

Composition commission to Mazen Kerbaj

Additional information

Biography

Mazen Kerbaj is a musician and comic book author. He also works on selected illustration and design projects and has taught at the American University of Beirut. Kerbaj was born in Beirut in 1975, during the Lebanese Civil War, and began his musical career when cultural life in Lebanon began to revive in the 1990s.

As a trumpet player Kerbaj is mainly active in jazz and free improvisation. He is generally regarded as one of the initiators and big names of the Lebanese free improvisation and experimental music scene. He is co-founder of Irtijal, an annual festival for improvised music, and Al Maslakh, the first label for experimental music in the region since 2005. As a trumpet player, in solo performances or with musicians such as Michael Zerang, Mats Gustafsson, Guillermo Gregorio or Fred Lonberg-Holm, Kerbaj pushes the boundaries of the instrument and continues to develop a personal sound and innovative language.

This experimental approach is expressed, among other things, in the use of preparations. By disassembling the trumpet completely, he exposes its core. While playing, he expands the instrument with all kinds of unusual features, such as tubes and balloons. All these extensions in turn give the instrument a new meaning. His semi-improvised performances challenge spectators to adjust their view of a traditional instrument.

One of Kerbaj's best-known improvisations is *Starry Night*, a sound recording made at home in the night of 16 to 17 July 2006, a few days after the start of the Israeli-Lebanon War, in which he plays a 'duet' with bomb explosions and roaring sirens.

Kerbaj is the author of more than fifteen books. His short stories and drawings have been published in anthologies, newspapers and magazines. His work has been translated into more than ten languages and has been shown in galleries, museums and art fairs around the world.

In 2015 Kerbaj was selected for a residency within the Berlin DAAD program. More information on <http://www.berliner-kuentstlerprogramm.de/en/gast.php?id=1269> or on the last page of this document. He has lived and worked in the German capital since then.

Video & music

Mazen Kerbaj – Trumpet Solo

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-n2OiDiyI5o>

Mazen Kerbaj – Trumpet with three overdubbing (Percussion Trio, part of The Corona Diaries series)

<https://vimeo.com/404083711>

Mazen Kerbaj – Walls Will Fall: The 49 Trumpets of Jericho

Short excerpt (video): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRZqgAaXkao>

More info + audio (34'): <https://bohemiandrips.bandcamp.com/album/walls-will-fall-the-49-trumpets-of-jericho>

Mazen Kerbaj – Starry Night (excerpt)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Llo4dh884hE>

Pictures

Kerbaj has worked with Nadar ensemble for the first time in 2019, leading the ensemble in a collective improvisation piece (3 performances, OdeGand, Ghent Flanders Festival (Ghent, Belgium)).

Nadar then invited Kerbaj to take part in the one-day-festival Alba Nova "Lift off", that the ensemble curated for Musica (www.albanovafestival.be). This festival was to take place in June 2020 and is now

postponed to the summer of 2021. Below are some pictures of the 2019 performance (© Danny Willems) and the poster illustration drawn by Kerbaj for the Alba Nova festival.







Mazen Kerbaj – Poster illustration for Alba Nova “Lift off” (planned for 2020, postponed to 2021). The festival program as well as this illustration are inspired by the 19th-century photographer, balloonist, art critic and spy Gaspard-Félix Tournachon (1820-1910) (after whom the Nadar ensemble was named).

guests → Kerbaj, Mazen

Name	Country	Category	Year
Kerbaj, Mazen	Lebanon	Music	2015

Mazen Kerbaj, born 1975 in Beirut, is a draftsman and author as well as a musician. He has published drawings, many short stories and several books with a variety of magazines and book publishers. His comics-like drawings and caricatures are reminiscent of Picasso's portraits of Dora Maar, with seemingly Cubist, synchronous viewpoints and sometimes markedly distorted features. Not infrequently, the subject of Mazen Kerbaj's portrait appears accompanied by words or sharp-tongued commentaries that speak of the conflicts of living in wartime even as they struggle to express the bloodcurdling sounds of these and other events.

In his music, Mazen Kerbaj transforms that which remains in part inaccessible to visual images. When he joins in an improvised duet with the sounds of the 2006 bombing of Beirut, the question of whether he does this out of resignation, resistance or defiance remains open. *Starry Night* is a minimalist improvisation that demonstrates the variety of sounds that can be developed from his experimental approach to certain instruments. It is therefore no surprise that Mazen Kerbaj is considered one of the pioneers of improvised music in the Near East. He founded various improvisation ensembles and played the first concerts of experimental improvised music in the region with colleagues such as the saxophonist Christine Sehnaoui. Together with the guitarist Sharif Sehnaoui, he conceived the Irtijal Festival, the first festival for improvised music in Lebanon, in 2000, along with the first label for improvisational music. While he initially developed his experimental sound world by generating differentiated sounds on the saxophone, Kerbaj has increasingly been seeking connections with other instruments.

His radical delight in experimentation manifests itself, for instance, in a »synthesis« of saxophone and trumpet. By combining the saxophone's mouthpiece with the trumpet's body, and electronic effects with extended playing techniques, Mazen Kerbaj creates a multilayered, at times meditative, at times energy-charged soundscape. During his Berlin residency, one aim is to translate the potential of the prepared trumpet into compositional concepts. The superimposition of different soundtracks – which arise, for example, from the incessant repetition of a single musical gesture and the continuous flow of sonic »microevents« – opens up a new compositional horizon of harmonically differentiated fields of sound. This musically innovative approach to playing techniques for the prepared trumpet made Mazen Kerbaj an esteemed musician in the European improvisation scene, for instance in the trumpet trio with Axel Dörner (D) and Franz Hautzinger (A). It is not just the effect that matters to these musicians, but rather uncompromising relentlessness and ultimately inner freedom. Mazen Kerbaj has been traveling back and forth between the Near East, Europe and the USA for more than 15 years as a musician and artist – whether with exhibitions of his paintings and drawings or as a soloist and ensemble member in concerts. Onomatopoeic chains of symbols in Mazen Kerbaj's work also create connections between the sound of the comics and the sound structures in the music.



Mazen Kerbaj - Gast des Berliner Künstlerprogramm des DAAD 2015



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► Print

Events by DAAD

Wormholes Electric (2015)

Processed Reality

Asia: East Coast - West Coast

Local Sound Art Scenes

Konferenz: New Geographies in Sound Art

Coordinates IV - New Sonic Geographies

Before the war, it was the war. After the war, it is still the war.
 (2016) UA

Before the war, it was the war. After the war, it is still the war

The Esthetics of Law & Mazen Kerbaj: Sampler / Sampled im Rahmen
 von Topophilia / Topophobia

»beirut won't cry«