* (Fennesz, CD, 2008), especially in *Endless Summer* (Fennesz, CD, 2006), by using samples and melodies from popular music Fennesz could be located somewhere on the margin between experimental music and pop. This characteristic engenders a melancholic musical space, based on nostalgic pop culture but reproduced with twenty-first-century technology and aesthetics. For instance, the first part of the song 'Caecilia' (Fennesz, CD, 2006) contains a melody played by vibraphone, ending with glitchy sounds, and then suddenly cuts into what sounds like an electric guitar and bass playing the melody of the song 'God Only Knows' (Wilson, 1966) by The Beach Boys. At each loop, layers of noise are then added on top of each other and deconstruct the main melody, giving us the melancholic feeling of a past that cannot be present anymore (Demers, 2010: 64). This gave me ideas about how to think of an audio-sample not just as sound but as material that belongs to the archive of historical meanings or nostalgic feeling and how one can extract these characteristics by manipulating the sound and rearranging it in ways that demonstrate its belonging to a certain archive.

In *Black Sea* (Fennesz, CD, 2008), the first thing that comes to my attention is the quality of the sound. The sounds are rich and the space given to each layer of the sound is well engineered in the mix. Although there are still spontaneous happenings in the album that makes the space alive and more tangible, I think this album drifts away from Fennesz's previous approach to the music and tends to lean more towards more

conventional material and forms. In my opinion, working with more guitar-driven and harmonic material, alongside the fact that he made his music with better technological tools, has made the *Black Sea* a more abstract album than *Endless Summer* and less—in Deleuze's words—'sensational'. It is the extent of the abstraction that I am concerned with. It is when the experimentations and processes signify a classical—or any other musical style—way of thinking about music. This abstraction prevents me from taking the best out of his recent music, since I can sense that the musical space has been deliberately structured in a way that would force the audience to feel certain emotions.

I tend to use technology as a tool that can translate my musical ideas rather than using it as *the* idea of my work. I prefer my music to be a composition that uses technology in the process of the composition rather than a piece where the technology itself is the idea. That is to say, I avoid those ideas that arise merely from the technological point of view. Instead, I would like to create a certain sound-space with the use of algorithms and digital processing. I aim to make sure that the listener can surpass the compositional process and avoid further technological analysis.

2.4 Iranian music and its influences on my work

In this chapter, I will briefly demonstrate what has happened to Iranian music and musicians in the course of the last two hundred years, highlighting the years of difficulties and suffocation. The history is explained from a personal point of view. I address the different events in history and the events that I have experienced personally during the time I lived in Iran, as a part-time underground musician and a full-time computer engineer, to put the influence from this music into perspective.

The part of Iranian music to which I have been listening since I was a teenager, and which has naturally influenced my way of listening and composing, has always been more of an internal and sensational experience than that of entertainment and aural pleasure. These influences are drawn from traditional music—based on classical Iranian poetry—and also from the folk music that is played in specific regions of Iran such as Kurdistan in the west, Turkmenistan in the northeast and Khuzestan and Bushehr in the south. Compared to traditional music of Iran, folk music is joyful to listen to, with its playful rhythmic patterns and active melodic developments. In addition, I should mention the mourning ceremonies that I witnessed from time to time and which take place annually for an Imam that was killed around 1,400 years ago. The ceremony consists of a performance with a vocalist singing a mourning poem and other male mourners hitting themselves—most of the time on their chest—in the rhythm of the 'music'. The main feature of this music is rhythmic accents over a stable tempo.

The main influence from all of these genres on me is to consider sound and music as an event in which one would take part, during which one would experience a certain sensation and through this process re-evaluate the world around him. Listening to music for most Iranian traditional music enthusiasts is not entertainment but rather an act of inner journey and mystical feelings—mostly melancholic feelings. Approaching Iranian music with these principles and applying them to music in general makes it possible not

only to investigate the pure characteristics of sound as material on hand for creating a musical space but also to open the way to having a critical point of view focused on fine art and literary aesthetics.

The sensation I experience when listening to most Iranian traditional music is that of grief. One of the aims that I pursue in composition, especially when working with Iranian music material, is to make the sound rebel against the sadness. The prominent characteristic of traditional Iranian music is its sadness through the use of simple and quiet instruments, the absence of a standard tuning system with singers chanting a sad or mystical mourning poem over the top. Ella Zonis explain this perception:

> One of the most striking characteristics of classical [traditional] Persian music, especially for the foreign listener, is its pervasive sadness… It may well be that the character of the land has imposed itself onto the collective character of the Persian people… Persians however, frequently offer a more compelling explanation of their natural character—their long, tragic history, full of invasions and foreign occupation. (Zonis, 1973: 17)

The traditional music of Iran conveys the feeling of sadness so deeply that it might even become disturbing. Moreover, unlike Zonis, I believe that it is even more sad for Iranians themselves than for foreigners; that is because a stranger to this kind of music and the Iranian language does not have that sense of melancholia about it and also does not have access to the exact meaning of the lyrics. In other fields than music, traditionally, Iranian culture generally considers sadness as an important element when evaluating any art piece. However, there have been some recent changes in Iranian tastes in art as a result of the influences of western culture. Generally though, the sadder it is, the better. For instance, there is a live version of the piece 'Shabikhoon Bala', which was played for charity fundraising in 2003 after a strong earthquake in Bam, an old city in the south east of Iran. The members are: Mohammad Reza Shajarian who is one of the most popular Iranian singers, Keyhan Kalhor on *Kamanche* (the stringed Instrument), a skilful

player with great technique on *Kamanche* and good rhythmic understanding, and Alizadeh on *Tar* (the plucked string instrument), one of the best players and progressive composers of traditional music. Kalhor starts with a mourning sound accompanied by Alizadeh on the *Tar*, making an atmosphere where the *Kamanche* is able to change modes constantly. Shajarian then starts to sing a poem by Ebtehaj. The lyrics are lamenting how natural disasters kill people so cruelly. This kind of natural disaster, which is common in Iran, could be one of the many reasons, amongst others mentioned above, that Iranian music has made sadness internal to itself.

In Iran, melancholy is traditionally accepted as a characteristic of one who thinks. This can be taken to such an extent that one could go so far as to worship sadness and consider it a purifying feeling that helps to improve one's character. Even in pop music, where the music is supposed to be cheerful, the sadness is still there—*Diar* by Shahram Shabpare is a good example of sadness in Iranian pop music. The lyrics are about how he has missed Iran since he had to flee the country after the Islamic revolution. (I should mention that he is considered one of the happiest Iranian singers!)

Looking through Iranian history, Iran seems stuck in a cycle of repetitions. Iranians fought for democracy more than one hundred years ago, resulting in the adoption of a democratic constitution. This was succeeded by a military coup in 1953, influenced heavily by the USA. Experiencing repression again, the soil was fertile for the Islamic revolution of 1979, when power was again 'transferred to the people' after the eight-year-long war with Iraq. Most recently a military coup in 2009 after the election has led to further instability. I have personally witnessed the last two incidents. Unfortunately, the situation is the same throughout Iranian history for many centuries before our own. The result is that Iranian culture—in its most general sense—has changed, again and again, under the impact of the country's internal problems and more prominently by foreign invasions and interventions. As a result, the only defensive strategy for people who want to maintain their cultural identity is and has been to stick to the remaining ancient rituals and traditions in order to re-define their identities as Iranians over and over again. Inevitably, Iranian music has had a tough time trying to survive. In the traditional and

folkloric music of Iran, what we have now is a mixture of rhythms and melodies from the different eras of trauma, violence and fear.

Since the 1950s there has been a broad interest in deviating from this tradition of mystical sentimentalism in all forms of art and literature. The tendency was to learn Western art methodology and aesthetics in order to create new works of art. Iranian music became more established by being freely taught and performed. Women were allowed to perform music. Music was broadcast on radio. New genres of music appeared (from revolutionary lyrical songs to the western orchestral music, pop and jazz), with even John Cage, David Tudor and Iannis Xenakis performing at the Shiraz Art Festival from 1967-1977.

However, the progression in both popular and avant-garde art came to a halt with the Islamic Revolution in 1979. After the revolution, any kind of music other than traditional music of Iran and western classical music was banned, and musicians from other genres could not present themselves in public. Consequently, music lost its entertaining role for society and once again was isolated and pushed back into small gatherings. Since music tends to represent the composer's and listener's feelings, it became mournful, sad, with an immense sense of confinement. At the same time— between 1980 and 1988—Iran was at war with Iraq. Long days of sheer fear forced Iranians to cherish their traditions further and cling to them as a reaction to their tough lives. Revolution and war led to yet another halt in the evolution of Iranian music and detached it from its past and history. The progression that had started many years before the revolution was suspended and all the experiments with western and Iranian musical elements were abandoned and did not continue to evolve. This is an element of Iranian music and history that attracts me: the cuts in its progressions and the tiny little traces that remain from each of these cuts. So, while I work with the traditional music of Iran as the raw material on which I base my musical ideas, I never expect them to take me somewhere; they will 'be' and are then cut into nothing or another musical space. This way of working with excerpts of Iranian music is more apparent in the album *There*, where these cuts usually happen after a tension in the musical space; I think of these

tensions as a violent rebellion against the musical space. After the rebellion and the changing of the musical space, the progression of the new material eventually leads to yet another tense environment and hence another encounter between the different planes of sound.[1]

However, in 1997, after Mohammad Khatami was elected as the president of Iran, music started to grow again. Khatami is an Islamic reformist who believes people are the main axis for the political decisions, and he was keen to allow some cultural developments by giving more freedom to cultural activities. During this period (1997– 2005), publication of many books that had been previously rejected by censorship was authorised. Music was considered less as an anti-Islamic cultural invasion and more as a profession. Although still many types of music—especially, rock, metal and electronic music—were banned from public performance, there were ways to circumvent the restrictions. My direct personal understanding of Iran's socio-political situation as a teenager was formed within this period. I used to play electric guitar in a rock band 'Aavaar' and a progressive rock band 'Loknat' between 2000 and 2005. With Aavaar we performed in four concerts, one of which was at the University of Tehran, where before Khatami no one would expect to have a rock and metal concert.

At the same time, using the internet had become popular among young Iranians. Access to information via the internet allowed part of Iranian youth to be connected to the world and be influenced by western cultures and contemporary ideas. They were flooded by downloaded mp3s from all genres.

In 2005, Ahmadinejad was elected as the president of Iran. As a fundamentalist, he brought back the same, if not more, restrictions that existed before Khatami. The internet was censored more than before but there were still chances to access the banned websites through anti-filtering software. Through the internet, Iranians had a chance—no matter how small—to be connected to the outside world and to access reliable sources in various scientific and cultural fields. Therefore, with higher awareness

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[1] I will discuss this notion further in chapter 3.1.

of global affairs, the unsettled conditions of the country did not lead to another revolutionary reaction but resulted in more reformist activities. There are many musicians in different styles like rock, electronic and experimental who try to be creative and have influence on their society without having any sense of what will happen to them and to their work in the future for, at present, there is no public attention and financial reward. They would get occasional attention from the western world and might be able to perform their music at galleries or underground spaces in Iran—mostly Tehran. Their work can be heard among small circles of friends and enthusiasts, and there is always envy for freely expressing their music and ideas in the society. I was in the same situation before coming to the UK to study. I do have this experience of despair and disappointment, which can lead to deep depression and passivity. As a result of these experiences, I personally feel a great deal of responsibility towards my work, since I was amongst the few who had the opportunity to study and live in a society where I can represent myself and be proud of my work. Thus, I try to maintain my connection with the art and music scene in Iran, especially Tehran, by envisaging projects that involve Iranian musicians and by thinking about different strategies that would attract more Iranian listeners. This idea has involved me in different collaborations with Iranian musicians and artists. I curated an event including twelve performances in various forms of art like music, performance art, theatre and installations. The event was titled *John Cage is Happening* and all the performances were based on one or more pieces from John Cage's *Songbooks*. I worked with three traditional Iranian instrumentalists and a singer for my installation/performance piece *Here.* I have a duo experimental pop band named *Zang* with Makan Ashgvari—based in Tehran—as vocalist. I am also collaborating with Sam Fathi, who is a Tanboor player[2].

As a reaction to the suppression of music and other cultural activities by the Islamic government, many cultural activities are now happening in concealed and underground spaces. No one can express himself freely in front of a stranger, for there is

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[2] Details of these projects are available in chapter 3.

a fundamental rule in Islam saying 'Command the right and forbid the wrong' that gives permission to anyone to be superior, commander or forbidder by God.

In the next chapter, I will explains how my music tries to merge the ideas and the material mentioned in the Background chapter.

3. My Work

3.1 My Approach to Structure

I would like to start writing about my own work by discussing how I chose to present and think about sound objects. One of the aspects of my music that I would like to indicate here is my lack of interest in musical climax. The experience of life to me is a constant flow of events and is not defined by its climaxes but rather by its unceasing continuity. This flow of events is constantly led and fed by desires—desires, which according to Žižek, are never fully satisfied and can only be displaced or substituted for other desires (Žižek, 1992: 4–8). Since dissatisfaction is the core nature of desire, a climactic sensation in music that fulfils the listener's desire is nothing but mere deception. The listener awaits the moment of climax; but by depriving him of the satisfaction that comes with the climax, a more true-to-life flow and experience of events is formed. So, in my opinion, 'resolving' a sound into another one, 'releasing' the listener after a musical tension, 'leading' everything to a climax in order to give a desirable and fulfilling experience to the listener is part of this constantly-nailed-into-our-heads idea that if we participate in an activity we must reach somewhere/something. In other words, a worthwhile activity/contemplation is the one that leads somewhere; it is one in which you obtain a certain achievement. Whereas if one's activity does not lead to a certain achievement, it would be considered as procrastination, a waste of time, or not experiencing a sense of fulfilment in life. Hence, through this perspective, the ability to purely experience the surroundings in a new way and through utter sensation is rendered obsolete.

From another point of view, Lydia Goehr explains the phenomena as a reaction to the typical scientific mind-set of the 20th and 21st centuries: 'with the predominance of science, aesthetics has tended to stand on the borders of disrepute. Aesthetic concepts, perhaps of all concepts, are believed to be least subject to scientifically styled or logical

description' (Goehr, 1992: 71). As a result, she then argues, aestheticians have tried to 'seek definitions' (Goehr, 1992: 71) for artist's notions behind their works. In my opinion, the act of generating definition for an artwork or for the way that art is idealised, created, conceptualised and received deprives the art of its unknowability and pushes it to the realm of advertised commodity. All definition-generators try to make sense of an artwork as an object that can be analysed and explained, just like a scientist would analyse an object or a phenomenon or as an advertiser would try to promote a commodity for purchase by consumers. As a consequence, audiences expect more and more to capture the concept of a piece of art rathers than indulging themselves in the activity of experiencing a new level of understanding and sensational reception.

Thus, I think arranging a musical work in order to convey a certain feeling and expression to the listener is first of all an authoritarian behaviour towards the listener. Also, by casting the music according to the listener's needs, the whole process of creating it becomes a commercial attempt to make it consumable and financially beneficial: you get what is written on the tin, this product has no side effects. In fact, side effects are the kind of influence I would like my works to have on the audience. By 'side effect' I mean leaving planned climactic moments or any other musical and artistic expression out of the music in order to give the audience the chance to be struck by an unplanned climax at any time—even after the piece has finished.

In relation to these ideas, I would like to try and experience the notion of unfulfilling music, so the listener and myself would expect anything that happens in the 'organised sound' (Varèse, 2004: 20) environment that I intend to create. Perhaps, I would say, this idea has its roots—beside the Western ideas on this matter mentioned in previous sections—in the great sense of unfulfillment and dissatisfaction in Iranian culture and in how the mutual relations between people and the system work: most efforts are presumably fruitless, and you cannot expect an exact result out of any social or political action. There is an element of risk in almost every action. Awareness of this risk has put me in a state of constant and obsessive awareness of my surroundings, and I want to translate this notion of being constantly alert into my music. Another relation between

my works and its material roots is that traditional and folkloric Iranian music rarely give the listener a sense of release and climax, especially in improvisational settings. Hence, samples of this type of music are suitable raw materials for my work, and I tend to think of the material as a caption point—a point in the compositional process that I always refer to or try to draw the listeners attention to—for the ideas mentioned above to achieve the integrity between my ideas and the material I work with.

Furthermore, the fact that one can analyse a music piece in relation to other musical pieces, which have been noted and documented through the course of music history, leads to defining a language that one can learn and use for one's own way of communicating with listeners through music. I cannot object to this way of thinking, for if this were not the case there would be no development in the field of music and sound. Having said that, just clinging to this language and in order to convey a feeling or idea to the addressed listener is a banal approach when you have such flexible material in hand. The majority of remarkable composers in music history have tried to define their own new language instead of using the already established language of their time.

To create an environment where the listener would lose the sense of time and space and would be always alert for any sound that happens without any introduction, one of the methods I found myself using is to throw a sound into a space that contradicts it and to listen to them rebel against each other. Through this rebellious operation of planes of sound against each other, I seek a new sound environment where one cannot think or analyse when listening, one simply listens to sense what is happening. I like to make a music that haunts the listener afterwards. I like to think that there is a way that music can capture the listener in such a way that he would not be able to think while listening to it but would feel it in other senses, like imagining different images while listening to the music. Considering that such music is possible, the listener starts to think only when the piece is finished. He may not listen to this music again, but he remembers the experience of listening to it. Deleuze thinks one can strike the audience's senses without occupying the brain (Deleuze, 1981: 34), and I really hope to achieve this in my music.

3.2 There

There is a response to the events in Iran from 2009. After the election in Iran, which caused many crucial debates and brutal and violent reactions from the Islamic regime, the whole society became socio-politically activated again; I was not an exception.

In the album *There* I tried to extract the rage out of the evident sadness in Iranian music and experiment with it. My aim was to re-identify the sound of the Iranian music—the sound that is always fractured by external forces, and has been for a long time—through experiments with different compositional methods and self-expressions. I like to make visible this potential rage in the apparently suffocated sadness and use it to represent the rage that I feel whenever I think about Iran and Iranian history and what has happened to myself and other Iranians.

It should be mentioned that since any claim that a work of art is representative of the society that it comes from is false, I tend to narrow the representative aspects of my work to my own situation and my way of thinking in order to get as close as it is possible to a self-representational work—although this is ideally impossible as well. By being successful in representing myself, I at least give an image of one-self within a society. By no means do I want to claim that I have succeeded in such a task, but by representing myself, I like to get as close as possible to a representation of the un-representable Iranian society and of the situation this society is in. In Sartre's words, 'I am thus responsible for myself and [inevitably] for all men, and I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be. In fashioning myself I [try to] fashion man' (Jean-Paul Sartre, 1992:602).

However, the following constitutes some explanation of what I was feeling and idealising during the composition of *There*. When composing 'There #3', I sampled an Iranian song played by Setar and cut it into many short pieces of audio clicks and scattered it around the time domain. The result is isolated audio clicks without connection with the previous or the next click. I also froze some of the notes played by

Setar (by playing back one frame constantly), processed them, and added them to the song in order to make a floating sound environment. Gated sounds appear in this environment and fade away instantly to give the sense of disconnection. The idea behind all this was to have the clicks show the fragmentation of the sound (of the Iranian music) and the frozen sounds reflect the resistance of the sound (of Iranian music) to the aggressive act of eliminating its existence. The idea is applicable to other cultural aspects of Iran in its history; although the whole culture is under siege by internal and external complexes, there is an essence that always haunts it. My main interest in working with Iranian music is to stress this essence. As I mentioned above, since it is not possible to capture such an essence, I try to look at it from a personal point of view.

In addition, in this album I had the idea that I would create and use sounds that are not working together, which for me was a good representation of the situation in Iran back then. I felt that there were lots of different ideologies and preferred ways of living amongst the Iranian people, from people who think that the only government is the government of god to the people who think the only way is going back to a royal government, something like what we had before the revolution in 1979, to the people who think that everyone should live together in a democratised government elected by the people—not to mention the radical leftists, fundamental Islamists, and others. In 2009, when many thought the government stole the election from the people by cheating in the election and twisting the truth, all of the previously passive groups of people came to streets and demanded what they wanted. The demonstrations led to a clash between the Revolutionary Guard and people; many people were injured and killed. I was away and following the news from distance, and I felt a great amount of rage and the envy that I was not there besides my friends and family. The tension that is evident in almost every minute of *There* is a result of this personal situation.

To demonstrate how I create a tense musical space—almost like a battleground—I will explain a few sounds and the ideas behind them as examples:

1. Track 'There #2' (3:30 to 4:29): a sound rises that not only contradicts the

existing sounds in the space but also has this almost battle-like progression that totally ruins the space and leads to another space which is entirely different.

2. Track 'There #4': the punchy kick drum, which is growling on top of a weak mix of processed sound, is played by Kamanche and gives the impression that it wants to crush the whole murmuring sounds in the background to pieces. The voice of Shamloo reading his revolutionary poem rebels against this situation later and changes the space completely. The poem is actually a letter to Shamloo's father, written from prison. In response to his fathers' letter in which Shamoo had been asked to express remorse for what he has done as a political activist, he replies passionately that what he has in prison is freedom since he chose it and he never gets to his knees and instead he earns his freedom by sticking to his principles. He then orders his father to do the same and not be one of 'them' in an effort just to make a living. I found this poem really fascinating at that time, always reciting it to myself. Since it suited well the idea I had for *There #4*, I tried to 'restate' it and make it contemporary again. It is as if the voice of Shamloo manifests itself from the past, and I attempted to manipulate the sound in order to make it spectral.

3. Track 'There #5': The clanking sound that starts at 1:59 creates an image of two backswords men fighting each other (what is actually processed is the sound of a folk song played by a string instrument called Tanboor). There are also argument-like sounds which start around the sixth minute of the song.

It has been three years since I finished *There*, and when I listen to it I cannot bear the great sense of tension anymore. Completely different ideas might be evident in my next works—and they are due to the ever-changing conditions of my self, surrounding and society—but I think one aspect will remain unchanged and that is composition through experimentation. It is by experimentation that I try to make my state of mind and the sensations I get through different experiences in life the basis of my music.

3.3 Here

The next project that I will write about is an audio-visual performance/installation project called *Here* (2011), the basics of which are the same as *There*.

Since I came to York to pursue my career, I have always had a fear of being disconnected from Iranian culture. I have tried my best to keep connected by keeping myself up to date with changes in the states of Iranian culture and politics, by travelling regularly to Iran and trying to collect raw material for my projects and by keeping contact with friends in Iran via Email, Skype or telephone. In December, 2010, I envisaged a live performance with three Persian instrumental performers and real-time electronics. I was away from Iran, and none of the performers could be present in the UK due to visa and financial problems. I decided to make this inherent problem of the project the idea behind it. What if you can see the performers but you cannot hear them? The pictures in newspapers always fascinate me: what was the sound environment at the moment of this image? What sort of sound was present there? Why is sound not captured? Would the sound reveal the truth further? How different is sound to image in representation of violence, sadness or rage? In *Here,* I tried to investigate the answer to these questions, and to play with the truthfulness of the sound to the image in order to make two different spaces in one: the sound space that you can hear in the gallery and the confined space in which the performers are performing.

I filmed and recorded three Iranian traditional musicians at a studio in Tehran. The filming took place after ten sessions of rehearsals. At each rehearsal I asked them to improvise in the mood and the structure I instructed. I tried to break some formal rules of the traditional music with respect to structure and nuance. They were asked still to improvise the pieces but to have in mind the structure of the music which we had set before. At some points I was telling them to apply some changes here and there from the talk back microphone in the control room, and they were agile enough to consider those suggestions and to change what they were doing immediately. I asked them to interact

with each other not only audibly but also by looking at each other and talking in between the songs. The result was a performance to be performed in a gallery. The performers' images were projected on three separate screens, which were placed on three sides of a square. They were filmed with a white background and presented as if they were in three boxes. As the fourth performer, with laptop and electronics, I was positioned on the fourth side of the square. I tried not to add too much to the music with electronics but instead process their sound as if the sound was getting "here" but because of a disconnection between "here" and "there", the sound we are receiving at this end contains some imaginary disconnection noises and errors. The contrast between the sound of them and the sound that I am creating and also between their space and the space of the gallery is of importance here[3].

3.4 Zang

In 2010 I managed to have a concert at a gallery space in Tehran. It was the opening of a painting exhibition, and the plan was to set out the equipment in five minutes after the opening, perform for half hour and then derig as soon as possible. The gallery owner had told me not to advertise on Facebook as he did not want to get involved in any trouble, so I only sent a few text messages to my close friends and people I thought might be interested in my music. I was expecting 30 people but 180 turned up. It was really surprising to me. The concert went well apart from the fact that there were too many people. After the concert, I asked for feedback from the people I knew or those who approached me with congratulations or questions. There were few people who could actually relate to the piece. Interestingly, most of those who enjoyed the work explained the visual images they saw or the situation they experienced during the concert: images like camel caravans passing deserts or situations like imagining being in a prison cell

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[3] Short excerpts of a performance of *Here* at Rymer Auditorium at the University of York alongside the full-version of the videos in one screen without the image of myself can be found in the portfolio.

during the concert—there were no psychedelic drugs involved to my knowledge. Many other seemingly irrelevant stories, images and ideas emerged through the feedback but, I believe, they could all be related to my original idea in a way.

Apart from the people who liked it, the majority of the audience were surprised that one would call these noises music and would expect others to listen to it and like it. They were asking why were you on your own on stage? Why did we not see any action? Why were no visuals accompanying your music? Or a more interesting one: is such a sound possible in nature? I thought, then, that my claim is to represent myself, my society and my feelings towards the society, culture and politics with use of sound and yet there are fewer people from Iran understanding it than I expected. So I set a task for myself: to put my efforts into envisaging ideas that would attract more audience in Iran and, while doing so, explore an experimentation path and the experimental elements that interest me. I think the situation is somewhat similar for experimental artists around the globe. Most of the experimental music has failed to connect with a broad audience. Although experimental artists and audience in the west are more experienced with experimental, 'avant-garde' or noise music, there is still a gap between the interests of audiences and those of experimental and 'avant-garde' artists. It is not necessary for any art to be received kindly by a majority of audience members, but in my opinion, it is an artist's responsibility to think of the reception—by reception I do not mean the way a work of art would sell itself to the audience, but it is the way that a work is conceived by the audience on which an artist would decide on the degree of the interference—of his work and whom he wants to affect. The music production tools are there and anyone can use them for any kind of experimentation and complicated algorithmic composition. The important aspect of using technology in my work is the effect that technology-based experimentation has on my work in facilitating the realisation of my ideas in a piece of music. This responsibility is more prominent for me in the context of an Iranian audience. This shift in ideas and objectives is by no means an effort in selling my music to the audience; it is merely because I do not wish to be caught in a deconstructive elitism that would disconnect me from my background.

Zang started after this experience of talking to audience which thought of me as foreigner or even alien. *Zang* is a band in which I compose laptop-generated music using various techniques and tools, trying to reference different electronic music styles mixed with my own experimentations in algorithmic, chance and noise music. Makan Ashgvari is the vocalist in *Zang*. He is a singer who has worked with various musicians from different genres like pop, jazz, classical and others. He is a musician who lives in Tehran and through different collaborative projects has made a fan base in Tehran for himself and has become known as one of the young serious musicians in the underground pop scene of Tehran. *Zang* use simple and illustrative lyrics in Farsi. The lyrics are Makan's poems that have been altered to fit the context of *Zang* by the two of us. I try to lean the lyrics towards abstraction, with vocal melodies suggesting repetitions of words and phrases, which are not common in the lyrical music of Iran. Traditionally the lyrics that have been used in Iranian music are mostly classic Iranian poems with strong metaphors, deep meanings and concepts. Zang tries to break that tradition by breaking up the lyrics rhythmically and melodically and, at the same time, insists on making descriptive images by words, instead of conceptual meanings.

One of the issues with *Zang* is the fact that Makan and I are living in different countries. Since we evolve the music, lyrics, and vocals at the same time, composition through long-distance communication is not an option, so we have narrowed our activities to the two times a year that I am in Iran. Every time I go to Iran we plan an underground live concert in different locations and start our rehearsals for that concert. Since we started in 2011, every song has been composed in a live setting.

Composing live and trying to respond to another musician in real-time is another challenge that I have in *Zang*. I chose to use Ableton Live alongside Max4Live in order to interact with Makan. I have used a controller whenever I had access to one. That is another aspect of doing underground gigs in Iran. Since no one can afford to have all the equipment, musicians are up for sharing their equipment with each other.

Zang is different to my solo projects in many ways. For instance, with *Zang* we put videos of our shows on YouTube to be able to connect with more audience and receive

their feedback. For my solo projects I rarely get any feedback while I am composing, and this isolation is part of these projects. On the other hand, in *Zang,* because my goal is to engage audience with experimental and noise music as much as I can, it is necessary to consider the feedback from our audience. The compositional process in *Zang* has so far been like this: we rehearse together, then play in a gig and present it to the audience via Internet and get some feedback; after that, I go back to my solo projects while in the UK, and after few months I travel to Tehran and we do the same thing again. What fascinates me is the fact that every time I compose a new song for *Zang* or go back to refine an older song of *Zang*, my solo experimentations helps me vastly in coming up with improvisational ideas and to interact with Makan more fluently. However, I found the process of analysing feedback a crucial aspect of what I do in *Zang*. I try my best to make songs that I think fit into my own concept of *Zang* as a musical band, while I listen to listeners' feedback and find the elements that put them off or the ones that encourage them to listen to *Zang*'s music. Maintaining the balance between my own idea of *Zang* and the listeners' expectations is the most important task in *Zang*. At times, I find myself excessively leaning towards either my own preferences or the listeners' reception and I push myself to get on a balanced path again. The process of keeping *Zang's* music poised between experimental and pop music is reflected in the songs themselves; there are songs that are pop (e.g. *Nowrouz To Rahe)*, songs that are experimental and noisy (e.g. *Gaze*) and songs that hover between the boundaries of the two (e.g. *Nazdik* and *Barfak*). The latter category illustrates *Zang*'s principal intentions.

As establishing a new connection between Iranian listeners and experimental music has always been a defining element in *Zang*'s work, publishing albums in Iran—and not abroad—is an important step in this effort. Although some labels have shown interest in publishing *Zang*'s music, the issue of receiving permission from Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to publish the lyrics and the music still remains. However, the challenge of finding a way to evade the restrictions has itself become part of the process of connecting with Iranian listeners.

3.5 *Hosh*

I have recently become more interested in environmental sounds and tend to listen more to everyday sounds rather than recorded music. The fact that anything can happen in an organic sound environment is for me the most interesting aspect of listening to quotidian sounds. Curating and performing in *John Cage is Happening* made me more conscious of the notion of a musical space where anything may happen. The only binding elements among the 'happenings' within such musical space are the characteristics of the space itself, and this perspective has altered the way I listen to music. I started working on the album *Hosh* from this point of view[4]. In *Hosh,* I tend to use random-based processes more than before. Also, I set myself a challenge to work and experiment more with rhythmic material rather than textural and slow-evolving sonic material. What I seek to achieve with *Hosh* is a musical space in which the listener cannot be distracted by any other stream of thought and is constantly aware of the happenings in the sound space.

During the process of composing *Hosh,* I was frustrated by finding myself incessantly alert and concerned about what happened around me. This constant state of being alert became the prime origin of *Hosh*. I attempt to make an environment with a constantly changing element, where one needs to be consciously alert to be able to track the little sparks of sound appearing and disappearing rapidly. I can trace this constant alertness back to the time I was living in Iran, when I was always concerned about what would happen to me even if I did not do anything illegal or risky. It is this state of mind that I intend to represent in *Hosh*[5]. Ideally, I want to pin the listener to the music, never letting him think of whatever he wants to think of, making him be constantly alert and sometimes scared of what is happening in the music. *Hosh* is still an open project and I am experimenting with different materials and methods to achieve these goals. Besides

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[4] A few tracks from *Hosh* are available in the portfolio disc.

[5] *Hosh* is a Farsi word that can be translated to: 1) sensibility, awareness. 2) shush.

using samples of Iranian music, I am sampling some western classical music for *Hosh* in order to make different types of virtual-environmental sounds.

3.6 Ongoing Projects

3.6.1 *Re*

Re is a series of self-portrait works that use voices of other artists as material and restate them from my personal—and contemporary—perspective. I use the image and voice of other artists to present my feelings about subjects I find in common with them. In *Re-Backlash Blues by Nina Simone- re: Pouya Ehsaei,* I have restated Nina Simone's frustration with how capitalism oppresses people by use of money and class discrimination. I wanted to show how Nina Simone's claim is still valid and how it has changed into a violent demand through these years. Other songs that I have been working on have the same political perspective and look at the 'system' from the position of power not weakness.

3.6.2 *Miraft*

Miraft is the name of a project in which I am collaborating with a Persian instrumentalist and musician Sam Fathi. I pursue the same ideas that I had in *There* but with processes that lead to more dynamic sounds and sudden changes in the sound. It is a live platform in which I can improvise with different audio manipulation techniques alongside improvising with pre-prepared material. We try to keep the compositional process practice-based and develop the songs in rehearsal sessions and concerts.

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