

“Many improvisors claim ‘I invented this’, ‘he stole that from me’, or ‘I was the first one to do that’. But I’m really happy because I steal from drummers and double bass players and nobody notices!”

For Mazen Kerbaj – comics writer, visual artist and a founding figure of Lebanese free improvisation – developing your own vocabulary on an instrument is key. Active since the mid-1990s, he is co-founder of MILL, the cultural music association behind Beirut’s annual improv festival Irtijal, and also of Al Maslakh, a foundational label for experimental music in the region. His artistic curiosity has led him to push the boundaries of his instrument as a soloist as well as part of several groups. “And I think it is the same for any other art,” he continues his train of thought. “Of course, you steal from here and there, nothing is born from nowhere, but developing your own vocabulary is very important, especially in free improv.”

I speak over Zoom with Kerbaj at his family home in Berlin about musicianship, improvisation and collaboration. As his work suggests, he is an unassuming character with a hearty laugh and razor-sharp wit. Surrounded by busy bookshelves, he is impeccably articulate as he moves from the idea of vocab to grammar. “It took me a long time to understand that improv is a vocabulary that needs a proper grammar that you also have to invent. For me, this is the difference between a good and bad improvisor because developing new sounds is only part of it. Knowing how to use them makes you a good improvisor.”

I ask how that translates to collaborating with other musicians. “I don’t like improv musicians who play a ‘solo’ at the end,” he replies. “They aren’t bad players per se, because they have a very nice vocabulary, but their way of using it is very flat. With time, I’ve noticed that my favourite people to play with have great sounds which make me turn around and ask, what the fuck are they doing? There are many musicians who can play a good concert here and there, but it’s very

rare to find improvisors that you can play with for many years, and they still surprise you. I think it comes down to a combination of knowing how to use a self-invented technique and a vocabulary as an improvisor.”

Kerbaj’s superb new release *Sampler/Sampled* puts many of these ideas into play. Consisting of two interdependent parts, *Sampler* is a catalogue of 318 short trumpet works, while *Sampled* is a series of collaborative compositions in new duos using only sounds from the former *Sampler* as sources. The former provides an index of Kerbaj’s trumpet solo and extended technical developments, with some tracks lasting just a few seconds.

Collecting sounds developed over the last 25 years of his career, this catalogue works on various levels. Firstly, it works as an incredible solo that gurgles, vibrates and sears, which the listener is invited to play in any random order. It also represents a collection of sounds that could be used as ringtones, sound effects or samples. It sits somewhere between a *Now That’s What I Call Hard Skronk!* trumpet sample pack and a never-tiring, shit-hot horn solo played directly in your face, in your own home. This fun approach to utilising sounds is the first step in Kerbaj’s vision of music as a universal language.

Kerbaj’s journey in developing his vocabulary of sounds began in Beirut in the early 1990s when he turned 17 years old. His best friend, experimental guitarist and fellow member of “A” Trio, Sharif Sehnaoui, gave him a trumpet on his birthday. “We would sit smoking pot until 6am and listen to music. We started with weird rock and then little by little, we discovered jazz and free jazz. Sharif said, ‘I have a trumpet. Do you want it?’ He gave it to me on my birthday and I said, ‘Why would I play trumpet?’ I’d never even touched an instrument before, and it started there, as a joke. At no point did I ever imagine becoming a trumpet player, an improvisor or a musician.”

Lebanese trumpeter, comic book artist and guerrilla film maker **Mazen Kerbaj** has developed an idiosyncratic musical language to forge global relationships via his *Sampler/Sampled* project. By **Mariam Rezaei**. Photography by **Mustafah Abdulaziz**

Lust



Translation



Mazen Kerbaj in Berlin, January 2022

Curiosity towards the instrument led him to various music courses in Lebanon, but the music he was learning was formal and his mind was already set on pursuing a career in the visual arts. "I already knew from a very young age that I was going to be a visual and comic book artist. But then trumpet came along and in the beginning, I used to just play very loud. My thing was just trying to make loud sounds. I took lessons with a trumpet player from the conservatoire but after several courses, we agreed it was totally useless."

When Sehnaoui left Lebanon for Paris with his wife, the pair continued to share their musical listening, except now Sehnaoui had access to newer and wilder music. "There was nothing like free jazz or free improv in Lebanon, so Sharif would send me second hand CDs of free improv in exchange for Bowie or Zappa albums. He sent me Evan Parker releases and that's how I started learning about different small ensembles like two trombones and two guitar players."

As Kerbaj could only hear the music without seeing it, how these musicians were making some sounds remained a puzzle for quite a while. "Everything was really in my imagination, you know, like, how do they do this? How can a saxophone sound like *this*?" he marvels. "I was fascinated, and when I saw my first live improv gig in Paris, three or four years later, I had to close my eyes! It was too much information!"

He remembers when he first learned about circular breathing after initially mistaking it for overdubbing with electronics. "Sharif sent me CDs of Evan Parker, Joe McPhee and Daunik Lazro. I noticed one player who wasn't breathing. This was before emails and the internet, so I called Sharif and said, 'This is great, but there's some overdubbing or something.' He said, 'No, no, it's live... Yeah, it's Evan Parker. He does circular breathing.'"

A little later, when Kerbaj had access to the early internet, he found a Word document on circular breathing which explained the process. "I then learned that all by myself. It took me a year. I started with my throat and then mastered singing. But this is so important to what I do today."

A lack of access to regular live performances of experimental music in Lebanon meant Kerbaj had to become resourceful, which in turn, led to him discovering new sounds and techniques for himself. "Sharif sent me a Rajesh Mehta and Paul Lovens recording. I saw that Mehta plays double trumpet. On the cover, you see two trumpets with a tube from one valve to the other trumpet. Just from seeing this photo I wanted to try it, so I put it all together and when I press the second valve, the sound moves to the other trumpet, but it sounds like shit! That's when I realised Mehta had really mastered it." He gave up after this first attempt but returned a few months later. "I had tried moving the tube on the trumpet until it sounded nice but it still wasn't great. So, instead of putting the trumpet mouthpiece in the tube, I put in a sax mouthpiece and suddenly, it was like having a bass clarinet in my hands. I put a disposable ashtray on the trumpet bell and I couldn't believe my ears! I could see it vibrating! From then, of course, I started putting anything in there!"

Relying so much on his ears and his imagination turned out to be as effective as it was surprising. He remembers Sehnaoui picking up a trombone and playing around with balloons. He'd heard music

by French trombonist Thierry Madiot and French-Slovenian composer Vinko Globokar but he'd never actually seen any of it performed. "A little after Sharif left Lebanon for Paris, I decided to try this balloon and little by little, I developed a whole language with it. Years later, I met Thierry Madiot for the first time and we played together. We both spoke about playing with balloons and I told him that I'd never actually seen him do it. At the end of this amazing gig, we both looked at each other and said, 'I didn't know you could do that with a balloon!' Every one of us has their own way of playing the balloon and breathing with an instrument."

Kerbaj developed his approach to his instrument in tandem with his other artistic endeavours. On the first day of the German Covid lockdown, 14 March 2020, Kerbaj began *The Corona Diaries* blog. Much like his 2006 blog detailing the 34 day war across Israel and Lebanon, it's a distinctively styled combination of drawings, videos, writing and sound, mixing the personal with the collective.

"I really felt a sense of emergency, like I did with the blog about the war in 2006," he recalls. "I wanted to do something because it's a very exceptional situation. I needed to cope with it by working, if I'm not going to travel. So many gigs got cancelled one after the other and I needed to respond to that. Plus, I like to keep myself busy."

While covering difficult and pressing issues, he also made space for fun and mischief. On the blog, Kerbaj included a particularly explosive electronics video, "Your Hand Is The Only Hand I Can Still Touch", using the Crackle Synth. Designed by the late Michel Waisvisz, this instrument is controlled by skin contact on the surface of the synthesizer. "I learned a technique using two hands, with one hand moving on top of the other. But then my wife puts her hand on mine and, given the circumstances of the pandemic, I called it a love song. A friend of mine called me from Beirut and said 'What is this shit? The music is great but how do you dare call this a love song? It looks like a fucking porn movie!'"

While working on his blog, Kerbaj mitigated against the effects of the pandemic via negotiation with festivals all over the world about his commissioned work. "Counterflows Festival in Glasgow had asked me to come and perform my 49 trumpet composition in 2020. Of course, it didn't work out because of Covid, so we postponed till the next year.

"I hate live streaming," he continues. "I hate everything about them and so when I chatted with Counterflows about playing online in 2021, they asked me 'what do you want to do?' I said, maybe a movie."

Progress was slow at first but the new sound of the Crackle Synth alongside his perfecting of trumpet sounds became the basis of the film *Mazen Kerbaj: The Musical*. Partially tongue in cheek, partially evocative of pandemic-borne self-isolation, the work follows a day in the life arc with irreprehensible wit and intimacy. "It's the first time I really used storytelling with my music. I never thought it was possible, especially without words. I mean, it's really just chapter titles and I manage to do something funny, which I do with my comics."

Each movement has a clear focus on specific musical gestures which were all purposefully filmed in one take. Although Kerbaj layers and overdubs several solo takes to form duos, trios and quintets

with himself, each movement is underpinned by what you might call a live energy. "The concept in 'The Prayer' was so solid that I recorded five solo takes, each one without headphones. Once they were combined as a quintet, they somehow all just worked." Leading on from *The Corona Diaries*, Kerbaj returned to his Crackle Synth with an act of solo love. "After my friend's comment on my love song being like a porn movie came the Masturbation chapter. I thought, I'll do it with myself and then nobody else can claim it. It's so funny in the piece."

This melding of humour, sound and intimacy connects with the audience through its embodiment of the simultaneously private and collective human experience of the pandemic.

The *Sampler/Sampled* project was initially part of a proposal for Kerbaj's one year residency in Berlin under the invitation of German organisation DAAD in 2015, but he actually set about completing it during the pandemic lockdowns of 2020–21. He invited other musicians from around the globe to take *Sampler*, and collaborate with him using their own grammar, putting the idea of music as a universal language into practice. "Of course, when you say music is a universal language, it sounds quite cheesy, but it is what it is. I don't have a better way of describing it. And in this project, I was really very happy to experience sharing and connecting with new musicians that I didn't know."

The global lockdowns provided opportunities for Kerbaj to research new music and discover new collaborators. "I found new musicians that I would have never met in real life. I might have found their music online, but I would never have met them as musicians because there aren't many live festivals at the moment." Kerbaj sent messages to potential collaborators across the globe including Tunisian producer Deena Abdelwahed, Lebanese producer Rabih Beaini and American composer Bob Ostertag, plus three turntablists, Vienna based Dieb13, US artist Marina Rosenfeld and DJ Sniff in Hong Kong. "I'm so glad I didn't finish this project five years ago because my initial idea was also to just give it to improvisors. So, to have turntablists and techno producers from all over the world playing with *Sampler* is fun."

The resulting album defies genre, with other contributions from Mexican producer Microhm, Palestinian beatmaker Muqata'a, and producer/founder of Jamaican Equinox Records, Gavin 'Gavsborg' Blair. Other contributors include Vienna based DJ and female:pressure founder Electric Indigo, Iranian sound artist Fari Bradley and Californian musician Rose. Recording in lockdown proved to be an efficient way of collaborating from a distance while helping break down barriers with musicians from different genres. "In improv music, you can go anywhere in the world, meet a new musician and they've played with other musicians you know, and it's like a really big family. In rock or techno scenes, it's more compartmentalised."

Kerbaj gave each collaborator one instruction: create a piece only using *Sampler* tracks as a sound source (plus the use of all kinds of effects or treatments). He sent *Sampler* dubplates to turntablists DJ Sniff, Dieb13 and Rosenfeld, and received three radically different tracks in return.

“After my friend’s comment on my love song being like a porn movie came the masturbation chapter. I thought, I’ll do it with myself and then nobody else can claim it”



“Norm Follows Function” with Dieb13 cuts across several different trumpet sounds that loop and tumble through harsh, brassy trumpets, tongue stops and heavy breathing through the horn. Marina Rosenfeld’s “Chainsaw” starts as a hard techno beat which quickly melts into vinyl crackle and needle-dropping through the *Sampler* record. On “Trumpet Zoo”, DJ Sniff juggles beats that rip through jungle rhythms into noise-gabber territory.

Afrofuturist techno track “Time Traveller” sees Kerbaj collaborate with Donzilla Lion of Ugandan label Nyege Nyege Tapes. “Don asked if he could add some kicks and drums. I said, normally, you shouldn’t, so maybe could you make a kick drum by transforming something? Of course, he went away, did just that and I don’t know how he managed to do it!”

On the sultry dancehall of “Now Serving #8190”, Gavsborg uses the trumpet as a siren with sliced and pitch-shifted horn forming bassy kick drums and

tuneful toms. Rounding off the album is a sublime track with activist, film maker and musician Bob Ostertag, featuring a gorgeous concentration of Kerbaj’s trumpet into sweeping drones that fan outwards in vibrant, harmonious layers.

There’s an unabashed purity to Kerbaj’s musical language which lies in the concentrated integrity of the execution of each gesture, regardless of its duration. From this concentration, each bit of randomised trumpet forms a full-bodied solo work, and regardless of how brazen or tender these sounds are, Kerbaj’s personality punches through. “I’m very conscious, even when I’m playing, of the relationship between sound and gesture. It’s very important for me,” he emphasises. “I really go for it, take risks and it pays off.” □ Mazen Kerbaj’s *Sampler/Sampled* is released by Morphine this month. The “A” Trio are set to celebrate their 20th anniversary this year with two new releases and tours. kerbajdiaries.com