Experimental Electronic Sound as Playful Articulation of a Compromised Sociality in Iran

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ABSTRACT

A host of ambient music pieces produced in Iran appeared on social media around 2010. Against all odds, these works started to gradually form a small 'scene' in the Iranian capital until around 2013. This scene has since been represented *publicly* and *legally* inside the country. It is also well known within experimental electronic music circles outside the country. In a politically-forced absence of many art/music forms in the public domain since the 1979 revolution, the emergence and burgeoning of such an 'avant-garde' scene is significant. This article argues how the scene's aesthetics, in the broadest sense of the term, can be understood as a locus for crystallisation of a concurrent resistance against and embodiment of an invasive, yet ambiguous, form of ethical-moral-legal control. This text also makes a case for how an interdisciplinary integration of ethnographic fieldwork within a practice-based research context in music/sound and anthropology, can contribute towards formation of composite methodologies that are beneficial to both fields.

Keywords

Experimental musicking; collaborative ethnography; practice-based research; noise; control; Iran

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Introduction

The themes of 'noise', 'control', and 'ambiguity' have recurred frequently, in different contexts and forms, in conversation with my Iranian interlocutors.[2] These motifs are also resonant with my own experience of living and working as a music producer in Iran and as a refugee sound artist, (ethno-)musicologist, composer, radio producer, and music blogger in the UK. To explore why the above-mentioned themes have organically become central topics of many discussions on experimental electronic musicking in Iran throughout my fieldwork, and how analysing them can help us better understand the aesthetics of the experimental electronic music scene in Iran (henceforth EEMSI), I will first identify and locate the scene in terms of its genric aesthetics, its use of technology, and its generative modes of practice/sociality. I will then lay out my methodology that is based both on my individual and collaborative sound-based practice (composition, performance, and installation) and my ethnographic fieldwork. Drawing on my field data and through a closer engagement with theoretical discussions in anthropology, sonic arts, and (ethno-)musicology, I will then move towards situating the scene in the context of recent social-political, economic, and technological developments in Iran, and in relation to transnational flows of material, aesthetics, and imaginaries. Analysing EEMSI's aesthetics in relation to the Islamic Republic's isolationist performance in an increasingly technologically-interconnected 'world', I will synthesise a theoretical framework for an aesthetic investigation of developments of the scene in Iran vis-à-vis processes of systemic control, proliferation of digital technologies, and wider distribution of more affordable/efficient internet connections. I will finally argue how,

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[2] The quotations in this article are taken from private semi-structured interviews conducted online between April 2017 and January 2019.

in contact with transnational networks of musical affinity, the aesthetics and attitudes developed as part of the scene have contributed towards a comparatively more effective negotiation of the state's filtering processes by experimental music producers in Iran.

Pioneering Works in Electronic/Electroacoustic Music in Iran: a brief historical account

The earliest example of an electronic/electroacoustic music composed by an Iranian is widely known to be *Shur* (1968) by Alireza Mashayekhi (b. 1940). *Shur* was composed at the Institute of Sonology at University of Utrecht. One of Mashayekhi's former students, Dariush Dolat-Shahi, also became known as a pioneer in electronic/electroacoustic practice in Iran. For Dolat-Shahi, the Shiraz Arts Festival (1967–1977) was a major inspiration. The festival was an annual international series of performative arts events held in held at the Persepolis ruins in Shiraz and was the 'empress' Farah Pahlavi's initiative. As a former graduate in architecture from École Spéciale d'Architecture in Paris, Pahlavi was fond of 'Western' modern visual and performative arts. Over eleven years, the Shiraz festival exhibited works of some of the 20th century's most influential composers and performers including Cathy Berberian, Iannis Xenakis, Peter Brook, John Cage, Gordon Mumma, David Tudor, Max Roach, Bruno Maderna, Olivier Messiaen, Luis de Pablo, Krzysztof Penderecki, Morton Feldman, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Merce Cunningham and others. There were, however, very few electronic/electroacoustic compositions produced during the last decade before the revolution, and electronic/electroacoustic music practice never produced a significant tradition in Iran.

The 1979 revolution transformed Iranian lives and radically disrupted the pioneering electronic/electroacoustic practices of Mashayekhi, Dolat-Shahi and a very

few others such as Massoud Pourfarrokh and Ahmad Pejman who had been also pursuing electronic composition since late 1960s (Cont and Gluck 2008). Such was the fate of the first generation of Iranian electronic/electroacoustic composers. It is worth noting that Ata Ebtekar (aka Sote), a second-generation electronic/electroacoustic composer and a widely known figure within EEMSI, later released two works in collaboration with Alireza Mashayekhi (Bastani 2019): *Persian Electronic Music Yesterday and Today 1966–2006* through Sub Rosa record label in 2007[3] and *Ornamental* through Isounderscore in 2009. (ibid)

Next generations of electronic/electroacoustic practitioners such as Ali Gorji, Reza Vali, Shahrokh Yadegari, Alireza Farhang, and Ata Ebtekar, among others, worked individually and with no substantial connection to each other from outside the country. Such largely individual practices in electronic/electroacoustic music outside the country did not translate into any significant tradition inside either. There is very little connection between the pioneering works in electronic/electroacoustic music in Iran, such as Alireza Mashayekhi's compositions during the 1960s and 1970s, and the work of the above-mentioned composers. Although Mashayekhi continued his composition classes after returning to the country in the 1990s, he never taught electronic/electroacoustic music. This is confirmed through my conversations with Mashayekhi's students, such as Sina Fallahzadeh (composer and pianist), as well as with his personal assistant Saeed Alijani (composer, conductor, music instructor). Despite the existence, therefore, of pioneering electronic/electroacoustic music practice in Iran, such practices did not influence the emergence of EEMSI in a meaningful way, which is widely agreed upon by my interlocutors.

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[3] Access the album via the following link (last accessed 23 December 2020):
subrosalabel.bandcamp.com/album/persian-electronic-music-yesterday-and-today-1966-2006.

Locating the Scene

EEMSI is generally an urban middle-class phenomenon, characterised by activities of educated and secularist computer musicians, digital artists, media producers, and creative coders. It is mostly concentrated in the capital Tehran and is largely represented, 'on the stage', by male producers of 25–35 years old, although the gender balance has been shifting in favour of more female participation.[4] Within genric lexicon, these musicians produce what can be categorised as ambient, drone, experimental, idm, noise, and glitch.

Figure 1. Rojin Sharafi Performing at Set Festival 2018 in Tehran[5]

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[4] Comparing SET Festivals live events in 2015 and 2017 demonstrates this shift. (SET had no live event in 2016.) While in 2015 the festival included one female performer out of 13 acts, four performers out of 12 acts represented in 2017 were female. 'Off' the stage or outside performed music scenarios, however, female participants have generally been more active. This is mainly due to the fact that solo female performance, particularly if it involves voice, is still a politically contentious issue in Iran.

[5] Photo by Aram Tahmasbi, extracted from the following link: flickr.com/photos/disk_ctm/29508435477

Generally, the scene can be broadly positioned within the realm of electronic and computer music, performed mainly with laptops, often with visual accompaniment, although all with an 'experimental' touch. The kind of experimentalism to which I have referred in this text, in relation to the emergent digital arts and electronic music practices in Iran, is neither intended as an aesthetic judgment in relation to the 'finished' work and/or of the artistic process behind it nor as a direct pointer for American experimentalism of the 1950s and its later offshoots, although EEMSI would not be totally unrelated to that movement either. My use of the term, however, does draw from Benjamin Piekut's holistic view over 'American Experimentalism'. Through a wide lens such as his that is capable of accommodating my interlocutors' descriptions, experimentalism consists of a mode of negotiation in an environment with no significant tradition in electronic music as argued previously (2011: 9–11)—an environment that's not particularly well-structured for the requirements of an amateur or professional in music or sound either. The kind of experimentalism I am concerned with here involves strategies of navigating not only the sonic and the technological but also the social, ethical, legal, ideological-political, and the economic. It takes place through a 'mediation'[6] between the 'emergent' and the more established networks of creative practice in Iran and beyond, also between participants in the scene and the broader society, including the authorities. It manifests in trials and errors, successes and failures. It engages with the practicalities and contingencies of presenting a new musical form and rendering it intelligible for others through different processes of 'translation'—i.e. through performances, talks, interviews, reviews, discussions, and articles; also through

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[6] Mediation in the sense used by Georgina Born (2005: 11), in which she writes: 'Mediation…from one perspective, as the clue to transcending idealist ontologies of music; from a second, … as diplomacy, as the negotiation between apparently incommensurable worlds'.

encounters with other artists, producers, audiences, government officials, curators, and publishers; and with festivals, residencies, academies, galleries and venues, materials, technologies, concepts, and imaginaries.

Inside Iran, the first few public appearances took place in galleries across the capital from around 2008–2010. The initial activities involved workshops, presentations, talks, and later performances and installations. In cyberspace, the earliest signs of an emergent experimental electronic music practice in Iran emerged on Facebook and Soundcloud around 2010, one year into President Ahmadinejad's second term in office (2009–2013).

Figure 2. Poster of an event consisted of workshops and performances organised by SaroSeda collective in Mohsen Gallery in Tehran (2010)[7]

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[7] SaroSeda was an artist collective, which was in part supported by Mohsen Gallery in Tehran. It was active from around 2009 to 2011. The poster is extracted from the following link:

parkingallery.com/?m=201007

The public face of this scene consists of two internationally-known festivals namely Tehran Annual Digital Arts Exhibition aka TADAEX[8] and SET Experimental Arts Events aka SET Festival[9]. Galleries like Tarrāhān-e Āzād (now Azad Art), Etemad, Mohsen, and Aun were the first public hosts of experimental electronic sound in Iran. In fact, this early connection to the visual art scene in Iran through presentation in galleries helped the embryonic scene sidestep difficulties of applying for official permits required for organising public events and to find an audience among the gallery-goer audience. It is important to note that any form of public dissemination of cultural products in Iran, including performance of music and release of musical albums, require an official permission granted by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The latter body investigates sounds, voices, lyrics, and texts as well as pictures and videos (in the case of audio-visual performances) to determine if the product is compatible with the Islamic Republic's understanding of appropriate music. A large part of such an understanding is not formulated in the state's laws and depends on the official's interpretation of laws, fatwās, and norms. Nahid Siamdoust (2017) has expansively investigated problematic relations of musical production and the Permit System in Iran.

In the private domain, for instance in gatherings and parties, however, the new experimental electronic music was known to a few circles of friendship, from slightly an earlier date and thanks to two private events that had taken place in 2008 in Tehran. In these instances, Nima Pourkarimi aka Umchuga, Siavash Amini, and Hesam Ohadi aka Idlefon had performed sets to a selected crowd mainly including friends, families, and acquaintances. The fact that such activities found a way to the public domain rather quickly and without provoking any serious resistance from the state is crucial, because a

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[8] tadaex.com

[9] setfest.org

large variety of musical endeavours still cannot be represented in such a way and remain merely as private interests or 'underground' adventures. This is due to the state's ideologically-rooted political scepticism towards musicking Iranians, which can be for instance discerned in its hostility towards certain genres of popular music such as rap, hip-hop, and house (Youssefzadeh 2001, 2004a, 2007, 2018; Nooshin 2008, 2009, 2011, 2016).[10] Before further contextualising the scene in relation to recent political, economic, and technological developments in Iran, I will lay out my methodology.

Figure 3. Javad Safari's Audiovisual Performance at Tarrahan Azad Gallery in Tehran (2008)[11]

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[10] Rap was for instance labelled by the former Tehran's chief of police Hossein Sajedi-Nia in 2010 as 'morally deviant'. See the following link for an article on the Telegraph that uses Sajedi-Nia's quote: (last accessed 7 February 2019):

telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/8123046/Why-Iran-is-cracking-down-on-rap-music.html

[11] Source: azadart.gallery/En/eventdetail.aspx?Id=23

Collaborative Music-Making as Ethnographic Research

Conducting research from a 'distance' as a political refugee in the UK, my fieldwork mainly involves online ethnography, one-to-one online interviews, and qualitative analysis using digital tools such as Atlas.ti in the context of a practice-based project in sonic arts and electroacoustic composition. The co-development of ethnography and artistic practice in this project is illustrated in Figure 4 as a feedback mechanism.
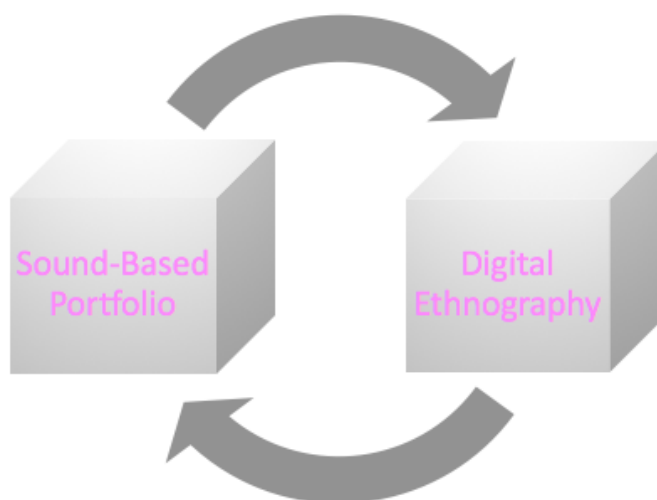

Figure 4. Research Structure

The particular focus of this article initially emerged through an analysis of the data gathered via online fieldwork and interviews conducted between 2016 and 2019. Themes that had recurrently appeared in interviews were explored in this period through composition, installation, and performance. As such, the two components of the research—i.e. ethnography and sound-based practice—were mutually supportive and intertwined, in that the former consisted both of practice which formed part of the 'object of study' of the ethnographic work and practice which formed part of the

'method of study', taking the form of both critique and provocation/intervention.

A sound-based portfolio positioned my work within wider networks of the practice of experimental electronic music in Iran. There has been, as such, a congruity between the technology used to make the work, that used to disseminate it, that which constructed the community of practice, and that which enabled study of the scene as a 'distant' participant-experiencer-collaborator. Collaborative compositions and performances offered a context for a meeting of different modes of doing and thinking experimental 'musicking' (Small 1998) in the context of this research, and synthesised new theoretical perspectives for a conceptualisation and contextualisation of the practices subject to scrutiny. This methodology enabled opportunities for uncovering of the processes and discourses that underlay practices of experimental electronic music in Iran, which would have otherwise been obscured from a solely ethnographic or artistic research perspective.

Such an interdisciplinary approach at the intersection of music, sound art/studies, anthropology, and (ethno-)musicology to the study of sound/music in the context of society/culture, stands on a firm ground that has been rigorously excavated, at least since Steven Feld's efforts in the early 1980s—see for instance Feld (1990). Broadly, conducting ethnography through a focus on collaborative practices in sound, listening, and music-/sound-making as a research method within humanities has since been well explored.[12]

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[12] Lorraine Plourde's investigation of *onkyō* (sound) scene in Tokyo (see Plourde 2008: 270–295); Benjamin Piekut's study of the 'avant-garde' music scene of the 1950s New York (see Piekut 2011); Thomas Porcello's investigation of sound recording and sound engineer training practices (2004: 733–758) or his seminal work on 'soundscape' as a mode of integrating sound within anthropology in Samuels et al. (2010: 329–345); Vincent Battesti fieldwork in Cairo (2020: 755–778); and Annemette

Feld's collaboration with Ghanaian producers, which is reported *in Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra* (2012) and the accompanying documentary, is another recent example. In fact, Feld's observation—that 'art-making is something that could be and should be central to anthropological thinking…[although] it has never happened' (Feld in interview with Angus Carlyle, in Lane and Carlyle 2013: 207–211)—offered the first methodological provocation to my research. This made me to think about how the merging of the two disciplines—artistic research in sound/music and anthropology—within a coherent research methodology could be beneficial to both fields. Later, in 2015, Simon Waters' paper (2015: 22–32) provided the next provocation for the design of a collaborative experiments as part of my research, leading me to recognise composition as a possible way of doing ethnography through musical commentary/critique and provocation. Waters analyses a work by Tullis Rennie to advocate the 'broader application' of popular music in understanding the role of music in social life (Ibid: 23).

> Although obviously not entirely without recourse to language, [Rennie's composition] begins to answer questions about how one work can comment on and analyse or critique another through its own agency as music. It also demonstrates how a work can marshal autobiography and ethnography to illuminate the human capacity to manipulate and be manipulated by musical activity. (ibid: 31)

Initially inspired by the work of Feld and Waters, my idea was to investigate how collaborative composition could be exploited simultaneously as ethnography and instigative-artistic practice for a materially engaged and less mediated exploration of the music scene in Iran. From a different perspective, the theme of collaboration also emerged through my fieldnotes in the summer of 2017. By then, I had conducted some

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Kirkegaard's fieldwork in Stone Town, Zanzibar, based on soundwalks (2020: 295–310) are but a few examples.

25 interviews with participants in the scene. Through an initial analysis of the gathered data I concluded that collaboration was a common practice. On the one hand, and from a social perspective, this seemed to be the case for collaborative work's 'capacity to facilitate trust and cooperation, social cohesion, community formation and transformation,' as argued by Camlin, Daffern and Zeserson (2020: 2). One the other hand, and from a music technological perspective, the commonness of collaborative practices appeared to align with what Waters' had argued (2000c: 5):

> Within what might be termed the media arts, of which the sonic arts are a productive subset, it is possible to identify an increased tendency toward collaborative or collective working. This may emerge from the fact that, at least in the (historically) early stages of the forms of work we are considering, artists tended - often out of necessity - to work together with technicians and with programmers, as well as from the fact that the networking possibilities of the physical world are now multiplied so dramatically by networking in the digital domain.

Collaboration, functioning as both a catalyst and a product of affinity networks within EEMSI, can be also understood from an educational theory perspective, in terms of Étienne Wenger (1998)'s work on communities of practice. Writing in a revised version of the theory with Beverly Wenger-Trayner, they note: 'Communities of practice [such as] … a band of artists seeking new forms of expression … are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly'. I will expand on the concept of affinity networks in the following parts.

Despite an abundance and a diversity of data collected through interviews and online ethnography, by the summer of 2017, it was clear to me that one crucial aspect of the practices I had set out to investigate could not be sufficiently explored. This realisation was formed following an assessment that showed discussions on the *processes* of making—the act of engaging with materials as a process of mutual

transformation and craft—was sparse, suggesting a 'hole' in the methodology that could not be filled merely by engaging with the scene through virtual ethnography and composition. Collaborating with my interlocutors in composition and performance filled exactly that space, in the very least because it qualified certain types of discussion that could have not otherwise taken place and that it further established and validated my position/status as a participant-experiencer-collaborator within the scene. Above all, however, collaborative practice enabled new channels for a rigorous practice-based investigation of the case at hand. I now turn to theorising the aesthetics of the scene.

Situating the Scene in Relation to Recent Political, Economic, and Technological Developments in Iran

EEMSI's emergence should also be viewed in relation to previous repression of a grassroots, alternative pop music scene in Iran—see Nooshin (2008, 2009, 2011) for a discussion of this scene and its developments in relation to the changing political landscape throughout the early 2000s. The remnants of this scene, mainly of the younger generations who had familiarised themselves with music production software and computer coding, started to experiment individually with computer music forms in their bedrooms and basements while expanding their knowledge, skills, and connections via the Internet, and reorganising. Arash Molla aka ArtSaves—electronic producer and DJ based in Tehran—comments on this phenomenon based on first-hand experience:

> Many of those who started experimenting with music production software came from a
> rock background. It was hard to be a rock band as you know, so people started learning
> how to work with software themselves to bypass the difficulties of gathering people
> together, rehearsing, hiring recording studios to record and to post-produce, and
> developing a collective vision in an environment so hostile to music. Through working
> with digital interfaces, they could achieve all of these individually and at least get to the

finished demos more easily and with less headache. (Interview with the author, 2 August 2017)[13]

During Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005–2013), the intensified sanctions put in place by the United States and the United Nations Security Council on Iran's economy meant no financial transaction to or from Iranian banks for ordinary citizens was possible. Nobody could, therefore, directly purchase anything via the Internet.[14] The conditions under sanctions were exacerbated during the politically and economically turbulent years of Ahmadinejad's presidency by the state's own economic and political mismanagement. With a further lack of proper copyright laws, a hack/crack software market grew. Shopping malls and tech stores like Paytakht and Bazar Rezā in Tehran were flooded with CD and DVD bundles that offered a large variety of copied and cracked software. Among the very many programmes on a DVD, one could accidentally come across a music production software, and some people did. For instance the famous hip-hop and electronic producer in Iran Alireza Poorsohoolat (aka Mezrab), whom I interviewed in 2018, told me:

> It was around 2005. In searching for some kind of converter programme, I ended up buying a cd in Bazar Reza that included about twenty [pieces of] software. One of these was FL Studio. I installed it, just as I installed most of the programmes on the CD to check what they could do. I messed around a bit with FL Studio and found it interesting. This was my introduction to music software, which led to more experimentation with sounds and software and made me a professional producer. (Interview with the author, 23 December 2018

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[13] All quotes from Iranian producers are translated from Persian by the author.

[14] The situation still remains more or less the same; the only difference now is that there is an internally functional network that people can use to buy goods online using Iranian bank accounts from inside the country.

Another form of introduction to software took place through film, television, radio, and the advertisement industry, mainly for the purposes of putting sound on or designing sound for videos. Experimenting with digital interfaces brought about new ways of doing and thinking sound/music as well as new forms of and reasons for connectivity with peers, practices, and materials in other parts of the world. In contact with the proliferation of more affordable and efficient internet connections, these circumstances fundamentally changed, for many, the approach to music/sound. EEMSI is the offspring of this change.
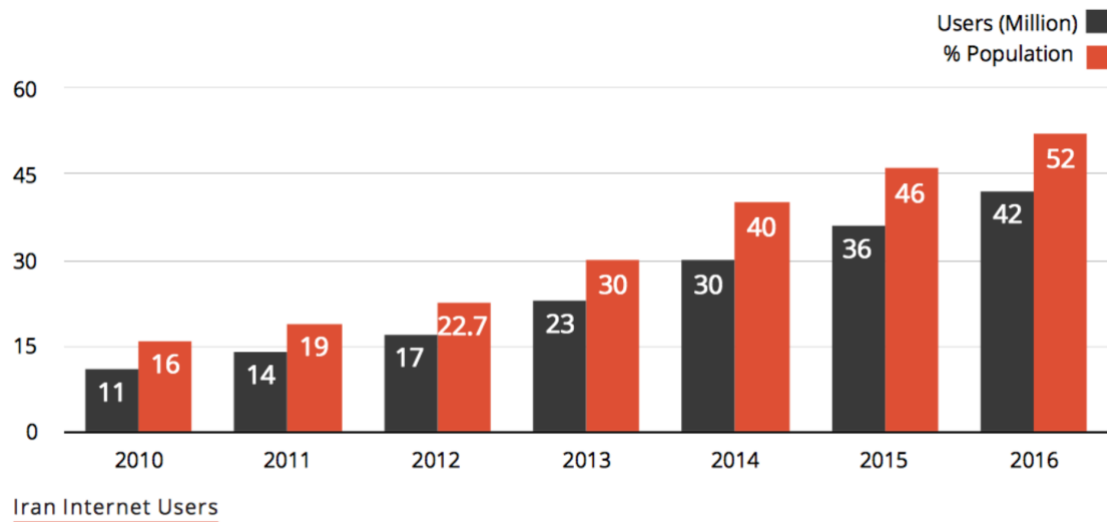

Figure 5. Population of internet users in Iran from 2010 to 2016[15]

When early indications of an emergent experimental electronic music practice in the public domain in Iran surfaced around 2010, I was based in Paris as a music technology student who had left the country one year earlier. One night I saw a post shared by a friend on Facebook that was linked to a piece of music on Soundcloud. The music was *Streets 1* by Umchunga. It was labelled with the hashtag 'Idm'. In the matter of a few months many more similar cases appeared on the internet. The sonic palette

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[15] Source: techrasa.com/2017/04/21/highlights-of-irans-ict-achievements-in-the-recent-years-2/.

from which the 'new music' coming from Iran drew did not belong to the practice of composers and producers I had previously known. When I left the country, rock, blues, country, and jazz influences were still surfacing in demos and occasional (mostly private) gigs. Certain folk music elements from Jewish heritage and the Balkan area had also found a way to the work made by a few acts. Some rather conventional electronic music—a few inspired by the use of software such as Fruity Loops and Reason, others influenced by psychedelic rock, new age, synth pop, and industrial rock aesthetics of the likes of Pink Floyd, Vangelis, Depeche Mode, and Nine Inch Nails—could also be heard here and there. Incorporation of elements borrowed from Iranian classical and folk music within the above-mentioned forms by a few rock, funk, and 'fusion' jazz bands, was another trend of the time.[16] But I had never previously heard of an electronic music from Iran, inspired by ambient, glitch, idm, and noise aesthetics. This realisation offered the first stimulus for my personal investigations that began in 2010 and led to my academic research in 2015.

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[16] Laudan Nooshin has reported on the Iranian pop music scene since 2005 (See for instance Nooshin 2005 and 2009). She has also written more specifically on jazz (2016), rock (2008), and hip hop (2011) scenes in Tehran.
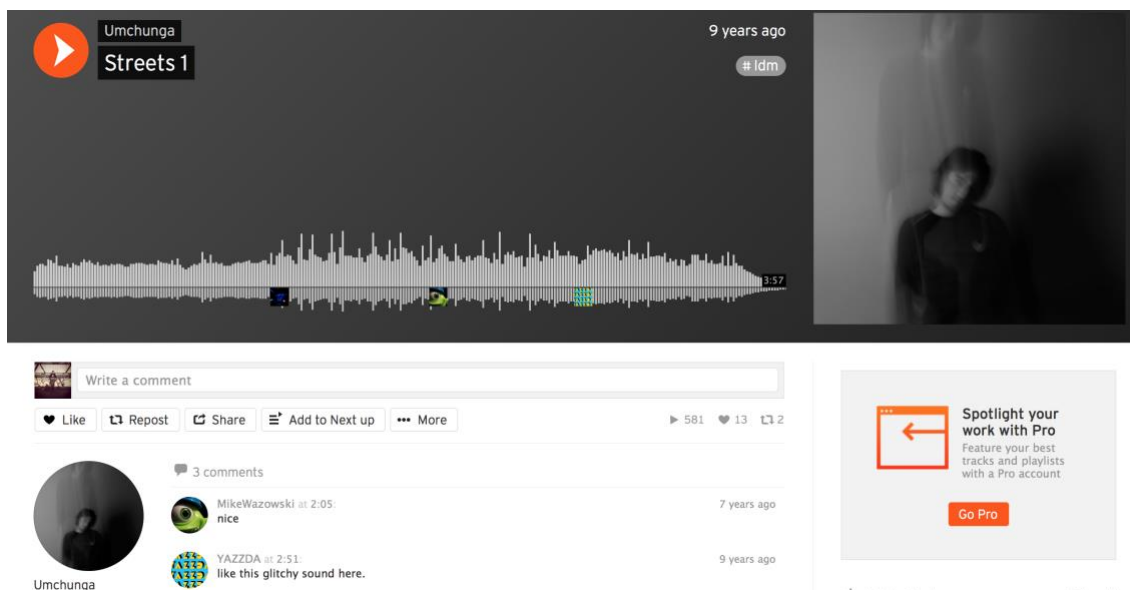
Figure 6. Screenshot from Umchunga's *Streets 1* on Soundcloud (artist's own page)[17]

Considering the aesthetics and relations formed as a result of the scene's activities, EEMSI can be theorised as a trans-local phenomenon emerged in contact with digital music technologies and the internet. In this context the scene has become embedded in—while at the same time perpetuating—certain networks of cosmopolitan 'musical' affinity whose function is broader than that of providing opportunities for conversation, sharing, learning and collaboration. These networks equip participants, to varying degrees, with new imaginaries that enable alternative modes of sociality performed outside the reach and control of 'traditional' authorities like the central government or nuclear family. Mark Slobin's concept of 'affinity interculture' (1992) has famously reflected on the organisation of such networks based on consumer choices, which, as Martin Stokes notes, 'offer modern subjects more-or-less limitless opportunities for self-fashioning' (2004: 49). Participating in such transnational

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[17] Umchunga is Nima Pourkarimi's artistic name. Find *Streets 1* via this link (last accessed 16 August 2018): soundcloud.com/umchunga/streets-1.

networks affords experimental electronic music producers in Iran new forms of belonging to something 'bigger' and more interesting than the everyday reality of polluted streets, backward universities, restricted relationships, hopeless gatherings, politicised ideals, dogmatic traditions, and inaccessible dreams—spaces, places, and ideas stained by omnipresent shadow of 'control' and hazy futures. Shahin Entezami (aka Tegh), an electronic/ambient producer based in Tehran, offers an account similar to many of my interlocutors in Iran to illustrate such a connection:

> What you describe as scene, to me involves circles of friendship with music as their fabric that are mainly shaped via the internet....In relation to my friends and now colleagues [in the SET Festival], I felt at the beginning that it was only them who were aware of this thing [the type of music Shahin liked], only them who cared so much about it, only them who talked passionately about it. I think this natural bond is the reason why these people, Iranian or otherwise, are prepared to give each other support, wherever they are [regardless of their geographical location]. (Interview with the author, 7 April 2017)

These 'circles of friendship with music as their fabric … shaped via the internet' described by Tegh encourage producers in Iran to explore new methods for dissemination and commodification of experiments, outside the territory upon which the state exercises direct control. The internet has, as such, concurrently provided an ecology and a technology enabling EEMSI to diversify and expand but also to streamline and connect.

Figure 7. Tegh performing as part of an event organised by SET Experimental Arts Events in Tehran (2015)[18]

Due to the state's rather obsessive tendency to monitor and regulate the social while not tolerating serious critique, such a possibility of connection and exchange outside the state's direct control, is of remarkable significance. Precisely because of its tangled relationship and constant exchange with the ideological-political, social, cultural, economic, and ecological in Iran, and musicians performed, individualised embodiments, EEMSI can be simultaneously viewed as a localised occurrence.[19] It is, however, crucial to recognise that the scene's (musico-)logics and identities are not

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[18] Source: setfest.org/portfolios/pher-num-tegh/

[19] From this perspective, EEMSI's repertoire of activities forms parallels with other regional counterparts, for instance the electronic/electroacoustic scene in Lebanon. As Thomas Burkhalter has shown in his work on experimental music in Beirut, 'electroacoustic musicians […] choose local and transnational forms to express their connection to the broader musical, cultural, social, and political environment' (2014:1).

created merely in 'response' to local or global flows. These are performatively taken shape across a range of fundamentally composite discourses and practices. As composite material, both in terms of stylistic approach to composition and sources used as compositional material, the emergence of experimental electronic music practices in Iran can be understood in relation to proliferation of digital technologies and what Georgina Born has termed 'relayed creativity'(2005: 26). Common use of software such as Ableton Live, visual programming environments such as Max/MSP (or Max for Live) and Pure Data or a variety of software synths and audio plugins, while handling any recorded material on the internet as potential sound source to be manipulated/sculpted towards specific compositional aims, are key technological elements enabling and driving EEMSI's productive processes. Emphasising the use of digital media in surpassing the capacity of material artefacts to stop the flow of re-creation, Born notes:

> If music notation and recording were the means by which musical ideas, and then sounds, became spatially mobile – released, or alienated, from both place and co-presence – then digital media have accelerated those processes....[D]igitized music...is continually, immanently open to re-creation. Distributed across space, time and persons, music can become an object of recurrent decomposition, com-position and re-composition by a series of creative agents. We need a new term for this capacity: I suggest relayed creativity. (2005:25–26)

Born has also observed that digital technologies 'afford and enhance a dispersed and collaborative creativity' (Ibid:25). |Such creativity manifests in the use of technology and the way digitised music, 'uploaded' on the internet, travels across cultures, societies, and musical genres affording opportunities for de-/re-compositing. I will further expand on how collaboration as a common practice within EEMSI, which has emerged at the meeting point of cosmopolitan musical affinity networks and has been shaped via the internet and digital music technology, has sustained the scene in an

environment that has never been particularly well-suited for its requirements (educational, economic, technological, political, etc.).

The generation born after the 1979 revolution and the Iraq-Iran war (1980–1988) did not fully experience the suffocating ambience of the 1980s and spent its teenage years throughout the relatively more politically tolerant and economically stable period of Mohammad Khatami's presidency (1997–2005). For understanding EEMSI from the theoretical perspectives of local music movements in an increasingly 'globalised' world, an appreciation of concepts such as 'cultural hybridity' (Hall 1993; Bhabha 1994; Bannerji 2000; Canclini 2001), 'cosmopolitanism' (Turino 2000), 'plural worlds' (Nilan and Feixa 2006), and 'social imaginary' (Castoriadis 1987; Gaonkar 2002; Taylor 2002) will be instrumental. As a network of musical practice relying on digital means of production (predominantly software) and dissemination/commodification (the internet), EEMSI can be understood in relation to what Pam Nilan and Carles Feixa have identified as 'the performative practices of cultural hybridity by young people as they negotiate forms of personal and group identity during the contemporary period of rapid social transformation sometimes described as globalization' (2006: 2). 'Hybridity' has been defined in different ways in cultural studies and social sciences, especially within post-colonial theorising. For a definition, I find Homi Bhabha's flexible use of the term appealing. In Bhabha's view 'cultural hybridity' is a result of continuous negotiation of expressions of difference within the dynamisms of cultural flows' (1994: 2). This characterisation also resonates with what Himani Bannerji has described as a potentially 'emancipatory use of culture' in the face of globalising power relations. (2000: 2)

Aesthetics of Absence and Controlled Noise

To locate EEMSI properly, one cannot escape discussing the state's significant control over cultural production in general and the domain of pop culture in particular. From the

perspective of my research, then, EEMSI's aesthetics are a locus for crystallisation of a concurrent resistance against and embodiment of an aggressively enforced control. Through this lens, the scene's aesthetics are shaped as a result of a play between the emergent, digitally-enabled modes of creative practice and forms of sociality, rooted in a cosmopolitan ethos shared among producers who operate as active nodes within decentralised, transnational affinity networks based in the cyberspace, and the internalised, individualised embodied effects of ideological-political and ethical-moral control in Iran.

To understand EEMSI is partly to understand this control. There is something unique about the hegemony, form, and texture of control within socio-cultural processes in Iran. It is exhausting for cultural producers, and society at large, to be forced to operate within a perpetual state of 'in-between-ness' and insecurity. The existence of such a state relates to conditions of political and economic uncertainty but also to deep-rooted mechanisms of dogmatic ethical-moral judgement, crystallised for instance through the laws but also citizens self-policing and policing of each other. Internalised to an extent within the society, such mechanisms manifest even in the most insignificant situations in daily lives of people in Iran. They constantly have to process what is (not) permitted; what can(not) be expressed; what is the hidden meaning of everything said or done; what is essentially morally right and what is wrong.

Reza Kazemzadeh, psychologist and hobbyist film critic, puts the society's search for new expressive territories through art and music, which was revitalised by the social, ideological-political, economic, and cultural transformations that occurred after 1997 in Iran, in a broader and more complex historical context. He suggests a relationship between aesthetics of art and music in Iran and wider historical processes as follows:

Thanks to the post-1997 changes, people started to take back some control over their lives by referencing in different ways what was important to them. Although, in art, literature, fashion, and architecture, such a referencing has been historically performed obliquely or cautiously, due to the society's conservative approach to expressive behaviours that should be viewed in relation to its broader geopolitical conditions, cultural diversity, power struggles, and so on. As a result of the 1979 revolution, this historical sense of cautiousness, often manifesting as self-policing in individuals' and group's behaviours, was re-enforced. Re-formed through the new regime's performances, it inevitably became internalised. So, not only because the politics or the power structures did not allow for autonomy, but also because systemic control had become internalised by individuals that it manifested itself in different ways through the aesthetics of art and music, for instance through abstraction or distortion. As such, the popularity of music genres like rap and heavy metal, and the emergent ambient/drone music in Iran could be also studied from this broad psycho-historical perspective. (Interview with the author, 26 January 2018)

Even though, arguably, democratic polities include systems of monitoring and filtering, what makes the Iranian case unique is the invasive and heavily moralised boundaries, and the risk-laden fuzziness of control. The argument is about pervasive but hardly detectable mechanisms that render a large category of practices, behaviours, interests, successes, failures, orientations, decisions, and even thoughts in Iran *almost (im)permissible* and potentially dangerous. In previous work, I have termed this machinic assemblage that filters and regulates the social in such a unique way in Iran the *amorphous regulatorium* and its output the almost-(im)permissibles (Bastani 2019).

This amorphous and semi-autonomous machine is an agentive force that currently operates at the conjunction of radically different worlds of cyber-powered imaginaries and social 'realities'—although the two are increasingly intertwined. It functions at the intersection of converging worlds of mad technological acceleration and neoliberal capitalism, and the rather isolated worlds of ideological-political resistance against the latter's transformative cultural force. The amorphous regulatorium ultimately works towards creating a context for a legitimate and justified resistance

against neoliberal capitalism's uncompromising force and, as such, guarantees the sustenance of ideological-political power in Iran through continuously renewed processes of ethical-moral-legal judgement. To clarify, I am not advocating any form of conspiracy theory here. I do not mean that such an elaborate system, or machine, is designed and implemented by the 'regime'. Rather, I have argued that this *machinic* operation has *emerged* as a result of the post-revolutionary establishment's performance.

As previously described laptops and software have provided producers in Iran with new means of music production and sonic exploration, which, as it will become clearer in this section, helped freeing musical presentation from the forms previously known to and frowned upon by the establishment. Distancing itself from familiar 'pop aesthetics', the emergent digital arts and experimental electronic music scene was afforded an environment for burgeoning. By engaging with digital technologies and the internet while learning from the experience of movements before them, experimental electronic producers are better equipped both technologically and politically in comparison to their predecessors. They are able to interact more efficiently/pragmatically with Permit System officials. The scene's musical/sonic aesthetics, which do not directly provoke politically contentious areas (for instance note an absence of vocal/text or direct social/political messaging), its early association with the visual arts scene through presentation in galleries, and an engagement with laptops and electronic software/hardware as opposed to conventional musical instruments, have facilitated a pragmatic approach as such.

In contact with similar musical approaches in other parts of the world via the internet and as a result of ongoing negotiations with the Permit System officials, event organisers, and the producers' formal/stylistic concerns, EEMSI has developed a

specific aesthetics, in the broadest sense of the term. This serves the producers' creative, professional, and psychological needs, while to some extent helping them sidestep ideological-political, and to a lesser extent economic, difficulties attached to careers in music in Iran. Hesam Ohadi aka Idlefon, an electronic producer, computer programmer, and a co-founder of SET, told me:

> It is true that we are pragmatic and cautious; we must be. You need to be careful, however, how you talk about this. We haven't fabricated an image such that it appeals to the officials in order for them to grant us permission, as some people have suggested. This image has been organically constructed as a result of our approach to sound and what we wanted from it. But, it is also true that we don't poke the sensitive areas and that our artistic work does not pose any problem for the system either. You know, it is delicate and vague so we are also careful but definitely not compromising. We do what we like to do. We would do the same in any other situations or locations. (Interview with the author, 7 April 2017)

This 'image' that Idlefon mentions can be described in terms of sonic-visual aesthetics, live performance strategies, design of the performance ecosystem, and 'management' of the performance environment. Digital means and the way they are interacted with on the 'stage' have been essential to how gigs are 'framed', the manner in which they are 'managed', and, therefore, in the way this image has been constructed.

By replacing, in part, human-human interactions with human-machine correlations, laptops and digital interfaces made it possible for the producers in Iran to frame their shows as explorations in 'science' or 'education' as opposed to music gigs, in their interaction with the forces of the state. Such a re-contextualisation has allowed the officials convinced of the new material's safe distance from the conventional red zones, to tolerate cautiously and with a few raised eyebrows, the strangeness of the experimental electronic music/sound. The role of digital interfaces in reconfiguring the performance space is significant here. It can be understood in relation to their capacity to somewhat de-politicise the *appearance* of gigs by reducing the familiar human-

human interaction among the members of ensembles or between performers and audience, while replacing it with new networks of human-machine configurations: performer-laptop units that interact with the audience in a significantly minimal and less direct fashion. Within the ideologically and politically charged and contested zone of musical presentation in Iran, such reconfigurations have enabled producers to further a constructive negotiation with the state officials for whom such sounds and images, despite their strange characteristics, or perhaps because of them, did not raise serious red flags.

From a different perspective, EEMSI's aesthetics can be also understood in terms of an absence of 'features' that are typically portrayed by the media, in Iran or in the 'West', as 'Iranian'. Here lies a particularity of this scene that I would like to discuss in more detail: its performative and discursive resistance towards almost anything 'mainstream', be it music, politics, celebrity culture, pop culture in general, western understanding of Iranian culture, arts and music, Iranian ideals of Persianism or Islamism, exaggerations on the Western media about total lack of freedom in Iran, omnipresent conflicts, and oppression, and the Iranian positivistic Reformist narrative of an absolutely progressive society, steadily pacing towards secular democracy. Although, or perhaps because, EEMSI is highly politically-conscious it has distanced itself from such narratives. This absence can also be identified as an *escape* from the cycle that strictly defines based on cultural, social, and political stereotypes—the discourse and practice that typically labels and defines for Iranian and non-Iranian audiences what should constitute Iranian music or art. It is also an escape from a highly regulated social reality in which one's sense of agency and autonomy—that differentiating, energising, organising, and guiding sense of a productive self or

identity—is compromised. As Maryam Sirvan of the Tbilisi-based NUM electronica duo (which also includes Milad Bagheri) told me:

> We live in Rasht, but sometimes we wonder what that really means. We have the physical experience of living here for our entire life but mentally it's like we've never been here. We are not involved in social processes here. Yes, we live in our own bubble, if you like. The only influence of Rasht in our work comes from its nature— jungle, sea, mountains—which offers us an escape from the social environment. If this surrounding natural and musical world did not exist, there would have been nothing else left here for us to do and enjoy. (Interview with the author, 10 May 2017)

The 'escape' as formulated in NUM's quote can also be understood in terms of an *exit* towards a new musical future that demands a radical reformation of the past. This 'past' would be one in which Iranian culture seems to have been eternally stuck, increasingly so due to the dogmatic and revivalist performance of the Islamic Republic. This absence, escape, or exit that I identified as key features of EEMSI, is also result of a pragmatic approach to making music in an environment in which music, sound, and voice are heavily politicised and moralised. The coded language of abstract sounds and images common to EEMSI products has, in fact, deep roots and precedence in Iranian culture as Kazemzadeh's comment illustrated above. This coded expression seems to be a new iteration of an older pattern that yet again found a specific social function, this time in the form of experimental electronic sound. Similarly, Ata Ebtekar (aka Sote) has also observed:

> I think there are connections between the use of blur soundscapes, reverb, stretched forms, drones, distortion, so-called dark ambiances, and the social life in Iran in general. I cannot say, however, what exactly those connections may be. (Interview with the author, 7 April 2017)

I argue that the tension between finding playful ways of furthering a creative practice, which can be presented publicly, and embodied effects of the almost-(im)permissibles, is the missing link between EEMSI's sonic aesthetics and broader social processes

mentioned in Sote's comment. The desire to incorporate noise and distortion is a widely-expressed one within the experimental electronic music scene in Iran. Producing music in situations of political and economic uncertainty, while negotiating new identities and aesthetics against certain dogmatic-traditional values and fears in families and the wider society, is perhaps the source of 'blur' soundscapes and 'dark ambiances' mentioned in Sote's comment. Through this lens, harnessing noise compositionally is simultaneously an emancipatory act of protesting (ambiguous) control—a visceral release from its frustratingly limiting boundaries—and the manifestation of its embodiment.

Conclusion

As the new phenomenon within the art/music scene in Iran, EEMSI's emergence in the public domain around 2010 can be understood in relation to Jacques Attali's (1985) 'formulation of a final utopian "political economy" of music—"composition"—by which the latter means each *individual*'s capacity to construct the soundscape to and of her own life' (as cited in Waters 2015: 25; emphasis added). In a society in which the social is seriously compromised by the politics based on dogmatic and vague ideologies that feed from revivalist interpretations of a revolution that took place 40 years ago, and an ideal Islamic society that presumably was established around 14 centuries ago, among other kinds of national/religious revivalist narratives, this focus on the individual is of crucial significance.

Due to the contraction of political air in two stages in Iran—first as a result of the hard liners' endeavours to reverse the Reformist government's cultural and political achievements from around 1999 to 2005 and the Reformists' complacent conformism, and later following a series of widespread protests known as the Iranian Green Movement against the results of the 2009 presidential elections that met with the

system's iron hand—the society was only prepared for minor changes in 2009. Having emerged in such a time and place, EEMSI delivered exactly that: a minor, but significant, change.

In the very act of avoiding explicit social-political references, the 'sound' of experimental electronic music in Iran 'at its most evocative, becomes the trigger for [playfully] articulating lived experience of place and a reality of listening [that producers and audiences] share[, as] [t]he everyday acts as a vehicle for expressing the personal, the societal and the political, which one hears, and others do too' (Robelo 2014: 696). The emergent, digitally-enabled modalities of creative practice within Iranian art/music scene articulate sameness and difference in diverse and complex ways. These are formed in negotiation with and in response to the broader material, social-economic-political, technological, ecological, and biological forces, but also generate new relations, aesthetics, and agencies that distort, reconfigure, and transform those in different ways within a feedback system.

Arguing against commentators[20] who have labelled the scene as 'conformist', 'passive', and therefore 'politically unjustified' because of its unique aesthetics, I would note that in playfully aestheticizing and publicising lived experience of the place in new

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[20] For instance, Tony Mitchel—an honorary research associate in cultural studies and popular music at the University of Technology Sydney—criticised an ambient music compilation that was released through Flaming Pines in 2016 titled *Absence*, calling it 'unjustified' for 'avoiding political statements altogether'. In his article that was published on the e-magazine Cyclic Defrost in the same year, he accused the album's aesthetics as somewhat conforming to systemic repression in Iran. Reminding his audience of the instances of human rights violation by the state and of the difficulties that musicians face in Iran, Mitchel had chosen Bahman Ghobadi's pseudo-documentary No One Knows about Persian Cats as a basis to argue how such issues affected musician lives in Iran and to support his point regarding the unjustifiability of *Absence*'s soundscape in comparison. See the full article via this link (las accessed 6 April 2020): cy-clicdefrost.com/2016/03/absense-a-survey-of-music-from-iran-by-tony-mitchell/.

ways, the reconfiguring(s) described earlier, however niche and marginal, are inevitably political, and in their radical novelty actively disruptive. As Jacques Rancière has argued (2013: xiii):

> The essence of politics consists in interrupting the distribution of the sensible by supplementing it with those who have no part in the perceptual coordinates of the community, thereby, modifying the very aesthetic-political field of possibility.

Although in its earliest ambient form, EEMSI started by articulating the 'background'—bedrooms, basements, late night web surfing, online chats, precious music discoveries, listening/composing with headphones, and dreaming—by that very act of making the 'background', the margins, the playful, and the 'repressed', audible, it unlocked new avenues for channelling creativity within the music scene in Iran. The early manifestations of EEMSI were, nevertheless, hopeful of a musical future in which experimental electronic music might appear in the 'foreground' of social conduct, and be confidently and proudly shared. Rather surprisingly this happened, and as it did, the scene rapidly grew. Although radically new, the overtly strange sound and image of the experimental electronic music found a legal way to the surface. In a country in which many forms of music still cannot be represented, where hardly anything gets professionally done due to political-economic uncertainties—as agents of perpetual ethical contingency—and their embodied artefacts across the social-material field of possibility, there is a thriving experimental electronic music scene, ironically but pragmatically, being shaped. It is no longer gentle like its early manifestations. It is confident and growling, morphing into new forms as younger producers bring in their influences, older ones become more experienced, and the social-material-technological landscape shifts.

The scene has been under increasing economic pressures since the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA (aka Iran's nuclear deal) and its policy of 'maximum pressure'. This has meant that EEMSI's activities inside the country have since been significantly reduced. At its apex, in 2018, the scene had produced an unprecedented series of events through SET and TADAEX festivals. In collaboration with the Berlin-based hub of experimental electronic music presentation CTM festival, SET represented eight acts including eighteen musicians, sound artists, producers, improvisers, and visual artists. The festival was shortly followed by the release of a large compilation album titled *Girih*[21] through Zabte Sote, a record label that Ata Ebtekar had recently founded in collaboration with the UK-based Opal Tapes. *Girih* is surely the most comprehensive and diverse collection of experimental electronic music made by Iranian producers ever released.

Compared against the definition of experimental offered in this text, the scene may soon not be so experimental anymore. In the politically-forced absence of many other musical forms, EEMSI increasingly constitutes an electronic music mainstream, audible on the surface of the society. There are, however, new forms still waiting to become; to find a way out from the quiet darkness of bedrooms and basements to the loud darkness of black box venues. Thriving in the dark, EEMSI is becoming one of the loudest voice of 'Iranian' music, representing (in every sense) a new musical and sonic possibility.

Geolocation information

The research was conducted in Sonic Arts Research Centre (SARC), Queen's

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[21] Find Girih via the following link (last accessed 23 Dec. 2020):
zabtesote.bandcamp.com/album/girih-iranian-sound-artists-volumes-i-iv

University Belfast, Belfast, United Kingdom. The research involved a study of a music scene in Iran, with an emphasis on the practices formed in Tehran. A part of the project, which included performance in collaboration my Iranian interlocutors, was conducted in London.

SARC Coordinate: Latitude 54.574640 – Longitude: -5.925600
Tehran Coordinate: Latitude: 35.715298 – Longitude: 51.404343
London Coordinate: Latitude: 51.509865 – Longitude: -0.118092

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Hadi Bastani is a sound artist, anthropologist, and composer. His academic profile involves an interdisciplinary and practice-based investigation of an experimental electronic music scene in Iran. His artistic practice engages with digital technologies and spatial audio techniques in immersive compositions/installations and improvised performances. His work also reflects on how collaboration in music/sound and anthropology can synthesise new modes of thinking and practice, that are beneficial to processes of academic knowledge production in both disciplines.

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