

# the PARIS REVIEW

## A World of Shared Ecstasy

*A new suite for string quartet weds Western and Arabic music with intelligence, integrity, and feeling.*



Mathias Énard's novel *Compass*, which won the 2015 Prix Goncourt, has been hailed for its elegiac, meandering portrait of Western scholars of the Islamic world. Few critics have noticed that it's also a novel about European musicians and composers enchanted by the sounds of the Middle East and North Africa. The narrator, Franz Ritter, is an Austrian musicologist, or, in his words, "a poor unsuccessful academic with a revolutionary thesis no one cares about." His thesis, which Énard obviously cares about, is that modern European concert music "owed everything to the Orient":

All over Europe the wind of alterity blows, all these great men use what comes to them from the Orient to modify the self, to bastardize it, for genius wants bastardy, the use of external procedures to undermine the dictatorship of church chant and harmony.

Ritter's compass invariably points east, and delirious exaggeration is his rhetorical signature, but the novel offers a suggestive account of Western music's encounter with its Eastern other. Beethoven, Mozart, and Liszt all wrote Turkish-style marches; Debussy, Bartók, and Hindemith were fascinated by Arabic and Asian scales. The Polish composer Karol Szymanowski was so besotted by North Africa that he wrote "Songs of an Infatuated Muezzin," whose lyrics at one point cry out "Allah Akbar!" Some Western musicians reinvented themselves as Arabic musicians, notably the late Swiss *qanun* master (and Muslim convert) Julien Jalal Eddine Weiss. Music, Énard suggests, has proven a uniquely fertile ground for cross-cultural dialogue and exchange, "a world of shared ecstasy, of a possibility for change, of participation in alterity." It has rejected the "violence of imposed identities" in favor of "the dual, the ambiguous."

As Énard somewhat grudgingly acknowledges, this faith in music's almost magical power was echoed, albeit in a more circumspect fashion, by Edward Said, whose accusatory specter haunts *Compass*. Said, of course, had little respect for the Orientalists beloved of Énard; in *Orientalism*, his classic 1978 monograph, he excoriated them for producing static, essentialist images of the inhabitants of the East, thereby contributing to an imperial project. Nor did he share Énard's affection for the Western adventurers and travelers who dressed up in native clothes, or styled themselves as sheiks, seeing them as dilettantes at best. Ritter, I suspect, is speaking for Énard, a scholar of Persian, when he complains that Said overlooked the redeeming features of Orientalism, above all the way it introduced the West to the great cultural and intellectual traditions of the Middle East. *Orientalism*, he declares at one point, "completed a posteriori

the scenario of domination which Said's thinking meant to oppose."

Yet Said, an accomplished amateur classical pianist and a discerning music critic, believed fervently that musical performance and education could create the conditions for equal creative exchange and collaboration between cultures divided by politics. In 1999, he joined forces with the conductor and pianist Daniel Barenboim to create the West-Eastern Divan, an Arab-Israeli youth orchestra, named after a cycle of poems that Goethe wrote under the spell of Hafez, a fourteenth-century Persian Sufi mystic. For Goethe, he said, art enabled "the voyage to 'the other,'" a means of leaving behind the self and seeing, or hearing, the world anew. By gathering young Arab and Israeli musicians in a common musical project, Said, who died in 2003, hoped to facilitate this voyage—not for the sake of "normalizing" relations between Israel and the Arab world (as its Arab critics would later charge) but rather to lay the groundwork for cooperation once Israel ended its occupation and Palestine achieved freedom. He described the Divan—now based in Seville, in the heart of what was once Muslim Spain—as "the most important thing I did in my life."

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Said, I think, would have appreciated John King's extraordinary suite for string quartet, *Free Palestine*, recently released on New World Records, and not only because King has dedicated it to the same cause that Said served as an unofficial spokesman. Seldom have the traditions of Western and Arabic music been fused with such intelligence, integrity, and feeling. King, an experimental New York composer born in 1953, discovered Arabic music late in life, but he has more than made up for lost time in his study of the *maqam'at* (melodic modes) and *iqa'at* (rhythmic units), the building blocks of the improvisatory form known as *taqsim*. Yet *Free Palestine* wears its diligence lightly. Although rigorous in its exploration of Arabic music, it is also playful, relaxed, and joyous, the work of a mature composer who has replenished himself thanks to a love affair with a new form. The freedom King's title invokes has as much to do with the liberation of sound as it does with the liberation of Palestine.

The inspiration for *Free Palestine* came from the Old City of Jerusalem, which King visited in 2011 while touring with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. He wandered into a Palestinian cafe, ordered a mint tea, and listened to the men around him. King does not speak Arabic, but in the conversation, and in its occasional silences, he heard "rhythm, intonation, and density." The sounds of the cafe haunted him, and two years

later, he began to teach himself the *oud*, the Arabic lute, using a website called Oud for Guitarists. He found a tutor—Kinan Abou-Afach, a distinguished Syrian composer, cellist, and oud player based in Philadelphia—and immersed himself in recordings by the instrument's lodestars.

In the *taqsim*, he discovered a kind of Arab jazz in which a soloist could improvise freely within a *maqam*, or modulate to other *maqam'at*, provided she returned to the original one. (*Maqam'at* are made up of seven notes that repeat at the octave.) He loved the "openness of time," the *taqsim's* elastic way of moving between the rhythmic drive of the tune and improvisations rich in melodic embellishments, slides, and tremolos. Aspiring to recapture the sound and feel of the *taqsim* without simply reproducing it on Western instruments, King wondered how the *taqsim* would sound if he combined it with the intricate harmonies, counterpoint, and canonic imitation of the string-quartet music he loved, as well as such extended techniques as *col legno*, in which the string is struck by the stick or the wood of the bow. He began to write the music on *Free Palestine* as a way of answering that question.

Each of the fifteen pieces on the album has a split title. The first part refers to the predominant *maqam* used; the second is the name of a Palestinian village or city that has been ravaged by war or literally erased from the map in 1948, when some four hundred Palestinian villages were razed by Israeli forces. While King was writing *Free Palestine*, the 2014 war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas broke out. More than two thousand Palestinians were killed, the vast majority of them civilians. (More than seventy Israelis were killed, too, all but seven of them soldiers.) King, who had been educating himself on the history of the conflict by reading Said, Mahmoud Darwish, and Hannah Arendt, says he felt moved to commemorate the "de-populated" villages of Palestine. These places, he writes in his composer's note, "are significant historically for what happened to the people who lived there as well as the ongoing conditions of apartheid, occupation and dispossession in both the 1948 and 1967 territories of historic Palestine." The music on *Free Palestine*, however, is neither programmatic nor didactic. It invites us to reflect on the destruction of pre-1948 Palestine, the *Nakba*, or catastrophe, without telling us *how* to think about it.

The "free" in *Free Palestine* also extends to the score, which draws heavily on spontaneous improvisation and the chance procedures invented by John Cage, one of King's mentors. In the first piece, "Sultani Yakah—Ijlil al-Qibliyya," a



propulsive, invigorating minimalist work evocative of Terry Riley's *In C*, each bar can be repeated any number of times, and the players move from bar to bar independently, while maintaining a strict, rapid eighth-note pulse. This could be a recipe for cacophony, but the remarkable players in the Secret Quartet—the violinists Cornelius Dufallo and Jennifer Choi, the violist Ljova Zhurban, and the cellist Yves Dharamraj—are attentive listeners, and they carry out King's instructions with verve, passion, and imagination. The result is music of impressive coherence and expressive range. There is the tormented drama of "Hamayun un-Nuris," which begins very slowly, with Dufallo playing baleful, twisting lines on violin over an otherworldly drone, until Dharamraj enters, with short, almost brutal staccato notes on cello, launching a series of contrapuntal dialogues. There is the sly, almost coquettish "Bayati Shuri—Al Sarafand," a delicacy in 5/8 of swirling, intersecting lines, flying just above a landing strip of pizzicato. (Each *maqam* is said to evoke an emotion or quality, and the "bayati" represents vitality, joy, and femininity.) Even more astonishing, perhaps, is how *natural* the music sounds: one never has the dispiriting feeling of listening to a contrived piece of "crossover" music or pastiche. To my ears, King's use of *maqam* and *iqā'* stands firmly in the vernacular modernist tradition of Shostakovich, Janacek, and Bartók, who drew on folk music in their string quartets. It's reminiscent, too, of John Zorn's compositions based on Sephardic Jewish modes, which, of course, share an ancestral history with the *maqam*.

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In his effort to combine Western and Arabic music, King runs up against an old and still powerful set of prejudices. Pierre Boulez, the self-appointed guardian of modernist purity, poured scorn on Western composers who borrowed ideas from what he called "Oriental music," likening them to "tourists setting off to visit a landscape that is about to vanish." Although he praised Eastern forms of music for their "acuteness of listening," "this fineness of the horizontal interval disengaged from the thickness of polyphony," he asserted that any

attempt to "transfer such elements" to Western music "is completely mistaken; it is the quest for the lost paradise," and could only result in kitsch. "The musical systems of East and West cannot have any bearing on one another, and this will be quickly realized by experienced composers of character," he declared, with his characteristic dogmatic certainty.

Boulez made these remarks in 1967, when, indifferent to his strictures, a new school of advanced composition, later known as minimalism, was gathering force, drawing explicitly on non-Western



musical traditions including Indian raga, Balinese gamelan, and West African drumming. Boulez's mandarin hostility to cross-pollination would not survive the challenge of minimalism and its offshoots. Yet the Arab East's impact on Western art music has been less pronounced than India's or Africa's, in large part for political, rather than aesthetic, reasons. Since 1967—also the year that Israel began its now fifty-year-old occupation of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem—the relationship between the West and the Arab world has been increasingly defined by wars, invasions, terrorism, refugee crises, and travel restrictions, none of which have nurtured mutual understanding, much less artistic exchange. John Adams made a noble attempt to address the Israeli-Palestinian tragedy in his 1991 opera *The Death of Klinghoffer*, juxtaposing a Chorus of Exiled Jews and a Chorus of Exiled Palestinians, only to face charges of anti-Semitism and calls for censorship. When the opera was revived after 9/11, Richard Taruskin accused Adams of "romantically

idealizing" the Palestinians who hijacked the *Achille Lauro*, and applauded the Boston Symphony for canceling its performance. What seemed to particularly infuriate the enemies of *Klinghoffer* was that Adams had told the story of the *Nakba*, and, worse, set it to some of the most beautiful music in his opera.

*Free Palestine* has ruffled feathers for similar reasons. Roulette, the Brooklyn performance space where the music was first performed in 2014, received a number of angry calls about the inclusion of a pro-

civil-rights activist. But King is doing something very different in *Free Palestine*. He is not so much presuming to "speak for" Palestinians as—to borrow Alcott's useful distinction—"speaking with" them. King told me he conceives of the suite as "a kind of dialogue" between Arabic and Western music. In this conversation, both are transformed, merging into a new language.

This mutually transformative dialogue is particularly suggestive in the album's longest track, "Athar Kurd-Deir Yassin," which alludes to the village where more than a hundred Palestinian villagers were killed by Zionist paramilitaries in April 1948. It is a slow, dirge-like melody based on a 10/8 rhythm; seven of its pitches are performed simultaneously at one point, which raises its impact to almost unbearable intensity. Sometimes the *maqam* is played softly, at others so violently that the quartet seems to be stabbing their instruments. "Athar Kurd—Deir Yassin" combines the harmonic density of Western modernism and the visceral emotional "cry" of Arabic music. I was reminded of Bartók's quartets, but King told me that he was inspired by the slow movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, "its shape and intensity," "that kind of slightly surreal but slightly uplifting thing." He wanted the piece to be "just as embedded with those things I felt from Beethoven, until I would sing the quartet and not know if I was in this world or in that world."

In Islam, the feeling that King describes of being in an indeterminate space between two worlds—whether this world and the afterlife, heaven and hell, or death and resurrection—is known as *barzakh*, the word in Arabic for barrier, veil, or curtain. For the Sufi scholar Ibn Arabi, *barzakh* is an isthmus, located between the World of Corporeal Bodies and the World of Spirits. *Barzakh* is not only their point of contact but the condition of their very existence. As in music, it is an interval: that which separates yet also connects. *Free Palestine* was written by an American composer in New York, but it constructs a *barzakh* of its own, a provisional republic of the imagination between the West and the Arab world. It looks beyond their cruel impasse into a possible future, as only music can.

—Adam Shatz