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## Listening to Arab modernity?

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SOUND REVIEWS

## Listening to Arab modernity?

**Sonic traces from the Arab world**, by Norient, Traversal Mix Edit, 2013, SFr20.00 (LP)

Two primary impulses – one aesthetic, one political – appear to drive Norient's 2013 vinyl release of a "mix edit" of their project, *Sonic Traces from the Arab World*. Aesthetically, the release is largely what it claims to be: a mix and edit of sounds (especially music) from the Arab World (especially Lebanon). Politically, the release sits at the nexus of several other related projects – including books, online articles, an online podcast-style mix (or "radio edit"), and a "Musikfilm Festival" – that weigh in on the future of world music and the way contemporary musicians from the Middle East and elsewhere understand their role in producing and critiquing a more traditional version of world music. In taking on this dual task, the Norient team has created a product that indirectly but persistently raises questions about the possibility of knowing the world through sound; an acoustemology, as Steven Feld has called it, that is produced and constrained through the project's editing process itself.

In many ways, the project comes into existence between the poles of the two different mixes: the "mix edit" on the one hand, and the "radio edit" on the other. The project seems to presume that a listener will take advantage of the multiple versions that exist: a small insert comes with the LP indicating how to access the radio mix and download it free of charge. The gesture is a welcome one, encouraging a listening experience based principally on listening to the "mix edit" as a coherent sound object, rather than as an assemblage of sounds in need of an explanation. The "radio edit" podcast supplies greater information in the traditional sense, such as musicians talking about their experience or artistic practice, as well as a few intriguing compositional decisions that I discuss below.

Traversal, the Swiss label that produced the album, promotes the project on its website as follows:

This limited mix-version of «Sonic Traces: From the Arab World» offers music, sounds and noises from the Arab World: Propaganda music by political groups and clans, psychedelic Arabic Rock from the late 1960s and 1970s, the noises of bombs and machine guns, synthesized Electro-Sha'bi from Cairo, old and rare shellac recordings, Death Metal, Rap, Electro-Acoustic Music, and Musique Concète. Collected and mixed by the Norient collective – Thomas Burkhalter, Simon Grab and Michael Spahr.

Listen to musicians and scholars discussing identity, life visions and traumatic war experiences in the full-version of «Sonic Traces: From the Arab World».<sup>1</sup>

This description is technically accurate but somewhat misleading. The bulk of the album consists of music – however slippery a term that may be – and mostly of previously recorded music, usually with some kind of beat. While it also includes "sounds and noises", listeners seeking a phonographic or "soundscape" composition may be disappointed. Burkhalter, Grab and Spahr have produced an extended musical composition (or probably two different pieces, one on each side), itself comprised of many fragments of music. One musical example follows after another, creating a series of juxtapositions, some of which – like the explorations of women vocalists and quranic recitation that kick off the B-side of the "mix edit" – clearly convey a story in music, even

if the details of that story are not entirely clear. Like in film montage, which similarly unfolds serially in time, juxtapositions of this sort naturally raise questions: Why did this track (or fragment of music) follow upon the previous one? What kind of relationship exists between them? How does a given track encourage the listener to rethink what has earlier passed or anticipate what might come next?

At its most effective, the "mix edit" executes this fragmentary montage in a highly performative way. Without the verbal interventions that interject in the "radio edit", the transitions between successive tracks are foregrounded. The most common editing solution to deal with these transitions is a DJ-style overlapping of two tracks briefly with accompanying fades in/out. In some more adventurous moments, the edit functions more like a hinge or pivot: a loud sound generates a sonic rupture that allows for a more dramatic cut between materials. This kind of anthropological DJing, again, generates a wide array of sonic associations. On some level, it also suggests a possible answer to a long-standing conundrum in producing and disseminating albums of field recordings/soundscape compositions/phonography. So many releases of such materials (whether on LP, CD, or as a podcast) either provide a listener with extended compositions that bring together multiple soundsources or else present material as a series of individual tracks, often with simple descriptors of site or place: "At the Pier", "In a Coffeeshop", "Budapest" etc. By composing multiple sound objects together but keeping the transitions between them very audible, the Norient team has managed to create an extended cut without necessarily composing a piece of their own. In other words, the creators of Norient seem to be acting as phonographic DJs, cutting from track to track, making vinyl an ideal format for encouraging such listening.

Unsurprisingly, all of this changes with the "radio edit" and even more so in light of the essay that accompanies it on the Norient website. Given the more radical form of sonic knowledge in the sound pieces themselves (including both the "mix edit" and the "radio edit") I limit myself here to comments on those pieces. The "radio edit" adds some musical examples, including a striking duet by trumpeters Mazen Kerbaj of Lebanon and Franz Hautzinger of Austria, inspired by gunfire ("machine guns and helicopters – soundscapes of my youth" comments Kerbaj) and Peter Brötzmann's 1968 album *Machine Gun*. Other artists, including musician/media artist Raed Yassin, also Lebanese, supply other commentary, including Yassin's opening remarks (roughly one minute into the "radio edit"), posing questions that seem to be the intellectual crux of the project:

What is identity? It's mixed up with a world streaming on the internet. In a way there are some people now who are citizens of the virtual space ... It will be so weird if somebody tell me that he has very strong identity related to his surroundings. Because the virtual space is very powerful. It can be a whole homeland.<sup>2</sup>

In a sense, the whole project sets its sights on this play of identity that emerges in the space between real and virtual, LP and podcast, record grooves and streaming audio, homeland and the web-based spaces of digital natives. Citing ethnomusicologists Anne Rasmussen and Veit Erlmann, the podcast narrators give voice to a narrative – presumably scripted by Burkhalter and his team – in which practitioners of "world music 2.0" are attempting to recuperate the synthesis of local tradition and pop music in a globalised, mostly neoliberal world.

The argument is a bold one, venturing beyond the usual ambition of phonographic recordings of soundscape compositions. The project's multifaceted approach – LP, podcast, website with text – offers sonic material and textual exposition as utterances in a variety of media registers. And yet, the proliferation of materials in some ways only manages to elide other fundamental questions – nagging spectres that have haunted anthropology and ethnomusicology for decades. To what degree does it make sense to speak of "the Arab World"? What breadth of coverage would be necessary to suggest an adequate representation of such practices? (As mentioned above, most of the musicians interviewed hail from Lebanon, with significant material from Egypt and North Africa as well.) To what degree is such a venture complicit in the same problematic circulations of world music itself? And finally, what is the status of music in relation to other kinds of sounds? The promise of a broader soundscape largely falls by the wayside in both sonic

versions, suggesting that “sonic traces” means something like fragments of recorded songs rather than a more radical view of what kinds of sounds matter. Indeed, Kerbaj’s comments about the interplay between music and other forms of sound only prompt the question of other intersections between these two worlds, an idea that might have been addressed more centrally, especially in the podcast format.

Nevertheless, whatever shortcomings may remain in this conceptualisation of “world music 2.0”, Norient’s project offers an exciting model for what “phonography 2.0” might sound and look like. The various components of the project resonate but tend not to repeat one another verbatim, with some exceptions between the two sound mixes. In other words, each format adds clear value to its partner formats, creating a rich multiplicity of experiences. In addition, it complements the expansive project Norient appears to be undertaking in reconsidering the interconnections and ruptures in contemporary popular music around the globe.

## Notes

1. <http://www.traversion.ch/new/index.php?buecher/norient-lp-arab-world/>, accessed 1 October 2014.
2. “Sonic Traces: From the Arab World (radio edit).” <http://norient.com/en/podcasts/sonic-traces-from-the-arab-world-lp/>, accessed 1 October 2014.

## Notes on contributor

**Peter McMurray** received his PhD in ethnomusicology and critical media practice from Harvard University, USA. His research focuses primarily on Islam and sound technologies, especially in Turkey and the Turkish diaspora. He is currently a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA, where he is beginning a project on the history of American acoustics research. He also has longstanding interests in oral poetry and is the assistant curator of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature.

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## Bernie Krause’s The Great Animal Orchestra – an exhibition\*

**On the Great Animal Orchestra Exhibition**, inspired by the work of Bernie Krause, Fondation Cartier (Paris), 2 July 2016–8 January 2017, exhibition curated by Hervé Chandès. Including works by: Pierre Bodo, Cai Guo-Qiang, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Raymond Depardon and Claudine Nougarret, Bernie Krause, JP Mika, Manabu Miyazaki, Moke, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Christian Sardet, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Shiro Takatani, TALLER Mauricio Rocha + Gabriela Carrillo, Tara Océans, Cyprien Tokoudagba, United Visual Artists, Agnès Varda, Adriana Varejão

Bernie Krause (\*1938) first made a name for himself at the end of the sixties, as a pioneer in the field of synthesisers. Together with Paul Beaver (1926–1975), he produced several records and took part in numerous studio sessions, in particular in the rock music world, amongst others for The Byrds and The Doors (cf. Pinch and Trocco 2002, 107–130). He is also a theoretician and a

\* Many thanks to Kate McNaughton for her translation