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Colliding Horizons: Sonic dialogues between Beirut and London

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ABSTRACT

Reflecting upon an exchange between London and Beirut that began in March 2018, led by Recomposing the City and Theatrum Mundi, this paper explores how history continues to make itself heard in the sonic fabric of a city, and questions the role of artistic intervention within this for processing urban social memory and reshaping a city's sounds into new forms. Becoming sensitive to the differences between insider and outsider in a city like Beirut, where the Civil War and its aftermath literally resonate, the paper addresses what, for many Lebanese artists, appears to be a crucial question: how to intervene in the incredibly rich, yet historically cacophonous soundscape of Beirut in a way that attempts neither to 'preserve' nor 'silence' it; how to harness Beirut's cavernous 'excess of sound' such that sonic dissonance can continue to thrive, while also being reconfigured along new lines of invention.

SHORT PAPER

How can urban sound enrich an understanding of the history and morphology of a city, while also offering up sonic materials with which to creatively reimagine that city? How does such a question translate between cities, and what kinds of dialogues arise in posing this question across urban social milieus that are radically different? What does it mean to converse and collaborate across cultures, histories, and societies, and particularly across the so-called global north and south?

These and other thoughts and questions framed the beginning of a collaborative research exchange between Beirut and London that began in March 2018, jointly coordinated by Recomposing the City[1] and Theatrum Mundi.[2] Together, Gascia Ouzounian, John Bingham-Hall, Merijn Royaards and I spent ten days in Beirut participating in an open-ended project that sought to facilitate conversations and creative exchanges between sound artists, musicians, architects, urbanists, acousticians and others working on issues of sound and space in Lebanon and the UK. Taking the above questions as a starting point, we engaged in a programme of workshops, studio visits, reading groups, and listening sessions, during which we shared works-in-progress, field recordings, text excerpts and music with an inspiring group of Beirut-based practitioners.

This paper builds on a prominent conversation that came out of that week, relating to the ways in which the immediate and historical past is rendered audible by the acoustic lifeworld of a city, and the possibilities this opens up for processing urban social memory and reshaping the sounds of a city into new forms. In Beirut, the Civil War and its aftermath literally resonate—through the hollowed-out shells of derelict buildings around which the urban soundscape echoes and ricochets; through the ongoing sounds of postwar reconstruction and spatial erasure, which have seen joint-stock companies like Solidere transform Beirut's historic downtown area into a high-end zone of foreign

1 http://www.recomposingthecity.org/.
2 http://theatrum-mundi.org/.

investment and free-flowing capital; and through the amplified din of traffic, drilling, and hammering that assail from a contested public space marked by an enterprise-driven restructuring process, a scarcity of public transport and infrastructure, and a reservoir of acoustically magnifying pre-demolition historical landmarks. Urban sound in Beirut thus carries with it a history of conflict and a present reality still processing and recovering from that conflict, and is thus intimately entwined with ongoing attempts to revise and transform narratives of war, memory, national and cultural identity.

Something that preoccupied a number of the sound artists and academics we met in Beirut was the question of how to negotiate this incredibly rich, historically cacophonous sonic fabric in a way that neither attempted to conserve or 'preserve' it, in a monumentalizing or nostalgic fashion, which, for some, would only hamper the process of recovery and prolong the grievances of a troubled history; nor in a way that attempted to 'silence' it, through noise abatement methods of selection, suppression, and erasure, as if it were possible or desirable to return to a Utopian quietude, or to reach any kind of consensus as to which sounds are wanted or unwanted, when those sounds are so often the sounds of other people's labour, their daily lives, their histories and social identities. Rather, the focus of participants seemed to veer more towards the question of how to creatively intervene in Beirut's incredible 'excess of sound' in ways that allowed for sonic dissonance and collision to exist and even to thrive, but also to be transformed and reconfigured along new lines.

Two works emerging from and/or discussed during the week captured these themes particularly well: Nathalie Harb's installation, *The Silent Room* (2017), a sanctuary-like self-constructed public space soundtracked by Beirut at its quietest hours, and Merijn Royaards's audio-visual piece, *Teggno* (2018), which acoustically maps and musicalizes the iconic 'Egg' building in Beirut's city centre. Both of these works are embedded in a city where traumatic events are impressed upon the landscape as physical abrasions that continue to make themselves heard; where the textures and surfaces of disintegrating architectural sites and yet-to-be-populated residential towers resound as part of the everyday soundscape, such that urban sounds take on a kind of ineffaceable historicity. Yet, both pieces are equally concerned with how this urban sonic fabric might be translated, transversalized, and made to intersect with other sonic social spaces. Both, in short, are interventions that leave such a soundworld intact, while also reconfiguring it to new ends, opening up possibilities for reimagining the sonic future of Beirut in both contrasting and complementary ways.

During our time in Beirut, we also met a number of DJs, producers, club owners and sound designers involved in the city's evolving night life. In particular, we were struck by what we'd read prior to arriving about the changing conception of the dancefloor in Beirut—as a space transitioning out of a VVIP culture of table service and elite entertainment propped up largely by Gulf Arab tourism, into a more informal, more dance-oriented, affordable and open socio-musical arena, partially due to the travel ban imposed by the Saudi Government during the Syrian War, but primarily due to the efforts of a number of key players in Beirut's electronic music scene. Those we met and spoke to in this scene had invested everything into revolutionizing the city's night life in the last 4-5 years—from seizing a plot of reclaimed land to build a 2000-capacity open-air nightclub; to implementing cutting-edge technologies to ensure the absolute best sound quality; to experimenting with innovative architectural acoustics that could deflect sound away from neighbouring hotels and residents; to cultivating new local electronic/dance music artists and aesthetics.

It was through talking to people on this scene that we met Fouad Bechwati, who founded the audio-acoustic consultancy, 21DB, and who is behind the sound design of

pioneering Beirut nightclubs such as Überhaus, the Gärten, and Stereo Kitchen. We also met the architects of the Gärten, Michael Najjar and Karl Karam; and the co-owner of Überhaus and the Gärten, Ali Saleh. Our conversations with this group, as well as our brief but memorable experiences of the night life, led us to deduce that sound and space are of paramount importance in Beirut dance music culture. This is an urban milieu where venues are purpose-built from scratch because there is no pre-existing club infrastructure; and yet, their very existence is continually threatened by political instability, contested land ownership, rapid property redevelopment, and an underlying conservatism that saw the temporary closure of two of Ali Saleh's clubs in 2018. In other words, musical public life is in no sense a taken-for-granted aspect of culture in Beirut, as it is in London or Berlin, for example. The physical architectures of the clubs have to be adaptable and extra-resilient to survive in the long-term. Indeed, Überhaus and the Gärten are designed to be transportable, as spider-like modular frameworks that can be dismantled, packed into shipping containers and, in theory, reassembled anywhere in the world. In the same way, the sound quality of clubs is pristine, resembling a fragile but vital club culture whose acoustic spaces are meticulously designed and assembled, the sound systems uniquely sourced and customised, to create a sonic haven or bolthole from the clamour and acoustic chaos of the city.

Bringing these two strands together—urban sound, on the one hand, and dance music culture, on the other—I discuss, finally, an ongoing project initiated by Merijn Royaards in the aftermath of our visit to Beirut. In thinking through the ways in which historically imbued urban sound might intersect with, or be transformed by, new sonic spaces, Royaards had the idea of creating a library of impulse responses—an archive of recorded sounds that capture the acoustic signature of particular architectural sites in Beirut, most notably, the Egg. He has since made these sounds freely available as an open access resource to allow Lebanese musicians and electronic music producers to sonically reconstruct the city on their own terms. Flutter echoes, car horns, and falling dust thus become musical materials that are then potentially re-inserted back into Beirut's musical and sonic fabric in the form of dance club tracks, building a new kind of architecture through sound. The following questions arise: how can such sonic tools be used to shape and reshape the all-encompassing noisiness of a city? What effects do these real and reconstructed or imagined sonic architectures have when placed in adjacency to each other? Can the reimagined transform our perceptions of the real?