Recent Experimental Electronic Music Practices in Iran:

An Ethnographic and Sound-Based Investigation

by

Hadi Bastani

A thesis
submitted to Queen's University Belfast
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Sonic Arts Research Centre
Queen's University Belfast
2019

Supervisory Team

Dr Simon Waters

Dr Ioannis Tsioulakis

Je ne dis [...] pas les choses parce que je les penses, je les dis plutôt dans une fin d'*auto*-destruction pour ne plus les penser.[1]

Michel Foucault – Interview with Fons Elders (1971)

[1] The quote is extracted from an interview published on YouTube on March 2014 titled *Foucault – The Lost Interview*, which was initially produced by the Dutch Philosopher Fons Elders for the Dutch Television in 13 September 1971, ahead of the famous debate between Foucault and Noam Chomsky, which took place in November of the same year. The interview is accessible via the following link (last accessed 26 Jun. 2019). See 15:13–15:21 for the above quote: youtube.com/watch?v=qzoOhhh4aJg

The whole interview is available in the form of a book titled "Freedom and Knowledge." It includes an introduction by Lynne Huffer and additional contributions by Fons Elders. It can be accessed via Vons Elders' own webstie via the following link (last accessed 26 Jun. 2019): hfonselders.eu/product/m-f-freedom-and-knowledge/

An excerpt is available for free online here (last accessed 26 Jun. 2019): academia.edu/6482878/Freedom_and_Knowledge_book_extract_YouTube_clip_of_lost_Michel_Foucault_interview_published_forty_years_after_its_time_

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to identify and locate an experimental electronic music 'scene' in Iran within a web of historical-social-political-religious-economic-technological agencies. Drawing from the growing traditions of digital ethnography and artistic research, this project documents and analyses the processes, aesthetics, and practices that shape the 'scene', while exploring and feeding back to those through sound-based practice. In setting ethnographic study and artistic practice in action within a mutually-interpenetrating loop, this work suggests a context for further anthropological and/or (ethno-)musicological inquiry that incorporates (collaborative) music- and/or art-making as a beneficial and rigorous research methodology.

Digital ethnography—online fieldwork and one-to-one interviews—as well as individual and collaborative composition, installation, and collaborative performance are the main strategies applied to investigate the subject matter. The outcome is, therefore, presented in the form of a portfolio of original works along with this thesis that is produced to contextualise the project's concurrently theoretical and practical engagement with and investigation of the case at hand.

Furthermore, through a grounding in personal experience, this text provides reflections on the author's relevant backgrounds and involvements, both inside and outside Iran, to further uncover the common processes of production-consumption within experimental electronic music networks in Iran. It investigates how his own practice has performatively taken shape in contact with, while mutually influencing, the material subject to scrutiny in this work. In so doing, the thesis aims to balance the particularities of practice-led (practice-based or artistic) research with generalities of engaging with histories and stories, while highlighting the *perspectives* through which the author, as a situated embodied agent, was afforded *a particular understanding* of the 'emergent' forms of experimental electronic music practice in Iran.

Acknowledgements

Many People have been crucial to the development of this work. First and foremost, thanks are due to Dr Simon Waters and Dr Ioannis Tsioulakis, whose enthusiastic engagement, patience, intellectual abilities, professional pragmatism, and open-minded approach, guided this PhD. Conversing with them—a sonic artisan, theorist, and composer, and a music anthropologist—ultimately informed how I engaged with the research material and literature in order to creatively and efficiently navigate disciplinary perspectives.

This work would not be possible without the generous contribution of my interlocutors and collaborators in the 'field', whose descriptions, explanations, comments, and critique helped shape an outcome, which is presented in the form of this thesis and portfolio. I salute with deep appreciation the productive involvement and kind support of Aida Shirazi, Ali Asghar Ramezanpour, Ali Eslami, Ali Panahi, Alireza Farhang, Alireza Poorsohoolat, Arash Molla, Ashkan Kooshanejad, Ata Ebtekar, Eugenio Caria, Farzane Noori, Hamed Rashtian, Hesam Ohadi, Idin Samimi Mofakham, Javad Safari, Kamran Arashnia, Kate Carr, Kiana Tajammol, Malthe Ivarsson, Maryam Sirvan, Milad Bagheri, Mo H. Zareei, Mohammad Nikpour, Mona Mostofi, Narcissa Kasraï, Nesa Azadikhah, Nima Aghiani, Pantea Aramfar, Parsa Jamishidi, Phil Gardelis, Ramin Sadighi, Ramin Safavi, Reza Kazemzadeh, Robert Henke, Rojin Sharafi, Sara Bigdeli Shamloo, Shaahin Saba, Shahin Entezami, Siavash Amini, Sina Shoaei, Sohrab Motabar, Stefen Tiefengraber, Thomas Ankersmith, Vedad Famourzadeh, and Zahra Gooya.

I am also grateful for the assistance of numerous members of staff in the Sonic Arts Research Centre (SARC) and Queen's University Belfast as well as friends inside and outside the university, including Barry Cullen, Craig Jackson, David Bird, Franziska Schroeder, Koichi Samuels, Maruška Svašek, Matilde Meireles, Michael Dzjaparidze, Miguel Ortiz, Pablo Sanz, Paul Stapleton, Pedro Rebelo, Tristan Clutterbuck, and Tullis Rennie, who provided feedback, intellectual stimulation, and technical support throughout this project

Finally, on a personal note, I am thankful to the family and friends who offered assistance at crucial moments. Thanks are due to Leila Ghandi for her love and support; to Hossein Bastani, whose contribution made this PhD an easier process; to Nayer Gooya, for her unconditional kindness; to Maryam Gooya whose timely aid made an important decision that led to this PhD possible; and to Mo. H. Zareei, Farhang Farrokhi and Hamed Rashtian, whose comradeship warmly accompanied and inspired the development of this work.

Contents

Abstract ---------- V

Acknowledgements ---------- VI

Chapter 1 Research Context ---------- 1

1.1 Introduction 1
1.2 A Personal Background 3
1.3 Questions 7
1.4 Methodology 10
1.5 Challenges 17
1.6 Clarification on the Use of Certain Terms and Concepts 18
1.7 Chapters Outline 21

Chapter 2 A Historical Context ---------- 25

2.1 Arts, Music, Religion, and Power Relations 25
2.2 The 'Modernisation' Project and Emergence of New Music 28
2.3 Birth of Electronic Music: From Shiraz Festival to the Revolution 32
2.4 Phonophobia and Maslaha of the System 36
2.4.1 The Supreme Leaders Versus Music 36
2.4.1 Permits and other Control Mechanisms 42

2.5 Socks of the Holy Smell: Undoing Senses or re-Inventing the Social 42
2.6 Post-1997 Pop Revival 47
2.7 Performing the Distance: Challenge of Belonging and Experimental Music 53

Chapter 3 Towards a Theoretical Framework ---------- 60

Chapter 4 Locating the Scene ---------- 68

4.1 Overview 68
4.2 Development in Relation to Recent Political, Economic, and Technological Changes 74
4.3 SET Festival (2015–Present) 86
4.4 Saroseda (2009–2011) 93
4.5 TADAEX (2011–Present) 94

4.6 **Affinity Networks: The Case Study of SET** 98
4.7 **Implicit Union Against the 'Mainstream'** 108
4.8 **Competition** 112

Chapter 5 Aesthetics of Electronic Music Performance ----- 117

5.1 **Reconfiguring Performance** 117
5.2 **Blurred Soundscapes: Control, Noise, and Amorphous Regulatorium** 123

Chapter 6 A Portfolio of (Sound) Work(ing)s -------------------- 132

6.1 **Overview** 132
6.2 **Thematic Exploration** 137
6.2.1 impulse|resonance 138
6.2.2 ecbatan 144
6.2.3 ornamental descend 149
6.2.4 pendulum: Electronic Improvisation and Visuals with Steph Horak 153

6.3 **Collaborative Composition as Ethnographic Research: A Practice-Led Experiment** 160
6.3.1 Collaboration Within the Scene 160
6.3.2 intra.view: A Collaborative Composition 164
6.3.3 Slides-zen-Dives: Electronic Improvisation with Pouya Ehsaei 174
6.3.4 SPIN and INTERFERENCE 183

Chapter 7 Conclusion -- 189

7.1 **Overview** 189
7.2 **Reflections on the Methodology** 191
7.3 **Impacts** 192
7.4 **Future Pathways** 193
7.5 **Coda** 195

References -- 200

Appendix A: Digital Access -- 210

Appendix B: Research Timeline ------------------------------------ 211

Appendix C: Interview Demographics ---------------------------- 213

Appendix D: Research Outputs -------------------------------------- 215

CHAPTER 1

RESEARCH CONTEXT

1.1 Introduction

This submission consists of two elements: a portfolio of sound-based practice and a piece of ethnographic research. These are mutually supportive and intertwined, in that the former consists both of practice which forms part of the 'object of study' of the ethnographic work and practice which forms part of the 'method of study', taking the form of both critique and collaboration/provocation/intervention. The text is simultaneously a piece of ethnographic fieldwork—conducted through online media because of the political status of the researcher—an autobiographical reflection, and practice-led commentary, which positions the author's work within the wider network of practice of experimental electronic music in Iran. There is, therefore, a congruity between the technology used to make the work, that used to disseminate it, that which 'constructs' the 'community' of practice, and that which enables study of the 'scene' as a 'distant' participant-collaborator. By the time this thesis is delivered (August 2019) no scholarly work has been done on the subject matter.

The thesis and portfolio were developed in the course of this research in constant negotiation and within a feedback system, such that the development of one continuously informed and inspired the development of the other. The portfolio was formed as a result of two different approaches to electroacoustic composition, performance, and to installation. The first approach concerned a thematic exploration of the ethnographic data. As the field analysis progressed, most recurrent themes were identified and explored in different ways through sound-based practice. The second approach, however, consisted of a 'less-mediated' engagement with the fieldwork in the sense that my interlocutors were directly engaged with the creative process as collaborators. Collaborative composition and performance offered opportunities for discursive and practical dialogue, commentary, and critique.

The theoretical-analytical approach of the thesis emerged through qualitative analysis of the field data using software. Digital organisation and analysis of the field data afforded the research a birds eye view of the many different themes, as these emerged through the interviews and online ethnography, in the form of various networks of relations. An analysis of these networks allowed for an identification of the most recurrent themes discussed by my interlocutors. This for instance revealed the scene's influential figures, significant places (venues, galleries, studios, web pages), and important collectives. It also showed approaches that were common to the practice of my interlocutors with regards to composition and performance, most popular software and hardware used, most pressing social, political, economic, and technical concerns, and so on. Such themes, juxtaposed with most relevant quotations, formed the basis of the this text's narrative, according to which the portfolio was then curated. This doesn't mean, however, that the portfolio's main role in the project is of rhetorical support. Since the portfolio and fieldwork analysis developed together and within a mutually-interpenetrating loop as explained above, the portfolio's role was essential in the very development and formation of the thesis' narrative construct all throughout the process. It is, however, true that in the final stage and as a criteria for the curatorship of the portfolio, the theoretical-analytical narrative of the thesis was determining. In other word, the main discussions and arguments determined what pieces were to be excluded from the final delivery.

On a side note, I shall mention that despite experiencing a period of growth (2013–2018), the experimental electronic music 'scene' subject to discussion here is now facing a difficult era as a new threat of war is looming. As a result of the current US administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA[2] (aka Iran's nuclear deal) in May 2018, a particular sequence of events has now produced a new state of emergency in the Persian Gulf.[3] The Islamic Republic's internal corruption, inefficiencies, and legitimacy crisis have inevitably deepened the recent quarrel with the US government. Due to what it seems to be President Trump's 'personal issue' with President Obama's achievements, including in relation to the Islamic Republic's nuclear

[2] See the following link for Iran nuclear talks timeline (last accessed 20 Jul. 2019): theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/02/iran-nuclear-talks-timeline

[3] See the following link for a timeline of the recent tensions at the Persian Gulf (last accessed 20 Jul. 2019): independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iran-uk-british-tanker-strait-hormuz-stena-impero-mesdar-a9013196.html

program[4], and his preoccupation, if not obsession, with 'changing Iran's behaviour', the US government has reinstated crippling sanctions on Iran's economy, deployed significant number of troops and military equipment at the Persian Gulf, and started a new political campaign to lobby for a new international coalition against Iran. A new era of national security and economic crisis in Iran means more political pressure on the cultural production space, which had experienced a period of *relative* freedom and growth. If the threats of war realise, this text may be the last research in relation to the subject matter.

1.2 A Personal Background

All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty – Phenomenology of Perception (1962, ix)

I was born and raised in Tehran, and lived there for over 24 years (1985–2009). As a guitar player and songwriter, I experienced first-hand the influence of the internet and digital technology on the emergence of new modes of creative practice and sociality in my surroundings. I also struggled first-hand with the social dogmas and ideological-political limitations that suffocated creativity in that environment. Around 2010, as an electroacoustic composer and music technology researcher in Paris, I witnessed, via social media, the development of specific forms of electronic music practice in Iran. Surprised by the novelty and quality of the material, I began exploring the emergent phenomena via the internet.

I was initially interested to find out what conditions, or significant changes, had prepared the ground for such forms of musical practice and their relatively non-problematic reception by the state in Iran. Five years later I was known as a sound artist, radio producer, and music blogger to a lot of Iranian experimental electronic musicians (and my future interlocutors), thanks to a host of radio programmes[5], blog

[4] See the following link for a discussion of the recent leak of UK's former ambassador to the United States' memoire, which supports the text's claim (last accessed 20 Jul. 2019): independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/kim-darroch-leak-memo-trump-iran-nuclear-deal-obama-latest-met-police-a9003951.html

[5] For instance, this show on Resonance 104.4 FM in 2013 (last accessed 9 Apr. 2019): sixpillarsarts.wordpress.com/2013/05/01/this-weeks-show-new-music-from-iran-ii-and-iii/
And this one on BBC Persian Radio (last accessed 9 Apr. 2019):
bbc.com/persian/search/?q=باستانی%20هادی

reviews[6], and podcasts[7] that I had produced to explore the new musical happenings and to introduce these to Iranian and international audiences. It was against this background that I started my research at Queen's University Belfast in 2015.

Hearing a piece of music on Soundcloud around 2010–2011 triggered a chain of events, guiding me for the next couple of years down a path that finally led to this thesis. In that piece I heard glitchy samples collaged against the moaning of a skilfully crafted drone. It was the first time I experienced something like this, was made by a producer in Iran. It was Umchunga's *Streets 1*.[8] The track was labelled with the hashtag 'Idm'. It was fascinating. It slowed me down for a few days, the same way a passer-by may slow down witnessing a gruesome car crash and discovering a colourful sun-set on the horizon at the same time. This thrilling surprise was partly the result of a sudden flash-back to the last couple of years of my life in Iran prior to moving to Paris in 2009.

After a year of work, in 2006, the White Comedy's album *What Are You Up to After the Orgy* was finalised in Kargadan studio in a north-western corner of Tehran. As it happened, I realised that I was also done with that style of musicking. In fact, the whole band knew it. White Comedy was a 'post-punk' band that two of my friends and I had started in 2004–2005. The album was mostly recorded and mixed using the software Sonar 5 in Kargadan, with the help of the studio's sound engineer Javad Safari. Javad's enthusiastic and careful attention to the nuances of music production had inspired White Comedy. Interestingly, through an interview that I conducted in this research, I found out that Siavash Amini and Hesam Ohadi (aka Idlefon)—now two of the scene's well-known figures—had also recorded an album in Kargadan around the same time that I was mixing White Comedy's work there. They too were influenced by Javad's friendly, enthusiastic, and encouraging approach. It was partly under that influence, they told me, that they started experimenting with software.

[6] For instance, this series of weblogs on Iranwire.com in 2013-14 (last accessed 9 Apr. 2019): iranwire.com/fa/author/272

[7] For instance, this collection of podcasts on Soundcloud in 2013-14 (last accessed 9 Apr. 2019): soundcloud.com/ios-podcasts

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

Prior to the recording, the members of White Comedy had been living far from each other. Ramin had been based in Kiev since 2002, Navid in Nottingham since 2004, and I was in Tehran. My friendship with Ramin dates back to 1995. It started in primary school based on a musical exchange: I gave him a black Sony chrome II cassette on which my brother had recorded the Ramones' *Subterranean Jungle* on the A side and the Motorhead's *Ace of Spades* on the B. In return he gave me a selection recorded by his brother on a colourful Sony CHF normal cassette, where I first heard Aerosmith's *Crazy* and The Eagles' *Hotel California*.

Let us keep going back in time: 2009, 2006, 2004, 2002, 1995, 1985. I was born in 1985 into a middle-class family in Tehran composed of my 45-year-old high school teacher mother, my 60-year-old retired banker father, and my 15-year-old high school brother. My 20-year-old midwife sister had already married and was living separately from us with her husband and their six-month-old infant. I was an uncle from the night I was born, yes, a night in which Tehran was wide-awake under Iraqi bombs dropped from the Russian MIG-25 fighter jets. Growing up under my brother's musical influence, I was exposed and drawn to many kinds of music, mainly British and American rock. I preferred making imaginary cities with cassette cases and daydreaming, while listening to the music penetrating my room through the wall from my brother's. Low-pass filters still sound ridiculously nostalgic to me…

Now let us fast-forward to the aftermath of *What are you up to After the Orgy*. Through a casual exploratory download on eMule or Ares in 2006, I discovered *Clicks & Cuts*—a compilation series that was released through Mille Plateaux record label in 2000. This was the time I first heard the likes of Frank Bretschneider, Snd, Vladislav Delay, and my then favourites Pansonic and Alva Noto. This series poisoned me with a bittersweet substance, inducing a concurrent feeling of excitement, awe, and fear. This was a familiar mixture of feelings that my close friends and I had experienced when we first read Ahmad Shamlou's, Forough Farokhzad's, Federico García Lorca's, and Vladimir Mayakovsky's poetry, as well as Sadegh Hedayat's Boof-e Koor (the Blind Owl), J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Heinrich Boll's *The Clown*, and Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, in our early teenage years; the kind of material in relation to which we had felt a nostalgic yet inaccessible sense of distance; a material for which we would almost wanted to claim a sort of copyright as the stuff we had always wanted to express but never found the appropriate means to do so. *Clicks*

& Cuts made me stop making music the way I used to. So, I started researching and stopped producing.

Browsing forums and blogs, reading diversely, and experimenting with various downloaded and cracked software became a full-time preoccupation. I left my BA in mechanical engineering unfinished in Tehran and started taking 'sound' more seriously. This whole shift since 2006 was the main reason I ended up in Paris. I wanted to be 'closer' to the 'source' while conducting research in music technology. I left Iran partly to do serious noise music and glitch art but Paris did not particularly provide me with what I was looking for. Instead, it pointed me to other possible worlds; those of Messiaen, Varèse, Parmegiani, Boulez, Xenakis, Schaeffer, Henry, Grisey, the ORTF, and Ircam, among others. As expected, Paris further complicated things for me.

Ambient music, particularly the work of William Basinski, was almost like a secret temptation to me during the last two years in Tehran. This was another reason why hearing repetitive ambient loops, reminiscent of Basinski's tape loop music, and 'noisy' textures coming from Iran surprised me. Once again, *distance* was pointing me elsewhere; this time towards the happenings of an emergent 'scene' in Iran. I started making maps of the new occurrences and transformations, trying to figure out who was producing this type of music, where were they based, what were their backgrounds, what aesthetic elements were shared in their work and why: did they know each other, and how come they started making this type of music? The sonic palette from which the 'new music' coming from Iran drew did not belong to the practice of composers and producers I knew in Iran. How come I did not know these people? When I left Iran (2009), 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—the kinds one would for instance hear in the work of Goran Bergović—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. But I had

never previously heard of an electronic music from Iran, inspired by ambient, glitch, idm, and noise aesthetics.

Four years later (2013) in London, I published the first outcome of my personal research on the 'emergent scene', in the form of two radio programmes guest-produced for Six Pillars to Persia show on the London-based independent art radio Resonance 104.4 FM. Later that year I published sixteen blogs, written in Persian, to talk about the work of fourteen Iranian producers, this time to an Iranian audience. The aim of these blogs, which included reviews, interviews, and podcasts was to bring the rather scattered practices under the rubric of Experimental Electronic Music Scene of Iran (EEMSI). These interests and activities finally led me to Belfast, where I undertook this PhD in Sonic Arts and Anthropology in 2015, focusing on an interdisciplinary and practice-led investigation of the experimental electronic music 'scene' in Iran. The text at hand is a fruit of this endeavour.

In spending the first year of my research at Queen's Belfast studying anthropology, with a focus on anthropology of music, techniques of ethnographic documentation, qualitative data analysis using digital tools, and discourse analysis, my involvements and interests were formulated into a primary set of questions. In order to research the 'scene' in Iran as a sound artist, composer, researcher, and music blogger living in exile—I have been based in the UK since 2012 as a political refugee before receiving my citizenship in 2019—my methods had to respond to the obvious challenge of investigating the 'scene' from a 'distance'. In the following sections of this chapter, the research questions will be laid out and the methodology designed to explore those will be explained. In addition, the challenges that this study had to address will be described. Also, the intended meaning of certain generalising terms and concepts that are frequently used throughout the text will be clarified. It is hoped that this chapter will provide the reader with a general understanding of the project's aims, as well as its theoretical and practical contexts.

1.3 Questions

The emergence of an experimental electronic music scene in Iran (henceforth EEMSI) should be viewed in relation to the ever-expanding influence of digital and new media technologies, and what Georgina Born (2005) has termed 'relayed

creativity'. Emphasising the use of digital media in surpassing 'the capacity of material artefacts to stop the flow of re-creation,' Born notes (*ibid*, 26) that:

> Music shows this remarkably well: digitized music, distributed via MP3s, CDs and the internet, is continually, immanently open to re-creation. Distributed across space, time and persons, music can become an object of recurrent decomposition, composition and re-composition by a series of creative agents. We need a new term for this capacity: I suggest relayed creativity.

Simultaneously, EEMSI is a localised occurrence in its tangled relationship and constant exchange with the social-material-semiotic in Iran and its performed individualised embodiments. Drawing from a diverse body of literature in Chapter Two, I have, however, argued that it would not suffice to merely consider the case at hand as a *response* to 'global' and/or 'local' 'flows' and to recognise that EEMSI's (musico)logics and identities are performatively shaped across a range of fundamentally composite discourses and practices.

The experimental electronic music 'scene' in Iran is generally a middle-class phenomenon, represented in urban environments through the activities of educated, mostly secularist, digital artists, media producers, and computer musicians. It is mainly concentrated in the capital Tehran and is represented largely by male producers of 25 to 35 years old. While providing a certain demography of the case under investigation here, such categorisation, however, do not constitute rigid boundaries. The confines of EEMSI—as an interconnected network of practices, imaginaries, aesthetics, materials, technologies, institutions, performances, and relations—are fluid and constantly shifting. As the 'scene' develops, it engages more geographies (online and offline) and becomes more diverse in terms of gender and age of the individuals involved in its processes as producers, performers, and audiences.

The first indications of an emergent experimental electronic music practice in Iran surfaced within the 'society' through galleries across the capital, from around 2008 to 2010, in the form of presentations, workshops, talks, and later as performances and installations. In the private domain, for instance in private gatherings and parties, however, these new forms were already known to a few friendship circles, following two private events that took place in 2008 in Tehran. I will investigate these two events in Chapter Four (4.3) in more detail. The fact that such activities did find a way to the public domain rather quickly and without causing any serious resistance from the state is crucial, because a large range of musical endeavours still cannot be

represented in such a way and remain merely as a private interest or an 'underground' adventure, due to the state's ideologically-rooted political scepticism towards musicking Iranians. The latter can be currently discerned for instance in the establishment's hostility towards certain genres of popular music like rap, hip-hop, and house.

Computers and digital interfaces have been instrumental in enabling a younger generation of artists and producers to individually explore new forms of practice, while significantly reducing the difficulties and risks of producing (also post-producing and performing) music in ensembles and bands, in an environment that offers them very little economic, social, or political incentive. In its capacity to establish a pragmatic dialogue with the system, the *aesthetics* of the 'emergent' forms of an experimental electronic music/sound in Iran, in the broadest sense of the term, has in turn enabled new opportunities for transforming and/or transcending the inherited social and ideological-political dogmas, as well as economic barriers, beyond their previously established limits and into a constantly shifting field of more diverse possibilities.

In parallel, the internet has offered a significant alternative to the producers in Iran to access information, to self-educate, learn new skills, and explore new expressive territories. It has enabled them to connect with peers across the world as well as inside the country, and to share, disseminate, and commodify the result of their experiments beyond the reach of the state's direct control. The world-wide web, as such, has concurrently provided an ecology and a technology enabling EEMSI to diversify and expand but also to streamline and connect.

Seeking a coherent framework for an intertwined artistic-performative and theoretical investigation of the topic, my research has broadly addressed the following key questions:

1- How have a small network of experimental electronic music practice, enabled by digital technologies and the internet, negotiated the conditions for development of new forms of musical/sonic/artistic practice in Iran that evade political censorship?
2- How do such forms interact and/or compete within a cosmopolitan formation, while demarcating a common ground in their discursive, embodied, and performative resistance vis-à-vis the 'mainstream' culture; a territory heavily monitored and regulated by the state in Iran and, from a broader

perspective, influenced by the multinational corporations and 'globalised trends'?

3- How can artistic research/practice and ethnographic study shape the outlines of an innovative and rigorous research methodology for exploring, investigating, and critiquing networks of cultural production, in this case an experimental electronic music 'scene', as situated within the broader historical-social-cultural-political-technological-ecological meshwork of agencies?

4- How can collaborative composition (or art-making in general)—as a context that affords meeting of various modes of thinking and doing—synthesise significant new insight into the processes that shape such networks and reveal potential avenues for further interdisciplinary research into different modes of cultural production and musical practice?

1.4 Methodology

As briefly explained in the introduction, to investigate the case at hand a body of sound-based work is produced in conjunction with (digital) ethnographic study. The co-development of these two distinct but interconnected areas of disciplinary practice in the context of this PhD can be formalised within a feedback mechanism via the figure 1.1 (below).

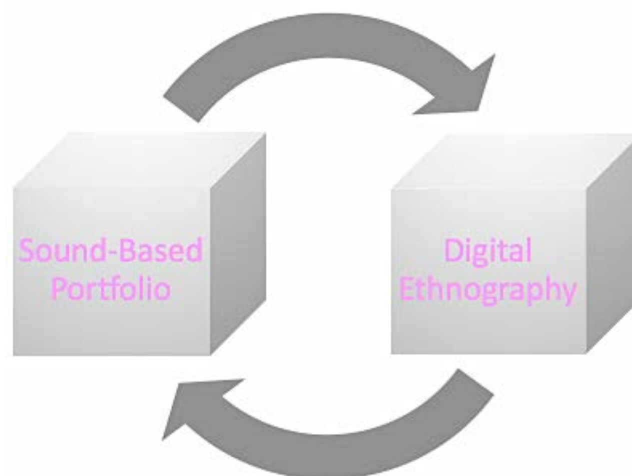


Figure 1-1. Research Structure

The diagram above represents the general structure according to which the ethnographic process informs the progress of sound-based portfolio and vice versa. Such a feedback mechanism ultimately informed the trajectory and emphases of the

research project. The close-up view provided below breaks this assemblage down to its constituent parts.

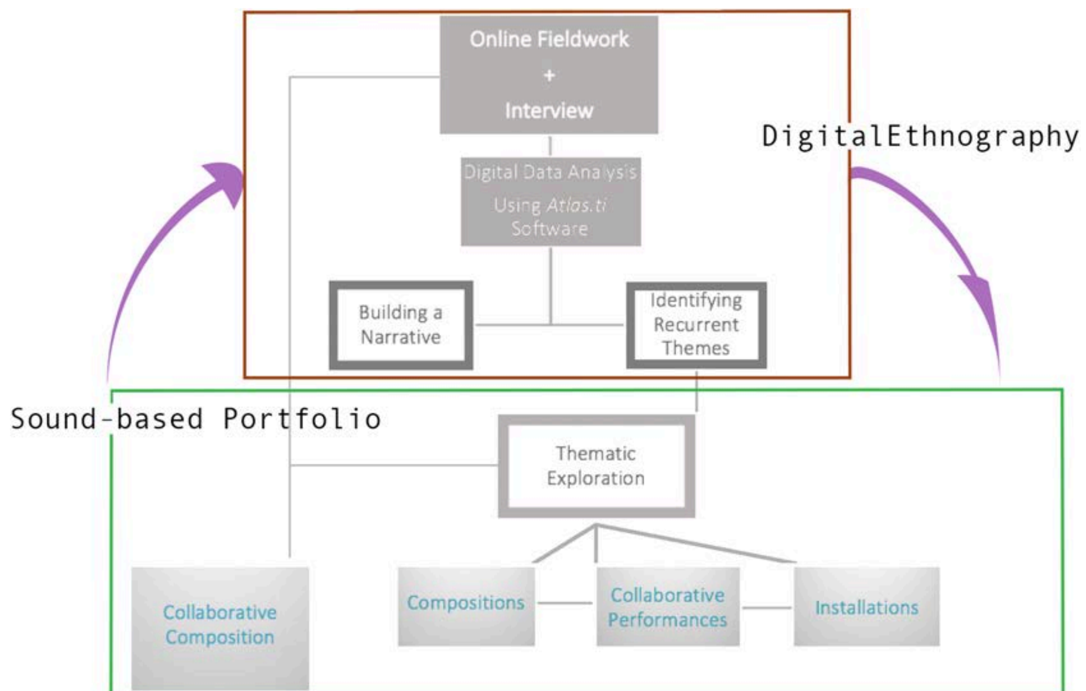


Figure 1-2. Research structure: close-up view

Through a continuous evaluation and analysis of the data gathered via online field-work and interviews, the most recurrent themes were then identified and the general outlines of a narrative was shaped, which together determined the focuses of the thesis. To conceptualise the first-hand accounts, I tried to avoid forcing them into theoretical categories that readily exist within the literature in sonic arts and anthropology in order to let the descriptions 'flow' as freely as possible and get tangled in material-semiotic meshes that are 'true' to the perspectives and practices of my interlocutors. The most significant of the recurrent themes—those that appeared more frequently and with stronger emphases in conversation with my interlocutors, which also resonated with my own experience of living and working in Iran and abroad—were then explored by means of sound-based practice through composition, installation, and performance. The practice, in turn, unlocked new territories for further ethnographic scrutiny.

One of the main approaches adopted to make the connection between the two 'dimensions' of this PhD more explicit was collaboration. Collaborative composition and performance offered a setting in which the meeting of different modes of doing and thinking synthesised new theoretical perspectives for the

conceptualisation and contextualisation of the practices subject to scrutiny in this project. As significantly distinct from a practice-led PhD that merely relies on the practice of one individual—i.e. the researcher herself/himself—this approach afforded the project opportunities for uncovering the processes that would have otherwise been hidden from the mere perspectives afforded by interview and individual artistic reflection. A brief theoretical tangent in the next paragraph hopes to offer another angle, from which the significance of sound-based practice in the context of this research can be appreciated.

From the Socratic tradition of ethics, to the present-day studies regarding 'human-machine configurations' (Suchman 2007), and discussions in the field of engineering—for instance with respect to models, cross-level causal manipulation and intra-level intervention, renormalization groups, morphogenetic analysis (the science of forms) and non-extendable explanatory and functional levels—we know that to understand a system in terms of its tendencies it is necessary to identify abstract properties that individualise the system's behaviour (Negarestani 2014). But, as Reza Negarestani (*ibid*) argues: 'we cannot identify these tendencies, unless we amplify them, in a sense identifying them by manipulating parameters responsible for their behaviour.' This understanding constitutes the basic goal of practice in the context of this research in its commingled relationship with ethnographic documentation as a tool to identify EEMSI's behaviours by way of feeding back into it, using the same mechanisms of dissemination and commodification and, as such, to magnify its tendencies in order to offer new insight into its processes. In so doing, this research diverges from the more traditional methods of (ethno-)musicological inquiry that depend on somewhat 'neutral' participant-observation techniques, suggesting instead a novel strategy that ascribes a more active role to the ethnographer as artist engaged in research as a participant-*collaborator*-experiencer.[9]

To document the 'scene' for the purposes of this research, I drew from the growing literature and methodologies of digital and online ethnography (Lysloff, Gay and Ross 2003; Postill 2008; Boellstorff 2012; Pink *et al.* 2016). The choice of online fieldwork in my case was partly a strategic one, as cyberspace has been the main locus for manifestations of the experimental electronic music 'scene' in Iran,

[9] The term 'researcher/participant-experiencer' was first used within the 'cyber ethnography' discourse in the work of Mary K. Walstrom (2004).

and partly a pragmatic one as I had set out to explore a 'field' as an artist and researcher living in exile. The contemporary tradition of studying the culture at a distance, as a methodology 'representing the birth of several new trends in anthropology that have endured to the present' (Mead and Métraux 2000, xiv) can be traced in the 'pre-digital' era, back to Margaret Mead's lectures at the University of Birmingham (England) in 1949[10]. The basic methodology for The Study of Culture at a Distance (TSCD) under Mead, Ruth Benedict (Mead's mentor), Rhoda Métraux (Mead's collaborator), and their team, involved investigation of cultures based on literature, film, and public imagery. As a set of innovative approaches within anthropological studies, various methodologies for the study of cultures at a distance developed in 20th and 21st century. With the expansion of world-wide web resources, proliferation of increasingly fast and more affordable internet connections, software applications, and portable and more efficient hardware as well as 'cloud' storage spaces, however, new methods of data collection, archiving, and analysis have emerged. In its contemporary form TSCD does, therefore, heavily draw on online ethnography as well as software-based data gathering and analysis.

In the case of this research, digital ethnography also activated a significant parallel with the practice of my interlocutors in Iran, which is heavily dependent on digital technologies. Digital means—computers, software, storage spaces, programming environments, audio streaming and social media platforms, and messaging and voice over IP services—allowed this research to build up while I inhabited spaces similar to those frequented by my interlocutors. This PhD benefitted, for instance, from Atlas.ti; a qualitative data analysis software that facilitated the development of a large archive of different forms of media files, affording me a powerful tool for their analysis based on cross-coding and automatically-generated diagrammed networks. An early example of such networks, which grew and developed in the course of the research based on my analyses and cross-references, is presented below. Ableton Live, Max/MSP, Pure Data, SuperCollider, WhatsApp, Telegram, FaceTime, Instagram, YouTube, Vimeo, SoundCloud, Bandcamp, Facebook, WeTransfer, Dropbox, iCloud, Microsoft Word and PowerPoint, Adobe Acrobat reader as well as Photoshop and Illustrator, … , all contributed to the development of this work.

[10] Métraux, however, has later described the beginning of TSCD as follows: 'The core idea of a program of studies of cultures at a distance was contained in the cross-cultural anthropological seminar inaugurated by Ruth Benedict when she returned to the department at Columbia in the autumn of 1946.' (Métraux 1980, 367)

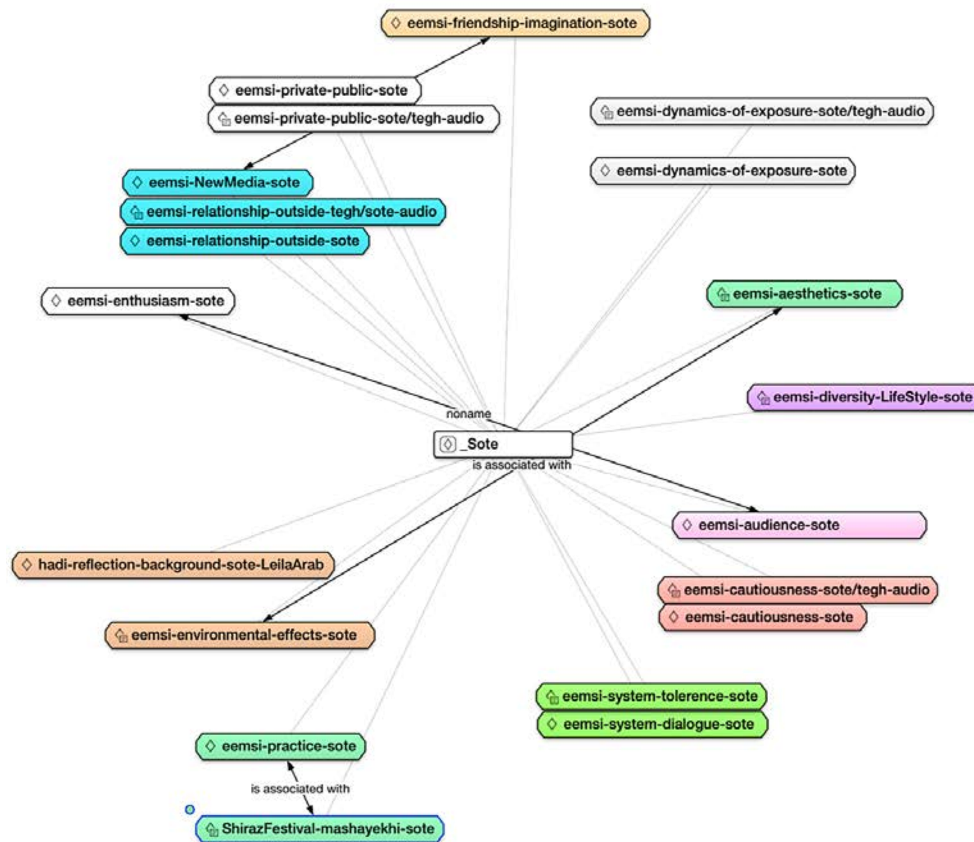


Figure 1-3. An example of the evolving association networks printed in 2016. It visualises the recurrent themes (coloured boxes) and demonstrates in how many different ways these are connected to each other. Vectors represent the direction as well as the weight of each connection, i.e. how often two themes were linked within the analysis.

The thread of literature addressing my methodology in relation to the digital and its impact on ethnography varies depending on the authors' disciplinary backgrounds and research interests. Encountering the digital and world(s) of the internet, scholars have tried to map out, theorise, and formalise methodology across different disciplines. For instance, in Anthropology (see Boellstorff 2008; Nardi and Kow 2010; Postill 2011; Horst and Miller 2012b), Human-Machine or Human-Computer Interaction (see Suchman 2007; Dourish and Bell 2011) and Sociology (see Robinson 2007; Turkle 2005 and 2011, Orton-Johnson and Prior 2013, Lupton 2014). It has been argued that the strand of Digital Ethnography was 'launched around 2000 with Christine Hine's *Virtual Ethnography*, although of course there were earlier predecessors—e.g., Baym 2000, Correl 1995, Gray and Driscoll 1992, Hakken 1999, Ito 1997, Lindlof and Shatzer 1998, Lyman and Wakeford 1999).' (Pink *et al.* 2016)

For younger generations in many parts of the world, however, doing ethnography through digital means is just an inevitability. By this, I mean to go a step further

than Noortje Marres' claim that 'the relations between social life and its analysis are changing in the context of digitization' (2014 [online]), and note that this has already changed. In fact, for younger generations, fieldwork as well as analysis begin with this change. It is not perceived from their perspective as a shift from pre-digital to digital and post-digital, but simply as the current state of affairs. As such, it is not a necessity for them, or for me, to 'imagine' or conceptualise how the relations in the 'real' world can be 'translated' into those in the 'virtual' or digital world(s). Digital ethnography, in this context, is simply how ethnography is currently put into practice: it grapples with a social world in which the boundaries between 'online' and 'offline' as well as between digital and analogue are blurred, if not irrelevant.

For an increasingly large population across the world who use ethnographic methods in different research contexts, the phrases such as 'digitally-mediated field-note' (Murthy 2011, 159) and 'data-gathering methods […] mediated by computer-mediated communication' (*ibid*, 159) may seem redundant, belonging to a bygone era. Of course, fieldnotes can be produced, and more often than not are produced, using mobile phones, tablets, laptops and other digital means. For sure, participant-observation in a 'digital age' (Robinson and Halle 2002, Robinson 2007, Turkle 2011) involves 'computer-mediated communication'. As Pink *et al.* observe, 'the digital has become part of the material, sensory and social worlds we inhabit.' (2016, 7). This is not, however, intended as a criticism. Murthy's remarks (above) surely had specific functions for him and the audience of his work at the time of their production. I would simply like to point out that not only was digital ethnography a pragmatic method in the case of this research—as I could not physically access the 'field'—it was also a realistic approach in a 'digital age' in which the social and digital are increasingly interconnected and mutually constitutive.

To summarise, I used digital means not only in order to experience the 'field', but also to archive data, produce field notes, keep open a developing conversation with my interlocutors, perform analysis and explore relations between different components of my research. In parallel, digital means enabled this project to investigate the subject matter through composition, installation, and performance. Digital technologies did, therefore, allow this work to engage with and reflect on the common processes of connection, production, and consumption that characterise the experimental electronic music 'scene', and to feed back to those through sound-based

practice in different forms, for instance through individual and collaborative compositions[11], compilation releases[12], mixtapes[13], interview with online magazines[14], installations[15], and collaborative performances[16].

In the course of this research I interviewed with 45 persons, with some more than once. These involved conversations with artists, producers, organisers, curators, audiences, publishers, a former government official, a professor of mathematical studies and curriculum planner, and a psychologist, all of whom were associated in one way or another with the 'scene' or could provide valuable insight into its developments from a particular professional perspective. I found my interlocutors based on my connections within the 'field', my knowledge of the 'scene', and through a continuous analysis of online data. The interviews were semi-structured. I broadly asked each person, depending on the course each conversation organically developed, about backgrounds, processes, relations, and practices. All interviews were conducted by myself using WhatsApp, FaceTime, Telegram, e-mail, Facebook, Instagram, and direct phone calls, between April 2017 and January 2019. The bulk of these were, however, performed between April 2017 and September 2018.

Interviews with my Iranian interlocutors were conducted in Persian, translated faithfully and to the best of my ability by myself to English, and those with my non-Iranian interlocutors—artists and producers who had performed in Iran—were conducted in English, used in this text in their original form. Finally, I shall note that all participants were in advance informed about the context of the research, its aims, funding resources, and institutional ties. Interviewees were also notified about how the data gathered through the interviews were to be recorded and used—solely for the purposes of this research, within the thesis as well as in conferences, journal papers, and other conventional academic settings, including my own personal website. All of my interlocutors were openly provided with the option of remaining anonymous or withdrawing their participation at any time before the end of the project. Should that have happened, I was committed to fully delete and remove the relevant data.

[11] hadibastani.com/selected-works#/intraview/
[12] hadibastani.com/selected-works#/ornamental-descend/ v
[13] hadibastani.com/selected-works#/mixtape/
[14] hadibastani.com/press
[15] hadibastani.com/selected-works#/ecbatan/
[16] hadibastani.com/selected-works#/pendulum/

1.5 Challenges

Although being somewhat of an 'insider' ultimately afforded me a rather convenient access to EEMSI's activities, it simultaneously complicated the analytical process in the course of the research. The crucial necessity for constant reflexivity was a serious challenge as my work became more deeply embedded within the 'field'. This challenge had to do with a constant need for critical assessment of my position and biases as an artist/participant-collaborator-experiencer vis-à-vis the 'field', while remaining conscious of the necessity of reflexive distancing.

Another challenge that manifested, particularly in the earlier stages of the research, involved finding ways of compensating for the minimal and politically-cautious presence of my 'subjects' in the 'online' domain, that could potentially problematise the process of data collection in the course of the research. Samuel Best *et al.*'s observation, that the greatest limitation within the online portion of study lies in the problem of 'representation' as '[h]ow does one represent a group that evades all attempts to produce a truly representative sample?' (2001, 134), aptly describes this problem. This condition, however, gradually improved throughout the research as the activities and connections of the 'scene' expanded, but also as a result of the political and economic shifts that ensued in Iran (2016–2018), which resulted in the emergence of a temporary atmosphere of hope and confidence, particularly among the middle class. In the longer term, engaging in discursive and artistic practice with my interlocutors via the internet, however, afforded this project more acceptance, allowing it to become more deeply integrated within the networks of experimental electronic music in Iran and abroad, in both offline and online domains. Such relations are explored in more detail in Chapter Six. Angela Cora Garcia *et al.* previously observed this quality of performing online ethnography, asserting that although it 'may obstruct reliability, it fosters group acceptance hence increases the research's validity.' (2009, 60)

1.6 Clarification on the Use of Certain Terms and Concepts

In the media EEMSI has often been referred to as an 'underground'[17] 'scene' in unclear ways. Within such descriptions—articles, reviews, podcasts, and interviews—'underground' is sometimes taken for illegal, other times for 'non-mainstream', and more often for an ambiguous combination of both. Based on my interlocutors' descriptions, the practices being investigated here can be characterised as 'non-mainstream' (even 'anti-mainstream'). It is important, however, to note that this research only involves the electronic music practices that have had the chance to be represented in the country *legally* and *publicly*.

Regarding the various usages of the term underground in relation to his work and the work of his colleagues and friends in SET Experimental Arts Events[18], Siavash Amini—ambient producer and cofounder of the SET festival based in Tehran—notes that:

> It depends on the context […] If underground is taken to mean illegal, then it is clearly inaccurate. But if it is described in opposition to mainstream or commercial music, it makes sense. That [not being mainstream] has been a main concern since the onset of SET. We knew from the beginning what we did not want to represent. The rest of it, however, happened as a result of pure experimentation and trial and error in all levels.
> *Siavash Amini ambient producer (interviewed on 17 May 2017 – translated from Persian by myself)*

Siavash's comment (above) gives me the opportunity to also clarify my use of the term 'experimental' in relation to the case under scrutiny in this text. Experimental is not used here to merely assign an aesthetic judgment in relation to the 'finished' work and/or of the artistic processes 'behind' it. My use of the term, instead, draws from a wider perspective over experimental music to more accurately reflect my interlocutors' practices and descriptions. It constitutes a mode of negotiation in an environment with no significant 'tradition' in digital arts and electronic music. The kind of experimentalism that I am concerned with here, therefore, involves strategies of navigating the ethical, legal, ideological-political, and economic structures. It takes place through a mediation between the 'emergent' and the more established networks of creative practice in Iran (and beyond). It manifests in trials and errors, successes and failures. It engages with practicalities and contingencies of presenting a new sonic/musical and/or visual form and rendering it intelligible for others through

[17] For instance, see this article published on the Quietus in September 2016: thequietus.com/articles/20902-techno-electronic-music-tehran-iran-ash-koosha-sote-siavash-amini (last accessed 7 Sep. 2018)

[18] SET Experimental Arts Events (aka SET festival) is an independent, artist-run experimental electronic music series in Tehran, founded in 2015. See the following link for their website: setfest.org

different processes of 'translation'—i.e. through offline and online performances, talks, interviews, reviews, discussions, and articles, encounters with other artists, producers, audiences, government officials, curators, publishers, festivals, residencies, academies, also with galleries, cafés, and theatres as the main 'public' spaces hosting experimental electronic music in Iran, as well as with materials, technologies, concepts, and imaginaries. In this context, experimental and experimentalism are not necessarily used in this text to establish a *direct* connection with the American experimentalism of the 1950s and its later offshoots either, although they would not totally be unrelated either. My use of the term as such does, however, draw from Benjamin Piekut's wide perspective as presented in his study of the 1950s movement; *Experimentalism Otherwise* (2011). In that work (*ibid*, 197) he notes that:

> 'American experimentalism is a contingent arrangement—social, technical, sonic, textual, and material—but this arrangement has played a significant role in structuring of markets, disciplines, and formal and informal pedagogical systems'.

The use of experimental in relation to EEMSI in this thesis, which resonates with Siavash Amini's description (below), also ties in with Simon Rose's flexible definition of *improvisation* as 'a large part of how we do things—telling us about the truer nature of our being-in-the-world, and this doesn't necessarily fit neatly within any particular discipline'. (2017, 152)

> The artists presented here [i.e. in *Absence*: a compilation of ambient and idm music released on February 2016 through Flaming Pines], including myself, are people who are constructing our musical language as part of our lives – a project which is no less of an experiment than the music itself. We are the voices who choose to be absent from the news and the musical mainstream (and in some cases from the city of our birth) in order to express the complex range of emotions and ideas which make up our lives, as honestly as we can. *Extracted from Siavash Amini's introductory essay to Absence on Flaming Pines*[19]

I will, however, return to improvisation *as a disciplinary approach* towards composition and performance in 5.1.4, to call attention to and explore a significant gap within EEMSI's repertoire of aesthetic activities. I should also explain that this text recognises the plurality and diversity of experimental electronic music practices in Iran. The term 'scene' is, therefore, used merely in an analytical context to broadly designate a new sphere of activity emerged within Iranian art/music, which has become visible in the public domain since around 2009–2010. Although these activities

[19] Access the album and the essay via the following link (last accessed 11 Oct. 2018): flamingpines.bandcamp.com/album/absence

constitute a heterogeneous network of relations, practices, technologies, individuals, processes, spaces and places, they have converged towards shaping a specific array of artistic/musical forms that are investigated in this text.

In the Humanities 'emergence' has proved a slippery concept with definitions drawing from diverse, and at times contradictory, sources—from individualist accounts within psychological reductionism to more holistic philosophical descriptions that argue for an irreducibility of collective phenomena to individual parts. In relation to the case at hand, however, derivatives of the word 'emerge'—such as emerged, emergent, and emergence—are used in the context of Jeffrey Goldstein's paper in the journal of *Emergence* (1999, 49–72). Goldstein defined emergence as 'the arising of novel and coherent structures, patterns and properties during the process of self-organization in complex systems.' (49) The latter description seems also more in line with the uses of the term within sonic arts literature, for instance in the work of Jacques Attali (1985), Simon Frith (1996 and 1999), Jonathan Impett (2011), and Simon Waters (2000b, 2000c, 2003a, 2007b, 2014a), among others.

The meaning this text intends to convey by 'society' extends beyond that of an ordered *human assemblage* or aggregate. John Law explains Bruno Latour's concept of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as 'a disparate family of material-semiotic tools, sensibilities and methods of analysis that treat everything in the social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located' (Law 2007, 2). Drawing from Laws' description of ANT, this thesis considers 'society' as constantly changing (yet repetitive) inter-related flows of social-material-semiotic processes; processes that involve a massive network of actors, relations, mediations, agencies, behaviours, bodies, biologies, ecologies, histories, subjects, objects, semiotics, physics and metaphysics.

Finally, the references to the 'local' in this text in relation to EEMSI do not mean to sketch it out as a plain field of uniform possibilities with dynamics and relations that emerge in isolation from 'trans-local' phenomena. In this text 'local' is not taken for 'national' or in opposition to the 'global' either. In a broad sense it gets close to the definition of site-specific. Where the boundaries of a particular site begin or end, however, depend on our frame of analysis, subject matter of scrutiny, perspectives through which the latter is 'observed', and 'tools' with which these are identified and measured. Otherwise, any occurrence can be simultaneously viewed as

‘infinitely’ local or global; the two are entangled and mutually-constitutive. As Tim Ingold writes in *The Life of Lines* (2015): ‘It is because the plant is of (not on) earth that it is also of the sky.’ (44–45) A recent phenomenon that has seriously challenged the local-global divide is the ‘climate change’; a problem that demands a solution that can only be found beyond this divide; one that is able to synthesise new modes of practice that are based on new forms of understanding about the ‘globe’ and the manifold meanings and impacts of our concurrently local and global (co-)existence. Bruno Latour’s extensive work on the topic focuses us, for instance in *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (2018), on the fact that we are all connected locally and globally, embedded in networks that are deeply entangled in both micro and macro scales. Considering this context, I used the term ‘local’ throughout the text merely for analytical purposes, in order to argue that the practices under investigation in this text have taken shape not only in contact with digital technologies and the increasingly expansive (or ‘globalised’) flows of goods and data, but also in relation to a web of historical, ecological, biological, social, cultural, political, and economic ‘forces’; a meshwork of agencies that have bonded (and bounded) materials and people in specific ways within the Iranian plateau.

1.7 Chapters Outline

Beginning with an account of the status of music in Iran in relation to the social, political, institutional, and constitutional changes, as well as to the religious discourse, Chapter 2 lays out a historical context. Furthermore, this part explores how the seed of an electronic music practice was formed during the last decade of monarchy and partly in relation to the state’s ‘modernisation’ project. With a focus on the most significant transformation in the country’s contemporary history—i.e. the 1979 revolution—this chapter then offers an analysis of how music became a platform for playing out conflicting identities. Exploring the relations of musical practice and social, ideological-political, economic, and technological developments throughout the society’s post-revolutionary history, the text then provides an overview of how a new popular music developed following the election of a reformist government in 1997. Through a selective phenomenological, sociological, anthropological, philosophical, and psychological reflection on the radical aesthetic shifts that took place after the ‘Islamic’ revolution, the second chapter ends with an exploration of how a new turn in the evolution of a culturally-grounded embodied anxiety of separation from ‘the

source'—which, in a post-revolutionary context, can be understood as the society's 'free' and 'modern' other—was articulated through art-making and musicking, as the restrictions on cultural production/consumption diminished in a period of relative tolerance and reformism. As such, this chapter suggests a connection between the emergence of experimental electronic music practices in Iran and a renewed quest for autonomy on the part of those individuals and communities whose agency had been undermined by the kinds of politics, morality, laws, ethics, and aesthetics that prevailed after the revolution; a time in which the opportunity for any serious critique of these was aggressively restricted by the system.

Based on this historical context, Chapter Three proceeds towards shaping a theoretical framework for a study of the case at hand in the age of ubiquitous digital technologies. Through this framework, the text seeks to problematise and diversify the analysis within sociological, anthropological, and (ethno-)musicological studies in relation to musical practice in Iran, with the hope of developing it beyond the rather overworked and predictive causal loops of politics-arts-religion. In so doing, the thesis offers the literature within these fields a certain pragmatic flexibility in contact with materials, technologies, philosophies, psychologies, ecologies, affinities, imaginaries, histories, and stories.

Chapter Four 'grounds' the experimental electronic music scene in Iran within a web of social-political-economic-technological agencies in Iran. It does so firstly by offering a list of key features that demarcate an aesthetic 'zone within which EEMSI can be broadly located, and then by focusing on the activities of three collectives that have been instrumental in the formation of the scene's networks, nurturing of its 'image', and development of its aesthetics. The intermingled trajectories of these collectives are analysed against a backdrop of social, political, economic, and technological changes, in order to offer a holistic view of the scene's concurrently 'local' and 'translocal' ties. Based on this contextualisation, Chapter Four then provides a close-up view of the scene's functions through an investigation its 'internal' dynamics and relations, as well as through an analysis of the affinities and competitions that shape it.

Chapter Five specifically investigates the aesthetics of electronic music performance in Iran in relation to affordances of digital technologies and to pervasive, but 'fuzzy', and ideologically-warped, flows of dogmatic ethical/moral judgement

within Iranian society. This part explores how the aesthetics of experimental electronic music performance have afforded producers, and products, a better position in the ongoing negotiation that has been happening between musical practice, the state, and the wider society in Iran. The chapter then argues that the scene's aesthetics, in the broadest sense of the term, are a locus for the crystallisation of a concurrent resistance against and embodiment of an aggressively enforced form of ('ambiguous') control. Through this lens, the scene's aesthetics is 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 sufficiently decentralised transnational affinity networks based in cyberspace, and the internalised, individualised, embodied effects of ideological-political and moral control in Iran.

Chapter Six presents a reflection on my own sound-based works in order to explore how it informed and complemented the ethnographic process, while being influenced by it, in the course of this research. It investigates different ways in which sound-based practice problematised and/or offered new insights into EEMSI's common practices and processes, while offering new directions for further research. In tune with the rest of the text, this part focuses on my work's broader contacts and frictions with EEMSI's manifestations, exploring how each piece, while becoming integrated within the scene's broader networks of production-consumption, entered into different forms of exchange with the words and works of my interlocutors, as a result of which further opportunities for problematisation, reflection, and understanding emerged. Analogous to the development of my practice throughout this PhD, this chapter sketches out a tripartite pathway that begins with thematic exploration—i.e. works set out to explore the recurrent themes that emerged through ethnography—moves towards a more performative approach to sound-based practice, and ends with collaborative projects.

The arrangement of the text, such that the reflection on the sound-based portfolio is deferred to the last chapter, is not intended to convey a sense of chronology. In other words, there is no one-to-one correlation between the specific pattern according to which the thesis is organised and the chronological order of the processes that have informed the progress of this PhD (if designation of a linear chronology is ever a practical possibility). This particular configuration of the text is

decided, therefore, merely as one effective way of communicating the knowledge produced through this research.

In its concurrently theoretical/analytical, practice-led, and speculative approach to musical practice—as a situated, embodied and entangled activity—this thesis seeks to contribute to the growing field of artistic research, as well as to the literature in the fields of (ethno-)musicology, sound studies, anthropology, and sonic arts.

Figure 1-4. Hesam Ohadi (aka Idlefon) performing as part of Idlefon (sound) and Nyla's (visuals) performance at SET Experimental Art Events 2015 in Tehran (2015). Photo by Mehran Ahmadi.[20]

[20] Extracted from SET Experimental Art Events page on Facebook (last accessed 20 Jul. 2018): facebook.com/setfesttehran/photos/a.995109320523532.1073741831.963772713657193/998845763483221/?type=3&theater

CHAPTER 2

A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

'Rhythm of the Saints'...
dancing naked with shadows
in my attic

Chenou Liu – Shadows Haiku for Paul Simon (2014)

2.1 Arts, Music, Religion, and Power Relations

As a by-product of long-lasting tensions between various belief systems and modes of living, the arts, literature, architecture, and even the vernacular of the people who lived in the Iranian plateau have been infused with devices that afford metaphorical, indirect, and obscured (or encoded) expression. The historical trajectory of such devices can be broadly characterised as a move towards abstraction and ornamental transformation (Grabar 1989, Riegl 1992). These forms find highly sophisticated and elaborate functions in cultural production. Their development is perhaps most evident in the proliferation of certain poetic and illustrative styles. Ehsan Yarshater has observed that 'poetry is the most significant artistic achievement of Persia, and, as an art with wide scope, sustained energy and universal appeal, provides the broadest stage for artistic and intellectual expression.' (1962, 61)

The influence of cultures of the peoples who lived within the Iranian plateau on Islamic art seems to consist of a peculiarly lyrical poetic attitude, which, in contact with Islamic ideas, led to the emergence of a phenomenal mysticism. Ali Asghar Seyed-Gohrab (2012) observes '[s]everal scholars such as De Bruijn, Ritter and Reinert have shown, in Persian poetry, metaphor grew in importance as compared to the "predominance of explicit similes in ancient Arabic poetry."' (7) Ettinghausen, Grabar and Jenkins (2001) too had shown that not only an entire iconography but also a specific imaginary, abstract-poetical in its realisation, was created in Iran in the later part of the 14th and 15th century, which is without parallel in any other part of the Muslim world.

Looking at the early Muslim encounters with their neighbours, particularly the Byzantine courts and the Sasanians in the Iranian plateau (c. 224–651), evidence could be gathered in support of the view that representational music and art, being understood as general signs of decadence or forms of idolatry, was considered illicit. A certain amount of hadith dating from this period—literature based on spoken reports in circulation among early Muslim communities after the death of the prophet of Islam Muhammad ibn Abdullāh that describes his words, actions and habits—expresses an amplifying abhorrence. Commentary on art and music in the Qurʾan, however, is done in an extremely vague manner. The term 'music' is nowhere explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an (Nieuwkerk, Levine, and Stokes 2016). The parts of the text that are believed to support ideas and positions against music are resistant to definite interpretation. These often refer to speaking in a loud voice, whistling, clapping, and so on.

Al-Ghazali, a well-known Iranian Sufi philosopher, was among the theologians who considered music as a spiritual pursuit conditionally permitted. In his book *Ihia Ulum al-Din*, written in the 11th century, he argued that music must be regulated based on constraints of time, space, and 'community' (or *ikhwan* – Arabic: الإخوان)—meaning that the conditions upon which the legitimacy of musical activity depended were to be defined by 'current custom'. This position is broadly the one that is still held among *ulama* (Islamic scholars) in Iran, including by Ali Khamenei the current Supreme Leader. The website of Ali Khamenei's office notes: 'It is the very mukallaf [meaning accountable Muslim adult] as a member of laity who is to determine the […] ḥarām music [meaning music forbidden by Islamic law].[21]

Nieuwkerk, Levine, and Stokes (2016) show that some of the post-Islamic literature concerning proscription and anxious justification of musical practice was absorbed by the Western scholars, who constantly heard from them the refrain of Islamic prohibition. Thus, the study of post-Islamic music has been charged with an orientalist persistence that one should begin with Islam's presumed censoriousness and work from there. Contrary to that belief, Sufism (or *Tasawwuf*, Arabic: تصوّف) that is known as the mystical dimension of Islam—arguably the most popular interpretation of Islam among Iranians (Ghadamyari 2012)—in which a combination of

[21] Extracted from the website of Ali Khamenei's office (last accessed 21 Jan. 2017): leader.ir/en/book/72?sn=13827

music and dance is used in spiritual pursuit, was at times granted high status in Iran (Lewishon 1997).

Since the 1980s, ethnomusicological sources willing to explain the various forms of musical practice in different Muslim communities, have developed more nuanced arguments, taking note of the local structures, communal and ritual traditions, political processes, and conflicting principles of cultural authority (Schuyler 1985, Qureshi 1986, Baily 1988, Yousefzadeh 2002, Lucas 2006, Stokes 2010). For instance, Talal Asad suggested that the fact that Islam—conceptualised in Asad's view as a 'discursive tradition'—holds complex and contradictory pronouncements on the subject of music reveals a highly complex scene that requires a deeper locally rooted frame of analysis (1986). Asad's work focuses our attention on the fact that Islam is not historically static or rigid but constantly in motion, even as it claims to be situated outside time and history. As a discursive tradition, Islam is predominantly concerned with present-day issues. It is preoccupied by ideas of modelling a future that is yet to come. It will also be, as it has been, Asad remarks, marked by struggles against atheists, imperial opponents, unorthodoxy, and secularism (*ibid*). Its relationship with musical practice, therefore, should be viewed in its entanglements with the material, ecological, social, cultural, political, and economic, and in relation to technological developments.

Drawing from Assad's discussion I would argue that despite the radical social, ideological-political, and economic transformation throughout the past century in Iran, as a result of which Islamic discourse finally dominated the political theatre, music has continued to thrive as an important element in the life of Iranian people. In the following section, I will try to provide a context for the embeddedness of musical activity within the broader socio-political processes in modern-day Iran to explain how music became a platform for playing out polarised identities in the events—known as the 1979 revolution or Islamic revolution—that ended a long history of monarchy in Iran.

2.2 The 'Modernisation' Project and Emergence of New Music

Under Reza Shah[22] Pahlavi (r. 1925–1941), 'modernisation' of Iran, as one of the system's central objectives, was also driven by the king's desire to maintain independence from the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union (Lenczowski 1978, Shawcross 1988, Keddie 2003). In the social, cultural, and political domains, this aspiration led to rushed regulatory experiments that were meant to suddenly transform the habits of ordinary people. Such processes continued until the 1960s and 70s under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (r. 1941–1979)—Reza Shah's eldest son and the last Iranian monarch—in phase with the American hegemonic and imperial policies in the region.

For the 'West', Iran functioned as an oil provider, a military agent, and a strategic political ally, chiefly to counter the hegemonic Soviet policies in the Middle East (Katouzian 1981; Mohammadi 1995). The practical implication of the regime's urge towards 'modernising' the country—which lacked the necessary infrastructures to become an industrialised power—and creating a predominantly urban, secular, and capitalist nation-state, was that it undermined any genuine debate on the manifold effects of such a process on a population that was largely religious, living in rural areas (66% in 1960 according to the World Bank[23]). In response to criticism, particularly the type coming from the Communist Left in Iran, the increasingly autocratic regime adopted a confrontational policy.

Shi'a clergy and the State had been distinct power organisms in Iran since the Safavid empire (1501–1722). It is worth noting that, even though the clergy played a central role in the 1979 revolution that overthrew the monarchy, it has not always been in opposition to the reigning powers. In fact, it was often tightly linked to them. The modern opposition of ulama to the monarchical regime began with the events that ensued from the constitutional revolution (1905–1907). Although the latter was actively supported by a number of prominent clerical figures, it was subsequently

[22] *Shah* is a Persian word for King. The Shah, however, is a term often used for the last Iranian monarch Mohammad Reza Shah of the house Pahlavi, Reza Shah's eldest son.

[23] Extracted from the World Bank, via the following link (last accessed 14 Apr. 2017): data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL?locations=IR

overtaken by modern parliamentary nationalists (Najmabadi 1987). Disillusioned with the outcome, the clergy withdrew from active politics for several decades. (*ibid*)

Almost two decades later, Reza Shah Pahlavi's secularisation and 'modernisation' projects—an emulation of Ataturk's policies in Turkey—pushed the clergy even further inward until 1953 coup that overthrew Mohammad Mosaddegh, the popular leader of the National Front who was democratically elected as prime minister (1951–1953). The coup sparked a crisis in the status of Iranian nationalism. It was in the subsequent political recomposition that the clergy began to assume a more active role through ideological leadership in opposition to Pahlavi's autocratic rule and 'modernising' policies in the 1970s, which according to many clerics and intellectuals alike took little account of 'traditional' values and, instead, promoted the idea that such 'traditions' were in themselves an obstacle to industrialisation and 'modernisation'. (Fischer 1980; Keddie 1981; Parsa 1989; Chehabi 2003, Nooshin 2005). Samad Behrangi (1939–1968), Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969), and Ali Shari'ati (1933–1977) were among the most influential intellectual elites who wrote, although from very different perspectives, on the collision of the 'Western modernity' and Iranian 'traditional culture'. As Laudan Nooshin explains:

> Many of those with whom I have discussed […] refer to the 1970s as a period of crisis in Iranian identity, and a number of authors have written about the "intoxication" with the West, which characterized the decade, the most well-known being the essay *Gharbzadegi* [or Westoxication] by Jalal Al-e Ahmad. (Nooshin 2005, 233–234)

Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989), the leader of the 1979 'Islamic' revolution, had sharply criticised the Shah's 'modernisation' project as early as 1964 (Yousefzadeh 2000), and denounced the state-sponsored National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT)—through which 'Western' popular music could be heard everyday— 'as issuing from a colonised culture' producing a 'colonised youth' (*ibid*, 37). Drawing on Mohammadi (1995, 371–374) and Sreberny-Mohammadi (1991, 178–179), Nooshin (2005, 233) notes:

> Following the so-called "Communications and Development" model put forward by writers such as Daniel Lerner, television in particular became a vehicle for promoting modernization, broadcasting a high percentage of imported (particularly American) programs that were disconnected from the reality of most people's lives.

To conclude this historical account, I would note that 'modernisation' projects transformed social life especially in major cities and impacted the habits of production-

consumption of cultural goods including music. Music of various kinds 'became available from the early 1960s, including a wide range of popular music styles' (Nooshin 2005, 234). Apart from Iranian classical music known as *musiqi e asil* (meaning original or authentic music) and popular music, a very limited number of electronic music pieces were also produced in this period. These early compositions were inevitably fused with Iranian classical influences.

As part of the Shah's broader ambition to 'modernise' the country, increasingly to his own liking and his own understanding of 'Western' models, while in parallel forging an Iranian identity that celebrated a selective vision of Iran's pre-Islamic history, especially that of the Achaemenid period, the system invested in promoting Western (particularly American) pop music as well contemporary visual arts and performative arts.. Mohammad Reza and Farah Pahlavi—who were crowned as emperor and empress following a coronation ceremony in October 1967, 26 years into the Shah's reign—initiated two major events to celebrate the fanciful meeting of 'Persian identity' and 'Western modernity'. One that took place in 12 October 1971 and lasted for four days to celebrate what was viewed as the anniversary of the founding of the Imperial State of Iran and the Achaemenid Empire by Cyrus the Great, known as the 2500-Year Celebration of the Persian Empire, was directly supported by the Shah himself. The other, an annual international performative arts festival that was held from 1967 to 1977 at Persepolis[24] ruins in Shiraz, known as Shiraz Arts Festival, was the empress' initiative, who, as a former graduate in architecture from École Spéciale d'Architecture in Paris, was fond of 'Western' modern visual and performative arts.

Shiraz Festival is known to be a major influence on some of the early electronic and electroacoustic music in Iran, for instance compositions of young Dariush Dolat-Shahi.

[24] Persepolis was the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid Empire (ca. 550–330 BCE).

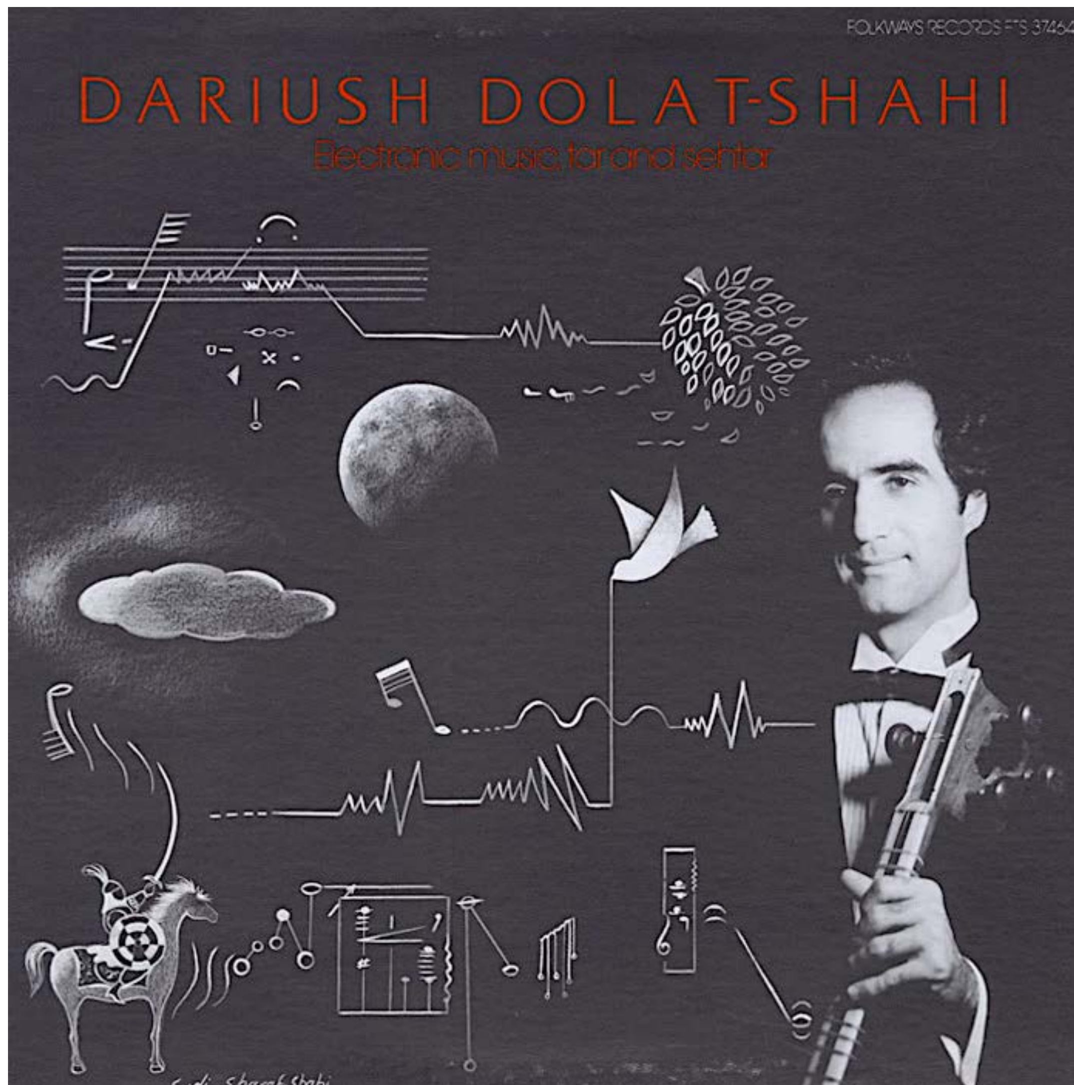


Figure 2-1. The cover of Dariush Dolat-Shahi's release titled *Electronic Music, Tar and Sehtar*.[25]

[25] Picture is extracted from the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings' page via the following link (last accessed 7 Jun. 208): folkways.si.edu/dariush-dolat-shahi/electronic-music-tar-and-sehtar/central-asia-contemporary-islamica/album/Smithsonian For an excerpt of *Tar and Sehtar* visit the following link (last accessed 5 Mar. 2019): youtube.com/watch?v=BEBKDupzQcQ

2.3 Birth of Electronic Music: From Shiraz Festival to the Revolution

Farah Pahlavi convened Shiraz Festival's events herself every year. National Iranian Radio and Television[26] served as the festival's sponsor. In Farah Pahlavi's opening address to the public, the formal purposes of the festival were outlined as follows:

> To pay tribute to the nation's traditional arts; Raise cultural standards in Iran; Ensure wider appreciation of the work of Iranian artists; Introduce foreign artists to Iran; Acquaint the Iranian public with the traditional and the latest artistic developments of other countries.'[27]

Established with an intention to represent works from across the globe equally, in practice the festival mainly focused on 'Western avant-garde' performance art and music. Above all else, however, the festival seemed to be an extraordinary show-off of the royal family's supposed cosmopolitan openness, international influence, forward thinking, good taste, and wealth, and effectively produced a context that highlighted the serious economic and political distress of the society. Even within artistic circles it raised questions in terms of its cultural awareness. An unintended consequence of the festival, therefore, was the formation of an implicit coalition among the critics and opponents of the regime, who believed that the system failed once again to meet the urgent economic and political needs of the country. The Shiraz Arts Festival, as such, became a landmark of the twilight years of the House Pahlavi and the history of monarchy in Iran.

Widely known as the first Iranian electroacoustic music composer, Alireza Mashayekhi (b. 1940) was among those who sharply criticised the festival—Mashayekhi's *Shur*[28], which was composed at the Institute of Sonology at University of Utrecht in 1968, is known to be the first electronic music piece composed by an Iranian. In fact, he boycotted the festival and never attended its events. Nevertheless, one of his works entitled *Contradiction I*, was performed by the American Brass

[26] NIRT was launched in 1966 following the merger of the country's radio and television services.

[27] Extracted from Farah Pahlavi's speech at the *Asia Society-New York* on (2013), accessible via the following link (last accessed 21 Jul. 2018): asiasociety.org/files/uploads/126files/Oct_5-13%20HMFP%20Remarks%20Asia%20Society.pdf

[28] For a listening of *Shur*, visit the following link (last accessed 5 Mar. 2019): youtube.com/watch?v=re5i6RPGLT8

Quintet in the 1976 edition. In an interview with Bob Gluck in 2005[29] Mashayekhi remarks:

> I believe that the Shiraz Festivals were wrong from the beginning to the end! […] In a country that has no tradition in [Western] classical music and no acquaintance with contemporary music, Shiraz Festival had the appearance of an invasion. […] For most Iranians who visited the Shiraz Art Festivals, it was a show by Europeans for Europeans! Some Iranian musicians who attended that festival told me it was a very good occasion for European composers to do their experimentations using Iranian taxpayer's money. […] Of course, some Iranian young musicians had the chance to listen to contemporary music, but that did not justify the Shiraz Festival.

In a small scale the festival managed, however, to achieve one of the goals stated in Farah Pahlavi's introductory speech—i.e. to 'introduce foreign artists to Iran,' which in realistic terms meant to a minuscule population of artists and producers concerned with contemporary practices in performative arts and music. Such an influence is talked about for instance in the comments made by Dariush Dolat-Shahi (b. 1947); a former student of Mashayekhi. Dolat-Shahi received a commission from the festival as a young composer. Almost thirty years later, in 2005, he shed some light on the inspirational and informative aspect of the festival in an interview with B. Gluck[30]:

> The annual festivals were a major source of information for us about what was happening musically outside Iran. [...] Every year, I waited for the event to happen. […]. One of my works was played at the 1976 festival, a year before the festivals ended.

Over eleven years, Shiraz Festival exhibited works 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, and Merce Cunningham among others.

[29] Extracted from B. Gluck's conversations with Dariush Dolat-Shahi, the full text—originally published through the EMF Institute (2006)—is accessible via the following link (last accessed 20 Jul. 2018): econtact.ca/14_4/gluck_mashayekhi.html

[30] Extracted from Bob Gluck's conversations with Dariush Dolat-Shahi, the full text is accessible via the following link (last accessed 20 Jul. 2018). It was originally published through the EMF Institute (2006): econtact.ca/15_2/gluck_dolat-shahi.html

Figure 2-2. Farah Pahlavi greets John Cage and Merce Cunningham at Shiraz Arts Festival 1972. Photo courtesy of Cunningham Dance Foundation Archive.[31]

As an aftermath of the festival, recording studios, facilities for the research and practice of electronic music, film studios, and a library were to be included as parts of an ambitious arts centre (Gluck 2007a). The design of the centre was initially discussed with Iannis Xenakis—composer, music theorist, architect, and engineer. Xenakis did deliver a draft. Based on the information found by Sharon Kanach in the Xenakis archives, Robert Gluck (2006) revealed that the complex was to be designed similar to Xenakis' Centre for Studies in Mathematics and Automation of Music (CEMAMu) in Paris, with a proposed budget of approximately seven million dollars, which was supposed to be secured by the National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT). Moreover, as part of the development plans, a few scholarships were given to students in order to prepare prospective staff for the proposed centre. '[A]mong them were Dolat-shahi supported by NIRT and Massoud Pourfarrokh supported by the Iranian Ministry of Art and Culture' (Gluck 2007a). In conversation with Bob Gluck in 2005 Dolat-Shahi recalls[32]:

[31] Extracted from B. Gluck's conversations with Dariush Dolat-Shahi, the full text—originally published through the EMF Institute (2006)—is accessible via the following link (last accessed 20 Jul. 2018): mitpress-journals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/leon.2007.40.1.20

[32] Extracted from Bob Gluck's conversations with Dariush Dolat-Shahi via the following link (last accessed 20 Jul. 2018): econtact.ca/15_2/gluck_dolat-shahi.html

> The government sent me on a very specific mission to learn electronic music. […] I was supposed to do my studies and finish my degree and work at a newly proposed arts center.

According to Robert Gluck (2007b), Dolat-shahi thus began work at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Centre (CPEMC) in 1976 preparing the tape portion of his festival-commissioned piece *From Behind the Glass*—a composition for 20 strings, piano, tape and echo system. The revolution, however, transformed the lives of Iranian electronic music students of Princeton. In the words of Dolat-Shahi:

> After the revolution, my scholarship was cancelled, but I stayed in New York and completed my PhD at Columbia in 1981. I supported myself by working as art director at Galaxy Music, where I did the artwork for album covers. After graduating, Ussachevsky [co-founder and head (1958–1980) of the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Centre] allowed me to continue to work informally in the studio. Bulent Arel also let me work in the studio at SUNY Stony Brook.

Robert Gluck further notes that 'Massoud Pourfarrokh also lost his scholarship owing to the revolution'. (*ibid*, 26) He continues:

> He subsequently ceased composing and worked in the Oriental Section of the New York Public Library until his death in 1997. Ahmad Pejman found CPEMC aesthetically not to his liking and continued his work independently in more orchestral and commercial directions in Iran and the United States.

Such was the fate of the first generation of Iranian electronic and electroacoustic composers. It is, however, worth noting that Ata Ebtekar (aka Sote), a well-known second-generation electronic composer whose work spans a wide range of genric[33] influences—from idm and breakcore to electroacoustic music—later released two works in collaboration with Alireza Mashayekhi. The first one—a double-album titled *Persian Electronic Music Yesterday and Today 1966–2006*—was released on CD through the Brussels-based record label Sub Rosa in 2007[34]. The second one titled *Ornamental*—a work that Mashayekhi and Ebtekar produced in collaboration with the Iranian Orchestra for New Music—was first released on vinyl through Brandon Nickell's (aka Aemae) record label Isounderscore in 2009. This work was re-released later that year under the name *Ornamentalism* through Sub Rosa on CD[35]. In relation to his collaborative releases with Mashayekhi, Ata told me:

---

[33] I have sometimes used the term 'genric' as a substitute for genre-driven or genre-based in this text.

[34] Access the album via the following link (last accessed 21 Mar. 2019): subrosalabel.bandcamp.com/album/persian-electronic-music-yesterday-and-today-1966-2006

[35] Access the album via the following link (last accessed 21 Mar. 2019): subrosa.net/en/catalogue/electronics/alireza-mashayekhi.html

> For the first release, Mr Mashayekhi gave me his archive to select works for this album. So, there are his pieces on the one side and my own works—pieces with Iranian themes—on the other. […] The second collaboration was released on vinyl through Isounderscore records in 2009 under the name 'Ornamental'. Then, almost 7 months later, Sub Rosa released it as CD with the addition of a few new versions of some of the former tracks under the title *Ornamentalism*. *Interviewed on 7 Apr. 2017 (translated by myself from Persian)*

The early electronic and electroacoustic music, bringing together Iranian classical or *radif* music and 'Western' Avant-garde influences, can be 'heard' as reflecting some of the society's broader concerns in a period of radical change. These concerns were often characterised by intellectual and religious elite in Iran in terms of a tension between 'traditional' and 'modern' values (Mirsepasi 2000, Jahanbegloo 2004, Nooshin 2015). Such a common characterisation, which is hardly capable of explaining the zones of contestation and the shifting paradigms of the society on the verge of a revolution is, nevertheless, helpful in a broad analytical level for identifying a significant gap—between the ways in which society habitually used to do things and the different ways in which it was suddenly expected to think, appear, and function.

2.4 Phonophobia and Maslaha of the System

Islam is, in its entirety, politics.

Ruhollah Khomeini – Sahifeh-ye Imam (2008, 270)

2.4.1 Supreme Leaders Versus Music

The 1979 revolution's winning discourse mainly fed from ideologies of four, largely incommensurable, forces that had strategically converged in the fight against the monarchical system. Broadly, it had a root in Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamic populism—his rhetoric of anti-imperialism, independence, and the struggle of oppressed versus oppressor—and a unique interpretation of Shi'ism that was outlined in his doctrine of Islamic governance or *Velayat-e Faqih* (1970). In addition, it was also influenced by Iranian National Front's tendency towards secularism and a nationalist social democracy. It developed also in relation to the activities of Iranian (Marxist-Leninist, and Maoist) Left. Finally, it fed from a particular fusion of socialist ideas and Islamic beliefs, which was crystallised in the practice of *Mujahedin-e Khalq* (MEK)—recognised by the Islamic Republic as a terrorist, cultist organisation. The forces closer to Khomeini dominated the political climax after the revolution and eliminated or

marginalised other groups and their ideologies. The post-revolutionary regime, as such, 'transformed the religious rituals and the symbolic universe through which revolutionary demands were articulated into a formal, juridical, and doctrinal foundation of an Islamic state.' (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016, xii)

The radical paradigm shifts encompassing all aspects of social life in post-revolutionary Iran had come about as a result of an understanding, particularly among ulama, that regarded the society as morally corrupt due to the former establishment's performance. To counter that, the Islamic government appealed to some singular morality to 'heal' or 'purify' the society by replacing the former state's disputed achievements in relation to froing a new modern/national identity with a cohesive religious one. Such inclinations were repeatedly promoted in different ways in Khomeini's speeches.

> Even if they [the 'Western' powers] go to Mars [...] they will not experience happiness, moral virtue, and spiritual exaltation. They will be unable to solve their social problems, because the solution of social problems and the relief of their own miseries require moral solutions, solutions based on faith. Attaining material power of wealth, the conquest of nature and space, all of this cannot cope with these problems. These things need Islamic faith, conviction, and morality to be completed, to be balanced and to serve humanity, rather than to endanger it. We possess this morality, this faith, and these laws. (Najmabadi 1987, 204, cited Khomeini)

Despite the strong religious undertone of the post-revolutionary political discourse I would argue that any analysis of the regime's approach to cultural matters in general and musical practice in particular should simultaneously take account of at least three layers of understanding with regards to the post-revolutionary 'regime':

- The Islamic discourse on the permissibility of music, visual arts, and performing arts;
- The revolutionary ideology of the post-revolutionary political system, a regime that primarily defined itself in opposition to the assumed corruption of the monarchy and its dependency on the 'imperial' powers;
- The regime's democratic apparatus that, albeit filtered and controlled, provides society with a locus for the expression of dissent.

Regarding the first layer, arguments are broad. A concept that helps us better understand the debate on the permissibility of music after the 1979 revolution in Iran, however, is *maslaha*. Joseph Alagha observes that 'in Muslim theology, maslaha as a

secondary source in Islamic law, is referred to […] as interest, benefit, advantage, good deed, and virtue.' (2015, 50) In Sunni Jurisprudence, as Shmuel Bar (2011, 446) notes, maslaha 'is the last tool that one may use to rule after having looked for the answer in the Qur'an, the Hadith and in previous rulings.' Disputes within the Islamic government in Iran after the revolution, however, compelled Khomeini to proclaim in January 1988 that the maslaha of the Islamic state outranked all secondary ordinances of Islam, even prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage.[36] Khomeini's reading of this Islamic concept as such afforded it a significant flexibility, activating it as a top principle in the Islamic Republic's policy-making processes. His assertion, still controversial in the Islamic world, highlights the political dimension of his somewhat populist religious pragmatism.

Khomeini's rhetoric on music before the revolution and during the early years of after the revolution was quite explicit. He was not in favour of it at all. He had regarded music as an instrument in the hands of the monarchical regime to distract people from 'serious work', while that system pursued its agenda of 'westernising' the country and injecting a 'false' Iranian identity that did not account for the nation's Islamic culture.

> If you care about your country, eliminate music. Do not be afraid if they label you as backward. [...] The agenda behind all the labelling is to distract you from undertaking serious work. *Translated by myself from Sahifa Noor (1979, 197–200)*

Despite Khomeini's hostile views, music could still be heard from the national Radio and Television after the revolution. Even that much, however, was not acceptable to him. In a speech to the national TV and Radio staff in July 1979 he said:

> If you are concerned about Islam and your country […] reform this system [the structure of TV and Radio broadcasts]; it means do not be so Western […] in thinking that there has to be music in between news. This is westoxication. Find a different layout. [For instance] Increase the news time. Do things in such a way that there is no place left for music. […] Music corrupts people's minds. *Translated by myself from The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works website*[37]

About ten years later, however, Khomeini reconsidered his views on music, declaring that:

[36] *Keyhan* newspaper (8 Jan. 1988)

[37] The Persian text is accessible via the following link:
imam-khomeini.ir/fa/n144616/کنکاشی در نظرات امام%20خمینی درباب موسیقی#_edn21

> *Mutrib* music [party music or music that makes people happy and energised for purposes other than the conventional religious ones] was *harām* [i.e. forbidden according to Islamic Shari'a law], but suspicious sounds were ok [meaning sounds that are not 'obviously' mutrib according to the *mukallaf's,* or accountable Muslim adult's, understanding]. *Translated by myself from The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works website*[38]

Khomeini's new Fatwa[39] or formal ruling (above) expressed that if mukallaf (accountable Muslim adult) was not sure whether a certain music or sound was harām, that music or sound was, therefore, ok. That music was generally ok unless proven otherwise based on the mukallaf's own understanding, was a significant turn in relation to the Leader's earlier views. The ḥarām music is often called *ghinā* within Islamic literature. According to Khomeini's most recent views, ghinā was any music that induced a sense of euphoria, happiness, or satisfaction in the Mukallaf listener in a non-Islamic-revolutionary context. Hasan Khomeini, Ruhollah's youngest son, has recounted a memory of his father that demonstrates the political basis of the Leader's Islamic-revolutionary views on music:

> Imam [Ruhollah Khomeini] thought differently about music before and after the revolution. [In a meeting, Ruhollah Khomeini said] I still consider any music broadcast [for instance] from Saudi Arabia's radio as harām. I considered [even] the news broadcast from the Shah's radio as harām, let alone the music. *Translated by myself from The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works website*[40]

Much of this debate—religious-political arguments against musical practice—Nooshin notes 'rests on a recognition of the power of music on people and the perceived need to control this power.' (2005, 237) The Islamic government was surely aware of music's power to manipulate and mobilise masses as it had benefitted itself from it prior to, and in the heat of, the revolution—from the pop songs of Farhad Mehrad and Fereydoon Foroughi to Iranian-classical works of Mohammad-Reza Shajarian to the communist chants of the Fedai Guerrillas, among others. As a scene of complex plays of identity, the revolution had become embodied within the expression of pop music as well. (Nooshin 2005)

[38] The Persian text is accessible via the following link: imam-khomeini.ir/fa/n144616/کنکاشی_در_نظرات_امام%20خمینی_درباب_موسیقی#_edn21

[39] According to Encyclopaedia Britannica Fatwa is, in Islam, a formal ruling or interpretation on a point of Islamic law given by a qualified legal scholar (known as a mufti). Fatwas are usually issued in response to questions from individuals or Islamic courts. Though considered authoritative, fatwas are generally not treated as binding judgments; a requester who finds a fatwa unconvincing is permitted to seek another opinion.

[40] The Persian text is accessible via the following link: imam-khomeini.ir/fa/n144616/کنکاشی_در_نظرات_امام%20خمینی_درباب_موسیقی#_edn21

In his seminal work *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985), Jacques Attali had previously reflected upon the inevitable need of totalitarian systems[41] to control and instrumentalise music. Attali (*ibid*, 7) noted:

> It is necessary to ban subversive noise because it betokens demands for cultural autonomy, support for differences or marginality: […] a distrust of new languages, codes, or instruments, a refusal of the abnormal—these characteristics are common to all regimes of that nature. They are direct translations of the political importance of cultural repression and noise control. For example, in the opinion of [the former Soviet politician, d. 1948] [Andrei] Zhdanov (according to a speech he gave in 1947 and never really disclaimed), music, an instrument of political pressure, must be tranquil, reassuring, and calm.

Khomeini's successor, Ali Khamenei, did not hold a significantly different position vis-à-vis music either. The following statement, extracted from the website of the current Supreme Leader's (Ali Khamenei's) office, describes his views on ghinā as follows:

> Any music which is *lahwī* and mutrib in the common view — i.e., suitable for gatherings of merry making — is ḥarām [forbidden by the Islamic law or shari'a] [...] To distinguish the subject of a ruling depends on the view of the mukallaf [accountable adult] as a part of common people. There is no objection to other kinds of music in itself. [42]

The above quote, which is supposed to express the rather definitive view of the regime's most powerful figure, is highly ambiguous at best. Evidently, the only objection made is to a kind of music that is capable of making people happy (in a non-religious-revolutionary context). This potentially includes any kind of music. And, the only person who can judge whether or not a music is harām is declared to be the accountable Muslim adult (mukallaf) listener. In other words, if mukallaf concludes that s/he is listening to party music, or 'degrading' and 'corruptive' music based on religious-revolutionary ideas whatever that means to the individual, that music is forbidden and s/he should refrain from listening to it. Furthermore, s/he would be

[41] The post-revolutionary regime in Iran is not totalitarian if one looks into Hannah Arendt's the *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) for a definition of the term. It can be characterised as a certain synthesis of theocratic autocracy and democracy; a quasi-democracy emerged from a mixture of 'theologico-political' and 'epistemologico-political regimes' (Plot 2014, 10). No matter how odd the mixture accommodating side by side the notions of theocracy, autocracy, and democracy might sound to the 'modern' ear, it is crucial to recognise the 'democratic' aspect of the system. In Iran, the president as well as the members of parliament and 'assembly of experts'—the institution that elects the Supreme Leader—as well as local councils, are directly elected by the people's vote. Although the electoral systems operate in a rather restricted form in comparison to 'Western' democracies, due to several mechanisms put in place by the constitution to filter out, in part ideologically and politically, ineligible candidates, the people's vote still counts. The democratic process, albeit restricted, still provides a channel for direct participation and effective expression of discontent.

[42] The full quote is available via the following link (last accessed 30 Sep. 2016): leader.ir/en/book/23?sn=5707

encouraged as a 'responsible' Muslim adult to advise everyone else in that situation to stop listening to it, which potentially can lead to police intervention if reported.

Khamenei's position with regards to musical practice, like his predecessor's, demonstrates a confused scepticism, if not a paranoid pessimism, which is, inevitably, articulated through ambiguous speech. Such an ambiguity has, however, had dire consequences for musicians and music enthusiasts. The only significant difference between Khomeini's view and Khamenei's is that the latter is even more vaguely expressed—in general Khamenei tends to express his opinion in a much less explicit and more interpretable manner in comparison to Khomeini's famously simpler, more direct, and often rather vulgar speech. Nooshin (2005, 242) explains (emphasis mine):

> [The] ambiguity [in government's position vis-à-vis music] served a purpose for the government, allowing it to change the rules at will or clamp down whenever it was politically expedient to do so; but it made the position of musicians precarious and subject to the vagaries of any religious leader or individual interpretation of Islamic law. *At the same time, the lack of clarity created crevices—opportunities for resistance—particularly since many of the laws were effectively unenforceable in the private domain.*

On various occasions throughout the text I have unpacked the last part of Nooshin's quote (above, in italic), to explain how bedroom spaces and their younger generation inhabitants, equipped with computers, digital interfaces, and new media technologies, offered a fertile ground for the seeds of new musical/sonic and social imaginaries. I will argue that meeting and/or clash of the latter forms ultimately led to the emergence of new modalities of artistic and musical practice within a growing niche of the arts and music scene in Iran. Experimental electronic music is one such form.

Despite the differences in style, the views of the both revolutionary leaders and their followers practically led to the imposition of numerous bans and limitations on different levels of musical activity, from gathering and listening to records to teaching, performing, promoting, and even to making, selling, and keeping musical instruments. Iraq's full-scale military invasion of Iran in 1980 and the tacit support of the Saddam's regime by the US, France, Germany, Soviet Union, and the UK, added more complexity and produced new grounds for further restriction on cultural production. These were strictly held throughout 1980s and increasingly less so afterwards.

2.4.2 The Permits and other Control Mechanisms

Musicking and its value within Iranian society bore a comprehensive systemic offence after the revolution, particularly during the 1980s, which significantly changed its meaning for the later generations. In that environment, musical practice became an underground expression of some sort of rebellion—against the society's laws and mainstream aesthetics as well as the politically-enforced narratives on morality—that had to be pursued in private and even there met with resistance, not only from the security forces but also from one's own family and friends, offended neighbours, colleagues, or classmates.

There are a number of official mechanisms through which public presentation or dissemination of cultural products, including music, is approved/disapproved in Iran. The most famous system operates within the Ministry of the Culture and Islamic Guidance that issues publication licences, known as Permit. A Permit is required by law for presentation, dissemination, importation, and exportation of cultural products, in any shape or form, in Iran—from music releases to audio books, exhibitions, festivals, movies, and so on.[43] The Ministry operates under the elected government. Another organisation that issues Permits is *Hozeh Honari* (literally meaning artistic domain). Hozeh Honari is a subdivision of Iran's Islamic Development Organization, which operates under the Supreme Leader's office. Islamic Republic of Iran's Broadcasting (IRIB), the head of which is directly appointed by the Supreme Leader, also has its own approval mechanisms within the realm of its own activities.

Among the Permit systems noted above, only the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance is not directly linked to the Supreme Leader's office. However, even this institution's decisions can be annulled or undermined by organisations close to the Leader's office. The latter forces usually compensate for unbalances that may occur between the elected government's policies and the Supreme Leader's views in relation to cultural production. Ali Asghar Ramezanpour, who served as Deputy Minister of Culture (2000–2003) under President Khatami and is now the current News Director at Iran International, told me:

[43] For detailed information on what are the permits for and can one apply for those visit Ministry of the Culture and Islamic Guidance's website via the following link (last accessed 21 Dec. 2018): farhang.gov.ir/fa/member-help/mojavez

> To analyse the system's relationship with musical practice in a certain period one should firstly note the Ministry's composition and general policies under a particular government. Secondly, it is also important to know that there are parallel forces outside the elected government's sphere of influence, with sufficient power and authority, capable of filing complaints and disrupting any cultural production process if need be. Usually, the more a government is politically aligned with the Supreme Leader's positions and interests, the less these forces are active and vice versa. *Interviewed on 6 Dec. 2017 (translated by myself from Persian)*

The parallel forces that Ramezanpour mentions operate under the Supreme Leader's office's supervision. These range from the Judiciary and the *Basij* paramilitary forces, to the representatives of the Leader in different provinces (for instance Friday prayer Imams). Complex and ambiguous as it may be, two major concepts that should be considered in religious-political discourse on the permissibility of musical activity in Iran are those of current custom and maslaha. Both of these concepts demarcate a constantly-shifting landscape of ideological-political agency, social resistance, and technological influence. They demonstrate that the basis upon which an understanding, or a verdict, is generated still depends on the broader material-social-political-technological conditions of the time and not on a static Islamic 'foundation'.

2.5 Socks of the holy smell: Undoing Senses or re-Inventing the Social

These socks were like they were alive [...] I wanted to know how much they cost.

Sun Ra in conversation with David Toop – Ocean of Sounds (Toop 1996, 32)

As already established, the 1979 revolution 'involved a complex play of identities that reflected contesting visions of what it meant to be Iranian' (Nooshin 2005, 237). As part of the Shah's 'modernisation' project, elements of 'Western life-style'—as these were understood by the royal family—were extensively promoted from the late 1950s, for instance through the national Radio and TV (Nooshin 2005). 'Western' (particularly American) popular music was a key component of the 'modernisation' project's cultural scheme, which was devised to change or somewhat refine the 'traditional' culture of ordinary people. The Islamic Republic, however, promoted, even more intensively and intrusively, a very different vision of what status arts and music could and should have in the society, in compliance with the regime's revolutionary-religious views.

As the rejection of what within the Islamic Republic's rhetoric was known as imperialist power's cultural hegemony or 'cultural invasion', the 1979 revolution led to a decade of isolation most notably from the countries of Western Europe, North America, and their regional allies. The 1980s was a period in which the settling regime 'attempted to disentangle itself from the web of neo-colonial influence, interventions, and cultural dependency' (Nooshin 2005, 232), while trying to regulate even the most private aspects of people's lives inside the country. The system did not tolerate any expression of dissent and proceeded to shut down critical voices. This style of governance cost Iranians, particularly those who did not agree with the regime's ideologies and politics, confidence and autonomy.

The new establishments' theocratic authoritarianism, which manifested in its paranoid control and institutionalised discrimination in terms of individuals' beliefs, political leaning, ethnic or religious background, and gender, polarised society in different ways, even to the level of the family unit. In so doing, Islamic Republic attempted to re-invent society. The aftermaths of the 1979 uprising, therefore, can also be understood in terms of an aesthetic revolution or, borrowing from Jacque Rancière, as a radical (re-)'distribution of the sensible.' (2013) In the following paragraphs, I will provide a brief account of only one of the ways in which the new regime, soon after the revolution, set out to radically transform society's aesthetics while its affiliates and sympathisers took over the public arena and made their presence strongly felt.

This account involves a new type of fashion promoted for the 'male' portion of the society and a dress-code imposed, directly through laws, on the 'female' portion over the age of puberty—which is determined by the ulama to be at nine years old for girls and fifteen for boys. Iranian girls are, however, required to wear it at school from the beginning; at six or seven years old. Drawing on the Islamic literature, the compulsory dress-code for women is called *hijab* within the rhetoric of the Islamic Republic. Although a significantly large proportion of Iranian women in various parts of the country have constantly pushed back on hijab in their everyday clothing choices to its absolute limits (and even beyond), the laws in this area are still intact. This dress-code, which used to be more strictly maintained throughout the first decade after the revolution, has two generic forms. It could be applied using *chador*—a loose and mostly dark-coloured outer garment or open cloak that covers

all parts of the body *except* the face, legs from ankle down, and hands from wrist down. It could also be applied using scarf and a certain type of long coat called, drawing from the French word, manteau. Although the latter form is basically meant to cover the same areas as chādor, it is less encouraged by the official narratives as it is considered religiously and morally inferior to chādor.

Iranian manteau—which used to be a rather loose and long coat (down to the ankles) with long sleeves (down to the wrist)—has gradually morphed into a much shorter and tighter coat with more variety in style and colour through people's everyday uses. Walking in the streets of Iranian cities nowadays—perhaps only with the exception of those areas that are considered as places for pilgrimage such as Qom and Mashhad, as well as a few other traditionally religious cities, where the 'traditional' hijab is still widely, but not as widely as the first two decades, used—one notices that this compulsory dress-code is transformed into what is effectively a variety of ordinary trousers and slightly long shirts with shorter sleeves.

For men, particularly during the first two decades after the revolution, the kind of look that was encouraged consisted of an ideally long (and dishevelled) beard, a type of black, white, grey, or brown mandarin shirt worn *over* mostly grey, black, or brown linen trousers, and a distinctive perfume with a rosewater odour that was meant to emit a sense of religious cleanliness and taste. Although this look was mostly just *encouraged* for men as noted above—while hijāb was made mandatory for women by the law—it was effectively enforced in certain work environments and other public spaces; one could be stopped and bullied by the security forces only for having long hair, short-sleeve shirt, or colourful clothes. These rather tenaciously dull and repressive fashions, however, changed very 'subtly' in the interior of buildings, where the shoes gave way to plastic or leather flipflops (mostly grey, black, or brown) and socks (mostly black, grey, white, or brown) or just socks with no flipflops. Chādor, manteau, long and loose trousers, loose mandarin shirts worn *over* trousers, dark colours, beard (the longer and more dishevelled the better), flipflops, rosewater and *socks*...[44]

[44] This focus on evaluating the post-revolutionary fashion within 'male' and 'female' portion of the society is put due to the fact that any sexual identity other than heterosexual is not officially recognised by the Islamic Republic. The public expression of a different sexual identity or orientation is punishable by law. Punishment can involve imprisonment, lashing, and execution. Moreover, any relationship with an opposite sex partner or even a friend outside marriage is officially forbidden. Transgender people can, however, legally change their assigned gender on official documents given that, being first recognised as having 'sexual identity disorder',

> The system has forced its doctrinal aesthetics often brutally but mostly in an extremely vague and interpretable way, letting people always speculating what type of behaviour they are allowed to express while constantly second-guessing and correcting themselves in terms of ideological-political or ethical-moral right and wrong, under the regime's aggressive aesthetic influences. This paranoid confusion has also played out within the Permit System, whose employees are members of the same society. Over time, however, these boundaries have been pushed back by the people who have increasingly become aware of their limited and limiting choices. In my time [referring to the late 1980s and early 1990s] even short sleeve t-shirts could cause you serious trouble, let alone playing music. Nowadays, however, these [memories] seem like [they are from a] a distant past. There are lots of cool gigs out there and people pretty much wear what they want. *Javad Safari, film composer, musician, and sound engineer (interviewed on 25 Aug. 2017 – translated by myself from Persian)*

As Javad's description also demonstrates (comment above), the aesthetic revolution encompassing all aspects of the individuals' choices did affect the ways in which music was regulated as well. Before 1997 and election of the Reformist President Khatami, music production was mainly restricted to the film industry, as well as the national TV and Radio, under the state's paranoid watch. After 1997, however, a space was opened up for an expression of pop music, as it will be described in more details in the next section, and the subsequent emergence of independent studios, private-sector institutions for musical education, and record labels—for instance Hermes Records[45] in Tehran was founded in 1999.

2.6 Post-1997 Pop Revival

Mohammad Khatami, a reformist cleric and former Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance (1982–1992), won the presidential elections in May 1997 with a large majority against the Right-wing candidate. Candidate Khatami's main campaign slogans 'civil society' and 'institutionalised liberty' had appealed to some twenty million voters (around 70% of the voters); a record not yet broken in the history of the Islamic Republic. During his time as the President (1997–2005) significant changes took place in relation to the government's performance and concerns regarding cultural and political matters. These changes set forth a new mood of tolerance and open debate. Abroad, his rhetoric of 'dialogue among civilizations', which came about in response to Samuel P. Huntington's theory of Clash of Civilizations (1996), attracted international attention. His government's policies relieved some of the international

---

they undergo a sex reassignment process including an SRS surgery. The surgery is even subsidised by the government.

[45] hermesrecords.com/en/

pressure on Iranian economy and politics. In the heat of such transformations, Mahmoud Alinejad had observed (2002, 26):

> The growing critical, and inevitably modern, discourses of civil liberty, political pluralism and individual rights [...] [are] being increasingly articulated in terms of a discursive field of public expression where new identities are constructed and seek recognition, at both symbolic and political levels.

The generation born after the revolution lived their teenage or early adult life during Khatami presidency. Thanks to the government's significantly more open policies with regards to cultural production, but also to satellite television and the internet, this generation were exposed to a larger and less censored variety of media, technologies, discourses, and practices. Although at first internet access was mostly an urban middle-class privilege, it gradually spread to more areas across the country and became available to a more diverse population—around 11% in 2005 and 70% in 2018 according to the Internet World Stats[46]—providing the society for the first time after the revolution with an alternative source of information. Recalling the period of Khatami's presidency, Nesa Azadikhah (b. 1984)—DJ, electronic music producer, and cofounder of Deep House Tehran [47]—told me that:

> I was a teenager […] We had a satellite TV that covered Asian channels including MTV, VH1, etc. […] At the time I had a single-deck cassette player, which I would place next to the TV speakers to record the music I liked. The internet wasn't yet as widely spread.

In my own experience as a then guitar player and songwriter who did the bulk of his studio recordings in Iran around 2003–2005, during Khatami's second term (2001–2005), the main achievement of the Reformist government seemed to be facilitating a space for expressions of a 'cosmopolitan' youth culture in public domain. As a result of this opening, pop music, in relation to which one could only be a passive listener or an amateur experimenter, finally found a way to the 'surface' producing semi-professional acts who went on to organise (offline and online) gigs, festivals, and musical contests across the country.

> In the 1990s, commercial keyboard synthesisers produced by brands such as Korg and Casio were available in music shops. Most of the commercial electronic pieces at the time were produced by these synthesisers [mainly referring to film music, advertisement, radio jingles, and a limited number of releases prior to Khatami's election in 1997]. Before 1997, a simple electric guitar sound could prevent your work from obtaining Permit. The music scene [apart from the limited commercial forms] was fully

[46] internetworldstats.com/me/ir.htm

[47] Deep House Tehran (deephousetehran.net) is an event organiser and online magazine that covers 'underground' house music in Iran.

> underground. After 1997, however, things changed. Pop bands mushroomed, electric guitar was suddenly everywhere, gigs with both Persian and English lyrics became common. Cafés were filled with young amateurs discussing politics, art, literature, and philosophy. *Javad Safari, film composer, musician, and sound engineer (interviewed on 25 Aug. 2017 – translated by myself from Persian)*

Prior to 1997, pop music could mainly be heard in the public domain from the state-sponsored media, although on could occasionally hear it from an open window of a residence of a passing car. The state-sponsored type usually had a religious or revolutionary undertone. The 'Western' type was illegally smuggled in the country and copied in the black market. After 1997, however, restrictions on performance and commercial release of music eased and Permits became more accessible. As a result, an alternative grassroots pop music scene with a rock orientation emerged—a predominantly urban middle-class phenomenon. As Nooshin (2008, 70) observed:

> By the summer of 2000 a new local pop music industry had emerged and pop music was everywhere in Tehran and the provinces, increasingly up-beat, to the extent that some of the music was indistinguishable from the imported ex-patriate pop which remained illegal.

As part of this shifting landscape, new acts with influences ranging from country, blues, funk, and jazz to heavy metal, progressive rock, hip-hop, reggae, world music, and flamenco emerged. Stylistically, these were later categorised in the media under terms such as Persian (or underground) rock, Persian (or underground) rap, Persian (or Iranian) jazz, as well as fusion jazz and fusion rock. I shall note, however, that many musicians and bands used to, and still do, reject the categorisation based on these trends, or in relation to Iranian/Western or local/global binaries, while positioning themselves within a broader and more fluid cosmopolitan musical setting. As Nooshin remarked in relation to her own fieldwork on pop music in Iran (Nooshin 2008, 80):

> Many rock musicians are refusing to be bound by such reductionist aesthetics and are formulating a new kind of aesthetics decoupled from national identity. Since most view themselves and their music as much in an international as in a local context, they unambiguously position this music and its meanings in terms of youth expression and cosmopolitanism, as well as an increasingly self-generating local expression of a more widely shared "global" culture.

I will offer a more in-depth investigation of the latter characterisation in the next chapter, where I deliver a theoretical framework based on my interlocutors' similar accounts as well as my personal experience and research. But, to go back to the subject, I should mention that these acts rarely drew from Iranian classical repertoire.

They mainly used English lyrics to communicate their outward sense of cosmopolitanism, but also because many musicians thought that Persian lyrics did not 'sit' well on 'Western' pop music forms. Some, however, did use medieval Persian mystic poetry of Hafez and Rumi. Original lyrics in Persian as well as Iranian classical music influences, nevertheless, gradually found a way into the emergent pop music forms. Performing legally in venues across the capital while releasing via the internet, bands such as 127, Imaj, and Ahoora, to mention only a few, gained some prominence—mainly among the urban, middle-class pop music enthusiasts.

The cultural, social, ideological-political, economic, and technological shifts, in relation to which pop music was both a consequence and a catalyst, began to influence the public domain aesthetics and prepared the ground for the emergence of new forms of sociality that radically changed the ways in which public spaces were accessed. New discussions were formed and new ways of doing things developed. As a by-product of the re-activation of the public sphere, new microcultures started to shape around shared taste in music and literature, among other things. In the absence of bars, pubs, and clubs in Iran, cafés, galleries, restaurants, bookshops, universities, pavements, street corners, rural retreats, theatres, blogs, and online chat rooms, as the younger generation's favourite hangouts, were activated as spaces where private imaginaries met, clashed, and synthesised new modes of practice and thinking. An increasingly large part of this meeting took place in cyberspace. Social media—for instance Myspace, Orkut, and Yahoo 360—channelled private discussions, concerns, thoughts, fantasies, practices, and imaginaries into public discourse. Blogs, and chat rooms also afforded their young Iranian inhabitants a powerful means for the reorganisation of public spaces/places and the activities that took place in them.[48]

Mark Graham and Shahram Khosravi (2002, 242–243) have previously recognised the capacity of the internet as 'a growing reserve of alternative, sometimes conflicting ideas, including alternative blueprints for cultural and social ordering.'

[48] By using the terms private and public spheres or domains, I do not mean to feed the over-used and contested dichotomy, partitioning the society into two distinct parts. I do recognise that the domain of social activity consists in a complex network of overlapping spaces, each composed of 'multiple nestings' (Born 2013, 25, citing Gal 2002, 81). However, in the post-revolutionary Iran one must recognise that speaking only of a complex continuum may undermine the radical polarities resulting from the system's attempts to regulate the social in Iran, through lawful and unlawful interventions based on an Islamic-revolutionary ideology. As a result of the latter processes, a radical divide between the individuals' activities, behaviours, and expectations in public and private spaces emerged.

They note that cyberspace is 'a topos where submerged, subjugated, and excluded knowledges are increasingly accessible and where often private and semi-private opinion can become more available for much larger publics.' Mediating between 'private' and 'public', as spaces that nest different kinds of performances with boundaries that are more rigid in Iran than perhaps anywhere in the 'Western world', the net-based social media catalysed new modes of sociality with music as their weaving fabric. As a result of such processes in a period of relative political tolerance, a small grassroots independent pop 'scene' emerged. It was mainly characterised by the activities of rock, jazz, and hip-hop acts., each of which enabled microcultures of their own. Around such activities a network of independent studios, rehearsal spaces, private (and public) gigs, audiences, private-sector music institutions, cafés, and relationships was shaped. Kargadan Studio was at the time at the centre of a small network of studios across the capital that recorded, produced, and encouraged alternative, independent, and 'underground' music in Tehran. Javad Safari, a film composer, producer, musician, and sound engineer, a cofounder and former associate of Kargadan Studio in Tehran who is currently based in Gothenburg told me:

> Recording studios became centres for the exchange of information about music technology and production techniques. A difference between Kargadan and other studios at the time was that we particularly welcomed alternative or, if you like, underground musicians, while most of the studios were only interested in the commercial market, and for obvious reasons. We had, however, a lot of fun working with independent young musicians like yourself. They were still outside the commercial circles and were open to experimentation with new ideas and materials, making and playing music because it was their passion. *Interviewed on 25 Aug. 2017 (translated by myself from Persian)*

As a result of deepening disputes between the reformist government and its Left-wing supporters with the Supreme Leader and his Right-wing followers, however, the sphere of cultural production once again started to shrink during President Khatami's second term. This situation continued and worsened during the next president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013). Musicians and bands found their gigs cancelled by parallel security forces—for some it happened during the show and for others just minutes before. Instruments were seized, several musicians were pushed to abandon their work, and a few were arrested. Consequently, a number of pop musicians left the country.

For rap producers, things have been much clearer from the onset. They overtly received rejection from the Permit system. Rap and hip-hop events, therefore, have always been held in private and even there some of them were raided by the

security forces, as a result of which a few rap producers ended up in jail for their music and texts.[49] 'This is due to the large audience rap has in Iran' says Alireza Poorsohoolat (aka Mez' Rab), a rap producer based in Tehran whom I interviewed on 17 December 2018 (translated by myself from Persian). Ali Asghar Ramezanpour's comment complements Mez'Rab's in noting that 'it is about the potential of rap, and pop music in general, to produce popular figures.' He continues: 'The system fears them for their ability to effectively mobilise people behind ideas.' *Interviewed on 6 Dec. 2017 (translated by myself from Persian)*

The transformations in telecommunication and new media technologies, nevertheless, enabled a younger generation of producers to explore new aesthetic territories and to begin realising (or re-inventing) new understandings of identity that emphasised individuality, while embracing cosmopolitanism. This 'underground' phenomenon during Ahmadinejad presidency (2005–2013)—a time of cultural, political, and economic stagnation—reactivated private spaces like bedrooms once again as production environments. Equipped with computers connected to the internet, loaded with cracked software, bedrooms became the fertile ground for the seeds of a new musical/sonic/artistic movement.

[49] See the following report for an example: express.co.uk/news/uk/733500/Iranian-rapper-Amir-Tataloo-sentenced-to-five-years-and-74-lashes

Figure 2-3. Protest against headscarf on 8 March 1979. Photo is by Hengameh Golestan, extracted from British Journal of Photography website from an article by Rachel Segal Hamilton (8 Sep. 2015)[50]

Figure 2-4. Narges Hosseini protesting against the headscarf on 29 January 2018. Photo is extracted from an article by Samuel Osborne on the Independent website (30 Jan. 2018)[51]

[50] The photo is accessible via the following link (last accessed 8 Aug. 2018): bjp-online.com/2015/09/the-day-100000-iranian-women-protested-the-headscarf

[51] The photo is accessible via the following link (last accessed 8 Aug. 2018): independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/iran-women-hijab-protests-arrests-no-headscarf-take-off-girl-of-enghelab-street-vida-movahed-a8185611.html

2.7 Performing the Distance: Challenge of Belonging and Experimental Music

The earliest indications of an experimental electronic music practice in 'public' domain around 2009 can be examined in relation to the post-1997 grassroots alternative pop scene. As explained in the previous section, the movements of this scene were disrupted by the security forces and, as such, the practice of pop music was once again largely pushed underground. From a broader perspective, the shifts that occurred as a result of the relative openings that had taken place in the domain of cultural production after the 1997 elections, to which the emergence of a grassroots alternative pop music scene was related, can be viewed in terms of society's renewed search for autonomy. Reza Kazemzadeh, psychologist and film critic, puts the society's search for new expressive territories through art and music within a historical context. He notes:

> Thanks to the post-1997 changes, people started to take back some control over their lives, for instance by referencing in different ways what was important to them. Although, this referencing in art and literature has been historically performed obliquely, due to society's cautious approach to expressive behaviours. The existence of such a social cautiousness towards expressivity should be viewed in relation to broader geopolitical conditions of the country, its cultural diversity, its geological affordances/limitations, its complex history of power struggles, and so on. As a result of the 1979 revolution, this historically-grounded sense of cautiousness, often manifesting as self-policing in individuals' and group's behaviours, was re-enforced. Re-formatted through the new regime's performances, it gradually became internalised within the society. So, not only because the politics or the power structures did not allow for autonomy, but also because systemic control had become internalised, that it manifested itself in new ways within the aesthetics of art and music, for instance through abstraction or distortion. The emergence of the ambient/drone music in Iran could perhaps be also studied from this perspective. *Interviewed on 26 Jan. 2018 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Comparing his professional experiences as a psychologist who has worked in Western Europe and in Iran, Kazemzadeh then continues with a rather shocking observation; one which strongly resonates with what I had experienced first-hand and was exposed to through the descriptions of many of my friends and acquaintances in Iran. Kazemzadeh notes:

> Here [In Western Europe], despite all the differences, often the more people isolate themselves from society the more they start limiting their freedom and autonomy. That potentially provides a context for depression and/or rebellion of different sorts. In Iran, however, the more one isolates oneself from society the more s/he gains in freedom and autonomy, because the public domain is not the right environment to experience

> those. This also can provide ingredients for depression, however, paradoxically, it also offers a space for experiencing autonomy and agency. *Interviewed on 26 Jan. 2018 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Four closely related and recurrent themes in Iranian music and literature are ache of distance, alienation from the source, nostalgia, and sadness induced by the departure (of someone or something). I am concerned here with a culturally-embedded and embodied sensation that can be best understood in terms of *farāgh* in Persian poetry. Farāgh does not find a straight-forward terminological equivalent in English. It is often translated as blank, emptiness, empty space, vacuity, gap, and void (also as leisure, spare time, and idleness). However, even if one can imagine a word that holds within a concentrate of all these terms, farāgh is still not that. One might get closer by adding to the concentrate a dosage of separation anxiety and longing for life or for something about life that is lost, while still failing to fully grasp it in English. As such, this embodied feeling is comparable to concepts such as 'saudade' in Brazilian and Portuguese culture and 'derti' in Greek rebetiko music. To understand this somewhat 'culture-specific' feeling, there is no better source than Rumi, who is the best-known Iranian poet outside Iran thanks to Professor Annemarie Schimmel's extensive work on his œuvre[52]. Rumi begins his *Masnavi-ye Ma'navi* (translated into English as *Spiritual Couplets*), which is one of the best-known and most influential works of Sufism, with the following words:

> Listen to this reed how it complains:
> it is telling a tale of separations.[53]

The whole poem is an exquisite depiction of a feeling of 'distance' and separation from the 'source'. Regardless of what Rumi's 13th century verse intended, one may ask how could this *source*, or the recurring and common worry of separation from it within Iranian literature, be conceptualised from a broad social perspective in the contemporary culture. Several Iranian thinkers such as Abdolkarim Soroush (1990, 2002), Dariush Shayegan (2001), and Farhad Alirezanezhad-Gohardani (2014) have argued that in the 'modern' era, what is understood as Iranian identity should be understood in relation to three competing components of Iranian subjective experience. According to Alirezanezhad-Gohardani (2014), these three elements consist of 'Persianism' (a sense of belonging to the pre-Islamic Persian empire or ancient Iran);

---

[52] See for instance *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddinn Rumi* (1980) and *I Am Wind, You Are Fire: The Life and Work of Rumi* (1997).

[53] Translated by Reynold Nicolson in 1920 revised and edited by Michael Bielas in 2016

'Islamism' (a sense of belonging to the Islamic culture and civilization), and 'modernism' (a sense of belonging to the Enlightenment's achievements). He argues (*ibid*) that the monarchical as well as the post-revolutionary regimes, both largely undermined at least one of these overarching elements. Distinctive recurrences of this situation in any given period of Iranian modern history by autocratic political systems, have produced gaps in the subjective experience of certain communities, creating among them a sense of alienation or loss of belonging. Such a characterisation might appear too generic and reductionist, nevertheless, it can lay down a certain foundation for a historically-grounded investigation of the significance of 'nostalgia' and 'loss' (of identity or sense of belonging) within contemporary Iranian culture.

I will draw on C. G. Jung's *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1970) to argue that this 'source', from which distance or separation has caused anxiety (or anxieties) among Iranian communities, can be broadly understood in contemporary times in terms of a more *intuitive* way of life (regardless of its structures, traditions, and dogmas)—a life lived by stories, in myths, or through myths; a 'flow' that was disturbed as a consequence of the spread of the waves created by the 'Enlightenment' and the 'Industrial Revolution' in the 18th and 19th century. Observing the issue from a Jungian perspective, as such, I conjecture that the fast pace of technological development which had already caused significant cultural shifts across the 'Global North', and beyond, also hit Iran and distressed the 'intuitiveness' of a 'psyche' at 'peace' with its habitual ways of life, with radical new 'images' that brought with themselves radical new demands; demands for a life described 'objectively' and based on a 'Modern', 'Scientific' rationale—by 'peace', using Jung's terminology, I mean a certain balance. The focus for me here is not so much on grand narratives of orientalist nature—about Eastern intuitiveness versus Western rationality; cultural spirit; collective subconscious and psyche—than it is on the *radical paradigm shifts* which, regardless of our choice of terminology, practically affected non-Western societies, albeit surely not in a uniform fashion, through the sweeping waves of industrialisation, modernisation, and increasing globalisation.

Providing a holistic study of this process is a huge task outside the scope of this research. For a brief context, however, one might want to look as far back as to the historical period between the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) and the Islamic Revolution (1979). Throughout the Constitutional Revolution, Iranian

Nationalist elite largely believed that Iran had to catch up with the 'advancements' in the 'West'—an understanding embedded in the text of the new constitution (1906) that had the support of prominent clerics as well. Looking at the constitutional revolution and its aftermaths, I speculate that a feeling of being undermined by 'Western' liberalism, 'modernity', and hegemonic power became institutionalised. With no realistic infrastructural support, 'modernity', was somehow supposed to forcefully penetrate the 'culture' from 'above'; a much less organic process in comparison to what happened in the 'West'.

The various modalities of such a top-down 'modernisation', together with suppression of critical voices and a failure in appropriate economic planning and infrastructural development, in a time of increasing urbanisation, formation of a new middle class in big cities, and financial growth resulting from oil export—which was inevitably accompanied by migration from the peripheries to the centres and development of slums—led to serious tensions that finally produced a context for the 'Islamic' revolution in 1979. A radical upheaval in the social order following the revolution and the nation's isolation from its new 'other' (the 'modern West') at a time in which society was absorbing the shock of selective 'modernisation', introduced another turn in the evolution of an embodied sense of 'alienation' from the 'source' described previously.

From a sociological perspective it is possible to argue that the rebellion against the Shah's 'modernisation' project was in a sense a reaction against accelerating neoliberal commodity capitalism and its transformative cultural force. Resistances of different kinds, on different scales, occurred across the world. It would be misleading, however, to merely think of these struggles in terms of societies' incapacity to cope with the speed of normative change, as such tensions and frictions were in part inherent within what is known as 'Western' or European Enlightenment 'modernity' itself. Although Capitalism 'naturally' tended towards globalisation, stability, and inclusion, it simultaneously required instability and isolation in the 'third-world' in order to control the local opposition forces—mainly Nationalism and ideological movements like Marxism or political Islam—that challenged its grip on cultural production, natural resources, and cheap labour.

Deleuze-Guattari's landmark philosophical project *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, particularly its second part *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), has famously reflected on

Capital's dual tendency towards deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Focusing on the relation of the body's agency and the territory's affordances, Deleuze-Guattari (1987) explained that 'flows' of capital deterritorialize a landscape by stripping away (decoding) the local senses of 'value' and social relations, and then reterritorialize it onto an organisation of capital flows; recoding local culture onto its inherently nihilistic value system. According to Roland Robertson deterritorialization and reterritorialization are two sides of the same coin of 'cultural globalisation'. (2000)

I will conclude this section by noting that not only through art and literature, but also through everyday expressions and social contacts, Iranian arts and music, in my understanding, perform an imagination infused with a feeling of distance, separation anxiety, isolation, nostalgia, and longing for life. In this context, performing the distance can be understood in terms of individuals' and groups' attempts to resist integration and/or dissolution into an imposed and uncompromising aesthetic system—the one established after the 1979 revolution which penetrated society down to the level of the family. It manifests as an ongoing, anxious and often melancholic search for missing pieces of the puzzle. The closing sequence of Franklin J. Schaffner's film *Papillon* metaphorically illustrates such a resistance—against giving up to the power that undermines one's autonomy and agency while forcing one down a descent into oblivion—where the protagonist, escaping from the Devil's Island by diving into the ocean with a float of bagged coconuts, exhaustedly cries: 'Hey you bastards! I'm still here'…

Victor Turner (1980) has famously argued that social performances enact powerful stories, 'mythic and commonsensical', that provide the social process 'with a rhetoric, a mode of emplotment and a meaning' (153). Through this lens the practices of experimental electronic music in Iran can be also viewed as performances that seek to explore new avenues for *escaping* the anxiety of alienation and control through a playful engagement with digital means and expanded communication (via the internet). The missing piece of the puzzle, I would argue, is *finding confidence* in one's own performances. It involves (re-)discovering autonomy by establishing functional connections, with (musical) worlds *untouched* by the forces that have been exerting such a control, and reinstating inter-personal and material affinities that transcend the limited and limiting boundaries of social reality in Iran.

EEMSI's experimentalism largely manifests aesthetically in an *absence* of features that are typically understood as 'Iranian'. Here lies a particularity of the scene that I would like to discuss in more details: its performative and discursive resistance towards almost anything 'mainstream'. As a politically-conscious movement, EEMSI distances itself from such narratives. I'll come back to this in Chapter 5 (particularly in 5.2) and Chapter 7. This absence of stereotypical specificity, by which I am referring to the discourse and practice that typically labels and defines for Iranian and non-Iranian audiences what constitutes Iranian music or art, is in fact an *escape* from this very cycle that defines and in so doing limits arts and music in Iran. 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.

This absence or escape can also be understood in terms of an *exit* towards new musical futures: futures that becomes, as Roland Barthes (1976, 178) would say, 'the essential destruction of the past.' And this 'past' would be one in which Iranian culture seems to have been stuck, increasingly so due to dogmatic and often revivalist performances of Islamic Republic. This is also a past invented around the name Iran in the 'West' since many decades ago. One that involves images and descriptions, which portray Iran simultaneously as an exotic destination with a rich ancient culture, welcoming and kind people, and a terrorist state or nation waging war all over the world. These are highly stereotypical, unnuanced, easy to grasp and, therefore, powerful vortex-like descriptions that swallow almost any cultural product that comes out of Iran, spitting it out from the other side under a certain number of ready-made and solidified categories. This absence, escape, or exit that I identified as key features of EEMSI, is also the 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 a quote by Reza Kazemzadeh (page 53–54) has shown. These are recurrent patterns that yet again have found specific social functions, this time in the form of experimental electronic sound.

In the next chapter I will provide a theoretical framework. This is a basis over which a concurrently discursive and practice-led investigation of the experimental electronic music scene in Iran in the context of this PhD took shape. Drawing on

concepts such as cosmopolitan musical affinity, internet-mediated spatio-material connectivity, and social imaginary, how EEMSI have emerged, thrived, and proliferated in contact with digital technologies.

CHAPTER 3

TOWARDS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate it but destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but restore it to a state which is still mystified.

Roland Barthes – Mythologies (1976)

Having a historical background laid out in the previous chapter, I will draw from some sociological, anthropological, musicological, and philosophical literature to mobilise concepts towards shaping a theoretical framework for contextualising the investigation of EEMSI in this text. This framework will serve as an opening through which a perspective over the processes and (not-)doings of the scene will be explored in the following parts.

The generation born after the 1979 revolution in Iran did not fully experience the suffocating ambience of the 1980s, spent its teenage years throughout the relatively more politically open and economically stable period of Khatami's presidency (1997–2005), and socialized within 'the cosmopolitan formation' (Turino 2003, 68): a setting that is described by Martin Stokes (2007, 5) as a space in which

> The nation-state system no longer orders and contains the global flows of finance, labor, commodities and ideas (on which nation-states depend). These circulate according to new logics [see for instance Arjun Appadurai's idea of the '-scapes' [1990 and 2000 for instance][54], logics not subordinated to some higher-level unifying principle, but which, rather, come together in complex and rather unpredictable ways.

For an investigation of the experimental electronic music 'scene' in Iran, therefore, an understanding of the concepts of 'cultural hybridity' (Hall 1993,

---

[54] 'Appadurai proposes five factors that contribute to the global exchange of ideas and information. He labels these five dimensions as '-scapes': ethnoscape, technoscape, finanscape, mediascapes and ideoscapes. They are fluid and constantly shifting, just as cultures are. Within each of these '-scapes', however, exists multiple realities, as an idea or image changes its context depending on the spectator. With the meaning of ideas changing depending on the person ingesting them, we must then grapple with the existence of an "imagined world," in which our reality is no more real than somebody else's.'

- The above quote is extracted from Ashley M. Hogan's entry on Amherst College website titled 'Appadurai's 5-scapes' (2010), accessible via the following link (last accessed 21 Jul. 2018): amherst.edu/academiclife/departments/courses/1011F/MUSI/MUSI-04-1011F/blog/node/229354

Bhabha 1994, Bannerji 2000, Canclini 2001) 'globalisation', 'cosmopolitanism'—as an analytical tool within anthropology and ethnomusicology (Tsioulakis 2011a,176), 'plural worlds' (Nilan and Feixa 2006), and 'social imaginary' (Castoriadis 1987; Gaonkar 2002; Taylor 2002), will be instrumental. In what follows I will firstly try to clarify my use of these terms, and then use some philosophy to mobilise concepts towards a certain theoretical framework.

I view the emergence of EEMSI in relation to what Nilan and 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) In this context, I am hoping to explore how these identity formations are constructed socially and in relation to 'the distinctiveness of local youth cultures in a globalized world' (*ibid*, 1). 'Hybridity' has been defined in different ways in cultural studies and social sciences, especially within post-colonial theorising. For a definition, I will draw from Homi Bhabha's flexible use of the term. In his view, 'cultural hybridity' is a result of continuous negotiation of expressions of difference within the dynamisms of cultural flows (1994, 2).' He notes:

> Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.

This characterisation also resonates with what Himani Bannerji (2000) has described as a '[potentially] emancipatory use of culture in the face of globalising power relations.' Moreover, Nilan and Feixa (2006, 1) notes:

> [H]ybridization is a process of cultural interactions between the local and the global, the hegemonic and the subaltern, the center and the periphery. On the other hand, [it] is a process of cultural transactions that reflects how global cultures are assimilated in the locality, and how non-western cultures impact upon the West. It is significant that García Canclini's work ['Consumers and Citizens' (2001)] points to youth cultures as laboratories for hybrid cultures.

'Plural worlds', to use Nilan and Feixa again (*ibid*, 1), connotes 'the constitution of youth identity and subjectivity within a number of salient discourses within cosmopolitanism'. In fact, considering the peculiarities of the 'post-digital' (Cascone 2000) or glitch aesthetics—one of the prominent aesthetic forms in EEMSI's repertoire—

in an era that is characterised in relation to the increasing speed and scale of information flows, it will be important to recognise the de-localisation of identity. The connection between 'hybridity', 'plural worlds' and 'globalisation', as such, also reminds us of this fact. In this context, as cool-hunters know very well, cultural innovation can emerge with similar force from the centre and from the periphery. (Featherstone 1990, Nilan and Feixa 2006).

'Globalisation' is an overused term. It often codifies the entirety of the world population in relation to capitalist market relations and consumerism. This often vague and homogenising application has been challenged since the early 1990s, for its undermining of human agency through a focus on the extreme underlying political, economic, and technological transformations. For example, Martin Stokes (2007, 6) explains:

> [N]eo-Marxian and neoliberal, share a view of a global market unfolding according to an inner dynamic that has, at some level, abstracted itself from the domain of the political. And in putting globalization beyond the domain of human agency, they both put it beyond political accountability, dissent and, ultimately, resistance.

In Postcolonial theory, however, 'globalisation' is described as a series of 'asymmetrical flows' (Hannerz 1992), an approach which is in sharp 'contrast with the previously held view that regarded it as a somewhat 'imminent state of oblivion caused by cultural imperialism' (Tsioulakis 2011a, 176). Among the most influential works in this area are Arjun Appadurai's *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy* (1990) and *Modernity at Large* (1996). Appadurai suggests a reading of 'globalisation' that is conscious of and reactive to the concurrent and mutual influences of the media, technologies, nationalism, capitalism and human imagination. Ioannis Tsioulakis notes that '[f]rom this perspective [Appadurai's], globalisation is no longer viewed as a monolithic and irreversible force from above, but rather as an unending canvas of emerging possibilities generated by local negotiations of transnational currents.' (*ibid*, 176)

To bring my discussion into a musical focus, a reading of Martin Stokes will be helpful. He asserts that the spread and fusion of musical styles across the globe cannot be viewed or interpreted simply in terms of cultural imperialism (2007). Instead, using Mark Slobin's terminology, he suggests that 'supercultural, subcultural and intercultural musical practices [...] are now in close and unpredictable contact, thanks to modern media and movements of people.' (*ibid*, 4) Mark Slobin had

previously argued that musical choices can represent ideological and aesthetic affinities across the world (1993). These affinities, he asserted, find their own ways of constructing new and unpredictable intercultural and intracultural arguments that transcend, and move beyond, the rather simplified concepts of local-global interchange or 'glocalisation'. What interests me here is investigating how, through emergent forms of digitally-enabled modes of musical practice, these new logics and imaginaries, in contact with each other and with other existing narratives within the Iranian society, clash, get dissolved, or produce syntheses, where the seeds of (minor) change sprout. But first, I will use some philosophy to complete the theoretical framework, which has been forming in this chapter.

Louis Althusser had observed that for Marx (emphasis mine) 'Ideology is [...] thought as an *imaginary construction* whose status is exactly like the theoretical status of the dream among writers before Freud' (2001, 108). For those writers, he continued, 'the dream was the purely imaginary, i.e. null, result of the "day's residues"'. However, contrary to Marx, Althusser approximated ideology to Jacques Lacan's understanding of 'reality' as the world we *construct* around us after our entrance into the 'symbolic order'—i.e. the social world of linguistic communication, intersubjective relations, knowledge of ideological conventions, and the acceptance of the law. (Lacan 1997)

While the traditional Marxist view concentrates on the 'real' as a world hidden by the ideology, regarding ideology as 'false' (in reference, for instance, to the 'real' economic base for ideology), the play of the 'real' and the 'imaginary' in Althusser's philosophy restores human agency in a delicate way. In Althusser's view, ideology does not 'reflect' the real world but 'represents' the *imaginary* relationship of individuals to the real world[55]. (2001) Benedict Anderson (1983) elaborated on the idea of the imagination as a constitutive force, extending its sphere of agency to communities as large as the nation. Drawing on Aria Kemiläinen's book *Nationalism* (1964), he wrote (1983, 27):

> What, in a positive sense, made the new communities imaginable was a half-fortuitous, but explosive, interaction between […] capitalism, a technology of communications (print), and the fatality of human linguistic diversity.

[55] For a discussion on 'imaginary' as a mode of social belonging and a force for cultural change, see Castoriadis (1987, 1997), Gaonkar (2002) and Taylor (2004).

The above observation finds even more relevance in the 21st century, a time in which the Andersonian paradigm functions through a much more flexible, absorbent, resistant, and elusive network of increasingly fast and more inclusive means of communication, and in relation to wide spread adoption of English as an 'international' language due to its domination of the world-wide web. Cornelius Castoriadis had, however, introduced to us the concept of 'social imaginary' in 1975. Lacan, Appadurai, and Charles Taylor, among others, also wrote along similar lines, although from different perspectives, about a similar concept.[56] Castoriadis posited that 'social imaginary' or 'instituting society' manifests itself in and through the social-historical institution, the institution of a 'magma of significations, imaginary social significations.'

> The institution of society by instituting society leans on the first natural stratum of the given—and is always found (down to an unfathomable point of origin) in a relation of reception/alteration with what had already been instituted. The position of meaningful figures or of figured meaning by radical imagination leans on the being-thus of the subject as a living being, and is always found (down to an unfathomable point of origin) in a relation of reception/alteration with what had already been represented by and for the psyche. (Castoriadis 1987, 225)

Using a similar conception, John Thompson (1984) later added that the social imaginary is 'the creative and symbolic dimension of the social world, the dimension through which human beings create their ways of living together and their ways of representing their collective life.' (6) Despite the sharpness of Althusser's, Castoriadis', and Thompson's conceptions—of imagination as a constitutive force—I should note that the representational model of behaviour, supporting an anthropocentric view of the world, has also been challenged in the 21st century. Nevertheless, Althusser's observation is still significant in that in critiquing the reflexive model it recognised imagination as an agentive force, conductive of ideology, rather than a passive container for thought that overshadows 'the reality'.

Within a more contemporary frame of understanding, one may replace representation in Althusser's theorising with 'enaction'[57]—a concept, which considers

[56] For instance see Lacan's *Écrits* (1977), Appadurai's *Disjuncture and Difference* (1990) and *Modernity at Large* (1996), and Taylor's *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2003)

[57] For arguments about an enactivist approach to cognition, see: Fuchs and De Jaegher (2009), Steiner and Stewart (2009), Di Paolo, Rohde, and De Jaegher (2010), Hutchins (2010), Stewart, Gapenne, and Di Paolo (2010), Froese and Di Paolo (2011), Klemm, Schomacher, and Söffner (2011), Colombetti (2013), Matyja and Schiavio (2013), Cappuccio and Froese (2014), Gallagher and Bower (2014), Schiavio (2014a, 2014b, 2015), McGraw (2015), Urban (2015), …

'embodiment' as 'articulated with other core concepts that inform the life-mind continuity thesis' (Loaiza 2016, 2)—and re-reformulate his assertion as follows: Ideology does not merely reflect or represent the 'real' world(s), but it is a way for individuals to 'enact' or 'perform' their imaginary relationship to realities, in their contact with each other and with other non-human agents. For such a re-composition to work, however, one must consider the human individual, and her/his imaginative constitution (or imagination), as embodied and situated; a cluster of entanglements with the material world(s); an entity embedded within a mesh of 'intra-activite *mattering'* as Karen Barad (2007) would say. In this context, 'cybernetics' (Weiner 1961), in its broadest sense, as extended to all phenomena and 'mattering(s)', is a useful concept for understanding the (self-)regulatory mechanisms of intra-activity. From this perspective, as the philosopher of 'mingled bodies', Michel Serres, has argued knowledge does not so much place us in front of the world as it entangles us with it in folds and knots. (2017).

The idea of the 'social imaginary' together with Anderson's elaboration on the concept of imagination as a constitutive force for communities and populations as large as nations, fused with a conception of 'cosmopolitanism' as an analytical concept within anthropology, while considering human cognition as situated, embodied, and entangled, finally provides me with the theoretical framework I was seeking in this part in order to investigate a small experimental electronic music scene in Iran. Through the kaleidoscope afforded by such a framework, EEMSI can be viewed as a self-organising network of 'mattering' through musicking—as a situated embodied human activity—and developing (imagined) forms of sociality that are (re-)negotiated in contact with other forces that too regulate the social within Iranian society. As an entangled web of 'mattering' (Barad 2007) formed within a cosmopolitan setting, EEMSI has managed to a great extent to bypass the state's mechanisms of control through the mediation of digital technologies, while shaping its own (micro-)regulated worlds. I would conclude by noting that, in theorising the musical practice—as a locus for creative meeting of situated embodied human and non-human agents (i.e. materials in the broadest sense; encompassing concepts, technologies, imaginaries, and semiotics)—one should not, nevertheless, forget its 'playful' and 'inventive' foundation. As Martin Stokes has reminded us (2007, 15):

> Musical cosmopolitanism may well be understood […] as the product of certain kinds of intentionality and agency, which we might appropriately understand politically and

> culturally. But to neglect the element of pleasure and play in the global circulation of musical practice would, it seems to me, also be to make a serious mistake.

In this and the previous chapter, I have tried to firstly disentangle my investigation of EEMSI from the commonly applied model of analysis in relation to musical practice in Iran, which primarily focuses on the relationship between music and religious-political discourse. I have done so initially by pluralising the religious narrative itself, then by introducing the political aspect to show that historically-rooted tensions between the religious world-views and practices of arts and music in Iran cannot be understood in abstraction from other social-political-economic processes and power struggles. I then provided a description of the major social and political changes in Iran—mainly focusing on the transition from the Monarchy to the Islamic Republic—and explored their relations to processes of identity construction and their expression through experimental music in Iran. Finally, focusing on the technological, imaginative, performative, inventive, and playful basis of musical practice I sought a broader context for its 'grounding'. In so doing, I have intended to free my enquiry into a small experimental electronic music scene in Iran from the mere circles of religion-music-politics causality commonly posited as the basis of theoretical work in relation to cultural production in Iran. I have done so in order to enable this investigation to embrace a broader, more realistic, pluralistic, and perhaps more intuitive, set of relations, practices, and conceptions, to more accurately represent the knowledge this research project has gained through sound-based practice, collaboration, and discursive exchange with my interlocutors.

The next chapter is dedicated to a proper grounding of the experimental electronic music scene in Iran according to its broad conditions of situatedness, as well as through an investigation of its internal dynamics. The aim is to provide an 'image' that is both sufficiently holistic and detailed; one that explores the scene's defining forces, aesthetics, affinities, and competitions in relation to distribution of political power and economic resources and according to the narratives provided by individual producers. In addition, the agency of new media and digital technologies in affording a context for the development of a specific array of experimental electronic music aesthetics is explored. Later in the text, I argued that such aesthetics have emerged not only in negotiation with various forces enacted within society—for instance that of the state's monitoring system—and digitally-enabled imaginaries, but also through a meeting of two different modes of producing electronic music:

one that is performed in bedrooms, home studios, cafés, and galleries using headphones—or loud speakers at a modest 'volume'—and another that is performed 'loud' in black box venues, most often in front of a *seated* audience.

> I believe that our scene [EEMSI] is deeply related to imagination and dream—to the way we have imagined new possible worlds, where relations are different from what we experience as social reality. I believe in the notion of collective subconscious and dreaming. It is abstract, it is hard to measure, but it exists. The way we clicked together or with some aesthetic forms can be viewed in relation to such concepts. My upcoming album *TAR* is very much inspired by thoughts and writings of Mark Fisher in this regard. Do you remember the city in [Italo] Calvino's book [Invisible Cities], built by men? They made it in order to find the woman in their dreams. So, they build the town around the city where the women lived or something like that. Regardless of the sexual references to men and women here, you know it was an example to tell you a different story [which is the following]: I feel that the relationship between the ways we [referring to SET colleagues and friends] relate to each other, the way we connect with other people across the world and so on can be described in terms of the dream city we want to build to realise the broader dream of living a different reality. *Siavash Amini (interviewed on 17 May 2017 – translated by myself from Persian)*

Figure 3-1. Stefan Tiefengraber (on the right half of the picture, wearing black shirt, with his left hand on the table) surrounded by the audience and artists in TADAEX festival, Tehran (2014).[58]

[58] Extracted from Stefan Tiefengraber's website, accessible via the following link (last accessed 20 Jul. 2018): stefantiefengraber.com/wm_ex10.php

CHAPTER 4

LOCATING THE SCENE

4.1 Overview

In order to offer a more localised description, I will first try to identify and locate the scene firstly through an investigation of three collectives, whose activities have been a key influence in development of the experimental electronic music networks in Iran. Providing a social context for the emergence of the scene, this chapter maps out the trajectory of Saroseda (2009–2011), TADAEX (2011–present), and SET (2015–present), against a background of social, political, economic, and technological change, while engaging more closely with the first-hand accounts. Furthermore, I will explore how certain networks of musical affinity, equipped with digital means, offered a context for initially scattered practices of experimental electronic music in Iran to evolve through collective practice and, as such, survive economic and technical complications. Considered together with a scarcity of financial resources and institutional support for electronic music in Iran, such circumstances also produced a ground for the emergence of a mostly non-constructive competition. Although there seems to be a resistance against acknowledging the existence of any competition at all by some of my interlocutors—mainly those who are doing relatively better as professional producers—its processes, effects and affects are articulated and critiqued in different ways by others.

EEMSI is generally an urban middle-class phenomenon, characterised by activities of educated and mostly secularist computer musicians, digital artists, media producers, and creative coders. Mainly concentrated in the capital Tehran, it is largely represented, 'on the stage', by male producers of 25 to 35 years old, although the gender balance has been shifting in favour of more female participation. The scene has also become geographically more diverse. Sohrab Motabar[59], Ali Panahi (aka Ali

[59] youtube.com/watch?v=BvfY4Nm-8Bs

Phi)[60], Saba Alizadeh[61], and Soheil Soheili[62] are among producers who have presented work and held workshops in different cities across the country.

Figure 4-1. Farzane Noori aka PHER performing as part of an event organised by SET Experimental Arts Events in Tehran (2015)[63]

Within the genric lexicon, EEMSI sounds can be categorised under terms such as ambient, drone, experimental, idm, noise, and glitch. Generally speaking, the scene can be broadly positioned within the realm of electronic and computer music, performed mainly with laptops, often with visual accompaniment. Due to lack of governmental and scarcity of institutional support for electronic music in Iran, these practices are heavily reliant on the efforts of individuals. This situation has, however, gradually changed since the scene's earliest appearances in the public domain around 2009. Electronic producers now offer lessons and workshops in music production, coding, and electronic music composition, both as private tutors and as part of a very few programs taught at the Tehran Conservatory and Azad University (Central Tehran branch).

[60] youtube.com/watch?v=fmziarq3JDY
[61] youtube.com/watch?v=6uWrJz-5eJE
[62] vimeo.com/277372558
[63] Picture extracted from SET's website via the following link: setfest.org/portfolios/pher-num-tegh/#!/grs/0/id/115

In terms of musicality, there are two main trends. One that involves different styles of ambient and drone music 'sounds' similar to the kind of music released through 12k[64] record label. The other that is often described by producers as idm, 'sounds' closer to the music put out by record labels such as Mille Plateaux[65], Raster-Noton[66] and WARP[67]. These works involve a substantial use of distortion, reverb, and glitches—Mille Plateaux was arguably the first record label that popularised glitch aesthetics, or sounds of digital 'failure', in music. Although many Iranian experimental electronic producers resist a classification of their work under such or any categories, the above descriptions roughly demarcate a zone within which EEMSI's musical/sonic aesthetics can be located. Another common ground can be found in relation to an *absence* of stereotypical sonic references to Iranian culture and society as previously described (see 2.7, page 58). There are, however, some rare exceptions, for instance in Ata Ebtekar's (aka Sote) repertoire where the familiar sound of traditional Iranian instruments like the setar and santoor combine with electronically synthesised sounds.

The practices I am concerned with here are primarily the result of producers' trial and error with Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs), software synths/effects, VST plugins or Audio Units, and computer programming. Although experimental and composite (I use composite instead of 'hybrid' in this thesis) harmonies, melodies, and repetitive beats are still widely used. Tempos mostly span a range between 90 to 140 BPM, although in the case of many 'free-time' ambient/drone works tempo may be irrelevant. Pieces are mostly three to twelve minutes long. Productions and performances mainly involve laptop, software, and midi controllers. Found objects and live acoustic instruments are not as frequently used. Physical synthesisers are not common either, mainly due their often high cost and lower availability.

> Although I love computers and digital sound, my dream is to do something without using computers someday. Working with an all-hardware setup, like a modular synthesizer, reel to reel and a few effect modules. It's hard to find these things here in Iran and also it's kind of impossible to import them. So that's why it's just a dream at the moment. Anyway, if I had to choose one piece of gear to add to my setup right now it

[64] 12k.com
[65] milleplateaux1.wordpress.com
[66] raster-media.net
[67] warp.net

would be buchla 200e system. *Porya Hatami, field recordist and sound artist, in conversation with Tobias Fischer, the Tokafi online sound art magazine's editor-in-chief (2014).*[68]

Voice is rarely used. When there is voice, it is often used not for its semantic content but just as another sound (which is often heavily processed). There is an emphasis on (new) sounds, colours, lights, geometric shapes, and abstract forms. Live performances often involve a visual element in the form of light design and/or abstract images on the screen as well. Sets that are performed in the dark, with no lights or visuals, are also common. Visuals do not, however, include human body parts. Social and political references in both sound and visual domains are extremely rare. When present, these references are either made in a cautious and indirect manner or presented through rather heavy (digital) processing. The public face of this scene consists of two internationally-known festivals namely Tehran Annual Digital Arts Exhibition aka TADAEX[69] and SET Experimental Arts Events[70] aka SET Festival. Focusing mainly on live performance, Chapter five investigates the scene's aesthetics in more depth.

For the reasons explained previously, the internet operates as the main source for accessing information, technology, pedagogy, connection (with producers, fans, labels, promoters, festivals, DJs, institutions, academies, and the media), dissemination (releasing through net labels and/or uploading via social media websites like Facebook, Instagram and Telegram or audio distribution platforms like Soundcloud, Bandcamp, and Spotify), and commodification (releasing through record labels). The majority of the musics/sounds are released either through net-labels and record labels based outside the country, or as self-released material via online audio streaming platforms. Only a very small handful of albums/pieces have been released through record labels inside the country. Hermes Records is one of the very few labels in Iran that has released some experimental electronic music.[71]

[68] Access the full interview via the following link (last accessed 11 Jul. 2019): tokafi.com/15questions/interview-porya-hatami/

[69] tadaex.com

[70] setfest.org

[71] For instance this album by Shaahin Saba (aka Dipole) that was released through Hermes in Iran in September 2011: hermesrecords.com/en/Musicians/ShaahinSaba

Figure 4-2. Poster of an event consisted of workshops and performances organised by SaroSeda in Mohsen Gallery in Tehran (2010)[72]

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

In the absence of clubs and bars in Iran, EEMSI is mostly represented in galleries, cafés, and black-box venues such as small theatres. Galleries like Tarrāhān-e Āzād (now Azad Art), Etemad, Mohsen, and Aun were the first public hosts of experimental electronic sound in Iran. In the private domain, for instance in gatherings and parties, however, these new forms were already known to a limited number of friendship circles, from slightly earlier following two private events that took place in 2008 in Tehran, in which Nima Pourkarimi aka Umchuga, Siavash Amini, and Hesam Ohadi aka Idlefon performed to a selected crowd—I will come back to these two events in 4.4.

[72] SaroSeda was an artist collective, which was in part supported by Mohsen Gallery in Tehran. It was active from around 2009 to 2011. The picture is extracted from the following link: parkingallery.com/?m=201007

Figure 4-3. Javad Safari's Audiovisual Performance at Tarrahan Azad Gallery in Tehran (2008)[73]

[73] Picture extracted from Azad Art Gallery's website via the following link (last accessed 7 Feb. 2019): azadart.gallery/En/eventdetail.aspx?Id=23

4.2 Development in Relation to Recent Political, Economic, and Technological Changes

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 technologies. In contact with the proliferation of more affordable and efficient internet connections, these circumstances fundamentally changed, for many, the way they approached music/sound. EEMSI is the offspring of this change.

Figure 4-4. Kargadan [old] Studio in Tehran[74]

As explained in section 2.6, as a result of the Reformist government's significantly more relaxed policies with regards to cultural production (1997–2005), two parallel pop music movements emerged: a mainstream scene that was supported by the state and, as such, was represented in famous venues and music stores, also through the National TV and Radio; and a grassroots alternative scene that was mainly represented in small venues through activities of rock, jazz, and hip-hop acts. Although rap and hip-hop gigs were never granted official permits, several rock and jazz bands found opportunities to publicly and legally perform their music, and in rarer occasions to sell records. In response to such changes in the music scene, production

[74] Source: facebook.com/kargadanstudio/photos/a.422018081265672/422019304598883/?type=3&theater

studios mushroomed. These offered more musicians to record materials, and to get exposed to music production software and hardware.

As Iranian politics once again started to radicalise at the Right-end of the spectrum, the grassroots alternative pop scene became a target for those hardliners who, from around 1999, had wished to reverse the reformist governments' political and cultural achievements. Consequently, many gigs were raided and cancelled. Many musicians abandoned their activities under (direct or indirect) pressure. Some were even arrested and had their instruments seized. A remaining part of this scene, mainly composed of younger producers who had familiarised themselves with music production software, started experimenting individually with computer-music from their bedrooms and basements. EEMSI's emergence was partly a result of these individuals' activities, who were determined to keep making music in new ways, while expanding their knowledge, skills, and connections with the help of digital tools and the Internet. The comment below describes this phenomenon from the viewpoint of one of my interlocutors in Tehran:

> Many of those who started experimenting with music production software came from a rock background. It was hard to be a rock band, 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. *Arash Molla aka ArtSaves, electronic producer and DJ (interviewed on 2 Aug. 2017 – translated from Persian by myself)*

Idin Samimi Mofakham—composer, performer, co-founder of Tehran Contemporary Music Festival (TCMF), and half of the Spectro duo—recalls his own transition from playing in an alternative rock band (Migrane[75]) to becoming an electroacoustic composer trained in contemporary western classical, music as follows:

> We founded Migraine around 2002 with Alma Samimi Mofakham (singer), Hamed Panahpour (bass guitar) and Pouya Pour-Amin[76] (electric guitar). We initially started as a cover band, playing rock songs that we liked, but gradually shifted towards experimenting with the work of minimalist composers such as Philip Glass. Alma left Iran to

---

[75] Migrane produced four of the most active and influential figures of EEMSI (Nima Aghiani, Idin Samimi Mofakham, Sara Bidgeli Shamloo, and Pouya Pour-Amin). See Migrane's page on Facebook via the following link (last accessed 20 Jul. 2019): facebook.com/pg/migrain2/about/?ref=page_internal

[76] Like Idin, Pouya Pour-Amin is now a well-known figure in Iran's experimental electronic scene. He has performed in SET 2018 and recently released an album, titled *Prison Episodes*, through Flaming Pines (June 2019). *Prison Episodes* is available via the following link (last accessed 20 Jul. 2019): flamingpines.bandcamp.com/album/prison-episodes

Germany in 2004. Sohrab Motabar[77] (guitarist) and Mohammad Abdollahi (drummer) joined us—Mohammad left the band shortly after. With this new line-up we focused more on experimental music. We prepared the basement of Sohrab's parental house in Tehran for our rehearsals, where we improvised, recorded stuff on tape, and manipulate the tapes to reach new sonic textures; material for further improvisation. I left Iran in 2005. Sohrab also left for the Netherlands in 2006 or 200 7. Hamed passed away. Pouya continued Migraine with two new members: Sara Bigdeli Shamlou (singer, lyricist) and Nima Aghiani (composer).[78] They released an album titled *Madame Butterfly*[79] through Oído Records [now dissolved] in 2011.

During Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005–2013), due to increasingly intensified sanctions imposed on Iran's economy by the UN security council and the United States, no international transaction to or from Iranian banks was possible for ordinary citizens. The situation still remains more or less the same, the only difference now is that there is a national network, which people can use to buy stuff online from inside the country using Iranian bank accounts. But during the politically and economically turbulent years of Ahmadinejad's presidency, in response to the circumstances created by the sanctions and the state's economic/political mismanagement, also due to the lack of proper copy right laws, a hack software market grew. Shopping malls and tech stores like Paytakht and Bazar Reza in Tehran were flooded with CD and DVD bundles, that offered consumers a large variety of copied and cracked software.

[77] Sohrab is also one of the better-known experimental electronic composers in Iran. Having finished a Master's degree in in computer-assisted composition using non-standard synthesis techniques at the Institute of Sonology, he is now based in The Hague. See Sohrab's SoundCloud for some of his available recordings online (last accessed 20 Jul 2019): soundcloud.com/sohrabmotabar

[78] Sara and Nima are now based in Paris. They formed an electronic duo in 2014 called 9T Antiope, which has since been one of the most prolific and best-known Iranian electronic acts along with Sote, Siavash Amini, and Porya Hatami. Sara is a singer, lyricist, electronic producer, and performer. Nima is a classically trained composer, violinist, electronically producer and performer. See the 9T Antiope's Bandcamp for their published works (last accessed 20 Jul 2019): 9tantiope.bandcamp.com/?fbclid=IwAR10vSCH2xjjA03sk3NyBI8SijFjuZiVjtUP5u6muj2FNQrlTCJJJfW-POdo

[79] The album is available on Spotify via the following link (last accessed 20 Jul 2019): open.spotify.com/album/7bmpLzgeAxEOfEcEkaLEvg?si=Gpqg3qQDRFCXFjKvQonGoQ

Figure 4-5. Paytakht Computer Complex in Tehran[80]

Among the very many programmes on a DVD, one could accidentally come across a music production software, and many people such as the famous hip-hop and electronic music producer Alireza Poorsohoolat (aka Mezrab) did. He told me:

> It was around 2005. In search of some kind of converter programme, I ended up buying a cd in Bazar Reza that included about twenty software applications. One of these was FL Studio. I installed it, just as I installed most of the pro-grammes on the CD to check what they could do. I messed around a bit with FL Studio and found it in-teresting. This was my introduction to music software, which led to more experi-mentation with sounds and software and made me a professional producer. *Inter-viewed on 23 Dec. 2018 – translated from Persian by myself*

The alternative to tech stores were online peer-to-peer file-sharing networks such as Kazaa, eMule, Ares, LimeWire, and Pirate Bay as well as the BitTorrent client programmes like Vuze's Azureaus, through which a large repository of the most up-to-date versions of a variety of software with instructions for cracking were available since around 2000. The earlier access to such platforms was through dial-up connections. Downloading an entire album through this form of access took an entire day, sometimes even more. As ADSL services became available around 2003, however, cracked software started to circulate more widely among producers and enthusiasts. Those with a better connection—often provided through one's parents' or acquaintances' institutional affiliation—would download and distribute among friends. For

[80] Photo extracted from the following link (last accessed 29 Nov. 2018): foursquare.com/v/paytakht-computer-complex--4/مجتمع-کامپیوتر-پایتخت/c22203b13c00f479ff186de

some other professionals, the gateway to software was the film and tv industry. The national Radio and Television, as well as the film and advertising industry, have been the main areas in which professionals in sound/music could have a job.

In 2013 President Hassan Rouhani was elected as the successor of Ahmadinejad (2005–2013). His election was viewed by many commentators as another rejection of the right-wing agenda by the majority of voters at the ballot box. It introduced another air of hope among those who had experienced difficult years of political and economic tension under the former government. Through a series of successful negotiations with the P5+1—UN Security Council's five permanent members plus the United States—Rouhani's government promised to lead towards lifting the sanctions and healing the economically distressed society. Reaching a comprehensive agreement on Iran's nuclear program in 2015 the promise was partly delivered. Former BBC Persian business correspondent Amir Paivar explained in his report[81] on 4 May 2018 that:

> The agreement lifted international sanctions on Iran's economy, including those on oil, trade and banking sectors. In exchange, Iran agreed to limit its nuclear activities. Iran's economy was in a deep recession in the years before the nuclear agreement. But the International Monetary Fund reported that the real GDP of Iran grew 12.5% in the first year following the implementation of the deal, demonstrated in the chart [next page]. Iran's trade with the European Union has increased significantly thanks to the lifting of sanctions but China, South Korea and Turkey remain Iran's top three trading partners.

The positive effects of the 'nuclear deal' on Iranian economy were particularly felt in 2016 as my interlocutors' comments, as well as the BBC chart on the next page, demonstrate. Read together with the bar graph presented on page 89 (figure 4-7)—a BBC chart that illustrates the population of the internet users for each year between 2010 and 2016—suggests a correlation between the economic growth and the population of internet users (and potential electronic music audience) by 2016. The post-JCPOA political and economic changes inevitably affected EEMSI as well. 'Under the deal, Iran gained access to more than $100bn in assets frozen overseas, and was able to resume selling oil on international markets and using the global financial system for trade.'[82] Endorsed by the UN Security Council, the deal was a significant

[81] See the full article on the BBC via the following link (last accessed 28 Nov. 2018): bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-43975498

[82] Quote extracted from a report published on 11 June titled *Iran nuclear deal: Key details* on the BBC (last accessed 26 Jun. 2019): bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-33521655

achievement that psychologically affected markets and encouraged businesses from across the world to express interest and to begin investing in Iranian economy once again.

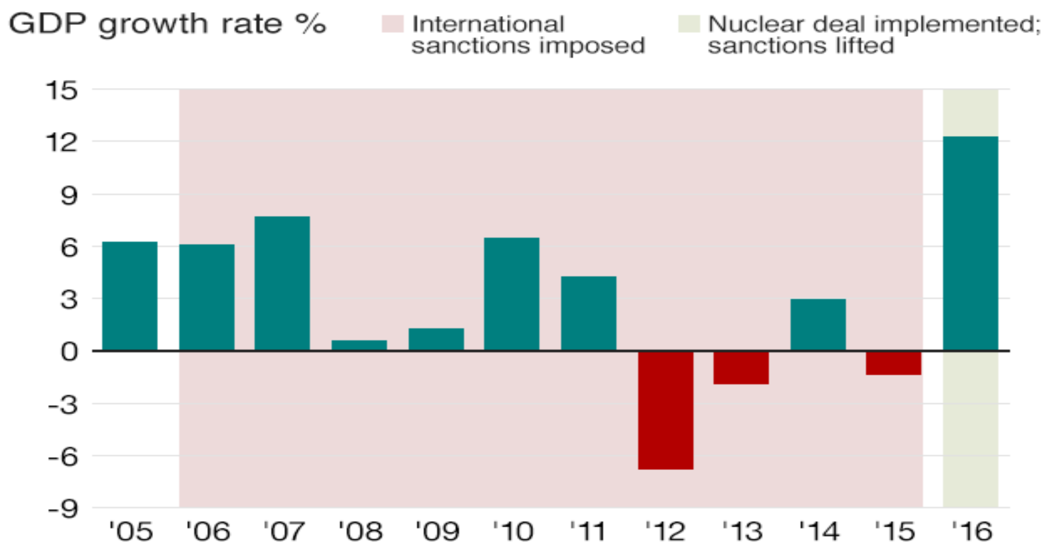


Figure 4-6. GDP growth in Iran between 2005 and 2016[83]

Although as an independent scene, EEMSI's growth was probably not directly affected by the growth in GDP, as Ramin Sadighi's comment (below) suggests the prospect of a better economic future changed society's 'mood' and shaped an atmosphere of hope and confidence, particularly among the middle class.

> It seems like everybody has become much more hopeful and pragmatic in what they do, but also perhaps more profit-driven. *Ramin Sadighi founder and CEO of the Tehran-based record label Hermes Records (interviewed on 12 Dec. 2017 – translated from Persian by myself)*

This situation persuaded institutions, record labels, and wealthy individuals to be more willing to support the scene. As a result, more venues were prepared to represent experimental electronic gigs—although this also had to do with the fact that EEMSI events had already proved capable of attracting an audience and that the Permits were more easily attainable.

[83] The chart is extracted from the BBC. It is accessible via the following link: bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-42553516

In such a transitory space—between a hopeless economic-political environment during Ahmadinejad's presidency and a future of economic improvement and better international relations promised by the new government—people (mainly middle class) regained confidence. This showed in their (online and offline) expressions. The re-emergent sense of poised outward-looking among the music producers helped the scene to expand its connections, as a result of which more collaborations took place. Some significant foreign investments and deals, signed for instance with Airbus and PSA (formerly Peugeot Citroën Moteurs)[84], meant that the government's economic promises were being delivered. Re-vitalised by the promises of the nuclear deal, the tourism industry[85] also attracted more foreign artists and producers to perform in Iran.

SET 2018, TADAEX 2018, and *Girih* [86] were clear by-products of such changing circumstances. In this period (2015–2018), EEMSI was arguably at its most active and, therefore, encouraged many more Iranian producers and amateurs to start exploring experimental electronic music, digital arts, and computer music. Ali Panai's observation (below) describes the effects of such changes on the music scene.

> The quantity of material out there today is noticeably larger. Many more people are practicing music in general. There is a bigger audience attending the events. More venues and organisers are prepared to represent electronic music. In Tehran, there are nights in which several performances happen in different parts of the city around the same time. The scene is now also more geographically diverse. The openings in the political and economic climate seemed to have helped the digital arts and electronic music. *Ali Panahi aka Ali Phi multimedia artist, founder of Nullsight*[87]*, and TADAEX's curator based in Tehran (interviewed on 15 Jun. 2017 – translated from Persian by myself)*

Ali sees the emergence of EEMSI mainly in relation to the proliferation of better internet connections and the widespread use of social media in Iran, particularly Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram. He says:

---

[84] See Reuters report on these deals (last accessed 18 Jun. 2019): reuters.com/article/us-iran-europe-rouhani/france-eyes-four-deals-from-iran-visit-including-airbus-peugeot-idUSKCN0V60TE

[85] See the Telegraph's report on the matter (last accessed 18 Jun. 2019): telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/middle-east/iran/articles/how-iran-tourism-industry-boomed-since-the-nuclear-deal/

[86] *Girih* is a compilation of experimental electronic music by Iranian producers that was released in August 2018 through Zabte Sote, Ata Ebtekar's (aka Sote's) record label. The album is available via the following link (last accessed 22 Mar. 2019):
zabtesote.bandcamp.com/album/girih-iranian-sound-artists-volumes-i-iv

[87] nullsight.com/index.php

> There have been two waves of digital arts and experimental electronic music in Iran. The first emerged in 2009 and the second around 2013. The post-2013 wave was a much larger phenomenon encompassing a more diverse body of practices.

TADAEX activities practically represents, also encourages, such a growth in the variety of produced digital arts/sound in Iran, through exhibitions that involve interactive installations, noise performances, and kinetic sound sculptures, among other forms. Ali further notes:

> I think that social media especially influenced the second wave of new media arts in Iran which has flourished in the last four years [2013–2017]. The economic and political changes brought forth by Rouhani's government helped as well. […] Although the access to many websites is still limited, for instance to Facebook and YouTube, people manage to use them much more easily via VPNs and anti-filters thanks to the faster connections that are now available to people, especially via mobile phone service providers.

Shahin Entezami (aka Tegh) echoes Ali in telling me that:

> I got to know these people who are now my friends and colleagues [in SET Festival] from social media, particularly from Facebook and Soundcloud. […] The relationship with our audience is also made possible via these networks. We promote our music, share it, and send it to labels and peers across the world. We also sell tickets via social media. We wouldn't even have that much audience, even inside the country, if it wasn't for the possibilities of social networking on the internet. *Interviewed on 7 Apr. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

And, Alireza Poorsohoolat (aka MezRab) echoes both:

> As a then rap and hip-hop producer my introduction to EEMSI was through Shahin Entezami and Kamyar Tavakkoli's album [*Artirial*] in 2014.[88] I later founded my web magazine [Jaryanmag on Instagram][89] and interviewed several experimental electronic music producers in Iran. I do not produce rap so much anymore. If my day job allows and I do produce at all, I tend to make electronic music. *Inter-viewed on 23 Dec. 2018 – translated from Persian by myself*

Considering that the political establishment in Iran is particularly sensitive to the changes regarding 'popular' culture, the emergence of a new musical mainstream, even if desired, can introduce significant risks to the future of the practices under scrutiny in this text. Assuming this possibility, I asked Ata Ebtekar (aka Sote) if he is worried about the future of the scene as it gets larger. He responded:

---

[88] Since its formation in 2013, the duo has produced one album (*Artirial*, 2013) and one single (*Home*, 2014) under the alias Artirial. These are both available via the band's SoundCloud page: soundcloud.com/artirial

[89] Alireza's web magazine is an active Instagram-based blog called Jaryan (jaryanmag) that covers electronic music and rap in Iran. Jaryan (literally meaning wave) can be found via the following link (last accessed 16 Jul. 2019): instagram.com/jaryanmag/?hl=en

> First of all, I'm happy to see that our scene is expanding. Although it may be true that if it grows significantly larger than it is, it can run into some troubles, I'm not, however, too worried because the type of work we do is by nature marginal. This is true of this kind of aesthetic activity anywhere in the world not just in Iran. You should consider, however, that the political atmosphere in Iran is also changing towards more openness and not less. *Interviewed on 7 Apr. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Ali Asghar Ramezanpour who served as Deputy Minister of Culture under President Khatami from 2000 to 2003 and knows many of the Ministry's current staff, had previously explained to me—quoted in 2.4 (page 43)—the different mechanisms and power hierarchies that broadly determine the regime's behaviour in relation to musical production in Iran. I asked about his opinion on EEMSI's future, considering the political complexities he had described to me. He said to me that 'in general size would be secondary' and noted:

> As far as the scene doesn't cross any red line, it doesn't matter how much larger it gets. So far as it doesn't produce an icon and does respect the system's sensitivities it will be alright. The size is secondary considering that these activities are quite marginal anyway. [...] If a certain music is not of the following four categories, the Permit System actually welcomes it: Any music that is attached to a public figure or is capable of producing one; any music that involves female voice or elaborate, dance-like, physical movement; any music that is somehow linked to the pre-revolutionary pop music; any music that has a clear political message. *Interviewed on 6 Des. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

From the above comment, it is possible to conclude that EEMSI has not crossed (at least not often enough) the four red lines drawn by Ramezanpour. It means that the forces that monitor the cultural production and, independent from the elected government, have the power to interfere are not yet alerted, or that they are so far convinced that EEMSI, in its current form, is not a 'problem'.

In phase with the economic growth and reanimation of the private sector as previously noted, the post-JCPOA circumstances offered society a certain political stability and generated a temporary consensus among different forces in relation to 'national priorities', which lasted until 2018. These changes encouraged producers, institutions, venues, publishers, and companies involved in music/art market to focus less on ideological-political speculations and, instead, concentrate on economic questions, such as what are the trends in the art/music scene and how can those translate into capital. This shift was noticeable for instance in venues' more flexible and politically-relaxed behaviour towards music events, including experimental electronic music performances. Ramin Sadighi, however, has also seen the pitfalls of such openings:

> I have noticed in my own field that people are generally more goal-oriented and pragmatic. Some, you could say, are also more opportunist. Either way, they want to get the job done. This is true of the officials we deal with as well. Part of this, however, is due to the experience that we all have gained through trials and errors throughout the four decades after the Revolution. Galleries, organisers, venues, record labels, and so on, they all know how to manage their activities more effectively, for instance where to organise a particular show, how to phrase their programs, who to contact, what to avoid, and so on. On the other hand, the officials have also become more accustomed to various aspects and forms of musical and artistic production, and, therefore, are more pragmatic and less impulsive in their decisions. *Ramin Sadighi Founder and CEO of the Tehran-based record label Hermes Records (interviewed on 12 Dec. 2017 – translated from Persian by myself)*

The post-JCPOA (2015–2018) situation of economic growth, relative political stability, and hope helped EEMSI to expand and diversify. Collectives and platforms multiplied, each focusing on representing a specific electronic music niche and shaping a 'micro scene' of their own. To cite a few example I can name the following: House no.4[90] founded by Mehdi 'Peter' Pirhosseinlou (composer); Tehran Sessions[91] founded by Kamyar Sheykh (electronic producer) that focused on alternative electronic and acoustic (mainly jazz, folk, and rock) gigs, Noise Works[92] founded and run by Saba Alizadeh (experimental electronic producer/performer and Iranian classical performer) focuses on noise and no-input mixer events; Paraffin Tehran founded by Azim Fathi (experimental electronic producer/performer) organises experimental electronic events in Iranian cities and in Baku (Azerbaijan); Paraffin claims to be 'a product of the real underground of Iran'; Deep House Tehran[93] founded by Nesa Azadikhah (electronic producer and DJ) represent 'underground' house and electronic music, featuring reviews, interviews, mix tapes, and podcasts in the form of an online magazine. Deep House convenes public experimental electronic music performances in galleries of Tehran, but also private dance music events. In parallel, Tehran Contemporary Music Festival's (TCMF) activity also grew since its first edition in 2017. Having held three editions since its foundation, TCMF is now established as the international festival for contemporary classical music in Iran with some events dedicated to electroacoustic and electronic music.[94]

Even conventional forms of electronic dance music have a stronger presence in the public domain, although mainly through the internet. The organisers of

[90] houseno4.org
[91] facebook.com/TehranSessions/
[92] sabalizadeh.com/media/
[93] deephousetehran.net
[94] tehrancmf.com/en-us/

underground dance music events like Deep House Tehran know that if they convene a show in a public venue, it has to have an 'experimental touch'.[95] It is almost as if the particular social-political climate in Iran encourages a certain experimental approach to sound-based practice, particularly now that EEMSI is a successfully established scene. 'Our public events are definitely not raves', says Nesa Azadikhah. She continues: 'There are no clubs in Iran, party music is still a red zone and any public form of engagement with it is potentially risky.' She further notes:

> I always loved DJing, however, recently I prefer producing and performing my own material. I don't know if I can continue DJing the kind of electronic music that I like. In general, dancing is still an awkward issue, especially dancing to music and in public.[96] It is of course worse if it is to live music. Being a female performer adds even more complexities. But, anyway, I don't want to talk about politics and I'm not an expert in that domain. DJing events exist but in a different context. For instance, I have recently DJed in two promotional events for Armani in a mall and for Samsung somewhere else. This is the only public context I know of, where DJs actually do DJing. *Interviewed on 30 Jan. 2019 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Since genres like house and techno are somewhat politically blacklisted in Iran, activities of the likes of Deep House present any researcher with the following challenge: how come these platforms exist at all and what happens to them? To fully understand the answer, one must simply live in Iran. Such complexities are a part of the social life in this country. The boundaries between legal and illegal or tolerated and unacceptable social behaviour or activity is blurred. Typically, during periods of relative economic stability and political tolerance—the latter is often a function of the former—cultural production relaxes. As a result, previously-problematic forms of practice may find new opportunities to manifest and new forms of practice emerge, until another period of economic and political turbulence pushes back on the achievements. This erosion, however, does not equal effacement: something of these achievements always remains in the practice and collective imagination of the people, irreversibly. This is part of the ongoing negotiation between the political system, which demands from its employees to make decisions based on (unsustainable) ideological dogmas, and the wider society.

---

[95] See for instance the following video that promotes a performance in Iranshahr Gallery in Tehran (last accessed 15 May 2019): facebook.com/Deephousetehran/videos/327317951284437/

[96] Dancing in public can be considered as an example of Offense Against Public Morale in Iran, which is punishable according to the Islamic Penal Code of Iran. A recent example in this regards that made news was the case of 18-year-old Maedeh Hojabri who had posted photos and videos of her dancing, on her own personal, but public, Instagram page. She was detained and forced to confess on the national TV.

At the time of finalising this text, however, the post-JCPOA impacts that I have written about in this section, reached a difficult turn following the new American government's withdrawal from the agreement in May 2018. The US has once again resorted to sanctions, this time even more aggressively. In addition, its alliance with Iran's regional competitors (Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates), and its resolution to 'change Iran's behaviour' has put Iran once again in a dangerously defensive position. As if sanctions and harsh rhetoric were not enough, the US has sent more warships, aircraft carriers, B52 bombers, and a Patriot missile-defence system to suffocate Iran right at its doorstep. These movements, together with provocative responses of the hardliners in Iran, systemic inefficiencies, corruption, legitimacy crisis, and an unwarranted hostility towards United States' main regional ally Israel, have significantly increased the threat of war in 2019.

The fragile Iranian economy is once again in crisis[97]. Another period of economic austerity, political struggle, and security threats, may lead to yet another shrinkage of the cultural production sphere, the signs of which are already surfacing. For instance, TADAEX 2019 was cancelled due to 'peculiar economic circumstances of the country and serious impediments in the domain of cultural production', as declared on the website (translated by myself from Persian). Tehran Sessions was also shut down. Its founder, Kamyar Sheikh, was taken into custody for one day. Havin found guilty of allowing a space for 'female signing' and 'obscenity', he was sent to jail for four days and was subsequently released on a remarkably high bail of around 350 million toman (approximately £67000). After release from jail, Kamyar uploaded a 'public' video on his personal Instagram page and explained what had happened.[98] In the caption of this video, Kamyar warns his fellow 'musicians' and '*bad-hijabs*' (literally meaning those who wear a 'bad', i.e. loose or relaxed, hijab), that 'they may be the next target.' (translated by myself from Persian)

To proceed further with the task of locating the scene in the next three sections, I will explore three collectives—SET, Saroseda, and TADAEX—whose role have been central in the burgeoning of the experimental electronic music in Iran and its representation beyond the national borders.

---

[97] For a discussion on the issue, see Ladane Nasseri , Golnar Motevalli, and Arsalan Shahla's article on Bloomberg on 9 Aug. 2018, via the following link (last accessed 3 Dec. 2018): bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-08-09/as-sanctions-hit-iran-s-on-the-verge-of-economic-breakdown

[98] Access the vide via the following link (last accessed 28 Jun. 2019): instagram.com/p/BzA89wtA51G/

4.3 SET Festival (2015–present)[99]

About 12 years ago [2005] I came back to Iran wanting to make people aware of experimental electronic music, but then the presidential government was different and there was no scene at all [. . .] But when I came back four years ago [2013] things had changed dramatically. There were a lot of 20-something artists just starting out. I became friends with about 10 of them and we started our own festival.

Ata Ebtekar (aka Sote) interviewed by Oli Warwick in English on Fact (Sep. 2017)[100]

Members of SET largely take no issue with positioning their work as part of a broader network of practice, or in relation to and in a certain dialogue or exchange with similar practices from both inside and outside the country. This approach is in contrast with some of my interlocutor's views that reject and resist any categorisation. To understand why that may be the case, it is helpful to look into the history of SET's formation and its internal dynamics as an independent and artist-run collective with a DIY attitude.

SET was founded by a group of artists, musicians, media producers, and coders in Tehran and has since organised three major electronic/electroacoustic music series in 2015, 2017, and 2018, along with several one-off events in Tehran. According to Siavash Amini (b. 1987) and Ata Ebtekar (b. 1972)—two of SET cofounders—the idea for an independent festival took shape when a group of artists and friends including Siavash met with Ata, who had recently returned to the country after almost thirty years of living abroad, in a café in Tehran (2014–2015).

Ata had left the country with his parents in 1983, during Iraq-Iran war (1980–1988), and settled for about nine years in Oldenburg (Germany). Having initially experienced electronic music on cassette tapes sourced from the underground tape business in Tehran, he formed an experimental electronic band in Oldenburg with two fellow Iranians under the influence of German industrial and synth-pop. He later moved to northern California and lived there for about 21 years prior to his move back to Iran in 2013. He told me:

> In the 1980s in Iran there was an underground tape culture. Music was copied on tape and distributed. One of my main sources was my cousin's archive, where I found my then favourites Duran Duran, Club Culture, and Michael Jackson. There were also alternative acts whose names we did not know but whose records we had. What interested

[99] setfest.org

[100] Access the full article via the following link (last accessed 30 Aug. 2018): factmag.com/2017/09/03/sote-iran-ata-ebtekar-interview/

> me in music back then was the use of strange and unfamiliar sounds, which I later discovered were produced by synthesisers. When I moved to Germany, I became interested in synth-pop and industrial music; the likes of Depeche Mode, Front 42, and Nitzer Ebb. The exposure to the Oldenburg's club scene as a teenager had a major impact on my future career as an experimental electronic composer and performer, which developed in northern California. *Interviewed on 7 Apr. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Ata has released music through labels such as Warp Records, Sub Rosa, and Opal Tapes, and collaborated with Alireza Mashayeki—whose work *Shur* (1968) is known to be the first electronic piece written by an Iranian composer[101]—as well as with Tarik Barri (visual artist) who has collaborated with the Radiohead's Thom Yorke in several projects. Producing under the pseudonym Sote, Ata bridges between two generations of Iranian electronic producers—generation of Alireza Mashayekhi's and Siavash Amini's. By extension, SET can be viewed as an offspring of two generations of Iranian electronic producers who, despite having started their musical/artistic career in different times and environments, share an understanding and enthusiasm regarding an exploratory approach towards 'sound' in their practice.

Described by the members of the collective as a nurturing character as well as an enthusiastic and prolific producer, Sote has managed to strengthen the bounds within SET while providing it with a certain stylistic edge. The latter can be characterised in terms of a significant attitudinal nuance that Ata has brought to the initiative; a mixture of 'northern Californian ethos[102]' and a nostalgic sense of being rooted at home. Such a nostalgic sensitivity or, as he terms it himself, 'respect for Iranian culture' translates in Ata's music/sound into a playful and confident exploration of Iranian music and cultural stereotypes, for instance in the use of traditional instruments in his releases and live sets. Ata's collaborations with Pouya Damadi (tar player), Behrouz Pashai (tanbour player), and Arash Balouri (santour player) are a testimony to his 'hybrid' (or composite) approach to electronic/electroacoustic music[103]. Eugenio Caria (aka SaffronKeira)—a Sardinia-based producer and

---

[101] See 2.3 for a more detailed mention of this collaboration and the significance of Mashayekhi and Ebtekar within Iranian electronic music tradition.

[102] In the American pop culture, Northern Californian ethos is known as the entrepreneurial focus in incessant growth through more innovation as exemplified by the activities of the Silicon Valley.

[103] See for instance Ata's collaboration with Arash Balouri (santour), Behrouz Pashai (tanbour), and Tarik Barri (visual) in SET Festival 2018 (last accessed 11 Apr. 209): setfest.org/archive/setxctm-18/index.html, also collaboration with Arash Balouri (santour) and Pouya Damadi (tar) on an upcoming album titled *Parallel Persia* to be released through Diagonal Records on 26 April 2019, which is recently announce via Sote's twitter (last accessed 11 Apr. 2019): twitter.com/sotesound/status/1115479267809402881

researcher—who performed in SET 2016, describes Ata's influence on the collevtive as follows:

> SET has Sote as a father and mentor, maybe for his age and experience. I talk with him a lot. In a country like this, it is quite easy get absorbed in problems and lose any sense of creativity. In such a situation having Sote by your side as an energetic and trustable figure is, I think, very important. *Interviewed on 22 Sep. 2017*

Apart from Ata's work, drawing from stereotypically Iranian themes is extremely rare in the practice of other SET members, and the broader experimental electronic music scene. The only other instance of a reference to Iranian classical music sonority within SET's repertoire would be Siavash Amini's suggestion of Iranian (micro-)tonality in *The Ambiguous Smile of a Drowned Biker*; a piece he released as part of *Girih* in 2018. Ata's gestural and bold approach to sound, therefore, generally stands out from the rest of the group's focus mainly on ambient/drone forms, in which sound is generally articulated through more gradual and patient changes—although each member's practice is unique in articulating these forms.[104] Temp-illusion, an electronic duo consisted of Shahin Entezami (aka Tegh) and Behrang Najafi (aka Bescolour), has also produced works that are gestural and beat-oriented with idm, glitch, and breakcore influences close to those of Ata's. Interestingly though, Behrang and Shahin had both been Ata's student for some time.

Other members of the group had also discovered music initially via the 'underground tape culture' and music trading black market in Iran. Compared to the 1980s when Ata discovered his early musical interests through music copied on cassette tapes, the underground music market was significantly larger in the 2000s, thanks to larger movement of people across borders, the advent of the internet, and new technologies for data storage: DVDs, USB flash drives, and hard drives. Also, the state was more reluctant to controlling such businesses. Shahin Entezami (aka Tegh), an electronic producer and co-founder of SET, notes:

> Around 2005-6[105] I did not have access to a high-speed internet. Connections were still mostly dial-up. So, the internet was not yet the main source for discovering new music.

[104] See for instance *Autolected*, released in February 2019 through Zabte Sote, via the following link (last accessed 11 Apr. 2019): zabtesote.bandcamp.com/album/autolected

[105] Around 2005–2006 higher-speed DSL and ADSL connections were available in some areas within the country. By 2012, however, ADSL connections were the dominant form of internet access in a large part of the country. 'As of 2012, 11 private access providers (PAPs) and Telecommunication Company of Iran (TCI) compete for market share, offering ADSL2+, WiMAX, and other fixed wireless broadband services' according to Ayse, Nash, and Leland (2013). The increasing accessibility, affordability, speed, and mobility of the new

The main sources were still people and shops across the city. Choices were ultimately limited to their archives. *Interviewed on 7 Apr. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

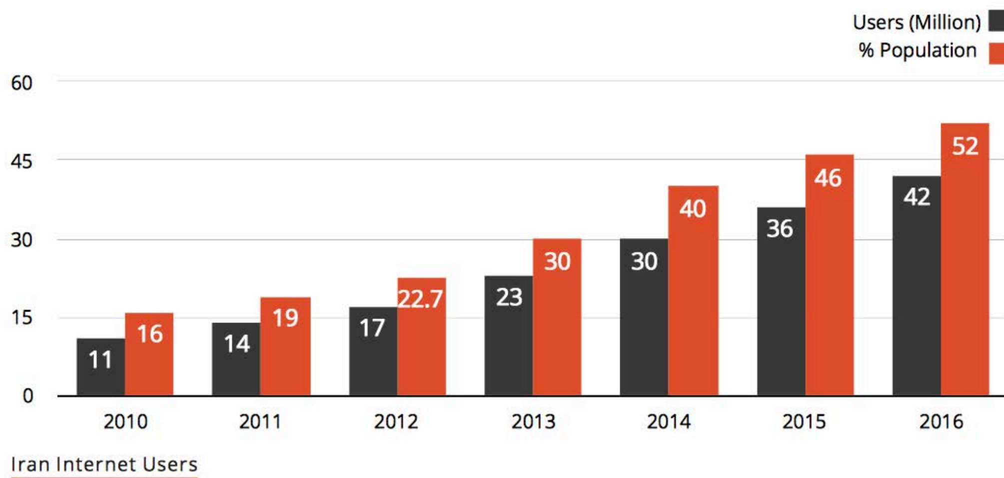


Figure 4-7. Iran internet users (2010–2016)

The chart above[106] demonstrates that the population of internet users in Iran grew on average 12% every year, between 2010 and 2016. In 2013 and 2014, however, the growth is accelerated. By 2016 more than half of the population were internet users. It is important to note that 'as in other parts of the world, there remains a strong divide, largely along class and economic lines, between those with ready access to the internet (and the cultural wherewithal to use it) and those without.' (Nooshin 2018, 344) According to the International World Stats[107], the figure for 2018 approaches 70%, which shows that the internet has become accessible to a significantly large working-class population as well. This growth, inevitably affected the ways in which people accessed information and material. Hesam Ohadi's comment (below) demonstrates this change in the habitual ways in which many in Iran discovered new music and music technologies. Hesam (aka Idlefon) is an electronic producer, computer coder, and a co-founder of SET based in Tehran. He recalled:

Nima [Nima Pourkarimi aka Umchunga] and his brother were obsessed with downloading music. In 2006, they had already gathered a large archive fully from the internet. Sharing a growing interest in electronic music, computer music, and 'sound', Siavash and I started exploring software synths, DAWs, and plugins at the time. Through Siavash and Nima's friendship, we gained access to such an exciting source of music/sound—for instance the releases of Mille Plateaux [a Frankfurt-based record label that focuses

services radically transformed the way in which Iranians accessed information and discovered music, in different parts of the country.

[106] Extracted via the following link (last accessed 20 Nov. 2018): techrasa.com/2017/04/21/highlights-of-irans-ict-achievements-in-the-recent-years-2/

[107] See the following link for the full report (last accessed 20 Nov. 2018): internetworldstats.com/me/ir.htm

on minimal techno and glitch]. This friendship, and its musical impact, determined the trajectory of our later works. *Interviewed on 22 Sep. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Hesam then continued (comment below) with an important remark about two private gigs that he had organised with Siavash and Nima in Tehran. These events that took place in Tehran around 2008 introduced the emergent, software-based practices of experimental electronic music to a professional crowd and, as such, laid a foundation for their multiplication.

> Towards the end of our first year in university Siavash and Nima became more seriously involved in making electronic music. I was then studying Industrial Engineering at University of Tehran. Siavash and Nima were Music students at Tehran University of Art. They had started working with a new software [Ableton Live]. I joined them a few months later; it was around February 2007. From then on and thanks to our friendship we progressed quite rapidly together, developing our individual styles. Towards March or April of the following year [2008], we presented the result of our experiments in two private events at Siavash's apartment my parents' house in Tehran.

For the guests and audiences of these two private gigs, many of whom were involved in one way or another with music industry in Iran as producers, instructors, or publishers, laptop performance of Nima, Siavash, and Hesam was a first encounter with the emergent form of musical practice subject to scrutiny in this text. Mohammad Pazhutan[108] (b. 1974)—a self-taught composer, sound designer, and tutor currently based in Montréal—was among the guests. At the time, he held private lessons in his own home studio. In Tehran and was known by his students at the time as the only tutor of electronic and electroacoustic music in Tehran. Kamran Arashnia—Tehran-based electronic producer and film composer—remembers joining with Pazhutan, his then tutor, in one of the events. Kamran recalled:

> My first exposure to this experimental electronic scene took place in Siavash's party [private gig]. I brought Pazhoutan as well. I remember he was quite touched by the performances, especially by Nima Pourkarimi's. When Nima finished his set, Pazhoutan went on to him and tapped on his shoulder [as a gesture of appreciation and encouragement]. But, later he became critical of the predominantly idm and ambient scene. He believed that the scene stopped developing after a time and lost their exploratory approach to sound. *Interviewed on 11 Nov. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Aida Shirazi—pianist, composer of contemporary classical music, and a current PhD candidate at the University of California, Davis—remembered the same event from a different perspective:

> In Tehran University of Art, I was in the same class with Siavash and Nima. One day they told me in the campus that there was going to be a private gig at one of their

[108] soundcloud.com/pazhutan (last accessed 6 Sep. 2018)

> friend's Hesam [Hesam Ohadi aka Idlefon], whom I did not know by then. I went to the gig. There, I heard a music that was so new and so interesting. Those people who performed in that gig were the only ones I knew who were doing that kind of stuff, which they called idm. I went to a similar private party organised by the same people a year later as well. From that point on, as I see it, the scene just continued growing larger.
> *Interviewed on 2 Aug. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

The then owner[109] of Mahriz, Nader Tabasian, was among the guests too. In one of the gigs, he had expressed interest in publishing the performers' work. Albeit small and private, these two gigs exposed a professional crowd to an emergent experimental electronic music practice. This rather intimate introduction resulted in securing a record deal for the release of a compilation album that involved works of Siavash, Hesam, and Nima in 2010[110]. The collection was titled *Gereh* (different from *Girih* that was released eight years later through Zabte Sote). Gereh literally means knot. The English name printed on the cover alongside Gereh, however, read *Spotty Surfaces*. The album was released in Iran through Mahriz Recordings.

Shahin Moghaddam Saba's *Dipole* came out through the also Tehran-based Hermes Records.[111] *Gereh* and *Dipole* are arguably the scene's earliest *public* exposure inside the country. Porya Hatami's *Birds of a Feather* that was released through Flaming Pines in 2012 followed in close pursuit.[112] *Gereh* was later responsible for Shahin Entezami's (aka Tegh) introduction to the embryonic scene, and to his future colleagues and friends in SET. A year later, Tabasian founded Oído Records (dissolved) in Spain and published 'two albums by Siavash Amini, two albums by Arash Akbari, and one album by Shahin Moghaddam Saba', according to Hesam. These Oído Records releases together with Porya Hatami's *Birds of a Feather* were EEMSI's earliest exposure to an international audience.

The private gigs and the follow up releases through Mahriz and Hermes triggered a chain of events, that in contact with Ata Ebtekar's practice and interests, finally led to the establishment of SET Experimental Arts Events in 2015. SET has so far organised three festivals in 2015, 2017, and 2018, and several one-off events

---

[109] Mahriz was later bought by Ehsan Rasoulof, the owner of Mohsen gallery in Tehran.
[110] Access the album via the following link (last accessed 17 Apr. 2019): open.spotify.com/album/2NUXHO58ELwix7xMHxh5qs?si=TcVOPu4zQDW_yimP46Q13Q
[111] Access Dipole via the following link (last accessed 17 Apr. 2019): hermesrecords.com/en/Catalogue/Dipole
[112] Access the album via the following link: flamingpines.bandcamp.com/album/birds-of-a-feather

in Tehran[113], Berlin (in collaboration with CTM festival)[114], and Barcelona (in collaboration with MUTEK 2018)[115]. The last edition of SET Festival in 2018—four days of fully sold-out performances, talks, and discussions—was organised in collaboration with the Berlin-based CTM festival and was sponsored mainly by the German cultural association Goethe-Institut in Tehran. Most of the events were held in four modest-size venues, which, together, hosted around 800 people. The main venue was the renowned site located inside the most iconic monument in Tehran the *Azadi Tower*. Although Azadi had hosted gigs before, this was the first time that a fully-fledged *electronic music festival* was held there.

SET 2018 represented eight acts—eighteen musicians, sound artists, producers, improvisers, and visual artists. As such, it was and still remains a landmark event in the near ten-year history of the scene. Robert Henke (aka Monolake), the Berlin-based, internationally known computer musician, artist, and co-developer of the music production software Ableton Live, which is the most popular music production and performance software among my interlocutors, was among the presenters of SET 2018. He told me:

> Performing in such a different context among these amazing people reminded me that there are other ways of experiencing music. The event in Tehran and the audience's reaction reminded me that when you know what are you experiencing is unique, you are focused on experiencing it as fully as possible, both as a performer and as an audience. In Berlin nowadays there is an abundance of electronic music events, so, audiences are quite indifferent and performers just want to get on with the job and get out of the venue as quickly as possible. In Tehran this wasn't the case. It was much more exciting in all levels. We stayed chatting after each gig and had interesting conversations. *Interviewed on 4 Sep. 2018*

Robert Henke's comment (above) described SET 2018 audience as unique. Later, Stefen Tiefengraber—a sound and interactive installation artist and performer based in Linz—also described his experience of performing in TADAEX 2014 in Tehran along the similar lines. He said to me:

> About 20 people stayed after the performance to have conversations and ask questions, I mean really professional questions. I assume that there is a broad interest in digital arts and electronic music in Tehran. *Interviewed on 25 Aug. 2017*

[113] For instance PHER and Arash Akbari's joint audiovisual set at Paytakht Hall, June 2015, Tehran, and Arash Akbari (audiovisual) and Thomas Ankersmith's (audio) sets at Saye Art Gallery, September 2016, Tehran.
[114] 9T Antiope, Siavash Amini, and Sote/Tarik Barri sets at 'CTM x SET' 2017, February 2017, HAU1, Berlin, and 9T Antiope/Rainer Kohlberger, Pouya Pouramin Ensemble/Rabih Beaini, and Sote sets at 'SET x CTM' 2019, January–February 2019, HAU2 – Berghain, Berlin.
[115] Siavash Amini and 9T Antiope sets at 'MUTEK x SET' 2018, March 2018, ImaginCafé, Barcelona.

Such an enthusiasm can be viewed in relation to the novelty that the presented material offered to the audience (and performers alike) in Iran, the degree of unprecedented professionalism with which SET and TADAEX events have been organised—particularly more recent ones—their cosmopolitan 'vibe', and the surprising revelation that in the peculiar social-political circumstances of the country such events were in fact a possibility. Viewed as a progressive movement in Iranian arts and music, EEMSI has found an audience among younger generations, of mainly college students and graduates[116], who are interested in new materials through which a sense of difference is articulated. EEMSI events, as such, has enabled new imaginaries, discussions, and experimentats, through which new understandings of identity can be discovered and performed.

The 2018 edition of the festival was shortly followed by the release of a large compilation album titled *Girih*[117] through Zabte Sote, a record label that Ata had recently founded in collaboration with the UK-based Opal tapes. *Girih* is surely the most comprehensive and diverse collection of experimental electronic music by Iranian producers ever released. It is mainly thanks to this level of technical and organisational professionalism, aesthetic novelty, and cosmopolitanism, that SET is established as the main hub for experimental electronic music in Iran. As such, this is indeed a rare phenomenon in the post-revolutionary trajectory of musical practice in Iran.

4.4 Saroseda (2009–2011)[118]

About six years prior to the formation of SET, in the same year in which the two private events mentioned in the previous section took place, an initiative called Saroseda (literally meaning buzz, hullabaloo, or noise) was perhaps the first *art collective* to expand the connections within the emergent networks of experimental electronic music and digital arts in Iran. Saroseda started as an artist initiative with the tacit support of Ehsan Rasoulof—son of a wealthy and influential Iranian banker—who had founded Mohsen Gallery earlier that year (2009) in Tehran. Saroseda continued

[116] Although in the level of production and performance EEMSI is still dominated by male artists, its audiences seem to represent a balanced picture.
[117] Access *Girih* via the following link (last accessed 22 Mar. 2019): zabtesote.bandcamp.com/album/girih-iranian-sound-artists-volumes-i-iv
[118] facebook.com/groups/Saroseda/

its activity for about two years before falling apart. Through Saroseda, three other founders of the future SET Festival—Arash Akbari (electronic musician and new media artist), Behrang Najafi aka Bescolour (electronic producer), and Amir Bahador Ashrafzadeh aka Amir B. Ash (visual artist)—met and joined in friendship with Hesam, Nima, and Siavash. Amir B. Ash was then involved in Saroseda's activities as an organiser. Another figure who, in association with Mohsen Gallery, was known as a founder of Saroseda was Arash Salehi. He was perhaps the one who initiated contact with other artists and gathered them around the idea of an artist-run collective. However, as the collective fell into disarray, he also vanished from the scene—at least his involvements with the scene significantly diminished to the point that not much up-to-date information about his later related work, if there are any, is available.

Saroseda provided an opportunity for professionals and enthusiasts from backgrounds in digital audio, visual arts, and creative coding to get together and organise collaborative events. Apart from the above-mentioned names, many more artists presented works as part of Saroseda series: Soheil Soheili's and Mahtab Alizadeh's audiovisual installation as part of 'Saroseda V.2' event in Mohsen Gallery, can be mentioned as an example. This enterprise that had the support of Mohsen Gallery, where the first Saroseda event was hosted towards the end of 2009, managed to convene a handful of workshops, talks, and performances including one in a province in north of Iran (Mazandaran) before getting dissolved. Ali Panahi (aka Ali Phi)—Tehran based multimedia artist—with whom I have spoken several times for the purposes of this research, was also among the people who had attended the Saroseda events. He later became involved with Saroseda's successor TADAEX as a curator– Sohrab Kashani and Arash Salehi were TADAEX's initial curators–and founded Nullsight[119]; a media art collective in Tehran.

4.5 TADAEX (2011-present)[120]

Several artists who were involved in Saroseda claim that due to lack of transparency, particularly regarding the way financial matters were handled 'behind the scenes', they started to reduce and eventually stop their contributions. The group fell into disarray as a result. Joined by new forces, the remainder of the collective followed

[119] nullsight.com/index.php
[120] tadaex.com

Rasoulof to a larger organisation called TADAEX, which went on to become the major festival for new media arts in Iran.

Thanks to the more tolerant policies of President Khatami's government (1997–2005) and launch of the Middle East's modern and contemporary art auctions Christies and Sotheby's in 2006 and 2007—with a focus on the arts of Turkey and Iran in the case of Sotheby's—Iranian visual art scene was reanimated despite the lack of governmental support. These occurrences—political and economic—together with other happenings in the Middle-East arts market, had empowered Iranian contemporary art markets both inside and outside the country. This situation, according to many Iranian artists, curators, art critics, and collectors, produced a bubble that started to deflate around 2009.[121] It was in this milieu that EEMSI and collectives such as Saroseda, and its successor TADAEX, emerged and branched out. From this perspective, I would argue that Rasoulof's initiation through Saroseda and TADAEX was partly a response to the new conditions of stagnation in the visual art scene, which secured Mohsen gallery's position as a new player with a distinct focus (digital arts) within the International Iranian art markets.

Compared to SET, TADAEX is a much larger and wealthier enterprise. Their annual events are held in the Mohsen gallery as well as in venues associated with the gallery or secured through the gallery's contacts—for instance the Tehran Independent Theatre that hosted several TADAEX 2017 events. The festival has collaborated with various Iranian and non-Iranian institutions in the capacity of artistic exchange programmes, artist residencies, and sponsorship. Among TADAEX past collaborators are University of Arts and Design Linz, Goethe-Institut, Austrian Cultural Forum in Tehran, Virginia Commonwealth University's School of the Arts in Qatar, and Border Movement.

---

[121] For a context, see the bellow following statements extracted from a report published in July 2008 on ABC News, which is accessible via the following link (last accessed Jun. 2019): abc.net.au/news/2008-07-09/iranian-art-market-enjoys-buying-frenzy/2498838

1- 'The prices have soared by a factor of 20 within two years [between 2006 and 2008]'
2- '"Despite the rise in prices there are more buyers than before. Many people want to make investments," said Shahnaz Kansari, who heads the Moon art gallery in Tehran.'
3- 'Amir Hossein Etemad, of the Negarkhaneh Etemad gallery in Tehran, had for instance warned in 2008 that 'I'm worried that this will prove to be nothing more than a speculative bubble that will explode.'

TADAEX 2017 presented about sixty artists from Germany, Austria, France, Italy, South Korea, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Poland, Qatar, and Iran, who presented forty-five works including installations, performances, and talks. Operating at such a scale and through a completely different structure, TADAEX's internal dynamics differ from those of SET. Although the festival attracts a much larger crowd and represents a wider variety of practices, it seems that it has not yet managed to create the kind of consistent 'image' or 'vibe' that SET has achieved. Having experienced first-hand all the editions of TADAEX and the majority of SET events until the time of our interview, one of my interlocutors who preferred to remain anonymous on this particular quote said to me:

> TADAEX is well-sponsored. They have no problem in that regard. It is not comparable in size to SET. No one knows, however, where the money comes from and why the likes of TADAEX and Pejman Foundation[122] in Tehran invest so much money in projects with no financial return. Despite their overt expenditure, they still have not managed to create a vibe that one would say is original to them after seven editions. They haven't been a great organiser either. Although what they do is in general great for the art scene, their unnecessarily high ambitions have meant compromise in consistency and even in quality. *Interviewed on 5 Oct. 2018 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Through the analysis of the interviews three general patterns emerged in relation to the comments made regarding experiences of TADAEX as a presenter and an audience member. From the audience perspective, the statements like the above quote are common. The issue seems to be largely related to how TADAEX events are curated. Audience commentators have mostly expressed that the large quantity and variety of represented material undermine the festival's consistency. Although this may indeed indicate a problem regarding curation, it could also point to the commentators' lack of experience with digital arts and the festivals of that size. As I have noted previously, TADAEX is the first and only festival operating at that level in Iran. From the presenters' perspective, however, two general patterns have emerged. The first concerns experiences of Iranian artists who are based inside the country. The second pattern appeared in relation to the comments made by those based outside the country—Iranian or non-Iranian. For Stefan Tiefengraber—sound and interactive installation artist and performer based in Linz—who presented in 2014 edition of the festival, performing in TADAEX was a good experience. He recalled:

> I was generally quite surprised how professionally the festival was organised, which is always a plus for a festival of that size. Although some issues were always resolved last

[122] pejman.foundation

> minute, everything always worked out at the end. I was also surprised about the number of people who showed up for my work and their high level of interest. The venue was full to its 100 persons capacity. *Interviewed on 25 Aug. 2017*

I must note that I, too, had a good experience in relation to presenting at TADAEX (2017 edition) despite the fact that I could not be physically present. The team seemed professional and the visual documentation I received showed that the directions I had provided for the proper installation of the piece were carefully followed. From the perspective of Iranian producers based in Iran, however, TADAEX has been experienced differently. The majority of my interlocutors in this group have criticised the festival for what they believe to be a biased attitude towards presenting and providing more facilities to non-Iranian artists. For instance, Vedad Famourzadeh—sound and multimedia artist and lecturer in Audio Technology at Islamic Azad University Central Tehran Branch—has told me:

> The higher quality and quantity of facilities and funding offered to foreign artists together with the festival's overall behaviour towards Iranian artists suggest that they are, for whatever reasons, particularly focused on representing foreign works. Their entertainment-oriented approach to new media art is also problematic in my opinion. *Interviewed on 27 Sep. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Although TADAEX and SET are the most 'visible' manifestations of the digital arts and experimental electronic music scene in the public domain in Iran, there are smaller initiatives that have also influenced the development of the scene's aesthetics and processes such as Noise Works[123], Noise À Noise[124], and ALIEN N' PROUD. The latter has started work recently (in June 2019) and claims to be an independent net-label focused on 'experimental audio'[125]. Noise À Noise has put out a compilation of electronic and noise pieces on January 2019 titled *Noise A Noise 19*[126], which included works by Sina Shoaei, Soheil Soheili, Parsa Hadavi, and Sohrab Motabar. It is available on Apple Music and Spotify.

The trajectories of Saroseda, TADAEX, and SET sketch out a path that begins with individuals' experimentations in bedrooms/home-studios, moves towards formation of new affinity networks, via the internet, and leads to the emergence of small collectives. Compilation releases, workshops, talks, installations, and

---

[123] sabalizadeh.com/media

[124] noiseanoise.ir

[125] aliennproud.com

[126] Access the album via the following link (last accessed 12 Apr.2019): open.spotify.com/album/5QW8u7it3zU70EzdEB09lD?si=0JdKj8JvT-6B4qQZ_2lqkA

performances, as well as collaborative projects with non-Iranian artists, exchange with the media, releases through non-Iranian record labels, and the establishment of two fully fledged international digital arts and experimental electronic music festivals, are the latest upshots of these overlapping trajectories. At the heart of the experimental electronic music developments in Iran, a crucial component is, however, evolving affinity networks and friendship circles that extend beyond Iranian national borders. These encompass a complex array of human-material-semiotic web of agencies that connect and evolve based on individuals' shared interests in music/sound, and in relation to similar uses of materials, symbols, and technologies. Focusing on SET, I will explore the relations that have emerged as a result of such networks as well as their meaning for experimental electronic music producers in Iran.

4.6 Affinity Networks: The Case Study of SET

What you describe as scene, to me involves a few circles of friendship with music as their fabric [...] In relation to my friends and now colleagues [in SET], 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 are prepared to give each other support, wherever they are [regardless of their geographical location].

From my interview with Shahin Entezami (aka Tegh) on 7 Apr. 2017

Considering the aesthetics and relations formed as a result of the scene's activities, EEMSI can be viewed as a trans-local phenomenon emerged in contact with digital technologies and the internet; relations that are embedded in, while help perpetuating, certain networks of cosmopolitan 'musical' affinity. The function of such networks is of course broader than that of providing opportunities for conversation, sharing, learning and collaboration. These equip the participants, in varying degrees, with new imaginaries regarding alternative modes of sociality that can be performed outside the reach and control of 'traditional' authorities, like the central government or nuclear family. As Tegh's opening comment and many more similar descriptions provided by my interlocutors in Iran suggest, the performances mentioned above have the potential to activate 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, and inaccessible

dreams; spaces, places, and ideas stained by an omnipresent shadow of 'control' and hazy futures.

These networks encourage producers in Iran to explore new methods for dissemination and commodification of their experiments, outside the territory upon which the state exercises control. The world-wide web has, as such, concurrently provided an ecology and a technology enabling EEMSI to diversify and expand but also to streamline and connect. Due to the state's rather obsessive tendency to monitor and regulate the social, while not tolerating serious critique, such a possibility is of remarkable significance. Precisely then, because of its tangled relationship and constant exchange with the ideological-political, also with the social and ecological in Iran, and their performed, individualised embodiments, EEMSI can be simultaneously viewed as a localised occurrence. It is, however, crucial to recognise that the scene's (musico-)logics and identities are not created merely in response to the local or global 'flows', and note that these are performatively taken shape across a range of fundamentally composite discourses and practices.

The networks under investigation in this section are interlinked based on what it seems to be an *intuitive* affinity among their constituents, which is discovered through connection made via the internet. The scale, reach, and distribution of these networks demarcate an ecology that, as such, inevitably extends beyond the mere contacts established by SET members. Porya Hatami's[127] collaborations with several non-Iranian artists and producers from different parts of the world—for instance with the Northern Irish ambient producer Darren McClure[128] and the German electronica/synth producer Uwe Zahn (aka Arovane)[129]—is an example. Hatami's case is, however, a significant example due to the exposure that his work has gained in the past ten years, and an interesting one due to the fact that he is based in Sanandaj: a city of mostly Kurdish population near the border with Iraq about 330 miles west of Tehran. He has never released work inside the country nor has he collaborated with any Iranian artist to my knowledge. His interviews, which are completely or mostly given to non-Iranian media, however, can illustrate how the networks being

[127] Hatami is a field recordist and sound artist based in Sanandaj, Iran. View his work via the following link (last accessed 1 Aug. 2017): poryahatami.com

[128] For instance *In-between Spaces*, which was released through Txt Recordings in Nov. 2015. Access the album via the following link (last accessed 2 Jun. 2019): noise.poryahatami.com/album/in-between-spaces

[129] For instance *rEsonance*, which was released through ÉTER in Sep. 2015. Access the album via the following link (last accessed 2 Jun. 2019): noise.poryahatami.com/album/resonance

explored in this section—that operate on the basis of an intuitive understanding and affinity among their members—have been made possible through the spread of faster and cheaper internet connections between producers in different parts of the world. Porya's response (below) to the Cyclic Defrost's interviewer who asked him about how he first met with Arovane and what was the best part of working with him, can be viewed a concrete example of cosmopolitan musical affinity networks in action. Here is Porya's response:

> Actually, we've never met in person. We started chatting online and we began swapping sounds and ideas soon after. We realized that we are very comfortable working together as a team. I think it was a week after our first correspondence that we completed our first track which became *rEsonance*, the fourth track of our first album. […] The best thing is our respective understanding. The communication happens with minimal explanation. There are times when one of us sends the other a sketch or a sound-file and without any discussion we start working on it. It is as if we already agree on what we want to do and what direction it will end up. [130]

SET has managed to establish itself as the public 'face' of EEMSI. This artist-run collective owes its aesthetical consistency (or 'image') to a close relationship among its members; a friendship vested in a shared 'taste' in music/sound and similar life styles. As a 'well-connected' middle class community of artists based in Tehran, SET members socialise among similar circles and have similar ways of interacting with each other, which is apparent for instance in their (offline and online) vernacular and particular uses of the internet. These also manifest in their political leanings and a resistance towards anything 'mainstream'.

SET members handle all aspects of their events—from curatorial to administrative and technical—collectively and among themselves. SET can be, therefore, described as a horizontal organisation in which members work together on a more or less level field and share responsibility in relation to their collective work. Siavash Amini's has described the latter as SET's 'biggest achievement'. He said to me:

> I believe that SET's biggest achievement is not its music; it is an experience of building a self-sufficient community. The fact that building such a community was ever possible at all in Iran was a revelation to us, and perhaps to others. Everyone before us had complained that the government was not supportive, there was no this and there was no that. But we made it happen and that's because we did everything ourselves. Each one of us took part in something that could be done and now we have an established festival, an overall growing community, and a reputation both inside and outside the country. It all comes down to the fact that we loved what we did, or we did what we

[130] Access the full interview via the following link (last accessed 11 Jul. 2019): cyclicdefrost.com/2018/05/arovane-porya-hatami-new-sound-experiences-interview-by-paranoid/

> loved, and because we connected to the people out there—inside and outside the country—who were like us and were doing interesting things. *Siavash Amini (interviewed on 17 May 2017 – translated from Persian by myself)*

Considering SET's status within EEMSI, it is possible to argue that the particular relations and modes of doing that emerged as a result of SET activities, have to a great extent shaped the aesthetics of the wider scene. Sara Bigdeli Shamloo (aka SarrSew)—electronic producer, singer, and half of the duo 9T Antiope explained this as follows:

> Well, these [members of SET] were the first people who started this new vibe of electronic music in Iran. They mainly did idm and ambient stuff in their own ways. So, the scene became predominantly idm and ambient in a unique way. But this has changed a lot. The scene seems much more diverse now. *Interviewed on 4 Oct. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Malthe Folke Ivarsson—Danish photographer based in Copenhagen—has travelled to Tehran almost every year since 2013 and has a close connection with SET members. His description of the 'unique' affinity between SET members, the 'sonic' palette of the work produced by the collective and its relationship to the state's politics is provided below:

> I know how intimate SET artists are with each other. They influence each other a lot. That's one thing. But also, as I understand it, getting permission for music with such features is easier than for instance for house and techno in Iran. So, there is a practical element to why ambient/drone scene has thrived in Iran so well. In this sense, I think, ambient is a sort of anti-aesthetics if you like. In ambient music, you can say so much by saying so little—you know well that SET artists are all very politically aware. *Interviewed on 22 Jun. 2017*

With regards to why ambient music has thrived in Iran and as a result of SET's activity, Malthe's comment (above) is informative. SET's aesthetics have been partly shaped in negotiation with the members' musical/sonic preferences, the country's ideological-political and legal structures, cosmopolitan musical affinities and net-based relationships, and the online media coverage. Ambient music constituted the first wave of the emergent experimental electronic practices in Iran, which was also relatively well-received by the media, initially outside Iran. The fact that such aesthetics did find a way in public venues and acquired a certain exposure that proved politically unproblematic, and that it received international attention reinforced the production of ambient music in Iran and encouraged more producers to do similar stuff. Ambient aesthetics, therefore, seem to have played a central role in the formation of affinity networks, initially established in cyberspace, between producers in Iran, their

peers in other parts of the world, and the media's understanding of such aesthetics and its possible meanings in the particular social-political-economic circumstances of the country.

Drawing from Malthe's comment (previous page), I would note that ambient as an 'anti-aesthetic' seems to suggest a connection with the broader historical development of artistic, literary, and musical aesthetics in Iran as well. Works of art—including craft[131]—and music with 'abstract', metaphorical, or 'coded' features have for a long time been part of Iranian culture. A brief historical account of such characteristics was provided in 2.1. I will, however, defer a more extensive discussion to the next chapter, where I specifically focus on EEMSI's 'live' aesthetics. From a different perspective, the scene's (anti-)aesthetics can be viewed as a move against the 'mainstream' tide (and, as such, away from political tension), which is understood by my interlocutors as 'a homogenising space of [supercultural and transcultural] trending and shallow consumerism.' (Vedad Famourzadeh interviewed on 27 Sep. 2017 – translated from Persian by myself) The latter perspective will be explored in more depth in the next section (4.8).

SET's 'image' seems to have emerged from a mixture of sonic/musical aesthetics, live performance strategies, enthusiastic and supportive teamwork, and a certain cosmopolitan ethos. As such, SET's activities seem to have convinced even those among my interlocutors who do not otherwise envisage EEMSI as an interconnected network of a scene, to have no difficulty in viewing this artist collective as having formed its own miniature scene in Tehran. As part of this image one can also notice a politically-cautious attitude. For instance, SET artists are careful about how their collective work is represented (online or offline). Siavash Amini's response[132] to an article by Tony Mitchel[133]—honorary research associate in cultural studies and popular music at the University of Technology Sydney—on Cyclic Defrost[134] e-magazine

[131] See for instance Parviz Tanavoli's *Talisman* (2006) and *A History of Sculpture in Iran Islamic Period* (2013), in which the author explores how craft—for instance lock making—became a locus for artistic expression in Iran; because making sculptures as such was increasingly viewed as a form of idolatry, as the Islamic laws became hegemonic.
[132] Siavash's response was published on 24 March. It is accessible via the following link (last accessed 11 Oct. 2018): flamingpines.com/cyclic-response.html
[133] Mitchel's article was published on 21 March 2016. It is accessible via the following link (last accessed 11 Oct. 2018): cyclicdefrost.com/2016/03/absense-a-survey-of-music-from-iran-by-tony-mitchell/
[134] cyclicdefrost.com/whowhat/

is an example of SET's reaction to 'misrepresentation'; the collective's mistrust of stereotyping and ready-made analysis in relation to their activity.

In what follows I will provide an account of Amini-Mitchel exchange in order to explore one of the important functions of affinity circles within EEMSI; that of affording individuals a sense of empathy, belonging, and responsibility—material that the Iranian nation-state perhaps could not offer them. In parallel, this account provides an opportunity for an investigation of some of the most recurring concerns of my interlocutors; namely their stance against mainstream culture as well as their problem with stereotypical representations offered in the media which, as some have said to me, treat their works as interesting exotic products or material unworthy of attention. It is precisely because of this common perception among my interlocutors that in earlier stages of my own practice during the course of this research, I have also consciously avoided stereotypical sonic references to Iranian culture and society. I did so partly in order to 'fit in', but also for investigative reasons and creative purposes. I will discuss this in more details in Chapter 6.

Absence is a compilation of electronic works mostly from SET members. It was released on February 2016 through Flaming Pines; a net-label founded by the London-based Australian sound artist and researcher Kate Carr. Mitchel had criticised *Absence*, noting that the album was 'unjustified' for 'avoiding political statements altogether' and failing to offer any 'Iranian characteristics […] apart from the Persian classical elements used by Pour-Amin and Siavash Amini [...]'. 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 music in comparison. His rather uninformed choice of Ghobai's film as a reference, his ideological basis for evaluating an ambient music album, his understanding of 'Iranian characteristics', and his choice of language provoked a response, which was provided by Siavash on behalf of SET and was published on Cyclic Defrost three days later—same platform that had published Mitchel's article.

There was, however, something in the article that was left, deliberately or not, unnoticed in Siavash's response. Offering a short review of Siavash's piece, Mitchel had noted that '[h]is 2015 "instrumental ambient drone" album *Subsiding* [..]

combines "controlled noise" with modern classical composition including violin and viola, as well as strings and clarinet'. He used the phrase 'controlled noise' and lets it hang without any further elaboration. I will come back to this phrase in 5.2 to explore how EEMSI's aesthetics are formed concurrently as an emancipatory performance in order to break free from limiting social-political-economic boundaries in Iran and their embodiment.

Before moving on to Siavash's response, I shall note that Bahman Ghobadi's film has been repeatedly mentioned by my interlocutors, during the interviews and in other occasions, as an example of poor representation of the complex issues facing musicians in Iran. Several of my interlocutors have pointed out that they had to reject offers from film makers, photographers, and journalists eager to document their practice, due to the serious flaws in Ghobadi's film and its wide reception outside Iran. They believe that the film utilised the music scene to further feed a stereotypical and fashionable conception of Iranian society that would have appealed to foreign film festivals.

In his response to Mitchel's article, Siavash questioned the author's understanding of what he had termed 'Iranian characteristics'. He wrote:

> Why does he feel he can tell us that our music has no Iranian characteristics? The reader [of Mitchel's article] never finds anything to define what those characteristics even are […] Most of us saw a computer or an Atari before a Tar [an Iranian long-necked string instrument]. […] I want to stress […] that resistance has multiple forms, and does not always take the forms favoured by privileged western academics and journalists who rarely stop to think for a second about what it might be like to not be living in the [W]est.

The latter part of Amini-Mitchel exchange, particularly, recalls Timothy Taylor's argument in his classic chapter on *Strategic Inauthenticity* (1997), about what he observed to be a conception of authenticity—constructed and perpetuated trough capitalist consumer culture in the 'West'—which considers 'musicians as sellouts if their music seems to be too much like North American and UK […] music: their betrayal is of music and place.' (23) He continues: 'North American and British musicians can make whatever music they want and only be viewed as sellouts if they try to make money; any other musician is constrained by the western discourse of authenticity to make music that seems to resemble the indigenous music of their place […]' Although Taylor's descriptions are specifically constructed in relation to what his text understands as pop music and world music, they are applicable, I would argue, to any

style of musicking. The fact that the focus of Mitchel's criticism is political, does not make a significant difference either. What is evident is his un-nuanced, if not dogmatic, pre-conception of what exactly political or politically-'justified' is and how exactly Iranian characteristics, whatever those may be, should sound as a result.

Almost a year later, along the similar lines of his response to Tony Mitchel's critique, Siavash said the following during a panel discussion at CTM Festival 2017 in Berlin:[135]

> It's an accepted notion in the Western media, that Iranians are either run-away rock stars or oppressed rap singers. Iranian artists have been hurt by simplification and misrepresentation in Western documentaries, news, and journalism. The truth about Iranian artists is far less newsworthy.

My interlocutors' reaction to 'misrepresentation' and generalising statements reminds us that 'artists and musicians negotiate individuality in complex ways' (Slobin 1993, xv) Slobin writes: 'The process often involves an unpredictable knotting of aesthetics, professionalism, and multiple allegiances.' The emergent, digitally-enabled modalities of practice and sociality 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-biological forces, but also generate new relations, aesthetics, and agencies that distort, reconfigure, and transform those in different ways within a feedback system.

In both Siavash's comments (page 104 and 105), and many other similar remarks made by my interlocutors during the interviews, two common (mis)conceptions are challenged. In the first comment, Siavash questions the *very* common and rather bluntly 'orientalist' expectation that an Iranian cultural product must reflect certain stereotypical 'Iranian features'—the way these are appreciated in the 'West'—and only (or mainly) as such is comprehensible and/or 'authentic'. I have also experienced such very common expectations in relation to my own practice, surprisingly within fairly open-minded circles inside academia. In the second comment, Siavash focuses our attention on what he thinks should be the primary subject of any discussion about his work and that of his fellow Iranian producers, namely the work 'itself', its individuality, and not the 'newsworthy' socio-political 'peripheries'. But of

[135] Full discussion is accessible via the following link (last accessed 6 Dec. 2018): soundcloud.com/ctm-festival/ctm-2017-contemporary-sound-in-iran

course avoiding such peripheries is difficult, especially in the mainstream media, precisely because of their newsworthiness and commercial value.

It is as part of a quest for (re-)inventing an identity that 'makes sense' through experimental musicking and/or art-making—an uncompromised (or less-compromised) individuality shaped in contact with creative practice—that the affinity networks within which EEMSI is embedded can provide us with insight into the scene's functions both from the producers' and audiences' perspective. Thanks to the ecosystem afforded by the internet and digital media, new ways of being and doing are explored in the context of alliances formed on the basis of exchange among 'like-minded' individuals. Producing affective affinities across cultures and nations, the digitally-enabled modes of sociality take shape as a result of individuals' concern with taking part in and/or composing ecologies (and soundscapes) that are inhabited only by those who share similar professional and/or emotional preferences; those who experience relatable struggles, (in-)efficiencies, (in-)capabilities, and fantasies. In a society like Iran, in which the establishment's authoritarian performances alienate those who are not in tune with its ideals, such alliances are significant also because of their functioning as mechanisms that restore agency, autonomy, confidence, and a sense of belonging.

To summarise, from the perspective of this section, EEMSI consists of a network of individual and collective practices, materials, semiotics, and imaginaries connected inside and outside Iran, thanks to shared aesthetic preferences (in the broadest sense of the term) rooted in cosmopolitan affinities taken shape and developed through net-based relationship, exploration, and 'self'-identification. Such a *sharedness* serves several functions for the experimental electronic producers in Iran. It affords a context in which an alternative reality, as distinct from the one experienced through daily life inside the country, can be experienced. As the 'space' that emerges through connection, sharing, and self-identification—or otherwise through aesthetic affinity—via the internet is 'sufficiently' decentralised, it affords opportunities for an exploration and performance of new understandings of identity. This space also enables the producers to disseminate and commodify the product of their experimentation outside the reach of the state's control and social dogmas. Affinity networks, therefore, offer an alternative space for certain forms of economic and social activity. Another function of these circles can be understood in terms of their capacity to produce a sense of community among their members. The latter function

is significant also because it serves to restore a sense of belonging that is lost as a result of the establishment's narrow-sighted, ideological approach to governance, which has alienated a large population in Iran. Lastly, the digitally-enabled affinity networks allow a context for the emergence of self-sufficient artist collectives inside the country that are equipped by 'outside' sources of information, knowledge, and expertise.

A pragmatic and technologically savvy disposition, characteristic of producers involved in EEMSI—an aspect of the experimental electronic networks that separates them from other music scenes in Iran—is partly a result of experimentation, connectedness, professionalism, and experience—meaning producing work in contact with and as part of an extensive and adaptable transnational network of material affinities—doings, imaginaries, technologies, institutions, and aesthetics. Connectedness has, therefore, afforded digital art and experimental electronic music producers in Iran more opportunities for converting their practice into capital (financial or social), beyond the state's realm of influence. Collective practice has been one of the scene's most significant modus operandi in relation to managing the technical difficulties and coping with the particular political, economic, and educational inadequacies in Iran.

Equipped with alternative means to re-negotiate a sense of autonomy, individuality, and social belonging, experimental electronic producers in Iran re-discover, while reconfiguring, social relations inside the country in their niche of activity through their online and offline performances. Grounded in and enabled through a digital ecology—the world(s) of the internet, computers, digital media and interfaces—experimental electronic music producers in Iran have introduced new relations and forms of contact that destabilise the previously-established norms and aesthetics in their corner of the society, preparing the 'air' for the emergence of new modes of practice and sociality that afford fresh experiences of identity and belonging. EEMSI's conditions of situatedness can be analysed from this perspective; the one within which Shahin Entezami's comment—at the beginning of this section (page 98)—makes anthropological sense. The networks of practice under scrutiny in this research consist of individuals who relate to such descriptions while rejecting categories portraying them merely in relation to the state's politics either as dissidents who defy the system in every action or as irresponsible conformists (re)producing work that is 'unjustified'.

4.7 Implicit Union Against the 'Mainstream'

We [artists featured in Absence] are the voices who choose to be absent from the news and the musical mainstream (and in some cases from the city of our birth) in order to express the complex range of emotions and ideas which make up our lives, as honestly as we can.

Siavash amini – Introductory essay to Absence[136]

While some of my interlocutors reject categorisation of their practice under the rubric of 'scene', regardless of how it is defined, the majority do accept it or do not take any serious issue with it. Among the former group, the rejection often manifests in the form of resistance vis-à-vis any attempt towards suggesting a connection between one's own practice and that of the others. Among the latter group, the scene is often defined in genre-related terms and negatively—in terms of what it does not constitute–but largely in relation to the pervasiveness of the internet. Ambient, noise, drone, glitch, and idm are the terms commonly used. Both groups, however, converge in their irritation towards 'mainstream'.

The conception of 'mainstream' among my interlocutors is a complex one. Although there seems to be an agreement regarding what is often described as the 'mainstream' culture's aesthetic flaws and underdevelopments, it is usually hard to pinpoint precisely what is at stake. The issue seems to be broadly, and rather loosely, related to everyone's (or each group's) unique perspective on the hegemonic and what constitutes 'bad taste'. Mark Slobin has identified 'mainstream' in relation to the 'superculture' and hegemony, in his *Subcultural Sounds* (1993). In Slobin's work hegemony cannot be understood through a 'high-theoretical' approach. Instead, he suggests that an intuitive or 'commonsense approach' would help best 'in trying to see whether and how hegemony is embodied in the daily musical life of particular populations.' (1992, 14)

Among my interlocutors 'Mainstream' appears to be largely understood as any practice presented through the mass media or attracting significant publicity. It relates to a variety of popular cultural artefacts such as attitudes, life-style choices, 'tastes', terminologies, and so on. It encompasses but is not limited to the material represented through Iranian media, inside and outside the country, and through the

[136] Extracted from Flaming Pine's Bandcamp via the following link (last accessed 17 Jun. 2017): flamingpines.bandcamp.com/album/absence

celebrity networks of the online social media. Even within the smaller, countercultural niches of the music/art scene, the 'currents' identified as more 'mainstream' are often loathed. But of course, if 'mainstream' was a solid and undesirable category, then, through self-critique and active comparison, no dogmatically 'anti-mainstream' practice should ever become 'mainstream' or hegemonic. A review of the literature in counterculture studies, however, shows that marginal, 'underground', or countercultural practices can become, and in many cases actively seek to become, hegemonic—defining forces in particular niches— and therefore mainstream. This desire has been often expressed indirectly by my interlocutors, for instance in statements that testify to a necessity for 'changing the mainstream culture' or 'elevating society's taste'.

Within a study of the post-Soviet Czech society, Michaela H. Pyšňáková's description of 'mainstream' seems to closely resonate with that of my interlocutors' in Iran. In *Understanding the Meaning of Consumption of Everyday Lives of 'Mainstream' Youth in the Czech Republic* (2013), the author points out that the term is sometimes used in a pejorative sense by subcultures 'who view ostensibly mainstream culture as not only exclusive but also aesthetically inferior.' (64) To understand why 'mainstream' might be experienced in a 'local' level by my interlocutors perhaps paradoxically as exclusive, as opposed to too inclusive, one should look into how power hierarchies within Iranian society function. Broadly, the closer one positions oneself to the state, one is more secure politically and financially. Respectively, the more one is critical of the state's behaviour, its forceful cultural policies, and political-economic incompetence, the less safe and less financially secure one would be. The state's extent and reach of control is vast. There is almost no serious economic activity possible without a connection, established based on an ideological affinity or strategic agenda, with the state. The state regulates and actively interferes in all aspects of social, political, and economic life in Iran. That is why the 'mainstream', including expressions of celebrity culture unfolding under the state's watch, is found by my interlocutors as mostly devoid of critical and alternative voices and is seen as unoriginal, compromised, and distasteful—both politically and in terms of creativity.

As explored in 2.6, the matter should be partly analysed in relation to the post-revolutionary state's aesthetic revolution and its tight grip on free individual and group expression; a process that has severely undermined and damaged, in different

ways, different people's the sense of autonomy and agency within society particularly of those at odds with its politics. The emergence of EEMSI from bedrooms equipped with computers loaded with software and connected to the internet, too, can give us a significant hint about why individuality might be a central concern for the producers in an environment in which any collective activity that is competently performed, if not performed to the clear benefit of the system, may be considered as suspicious and, as such, censored and bullied. The anti-mainstream positions within EEMSI can be, therefore, simultaneously understood as quite rebellions against a compromised sociality. My interlocutors do also argue, however, that their frustration with mainstream is not limited to Iranian society or state. 'Everywhere the mainstream means serious compromise on one's individuality and difference in favour of formulas that allow individuals feel included within the social process' says Javad Safari. 'This image has to be happy', he continues, 'uplifting, almost robotic and sufficiently predictable in its expressions; this is the death of nuance in culture in my opinion.' He further notes:

> The mechanisms that create celebrity figures are literally anti-cultural in their homogenising force. In Iran, of course, because of the fact that these people, on top of their universal fakeness, have to be politically gentle and compromising too, makes any decent person cringe.

Operating as active nodes within sufficiently de-centralised transnational networks of musical affinity, experimental electronic music producers in Iran (re-)negotiate individuality and autonomy in relation to idealised visions of identity performed through sound-based practice. As such, they playfully resist dissolution into homogenising flows—of products, concepts, practices, symbols, and aesthetics—that compromise on their individuality by positioning them in relation to typical visions of politics, culture, ideology, or (sub)cultures. EEMSI's rejection of mainstream culture—both in local and transnational levels—can be understood, therefore, as a reaction against its stereotyping machine that undermines individual creativity in favour of consumer group identities or trends.

To investigate the relation of countercultural behaviour to hegemonic structures in a global scale one could look into Jon Naustdalslid's socio-economic perspective on centre-periphery systems. Naustdalslid's *A Multi-Level Approach to the Study of Center-Periphery Systems and Socio-Economic* (1977, 203–222) examines Johan

Galtung's 'centre-periphery' model as laid out in his *Imperialism* (1971, 81–117). Naustdalslid asserts that a mere reference to 'center-periphery models, based on theories of dependence, dominance, and imperialism, [only with regards to] international systems' is not sufficient (1977, 203). Instead, he suggests that such models should also recognise the socio-economic organisation of centre and periphery societies as well as 'the historical dynamic character of center-periphery relationships.' He concludes: 'Only if the socio-economic organization of the centers can be made non-exploitative, can we have any hope to abolish center-periphery relationships.' (219)

Naustdalslid's observation reminds us of the significance of the distribution of power across socio-economic hierarchies from the perspective of centre-periphery relations. As previously noted, such a distribution is heavily weighted towards positions closer to ideological-political power in Iran. This situation moulds individuals with two different, often sharply contradictory, characters each of which serves a different social function. The one that is ideologically-politically compromising and conformist—often the one that makes money—is performed in situations in which one needs to interact with people whose profession or manners (ways of talking, fashion, choice of words, appearance, and so on) reveals an affinity with the state and its expectations.[137] The other one that is critical and pleasure-seeking—often the one that spends money—reveals in more private and friendly occasions. Often the closer one is to the power in Iran, the more expressively this polar difference manifests. My interlocutors are heavily critical of this culture that plays out most clearly through manifestations of the 'mainstream' in the media; a space influenced by celebrities who can hardly remain in public attention without expressions that are, although to varying degrees, but nevertheless, politically compromised.

In the next part, I will explore how competition within EEMSI can be explained in terms of the asymmetrical distribution of resources within the broader art/music scene in Iran, and in relation to continuous flows of new imaginaries that seek to break from the previously established norms and power hierarchies.

[137] for instance children often learn from an early age that there are certain things they cannot talk about at school, things that may reveal the family's views vis-à-vis the official narratives.

4.8 Competition

Competition takes place on two generic grounds. One that involves an ongoing struggle to gain access to limited resources reflects, drawing on Max Weber's theory of social stratification (1947), an interplay among three forces: financial support, prestige, and power. In our case, the latter could mean authority within art and music scene(s) in Iran. The other, which develops in folds and knots with the latter but does not produce such wearing effects, unfolds as a play among discourses that seek to articulate the 'true', 'authentic', 'tasteful', and individual 'voice' within the experimental electronic music scene as a network of interconnected, yet intermittent, cosmopolitan blocks.

At the intersection of new approaches to thinking and doing music/sound, political-economic reconfigurations, and the emergent structures of hierarchy within the broader art scene in Iran, networks of electronic music practice compete for recognition and authority. From this perspective, EEMSI can be viewed as a negotiated space co-constituted by the increasingly polarised, networked, segregated, and territorialised sets of aesthetics, practices, and social relations. Sina Shoaei—multimedia artist based in Tehran—has commented on this aspect of experimental electronic music scene's developments in Iran with a critical undertone:

> The digital arts and experimental electronic music scene that you study is made colonies in my opinion. Within each of these, relationships are tight and productive. Between them, however, there is not much constructive interaction. Rather, there is tension and unhelpful competition. Each colony tries to mark a territory and become the main voice. This territorial behaviour, as I see it, impedes the flow of knowledge and blunts people's sense of self-critique, which is a necessary component in developing a creative practice. This has resulted in an increasing inability with respect to producing attractive, creative, and productive environments for everyone to get involved. *Sina Shoaei multimedia artist (interviewed on 29 Aug. 2017 – translated from Persian by myself)*

Several of my interlocutors have criticized SET's and TADAEX's approach in prioritising only a narrow range of experimental music/sound and digital arts forms. These individuals believe that SET and TADAEX, as the two major platforms that represent experimental electronic music/sound and digital arts, undermine the variety and diversity of the work produced in Iran. Vedad Famourzadeh—multimedia artist based in Tehran—has observed:

> The competition for financial resources, prestige, and fame in digital arts circles is quite fierce, and not in a constructive sense. People have made small islands of their own,

> each sort of trying to monopolize the space created as a result of digital art and electronic music practices in Iran. *Interviewed on 27 Sep. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

The two previous comments represent the opinion of the majority of those independent artists who have not been directly involved with nor have benefited from the activities of the resourceful collectives/organisations like SET, TADAEX, and TCM. Viewed from this 'outsider' position, EEMSI is a partitioned landscape made of 'colonies' and 'islands' each minding their own business, while failing to produce 'constructive interactions' between them that would benefit more artists and producers inside the country. Competition on limited resources, from this standpoint, encouraged 'territorial' behaviour. In tacit response to this critique, Ata Ebtekar who is a cofounder of SET and was one of its members at the time of the interview told me that:

> Of course, a festival, venue, or record label is entitled to have its own priorities and taste. Platforms like SET are run by a bunch of people who are prepared to put their force behind creating a specific niche that corresponds to their own preferences. This is neither unique to us [SET] nor to Iran. I don't buy it that we must represent all kinds of electronic music produced in Iran. This is not to say that there aren't good quality works out there, but that we have our own priorities and limits. *Interviewed on 7 Apr. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Competition within EEMSI can be firstly understood in relation to the significant scarcity of financial, curricular, and information resources (particularly those written in or translated into Persian). Also, the peculiar social, ideological-political, and economic situation in Iran has left the domain of artistic and musical activity devoid of an inclusive and functional system with diverse and clearly defined positions, roles, institutions, and funding bodies. Hamed Rashtian—artist and sculptor based in Tehran at the time of our interview, and in Vancouver more recently—has said to me:

> Artists spend a lot of time, energy, and money in order to find viable ways of sustaining their practice in Iran, because there are no proper market structures in place. Roles are not defined, hierarchies are temporary, funding resources are scarce, sponsors are moody, and so on. Everyone here has to navigate experimentally and find a very personal trajectory, then stick to it and ultimately keep on being discrete about it. This is the source of a lot of destructive competitive behaviour in the art scene here. The lack of such structures is felt even more strongly within the digital arts and electronic music scene, because products of this scene do not turn to capital as easily as other visual art materials without funding bodies and governmental support. If suddenly a gallery, an individual, or a festival decides to support these types of activities in such an environment, expectations would be so high. Visual artists have at least the chance to find their own private buyers, inside or outside the country, by selling in exhibitions, auctions, and so on. *Interviewed on 18 Oct. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Secondly, competition within EEMSI can also be conceptualised in terms of a friction between cosmopolitan imaginaries; visions of possible desired worlds. Reconfiguring the boundaries and distribution of discourse and practice across arts and music scene in Iran in favour of particular understandings of 'originality', these forms compete within a locally-negotiated network of transnational aesthetic affinities. Each tries to articulate its own as the authentic or the 'true' alternative art/music/sound. Alan P. Merriam and Raymond W. Mack's study of social groups in jazz (1960, 211–222) and their observations in relation to a shared feeling of social isolation among jazz musicians relate to EEMSI's context. These also resonate with the claims made in 4.8 regarding producers' frustration with the 'mainstream'. Merriam and Mack (1960, 217) noted that:

> The musician's conception of his own music, plus his inability to express this conception except to those who already understand, as well as his view that the commercial necessities of life are forced upon him by a society which does not realize he is a creative artist, all combine to contribute toward his view of the outside world as essentially hostile and to reinforce his sense of belonging to an isolated segment of society.

Sponsorship for digital arts and electronic music events or products is mainly secured through advertisement. A few galleries like Mohsen (the founder of TADAEX) and on a smaller scale Etemad and Tarrahan Azad in Tehran, and Q-Project in Shiraz (an initiative by AAB gallery and café), have also hosted events and provided some support for the emergent forms of practice subject to scrutiny here. SET and TADAEX have, however, managed to also secure foreign funding. For instance, both have been sponsored for some their events by the non-profit German cultural association Goethe-Institut in Tehran. Apart from SET and TADAEX, most of the EEMSI events are, however, funded by the artists/producers themselves or through support from families, friends, and individual sponsors.

For the reasons explained above, EEMSI has been financially dependent for the most part on advertisement and individual sponsors, also on galleries, cafés, and theatres, which have been hosting experimental electronic events in Iran. Association with galleries has to an extent integrated EEMSI within the broader visual art scene. For instance, thanks to association with the wealthy and well-connected Mohsen Gallery in Tehran, TADAEX has become the major hub for presenting digital arts and experimental electronic music in the country. Hamed Rashtian, sculptor, notes:

> Galleries in Iran are primarily commercial units. Because there were no known sources of funding for digital arts in Iran, no one [no galleries] around 2009 knew how to react

> to this new phenomenon […] The early instances of these events [referring to sound installations] in galleries of Tehran, were organised in such a way not to disrupt the commercial flow of exhibitions. So, these would often take place on a Thursday evening between two exhibitions, for example. *Interviewed on 18 Oct. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

He continues:

> Of course, there were newcomers such as Mohsen Gallery [founded in 2009], who wanted to establish themselves in the art scene by presenting a new progressive image. It was ultimately the ambition of people like Rasoulof that offered a possibility for that kind of sound art and music to thrive in galleries.

Framed as art and not as music, the earliest EEMSI events—installations, performances, talks, and workshops—were represented in galleries. Association with the visual arts scene was a determining factor in the negotiation of the emergent digital arts and experimental electronic music forms with the political establishment. Comparing to the music scene, the visual arts scene and the market associated with it in Iran has a longer history, a more established and less disrupted tradition, and a less problematic relationship with the state. Presented as explorations in art and science, instead of music gigs, the emergent forms had a better chance to survive official and parallel modes of filtering as described in 2.4 and 4.2 by Ali-Asghar Ramezanpour. Presenting in galleries also removed the burden of applying individually for Permits as an artist or producer.

In a situation of economic insecurity, political instability, scarcity of curricular support, scarcity of informational resources in Persian, and lack of established market structure in which roles are defined, a very limited number of well-connected and wealthy collectives do control and shape the majority of the scene's output. From this perspective, EEMSI appears to be composed of multiple collectives, each of which has established with a small scene of their own and, depending on their financial and social capital, each entertains and controls a particular niche. Outside these 'colonies'—as Sina Shoaei called them (page 112)—or 'islands'—as Vedad Famourzadeh termed them (page 112–113)—producers have a risky, long, and hard path to recognition and professional autonomy. Such a context, as Hamed Rashtian put it earlier (page 113), has created a psychologically-consuming environment for artists and producers in which significant time and energy is spent towards unproductive relations. On the other hand, competing narratives within a locally-rooted frame of cosmopolitan affinity network evaluate each other in terms of 'authenticity' and

'true' (anti-)mainstream behaviour. In the very act of doing so, they offer a space for 'alternative' modes of practice and thinking, while triangulating towards forms of representation that are nuanced and more open to exchange with the world outside of the state's control. In the next chapter, I will investigate how aesthetics of electronic music performance in Iran, in the broadest sense, has afforded the emergent scene practical and pragmatic means for sidestepping the ideological-political and economic obstacles, which have been impeding the flow of creativity in Iranian arts/music for decades.

CHAPTER 5

AESTHETICS OF ELECTRONIC MUSIC PERFORMANCE IN IRAN

5.1 Reconfiguring Performance

Laptops, digital interfaces, and software have provided producers with new means for music production and sonic exploration which, as will become clearer in this section, helped free musical presentation in Iran from the forms previously known to and frowned upon by the establishment. Detached from the kinds of familiar-'problematic' music aesthetics known to the state officials, the emergent practices have created a buffer zone in which experimental electronic musicking have burgeoned. By engaging with digital means to compose/perform music, also through learning from the movements before them, experimental electronic producers in Iran have become better equipped, than their predecessors, in dealing with circumstances of political and economic insecurity.

As a result of the scene's ongoing negotiation with other forces within Iranian society and beyond, a specific array of aesthetics, in the broadest sense of the term, are developed. While satisfying the producers' creative, professional, and psychological requirements, such aesthetics have dissolved the ideological-political, and to some extent economic, difficulties attached to musical presentation in Iran. Hesam Ohadi (aka Idlefon)—electronic producer, computer coder, and co-founder of SET—told me:

> It is true that we are pragmatic and cautious. You need to be careful, however, how you talk about this. We haven't fabricated our image so that it appeals to the officials as some people have suggested. This image has been 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 to the system. Here is an example. We know for instance that BBC Persian is a red zone for the system [BBC is viewed by the state in Iran as a provocateur and a policy instrument for the British state], so we have turned down all their offers for interview. […] 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 via Skype (7 Apr. 2017)*

From the perspective of this research, this 'image' that Hesam has mentioned (comment above) involves a few components in the context of live performance as follows: sonic-visual aesthetics[138]; performance strategies; design of the performance ecosystem; 'management' of the performance environment. In relation to the emergence of this socially negotiated image, it is crucial to take note of the technology used by the producers in live situations in Iran and the way they are interacted with on the 'stage'. It is also important to consider the way gigs are discursively 'framed'—particularly earlier events—and the manner in which they are 'managed' by performers, organisers (often the same people), and venue personnel.

Reconfiguring the context and space of presentation, laptops and digital interfaces played a crucial role in the development of an aesthetics, which was able to enter into a fruitful exchange with various forces within society, including the Permit System. This role can be defined in terms of the capacity of the technology used in performances in de-politicising the *appearance* of musical presentation by reducing the conventional human-human interaction in live situations, among the members of ensembles, also between performers and audience. Within the ideologically and politically charged and contested zone of musical presentation in Iran, such a reconfiguration has enabled producers to initiate a constructive dialogue with the Permit System officials, for whom the presented sounds and images, despite their strange characters, did not raise serious red flags. Laptops and digital interfaces redefined, as such, the performance ecology *in appearance* as a network (Prior 2008) of human-machine correlations, hence making it easier for the producers to discursively (re-)frame their shows in their interaction with the forces of the state as *explorations* in 'arts' and 'science' as opposed to music gigs. The latter (re-)contextualisation allowed the officials convinced of the new material's safe distance from the conventional red zones, for instance certain pop music forms, to tolerate, rather comfortably, the strangeness of the presented material. In the following few paragraphs, I will provide three accounts, from Siavash Amini, Nesa Azadikhah, and Ata Ebtekar, to investigate how experimental electronic producers' approach towards presenting in venues across the country can be read as 'managing' the performance space.

[138] Refer to 4.3 for a discussion of EEMSI's sonic/musical aesthetics.

Siavash said to me:

> I perform in pitch dark, as dark as possible. I even set the brightness of my laptop screen to the minimum. Ata [Ata Ebtekar aka Sote] and many others have also performed in similar conditions. In my case, I want the audience to feel the music through their bodies and sense the slightest nuances in sound. In my performance loudness is crucial. In darkness, a loud sound puts the body out of its comfort zone and sensitises it to variations in the space, which is an interesting context for listening to ambient music. *Interviewed on 17 May 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

In contrast to Siavash's comment, which describes his live performance strategies purely in terms of musical and psychoacoustical purposes, there are others who believe that such approaches to electronic music performance in Iran are developed directly or indirectly in response to the limiting, yet ambiguous, regulations as well as to the different, often contradictory, reactions of the state's agents to music events.[139] Although a much more diverse array of musical practices is nowadays performed in public venues across the country, the deep-rooted paranoias regarding what may constitute a politically 'inappropriate' behaviour in a particular situation, are not yet fully vanished. Solo female voice[140], dancing (or 'dramatic' movements), performing or listening to 'party music', and exciting or 'provoking' the crowds are still either illegal or potentially risky activities. The precise boundaries of 'inappropriateness' in these circumstances, however, is still largely unclear. Nesa Azadikhah told me:

> I have performed in several venues in Tehran. We are often warned in advance, by the venue, about the possibility of cancellation if the music is too groovy or the audience behave inappropriately. So, we are somehow required to handle the audience ourselves. That's what I usually do anyway because I don't want trouble for anyone. But, at the end of the day, I have also more-or-less managed to play what I wanted. *Interviewed on 2 Aug. 2018 (translated from Persian by myself)*

I asked Nesa to elaborate on what she thought it was meant by 'inappropriate' behaviour by venue personnel. 'Well, you know what I mean', she responds. I asked her to elaborate further. She said: 'I don't know, moving too much probably.' Then I reminded her of a show in which the DJ was playing dance music in the backyard of a gallery and the audience was on their feet and clearly, but very lightly, dancing. I had seen this on the public page of one of the performers on Instagram.[141] She paused, then replied:

[139] See Ramezanpour's comment in 2.4 (page 41–42) for a context regarding mechanisms of the state's intervention.

[140] Apart from the solo voice, other conventional forms of female musical performance are generally not problematic (well, at least in theory).

[141] To protect the participants' identities I must avoid providing a reference here.

> Well, yes! But, in general, dancing in public is still risky especially to music, worse if it is to live music. But, perhaps if the audience don't move too much […] while facing forward [not each other] it is probably less problematic. [And we synchronously burst to laugh, loud…]

Nesa's description reaffirms the lack of clarity in the laws and the state's over-complicated mechanisms of controlling the nation's expressive behaviours. For a performer overcoming such complications still largely depends, it seems, on learning from her/his own trial and errors and perhaps a bit of luck, which is often a function of one's wealth and 'strategic' connections.

Performing in a dark room for a seated audience while facing computers and electronic gears removes, to a great extent, the difficulties of policing the live performance space. It also enables a situation in which the musical affect is more effectively communicated in the context of ambient, drone, idm, noise, and acousmatic music. Phil Niblock, Merzbow, and Tim Hecker, for instance, have all performed in similar conditions and for reasons similar to those articulated by Siavash Amini (previous page).[142] This lucky overlap of genric and political appropriateness has empowered the scene, allowing it to aesthetically and technically burgeon in an environment in which many other forms of musicking still grapple with serious limitations.

In contrast to Siavash's performing-in-pitch-dark strategy, Ata Ebtekar (aka Sote) believes that visuals do help an audience, who may not be otherwise familiar with the type of music/sound presented, to follow the performance easier. Ata's comment has echoes of what has been argued within the sonic arts literature, from which we know that coherent correlations between sounds' spectromorphology, physical movements of the performers, and visual (as well as other sensorial) stimuli in the space are key to 'successful' performance of electroacoustic music. This area is also one of the focuses of Leigh Landy's 'intention-reception' project, which is designed to evaluate subjective ('listening') experiences of electroacoustic music audiences. (Landy 2006, 29–53).

---

[142] See for instance the following excerpt recorded during Niblock's, Hecker's, Merzbow's, and Amini's performances: Phil Niblock at Estúdio da Bomba Suicida in Lisbon in 2006 (last accessed 2 Apr. 2018): youtube.com/watch?v=f0mOjkkR-5M
Tim Hecker at The Ace Hotel Theatre in Los Angles in 2017 (last accessed 2 Apr. 2018): youtube.com/watch?v=yMaUZoc9KfM
Merzbow at Saravah in Tokyoin in 2015 (last accessed 2 Apr. 2018): youtube.com/watch?v=S2B9gMzAtPg
Siavash Amini at Ponec in Prague in 2017 (last accessed 2 Apr. 2018): youtube.com/watch?v=Gw-H0xaWMEo

Referring to a set he had performed in Boiler Room[143], Ata told me:

> My preferred way of experiencing live electronic music is through a good audio-visual set. That's why I had visuals even in my Boiler Room set as well. Those were made by Pedram Sadeghbeyki. *Interviewed on 7 Apr. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Sote's DJ set in Boiler Room is an interesting example, as it simultaneously demonstrates the most common scenario of live electronic music in Iran and the complexities surrounding it. Boiler Room is a platform for DJs and dancers. As such, it has mainly been a dance floor. Sote's set was, however, performed with no dancers on the floor. Instead, he used visuals to accompany the musics/sounds. 'It was an attempt to introduce Iranian electronic acts to the Boiler Room audience,' Sote said to me. I asked him why did his show not involve an audience on the dance floor. Here is his answer:

> Firstly, I don't like having people around me on the stage while I'm performing. I always include that note in my technical rider. Secondly, I don't like the usual Boiler Room format. In addition, I was DJing ambient music. I thought having people around with beers in their hands, not knowing how to move to a music that is not particularly groovy, wasn't going to produce a nice image. It would have been boring and awkward. So, I thought it's best to keep it simple and respect the music I was playing. *Interviewed on 7 Apr. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Figure 5-1. Screenshot from Boiler Room's page on Facebook, announcing Sote's DJ set. It is not clear what the comments are about—maybe excitement (or displeasure) for those who know Sote and/or surprise for those who think there cannot be such a thing as Iranian electronic music.[144]

[143] See the following link for the video of Sote's full Boiler Room set (last accessed 12 Mar. 2019): youtube.com/watch?v=j-GsiPECHYA

[144] The photo is accessible via the following link:

We now know that performing with 'no lights' or with the addition of minimal and 'abstract' visuals on the screen constitute the most common scenarios of live electronic music performance in Iran.[145] But, how are the images conceived by the agents of the Permit System? Regarding how visuals are assessed as part of a live performance application submitted to the Ministry of the Culture and Islamic Guidance for a Permit, Ali Phi told me:

> Well, there is no separate procedure in place for the visual part of the works. They comment on the performance as a whole. But venues have control procedures of their own, which of course differs from place to place. They usually check the visuals separately and make comments. They may ask you to edit some parts based on their understanding of what might be troublesome for them. *Interviewed on 15 Jun. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Ali noted that insofar as the visuals are abstract and have no clear social references they should not cause any trouble.

> They [Permit officials] use a funny terminology to refer to those visuals that exceed the aesthetic boundaries of a 'real' image so to speak. I mean if the visuals are abstract, for instance geometrical shapes or anything that is not directly recognisable as 'real', they call it 'motion'. And, motion is ok! […] Oh! And they specifically have an issue with eyes! Human images, human organs, and particularly eyes are tricky. The reason behind this sensitivity on eyes, I think, is a superstitious belief among some religious people.

Hesam Ohadi's comment about his experience of applying for live performance Permits illustrates a similar trend with regards to the sound. He told me:

> In one instance, they [Permit officials] listened to my heavily beat-oriented idm and Arash Akbari's drone music and said: 'These are just sound effects, not music.' We are absolutely fine with this assessment. At least it offers an opportunity for us to talk to each other. […] Because our focus is sound, our works can be interpreted in many different ways and I think that's a good thing. *Interviewed on 22 Sep. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

At the intersection of 'abstract' sounds and visuals, performance contexts, the Permit System's understanding of those, and experimental electronic producers' professional pragmatism, an effective and consistent consensus seems to have been reached. Digital interfaces, particularly laptops and software, have enabled a context for a conceptual and practical reconfiguration of the performance ecology, to the

---

facebook.com/boilerroom.tv/photos/a.166480700064316/1218142988231410/?type=3&theater

[145] See for instance the photo documentation of SET festival 2018 in Tehran via the following link (last accessed 15 May 2019): setfest.org/portfolios/setxctm-2018/#!/grs/0

Also see this performance by Hesam Ohadi (aka Idlefon) with light design by Amir Bahador Ashrafzadeh (Amir B. Ash) at Set festival 2017 in Tehran: youtube.com/watch?v=f16LWPPTRyk&feature=youtu.be

extent that it does not disturb the system's red lines. In a period of relative political stability and economic growth (2013–2018), these factors enabled a context for the burgeoning of electronic music practice and aesthetics in Iran.

5.2 Blurred Soundscapes: Control, Noise, and the Amorphous Regulatorium

I think there are connections between the use of blurry soundscapes, reverb, stretched forms, drones, distortion, so-called dark ambiences, and the social life in Iran in general. I cannot say, however, what exactly those connections may be.

From my interview with Ata Ebtekar aka Sote on 7 Apr. 2017 (Translated from Persian by myself)

The speed with which computers, digital and new media technologies, particularly the internet, have transformed societies through enabling new relations and forms of connectedness between people, materials, and imaginaries has also triggered the emergence of new domains/modes of production including with regards to musical practice. The emergent, digitally-mediated modes of creative practice feed from new forms of spatio-material connectivity that extend, more than ever, beyond the national borders. EEMSI can be broadly viewed as a product of such new connections. What makes the case of EEMSI rather unique, however, has partly to do with society's relationship with the state's performance and the sociocultural and ideological-political flows of ethical-moral control. These have been re-enforced, as previously argued, as a result of the state's excessive intervention in all aspects of the citizen's lives—from large-scale economic activities to the most trivial matters of private life[146].

Concerned with leading the society according to a hardly defined revolutionary-Islamic doctrine, the state has tried to regulate people's doing/knowing through regulating the education system, controlling the domains of publication, and filtering publication. It is precisely the form, extent, and reach of this control that has been disrupted through the ubiquitous use of new media technologies. Despite digital technologies' capacity to transform the flows and relations of production-consumption, a major issue facing producers in Iran is still the limited access to information.

[146] See for instance this BBC Persian's report on Iranian parliament's questions to the Interior Minister regarding the Ministry's inaction towards women who wear support stockings in 2014: bbc.com/persian/iran/2014/06/140624_l12_iran_interior_minister_rahmani_frazli_socks_majlis_women

Publishing in general is under significant pressure. Access to the internet is still actively restrained.[147] If one is technically capable of and prepared to go the extra mile to find suitable VPNs, changing them regularly, and to not despair over their inefficiencies, then, thanks to the faster connections available, one has the chance to access what one needs. But firstly, this annoying extra work is often enough to discourage and disappoint users, and to reconfigure their expectations in the long term. Secondly, as we know, searching for content on the internet is not always a precisely targeted activity—it is not so much about what one exactly *needs* than it is about what one can broadly find, often by accident. To summarise, by exhausting the users and channelling their expectations, censorship effectively shapes the users' habits of accessing information.

Addressing the state's extent of ideological control over the education system, Zahra Gooya—professor of Mathematics Education and Curriculum Studies in Shahid Beheshti University Tehran—has told me that:

> Education planning too has a strong ideological undercurrent here. In organising musical curricula for schools and colleges, ideology heavily influences the general guidelines, leaving the professionals little room for manoeuvring. Students suffer immensely from the consequences. This is generally how proper scientific professionalism in Iran is sacrificed for other concerns.

There is something unique about the form, reach, and texture of control, and socio-cultural processes in Iran. It is frustrating to be forced to operate in a state of perpetual 'in-between-ness' and insecurity, as described by my interlocutors. The existence of such a state relates to the conditions of political and economic uncertainty but also to deep-rooted mechanisms of dogmatic ethical-moral judgement. Internalised within the society, such mechanisms manifest even in the most trivial situations in daily lives of people; they constantly have to process in various situations 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.

One may say that even democratic systems consist of politicians who, one way or another, do feed from ideology, and that political systems' urge to monitor, filter, and control is not specific to Iran. That may be generally true, but the devil is

[147] For a recent report on systemic filtering of the internet in Iran see this text published on 23 April 2019 on The Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI):
iranhumanrights.org/2019/04/prosecutor-generals-cyber-division-launches-new-online-censorship-center-in-iran/ e

in the detail here. I will not go into much length comparing the political system in Iran with democratic and autocratic systems in order to examine their differences/similarities. What I am trying to convey here is, in fact, not so much about control per se than it is about its invasive and heavily moralised boundaries in Iran; its chilling, risk-laden, fuzziness. It 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. That is why I am going to term 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*.

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—the converging worlds of mad techno-logical 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 assemblage has emerged as a result of the establishment's performance.

Although the existence of this rather strange category may not be necessarily recognised as such by the larger society, its effects and affects are often casually and humorously described by my interlocutors as well as by many other Iranians I have known or have met. The comment below, made by a person who preferred to remain anonymous in this particular instance, represents such descriptions:

> You know, the same way that you can buy booze anytime you want—even many religious people drink here—but it is officially a no-no; you can throw parties every week with no problem but if once you get caught things can get nasty; in a musical context you can also be a woman and sing in some occasions with no problem while being censored in others. So, you inevitably end up in a situation in which you may be allowed to sing but the singing aspect must be concealed to the point that it is not recognised as such, for example through a lot of processing and stuff, while sort of hiding behind a table, sitting in the dark. Some say female solo singing voice is illegal altogether. Well, I

> am not even sure if there is a law against it or not. Do you? There probably isn't. These things, like most things, are left open to interpretation and to the officials' personal tastes. *Anonymous interviewed on 5 Dec. 2017 (did not want to be credited on this quote)*

The above quote illustrates the majority of performances of electronic music in Iran, the documentations of which I had the chance to access and analyse, in which there were female singers (or female performers using their voice). This situation, however, extends beyond female voice and performance as described. Functioning professionally in this state of 'irregular regularity'—as one of my fellow composers has put it—and perpetual contingency constitutes a major concern for the majority of my interlocutors, whose practices have been the focus of this study. They have expressed it in a variety of different ways.

Figure 5-2. Rojin Sharafi playing at SET X CTM Festival 2018 in Tehran[148]

I would argue that the tension between finding ways to playfully conduct a creative practice, which can also be presented legally, and the embodied effects of almost-(im)permissibles, is the missing link between EEMSI's aesthetics and broader social processes mentioned in Ata Ebtekar's comment at the beginning of this section. The desire to incorporate noise, distortion, or 'dirty sounds' as Shahin Entezami has put it, is a widely-expressed tendency within the experimental electronic music scene in

[148] Extracted from SET Experimental Arts Events website, accessible via the following link (last accessed 18 Dec. 2019): setfest.org/portfolios/setxctm-2017/

Iran. Producing music in parental homes, often using headphones, while having a penchant for 'noise'—as an emancipatory force experienced through musicking—while negotiating an aesthetics through exchange with broader social and ideological-political agencies in Iran, is perhaps the source of the 'controlled noise' that Tony Mitchel's article had detected[149]. Through this lens, controlling noise is simultaneously an emancipatory act of protesting (ambiguous) control—a visceral release from its frustratingly limiting boundaries—and the manifestation of its embodiment.

In my interlocutors' descriptions there are also suggestions of a relationship between Tehran's atmosphere and the sonic aesthetics of experimental electronic musicking in Iran. For instance, Shahin Entezami (aka Tegh) talked about the possible connections between the aesthetic of his own music and Tehran's soundscape and polluted air:

> I came back to Tehran [he had lived in a different city during his Bachelor studies] and my work started sounding differently. Hearing all the noises and breathing the polluted air of this city definitely affected my mood and my work. I cannot find a better explanation as to why my sounds are so distorted now, why they are much dirtier. See, I clean my gears overnight and the next morning, before I start working, there is already so much dust sitting on them. *Interviewed on 7 Apr. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

In Mitchel's article, 'controlled noise' (see 4.7, page 103) alludes to what he takes to be a conformist approach. Controlled as it may sound, I know thanks to this research and my practical engagement with Iranian artists, producers, and audiences inside the country, that the glitched beats of Bescolour, distorted drones of Tegh or Umchunga, and gestural music of Sote packed with aggressively frequency-modulated bursts are not easy to bear even for many of those who do attend EEMSI events. As Alireza Poorsohoolat (aka MezRab) told me: 'most people think EEMSI events are too noisy; they are definitely not for everybody' (Interviewed on 23 Dec. 2018 – translated from Persian by myself). If one considers the degree of novelty presented through these materials to Iranian audiences inside the country, then labelling them as conformist would be naïve if not a sign of intellectual incompetence. Approached differently, one can analyse *Absence*, and by extension EEMSI, as situated within its locale. In this context EEMSI's statement becomes a radical one. After all, as Paul Hegarty has pointed out, 'noise is already that qualification [e.g. unpleasant, loud, etc.]; it is already a judgment that noise is occurring … [N]oise is cultural …'

[149] See 4.7 for a discussion of Tony Mitchel's article on the compilation album *Absense*, in which he uses the term 'controlled noise' to describe one. of the sound sources used in Siavash Amini's album *Subsiding* (2015).

(2007, 3)—so is its controlling. EEMSI's insistence, apart from a few exceptions, on excluding Iranian stereotypes in its ventures through sounds and visuals is neither intended as a political compromise, nor as downplaying of cultural contexts. Rather, such an insistence should be read as an exit towards a new musical future, a 'future' that becomes, as Roland Barthes (1976, 178) would say, 'the essential destruction of the past.' And, the 'past' in this formula would be one in which Iranian culture seems to have been stuck, increasingly so due to the dogmatic and often revivalist performance of the Islamic Republic. This is also a past invented around the name Iran in the 'West' since many decades ago; one which involves images and description that portray Iran simultaneously as an exotic destination with a rich ancient culture, welcoming and kind people, and a terrorist state or nation, that's waging war all over the world. This absence, escape, or exit that I have identified as a key feature of EEMSI, is of course 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 also noted (see page 53–54); these are recurrent patterns that yet again have found specific social functions, this time in the form of experimental electronic sound.

EEMSI has been consistently growing since its earliest manifestations in public venues around 2009–2010. The works presented through SET and TADAEX, as well as through other platforms such as Noise Works and TCMF, have become much more confident in their approach in delivering coherent sounds and visuals. In the early years (2009–2011), Metro-14, Photomat, The Waterfront (Siavash Amini's first project), and *Spotty Surfaces* (the first experimental electronic music compilation released in Iran in 2010) constituted the emergent scene. These works typically incorporated rather shy and heavily processed guitar riffs, digitally-produced drones and 'soft' glitches in an ambient, shoegaze, downtempo style. In sharp contrast to these early appearances of the scene, SET 2018 presented a matured electronic music series in collaboration with CTM Berlin, in the most iconic monument of the Iranian capital *Azadi Tower*. Later that year Zabte Sote, in collaboration with the UK-based record label Opal Tapes, released a diverse compilation of experimental electronic

pieces titled *Girih* that drew on a significantly broader set of influences and aesthetics.[150]

Revisiting *Absence* and Mitchel's critique of it can also provide a context for reflecting upon preconceptions that precede listening and musicking as situated activities. The relationship between listening and 'discourse' is evaluated for example through Francois J. Bonnet's book 'The Order of Sound' (2016). There, Bonnet investigates the relations between 'sonorous', the 'audible', and 'discourse', writing (200-201):

> Discourse intervenes in listening by turning the perceived object into an object that can be spoken of, described, classified, linked to this or that other object—that is to say, by making it communicable. Discourse introduces heard sound into a community. [...] Discourse in embryo, potential discourse, is already there flush with listening itself. At once more and less than a discourse, it is a discursive seed. It is that which, as yet salient, provokes listening, determines an aim for it, a reason. It is that through which listening generates objects. It is that which forms the audible object. Residing in it already are the becomings of discourses, of fictions.

In the next chapter I will focus on my own sound-based practice in order to explore how during the course of this research it has enabled a condition for further problematisation of and reflection upon the concepts, contexts, and processes that have shaped the experimental electronic music scene's aesthetics in Iran. Furthermore, I will explore how its participation and integration in the networks experimental electronic music in Iran enabled a context for a concomitant theoretical and practice-led scrutiny throughout this project. One of the main arguments of this text is that an intertwined ethnographic and practice-led setting as such, which incorporates artistic and discursive collaboration as a catalyst for new forms of understanding that are otherwise out of reach from a mere ethnographic or artistic standpoint, can be used as a holistic model for further inquiry into musical practice within (ethno-)musicology, sound studies, anthropology, philosophy of music, and sociology.

[150] Access *Girih* via the following link (last accessed 22 Mar. 2019): zabtesote.bandcamp.com/album/girih-iranian-sound-artists-volumes-i-iv

Figure 5-3. Robert Henke (aka Monolake) performing at SET 2018. Photo extracted from SET Experimental Arts Events website[151]

Figure 5-4. Audience sitting during a live electronic performance at TADAEX 2016. Photo is extracted from TA-DAEX website.[152]

[151] The photo is accessible via the following link (last access 30 Jan. 2019): setfest.org/portfolios/setxctm-2018/
[152] The photo is accessible via the following link (last accessed 30 Jan 2019): tadaex.com/2016/media/

Parts of this chapter was featured in the following publication:

Hadi Bastani, Koichi Samuels, "Digital Media, Live Interfaces and Inclusion: Ethnographic Perspectives," In Proceedings of the 2018 International Conference on Live Interfaces (ICLI), Porto, Portugal (2018).

Parts of this chapter was presented at the following conference:

Multi-Disciplinary Standpoints on Conflict Transformation, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK (2017).

CHAPTER 6

A PORTFOLIO OF (SOUND) WORK(ING)S

6.1 Overview

In this chapter I reflect on those of my sound works that more directly engaged, both in a conceptual and practical level, with practices of my interlocutors. These works become integrated within EEMSI's production-consumption networks—as part of compilation releases, collaborative projects, and installations presented in digital arts and experimental music festivals in Iran—and, as such, fed back to their processes.

A sound-based exploration of EEMSI took place within two general settings that were developed in parallel over the course of two years (2016–2018). Accordingly, this chapter is divided in two parts. The first part involves an exploration of and reflection upon some of the most recurrent themes, which were identified through an analysis of the interviews and online fieldwork, by means of individual composition, installation, and collaborative performance. The second part consists of commentary on the collaborative projects—composition and performance—which were designed and realised with the active participation of my interlocutors. Offering a context for a less mediated contact with the scene, collaboration afforded new perspectives that were otherwise hardly accessible from the standpoint of (digital) ethnography or individual sound-based practice. As noted in the opening chapter, however, the deferral of writing on the portfolio to the last part was merely a formal decision, which was made in favour of structural clarity. Otherwise, the two disciplinary approaches involved in the study of EEMSI in this PhD—i.e. (digital) ethnography and practice-led research—constituted a feedback loop through which the research processes unfolded and the final output was shaped.

This text's preoccupation with the concepts of ambiguity, noise, creativity, and control, as explored in previous parts in relation to EEMSI's aesthetics, pervasive flows of ethical-legal-moral judgement, and intrusive but fuzzy religious-ideological-

political mediations within the society—mediations that regulate individuals' and groups' behaviours in Iran—is also informed by the development of my own practice as it transitioned to a new environment (UK) and got entangled in a different network of relations, practices, concerns, imaginaries, and aesthetics. In this context, a sound-based investigation of EEMSI via the rest of this thesis hopes to offer a new perspective—as distinct from that afforded by ethnography as such—for the crystallisation, identification, and exploration of, as well as generalisation upon the flows of sameness and difference that underlie the scene's unfolding across a cosmopolitan setting, in the online and offline domains, within Iranian society and beyond. As such, the portfolio and its attached commentary serve also as a context for investigating the attitudinal differences that characterise the scene.

The initial aim of a practice-led engagement with the 'field' was to facilitate a dialogue with my prospective interlocutors; one that was primarily triggered by and based upon sound-based practice. To that aim, I systematically shared my work throughout the process of the research with producers and performers in the 'field' via Facebook[153], Telegram, email and Soundcloud[154]. As a result, new discussions were formed. Musical and discursive dialogue offered the research an opportunity to establish itself as an actor within the scene, to which I did not have physical access. It also afforded it more opportunities for the identification, exploration, and challenging of the concepts, aesthetics, and processes that were common to the musical practice of my interlocutors in Iran.

As my work gradually became included within the experimental electronic music circles via the internet, it also began to become integrated within the same production-consumption networks that differentiated EEMSI from other musical and artistic currents in Iran. A deeper involvement in such a way, created more opportunities for my work to be discussed and evaluated in relation to other outputs of the scene, enabling a context in which my interlocutors' work and my own mingled and co-developed in contact with each other.

---

[153] facebook.com/DigitalArtsAndExperimentalMusicSceneOfIran/
[154] soundcloud.com/hadi-bastani

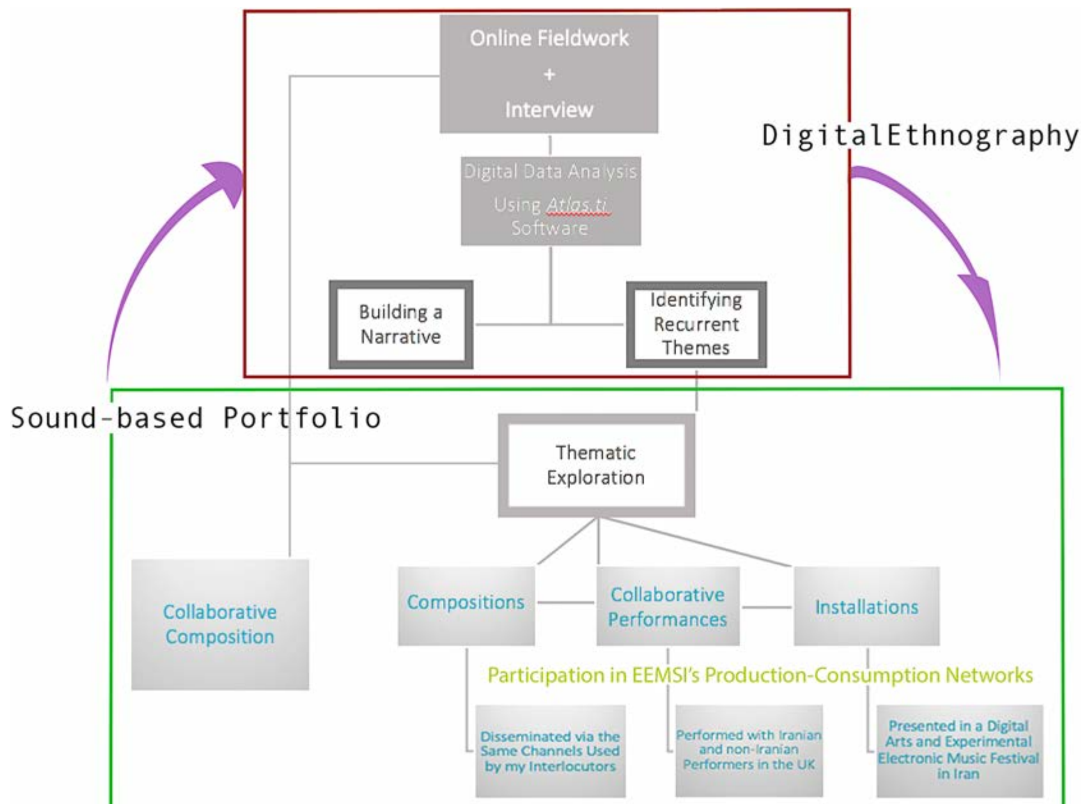


Figure 6-1. Participation of my sound-based practice in EEMSI' production-consumption networks

Exploring the boundaries of politically 'tolerated' or 'publicly-presentable' aesthetic activity in Iran, EEMSI has constructed its own regulated world in negotiation with other forces enacted within society and beyond. At the intersection of forming new practices and relationships that transcend the limitations of everyday life in Iran and inventing worlds of new social relations and aesthetic pursuit, the activities of my interlocutors can be conceptualised simultaneously as a resistance against the mainstream (also elite and celebrity culture) and embodiment of ambiguous ideological-political/legal-ethical-moral control.

The body of work developed for the purposes of this research is above all a response to such a tension that was identified in conversation with my interlocutors and through self-reflexive practice. It was, therefore, crucial for my sound-based pieces to aesthetically remain 'in touch' with the practice of my interlocutors in order to explore its underlying theoretical and practical strands. To that aim, I started making works by first imposing a set of limitations in order to simultaneously stimulate creativity and respond to the scene's aesthetic developments in relation to its conditions of situatedness. These initial limits are listed below:

- Every work had to broadly fit within the ambient music context which has been the most known and represented form of experimental electronic music coming out of Iran;
- In accordance with the work of majority of my interlocutors, any sound that could be identified as part of Iranian classical music repertoire was not allowed;
- Any sound that could be heard as referencing the most obvious or 'exotic' (as described by a lot of my interlocutors) characteristics of Iranian society as these are known through media stereotypes—for instance any recordings that contained Persian language, New Year celebrations, call to prayer, state-sponsored orchestrated marches, Friday prayers, other religious occasions, ancient Iran references, and rituals among other things—was not allowed.
- Unprocessed voice and explicit social-political references in sound or visuals were not allowed.
- Every work had to be based upon one sonic cell as its main idea, in response to the minimalistic approach of most of my interlocutors to composition.

In later stages of the research and in contact with performers whose work I had the chance to experience in SARC and other places, however, my focus was shifted towards exploring more collaborative and performative ways of sound-based or musical exchange, while expanding my sonic palette beyond the confines of genre aesthetics from which the ambient producers in Iran particularly drew. I did this in two ways and in order to intervene in and constructively critique the scene's established aesthetics:

- Firstly through works that sought to expand on EEMSI's repertoire through exploring new aesthetic territories, mainly in collaboration with Iranian producers. Multi-channel pieces such as *intra.view* and *ecbatan*, as well as improvised performances with Pouya Ehsaei (*modular improvisation*) and Steph Horak (*pendulum*) can be grouped under this category.
- Secondly through works that aimed at challenging the genre-driven regularities to which at least a part of the scene has remained loyal: for instance those that can be found in different styles within the boundaries of genres such as

ambient, downtempo electronica, and ambient techno.[155] SPIN, *INTERFERENCE* and *impulse|resonance* were produced to that aim.

To summarise, my portfolio engaged with the work of experimental electronic music producers in Iran, and abroad, on two general levels. At the first level, it followed a set of 'limitations', devised at the beginning of the composition process in order for the piece to 'fit in'; to become 'accepted'; to allow an empathetic researcher-respondent rapport take shape organically; but also to provide a context in which some of the characteristics of EEMSI as tendencies of a system of (social) aesthetic reconfiguration could be amplified in order to be investigated. Through the latter my practice also hoped to explore how can such limitations be utilised as creative tools for critical/aesthetic exploration. At this stage, I produced work *as if* I was based in Tehran working in close contact with my interlocutors, practically involved in a pragmatic negotiation with broader social, ideological-political, and cultural forces. Using my established position as a researcher-collaborator, at the next level I shifted my focus, however, towards questioning such boundaries. My aim was to suggest new ways of doing/thinking music/sound that surpassed those limitations while still remaining within the pragmatic confines of legal or 'publicly presentable' music in Iran. At this level, my interlocutors were directly involved in the work as collaborators. In this context, composition and performance processes functioned as means of mutual transformation, commentary, and critique. It is particularly in this second stage or level that the methodological novelty of this PhD lies; in the attempt to synthesise a new approach for (ethno-)musicological inquiry, from investigative artistic practice and ethnographic study, that draws on collaboration as a core strategy. As such, this PhD seeks to move beyond the space of traditional ethnography, in which actively challenging and questioning the 'field' is not a common practice.

[155] See for instance Nima Pourkarimi's (aka Umchunga) latest upload on Soundcloud, Shaahin Moghadam Saba's (aka Dipole) latest upload on Soundcloud, and Siavash Amini's latest release through Room 40 via the following links (last accessed 2 Jul. 2019):
soundcloud.com/umchunga/swirl
soundcloud.com/dipole7/shaahin-saba-dipole-nostalgia-live
room40.bandcamp.com/album/serus?fbclid=IwAR1YA-gzeuIKzJLmH95fJKxkpsHEDOl797CbGLj0olYLqFZPUDku8s85Fb1M

6.2 Thematic Exploration

From the perspective of this research, the most significant patterns emerged broadly in relation to discussions regarding the following four themes:

- Individuality and a search for autonomy through a playful articulation of sameness and difference;
- Abandoned modes of doing music/sound and emerging ones;
- EEMSI as a de-centralised and inter-connected network of music/sound that codevelops as its practices respond to each other's aesthetics nuances;
- Expanding EEMSI's repertoire through self-critique and exploring new aesthetic territories that, pragmatically, have the capacity to be represented legally and publicly in Iran without causing any severe political disturbance.

While exploring how did my work conceptually and practically engage with the works and words of my interlocutors, in this part I also map out its trajectory in relation to a discursive and sound-based engagement with the scene—a trajectory that reveals a gradual move away from individual studio-based approaches to composition, to more collaborative and performative ones. Reflecting on one of my collaborative performances (in 6.2.4), *pendulum*, I will also investigate the undercurrents that are likely responsible for a scarcity of live improvised electronic music performances in Iran—which appears to be a significant gap within the scene's repertoire of practice. An engagement with improvisatory approaches towards electronic music composition and performance in the latter stages of this PhD occurred partly in response to this gap. I explored such approaches not only to contribute to the scene's repertoire, but also to question its aesthetic boundaries in relation to its broader conditions of situatedness and suggest directions for further research regarding the workings of the developing experimental electronic music networks in Iran.

6.2.1 impulse|resonance

In resonance the inexhaustible return of eternity is played—and listened to.

Jean-Luc Nancy – Listening (2007)

The central element of this piece is a cell produced of two samples extracted from two songs with Persian lyrics. The first sample involves the word 'Iran', which is isolated from a song[156] titled *Baroon Miad* (Persian: بارون میاد), meaning 'rain is falling', produced by Fedai Guerillas[157] in 1970s. The second sample involves the Persian word *man* (Persian: من), meaning 'self' in the context of the song. It is extracted from a rap song titled *Kavir* (Persian: کویر) meaning 'desert' by Ali Sorena[158], produced in 2017. Both samples are, however, processed in such a way that their semantic contents are concealed.

The first song was made with an anti-monarchy communist sensitivity, a romantic sense of duty towards (armed) resistance, and a belief in the power of the 'masses' for self-determination. The second, however, is a requiem for a painful longing for life; a 'dark' ode to solitude which expresses a rage against lack of individual autonomy. While the first promotes a sympathy among the 'masses' and is hopeful of a future in which an ideal of communist and just society is realised, the second presents an almost hatred for being stuck among the masses, also for war and violence. It ultimately laments for a 'self' that is not realised (and perhaps cannot yet be).

These two songs represent important concerns of two generations of, mainly, educated young people in Iran, four decades apart from each other: one that participated in the 1979 revolution and one that had to face its consequences without having taken part in it. The first engages with an idea of ideal *nation*. It refers to a time in which many groups with different and often conflicting ideologies converged in the fight against the monarchical system. The second, however, searches for its lost

[156] The song is accessible via the following link (last access 1 Feb. 2019). The sampled word ('Iran') can be heard at 01:58–01:59. youtube.com/watch?v=coOPfMqcPIs

[157] Organization of Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas known as Fedaiyan-e Khalq, was a Marxist-Leninist underground guerrilla organisation in Iran founded in 1971. As part of their broader anti-imperialist agenda, they engaged in a revolutionary armed struggle against monarchy. Their activities were influential in preparing the ground for the 1979 Islamic revolution. The organisation as such dissolved in 1980, a year after the revolution, and were heavily repressed by the post-revolutionary regime.

[158] The song is accessible via the following link (last access 1 Feb. 2019). The sampled word ('*man*') can be heard at 03:09–03:10 youtube.com/watch?v=ZsNS-MmIrGA

individuality. There is, nevertheless, common ground between the two. The latter can be described in terms of a struggle for freedom, autonomy, and a certain melancholy of *distance*—from a reality in which the struggle for 'self'-realisation/identification is over; a reality in which the repressed and fuzzy self is reunited with its free, 'authentic', and 'transparent' other.[159] Both songs are politically problematic in Iran. If discovered by security forces, even possession of these can potentially cause an owner trouble. The first song was denied public presence in both regimes due to its attachment to a communist ideology. The second has also been denied public presence as belonging to a genre (rap) that is labelled 'morally deviant'[160] by the Islamic Republic police and security chiefs—rap works cannot be released or performed publicly in Iran, apart from only a few exceptions who produce pro-regime songs—among the latter group some have been forced to do so under pressure from the security agents.[161]

As a medium that affords manipulation and juxtaposition of sonic events of any kind, electronic and electroacoustic music offer a context for a creative expression of the excluded; marginal sounds and dissident voices. Through decomposition, reprocessing, and recomposition, a material that is denied expression due to its semantic content or aesthetic features—in the case of the above two songs for ideological and political reasons—can be recontextualised and represented. As I have previously discussed, Iranian literature, music, architecture, art (including craft) is full of similar performances. This way of approaching composition does resonate with the practices of experimental electronic music in Iran as well. Although one may criticise such an approach as politically passive, in its disciplined creativity it nevertheless allows for dialogue. Also, in its aesthetic novelty, it allows easier negotiation with the political system, in times when the political system may be too intolerant of

---

[159] See 2.7 for a discussion that engages with an understanding of what this 'distance'—a 'cultural-specific' embodied feeling of being alienated from the 'source'—involves.

[160] This is an expression used by former Tehran's chief of police Hossein Sajedi-Nia in 2010. It is extracted from an article on the Telegraph titled 'Why Iran is cracking down on rap music', accessible via the following link (last accessed 7 Feb. 2019):
telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/8123046/Why-Iran-is-cracking-down-on-rap-music.html

[161] See these two articles in the Guardian that together narrate the story of an underground rap producer who, under pressure, turned into a pro-regime propaganda machine:

1- theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/03/iranian-rapper-website-arrested-amir-tatalou-narenji
2- theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2015/jul/20/iran-military-goes-hip-hop-for-youth-appeal-amir-tataloo

the nation's direct critical expressions. Here, it is helpful to remember Hesam Ohadi's comment on his experience of applying for a Permit. He had noted:

> In one instance, they [Permit officials] listened to my heavily beat-oriented idm and Arash Akbari's drone music and said: 'These are just sound effects, not music.' We are absolutely fine with this characterisation. It at least offers an opportunity for us to talk to each other. […] Because our focus is sound, our works can be interpreted in many different ways, and I think that's a good thing. *Interviewed on 22 Sep. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

An indirect and metaphorical cultural expression and articulation of social-political matters, in a society in which direct political statement or social criticism is often supressed by the establishment, is both pragmatic and creative. Also, due to its ability to simultaneously afford new perspectives on thinking/doing and thus enabling channels for new forms of creative practice while allowing for discussion and debate, it is, in fact, radically political. Having a historical grounding in Iranian culture, such a 'playful' and pragmatic way of reforming material for aesthetic purposes through abstraction/metaphor, is, in fact, embodied in everyday social performances of Iranians. Aesthetics of EEMSI, as such, can be viewed in relation to, and perhaps as a recurrence of, similar social-historical-cultural tropes.

Let us go back to the piece. The two samples were processed separately and then mixed together as one audio cell from which the composition developed. The main techniques used in *impulse|resonance* involved time-stretching, pitch-shifting, and granular synthesis. These methods were applied in order for the piece to explore the 'inner' qualities of the extracted sounds—of 'Iran' and '*man*' (meaning self)—as these were transformed into a set of drones and 'controlled' noises. The drones were then combined with the sound of a bell. The final material, as such, can be heard as the development of drones through resonance of the bell. The composition process involved identifying points of synchrony between the rhythm of the bell resonances and flunctuations of the drones, in order to play with the 'beating' resulted from the movements of their pitch contents against each other.

The piece also explored how social concerns could 'resound' in or find an expression through electroacoustic music. After it was shared together with a description with a number of my interlocutors, *impulse|resonance* triggered a conversation about 'ideals' and if/how experimental electronic music scene in Iran has any connection to those. It seemed that due to its relationship to ideology this term

(ideal) divided the crowd. One of my interlocutors said in a private message on Facebook:

> Music is what we love to do. It is the realisation of a dream of what we enjoy doing. It has nothing to do with politics. It is pure exploration, as a result of which a small society is shaped that is primarily concerned with sound and artistic expression.

Another one said:

> Experimenting with sounds and making music in an environment that does not value music is purely idealistic, if not naïve or even mad. This mad idealism, however, should not be dissolved through discussions that focus on social aspect of everything, as it is a deeply personal, if not squarely anti-social endeavour.

Along the similar lines, Milad Bagheri and Maryam Sirvan of the electronica duo NUM from Rasht (capital city of a northern province in Iran), which has been based in Tblisi since around 2018 (or second half of 2017), told me:

> We live in Rasht but sometimes we wonder what that really means [says Milad]. We have the physical experience of living here for all our life but mentally it's like we've never been here [says Maryam]. [She continues:] We are not involved in social processes here. Yes, we live in our own bubble, if you like [Milad says]. [He continues:] The only influence of Rasht in our work comes from its nature [Maryam agrees]—jungle, sea, mountains—that 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 [says Maryam]. *Interviewed on 10 May 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

My interlocutors' accounts describe 'musicking', in its broad sense (Small 1998), in terms of 'love' of doing music/sound; as playful articulation of difference and of an imagined alternative sociality. In this context, musicking can be understood as enacting a supressed individuality that has emerged as the consequence of a compromised sociality. Musicking, as such, seems to have offered the producers a 'space' for self-realisation and self-identification; a 'technology of the self' (DeNora 1999, 53). Why self-identification for these individuals often means a rejection of the social and its crucial role in shaping their practice, decisions, and preferences, has to be answered in relation to what music and society mean to them. To answer the former, Simon Frith's seminal essay *Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music* (1987)—in which he identifies four 'social functions' (or meanings) of (pop)[162] music—provides us with significant insight. Frith views music's first social function in relation to its capacity in 'answering questions of identity' (2007, 264). He continues: 'The pleasure that pop

[162] I have put 'pop' in parentheses to suggest, drawing on Waters (2015, 22–32), that his observation is not limited to a certain form of practice and is applicable to music in general.

music produces is a pleasure of identification—with the music we like, with the performers of that music, with the other people who like it.' In a society in which many forms of expression may be labelled 'immoral' and be confronted[163]—not just by the state but also by the larger society in which the state's repressive behaviour is, to varying degrees, internalised and transformed into mechanisms of self-policing—this function acquires a critical significance.

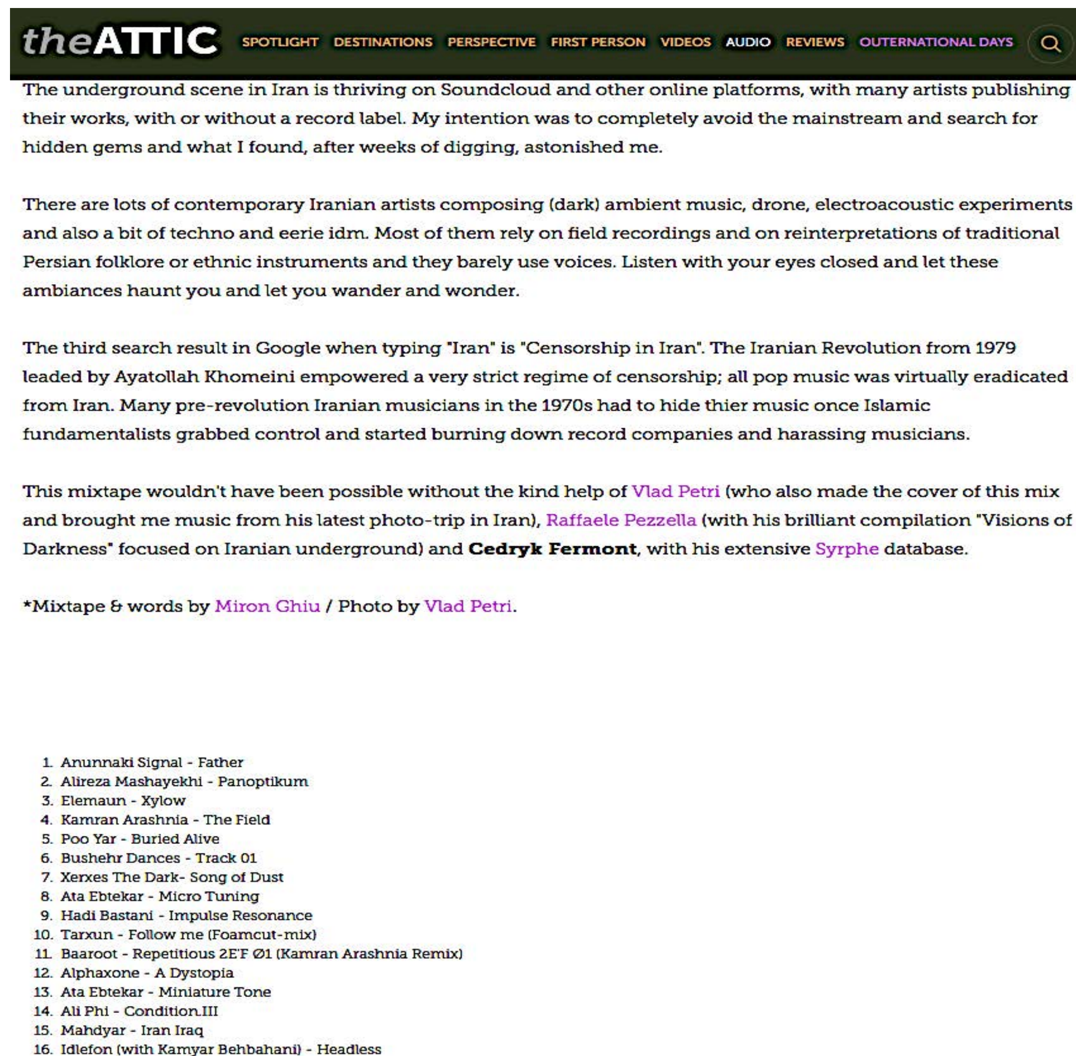
(Self-)identification with music, as such, functions, using Maryam and Milad's words (comment on previous page), as an 'escape'—from the melancholy resulting from a forced interaction with a filtered, staged, and imposing social space. In this context, musicking provides a locus for realisation of new understandings of identity through a rewarding activity capable of creating its own networks of sociality, that can be extended beyond the national borders in our 'digital age'. Attached to a more accessible community of producers thanks to the internet and digital technologies, that share similar 'tastes', ways of thinking and doing, musicking as such offers new affective modes of sociality. Drawing from Frith's observation, musicking, therefore, affords experimental electronic producers in Iran 'a way of managing the relationship between [their] public and private emotional lives.' (2007, 265) Recalling Reza Kazemzadeh's comment (2.7, page 53–54), made from the perspective of a clinical psychologist, will be complementary in appreciating the importance of these two functions in the context of practices under scrutiny in this text.

> In Iran […] the more one isolates oneself from the society the more s/he gains in freedom and autonomy, because the public domain is not the right environment to experience those. This […] can provide ingredients for depression, however, paradoxically, it also offers space for experiencing autonomy and agency. *Interviewed on 26 Jan. 2018 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Through a blind search on google, I saw *impulse|resonance* as part of a mix of 'Iranian' electronic music on the-attic.net[164], along with the works of Alireza Mashayekhi, Ata Ebtekar, Ali Phi (aka Elemaun), Kamran Arashnia, Javad Safari (Baaroot), and Hesam Ohadi (aka Idlefon) among others, all of whom contributed to the process of this research. Attic, a platform that claims to be dedicated to investigating cultures across the world, has paid a particular attention to electronic music in Iran, and

[163] See for instance this recent example of a teenage girl beaten and arrested for playing water games with her friends in a public park: observers.france24.com/en/20190628-iran-teenage-girl-iranpolice-water-guns
[164] The mix is available via the following link (last accessed 1 Feb. 2019): the-attic.net/audio/2211/destinations:-improvised-soundscapes-in-iran.html

especially to the activities of Ata Ebtekar.[165] Appearing in collections like that, my practice has been consistently in 'touch' with the scene, feeding back into its processes, while developing through an exchange with it, which continued all throughout the research.



theATTIC SPOTLIGHT DESTINATIONS PERSPECTIVE FIRST PERSON VIDEOS AUDIO REVIEWS OUTERNATIONAL DAYS

The underground scene in Iran is thriving on Soundcloud and other online platforms, with many artists publishing their works, with or without a record label. My intention was to completely avoid the mainstream and search for hidden gems and what I found, after weeks of digging, astonished me.

There are lots of contemporary Iranian artists composing (dark) ambient music, drone, electroacoustic experiments and also a bit of techno and eerie idm. Most of them rely on field recordings and on reinterpretations of traditional Persian folklore or ethnic instruments and they barely use voices. Listen with your eyes closed and let these ambiances haunt you and let you wander and wonder.

The third search result in Google when typing "Iran" is "Censorship in Iran". The Iranian Revolution from 1979 leaded by Ayatollah Khomeini empowered a very strict regime of censorship; all pop music was virtually eradicated from Iran. Many pre-revolution Iranian musicians in the 1970s had to hide thier music once Islamic fundamentalists grabbed control and started burning down record companies and harassing musicians.

This mixtape wouldn't have been possible without the kind help of Vlad Petri (who also made the cover of this mix and brought me music from his latest photo-trip in Iran), Raffaele Pezzella (with his brilliant compilation "Visions of Darkness" focused on Iranian underground) and **Cedryk Fermont**, with his extensive Syrphe database.

*Mixtape & words by Miron Ghiu / Photo by Vlad Petri.

1. Anunnaki Signal - Father
2. Alireza Mashayekhi - Panoptikum
3. Elemaun - Xylow
4. Kamran Arashnia - The Field
5. Poo Yar - Buried Alive
6. Bushehr Dances - Track 01
7. Xerxes The Dark- Song of Dust
8. Ata Ebtekar - Micro Tuning
9. Hadi Bastani - Impulse Resonance
10. Tarxun - Follow me (Foamcut-mix)
11. Baaroot - Repetitious 2E'F Ø1 (Kamran Arashnia Remix)
12. Alphaxone - A Dystopia
13. Ata Ebtekar - Miniature Tone
14. Ali Phi - Condition.III
15. Mahdyar - Iran Iraq
16. Idlefon (with Kamyar Behbahani) - Headless

Figure 6-2. Screenshot captured from the-attic.net, showing impulse|resonance included as part of a mix of Iranian electronic music.[166]

[165] See for instance the article titled *Dinner with Sote* via the following link (last accessed 28 May 2019): the-attic.net/features/2260/dinner-with-sote.html or the Attic's Staff Picks of April 2019: the-attic.net/news/2270/staff-picks-_-april-2019.html?fbclid=IwAR37CO0Hc1z12QziRvmUuTJ8xFhFEV24c6Q6O9JjsPsI5J9SM8JrD8x1ymw

[166] Extracted from the following link (last accessed 1 Feb. 2019): the-attic.net/audio/2211/destinations:-improvised-soundscapes-in-iran.html

6.2.2 ecbatan

The piece is formed around one guitar arpeggio. I had first used this arpeggio about fourteen years ago (in 2005), during a White Comedy[167] recording at Kargadan studio in Tehran. It was discarded from the album's final mix. For the purposes of *ecbatan*, I retrieved it from a recording that had been made during one of the bands' jam sessions at Kargadan. Working with this material, recycled from an old archive of discarded recordings, I sought to somewhat reinstate a spatial and material connection with an environment to which I had lost physical access.

I played the arpeggio repeatedly for eleven minutes without a metronome—while meditating and focusing on the memories of a specific spot in a place where I lived the biggest part of my life: Ekbatan (in the west end of Tehran)—and recorded the whole session. I wanted all the irregularities of breathing and playing an instrument that I had abandoned when I left Iran, and with it a mode of musicking—one that for me was representative of music-making in Iran—become woven into the work's fabric. To that end, I used the recording entirely in the piece with no further adjustments to enable a context through which my physical and conceptual 'distance' with that 'place' (and/or 'time') and that previous state of being and mode of musicking, could be experienced sonically through the juxtaposition of field recordings made in Ekbatan (in 2005) and a mistimed (or misplaced) guitar arpeggio, that was also initially made there.

I also used sounds that were accidentally captured during the pre-recording set-up of White Comedy's jam session—while the band were messing around with different objects and instruments in the studio's 'dead room'—and samples from a series of field recordings that I produced eleven years later (in 2016) in Belfast. The sonic palette was completed with the addition of some synthesised sounds and noises that I programmed for this piece in NI Reaktor and Pure Data. The main function of the latter sounds/noises was to disrupt the 'meditative' flow of the ambient parts and, as such, to further challenge the regularities of ambient aesthetics. Such instances happen mainly in two places (or times); at 03:03 and 07:59. It began, therefore, as a self-referential dialogue between two places (Tehran and Belfast or Iran and UK) and/or times (2005 and 2016), also between two approaches towards

---

[167] White Comedy was a 'post-punk' band founded by two of my friends and myself around 2003–2004. It dissolved in 2006. See 1.2 (page 3 and 4) for more context.

musicking—the one that I had abandoned after White Comedy's recording and the one I developed subsequently and as a result—*ecbatan*'s final form sought to comment upon and constructively critique EEMSI's more dominant aesthetics, through music/sound.

Refraining from correcting the timing 'imperfections' was also a strategy to challenge the mechanistic regularities of genre music, which, in the context of electronic music produced in Iran partly occur as a result of intuitive engagement with the affordances and limitations of music production software such as Ableton Live. Ableton, in particular, allows for an easy and intuitive production and playback of 'perfectly'-timed loops. Investigating what impacts interfaces such as Ableton may have had on the practice of electronic music producers in Iran (or anywhere else for that matter) and, by extension, on the sonic aesthetics of EEMSI in encouraging certain forms of creativity while supressing other possibilities, could be a direction for further (ethno-)musicological inquiry into this 'field'.

Sonically, *ecbatan* follows a trajectory that starts from an 'open field' and ends with placing the listener (as if) 'inside the speakers'. The sequence of events within the piece follows a reversed-time logic; as the piece advances on the 'timeline' it gradually moves towards 'older' events while constantly oscillating between the two places (Tehran and Belfast). It is, as such, a meditation on time, place/space, and memory, not so much in order to remember as such but to let new connections emerge from the superimposition and juxtaposition of material coming from those times and places/spaces; from different cultures and ecologies; as belonging to different states of affairs; from the intersection of abandoned musical worlds and emerging ones. Simon Frith's observation regarding music's function to 'shape […] memory, to organize our sense of time' (2007, 266)—'by both intensifying a sense of the present, and by managing our attention to time passing at every level from milliseconds to decades' (Waters 2015, 26)—seems an accurate account of what *ecbatan* sought to explore and evoke.

Expanding on Frith's observation and drawing on *Music, Sound and Space* (Born 2013), , I would add that music also situates us by offering suggestions of space/place and, as such, (re-)organises our memory in relation to indications of space/place. These indications manifest not just as direct references—sounds that explicitly refer to a certain place—but also in terms of aesthetical and/or

metaphorical references—sounds that indirectly evoke a sense of place. As DeNora has observed: '[M]usic's specific properties may contribute to or colour the shape and quality of social experience, self-perception and emotion.' (1999, 53) Due to its capacity to manipulate affect, the impact of music in this regard is particularly well documented through studies that have engaged with music/sound therapy, for instance in relation to individuals who live with dementia.[168] As a radically new phenomenon, experimental electronic music's function in Iran can be investigated from this perspective as well. From this angle, EEMSI can be viewed as having penetrated the social process in particular niches of the society in which EEMSI has relevance, disrupted their repetitiveness and, as such, affectively punctuated time for its audiences, staining it with 'events', aesthetics, behaviours, orders, (im)perfections, and new relations. In so doing, it not only makes association between those events and 'spirit' of a certain period—which is marked by certain struggles and enjoyments both in social and individual levels—but also through such a mediation EEMSI 'events' also enable new relations with the place (venues, street corners, and cities), people, technologies, and imaginaries.

Viewed in the context of broader trajectory of my practice during the course of this research, *ecbatan* was a pivotal piece as it marked the beginning of a transition between two different approaches to composition: a familiar one according to which pieces were carefully planned and written and an emerging one that tended towards more performativity and was open to accidents. In my earlier works one of the main concerns was to figure out ways of exercising precise control over sounds and their spatial manifestations within a piece, in order to make them subservient to my compositional needs and aims. In my later works, however, these concerns increasingly shifted towards finding creative ways of giving up the precise control through more spontaneous and performative approaches to composition that involved improvisation. In *The Lived Experience of Improvisation* (2017) Simon Rose notes: 'The immediacy required for composing in the process of performing calls for a particular presence in time within engagement in the world, an intervolving.' (161) Through a retrospective reflection I would note that composing in and through performing became a focus, perhaps because it increasingly felt relevant to the new conditions of my life as I transitioned between the two societies (Iran and UK). This change took place

[168] See for instance Hsu *et al*. (2015), Ridder *et al*. (2013, 67–68), Pavlicevic *et al*. (2013), Ueda et al. (2013, 628–641), and Brotons (2000, 33–62).

organically and through an ongoing exchange with the practice of my interlocutors and that of my colleagues and friends in the UK, especially in SARC, where I have been based since summer of 2014. In this context, *ecbatan* can be viewed as the sonic/musical articulation of such a transition as well; one that marked the flow of time and embodied an experience of place and a mode of becoming—transitioning between a state of being refugee to a state of becoming permanent resident (and then citizen); from a state of insecurity and float to a state of relative stability and 'grounding'.

The piece was finalised for a quadrophonic speaker configuration, transducers, and plywood, and was presented as a multimedia installation in SARC on the August of 2017. Four months later (in December), it was presented in Tehran at TADAEX 2017 as a 4-channel sound installation. Presenting my work in Iran marked the first phase of engaging more directly with producers and audiences inside the country. Such feedback processes during the course of this PhD opened new channels for further collaboration and new possibilities for research, dialogue, and exchange. It is ironic and a reality of the 'digital age' that material can travel at the speed of 'light' beyond the regulatory reach of the governments. I cannot go back to Iran, but my work can. It did—'in the blink of an eye'—and was presented to the diverse audience of the major digital arts festival in the country.

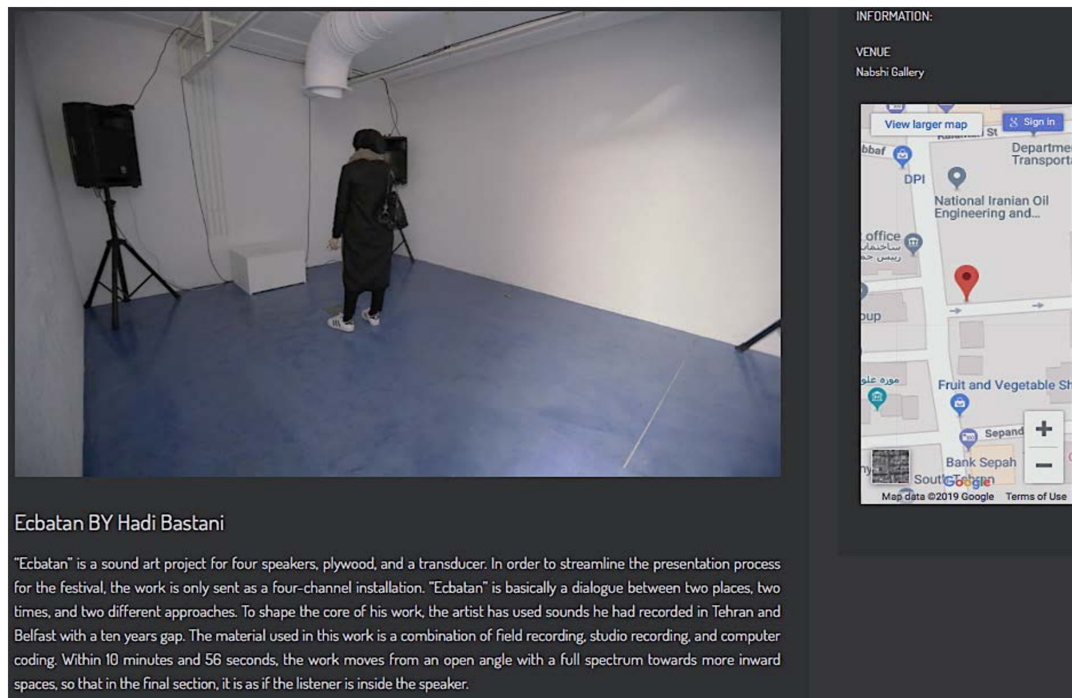


Figure 6-3. Screenshot from TADAEX 2017 programme[169]

[169] The programme as well as the and the photo are accessible via the following link (last access 31 Jan. 2019): tadaex.com/2017/work.php?id=9

6.2.3 ornamental descend

The main idea of *ornamental descend* was to respond to Ata Ebtekar's practice. Ata's work has provided a predominantly ambient scene with an important nuance and, as such, encouraging the development of new styles. Having uniquely, and rather confidently, engaged with elements of Iranian classical and folk music, his repertoire of practice provides a significant contrast to that developed by his former colleagues in SET (especially in early years). His work somehow bridges elements of 'sophisticated' club music—closer to forms such as idm and breakcore—and electroacoustic music. In an environment in which many forms of music typically played in clubs are not allowed to be represented in public in any shape or form—the kinds one may generally call, regardless of their different genric characteristics, 'groovy' or danceable—Ata's practice fills an important gap. It is partly thanks to Ata's music, optimism, enthusiastic conduct, connections, and PR abilities that SET has grown to such an extent, becoming the number one platform for experimental electronic music in Iran with a reputation that goes beyond the country's national borders.

As a prolific producer and performer, Ata is undoubtedly EEMSI's most internationally (perhaps also domestically) known figure. He has released work through prominent electronic music record labels such as Warp and performed in famous electronic music festivals such as MUTEK, CTM, and Ars electronica. He is a co-founder of SET and has been a member for almost four years (until April 2019). He also teaches electronic music in Tehran as a freelance tutor and owns Zabte Sote, the first dedicated and active electronic music record label in Iran. As a composer/performer, tutor, and record able owner his aesthetic influence is trackable within EEMSI' repertoire. Temp-Illusion's recent works are an example in which Ata's gestural electronics and rhythmic developments meet with a beat-oriented compositional approach[170]—Temp-Illusion is the duo of Shahin Entezami aka Tegh and Behrang Najafi aka Bescolour. As a result of a high-profile, two-decades-old professional career Ata's work interacts with the scene from a somewhat 'safe distance'; one that allows him to work relatively peacefully (as a 'father figure' from Eugenio Caria's point of view[171]) without steering up too much controversy.[172] Interviewing Ata in

[170] I have previously explored Ata's role in more depth within SET through 3.2 and 3.5.

[171] See Eugenio Caria's comment in page 65, which offers a similar observation with regards to Sote's status within the scene.

[172] See 4.9 for a discussion regarding competition within the scene.

earliest stages of my research effectively paved the way for further interviews and facilitated my access to the scene.

Ornamental descend is 04:03 long and, as such, is my shortest composition within the portfolio. It is composed based on a 'musical' phrase that appears at 02:31 and gradually develops through different variations and ornamental passages until the end of the piece. It explores microtonal structures, particularly quarter-tones, in a 'pop' music context—due to its length and riff-oriented character—similar to the majority of Ata's works. All sounds are formed through performing with Eurorack modules—a wavetable synthesizer, oscillators, filters, lfos, sequencers, and envelope generators. To achieve the kind of microtonal intervals and ornamental passages that the work involves, different couplings of control signals and audio sources were explored. The piece's main sonic cell—the phrase that appears at 02:31—is developed throughout the piece in the form of call and response, which is a common compositional technique in *dastgāh* music (a modal system used in Iranian classical music). Developed ornamental passages have been considered as virtue of skilful performer within Iranian folk and classical music for centuries. Performers of Iranian 'traditional' instruments have been recognised and praised within Iranian classical music literature for their authentic and elaborate use of ornamental passages.[173] Quarter-tones are also contained in many Persian dastgāhs, and, as such, are known as one of the characteristic sounds of Iranian folk and classical repertoire.

Ornamental descend was released in August 2018 as part of a diverse and expansive compilation of experimental electronic music by Iranian producers. The album, titled *Girih*, was curated by Ata Ebtekar himself and was the first album released through his own, recently-founded (2018), record label Zabte Sote in collaboration with Opal Tapes; a record label based in Newcastle (UK) whose work is known to electronic music enthusiasts. This compilation is the most comprehensive and arguably the most significant collection of 'Iranian' electronic music ever produced due to its unprecedented size and diversity. As such, *Girih* marked an apex in the activities of experimental electronic music scene in Iran. It also helped me find several new acts that I was otherwise unaware of such as Rojin Sharifi[174], Parsa

[173] In 2.1 I have provided a brief historical account addressing the status of ornament within Iranian-Islamic arts. For more discussions see Nettl (1972 and 2001), Van Khê (1980), Tsuge (1980), Reckord (1986), Bastaninezhad (2014), Azadehfar (2014), Heydarian (2016), Bahadoran (2016), and Akrami and Moghimi (2017).
[174] zabtesote.bandcamp.com/track/pulp

Jamshidi (aka PARSA)[175], and Pantea Aramfar (aka pan-tea),[176] whose valuable inputs in later interviews further informed and influenced the development of my research and practice.

Due to the return of the US sanctions on Iran following the new US administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA (aka Iran's nuclear deal) on May 2018, President Trump's obsession with 'changing Iran's behaviour', a new threat of war for which the Iranian state is also responsible, a new power struggle in Iran's neighbourhood between Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran, and the resultant (re-)radicalisation of the political theatre inside the country, the future of experimental electronic music scene seems unclear. In this situation, *Girih*'s most significant achievement may be the fact that it managed to gather a wide variety of otherwise scattered practices, introduced them to wider international audiences via a reputable platform in the field of electronic music, and, as such, archived a body of practice—a 'scene'—that may start to degenerate due to the impacts of a new period of radical political and economic instability.

Figure 6-4. Screenshot captured from Zabte Sote's page on Bandcamp[177]

[175] zabtesote.bandcamp.com/track/expopp-1
[176] zabtesote.bandcamp.com/track/a-c-a-t-in-a-basket
[177] Extracted from Zabte Sote's official page on Bandcamp, accessible via the following link (last access 4 Feb. 2019): zabtesote.bandcamp.com *Girih*'s artwork is designed by Amir B. Ashrafzad

Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

Follow

The Iran sanctions have officially been cast. These are the most biting sanctions ever imposed, and in November they ratchet up to yet another level. Anyone doing business with Iran will NOT be doing business with the United States. I am asking for WORLD PEACE, nothing less!

2:31 am - 7 Aug 2018

Figure 6-5. Screenshot from Donald Trump's Tweet (7 Aug. 2018) on the return of US sanctions on Iran[178]

Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

Follow

....Iran's very ignorant and insulting statement, put out today, only shows that they do not understand reality. Any attack by Iran on anything American will be met with great and overwhelming force. In some areas, overwhelming will mean obliteration. No more John Kerry & Obama!

7:42 am - 25 Jun 2019

Figure 6-6. Screenshot from Donald Trump's Tweet (25 Jun. 2019) in response to President Rouhani's speech[179]

[178] Extracted from Donald Trump's official twitter account, accessible via the following link (last accessed 29 May 2019): twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1026762818773757955?lang=en-gb

[179] In response to a cyber-attack launched by the US military on Iranian computer-controlled weapons on 20 June 2019, which followed four days later by more sanction on Iranian officials including the Supreme leader, Irani's President Rouhani had said that the White House was 'suffering from intellectual disability'. Trump's tweet is extracted from his official twitter account, accessible via the following link (last accessed 6 Jul.2019): twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1143529907403788288

6.2.4 pendulum: Electronic Improvisation and Visuals with Steph Horak

[There is] no point of stability or centre [with regards to our cognitive relationship to the perception of music, and to the larger world]. As in a vibrating string, the axis of the oscillations performed is the string at rest. Such a middle ground would be tantamount to silence. Resonance, by contrast, requires oscillation of both the mind and the ear. It summons us to always keep on percussing, discussing, percussing.

Veit Erlmann – Reason and Resonance (2014)

Having initially started as a conversation with the UK-based sound and voice artist Steph Horak, *pendulum* found its final shape as a live improvised electronic music and visual performance. It was presented at Sonorities festival 2018 in Sonic Laboratory of the Sonic Arts Research Centre at Queen's University Belfast. It emerged as such, as a result of the texts that Steph and I had exchanged during a three-month correspondence prior to the performance. The live setting involved electronic modules, recited poetry (playback), voice, and visuals.

The performance was formally divided in several shorter sections, such that each started with improvisation and ended with recited poetry. In the space between textual (or poetic) dialogue, improvised sounds represented our different approaches to musicking. The aim was to respond to such differences through improvisation informed by listening; to each other's playing and to the poetry. In *pendulum*, the arrangement of texts can be interpreted by the 'listener' as a dialogue between two people. In practice, however, they are juxtaposed accidentally. As such, they sometimes clash, sometimes pass by each other indifferently, and sometimes work together towards synthesis of a 'hybrid' perspective. The entanglement of text and improvised sounds within the piece is intended to serve as an intuitive context for manifestations of difference—different point of views, approaches, decision-making processes, and attitudes.

The main idea for the piece was, on the one hand, to explore, based on our own texts and sound-based practice, the apparently 'instinctive' human tendency towards constructing dichotomies in dealing with complex issues. We had conjectured that the existence of such a seemingly 'natural' inclination is a basis for the emergence of many forms of technology including the digital. To that aim, we surveyed various uses of binary oppositions within our own poetic and reflexive writings and

picked a number of texts, which reflected those in relation to the notion of 'difference' with regards to issues of identity, gender, race, culture, and politics. On the other hand, we were keen to reflect on digital music media's capacity to 're-open creative agency' (Born 2005, 26) through 'decomposing' the 'aural and visual objects into basic binary representations' (*ibid*, 28); an underlying driving force responsible for the emergence and burgeoning of a digital arts and experimental electronic music scene in Iran that has been subject to scrutiny in this text. In this context, *Pendulum*'s aim from my perspective was also to respond to a relatively recent, and still very niche, interest within EEMSI in relation to live improvised electronic music performances; a form which has been almost completely absent from the scene's live repertoire.

The poetry element was stored in a digital sampler module as a series of pre-recorded samples, which were supposed to be triggered by the visuals during the performance according to a set timing. The visual component was produced using a basic Max/MSP code extracted from a patch that was uploaded on Cycling 74 forum[180] by a user under the alias VINCE. The latter consisted of three black graphic pendulums that oscillated at different frequencies. In our version, the pendulums' bobs were rendered transparent in three colours: red, green, and blue. We tweaked the patch such that the pre-recorded poetry was triggered (via OSC messages) in certain instances of the meeting of two or three pendulums at an *extreme*—the only point in the trajectory of pendulum in which, as a result of a 'non-zero acceleration' that involves a change of direction, an ephemeral balance occurs. Through the correlation between poetry and the meeting of pendulums, the piece intended to metaphorically emphasise the significance of such a fleeting moment; one in which actors reach a fragile equilibrium before starting to diverge once again towards opposite poles. As the RGB bobs overlapped, their transparent shape allowed for the synthesis of new colours, which also served to further highlight such an ephemeral balance.

Due to a technical problem during the performance, however, the Max patch did not trigger the pre-recorded poetry samples at the 'right' moments. Instead, it acted as if completely independently from the pre-programmed setting. This resulted in 'misplaced' audio-visual relations that undermined the performance dramaturgy. Although it would be interesting to pursue a line of inquiry concerning an evaluation

---

[180] cycling74.com/forums/page/1

of *pendulum* in terms of success/failure, the main question for me in the context of this research is the following: how can the experience of enacting *pendulum* help me provide more insight into EEMSI's processes? What are the points of contact/departure between EEMSI's repertoire and *pendulum* from the perspective of this research? To answer these, I would like to begin with reflecting on the following thought: in one of my two main attempts to perform improvised electronic music during the course of this research—the other one being a collaboration with Pouya Ehsaei[181] at IKLECTIC London (March 2018) which will be discussed later—something ended up going 'wrong': a piece of code that was configured to 'meaningfully' mediate between the visual component and the sonic did not do its job 'properly'.

I would argue that EEMSI's aesthetic specificity (or otherwise shortcomings) in live performance situations—by which I specifically refer to the noticeable scarcity of improvised sets—can be understood in terms of an embodied resistance against 'uncertainty': contexts in which there is relatively higher chance for things to go 'wrong'. Through a perspective on a clash between the affects of an invasive mechanism of social-political, juridical, ethical-moral control—a 'machinic' process that I identified, explained, and termed 'amorphous regulatorium'[182] in Chapter 5 (5.2, page 125)—and digital media's capacity to 're-open creative agency' (Born 2005:26), the above understanding can provide us with significant insight. In *On Musical Mediation* (2005) Georgina Born claims that such a 're-opening' is made possible as 'digital media supersede the capacity of material artefacts to stop the flow of re-creation [...] Music shows this remarkably well: digitized music, distributed via MP3s, CDs and the internet, is continually, immanently open to re-creation.' (26) I would argue, however, that any similar arguments in relation to digital arts/music in Iran should begin by theoretically dealing with the state's aggressive policies in, on the one hand, filtering the flow of material artefacts and, on the other, to monitor and restrict

[181] Reflections on the performance with Pouya Ehsaei is offered in the next section.
[182] As defined in Chapter Five, the almost-(im)permissibles involves a large category of coordinated 'actants'—behaviours, thoughts, practices, ethics, laws—that in the current situation operate at the conjunction of radically different worlds—the world of internet 'imaginaries' and the world of social 'realities'; the converging worlds of 'mad' technological acceleration and neoliberal capitalism, and the isolated worlds of ideological-political resistances against the latter and its 'cultural' hegemony. The almost-(im)permissibles are, however, and more broadly, a historically grounded by-product of ambiguous ethics resulting from particular transcultural-social-economic-ecological-(theologico-)political processes and power relations in the Iranian plateau. They are an amorphous, semi-autonomous, agentive force that guarantee a creative reproduction of the mechanisms, or 'fuzzy' channels, through which moral-ideological-political control sustains itself without being sufficiently detected and countered.

people's access, as much as possible, to any possibility (even in thought) outside the boundaries of its control. It is only after this theoretical manoeuvre, it seems to me, that the agency of digital and new media technologies in offering creative possibilities can be meaningfully explored in the context of this research. In other words, to rigorously investigate such a capacity to act and make difference in relation to formations of aesthetics, processes, activities, and preferences or 'tastes', we first need to situate it within a particular social-material-semiotic[183] context.

My findings show, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, that what digital and new media technologies have enabled in the context of EEMSI involve new forms of thinking, practice, and sociality. This has taken place through disruption of ideologically-grounded processes of political control exerted upon production-consumption, ethical-moral and legal regulation, economic and curricular activity, and through redistribution of knowledge, social relations, means of production and dissemination. Through this viewpoint, EEMSI's emergent 'live' aesthetics can be conceptualised in terms of a metamorphosis: a *bodily* transition from a previously tedious and rather passive (or otherwise repressed) mode of existence to a much more active one that involves a playful engagement with making and performing electronic music. Although this transition has been unfolding in the public domain (online and offline) for almost a decade now, it is still too young in social-historical-biological terms. From the perspective of this research, the aesthetics of electronic music performance in Iran still externalises the tensions arising from a creative engagement with the affordances/limitations of digital technologies, in a cosmopolitan setting mediated by the internet, and embodied effects of the 'almost-(im)permissibles'.

The latter description resonates with Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi's understanding of Foucault's writings about the mass movements that led to the 1979 revolution in Iran, as the consequence of body's desire to liberate from the prison of the soul (2016). I do not use this analogy to draw a parallel with the conditions of the 1979 revolution—a historical event in relation to which EEMSI generation has no direct, unmediated, access—but to specifically draw attention to this play between 'body' and 'soul' as repeatedly articulated in Foucault's writings. As described in *Discipline*

[183] This emphasis on the 'social' is not meant to be exclusive of the biological-ecological influences. Social-material is, therefore, meant as a holistic and entangled concept, involving all forms of a 'mattering' (Barad 2007) and sociality that is consist of materials, actors, relations, mediations, agencies, biologies, ecologies, histories, subjects, objects, perceptions, semiotics, and metaphysics, as described in 1.6 (page 20).

and Punish (1977), the kind of soul that Foucault refers to is 'the effect and instrument of a political anatomy' (25); 'the present correlative of a certain technology of power over the body.' (29). As such, it finds a parallel in my concept of 'amorphous regulatorium' and its social affects. EEMSI's live performance aesthetics has emerged through an intensive, situated, and embodied play that has been unfolding, although rather marginally, against the manifestations of the mainstream culture in Iran between the 'externalising', 'de-regulatory', 'freedom-seeking' body and the 'internalising', 'regulatory', 'claustrophobic', ideologically-politically moulded and 'morality-seeking' 'soul'.

EEMSI's aesthetic specificity—the question of why only a specific array of electronic music practices has surfaced within Iranian society in public domain—can be broadly understood in relation to four themes that have emerged through the process of this research and in contact with the works and words of my interlocutors. These can provide a context for understanding why electronic improvisation has been a rarity within EEMSI:

1- The lack of an experimental electronic music tradition in Iran;
2- Restrictive and regulatory processes that can only be surpassed *creatively*, through synthesis of new *reliable* forms; forms that are able to enter into constructive exchange with the state's filtering machine and society's needs and anxieties, without causing an abrupt disturbance;
3- Digital interfaces and the internet's capacity to facilitate such syntheses through enabling new forms of 'mattering' (Barad 2007) distributed through (sufficiently) de-centralised networks, beyond the confines of the nation-state;
4- Disentanglement of the embodied control: (re)discovering and reconfiguring the affective limits of almost-(im)permissibles through performance (in its broadest sense of the term).

In the context of live improvised electronic music, the performance ecosystem, as a contingent ecology, is fragile. As Waters (2007b, 4) notes: 'The relationship between performer, instrument and environment becomes notably mutable in situations in which component elements are assembled in the real time of performance.' Lurking beneath the visible surface, technical and bodily 'glitches' are often agents of transgressive change that impose new demands upon the ecosystemic behaviour by

disrupting, at times radically, the performatively and/or empathetically negotiated 'design'. Radical disturbances as such leave the musicking humans with only one good response: to creatively adapt. For the young digital arts and experimental electronic music movement in Iran this can be difficult, in the sense that their response needs to be carefully measured in advance, as part of an ongoing negotiation with other forces enacted within society, including those of the state. EEMSI involves performances of individuals who, in order to explore new uncertain territories, need to simultaneously develop a reliable 'map' that enables them to confidently navigate the (social-cultural and ideological-political) 'red zones'. Such a traverse requires the approval of the 'authorities': forces of the state as well as the 'internalised' agents of 'self-policing'. In this context, live electronic improvisation seems to be a particularly risky method of musicking in Iran, at least for now, due to the challenging and unexpected outcomes it may produce; contexts in which things may go 'wrong'.

A discussion of *pendulum* in this section hoped to explore how reflecting on the correlation between situated embodied musicking human agents' decisions and the ecosystemic behaviour in the context of live electronic music, through a perspective over the social and performative aspects of 'noise' and 'control', can generate new understandings regarding EEMSI's aesthetics specificity. In the following part I will specifically focus on three collaborative projects, which have offered this research significant new insights into EEMSI's conceptual and practical workings. More substantial attention, however, will be given to one of the projects titled *intra.view* to investigate how, as a locus for the meeting of different modes of doing and thinking sound, collaborative composition can synthesise perspectives that are otherwise hardly accessible through (particularly online) participant-observation techniques.

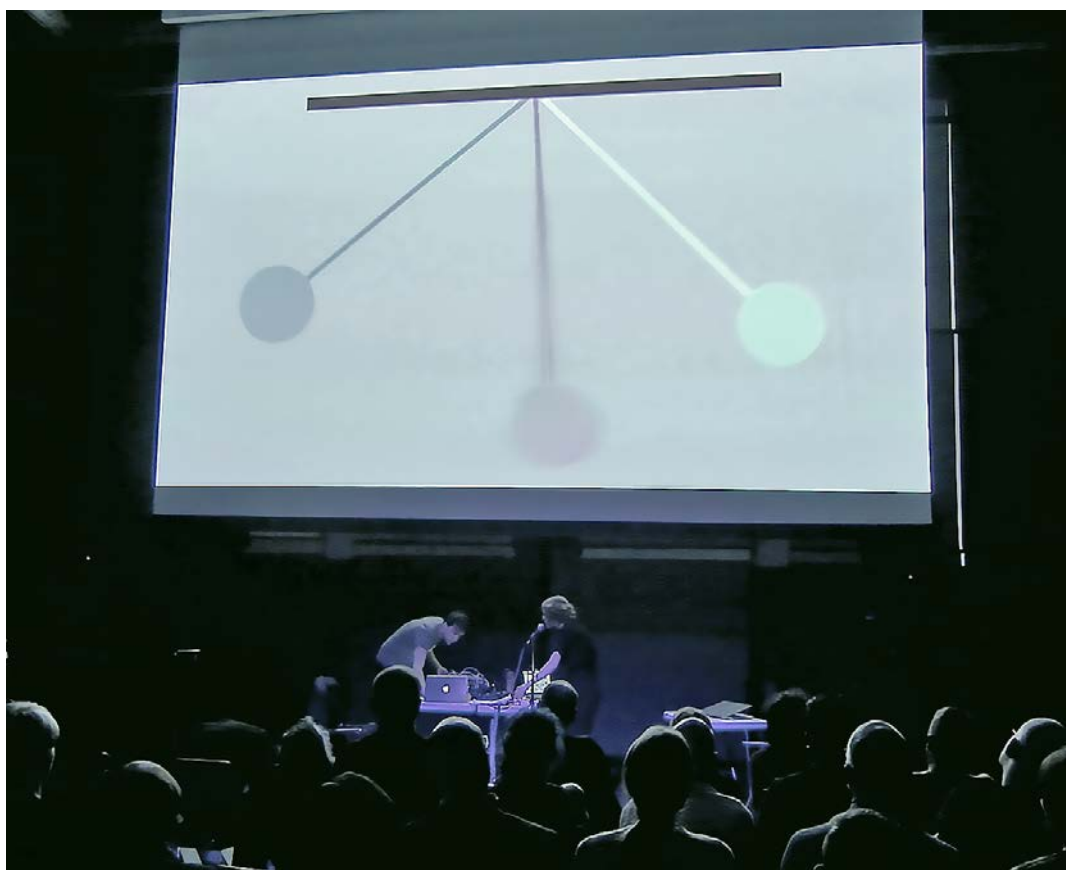


Figure 6-7. Screenshot from the video documentation of *pendulum* at Sonorities 2017

6.3 Collaborative Composition as Ethnographic Research: A Practice-Led Experiment

6.3.1 Collaboration within The Scene

In 2015 Simon Waters sent me a pre-published version of his paper *Tullis Rennie's Muscle Memory: Listening to the Act of Listening* (2015, 22–32), which influenced my research in its earliest stage and encouraged me to think about designing collaborative experiments. In that paper Waters analyses Rennie's piece to 'test the extent to which four roles which Simon Frith (1987) identifies as crucial to the meaningfulness of popular music may have broader application than he intended, being helpful not only in understanding "popular uses of '"serious"' music" (2007, 149) but music in general' (Waters 2015, 23). Waters concluded his text on the following note (*ibid*, 31):

> Although obviously not entirely without recourse to language, Muscle Memory 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.

Steven Feld had previously argued 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) Feld's *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra* (2012), which reports on his experience of performing and recording with the Ghanaian musicians, could, however, be viewed as an example where this synthesis had happened. Inspired by Feld's work, Waters' paper, and Rennie's experiment, I set out to explore how this research could benefit from collaboration. Considering the fact that I did not have physical access to the 'field' and that I had to mainly rely on online ethnography and my own experiences, also on my broader research and sound-based practice of course, this experiment could potentially contribute significantly to this PhD, and so it did. The idea was to investigate how collaborative composition could be exploited simultaneously as ethnography and instigative-artistic practice for a more engaged and less-mediated exploration of the music scene in Iran.

From a different perspective, the theme of collaboration emerged through my fieldnotes in the summer of 2017. By then, I had conducted some 25 interviews

mainly with artists, producers, and audiences of experimental electronic music in Iran. Through an initial analysis of that material, I had gathered that collaboration was a common practice within the scene and perhaps for obvious reasons. These are well articulated in *The Musical Process in the Age of Digital Intervention* (Waters 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.

Despite the abundance and variety of data that was already gathered through interviews and online ethnography by the summer of 2017, one crucial aspect of the practices I had set out to investigate could not be sufficiently explored. This was due to the fact that discussions on the *process* of making—the act of engaging with materials as a process of mutual transformation and craft—was sparse, suggesting that this was probably going to be the most challenging aspect of studying EEMSI from a distance for me. That I could not be physically among my interlocutors to experience their doings and to observe and talk about their not-doings, as they worked on new materials, signalled a gap that could not be fulfilled merely by online ethnography and through interview. Collaboration filled exactly that gap. Above all else, it qualified certain types of discussion with my interlocutors that could have not otherwise taken place. It also further validated my position as a researcher and collaborator within the scene and enabled a new channel for rigorous practice-led investigation of the case at hand.

As described in 4.5 (page 93–94), the earliest example of a collective practice within EEMSI was Saroseda. This short-lived digital arts and experimental electronic music series managed to connect producers (online and offline), who, in their private spaces, were otherwise immersed in individual experimentation without being aware of their 'peers' across, as well as outside, the country. The connections were made during workshops, talks, and performances that were organised by artists themselves, some with connection to Mohsen Gallery in Tehran. Saroseda's Facebook[184] also helped spreading the word and expanding connections within the scene. Following some disputes among artists, particularly about the lack of transparency regarding

[184] facebook.com/groups/Saroseda/

the collective's financial output and unclear ties to Mohsen Gallery, Saroseda dissolved. It later morphed, however, into a much larger organisation called TADAEX (Tehran Annual Digital Arts Exhibition), founded directly by the owner of Mohsen Gallery. TADAEX is now established as the major digital arts festival in Iran. Hesam Ohadi (aka Idlefon)—electronic musician and creative coder based in Tehran—recalls:

> 'Before its dissolution in 2011, Saroseda organised three public events in Mohsen gallery, in a venue in Mazandaran (a province in northern Iran), and in Aun gallery Tehran.'
> *Interviewed on 22 Sep. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Another example is SET Experimental Arts Events (aka SET festival). SET is now established as the main hub for the showcase of experimental electronic music in Iran. Collaboration within SET is not just limited to the artists based inside the country. Most of SET members have established contacts beyond the national borders and collaborated with artists and producers based in different countries. As a collective, they have also teamed up with renowned electronic music festivals such as CTM Berlin[185] and MUTEK[186]. In the next few lines I am going to mention, in no particular order, several names that have been influential in the development of the scene as I know it: Metro 14[187] (disbanded after their debut album *Where the Light Dies*, released on the Tehran-based Music blog and record label Zirzamin in 2011); Photomat[188] (disbanded after their debut album *Windowsill*, released on the now-dissolved Madrid-based netlabel Oído Records in 2011); Temp-illusion[189] (a still-active duo founded in 2011 by Shain Entezami aka Tegh and Behrang Najafi aka Bescolour); *Organism*[190] / *Organism_evolution*[191] (a collaborative album by the Sanandaj-based artist Porya Hatami and German artist Uwe Zahn aka Arovane, released on the Berlin-based netlabel Karlrecords in 2018); elemaun[192] (an audio-visual project initiated by Ali Panahi aka Ali Phi); *Topology of Figments*[193] (a collaborative album by the Tehran-based artist Siavash Amini and Athens-based artist Phil Gardelis aka Zenjungle, released on the

[185] SETxCTM 2018 in Tehran: setfest.org/portfolios/setxctm-2018/
CTMxSET 2019 in Berlin: setfest.org/portfolios/ctmxset-2019/
[186] MUTEKxSET 2018 in Barcelona: setfest.org/portfolios/setxmutek-2018/
[187] facebook.com/metro14band/
[188] facebook.com/photomatband/
[189] facebook.com/tempillusion/
[190] karlrecords.net/?page_id=435
[191] karlrecords.net/?page_id=546
[192] elemaun.com
[193] flamingpines.bandcamp.com/album/topology-of-figments

Sydney-based netlabel Flaming Pines in 2016); *Refactor*[194] (a collaboration between sound artist Vedad Famourzadeh and visual artist Nikzad Arabshahi, both based in Tehran, presented as a generative audiovisual installation in 2017 in Tehran–curated by Mojdeh gallery and Iranshahr gallery).

[194] derivative.ca/events/2017/Refactor/

6.3.2 intra.view: A Collaborative Composition

The project started by selecting four participants at random among my interlocutors.[195] To my surprise, all the first four candidates chosen—Kiana Tajammol, Sohrab Motabar, Ramin Safavi, and Mo H. Zareei—agreed to participate. Finding a structure for collaboration was the theme of our initial conversations. The idea of working simultaneously via an online collaborative platform was rejected due to unpredictabilities of accessing the internet in Iran and the logistics of managing a timetable for five individuals to get online at the same time and write music or perform together in different time zones. We finally agreed that it was best if we compose individually, at our own pace, and share the result via a cloud-based file-sharing service such as Wetransfer or Dropbox. The participants also agreed that I had to kickstart the process myself.

I began by making a generative music patch using NI Reaktor[196], which involved a few noise generators, filters, sample players, a harmoniser, and a granular synthesis engine. Using this programme, a piece was written that consisted of two parts: a fully composed eight-minute section that involved my active engagement with the above-mentioned objects through performance, and a forty-two-minute 'generative' section produced through an exchange among the objects themselves according to a self-regulating feedback mechanism. While the first part was somewhat charged with my presence as composer, the second part involved a quasi-autonomous mechanism through which a fluid and rather minimal soundscape emerged without my direct intervention in its process. We agreed to consider the first eight minutes as the first composer's active response to the affordances and limitations of working with only a few source materials and modifiers, and the following forty-two minutes as a basis upon which everyone else could construct their response in relation to the first composer's (i.e. my) intervention (the first eight minutes). Everyone was allowed to sample any part of the piece (the whole fifty minutes) or to work with her/his own material while producing music/sound that reacted in some shape or form to my composition/intervention.

---

[195] For selecting the potential participants, I assigned each of my interlocutors a number. The ordering of these numbers corresponded to the sequence of our interviews in the course of the research. For instance, the first person with whom I interviewed (the earliest interview in the course of the research) was assigned 1, the second 2, and so on. Then, using a random number generator in Max/MSP, four numbers were produced.

[196] Reaktor is a graphical modular software that allows for a visual, object-based approach to composition and sound design. For more information visit: native-instruments.com/en/products/komplete/synths/reaktor-6/

I received the responses consecutively on May 4 (Ramin), June 13 (Mo), June 22 (Sohrab), and August 9 (Kiana), 2017. Ramin sent me a video as well. It was captured from a live version of his response, which he had performed with a fellow producer in a private party in Tehran. Listening back to the responses, an immediate remark can be made in relation to the length of the compositions. Except Mo who entirely disregarded the second part of the original piece, producing a remix of the first eight minutes in an idm style, the other three participants based their compositions on the entirety of the second part interacting in different ways with the forty-two-minute computer-generated soundscape. Sohrab's and Kiana's pieces, although very different from each other in their choice of material and sound manipulation processes, could be broadly placed within a tradition of electroacoustic music. Ramin's beat-oriented, concept-album-like response, however, had hip-hop influences. Mo's remix revealed an idm inspiration that manifested in his placement (or timing) of kick drums, use of digital delay, and heavy side-chain compression.

Sohrab's composition remained somewhat faithful to the generic form of the original soundscape, responding to its abrupt changes and gradual shifts. It presented a playful exchange with the original material. His recording sounded very much 'performed'; as if he had composed through performance. Although I could constantly distinguish the original sounds throughout Sohrab's piece, his interventions constantly challenged those, producing zones of contestation and tension, while occasionally releasing the pressure and dropping the listener back into the rather calm and familiar field of reference; that of the source material.

Sohrab graduated after this collaboration, in 2018, from a Master's degree at Institute of Sonology in Royal Conservatory of The Hague in computer-assisted composition using non-standard synthesis techniques. He is based in the Hague but travels frequently between Iran and Holland. He described his method of interacting with the piece as follows:

> I have used three drum loops and a virtual tape sampler with variable speed as parts of a bigger patch I had made in Max/MSP. The drum loops' tempi are determined by the speed with which the tape sampler reads the source audio that consists of samples that I had recorded from the first eight minutes of your piece. Then I coupled the output of the sampler with the drum loops in different ways using ring modulation, vocoding, sidechain compression, etc. […] Next, I listened to the second part of your piece again and realised that it somehow functioned as silence for me or like a background noise. So, I used this part as a basis over which I improvised with my Max patch, while trying to pay attention and respond to the overall shape and texture of your work in real time

> […] As you have noticed it too, my piece sounds very much performed. *Interviewed on 1 Jul. 2017 (2nd interview – translated from Persian by myself)*

I used the opportunity of speaking to him again to ask how he became interested in electronic and electroacoustic music in a country with almost no background in these fields. His response was illuminating as it pointed me in an obvious direction, which I had not previously considered—to the national TV and Radio. He replied:

> I grew up among people who were seriously influenced by the transformation in Iranian arts with modern influences. Shiraz Festival, for instance, was influential in spreading new forms of practice, I think. But even in the suffocating years of 1980s [the first decade after the revolution] and early 1990s one could still hear electronic music on TV and Radio. Many famous works of the 1960s and 1970s were used—of course all the copyright stuff was ignored [he laughs]—from Vangelis to Pink Floyd to Jean-Michel Jarre. I mean such aesthetics and influences did not suddenly disappear after the revolution. These kinds of stimuli in my surroundings certainly had an influence on the development of my musical taste.

Around two month later, a comment made by Javad Safari—the engineer who had helped my band (White Comedy) record and mix its debut, and last album in Kargadan Studio in Tehran—also pointed me in the same direction:

> Apart from a very few works published for instance by Ahmad Pejman and Naser Cheshm Azar—works like *Barane Eshgh* and *Hameh Shahre Iran* in which keyboard synthesisers were used mainly to mimic the familiar sounds of acoustic instruments—people could still hear electronic music in cinema, also on TV and Radio; mainly in the background of programs for instance during weather forecast, news, and documentaries. *Interviewed on 25 Aug. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

The comments made by Sohrab and Javad (above) provided the provocation for exploring Shiraz Festival (discussed in 2.3) and the impact of national TV and Radio, as well as the film industry, on the emergence of an experimental electronic music scene in Iran (discussed in 2.6, 2.7 and 4.2).

Let us go back to *intra.view*. Sohrab's strategy in responding to the general form and texture of the piece was shared among all the participants. However, his spontaneous, improvisatory, and performative approach in responding to the changes in the source material separated his work from the rest of the group's. Kiana told me that she had mainly used 'field-recording and samples recorded from playing with objects in her flat while listening to the original piece', in a more in-control way and cinematic style. (Interviewed on 5 Feb. 2018 – translated by myself from Persian) Her work is composed mainly using found objects and field recordings juxtaposed with highly processed or synthesised sounds, and a layer of pitch-shifted human

voice with no semantic content, which sounds like a mixture of humming and delirious growling. The piece begins, rather abruptly, with a layered drone that sounds like a synthetic glass harmonica. After about thirty seconds, sound of fireworks (or fired bullets) and ambulance siren position the 'listener' in the middle of a field, where events had already been taking place. Before the 'listener' could find time to figure out what the origin of the sounds might be, s/he is dropped into a new synthetic-sounding environment where s/he would follow a voice; a female voice. Such abrupt cuts constantly introduce the 'listener' to new soundscapes. As such, the piece presents a dream-like environment in which momentarily-established events are repeatedly replaced and/or transformed by new ones. In the midst of this constantly-shifting soundscape, the listener is occasionally transported back into an environment, where the clatters of familiar everyday life could be distinguished.

Kiana graduated from a Bachelor's degree in New Technologies in Art with a focus on video art from Brera Academy of Milan in 2015. She was based in Tehran when I interviewed her on February 2018, but moved back to Italy around 10 months later. She told me that she was initially introduced to EEMSI through her Italian partner who is an electronic producer. Regarding her experience of participating in this collaborative composition project and her methods, she said to me:

> I was listening to the news just before starting to work on the piece. So, I had all those images and sounds of Syria and other stuff in my head. I began by playing with and recording certain objects in my flat. Listening back to the recordings, I realised that I could hear TV news it in the background. After a few times of more careful listening, as I was composing with these sounds, I realised that I could also hear another distant noise that I had not been aware of when I made the recordings. It was from the near-by airport and an operation that I had recently made aware of; that of washing the plane engines. My previous flat, where I composed the piece, was in a residential complex [Ekbatan], which is located near Mehrābād [an airport in west-end of Tehran]. The field recordings that I mentioned were produced in Milan during a festive night with fireworks and ambulance sirens. It felt right to use them as they sonically invoked an environment close to that of the TV news [war in Syria]. I finished the piece by improvising a bit with my voice on top. *Interviewed on 5 Feb. 2018 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Ramin described the shape of the original material as 'wave-like', noting that:

> Like sea waves, the events in your piece come to the foreground of attention and fade to the background in varying intervals, both in big and small chunks. I decided to retain this characteristic in my response. *Interviewed on 25 Apr. 2018 (2nd interview – translated from Persian by myself)*

He was not otherwise interested to talk about his methods. He said: 'Whatever you want to hear is already there [in the music].' (Interviewed on 25 Apr. 2017 – translated from Persian by myself) He did not even send me the original file of his composition. Instead, he offered two live recordings from two performances of his piece, one that he had played alone in his bedroom/studio and another which he had performed with a fellow producer in a private gathering somewhere in Tehran. The former was an M4A audio file, recorded via his iPhone, and the latter was an MP4 multimedia file (audio and video), which was captured using a camcorder.

Ramin's response teases out two important aspects of musical practice, perhaps more clearly than other participants. Firstly, by recording sound via mobile phone and camcorder, it reminds the 'listener' of the mediatory role of technology in shaping 'music' and the way its affect is communicated. Within the recordings, such a mediation manifested for instance in certain qualitative features that could be explored using an audio spectrogram visualiser. Viewed as such, the waveforms revealed 'traces' of Ramin's room as accentuation of certain resonant frequencies and suppression of others. This can be discerned from the picture on the next page, which offers a screenshot from the spectrogram of the recording made in Ramin's bedroom/studio, in the shape of an audio spectrum weighted to the low and mid frequencies (colourful areas) and sparse in higher ones (dark areas), indicating that the energy of low frequencies have 'masked' higher ones with shorter wave lengths. This can be heard as a recognisable 'hum' in the lower-end of the frequency spectrum, which is the result of bass frequencies' movement between the concrete walls coated with plaster in Ramin's room. Secondly, his response highlighted the fact that we always experience sounds as vibrations in the space. Through Georgina Born's perspective, which offers the view that that the 'most distinguishing feature of the auditory experience is its capacity to reconfigure the space' (2013, 3), Ramin's work could be experienced as an agent that reconfigured the space of his room, the place of gathering in Tehran, my studio in Belfast, and my research.

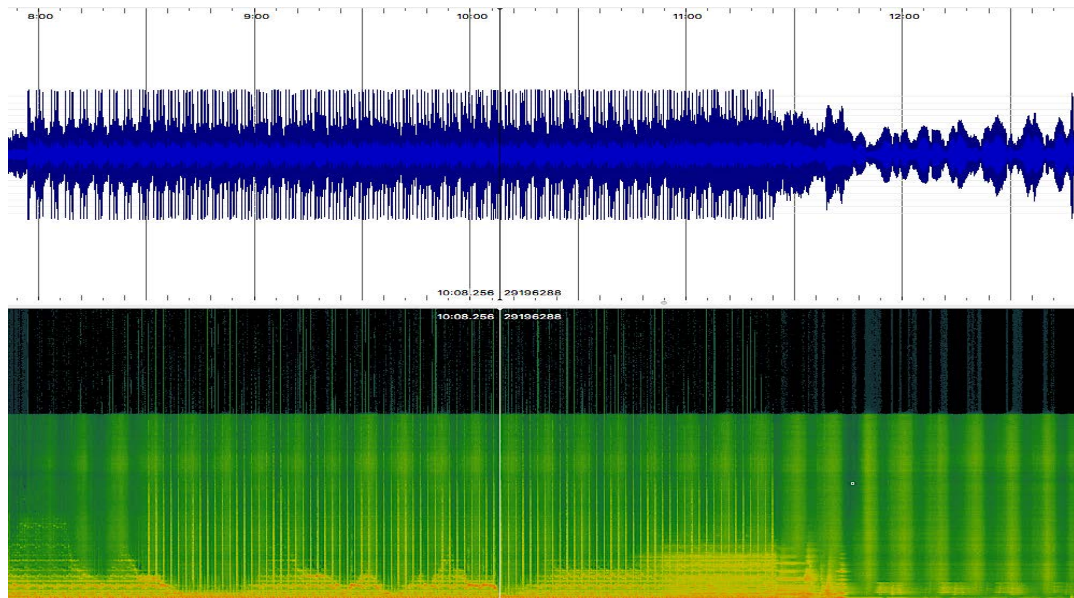


Figure 6-8. Screenshot from a part of the spectrogram of Ramin's composition produced using Sonic Visualiser

Ramin's response also shares with us a rather personal experience. It lets us 'in' his most private space, a place in which his musical journey had begun and developed. In so doing, it emphasises the relation of that space to his music/sound and reminds us of the distributed (or social) aspect of musical practice in its broader relationship to space, place[197], and affect. Lastly, by limiting us to 'low-quality' recordings, one of which articulates an experience of his bedroom/studio while the other involves a video that arguably foregrounds his image more than the sound, Ramin reminds us of his 'presence', his individuality, significance, and agency.

Mo is based in New Zealand, where he lecturers in Music Technology at Victoria University of Wellington. He also travels frequently to Iran. His descriptions similarly reveal a relationship between the sonic aesthetics of his practice in general, including his response in the context of this collaboration, to space/place. In his case, this space/place is Ekbatan; the residential complex where he grew up. He says:

> It was summer of 2014. I was walking in Ekbatan when something about the environment suddenly struck me. I discovered a close relationship between the 'modern' brutalist architecture of the place and the kind of aesthetics that interested me in music and design, for example those that were promoted through Raster-Noton [record label]. In fact, I simply realised that I had grown up in an environment that possessed distinct aesthetic features. I always loved Ekbatan and appreciated its orderliness. Any time I came back home, I felt a familiar sense of relief. This realisation led me to research brutalist architecture, which in turn made me increasingly see relationships between the sonic aesthetics and design philosophy of the Raster-Noton, brutalist architecture, and that of my own practice. So, an obvious connection was made between my environment

[197] For an anthropological investigation of the relations between space and place see Feld and Basso (1996).

> and my practice in terms of an appreciation of order and structure. I later co-published a paper in *Organised Sound* [2016, Volume 21, Special Issue 1, 51–60] and discussed this in more detail. *Interviewed on 28 Sep. 2017 (translated from Persian by myself)*

Three out of four participants, which were selected at random for this project, lived at least a part of their life in Ekbatan[198]. This is interesting. Apart from Kiana, Ramin, Mo, and myself, I know that Siavash Amini and Sina Shoaei also lived periods of their lives in Ekbatan. There may be others too. A more local and focused investigation of the relationship between place and the aesthetics of experimental electronic music in Iran can potentially offer significant new insights into the workings of the scene. The relevance Ekbatan's architecture, spatio-material distribution, demographics on the emergence of particular styles of electronic music practice in Tehran, could in itself be a new direction for further research.

Juxtaposed with the interview material and participants' descriptions, the four compositions prove to be a large source of information and potential knowledge. In addition to what was discussed, Kiana's work with its references to Mehrābād airport and war in Syria, together with Ramin's sonic references to his claustrophobic bedroom, draws attention to the spatial aspect of sound/music and its relation to private-public continuum as a segmented and partitioned space; 'one with potential for generating multiple nestings.' (Born 2013, 25, citing Gal 2002, 81). Ramin's and Sohrab's descriptions regarding the form and function of the original material, using terms like 'foreground' and 'background', also draw attention to the cognitive aspect of listening as a situated embodied activity.

To conclude, I would note that by highlighting the role of technology, space/place, and cognition, the responses evoke a discussion regarding the modality of musical practice as 'inherently mediational' in the sense that 'music is always (but variably) experienced through a constellation of aural, notational, visual, performative, corporeal, social, discursive, and technological forms—forms that mediate music (or sound)' (Born 2013, 9). It is in the light of this insight—of music as mediational practice—that, using Latour's concept of 'mediators' (2005, 39), meaning can be extracted and analysed as translated, distorted, and modified through music, helping us understand 'how music is transformed by its social manifestations or embodiments, as the social is being produced and transformed by music.' (Born 2013, 9)

---

[198] Aerial view of Ekbatan (last accessed 28 Jul. 2018):
wikimapia.org/1320963/Ekbatan-Residential-Complex#/photo/1195811

Presented in public venues, the initially private, personal, and dispersed manifestations of experimental electronic music in Iran have found a 'voice' and a position within the society. Equipped with a refreshed (or re-invented) sense of social identity, experimental electronic sound has reconfigured the public within particular niches of activity in the country (and beyond), offering a new 'sense' of spaces to those who experienced its unfolding 'on the ground'. The experimental electronic 'voice', as such, has been articulating an embodiment and imagination of the place, which has fed back into the society and catalysed new modes of practice, thinking, and sociality.

In the last stage of the project I recomposed the original work, based on all the four responses I had received, in order to add yet another layer of commentary and close the circle. The piece was presented as an audio-visual collaboration with the US-based visual artist Anna Weisling at Sonorities Festival 2018 in the Sonic Arts Research Centre, Queen's University Belfast. Unfortunately, none of the participants managed to come to Belfast to contribute to the performance of the work due to other engagements or difficulties obtaining visa. I contacted Narcissa Kasraï—electroacoustic composer based in Tehran—who I hoped would be interested in collaborating. She agreed. The festival's management team officially invited her to perform and provided support for her visa, travel, and accommodation costs for the period of the festival. Despite assurances and supports, Narcissa was unsuccessful in obtaining a visa. I recount this story to tease out another aspect of this collaboration in its inevitable entanglement with the political.

With a focus on the creative process and collective experience, *intra.view* offered an opportunity for coordinated artistic exchange and ethnographic research, the result of which influenced the discussions and arguments presented in the thesis. As such, this collaboration suggests a new form of ethnography; the one in which the familiar role of the ethnographer, who *observes* the activities of her/his 'informants' and/or *participates* in their performances, is reversed. Within the scenario put forward by *intra.view*, the ethnographer as artist-participant-collaborator sets up a context for collective art-making, the more precise conditions of which is negotiated and designed with the help of his interlocutors. This practice is aimed to encourage the 'informants' to get directly involved in the process of the research, codetermining its outcome and future directions. The task of the ethnographer, in this respect,

apart from being a collaborator, becomes the examiner of the said involvements, their inter-relations, and their broader connections to the 'flows' that are often understood by the artists/musicians to be external, hence secondary, to the processes of making and, as such, ignored during informal conversations or formal interviews.

Figure 6-9. Kiana Tajammol (left) performing at Sayeh Art Galery, Tehran, 17 Sep. 2016. Photo by Behshad Tajammol.

Figure 6-10. Sohrab Motabar performing at Today's Art Festival, The Grey Space, The Hague, 22 Sep. 2018.

Figure 6-11. Mo H. Zareei aka mHz performing at SETxCTM Festival, Azadi Tower, Tehran, 26 Jul. 2018.

Figure 6-12. Ramin Safavi (left) performing his version of intra.view with a fellow musician in a private event, Tehran, 18 Apr. 2017. Image is a screenshot captured by myself from the video that Ramin has sent me of this performance.

6.3.3 Slides-zen-Dives: Electronic Improvisation with Pouya Ehsaei

The idea of this piece took shape when Kate Carr asked me on Facebook if I was interested in performing as part of an electronic music event that she was curating at IKLECTIK Art Lab in London.[199] I have known Kate in person since 2016. I first found out about her involvement with EEMSI following the release of *Birds of a Feather*; an album by the Sanandaj-based field recordist and sound artist Porya Hatami and the Toronto-based producer and sound artist Michael Trommer. It was released through Kate's own record label, Flaming Pines, in 2012.[200]

Birds of a Feather was the first Iranian experimental electronic work I knew that was issued through a non-Iranian record label—perhaps with the only exception of Ata Ebtekar's earlier productions, for instance his 2002 Warp Records release *Electric Deaf* EP. Since the start of his professional career, Hatami has only released through non-Iranian labels. Online data about him indicates that he is still based in Sanandaj, a city of mainly Kurdish population in the west of Iran near the border with Iraq. Finding his work was a surprise. I did not know him. None of my friends and contacts knew him directly either. He has been an enigmatic figure; a producer who has put out mature works of drone, ambient, and soundscape, often in collaboration with producers known internationally within ambient music circles such as the Northern Irish Darren McClure[201]. I contacted him three times during this research; he never replied.

Kate later published *Absence*; a compilation of mostly ambient works that became a 'soundmark' of Iranian experimental electronic music scene. Regarding how she first came into contact with the scene, she told me:

> It was with Porya Hatami whom I reached out to via Soundcloud in 2012. He put out this album called *Birds of a Feather* via Flaming Pines later that year. Then I became more aware of the scene through Siavash Amini's work around 2014—I had previously seen a review of his work on Facebook. But then my first actual contact was through Arash Akbari in 2014 who had sent me a demo of his album *Vanishing Point*. As I was seeing more and more music coming out of the ambient scene, I just raised with Arash if he could curate a compilation, which he did. [This compilation was released under the

---

[199] See the event's page on Facebook via the following link (last accessed 17 Apr. 2019): facebook.com/events/169811266993682/

[200] Access the album via the following link: flamingpines.bandcamp.com/album/birds-of-a-feather

[201] poryahatami.com/music/in-between-spaces/

> name *Absence* on February 2016 through Flaming Pines.] My later contacts were with Sara [Sara Bigdeli Shamloo aka SarrSew] and Nima [Nima Aghiani]. *Interviewed on 1 Sep. 2017*

The event at IKLECTIC was advertised on Facebook in relation to the developments of experimental electronic music in Iran.[202] 9T Antiope[203] (Sara Bigdeli Shamloo and Nima Aghiani) and I were invited to play. Kate had asked me if I could invite another Iranian electronic producer as well. I raised it with Pouya Ehsaei and he agreed to join. Pouya is a London-based electronic music producer, a member of the band Ariwo[204], and the cofounder of Parasang[205] concert series in London. 9T Antiope's Visa applications were rejected by the UK embassy in Paris—Iranian performers all have stories to tell about a myriad of cancelled shows. While in Iran this happens mainly due to the establishment's problematic relationship with musical presentation, outside the country issues related to visa are the main cause. Previously, Ash Koosha—London-based producer who has released work through Ninja Tunes[206] and REALMS Records[207] among others—was refused entry to the US to perform due to the 'travel bans' put in place by the Trump administration, which have since affected Iranians and citizens of five other Muslim-majority countries. Thanks to his determined follow-up, Ash's visa was, however, later approved.

The performance night at IKLECTIK began with a short talk by myself, which was meant as an introduction to EEMSI for the audience. This was followed by our set. We improvised together with Eurorack modules and hacked electronics. The version submitted as part of this PhD was recorded live via the built-in X/Y stereo pair of a Zoom H4n digital recorder. We had used the Zoom as a back-up in case the line recording of the performance that was promised to us by the venue had issues, which it did.

The set developed, spontaneously and organically, as a series of drone parts and a percussive passage. The sonic output can be described in terms of constantly moving clusters of electronically-generated glissandi of different kinds that inter-weave and complement each other while heading towards 'nowhere specific'. To add

---

[202] facebook.com/events/i-k-l-e-c-t-i-k/hadi-bastani-pouya-ehsaei/169811266993682/
[203] 9tantiope.bandcamp.com/
[204] ariwomusic.com/
[205] Parasang is a weekly series at Redon in Bethnal Green, London, founded by Pouya Ehsaei and Harry Follett. See their page on Facebook via the following link (last accessed 17 Apr. 2019): facebook.com/Parasanglive/
[206] ninjatune.net/artist/ash-koosha
[207] ashkoosha.bandcamp.com/album/aktual-2

more layers of 'liveness', two contact microphones were used on my modular system's case during the show, which allowed me to amplify, further process, and play with the often undesired and supressed 'noises' resulting from physical contact between various parts of the system and my hands. These can be heard at the beginning of the recording as I start patching, for instance between 00:34 and 02:58, and towards the end as I begin un-patching to restore the system to its initial state, for instance between 13:27 and 15:10. I wanted to start the set with no pre-patching, to return to a similar state in the end and, as such, to begin and end with the 'noise' of the 'background' and the patching process, while integrating, instead of trying to eliminate or supress, the usually-unwanted sounds of the environment and of the performance ecosystem.

On the cover of his 1978 record *Ambient1: Music For Airports*, Brian Eno characterised 'ambience' as 'an atmosphere a tint [...] designed to induce calm and space to think.' The early manifestations of EEMSI in galleries, in the form of ambient/shoegaze music had also made *a background* audible: the one which had been sounding in bedrooms and home studios through sonic explorations, late-nights net-surfing, and mid-day dreaming of individuals unsure and perhaps not so concerned about whether their experiment could ever find a way to the 'surface' and become integrated in the 'foreground' of social conduct. It did. As it happened, it became much louder, more confident, professional, and more pragmatic. It connected with other practitioners and enthusiasts, offering them a space to think new possibilities. Articulating the sound of the 'background', EEMSI resounded a previously personal, private, and reserved space. In so doing, and in introducing a new aesthetics, it reconfigured the social through (re)activating social spaces/places that were previously used for other purposes, such as music and theatre venues, street corners, cafés, and galleries. As such, EEMSI enabled new relations and forms of connectivity between people, but also between them and technologies, ideas, concepts, buildings, politics, urban environments, socialites, symbols, histories and stories.

Slides-zen-Dives performatively responds not so much to any individual practice within EEMSI, but to an important aspect of the scene as 'a whole' through literally making use of the sound of the background as raw material for 'artistic' manipulation, reintegrating it (or including it back) into an immediate experience of music 'in the foreground'. It does so not to make any political statement of activist

nature with the purpose of making the excluded heard, but with an aim to playfully aestheticizing it, leaving the political as an inevitably emergent by-product of radical collaborative material manipulation and its distributed (sonic/musical) affect. That is precisely what the experimental electronic music scene has done in Iran according to my interlocutors' accounts, which draw attention to the playful and uniquely individualistic aspect of musicking in their views, as opposed to its immediate social-political implications, contexts, or backgrounds. As such, these do not seek to prescribe a particular mode of artistic and/or discursive exchange as a universal ideal for creating social impact. What they do offer, however, is a narrative in relation to particular understandings of a performed body of practice situated within a music/art niche, which, in negotiation with various forces enacted within the increasingly cosmopolitan 'society', has acquired a capacity to engage a certain number of groups and individuals. Doing so, the experimental electronic music scene 'in Iran' inevitably articulates, like all social phenomena, a complex, multifarious, and heterogenous, lived experience of the place; an experience that forms a compound, not a hybrid, in which the political is an inseparable constituent and an expression. Although considering the social-economic-political contexts of Iran it may be tempting to explain such an experience in terms of an immediate understanding of its political substance, its significance cannot be and should not be reduced as such through ready-made analytical devices, as I have hoped to show throughout this text based on my interlocutors' descriptions and my own experiences.

Slides-zen-Dives starts with a series of acoustic samples: bowed cymbals, struck bowls, and strummed plucked strings.[208] These were triggered via a programmable clocked modulation source, each according to a set timing. The most dominant of these sounds are the bowed ones, the first of which appears at 00:06. It seems that the sonic presence of this primary material, reinforced by more bowed samples that followed at 00:16, 01:10, and 01:19, had ultimately determined or rather dictated the aesthetic terms of the entire set, guiding our interactions towards the development of an array of ascending/descending glissando-type sounds. On my side of the table, the bowed samples got stretched, granularized, pitch-shifted, layered, and used in different ways in conjunction with other material and in relation to Pouya's playing. It is evident from the recording that Pouya had reacted similarly to the form

[208] These samples are extracted from an archive of recordings produced by Dr Paul Stapleton and used with his permission.

and texture of this material and developed the rest of his sounds in response to it, and to my playing. The result of this exchange was a constantly moving cluster of interweaving electronic drones juxtaposed with the acoustic samples. In order to add more layers of performative audio-reactivity and further complexify and entangle our interactions, we had also shared audio and control signals during the set: AC and 1 volt/octave pitch signals as well as digital gates, triggers, and clocks.

At 05:21 Pouya introduces a sine oscillator with an ADSR envelope on its 1v/oct (pitch) input. This sound recurs in ten to eleven seconds intervals until 07:20, before morphing into a continuous tone with an ascending pitch, which compliments my continuously-descending wavetable drone. It lingers for about a minute until it starts to descend—revealing that he had applied a long A/R envelope on its pitch input. Pouya's sinusoid persists until about 10:05. At around 09:14, however, a series of filtered noises in the form of short pops guid the performance towards a new section. The almost-two-minute ensuing passage builds up an atmosphere that leads to the development of a fully percussive part, which becomes established at 11:08. In this part I play with a sample that I had recorded from a YouTube video of Shanbezadeh Ensemble performance of traditional south Iranian (aka *bandari*) music at Le Lieu Unique, Nantes, in December 2016.[209] At 12:42 drones and granularized *bandari* beats recede in a rainy soundscape. Rain was being sampled live during the performance by myself from the audio stream sent to my system via two microphones set up outside the venue. The set finishes with the slowly fading sound of rain. At the show, as the acousmatic rain faded out from the venue's 'inside' space and disappeared in the PA system, the 'organic' one just 'outside' the venue's closed doors faded in omnidirectionally and immersed the place. As such, one might say, this process sustained the 'event' for the curious ears while blurring the borders between the 'performed' and the 'environmental' sound; between the venue's and the city's soundscape; between the 'inside' and 'outside'.

Slides-zen-Dives was collaboratively shaped through a sympathetic exchange with performing bodies (human and non-human); a process through which biologically and socio-culturally situated imaginaries, decisions, actions, feelings, and expectations intermingled with digital agency, technological affordances/limitations,

[209] The video is available via the following link (last accessed 17 Jul. 2019): youtube.com/watch?v=tNSUJwd2ezE

environmental affects, and their aesthetic co-developments. Such an exchange involved, since our first jamming prior to the gig, an empathic connection, which has been described in this text partly in terms of a cosmopolitan sonic/musical affinity: an intuitively shared understanding of desirable sonic/musical (not-)doings and soundscapes. This 'subliminal' connection, which is shaped in relation to a specific network of 'mattering' (Barad 2007), articulates a desire towards the formation of new relations and modes of sociality that transcends the everyday 'reality'—as the latter is experienced and perceived by individuals. After all, as Christopher Small has argued: 'Musicking is about relationships, not so much about those which actually exist in our lives as about those that we desire to exist and long to experience.' (1998, 183)

After the show, attendees stayed for further conversations. It was a good opportunity for engaging more intimately with their questions and to take some notes. Conversations quite rapidly went on the direction of the relationship between the performed sounds and 'Iranian characteristics'. Although everyone seemed happy with and energised by the show, for the majority it seemed surprising, if not confusing, that there were no 'Iranian' references in the music. The commentators were, however, surprised in *different* ways. Among themselves a discussion started. One group was excited about the lack of 'stereotypical references' and the fact that focus of the night was on music and not anything else, while the other group was somehow disoriented as a result of what was deemed an absence of 'Iranian features'.

Iran has been a hot topic in the 'Western' media since after the 1979 revolution for various reasons, mainly due to its new political 'image' that projected, for many 'Western' powers, a certain uncomfortable anti-imperialist activism rooted in an Islamic-revolutionary ideology. The post-revolutionary regime's regional role, particularly in confrontation with Israel, and its human rights profile, justified their primarily prejudiced unease for them—maybe it was a self-fulfilling prophecy maybe not. Iran has been introduced to the 'Western' audiences, however, also as an 'exotic' travel destination for its ancient historic sites, Islamic architecture, diverse ecology, food cultures, and bizarre toilets, but also as the exporter of Persian rugs, saffron, pistachio, caviar, petroleum, and poetry. Among music enthusiasts Iran is mostly known for its classical and folk music. Oscillating between a 'difficult state' and an 'exotic destination' of historic and cultural significance, also of 'friendly', 'sophisticated', and 'emotional' people, the images of this country—as (re-)fabricated

through media coverage, political discourse, and tourism—seem to have effectively created particular kinds of expectations from anything Iranian in the 'West'. (Does anybody expect from a Spanish electronic duo to deliver sound with a 'Spanish character'; for instance referencing flamenco traditions?!). I would ultimately consider the audience's expectation regarding 'Iranian characteristics' even in a live improvised electronic music context, as well as their excitement about the 'lack of stereotypes', parts and parcel of such 'images' invented since the colonial period (although Iran has never been colonised as such).[210] From a different perspective, similar conversations have, however, been a part of the contemporary musical discourse inside the country as well. Discursive exchanges in this context often relate to the issues of authenticity and the capacity of Iranian classical or traditional music in 'adapting' to the demands of 'modern' era and contemporary music forms.[211]. Similar ideas have been discussed within 'pop' music circles as well, for instance in relation to 'fusing' elements of Iranian classical music with elements of jazz[212], blues[213], rock, metal, and hip-hop.

The practice and words of the majority my interlocutors, however, demonstrate a resistance against such genric 'hybridisations' (or 'fusions'). EEMSI's frustration with politics can also be partly viewed in relation to the commentary made in the media about the producers' work. Such an irritation has been expressed in different ways throughout the interviews and in casual conversations.[214] Although such a frustration seems to be the result of a certain lack of security and confidence formed through a life lived under the conditions created by the operations of the amorphous regulatorium in Iran, the country's isolation from its liberal, technologically advanced and affluent 'other' (the 'modern West'), and a humiliating mistrust regarding Iran in the 'West', it is mainly regarded by my interlocutors as a by-product of media 'misrepresentation'. Whatever the cause, its embodied residues manifest in the form of sonic-visual aesthetics; for instance in a disregard for any sound, image, or interpretation that draws from stereotypes of 'Iranian characteristics'. Such

[210] Edward Said has famously reflected on the issue in his seminal work Orientalism (1978).

[211] For a discussion regarding these themes see Laudan Nooshin's *Iranian Classical Music: The Discourses and Practice of Creativity* (2015).

[212] See for instance Mahan Mirarab's work: mahanmirarab.com/wp/

[213] See for instance Mohsen Namjoo's work: mohsennamjoo.com

[214] For instance see Sara Bigdeli Shamloo's (aka SarrSew) and Siavash Amini's discussion at CTM festival Berlin (2017), via the following link (last accessed 8 Feb. 2019):
soundcloud.com/ctm-festival/ctm-2017-contemporary-sound-in-iran
Navigate, for instance, to 19:50 and listen until 21:46 for Sara and Siavash's comment regarding these issues.

aesthetics, however, concurrently indicate a desire towards (re-)inventing futures. To understand this, one can characterise it in terms of Roland Barthes' description of the position of the critique vis-à-vis culture (or the 'mythologist' vis-à-vis myth). In *Mythologies* (1976, 158) he writes: 'The future becomes an essence, the essential destruction of the past.' From the majority of my interlocutors' point of view, this is a past in which Iranian culture seems to be stuck, perhaps mainly due to the dogmatic and revivalist performances of the political systems.

Shahin Entezami's (aka Tegh) comment (below), however, sheds light on a different dimension of the media's 'exoticisation' of EEMSI. Sensing a potential danger, he believes that the common presumptions about Iranian politics, culture, and society, have led some commentators to think of the experimental electronic music practice in Iran as an exceptional phenomenon. Shahin thinks this approach is worrying because it encourages the producers in Iran to think of their work as inherently special; a condition that may work towards the loss of a sense of self-critique that has been essential for the development of an experimental music scene in the first place.

> We know that a part of the attention given to us is because of everything else that has put spotlight on Iran. We are only making electronic music, which is of high quality for sure, but there is nothing special about the fact that a bunch of Iranian guys are making this or that kind of music. Such an attention to the electronic and ambient scene in Iran can make producers believe that they are doing something so worthy of attention. It has already made some far less self-critical. If this becomes widespread, which has fortunately not been the case, it can produce a self-destructive movement. *Shahin Entezami aka Tegh (interviewed on 7 Apr. 2017 – translated from Persian by myself)*

Figure 6-13. Pouya Ehsaei (right) and me playing at IKLECTIK Art Lab, London, 14 Mar. 2018.
Photo by Kate Carr.

6.3.4 SPIN and INTERFERENCE

The next two compositions I am going to write about—*SPIN* and *INTERFERENCE*—are developed as part of a project that Sohrab Motabar and I started in 2018; *medianthropy*. I had collaborated with Sohrab in *intra.view* before this project began. The broad aim of *medianthropy*, in the context in which *SPIN* and *INTERFERENCE* took shape, is to explore the agency of ubiquitous digital information and technology in shaping new modes of connectivity between people, materials, and imaginaries within EEMSI through a series of ethnographically informed compositions and multi-media performances. For the start we decided to focus on randomly documenting our own daily routines though sound, image, video, text, and pieces of computer coding. The idea was to explore how the flood of seemingly unrelated data and the specific ways in which these data are accessed in our daily lives, may produce new insight into the emergence of new ways in which we tend to perceive life and respond to its complexities through practice (and discourse). The specific focus of *SPIN* and *INTERFERENCE*, however, was to explore possible relationships between the aesthetics of experimental electronic music practice in Iran, means of production (software/hardware), common forms of using the internet, and the kinds of data accessed in the daily life of Iranian digital artists/producers.

The composition process began with a survey. An online questionnaire was sent to twenty electronic producers based in Iran, who were chosen at random.[215] Participants only had to open the link of the online survey, fill in the form anonymously, and press submit. Within the form everyone was asked to respond to the following eight questions: 1- How long is your average daily usage of the internet? 2- For what purposes do you mostly use the internet? 3- What sound sources do you frequently draw from in your practice and how do you access those 4- What software/hardware are more frequently used in your practice and how did you learn to use those? 5- Have you ever been trained, outside your individual endeavours, to manipulate sound, to compose, and to work with the software/hardware you use in your practice? 6- How do you describe your work in terms of genre aesthetics, if at

[215] For selecting the potential participants, I assigned each of my interlocutors a number. The ordering of these numbers corresponded to the sequence of our interviews in the course of the research. For instance, the first person whom I interviewed (the earliest interview in the course of the research) was assigned 1, the second 2, and so on. Then, using a random number generator in Max/MSP, twenty numbers were produced.

all? 7- Do you see a connection between using the internet and the development of your practice in any shape or form (explain)?

The results demonstrated that participants believe they use the internet around three to four hours per day in average. They spend most of this time to acquire information related to their practice, to listen to music, to check their social media accounts, and to watch series. The majority consider themselves autodidacts with little or no directly relevant training outside their individual efforts. YouTube and Wikipedia are most frequently mentioned as sources for information. The most popular production software are (in order of popularity): Ableton Live and Max for Live, Logic Pro, Nuendo and FL Studio, MAX/MSP, Pure Data. Sounds are sourced from personal libraries—recorded and synthesised, or sampled from the work of other producers and artists—and from varied online sources. Nevertheless, Ableton Live, VCV Rack[216], field recording, and samples extracted from various online sources, including audio archives such as the BBC's and the British Library's, were more frequently mentioned. The majority characterised the style of their work as experimental. The internet is mentioned by all the participants as the main source of music and the most significant influence in shaping their musical 'tastes', in providing information that otherwise would have been inaccessible, and in connecting them with artists, producers, and collaborators inside and outside the country. Social Media such as Facebook and Instagram, audio streaming platforms like Bandcamp and SoundCloud, messaging services like Telegram and WhatsApp, as well as YouTube and Wikipedia are the net-based spaces most frequented by the participants. These data not only served as a basis for the formation of *SPIN* and *INTERFERENCE*, but also, in conjunction with other online ethnographic studies and interviews, broadly informed the material presented in this thesis.

SPIN and *INTERFERENCE* are composed based on samples contributed by Sohrab Motabar and myself. These two pieces constituted my first attempt to map seemingly unrelated data in the context of *medianthropy*, through music. To that aim, all samples were randomly selected from a library of recordings that Sohrab and I

[216] VCV Rack is an open source and multi-platform modular synthesizer software, initially developed by Andrew Belt. Access VCV Rack's website via the following link (last accessed 22 Apr. 2018): vcvrack.com

had shared via Dropbox.[217] Through the latter process a sound library for these two works was formed, which consisted of original recordings as well as samples extracted from two online sources: British Library and BBC archives. In *SPIN*, for instance, the orchestral string sounds that appear at 01:17 belong to a 1950s vinyl recording and is extracted from the British Library's page on Soundcloud[218] (unfortunately I cannot find the exact link for the relevant recording). The FM radio tuning sounds that appear at 02:43 belong to an archive of BBC recordings, which was officially released on April of 2018.[219] The rest of the material in this piece are all original recordings. *INTERFERENCE* is, however, wholly based around five short samples that are introduced successively at the beginning of the piece until 00:12. These were extracted from Sohrab's samples, which had been generated using code written by himself in SuperCollider[220]. The distorted radiophonic voice that first appears at 01:01 was also extracted from the BBC archive.

Sample-based composition and performance has been around with the Schaefferian musique concrète since 1940s and became 'mainstream' through hip-hop since 1970s. Viewing sample-based music as a source of information mapping, however, can be regarded as a new approach. In the context of my work, this perspective finds its earliest roots in media studies and the work of Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler. McLuhan wrote in *Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962, 41) that:

> [I]f a new technology extends one or more of our senses outside us into the social world, then new ratios among all of our senses will occur in that particular culture. It is comparable to what happens when a new note is added to a melody. And when the sense ratios alter in any culture then what had appeared lucid before may suddenly become opaque, and what had been vague or opaque will become translucent.

Twenty-five years later (1987) in an article that first appeared in *October* journal (101–118) and addressed the challenges posed by digitisation of data, Kittler noted: 'A total connection of all media on a digital base erases the notion of the medium itself.' (Kittler 1997, 32). The experimental electronic music scene that I have written about

---

[217] All samples were arranged alphabetically in a list and assigned with ascending numbers accordingly (1,2,3…). Then, using a random number generator in Max/MSP, a number of samples were consecutively selected.

[218] soundcloud.com/the-british-library

[219] This archive is fully accessible, and downloadable, via the following link (last access 6 Feb. 2019): bbcsfx.acropolis.org.uk

[220] SuperCollider is a programming environment and a language for real-time audio synthesis and algorithmic composition. It was initially released in 1996 by James McCartney. See the following link for its dedicated page on GitHub: supercollider.github.io

in this text is a product of the 'digital age'. To understand its underlying processes, therefore, a local-global frame of analysis, although important, would not suffice. A concurrently ethnographic and practice-led study can help articulating the blind spots of in-between; processes that are deeply rooted in producers' simplest everyday life exchanges—with their fellow humans but also with new media technologies and digitised data. The form of such exchanges were significantly different only twenty years ago. These now involve using mobile phones to navigate the geographies, engaging with augmented reality games that extend the digital reach of our devices to the 'natural' environment (urban or otherwise), finding answers to our all kinds of questions rapidly through carrying the most unbelievably large libraries in our pockets, and so on. The aesthetics of EEMSI are above all shaped through such processes, which undermine a clear-cut local-global divide.

In this context, *medianthropy* and its earliest outcomes *SPIN* and *INTERFERENCE* are an attempt to document and creatively reflect on the emergence of new modes of connectivity between 'sounds' and experimental electronic producers who are 'physically' based in Iran. Furthermore, *INTERFERENCE* also aims to challenge the regularities of genre music, especially idm and techno: two popular genres from which EEMSI heavily draws. It does so from 'within' the aesthetic confines of such forms—otherwise the work would have lost 'touch' and could have no longer been conceived as conversing with EEMSI's common practices. In parallel to genric influences, such regularities can also be understood in terms of actions that are encouraged by the design of software interfaces such as Ableton Live; the most used software for music production and performance among my interlocutors. In this context, for instance, the regular timing (or placing) of the 'kick drum' in techno (aka four-on-the-floor kicks) is repeatedly challenged throughout *INTERFERENCE*. Ableton in particular allows producers to relatively easily craft 'perfect' loops, and to trigger them in live sessions. The result is performances in which the music transitions from one perfectly crafted loop to another. *SPIN* and *INTERFERENCE* both aim to challenge such digital-interface-influenced regularities. I should note, however, that these have also been challenged by some of my interlocutors as well: for

instance by 9T Antiope's Nima Aghiani[221], Sohrab Motabar[222], Parsa Jamshidi (aka PARSA)[223], and Parsa Hadavi[224].

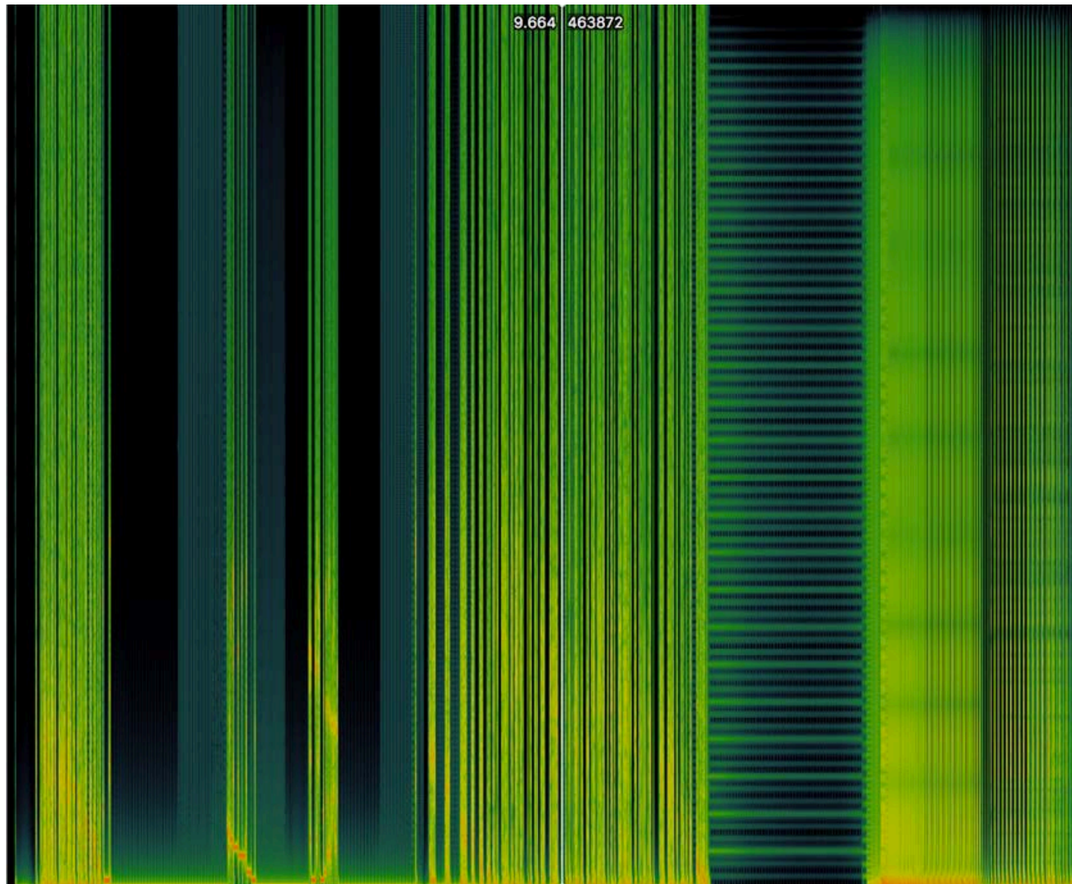


Figure 6-14. Screenshot from a part of the spectrogram of *INTERFERENCE* produced using Sonic Visualiser

[221] For instance see *Backscatter*, an album by Nima Aghiani self-released on 9T Antiope's Bandcamp in February 2018, via the following link (last accessed 13 May 2019): 9tantiope.bandcamp.com/album/backscatter

[222] For instance see *Layers-X*, a single by Sohrab Motabar released as part of the compilation album Noise À Noise 19 through the Tehran-based record label Noise À Noise in January 2019, via the following link (last accessed 13 May 2019): noise-a-noise.bandcamp.com/track/sohrab-motabar-layers-x

[223] For instance see expopp 1, a single by Parsa Jamshidi released as part of the compilation album Girih through Ata Ebtekar's record Label Zabte Sote in August 2018, via the following link (last accessed 13 May 2019): zabtesote.bandcamp.com/track/expopp-1

[224] For instance see *(Metamorphosis for Tapes) Homage a Gholamali Margiri*, a single by Parsa Hadavi released as part of the compilation album Noise À Noise 19 through the Tehran-based record label Noise À Noise in January 2019, via the following link (last accessed 13 May 2019): noise-a-noise.bandcamp.com/track/parsa-hadavi-metamorphosis-for-tapes-homage-a-gholamali-margiri

Parts of this chapter were presented at the following conference:

Society for Ethnomusicology's 63rd annual Meeting, 2018, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Today, too, I experienced something I hope to understand in a few days.

The Perfect Human (short film) – Jørgen Leth (1968)

7.1 Overview

As a radio producer and music blogger, I had covered the scene's developments since around 2012, while contributing to its unfolding in cyberspace, initially as a composer and subsequently as a sound artist and collaborator. I therefore began this research from the position of a producer whose work had already been known to some of the key figures in the 'field'. This connection provided the project a relatively quick and easy access to the field. It also afforded me an opportunity to methodically bridge the ethnographic field data, through my own sound-based practice and collaborative projects, with material processes involved in the work of Iranian experimental electronic musicians, both theoretically and in practice.

Engaging with the first-hand accounts as a 'researcher/participant-experiencer' (Walstrom 2004) while mobilising my individual and collaborative works as an investigative means for rhetorical and sound-based exploration, this research attempted to (un)cover and situate contingencies of experimental electronic musicking in Iran. The issue was addressed with regards to the country's broader social, political and economic transformations, with a particular focus on the historical period after the 1979 revolution. In so doing, this work investigated thinking, doing, and sharing experimental electronic music in Iran, and by Iranian producers in cyberspace, as an emergent mode of practice and discourse developed in constant exchange with evolving networks of transnational musical affinity, whose interactions have been facilitated and extended through internet-based communication.

Proliferation of increasingly powerful and accessible digital technologies—particularly music production and sound synthesis software—and the rapid spread of faster and more affordable internet connections in the past ten years, seem to be the main technological factors responsible for the emergence and thriving of an experimental electronic music scene in Iran. This research also investigated the case at hand in relation to social, cultural, and technological developments of a grassroots alternative pop music scene in Iran, which had emerged in the public domain around 2000 and was subsequently pushed underground as a result of a gradual re-radicalisation of the political atmosphere in Iran from around 2000 to 2009. From this particular perspective the formation of an experimental electronic music scene in Iran was characterised as a pragmatic and creative response to the new social, political, and economic constraints, under which music producers continued their practice.

The initial aim of a practice-led engagement with the 'field' was to facilitate a dialogue with my prospective interlocutors, which was primarily triggered by and reliant upon sound-based practice and musical exchange. To that aim, I systematically shared my work throughout the research with producers and performers in the 'field' via Facebook, Telegram, email and Soundcloud, while encouraging discussions on the processes of making, promoting, and disseminating music. Musical and discursive dialogue afforded the research a mechanism through which a sustained contact with the scene was guaranteed. As such, it further established the project as an actor within the scene, to which I did not have physical access, and provided it with ample opportunities to become scrutinised, critiqued, and commented upon. As the sound-based outputs of the project became integrated within the same production-consumption networks that differentiated EEMSI from other musical and artistic currents in Iran, mutual commentary through musicking, as laid out above, positioned this research at a reflexive 'distance' vis-à-vis the scene. Engagement both at the level of discourse and practice ultimately enabled a context in which my interlocutors' work and my own mingled and co-developed in contact with each other.

7.2 Reflections on the Methodology

The general outlines of the research methodology are laid out in Chapter One (see 1.4). Chapter Six, however, further elaborates the methodology to include more details on the 'practice' aspect of the project (see 6.1, the introduction to 6.2, in 6.3.1. and 6.3.2.). Reflecting on how the project developed, I appreciate that a more substantial focus on collaborative sound-based practice could have significantly benefitted the work. However, if the project developed with a slightly heavier emphasis on theoretical discussions and rhetorical analysis, it was mainly due to an imposing constraint under which I had to operate, namely the lack of physical access to the field. As a (then) refugee in the UK, I could not travel to Iran to conduct fieldwork 'on the ground', as opposed to via the internet, and in a closer 'physical' encounter with the scene. If such an encounter was possible, I would argue, the project could have and would have benefitted from more collaborations with producers in the field, both with respect to the ethnographic documentation and sound-based practice. This observation will be the basis for a suggestion I would like to make to researchers who wish to undertake similar research. Should physical access to the field be possible, I would suggest that a more substantial focus on documentation and analysis of the 'processes' of music-making with an emphasis on collaboration, as a potent means for empirical investigation, will be beneficial both in the context of ethnographic study and practice-led (practice based, practice as, or artistic) research.

The constraint I had to deal with from the start of the project inevitably required a pragmatic response, as a result of which a methodology to engage the 'field' from a 'distance' was developed. Although a lack of physical access to the field limited opportunities of working in closer physical encounter with the artists and producers, it encouraged a sustained researcher-informant rapports via the internet. Considering the fact that EEMSI has largely used the online domain for its activities due to the peculiar social-political circumstances of the country, an inevitable focus on the digital and online fieldwork enabled the research to more rapidly and effectively reach out to the producers in the field and to build trust. At early stages of the project, this focus fostered wider acceptance and as such increased the research's validity. Combined with collaborative music-making endeavours, it facilitated a wider access to parts of the field, which would have otherwise been more difficult to access due to geographical dispersion. The weaving of the strands of digital and online

ethnography with practice-led research, with an emphasis on collaboration, offers a framework for the study of cultural production *from a distance*.

Such a methodology will be beneficial to researchers who may not be able to physically access the 'field', for instance in circumstances of war, socio-political or religious conflict, or wide spread infectious disease. It will also benefit projects that target populations that are geographically dispersed. More broadly, it will be appropriate to all practice-based inquiries conducted in this 'digital age'; a time in which the boundaries of 'online' and 'offline' have become increasingly blurred. As previously recommended by Garcia et al. (2009, 60), researchers should 'experience the online site the same way that actual participants routinely experience it,' whenever that's possible.

7.3 Impacts

This research contributed to critical debates within the scene, encouraged interdisciplinary collaborations, and challenged the genre-influenced regularities of (ambient) music-making in the context of EEMSI, in favour of a more aesthetically diverse and self-critical practice. My compositions were released along with work of Iranian experimental electronic producers in compilation albums such as *Girih* (2018)[225] and mixtapes like *Iran Experimental Underground* (2016)[226]. My collaborations with Iranian experimental electronic producers were featured in reputable academic and non-academic festivals and experimental music events such as Sonorities Belfast (2018)[227] and Iklectik London (2018)[228]. Although I could not travel to Iran due to being a political refugee in the UK at the time, my installations did travel to the country and got featured in the main hubs of new media arts in Tehran, for instance in TADAEX (2018)[229]. This project also contributed to other academic researches, for instance to Dr Gey Jennifer Breyley's book chapter on Iranian rock and electronic producers' opinions on and inspirations from Joy Division's music, titled *'I hung around in your Soundtrack': Affinities with Joy Division among Contemporary Iranian Musicians* (2018, 209–

[225] zabtesote.bandcamp.com/album/girih-iranian-sound-artists-volumes-i-iv

[226] brutalresonance.com/news/unexplained-sounds-group-releases-iranian-experimental-music-collection-iran-experimental-underground/?fbclid=IwAR2SK-_7Fk9XWXPb6XO85x4seQBEz-vKBGzTXPWS123K-CSC2UOIgWSzYcE

[227] sonorities.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2_Sonorities2018_OnlineBrochure_Small.pdf

[228] facebook.com/events/i-k-l-e-c-t-i-k/hadi-bastani-pouya-ehsaei/169811266993682/

[229] http://tadaex.com/2017/work.php?id=9

228). It engaged with academic debates on inclusive music making and digital technologies[230], experimental music and sociality[231], improvisation[232], music aesthetics and politics[233], experimental music performance[234], sound installation[235], electroacoustic composition[236], collaborative musicking and collaborative ethnography[237]. It also engaged with non-academic investigations, and for instance got featured in online articles such in one of The Quietus' essays titled *Underground Tehran: Techno & Experimental Electronic Music In Iran* (Zhang 2016)—the Quietus is one of the most read e-magazines within EEMSI that covers experimental music.

7.4 Future Pathways

Due to the truly interdisciplinary nature of this research, there are a number of different paths in which it can continue and develop. In my fieldwork I noticed a gap in the practice of experimental electronic music producers in Iran, with regards to live performance situations. I observed that improvised live settings are extremely

[230] 2018 | 'Digital Media, Live Interfaces and Inclusion: Ethnographic Perspectives,' Conference paper co-authored with Koichi Samuels, Presented as part of Inspiration, Performance, Emancipation series, International Conference for Live Interfaces (ICLI), Porto, Portugal.
[231] 2019 | 'Experimental Electronic Sound as Playful Articulation of a Compromised Sociality in Iran,' Conference paper presented in Music, Sound, Space and Place: Ethno- musicology and Sound Studies, British Forum for Ethnomusicology (BFE) and Société Française d'Ethnomusicologie (SFE) Joint Autumn Conference, City University London, London, UK.
[232] 2018 | 'Pendulum,' Audiovisual performance, Presented in collaboration with Steph Horak at Sonorities Festival, Sonic Arts Research Centre, Queen's University Belfast, UK.
2018 | 'Modular Improvisation,' Improvised electronic music performance, Performed in collaboration with Pouya Ehsaei at IKLECTIK Art Lab, London, UK.
[233] 2017 | 'Under the Radar: Ambient Music and/in the Iranian State,' Conference paper presented in Multi-Disciplinary Standpoints on Conflict Transformation, Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice, Queen's University Belfast, UK.
[234] 2018 | 'Pendulum,' Audiovisual performance, Presented in collaboration with Steph Horak at Sonorities Festival, Sonic Arts Research Centre, Queen's University Belfast, UK.
And 2018 | 'Modular Improvisation,' Improvised electronic music performance, Per- formed in collaboration with Pouya Ehsaei at IKLECTIK Art Lab, London, UK.
[235] 2018 | 'Ecbatan,' Sound installation (multi-channel), Composed for a quadraphonic speaker configuration, transducers, and plywood, Presented at TADAEX Festival, Tehran, Iran.
And Also 2015-2019 | 'Hospice Garden,' Site-specific sound installation, Composed for an Octophonic speaker configuration (wall-mounted and garden speakers), Commissioned by Northern Ireland Hospice, Belfast, UK.
[236] 2018 | 'Intra.view ,' Electroacoustic Composition (multi-channel), Created in collaboration with Sohrab Motabar, Kiana Tajammol, Mo H Zareei and Ramin Safavi, Performed with Anna Weisling at Sonorities Festival
And 2018 | 'Ornamental Descend,' Electroacoustic Composition, Released through Opal Tapes in London, UK, and Zabte Sote in Tehran, Iran.
[237] 2018 | 'Collaborative Composition as Ethnographic Research in Iran's Digital Arts and Experimental Electronic Music Scene,' Conference paper presented in Decolonizing Strategies in Ethnomusicology, Teaching, and Performance, Society for Ethnomusicology's (SEM) annual meeting, Albuquerque, NM, US.

rare. In Chapter Six (particularly in 6.2.4) I investigated possible reasons and offered a speculative framework for further inquiry in this area. An interdisciplinary investigation that focuses more substantially on the theme of improvisation within broader Iranian electronic music practices would be one trajectory for future research.

Another area in which the research can develop, could be defined in relation to significance of the technologies, tools, interfaces, and particular uses of those in music making processes, in the formation of specific kinds of aesthetics in small electronic music scenes, like EEMSI, that are located in the margins of capitalist market economy. This inquiry can be expanded to include case studies from different 'marginal' cultures in south Asia or across the world.

In this research, EEMSI's emergence was investigated partly in relation to Iranian musicians' connection with producers, bloggers, journalists, and small net-labels as part of transnational affinity networks, in which a shared 'taste' in music becomes the basis for various forms of musical and extra-musical exchange. A particular focus on the composition of such networks and their significance in the emergence of new modes of musical practice in different social-cultural settings, would be another possible route to explore.

One of the key areas in which this work's novel contribution lies, is its unique approach to interdisciplinary research. The methodology that is developed in this research could become the basis for more ambitious explorations. One research scenario on which I have been working recently, and in relation to which I have developed a proposal, involves an investigation of life around drying wetlands in Iran. This project aims to investigate Iran's climate crisis, with a focus on water scarcity by focusing on three specific wetland sites, through ethnographic fieldwork and investigative sound art. The fabric binding the two disciplines will be collaboration. This project will mainly address the following questions:

- How can ethnographic fieldwork and artistic research, in the academic sense of the term, be integrated within a robust methodology in order to address environmental challenges in places, in which environmental activism hit a political wall?
- How can collaborative ethnography, collaborative sound art, and music-making engage wider communities in dialogue and practice, in order to locate areas of contention, to raise awareness, and suggest sustainable solutions for

ecological problems and their social, political, cultural, and economic implications?

Finally, the case study offered in Chapter Six suggested that there might be a connection between the emergence of EEMSI and physical, social, and economic characteristics of particular places in Tehran, for instance residential complexes such as Ekbatan. The unique architecture of these complexes afford the residents particular modes of socialisation and understandings of the place/space. A research into distribution of social spaces, demographics, and physical, acoustical, and socio-economic characteristics of such environments in Tehran (and other cities) can offer significant new insight into processes, practices, and aesthetics that define EEMSI and its particular patterns of unfolding.

7.5 Coda

Engaging with the case at hand through ethnography and artistic practice/research, this research sought to offer a model for further interdisciplinary inquiry in the areas of (ethno-)musicology, sound studies, sonic arts, anthropology (of music), popular music studies, and musical composition; one that recognises the significance of (collaborative) music- and/or art-making as a process of mutual transformation in identifying and locating emergent forms of practice, discourse, and modes of sociality. Through a focus, both on the side of research and practice, on digital technologies this work investigated how composition, sound art, and ethnography can pluralise and diversify the analysis of musical practice, with the specific aim of liberating the latter from the mere causal circles of politics-music-religion that still dominate critical discourse around the practice of art and music in Iran.

Digital technology and the internet have been instrumental in enabling a younger generation of producers in Iran to explore new performative possibilities and to develop new modes of musicking and/or art-making. Influenced by the 'globalised' flows of data, goods, imaginaries, practices, semiotics, and affinities, and also due to 'local' factors explored here, the experimental electronic music practices that have been subject to scrutiny in this text found a way to the 'surface' of the society around 2009. Experimenting with computers and software while engaging with multiple discourses/practices of digital arts and electronic music via the internet,

producers were afforded a more pragmatic approach in dealing with the economic and ideological-political difficulties attached to furthering a career in music/sound in Iran.

Grappling with practicalities and contingencies of performing in Iran, and in contact with transnational networks of musical affinity, digital arts and experimental electronic music prodders, collectives, and festivals have been equipped with a level of professional/technical expertise that is unprecedented in comparison with other 'non-mainstream' musical movements in the country. Together with an enthusiasm associated with pursuing a creative practice in music/sound in Iran, despite the social, ideological-political, and economic difficulties, an emergent sense of professional pragmatism has enabled producers to more effectively negotiate a space for the display of electronic music in the country.

An early association with the visual arts scene also helped EEMSI avoid being contaminated with the same ideologically/politically problematic stereotypes associated with 'underground' music in Iran. Furthermore, by reducing human-human interactions, at least in appearance, within the performance space by highlighting the human-machine correlations, laptops and digital interfaces have provided practitioners with an opportunity to 'frame' their performance as explorations in art and science. Such a (re-)configuration has afforded the scene a context for sidestepping censorship to a considerable extent. In so doing, EEMSI has helped normalising musical performance in the eyes of the state officials and the wider society.

The aesthetics of EEMSI have, therefore, been taking shape in relation to producers' evolving practice in contact with digital technologies, cosmopolitan networks of musical affinity, and practicalities of making and presenting electronic music in Iran, as they experimentally navigate the social, political, and economic structures, ethics, and laws in Iran. We know from Simon Frith's *Taking Popular Music Seriously* (2007) that musical preferences—to which I would add choices, strategies, and production techniques—do not just derive from our socially-constructed identities, or technological developments, they also shape them. This mutually-constitutive relationship between identity and 'taste'; between our judgement of what is good/authentic; what can(not) be represented or what producers prefer not to present is of course mediated by a myriad of biological, socio-political, economic, material-technological agencies everywhere. Focusing mainly on the scene formed in Tehran, in

this text I tried to balance the personal accounts of 'feelings' and experiences with the broader impact of social mediators in Iran, by juxtaposing my interlocutors' descriptions with historical, sociological, political, psychological, pedagogical, and philosophical accounts throughout the text.

On the conceptual level, as an evolving material-semiotic network of experimental electronic music practice and process, EEMSI acts out producers' imagination of contrasting, at times competing, alternative sonic/musical 'worlds', and a melancholia of *distance* from the 'source' as experienced by the producers in Iran, who interacts with their peers mainly through internet-based modes of communication. In this context musicking becomes an experiment in forging (or claiming) autonomy; a creative exploration of new modes of sociality that offer contexts for reconfiguring and/or transcending the limiting realities of everyday life in Iran.

Drawing on Small (1998), I would argue that the 'intrinsic' capacity of musicking, expanded through the use of digital media, as a stimulus and distributed exercise in craft, sharing, manipulating affect, and articulating sameness and difference—a process of playfully and creatively engaging with material and objects in the broadest sense, bodies, places, spaces, and voices—has found specific social functions in Iran of post-2009. As argued in the text, these functions take a complex set of embodied residues and new imaginaries and produce new relations that feed back into the society through new modes of practice, materiality, and sociality. Although it goes without saying that such feedbacks resonate with the interests, (embodied) knowledge, and ambitions of only a small section of the society, located at the margins of arts and music scene in Tehran. The results of such processes then enter into new modalities of negotiation with other forces enacted within the society, producing a ground for the burgeoning of a particular form of experimental electronic music practice. Through constantly destabilising previously formed and solidified assumptions, and converging towards particular sets of locally-negotiated aesthetic activities, such an ongoing exchange have been the source of EEMSI's growth. The scene's modus operandi lies, therefore, in practically and pragmatically reconfiguring the social, as well as the legal and the ideologically-politically tolerated, in relation to musical/artistic practice in Iran.

In its concurrent contact with the particular boundaries of social performance in Iran and the broader flows of musical-material agency, EEMSI's emergence

can be understood in terms of '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.' (Waters 2015, 25 – emphasis mine). In a society in which the social performance is compromised by a politics based on dogmatic ideologies that feed from a revivalist interpretation of the 1979 (Islamic) revolution, this focus on the individual is of crucial significance. Due to the contraction of political air in two stages—from around 1999 to 2005 and later around 2009—as explored in this thesis, the society was only prepared for minor changes in around 2010. Having emerged in such a time and place, EEMSI delivered exactly that; a minor but significant change. From the perspective of this research, EEMSI's accomplishments, as such, are most significant at the level of the individual.[238] In this context, the experimental electronic music scene can be viewed as a growing network of individual practices connected, via the internet, through a shared passion for new modes of musicking that aspires to manipulation of 'sound', in its most abstract form, while avoiding extra-musical references to Iranian culture, society, and politics. Arguing against some commentators like Tony Mitchel (See 4.6 for a full discussion) who have labelled the scene, precisely because of such a characteristic, as 'conformist', 'passive', and therefore 'politically unjustified', I would argue that in playfully aestheticizing and publicising lived experience of the place in new ways, the reconfiguring(s) described previously, however niche and marginal, are, as such, 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.

Borrowing from Pedro Rebelo's The Local and the Distributed in Sonic Arts (2014), I would note that 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...'

[238] Although, if we look into *Taking Popular Music Seriously* (Frith 2007, 310) for advice, we will notice that music 'only' produces 'collective, disruptive cultural effect [...] through its impact on *individuals*.' (emphasis mine)

(696) The emergent, digitally-enabled modalities of practice and sociality 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, socio-political, economic, 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.

Although in its earliest ambient/shoegaze/downtempo form, EEMSI started by articulating the 'background'—bedrooms, basements, late night web surfing, online chats, precious music discoveries, listening, and dreaming—by that very act of making the 'background', the margins, the playful, and the 'repressed' audible, it unlocked new avenues for channelling the creative 'drive' 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. The establishment did not take serious issues with it. Although radically new, the 'strange' and initially gentle expressions of the oppressed did not bother the oppressor. 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 in Iran—and their embodied artefacts across the social-material field of possibility, there is a thriving experimental electronic music scene, ironically but pragmatically, forming. And it is no longer gentle. 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. Compared against the definition offered in this text, the experimental electronic music scene in Iran may soon not be so 'experimental' anymore. In the politically-forced absence of many other 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 has become one of the loudest voice of 'Iranian' music, representing (in every sense) a new musical and sonic possibility.

REFERENCES

[1] Alagha, Josep. 2015. "Moderation and the Performing Arts in Contemporary Muslim Societies." (University of Texas Press) 32 (2): 44–68.

[2] Alinejad, Mahmoud. 2002. "Coming to Terms with Modernity: Iranian intellectuals and the emerging public sphere." *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 13 (1): 25–47.

[3] Alirezanezhad-Gohardani, Farhad. 2014. *Tragedy of Confusion: The Political Economy of Truth in the modern history of Iran (A novel framework for the analysis of the enigma of socio-economic underdevelopment in the modern history of Iran).* Doctoral thesis, Durham: Durham University.

[4] Althusser, Louis. 2001. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays.* Translated by Ben Brester. New York: Monthly Review Press.

[5] Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism.* London: Verso Books.

[6] Appadurai, Arjun. 1990. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Theory, Culture & Society* 7 (2–3): 295–310.

[7] —. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[8] —. 1993. *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West.* Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

[9] Asad, Talal. 1986. *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam.* Washington, D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University.

[10] Attali, Jacques. 1985. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music.* Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[11] Baily, John. 1988. *Music of Afghanistan: Professional Musicians in the City of .* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[12] Ballard, J. G. 1984. "What I Believe." Paris: Science Fiction (French Magazine).

[13] Bannerji, Himani. 2000. "The paradox of diversity: The construction of a multicultural canada and "women of color"." *Women's Studies International Forum* 23 (5): 537–560.

[14] Bar, Shmuel. 2011. "God, Nations, and Deterrence: The Impact of Religion on Deterrence." *Comparative Strategy* 30 (5): 428–452.

[15] Barad, Karen. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

[16] Barthes, Roland. 1976. *Mythologies.* Translated by Annette Lavers. London: Grafton.

[17] Baym, Nancy K. 2000. *Tune-In, Log Out: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

[18] Best, Samuel J., Brian Krueger, Clark Hubburd, and Andrew Smith. 2001. “An Assessment of the Generalizability of Internet Surveys.” *Social Science Computer Review* 19 (2): 131–145.

[19] Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture.* London: Routledge.

[20] Boellstorff, Tom. 2008. *Coming of Age in Second Life.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton Uniersity Press.

[21] Boellstorff, Tom, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T.L. Taylor. 2012. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method.* Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press.

[22] Bonnet, François J. 2016. *The Order of Sounds: A Sonorous Archipelago.* Translated by Robin Mackay. Falmouth: Urbanomic.

[23] Born, Georgina. 2013. ed. *Music, Sound and Space: Transformations of Private and Public Experience.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[24] Born, Georgina. 2005. “On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity.” *Twentieth-Century Music* 2 (1): 7–36.

[25] Borszik, Oliver. 2014. *International Sanctions against Iran under President Ahmadinejad: Explaining Regime Persistence.* Paper, Hamburg: German Institut of Global and Area Studies.

[26] Brend, Barbara. “Oleg Grabar: The Mediation of Ornament. The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1989, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (Bollingen Series, Xxxv. 38.) Xxv, Pp. 284, 30 Plates. Princeton University Press, 1992. £35, $49.50.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 58, no. 2 (1995): 361–63. doi:10.1017/S0041977X00010958.

[27] Canclini, Néstor García. 2001. *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts.* Translated by George Yúdice. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[28] Cascone, Kim. 2000. “The Aesthetics of Failure: “Post-Digital” Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music.” *Computer Music Journal* 24 (4): 12–18.

[29] Castoriadis, Cornelius. 1987. *The Imaginary Institution of Society.* Translated by Cathleen Blamey. Cambridge: Polity Press.

[30] Chehabi, Houchang E. 2003. “The Westernization of Iranian Culinary Culture.” *Iranian Studies* 36 (1): 43–61.

[31] Correll, Shelley. 1995. “The Ethnography of an Electronic Bar: The Lesbian Cafe.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 24 (3): 270–298.

[32] De Bruijn, J. T. P. 1997. *Persian Sufi Poetry: An Introduction to the Mystical Use of Classical Persian Poems.* London: Curzon Press.

[33] Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus.* Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[34] DeNora, Tia. 1999. “Music as a Technology of the Self.” *Poetics Journal of Empirical Research on Culture, the Media and the Arts* 27: 31–56.

[35] Dourish, Paul, and Genevieve Bell. 2011. *Divining a Digital Future: Mess and Mythology in Ubiquitous.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[36] Erlmann, Veit. 2014. *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality.* Cambridge, MA: Zone Books.

[37] Ettinghausen, Richard, Oleg Grabar, and Marilyn Jenkins. 2001. *Islamic art and architecture 650-1250*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

[38] Farrokhzad, Forough. 1963. *Tavallodi Digar [Another Birth]*. Tehran: Morvarid va Khāne-ie Ketab

[39] Featherstone, Mike. 1990. "Global Culture: An Introduction." *Theory, Culture & Society* 7 (2–3): 1–14.

[40] Feld, Steven. 2012. *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: Five Musical Years in Ghana.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

[41] Fischer, Michael M. J. 1980. *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

[42] Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* Translated by Alan Shendan. New York: Vintage Books.

[43] —. 1971. Michel Foucault interviewed by Fons Elders (a short film). Produced by Elders for the Dutch Television on September 13, 1971. Uploaded on *YouTube* under the title "Foucault – The Lost Interview" on March 20, 2014. Accessed June 26, 2019. youtube.com/watch?v=qzoOhhh4aJg.

[44] Frith, Simon. 1996. "Music and Identity." In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, 108–127. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

[45] Frith, Simon. 1999. "Reviews." *European Journal of Communication* 14 (1): 128–130.

[46] Frith, Simon. 2007. "Towards an aesthetic of popular music ." In *Taking Popular Music Seriously*, by Simon Frith, 257–273. London: Routledge.

[47] Gal, Susan. 2002. "A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13 (1): 77–95.

[48] Galtung, Johan. 1971. "A Structural Theory of Imperialism." *Journal of Peace Research* 8 (2): 81–117.

[49] Gaonkar, Dilip P. 2002. "Toward new imaginaries: An introduction." *Public Culture* 14 (3): 1–19.

[50] Garcia, Angela Cora, Alecea I. Standlee, Jennifer Bechkoff, and Yan Cui. 2009. "Ethnographic Approaches to the Internet and Computer-Mediated Communication." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 38 (1): 52–84.

[51] Ghadamyari, Karamali. 2012. "Sufism impact on Iranian society, culture and literature." *European Journal of Experimental Biology* 2 (2): 410–416.

[52] Ghamari-Tabrizi, Behrooz. 2016. *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[53] —. 2016. *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution and the Enlightenment.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[54] Gluck, Robert J. 2007. “The Columbia—Princeton Electronic Music Center: Educating International Composers.” *Computer Music Journal* 31 (2): 20–38.

[55] Gluck, Robert J. 2007. “The Shiraz Arts Festival: Western Avant-Garde Arts in 1970s Iran.” *Leonardo* 40 (1): 20–38.

[56] —. 2006. “The Shiraz Festival: avant-garde arts performance in 1970s Iran.” *ICMC 2006*. New Orleans: Michigan Publishing. 216–222.

[57] Goldstein, Jeffrey. 1999. “Emergence as a Construct: History and Issues.” *Emergence* 1 (1): 49–72.

[58] Graham, Mark, and Shahram Khosravi. 2002. “Reordering Public and Private in Iranian Cyberspace: Identity, Politics, and Mobilization.” *Identities* 9 (2): 219–246.

[59] Gray, Chris H., and Mark Driscoll. 1992. “What's real about virtual reality?: Anthropology of, and in, Cyberspace.” *Visual Anthropology Review* 8 (2): 39–49.

[60] Hakken, David. 1999. *Cyborgs@Cyberspace?: An Ethnographer Looks to the Future.* New York: Routledge.

[61] Hall, Stuart. 1993. “Culture, community, nation.” *Journal Cultural Studies* 7 (3): 349–363.

[62] Hannerz, Ulf. 1992. *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning.* New York: Columbia University Press.

[63] Hegarty, Paul. 2007. *Noise Music: A History.* London: Bloomsbury Continuum.

[64] Hine, Christine. 2000. *Virtual Ethnography.* London: Sage Publications.

[65] Horst, Heather A., and Daniel Miller. 2012. eds. *Digital Anthropology.* London: Berg Publishers.

[66] Hráčková Pyšňáková, Michaela. 2013. “Understanding the Meaning of Consumption in Everyday Lives of Mainstream Youth in the Czech Republic.” In *New Perspectives on Consumer Culture Theory and Research*, by Pavel eds. Zahrádka and Renata Sedláková, 39–77. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

[67] Impett, Jonathan. 2011. “What are we making? The work-without-content in live computer music.” *Proceedings of the 2011 International Computer Music Conference.* Huddersfield: Michigan Publishing. 456–459.

[68] Ingold, Tim. 2015. *The Life of Lines.* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

[69] Jahanbegloo, Ramin. 2004. ed. *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

[70] Jung, Carl Gustav. 1970. *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious.* Translated by Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

[71] Karimi, Majid, and Mansoor Limba. 2008. eds. *Sahife-ye Imam: An Anthology of Imam Khomeinis Speeches, Messages, Interviews, Decrees, Religious Permissions, and Letters.* Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works.

[72] Katouzian, Homayoun. 1981. *The Political Economy of Modern Iran: Despotism and Pseudo-modernism, 1926-79.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

[73] Keddie, Nikki R., and Yann Richard. 1981. *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

[74] Keddie, Nikki, and Yann Richard. 2003. *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

[75] Kemiläinen, Aira. 1964. *Nationalism: Problems concerning the word, the concept and classification.* Jyväskylä: Jyväskylä University Publishing.

[76] Kittler, Friedrich , Dorothea von Mücke, and Philippe L. Similon. 1987. "Gramophone, Film, Typewriter." translated by Dorothea Von Mucke with the assistance of Philipe L. Similon. *October* (The MIT Press) 41: 101–118.

[77] Kittler, Friedrich. 1997. "Gramaphone, film, typewriter." In *Literature, Mdeia, Information Systems: Friedrich A. Kittler Essays*, edited by John Johnston, 28–49. Translated by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. Amsterdam: Overseas Publication Association.

[78] Lacan, Jacques. 1997. *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis.* Translated by Anthony Wilden. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

[79] Landy, Leigh. 2006. "The Intention/Reception Project." In *Analytical Methods of Electroacoustic Music*, by Mary Hope Simoni, 29–53. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge.

[80] Lane , Cathy, and Angus Carlyle. 2013. *In the Field: The Art of Field Recording.* London: Uniformbooks.

[81] Latour, Bruno. 2018. *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

[82] —. 2005. *Reassembling the Social – An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[83] Law, John. 2007. "Actor Network Theory and Material Semiotics (version of 25th)." *John Law's STS Web Page.* 18t May. Accessed April 11, 2018. heterogeneities.net/publications/Law2007ANTandMaterialSemiotics.pdf.

[84] Lenczowski, George. 1978. ed. *Iran under the Pahlavis.* Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press.

[85] 1968. *The Perfect Human (short film).* Directed by Jørgen Leth.

[86] Lewisohn, Leonard. 1997. "The Sacred Music of Islam: Samā' in the Persian Sufi Tradition." *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 6 (1): 1–33.

[87] Lindlof, Thomas R., and Milton J. Shatzer. 1998. "Media Ethnography in Virtual Space: Strategies, Limits, and Possibilities." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 42 (2): 170–189.

[88] Liu, Chenou. "Shadows Haiku." Uploaded on *micropoetry.com.* on February 27, 2014. Accessed August 18, 2016. micropoetry.com/shadows-haiku-2.html.

[89] Loaiza, Juan M. 2016. *PENULTIMATE DRAFT Musicking, Embodiment and Participatory Enaction of Music: Outline and Key Point.* Essay, Belfast: Queen's University Belfast.

[90] Lucas, Scott C. 2006. "The Legal Principles of Muhammad B. Ismāʿīl Al-Bukhārī and Their Relationship to Classical Salafi Islam." *Islamic Law and Society* 13 (3): 289-324.

[91] Lupton, Deborah. 2014. *Digital Sociology.* Abingdon: Routledge.

[92] Lyman, Peter, and Nina Wakeford. 1999. "Introduction: Going into the (Virtual) Field." *American Behavioral Scientist* 43 (3): 359–376.

[93] Lysloff, René T. A, and Jr. Leslie C. Gay. 2003. eds. *Music and Technoculture.* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

[94] Marres, Noortje. 2013. "What is Digital Sociology?" Noortje Marres Interview by Mark Carrigan. Uploaded on Mark Carrigan's website on April 14, 2013. Accessed June 11, 2017. markcarrigan.net/2013/04/14/what-is-digital-sociology-an-interview-with-noortje-marres.

[95] McLuhan, Marshall. 1962. *The Gutenberg Galaxy : the making of typographic man.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

[96] Mead, Margaret, and Métraux Rhoda. 2000. *The Study of Culture at a Distance.* New York: Berghahn Books.

[97] Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception.* Translated by Colin Smith. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

[98] Merriam, Alan P., and Raymond W. Mack. 1960. "The Jazz Community." *Social Forces* 38 (3): 211–222.

[99] Mirsepasi, Ali. 2000. *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[100] Mohammadi, Ali. 1995. "Cultural Imperialism and Cultural Identity." In *Questioning the Media: A Critical Introduction*, edited by John D. H. Downing, Ali Mohammadi and Annabelle Sreberny, 362–378. London: Sage Publications.

[101] Murthy, Dhiraj. 2011. "Emergent Digital Ethnographic Methods for Social Research." In *Handbook of Emergent Technologies in Social Research*, edited by Sharlene Hesse-Biber, 158–179. New York: Oxford University Press.

[102] Mynatt, Elizabeth D., Annette Adler, Mizuko Ito, and Vicki L. O'Day. 1997. "Design for Network Communities." *CHI '97 ACM Conference on Human Factors & Computing Systems.* New York: ACM. 210–217.

[103] Najmabadi, Afsaneh. 1987. *Land Reform and Social Change in Iran.* Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.

[104] Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2007. *Listening.* Translated by Charlotte Mandell. New York: Fordham University Press.

[105] Nardi, Bonnie, and Yong Ming Kow. 2010. "Digital Imaginaries: How we know what we (think) we know about Chinese gold farming." *First Monday (e-Journal)* (University of Illinois) 15 (6): firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3035/2566.

[106] Naustdalslid, Jon. 1977. "A Multi-Level Approach to the Study of Center-Periphery Systems and Socio-Economic Change." *Journal of Peace Research* 14 (3): 203–222.

[107] Negarestani, Reza. 2014. "Frontiers of Manipulation." Talk presented at Speculations on Anonymous Materials Symposium. Kassel, Germany. Video Uploaded on *YouTube* under the title "6 Symposium: Speculations on Anonymous Materials - Reza Negarestani" on January 18, 2014. Accessed March 11, 2017. youtube.com/watch?v=Fg0lMebGt9I.

[108] Nilan, Pam, and Carles Feixa. 2006. eds. *Global youth? : hybrid identities, plural worlds*. London: Routledge.

[109] Nooshin, Laudan. 2018. ""Our Angel of Salvation": Toward an Understanding of Iranian Cyberspace as an Alternative Sphere of Musical Sociality." *Ethnomusicology* 62 (3): 341–374.

[110] —. 2015. *Iranian Classical Music: The Discourses and Practice of Creativity*. Abingdon: Ashgate Publishing.

[111] —. 2005. "Subversion and Countersubversion: Power, Control, and Meaning in the New Iranian Pop Music." In *Music, Power, and Politics*, edited by Annie J. Randall, 231–272. New York: Routledge.

[112] —. 2008. "The Language of Rock: Iranian Youth, Popular Music, and National Identity." In *Media, culture and society in Iran: Living with Globalization and the Islamic State*, edited by Mehdi Semati, 69–93. Oxford: Psychology Press.

[113] Orton-Johnson, Kate, and Arthur N. Prior. 2013. eds. *Digital Sociology: Critical Perspectives*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

[114] Parsa, Misagh. 1989. *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

[115] Piekut, Benjamin. 2011. *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

[116] Pink, Sarah, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, and Jo Tacchi. 2015. *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

[117] Postill, John. 2008. "Localizing the internet beyond communities and networks." *New Media & Society* 10 (3): 413–431.

[118] Prior, Nick. 2008. "Putting a Glitch in the Field: Bourdieu, Actor Network Theory and Contemporary Music." *Cultural Sociology* 2 (3): 301–319.

[119] Qureshi, Regula Burckhardt. 1986. *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context and Meaning in Qawwali*. Cambridge: Cambridge Universoty press.

[120] Rancière, Jacque. 2013. *The Politics of aesthetics*. London: Bloomsbury Continuum.

[121] Rebelo, Pedro. 2014. "The Local and the Distributed in the Sonic Arts." *Invisible Places, Sounding Cities: Sound, Urbanism and Sense of Place*. Portugal: Viseu. 686–697.

[122] Riegl, Alois. 1992. *Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament*. Translated by Evelyn Kain. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[123] Robertson, Roland. 2000. *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture.* London: Sage.

[124] Robinson, Laura. 2007. "The cyberself: the self-ing project goes online, symbolic interactionin the digital age." *New Media & Society* 9 (1): 93–110.

[125] Robinson, Laura, and David Halle. 2002. "Digitization, the Internet, and the Arts: eBay, Napster, SAG, and e-Books." *Qualitative Sociology* 25 (3): 359–383.

[126] Rose, Simon. 2017. *The Lived Experience of Improvisation In Music, Learning and Life.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[127] 1973. *Papillon (film).* Directed by Franklin J. Schaffner.

[128] Schuyler, Philip D. 1985. "The Rwais and the Zawia: Professional Musicians and the Rural Religious Elite in Southwestern Morocco." *Asian Music* 17 (1): 114-131.

[129] Serres, Michel. 2017. *Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies.* Translated by Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

[130] Seyed-Gohrab, Ali Asghar. 2012. ed. *Metaphor and Imagery in Persian Poetr.* LEIDEN: Brill Publishers.

[131] Shawcross, William. 1988. *The Shah's Last Ride.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

[132] Shayegan, Darish. 2001. *La lumière vient de l'Occident, Le réenchantement du monde et la pensée nomade.* Essay, Paris: Éditions de l'Aube.

[133] Slobin, Mark. 1992. "Micromusics of the West: A Comparative Approach." *Ethnomusicology* 36 (1): 1–87.

[134] —. 1993. *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West.* Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

[135] Small, Christopher. 1998. *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening.* Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

[136] Soroush, Abdolkarim. 1991. *Rāzdāni va Roshanfekri va Dindāri [Mysticism and Intellectualism and Religiosity].* Tehran: Serat.

[137] —. 2002. *Sonnat va Secularism [Tradition and Secularism].* Tehran: Serat.

[138] Sreberny-Mohammadi, Annnabelle. 1991. "The Global and the Local in International Communications." In *Mass Media and Society*, edited by James Curran and Michael Gurevitch, 177–203. London: Edward Arnold Publishers.

[139] Stokes, Martin. 2010. *The Republic of Love.* Chicago: The University of chicago Press.

[140] —. 2007. "On Musical Cosmopolitanism." The Macalester International Roundtable 2007. Paper 3.

[141] Suchman, Lucy. 2007. *Human-Machine Reconfigurations.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

[142] Taylor, Charles. 2002. "Modern Social Imaginaries." *Public Culture* 14 (1): 91–124.

[143] Taylor, Timothy. 1997. *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*. London: Routledge.

[144] Thompson, John B. 1984. *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

[145] Toop, David. 1996. *Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds*. London: Serpent's Tail.

[146] Tsioulakis, Ioannis. 2011. "Jazz in Athens: Frustrated Cosmopolitans in a Music Subculture." *Ethnomusicology Forum* 20 (2): 175–199.

[147] Turino, Thomas. 2003. "Are We Global Yet? Globalist Discourse, Cultural Formations and the Study of Zimbabwean Popular Music." *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 12 (2): 51–79.

[148] Turkle, Sherry. 2011. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books.

[149] —. 2005. *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[150] Turner, Victor. 1987. *The Anthropology of Perfomance*. New York: PAJ Publications.

[151] Van Nieuwkerk, Karin; Levine, Mark; Stokes, Martin. 2016. eds. *ISLAM AND POPULAR CULTURE*. Austin: UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS.

[152] Walstrom, Mary. (2004). Ethics and Engagement in Communication Scholarship.10.4018/9781591401520.ch010.

[153] Waters, Simon. 2000. "Beyond the acousmatic : Hybrid tendencies in electroacoustic music." In *Music, Electronic Media and Culture*, edited by Simon Emmerson, 56–83. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing.

[154] —. 2014. *Inhabiting Sound: Tactile-Sonic Links in Musical Meaning*. Paper presented at Musical Materialities in the Digital Age Conference, Brighton: University of Sussex.

[155] —. 2006. *Performance Ecosystems: Ecological approaches to musical interaction*. Paper presented at Annual Symposium Two Thousand + SIX, Belfast: Queen's University Belfast.

[156] —. 2000. "The musical process in the age of digital intervention." *Queen's University Belfast ARiADA Texts*. Accessed August 2019. pure.qub.ac.uk/ws/files/17255926/2000musical_process_libre.pdf.

[157] —. 2003. "Thinking the unheard: Hybrid thought in musical practice." In *Hybrid Thought*, edited by John. Monk and Rolf Hughes, 163–189. Milton Keynes: Open University.

[158] —. 2015. "Tullis Rennie's Muscle Memory: Listening to the Act of Listening." *Contemporary Music Review* 34 (1): 22–32.

[159] Weber, Max, A M Henderson, and Talcott Parsons. 1947. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. New York: Oxford University Press.

[160] Wiener, Norbert. 1961. *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*. Paris: Hermann & Cie.

[161] Yarshater, Ehsan. 1962. "Some Common Characteristics of Persian Poetry and Art." *Studia Islamica* 16: 61–71.

[162] Yousefzadeh, Ameneh. 2002. *Les bardes du Khorassan iranien Le bakhshi et son repertoire (Travaux et memoires de l'Institut d'Etudes iraniennes)*. Louvain: Peeters publishers.

[163] Youssefzadeh, Ameneh. 2000. "The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution: The Role of Official Organizations." *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 9 (2): 35–61.

APPENDIX A

This section provides a link to a digital version of the thesis and the portfolio via my personal website.

Thesis: https://www.hadibastani.com/phd-thesis

Portfolio: https://www.hadibastani.com/phd-portfolio

APPENDIX B

The chart below offers an overall view of the timeline in the span of four years, from 2015 to 2019, and the text that follows will provide a more detailed breakdown of the project's main stages based on the tasks performed in each year.

Nov. 2015 – Nov. 2016 | **Learning**

- History of music anthropology
- Techniques of ethnographic documentation
- Discourse Analysis
- Preparing the draft of the first chapter for the differentiation

Nov. 2016 – Nov. 2017 | **Fieldwork/Portfolio/Collaboration/Presentation**

- Start of online interviews and online ethnography
- Start of transcription
- Digital data analysis
- Start of the portfolio
- Developing a theoretical basis for collaborative sound-based practice
- Start of a collaborative composition project (intra.view)
- Presenting the findings in a conference

Nov. 2017 – Nov. 2018 | **Fieldwork/Portfolio/Collaboration/Presentation**

- Continuing online ethnography
- Finalising intra.view
- Working on new pieces for the portfolio
- Presenting parts of the portfolio as installations and collaborative performances

- Presenting theoretical findings in conferences and proceedings
- Developing draft of new chapters

Nov. 2018 – Aug. 2019 | Portfolio/Thesis

- Finishing the fieldwork by January 2019
- Organising the thesis drafts and preparing a final version
- Finalising the portfolio
- Finalising the thesis based on supervision feedbacks
- Presenting the findings in a conference
- Submitting the project in 30 August 2019

APPENDIX C

This section first aims to offers some demographic data regarding the interviews that were performed in this research. It then attempts to present a portray of EEMSI's major 'contact points'—festivals, galleries, blogs, podcast, collectives, and record labels that have been central to the early developments of the scene in Iran and beyond.

From April 2017 to January 2019 I interviewed 45 persons; 12 females (27%) and 33 males (73%). From the 45 interviewees 38 were Iranians (84%) and seven were non-Iranians (16%). Among my Iranian interlocutors—38 out of 45 interviewees—11 were female (29%) and 27 were male (71%). Among my Iranian interlocutors, seven persons (18%) were based outside Iran at the time of the interview. Among these seven individuals, four of them would visit Iran frequently, three of them could not go back to Iran at all (political refugees).

A few collectives, festivals, galleries, record labels, and venues have been central to the early developments of the scene. Saroseda (2009–2011) was the first artist collective that connected electronic producers, visual artists, and coders in Tehran. TADAEX was the first new media arts festival in Iran (2011–present). It has been a major platform for experimental electronic music since its foundations. SET festival is considered as the main hub for experimental electronic music in Iran (2015–present). These two have been followed since 2017 by TCMF, which has established itself as the major electroacoustic, western and Iranian contemporary art music festival.

EEMSI events have been represented in several galleries in the capital, for instance in Mohsen, Tarrāhan Azad (Azad Art Gallery), Aun, Sāyeh, Iranshahr, and Etemād. Record labels such as Hermes, Māhriz (dissolved), Zabte Sote, and Noise à Noise in Iran and Flaming Pines (UK), Opal Tapes (UK), Unexplained Sound Group (Italy), Oído Records (dissolved), Umor Rex, and Dronarivm (Russia) have also been influential in exposing EEMSI to wider international audiences. Facebook, Instagram, Soundcloud, and Bandcamp has functioned as the main hubs for the dissemination of the scene's output. Six Pillars to Persia show on the London-based Resonance 104.4 FM independent art radio, Headphone Commute electronic

music blog, and Hadi Bastani's Iranian Experimental Music blog on Iranwire.com (2013–2014), and The Attic and the Quietus online music magazines were among the earliest platform that spread the word about EEMSI both inside and outside Iran.

APPENDIX D

This section presents the list of performances, compositions, and installation works produced for the purposes of this PhD, as well as awards, conference presentations, and conference proceedings publications that have arisen from this project.

7.2.1 Award

Full PhD Scholarship awarded by Northern Ireland Department of Employment and Learning (DEL)—now changed name to Department for the Economy (DfE). May 2016 to December 2018. Belfast, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom.

7.2.2 Performances and Installations

Sarcian Sinemass. Sound Installation presented as part of Umbrella Belfast's public art showcase. December 2017. Sonic Arts Research Centre (SARC), Queen's University Belfast, United Kingdom.

Sarcian Sinemass. Sound installation at The Art Department. December 2017. Belfast, United Kingdom.

Slides-zen-Dives. Live electronic improvisation with Pouya Ehsaei at IKLECTIK Art Lab, March 2018. London, United Kingdom.

#Neversame. Audiovisual installation at Sonorities festival, April 2019, Sonic Arts Research Centre, Queen's University Belfast, United Kingdom.

Intra.view. Live audiovisual performance with Anna Weisling (on visuals) at Sonorities festival, April 2019, Sonic Arts Research Centre, Queen's University Belfast, United Kingdom.

Pendulum. Live electronic improvisation and visuals with Steph Horak at Sonorities festival, April 2019, Sonic Arts Research Centre, Queen's University Belfast, United Kingdom.

Ornamental Descend. Composition presented as part of an experimental electronic compilation titled *Girih* that was released through the Tehran-based record label Zabte Sote in collaboration with the UK-based record label Opal Tapes. August 2018. Physically released in the UK and digitally via Bandcamp.

Ecbatan. Sound installation at Tehran Annual Digital Arts Expo (TADAEX), December 2017. Nabshi Gallery, Tehran, Iran.

7.2.3 Conference Proceeding Publication

Koichi Samuels, Hadi Bastani. 'Digital Media, Live Interfaces and Inclusion: Ethnographic Perspectives,' in proceedings of the 2018 International Conference for Live Interfaces (ICLI), Porto, Portugal (2018).

7.2.4 Conference Presentations

'Under the Radar: Ambient Music and/in the Iranian State,' paper presented at Multi-Disciplinary Standpoints on Conflict Transformation Conference. Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice Annual Postgraduate and PhD student conference. September 2017. Queen's University Belfast, United Kingdom.

'Digital Media, Live Interfaces and Inclusion: Ethnographic Perspectives,' (co-authored with Dr Koichi Samuels). June 2018. International Conference for Live Interfaces (ICLI), Porto, Portugal (2018).

'Collaborative composition as ethnographic research in Iran's digital arts and experimental electronic music scene,' paper presented at Decolonizing Strategies in Ethnomusicology, Teaching, and Performance. November 2018. Society for Ethnomusicology's (SEM) annual meeting. Albuquerque, New Mexico, United States (2018).

'Experimental Electronic Sound as Playful Articulation of a Compromised Sociality in Iran,' paper presentation at the upcoming British Forum for Ethnomusicology (BFE) and Société Française d'Ethnomusicologie (SFE) joint conference Music, Sound, Space and Place: Ethnomusicology and Sound Studies. October–November 2019. City, University of London, London, United Kingdom (2019).

7.2.4 Media

This research was mentioned in an interview with the Quietus regarding the experimental electronic music scene in Iran. Available at: thequietus.com/articles/20902-techno-electronic-music-tehran-iran-ash-koosha-sote-siavash-amini

The project also contributed to and was mentioned in Dr Gay Jennifer Breyley's research. Citation provided by Dr Breyley via email is as follows: Gay Jennifer (2018, forthcoming): "'I hung around in your soundtrack": Affinities with Joy Division among contemporary Iranian musicians' in Aileen Dillane, Martin J. Power and Eoin Devereux, eds, Heart and Soul: Critical Essays on Joy Division (London: Rowman & Littlefield), 209-228.