

INTO

What you're into if you're into sound and music

MAZEN KERBAJ

IMPROVISING
IN LEBANON

LISTEN CLOSER

✓ Twenty years of empreintes DIGITALes

KAFKA FRAGMENTS

✓ Kurtag's private theatre

The magazine of





A NEW DESTINATION FOR IMPROV

Mazen Kerbaj is at the forefront of Lebanon's growing improv scene, bringing together local and international musicians for Beirut's Irtijal festival and developing his own sonic and visual art. Ahead of this month's MazaJ festival in London, he tells Daniel Spicer about the challenges of discovering, playing and curating improvised music in the Middle East.

"There is no such thing as an Arab identity. I do not define myself as an Arab artist because I wouldn't say that Picasso is a Spanish painter or Evan Parker is an English musician. You are just a musician or a painter or whatever."

Lebanese trumpeter/improviser Mazen Kerbaj may well deny the existence of an Arab identity, but this month he'll be in London among a group of Middle Eastern musicians playing at the MazaJ Festival – a new event that seeks to celebrate contemporary experimental Arabic music and Middle Eastern sonic culture. According to the organisers, MazaJ (Arabic for 'mood') will strip bare the stereotypes of Arabic music by giving UK audiences a rare chance to encounter some of the Middle East's most questing artists. The fact that it's happening at all is



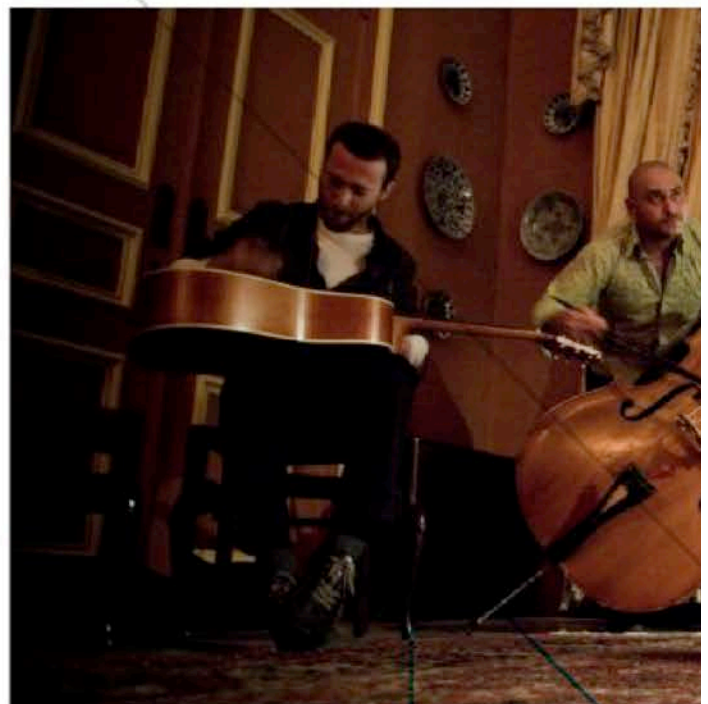
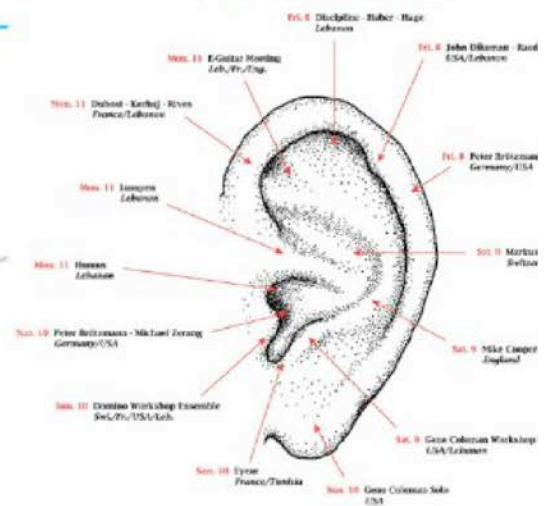
proof positive of the rapid growth of interest in experimental music in the Arab world in recent years. In Egypt, sound artist Mahmoud Refat's 100COPIES label and 100LIVE Electronic Music Festival have helped to document and stimulate Cairo's nascent experimental scene. In Turkey, free-jazz guitarist Umut Çağlar's re:konstruKt label has provided a focal point for Istanbul's improvising community. But, in many respects, Lebanon is leading the way, with an explosion of interest in avant-garde sounds over the last decade – an explosion for which Mazen Kerbaj is largely responsible.

Today, Kerbaj is an in-demand artist with a distinctive musical identity. He has played in the Middle East, the USA and Europe, frequently in solo performance but also in duos and trios – not just with other Arabic musicians, but also with Euro-improv artists including trumpeters Franz Hautzinger and Axel Dörner as well as US improvisers such as Assyrian-American percussionist Michael Zerang and cellist Fred Lonberg-Holm, both mainstays of the Chicago avant-jazz scene. Tellingly, Kerbaj's trumpet style sits somewhere between the fire of American free jazz and the classically-informed lyricism of some European improv. It wouldn't even be too fanciful to suggest that there is a hint of the muezzin's call to prayer in his lingering, evocative tones. While resisting the temptation to describe his application of mood as 'painterly', it's also worth noting that he's developed a parallel career as a visual artist and cartoonist. As well as

THE AUDIENCE IS DIFFERENT FROM IN EUROPE WHERE IT'S OLD GUYS – THE GUYS WHO FOLLOWED THE EVOLUTION OF THIS MUSIC. IN BEIRUT IT'S MOSTLY YOUNG PEOPLE'

IRTIJAL 05

THE INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL WORLD IN LEBANON
المهرجان الدولي الموسيقي العرندة الدولي في لبنان



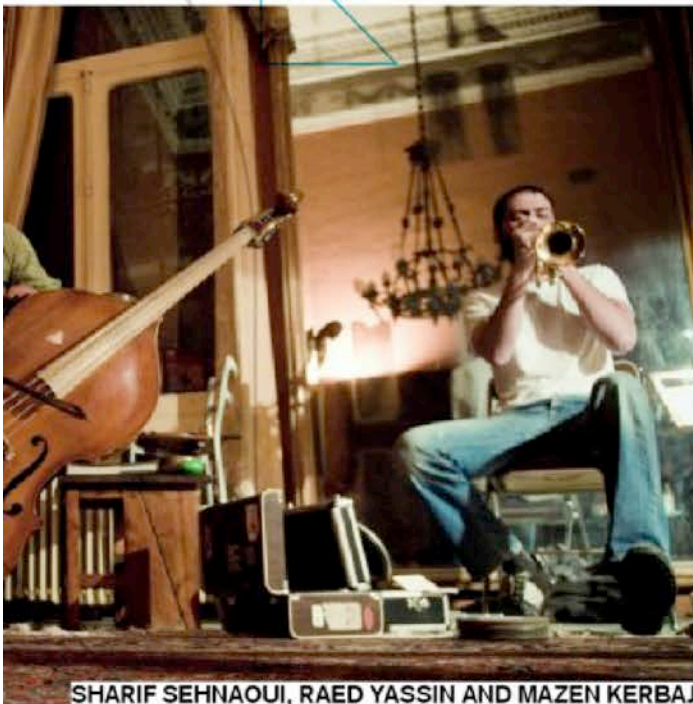
several published volumes of cartoons, he's contributed his bold, Cubist-influenced designs to numerous magazines, newspapers and posters.

But the fact is, he's had to work hard to get where he is now. Kerbaj's first gig took place in a Beirut bar in 2000, as a duo with Lebanese saxophonist Christine Sehnaoui – considered by some to be the first improvised music concert in the Middle East. "Improvised music itself did not exist almost here before myself and a couple of other guys began to play this music," claims Kerbaj. "It was non-existent until roughly '98 or '99." The following year, together with guitarist Sharif Sehnaoui, Kerbaj co-founded the Irtijal Festival, which he has continued to curate ever since. Over the years, the festival has provided a crucial nexus for the burgeoning Middle Eastern improvising scene – and brought many respected

international musicians to the region, including Joe McPhee, Rhodri Davies and Michael Zerang. The Irtijal festival celebrated its tenth anniversary this year, with four days of concerts entertaining more than 500 paying guests. It's quite some achievement considering how unknown improv was in Lebanon just a decade ago. "When we started playing this music," says Kerbaj, "people would come up after the concert and say 'you have invented a new music.' We had to explain, 'No, these types of experiments have been in music since the '60s.' It was like what people would say after an AMM concert maybe in '65, in London."

Perhaps it's little surprise that radical artforms such as improv have taken a while to catch on in Beirut. Even now, mention Lebanon and most Westerners will think of the horrific civil war that shattered the tiny state from 1975 – the year of Kerbaj's birth – until 1990. It's a long way from the thriving improv scene of London or the jazz clubs of New York, Paris or Berlin. Growing up there meant that Kerbaj had to work hard to learn about the music.

"Contrary to a lot of people who discover it first by a concert and then buy CDs, I discovered this music by CDs and didn't see my first concert until maybe five years after discovering the music," he says. "I went to Paris especially to see a festival where a lot of musicians were playing this music. I knew about it well by then because I had friends in Europe who would send me CDs. It was difficult that I couldn't find any CDs here.



SHARIF SEHNAOUI, RAED YASSIN AND MAZEN KERBAJ

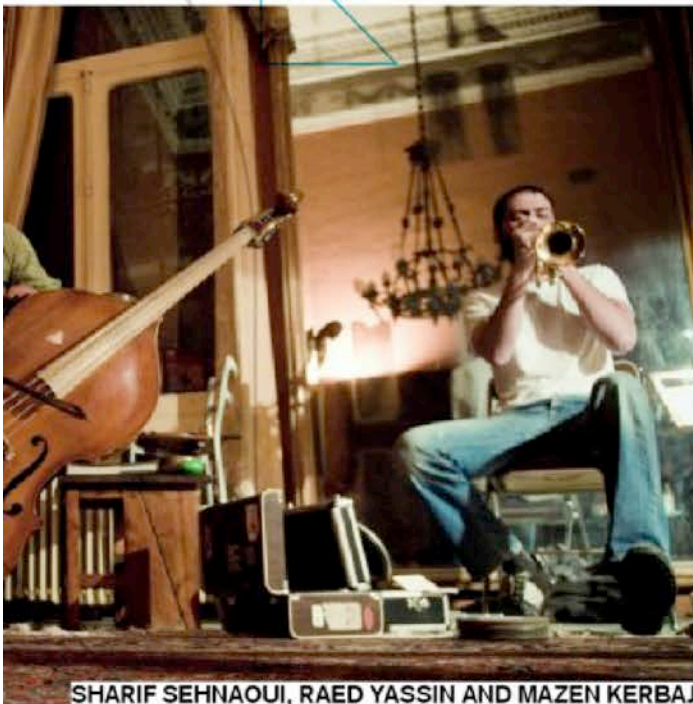
several published volumes of cartoons, he's contributed his bold, Cubist-influenced designs to numerous magazines, newspapers and posters.

But the fact is, he's had to work hard to get where he is now. Kerbaj's first gig took place in a Beirut bar in 2000, as a duo with Lebanese saxophonist Christine Sehnaoui – considered by some to be the first improvised music concert in the Middle East. "Improvised music itself did not exist almost here before myself and a couple of other guys began to play this music," claims Kerbaj. "It was non-existent until roughly '98 or '99." The following year, together with guitarist Sharif Sehnaoui, Kerbaj co-founded the Irtijal Festival, which he has continued to curate ever since. Over the years, the festival has provided a crucial nexus for the burgeoning Middle Eastern improvising scene – and brought many respected

international musicians to the region, including Joe McPhee, Rhodri Davies and Michael Zerang. The Irtijal festival celebrated its tenth anniversary this year, with four days of concerts entertaining more than 500 paying guests. It's quite some achievement considering how unknown improv was in Lebanon just a decade ago. "When we started playing this music," says Kerbaj, "people would come up after the concert and say 'you have invented a new music.' We had to explain, 'No, these types of experiments have been in music since the '60s.' It was like what people would say after an AMM concert maybe in '65, in London."

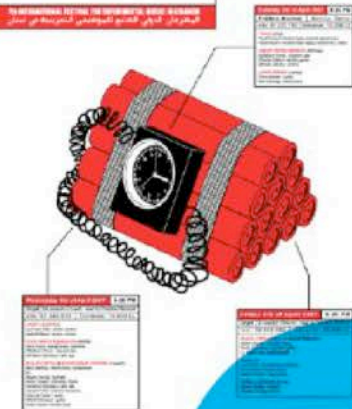
Perhaps it's little surprise that radical artforms such as improv have taken a while to catch on in Beirut. Even now, mention Lebanon and most Westerners will think of the horrific civil war that shattered the tiny state from 1975 – the year of Kerbaj's birth – until 1990. It's a long way from the thriving improv scene of London or the jazz clubs of New York, Paris or Berlin. Growing up there meant that Kerbaj had to work hard to learn about the music.

"Contrary to a lot of people who discover it first by a concert and then buy CDs, I discovered this music by CDs and didn't see my first concert until maybe five years after discovering the music," he says. "I went to Paris especially to see a festival where a lot of musicians were playing this music. I knew about it well by then because I had friends in Europe who would send me CDs. It was difficult that I couldn't find any CDs here.



SHARIF SEHNAOUI, RAED YASSIN AND MAZEN KERBAJ

الارتجال 07 IRTIJAL 07



'WORKING HERE, YOU FEEL YOU'RE NOT JUST WORKING AS A MUSICIAN – YOU FEEL YOU ARE DOING SOMETHING FOR THE COMMUNITY'

In a sense the internet was a big deliverance. You see mostly crap and you have to go for the cool things, but at least you can get them whenever you want to, which is the big innovation, the big relief."

The advent of the internet hasn't just made it easy for curious music fans in the Middle East to track down obscure free-jazz discs. It's also made it possible for musicians like Kerbaj to spread their own sounds further afield. And that's also been the purpose of the Lebanese CD label Al Maslakh ('The Slaughterhouse'), founded by Kerbaj and others in 2005. "Even before the internet, the biggest tool for me to make myself known was the CD," says Kerbaj. "It enabled us to show our music to festivals, to get gigs outside of Lebanon. That was our way and we still believe in this thing. We are retro guys who believe in the object." Recent releases on Al Maslakh have included *3:1*, a 2008 trio date with Kerbaj, guitarist Sharif Sehnaoui and German trumpeter Birgit Ulher.

It's a testament to Kerbaj's drive and tenacity that the homegrown Lebanese appetite for free-improv is now so healthy. "Today it is better because we have played this music for ten years so there is a small audience," he agrees. "There are people who know about Peter Brotzmann or Evan Parker or AMM or whatever. The audience is typically different from in Europe where it's old guys – the guys who followed the evolution of this music. In Beirut it's mostly young people from the Universities or just beyond in their twenties or the beginning of their thirties. So the scene is building up and there is a new generation of younger people coming in."

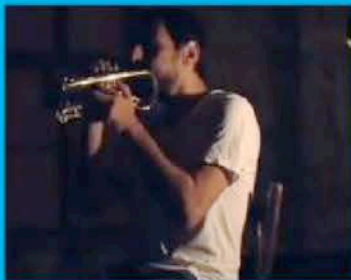
Moreover, it's not hard to sense how proud he is of the transformation he's helped to bring about in the artistic life of his homeland. "I grew up thinking that at the first opportunity I would go and live in Europe or somewhere. I never would have thought that I would stay in Lebanon. But today, I wouldn't imagine myself living somewhere else. Somehow I dis-

covered it's the same shit here or in London or in New York or whatever. Working here, somehow you feel you're not just working here as a musician – somehow you feel you are doing something for the community, for the musicians, you are really creating a high ground for the scene to follow. You are really helping somehow to create something."

MazaJ takes place at London venues from Thursday 18 to Sunday 21 November. Mazen Kerbaj performs on 20 and 21 November.

www.soundandmusic.org.uk/mazaj

Listening post



Mazen Kerbaj and Sharif Sehnaoui



Mazen Kerbaj, Raed Yassin and Charbel Haber



Rouba3i (Mazen Kerbai, Chrsitine Sehnaoui, Sharif Sehnaoui, Fabrizio Spera)



Mazen Kerbaj performing at Franz Hautzinger's Oriental Space, Konfrontationen Festival 2007



AI Maslakh record label



Mazen Kerbaj