



Middle East and Central Asia Music Forum

Wednesday May 31st 2023, 1.30-6.15pm

SCHEDULE AND ABSTRACTS

Department of Performing Arts, City, University of London
Room AG09, College Building, St John Street, London EC1V 4BP

Session 1, 1pm-2.15pm

Chair: Peter McMurray (University of Cambridge)

Rhys Thomas Sparey (King's College London). '#IAMHUSSEINI: Television, Mourning, and Poetic Recitation in Iraq'

Reza Masoudi Nejad (SOAS) 'The Urban Ritual: Ritual and Counter-Ritual during Muharram in Mumbai'

BREAK (15 mins)

Session 2, 2.30pm-4.15pm

Chair: Martin Stokes (King's College, London)

Ali Mousavi (Aalto University, Finland). 'Beautiful Rotten Tehran: A Multi Sensory Artistic Research On Contemporary Urban Design in Tehran (Pardis Phase 11)'

Rashel Pakbaz (University of Cambridge). 'Modes of Resistance in Martyrs' Hymns of the Assyrian Liturgy'

Vanessa Paloma Elbaz (University of Cambridge). 'Perception, Carnality and Corporeality: The Geontopower of Sonic Phenomenology in the North Africa - Latin America Corridor'

BREAK (30 mins) with tea and coffee provided

Session 3, 4.45pm-6pm

Chair: Vanessa Paloma Elbaz (University of Cambridge)

Dunya Habash (University of Cambridge) 'From Maqām to Makam: In Search of Syria's Post-Revolution Cultural Imaginary in Turkey'

Saman Samadi (University of Cambridge). 'Persian Modal-Rhizomatic Composition'

7pm-8.30pm Concert in the Performance Space, Lower Ground Floor, College Building

‘Among Streets, Windows and Times’

97 Ensemble present a programme of new music, poetry and improvisation, centred around the work of female Iranian composers, and including the premiere of Golfam Khayam's *Among Streets, Windows and Times*, specially commissioned as part of the [Sonic Tehran Project](#)

The Middle East and Central Asia Music Forum has been running since 2007 and is open to researchers, students and anyone interested in the music and culture of the region. In the spirit of fostering dialogue and interdisciplinarity, we hope that the issues discussed at the Forum will be of interest to a broad audience, including musicologists, ethnomusicologists and other researchers in the arts, humanities and social sciences. In addition, we welcome those working on other aspects of Middle Eastern and Central Asian culture broadly speaking (dance, visual arts, media, film, literature, etc). The Forum is convened by Professor Laudan Nooshin, City, University of London (l.nooshin@city.ac.uk) and Professor Rachel Harris, SOAS, University of London (rh@soas.ac.uk).

ABSTRACTS AND BIOGRAPHIES

1. Rhys Thomas Sparey (King’s College London). ‘#IAMHUSSEINI: Television, Mourning, and Poetic Recitation in Iraq’

This article is a study of Shi'i Muslim mourning through a call-in talk show on Imam Hussein TV called *#LAMHUSSEINI* filmed in Karbala, Iraq. In studying the lamentations of callers and presenters and locating them within a visual context of the television studio, this presentation demonstrates how the viewership of *#LAMHUSSEINI* constitutes televisual *majlis* ('assembly') composed of more than passive asynchronous consumption and which may be considered the key components of the Shi'i mourning *majlis*: cultural memory of the Battle of Karbala (61 AH/680 CE, Umayyad Caliphate), the "emotional texture" of mourning its Shi'i martyrs (qua Richard Wolf), intercorporeality, *nazar* ("witnessing" the *abl al-bayt* and being witnessed by them), and translocation. I show how the COVID-19 pandemic drove the producers of *#LAMHUSSEINI* to recalibrate to expectations of a spatially proximate ritual, rather than sustaining the "natively digital" aesthetic (qua Richard Rogers) of its prime-time forebear, *Welcome to Karbala*. I hereby formulate a two-fold argument: (1) Rather than precluding a physically felt understanding of community and solidarity, this change brought about a tacit but embodied sense of the televisual *majlis* among *#LAMHUSSEINI*'s viewers; (2) In terms of aesthetics, this form of worship actually became less digital during the COVID-19 pandemic. I therefore posit a difference between *spatial intercorporeality*, in which a person's sense of other human bodies or a more-than-human presence is produced by the affordances of spatial proximity ("compresence" in perceptual phenomenology), and *functional intercorporeality*, in which it is facilitated by the material preconditions of a shared activity, e.g., calling into a talk-show.

Rhys Thomas Sparey is a PhD Candidate in the Music Department at King’s College London and a Cultural Historian of digital forms of Islamic arts and material culture. His work is based on digital archaeology, online ethnography and fieldwork conducted throughout the Arabian Sea area, informed also in part by memories of growing up in Saudi Arabia. His doctoral thesis, *Mourning Friends, Mourning Martyrs: A Phenomenology of Digitally Mediated Grief among Shi'i Muslims during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, stresses an interdisciplinary, transnational, transmedial, and neurodivergent approach. Rhys has taught in digital humanities, creative industries, music, and sociology departments at a primary, secondary, and tertiary level in both Arabic and English-speaking classrooms.

2. Reza Masoudi Nejad (SOAS) ‘The Urban Ritual: Ritual and Counter-Ritual during Muharram in Mumbai’

Muharram rituals have been constantly reinvented in Mumbai during the last two centuries. The format of Muharram commemoration, as practised today, is the result of intensive negotiations and tensions between diverse ethno-religious groups that have settled in Mumbai. Therefore, it is hard to simplified Muharram as a Shi’i annual event to commemorate the tragedy martyrdom of Hussain, the grandson of the prophet Mohammad, in Karbal. I will explain how Muharram produces a space for social negotiations during last two centuries and particularly looks at a new social fold in such space where a Wahhabi counter-ritual is manifested. The Wahhabi community is a relatively new social group mainly constituted by Indian Muslim workers who returned from Arab countries. While seemingly their counter-ritual is aimed at challenging the commemoration of the tragedy of Karbala, they employ Muharram to negotiate their social position within Mumbai’s dynamic urban society. With such a focus, “Mumbai Muharram” is considered as an “urban ritual” that produces a space for intensive “urban negotiation”. The idea is to explore Mumbai Muharram beyond its religious connotations, showing its social complexity that constitutes not only Shi’i Muharram but also its counter-ritual. Mumbai Muharram is a grand urban ritual that should be seen as a part of the cosmopolitan process of this city.

Reza Masoudi Nejad is an urbanist, who is generally interested in the social production of space, the geography of crowds and protests, and particularly focused on religious rituals in urban settings in Iran and India. He is currently a Research Associate at SOAS and has been a teaching fellow at SOAS and FU Berlin, a Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen (Germany), and an Alexander von Humboldt Fellow at the Centre for Modern Oriental Studies (ZMO) and TU Berlin. He has cross-disciplinant background and completed his PhD at the Bartlett School of Built Environment, UCL in 2009.

3. Ali Mousavi (Aalto University, Finland). ‘Beautiful Rotten Tehran: A Multi Sensory Artistic Research On Contemporary Urban Design in Tehran (Pardis Phase 11)’

Acoustemological Investigation: Sound Diary #Tehran is a research-based project that is being developed as part of my ongoing PhD research. This is accomplished by employing sensory methodology as a research tool for observing and analysing architecture and urban design. Art and architecture have always seemed to me to have the potential for social change and the improvement of the existing social order. They can be emancipatory, assisting in self-development, promote social justice, and, in small ways, changing our world. As a result, artists and architects engage in activities of innovation and creativity in the hope of articulating their dreams and building a better future for the benefit of their communities. The living environment and places where people spend their time tell a story about who they are and their vision of the future. Art and architecture are social practices that are inextricably linked to the rest of social life. In this regard, this exposition is an attempt to observe, study, and analyse the process of urbanisation in Iran, specifically the housing construction in the Pardis Phase 11 suburbs of Tehran. The interest in the sensory dimension of Pardis Phase 11 serves as the starting point for this artistic research project. The project employs sensorial methodologies such as acoustemology to investigate the area and urban transformations caused by concepts such as ‘modernisation’, ‘development’, ‘progress’, and ‘globalisation’. The work evolves through a large collection of media content in the form of field recordings made at the Phase 11 site. The project aims to create a discursive sensory environment to generate a contemplative and in-depth reflection of a barren land transformed into an urban setting.

Ali Mousavi is an Urban Researcher and Art Educator based in London. He is currently undertaking his PhD research at the Aalto University in Art, Design and Architecture Department, in Helsinki, Finland. His artistic research, “Beautiful Rotten Tehran” focuses on the history of urban form & housing architecture in the Middle East, particularly Iran. Mousavi’s practice embraces sensorial methodologies such as sound, smell and cartography to examine the city and urban transformation by the forces of global capitalism. His research interests expand into the environmental and ecological issues that confronted our cities all over the globe, in particular sustainable urbanism, biodiversity and alternative/ democratic methods in urban planning and housing architecture. Mousavi has run a number of workshops and lectures on Art & Aesthetics, Social-Engaged Art, Politics of Foods and Everyday Life in London and Tehran. His works have been exhibited in London, Dubai, and Los Angeles.

4. Benedict Turner-Berry (University of Cambridge) “‘Every Tom, Dick and Harry has a du‘ā’”: Sounding Care and Piety within UK Islamic Radio’.

This paper examines three Islamic community radio stations (Crescent Radio, Inspire FM, and Salaam Radio) and how, for listeners, they sustain notions of cultural and religious identity through their broadcasts. Situated within the context of Ramadan 2022, I display radio as a vital sonic infrastructure within the local environment, offering multiple avenues through which individuals can edify and sustain their own religious practices within the holy month. A rich ethnography of these stations illuminates their broadcasts as both culturally and religiously resonant for its listeners, one that affords a temporal reframing of the urban environment which sonically intersects the secular metropolitan surroundings. On a more detailed level, I pay particular attention to the sui generis ways radio acoustically supports Ramadan. I frame this in the exploration of two recitation-based broadcasts: *tarawih* prayers and broadcasts that occur during *iftar*. I exhibit not only how the broadcasts reimagine community formation, situating listeners within virtually connected spaces, but also their pedagogical importance for listeners’ own private recitation practices. I situate the case studies within a theoretical expansion of care ethics. With the work of Stephanie Collins (2015), I consider an auditory ethics of care – that is a set of sonic practices that prioritise collective well-being over aesthetic and other considerations. Ultimately, these combined reveal the complex and layered ways Islamic community radio reimagine the multisensory time of Ramadan for its listeners in 2022.

Benedict Turner-Berry read music at the University of Cambridge, graduating with a first-class degree, which he followed with an MPhil degree specialising in Islamic Sound Studies and Radio. Benedict has a strong passion for ethnomusicology, his research focussing mainly on the intersection of migration, music and citizenship. He is excited to further this research when he commences his doctoral studies in October at the University of Cambridge, under the supervision of Dr Peter McMurray, where he will be generously supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

During his time as an undergraduate, Benedict was Organ Scholar at Corpus Christi College and for St John’s Voices, the mixed-voice choir at St John’s College. Aside from playing the Organ, Benedict is also a keen singer having held a postgraduate choral scholarship in the choir of King’s College, Cambridge, where he now serves as a lay clerk. During his time at Cambridge, Benedict has enjoyed playing and singing for multiple BBC Radio 3 broadcasts, including the recent broadcast of ‘Easter from King’s’ as well as a choral evensong with St John’s Voices.

5. Vanessa Paloma Elbaz (University of Cambridge). ‘Perception, Carnality and Corporeality: The Geontopower of Sonic Phenomenology in the North Africa - Latin America Corridor’

In thinking of power and space without frontiers and horizons (Palmer, 2023), we are permitting engagement with sound and music through a decentred phenomenology (Merleau Ponty, 1945). Establishing non-hierarchical models of engagement, relationship, perception and motion in “an acentered, non-hierarchical, nonsignifying system... defined solely by circulation of states” (Deleuze & Guattari) we are “allowing a quantum understanding of political and ethical rule” in Karen Barad’s terms. The deep reciprocity that has existed between human and non-human phenomenology in the circulation of sonic and musical knowledge in the North Africa-Latin America corridor, as opposed to generally assumed limited binaries such as hierarchical structures of belonging and non-belonging, extraction and exploitation, carnality (neither discursive nor pre-discursive material manifestations of discourse) & corporeality (the way in which dominant forms of power shape and reshape materiality), and the critique of power where immanent forms of social obligation are beyond given articulations of identity and knowledge exchange in this region. This paper will discuss two songs present both in Algeria and Cuba, demonstrating how “determinative difference between life and nonlife crumbles biopower ... giving way to geontopower” (Povinelli, 2014) through the perception of music and shared transnational identities.

Vanessa Paloma Elbaz is currently a Research Associate at the University of Cambridge on the Past and Present Musical Encounters Across the Strait of Gibraltar ERC funded project. A previous Senior Fulbright Senior Scholar, Posen Fellow, and TALIM fellow, her research has been funded by Marie Skłodowska Curie H2020, American Institute for Maghrib Studies, the Righteous Persons Foundation and the Cambridge University Arts & Humanities Impact Fund amongst others. Her first monograph is due for publication in 2023 with Brill.

6. Rashel Pakbaz (University of Cambridge). ‘Modes of Resistance in Martyrs’ Hymns of the Assyrian Liturgy’

The liturgical music of the Assyrian Church of the East helps reconstruct a historical narrative that assists Assyrians, as indigenous people of N. Iraq, in maintaining continuity into the future. As a chant genre, Martyrs’ hymns have a central role in this process. The long history of religious persecution of the Church, in particular, and the Assyrian people, in general, have fostered the relevance of performing Martyrs’ hymns by the community today. Martyrs’ hymns render a historical narrative through their textual content and music. By performing these hymns, Assyrians establish connections between that which they sing and the reality of the life they experience as an ethnoreligious minority in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Syria. While these hymns convey feelings of sorrow and lament, they release emotions of disappointment and frustration and further stimulate hopefulness and resistance in the mentally and emotionally depleted Assyrians.

Rashel Pakbaz is an ethnomusicologist affiliated with the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge and the Sydney College of Divinity. Her area of expertise is the music of Assyrians with focused interests in music and liturgy, identity and minorities. As an active member of her community, she has held various roles that include serving as the Director of the Research Committee on the Mesopotamian Night Project (a project launched by the Assyrian Aid Society of America), a member of the William Daniel Cultural Committee, collecting and promoting the works of contemporary Assyrian artists and scholars, as well as the director of various church and community choirs and piano accompanist in Iran, Vienna and the United States.

7. Dunya Habash (University of Cambridge) ‘From Maqām to Makam: In Search of Syria’s Post-Revolution Cultural Imaginary in Turkey’

This paper explores musical manifestations of forced migration focusing on the experiences of Syrian musicians and artists in Turkey. Concentrating on key urban centres in Turkey (Istanbul and Gaziantep), an understudied geographical location in music and forced migration, I draw on extensive ethnographic fieldwork with displaced Syrian musicians employing semi-structured and unstructured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis as primary methods of data collection. My research adopts a multi-sited approach analysing a range of contexts in which Syrian music making in Turkey is experienced, including Syrian support and cultural organisations, schools, street music, and the lives of individual musicians. In light of the contemporary Syrian refugee crisis, this paper offers a timely combination of approaches in ethnomusicology and forced migration studies to investigate how Syrian musicians as agents embed themselves in their new homelands where changes in performance practice, physical space, and cultural norms must be accounted for. At the centre of this study lie the following research questions: how do Syrian musicians respond to their changing social and historical circumstances? How do they use their craft to create a voice for themselves in Turkey? Are there structural and political forces that support or impede this expression? Does settling in a metropolis like Istanbul as opposed to a smaller city like Gaziantep make a difference to Syrian musical expression? If so, why and how? Who is the audience in exile? In answering these research questions, I seek to elucidate the social and artistic challenges Syrian musicians face in their efforts to adapt to their new host context and survive economically, to explore how they experience marginality and multiculturalism in Turkey, and finally, to extrapolate from their experience an analysis of the Syrian community’s current social and cultural profile while displaced in Turkey.

Dunya Habash is a PhD Candidate in Ethnomusicology at the Faculty of Music, University of Cambridge. Through a Woolf Institute Cambridge Scholarship and under the supervision of Dr Matthew Machin-Autenrieth, her ethnographic research with Syrian musicians in Turkey examines the effects of ‘integration’ on music-making and more generally on Syrian cultural practices and imaginaries post-displacement. Dunya is also a PhD Scholar and Outreach Officer at the Woolf Institute, Cambridge. She holds undergraduate degrees in Music and History from Birmingham-Southern College (USA), where she embarked on her first substantive project with Syrian forced migrants, a documentary film on Jordan’s largest refugee camp for Syrians, *Zaatari: Jordan’s Newest City*. That work led her to complete an MSc in Refugee and Forced Migration Studies at the University of Oxford Department of International Development in 2017 and a TEDx talk in Birmingham, AL. Dunya is also a classically trained pianist.

8. Saman Samadi (University of Cambridge). ‘Persian Modal-Rhizomatic Composition’

The modal system of Persian classical music has become frozen in amber for centuries; the concept of a cyclic modal system, despite inner flexibility and vast potential, was merely conserved by traditionalists. Years of reflecting on my compositional practice — which has been closely connected to Persian music — prompted a desire to research this question: How to develop an alternate method of utilising Persian modes that would be innovative and expand timbral possibilities, facilitating a new approach to composing music drawing upon the essential characteristics of Persian music? In the pursuit of answers to this inquiry, I employed the Deleuzian concept of *rhizome* upon Persian musical modes in my works. In this presentation, through displaying audio-visual material, and analytical demonstration of two compositions, *Ashā* (2020) for flute, and *Through A Veil* (2021) for wind quintet and fixed media, I introduce Persian Modal-Rhizomatic Musical Space as one aspect of my creative practice.

Saman Samadi is a Persian-American composer, performer, music scholar, and current doctoral researcher at the University of Cambridge. Over nearly two decades, his prolific repertoire of orchestral, chamber, solo and electroacoustic music has been performed internationally — in the mid and far East, Europe, and on both coasts of the United States. His music was inspired early by those composers who are known under the rubric New Complexity; however, in 2010, he commenced to develop his unique compositional approach, one which entails a new pitch space, utilising microtonal modes derived from traditional Persian music, multilayered and heterophonic textures, complex polyrhythms and polymeters, all traced within a detailed system of musical notation. He is a first-prize winner of the 2012 Counterpoint-Italy International Composition Competition. For the past half-decade, Samadi has been an active performer, leading multiple ensembles, in New York City's Downtown Scene of experimental music and free improvisation. In 2015, he was awarded an Artist Diploma from the New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA). Samadi is the founder and director of the Cambridge University Experimental Music Ensemble. He holds degrees in music from the University of Tehran and a degree in Mathematics from NODET, an Iranian educational institution for mathematical prodigies. Samadi is a Grantham Scholar and the President of the Wolfson College Music Society at the University of Cambridge.