

Noise, (Dis)enchantment, and (Re)birth

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N.B. This article is the second installment of “Nomadic Sound Worlds,” a four-part series that explores Canadian contemporary music through the lens of present-day global migration. Published in 1999, a collection of essays named Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss (ed. André Aciman) informs this project, with trajectories branching out from related themes including mobility, displacement, loss, reconciliation of polarized truths, and invention of selves. In this regard, the series will feature selected immigrant Canadian artists whose artistic worlds collide with various personal stories of immigration.

I want to take you on a long journey through interwoven thoughts and stories. After all, the evolution of societies takes place when human stories affect myriad decision-making, and vice versa. They are not in isolation from each other, just as stories of movement and immigration form political histories and national timelines permeating the landscape, values, and social fabric of contemporary Canada.

Having dinner and taking the subway to Toronto’s York Mills Station on the 2nd of November 2018 felt like a blur, distorting the detached reality I will find moments later at the Agricola Finnish Lutheran Church—the venue for the opera production *The Journey: Notes of Hope*. The church was packed with people when I arrived, anticipating what *Opera Canada* described as an “authentic, moving experience...a compelling story of one person’s migration.¹ Despite the glamour attributed to today’s immigrant stories, they never emerge as the result of one lone person’s actions. While soprano Zorana Sadiq, cast in the lead role, carried that lone embodiment of this burdensome experience onstage, the Iranian Canadian Composers of Toronto (ICOT) will attribute this achievement to a handful of composers and artists working together. This opera production had its own army of movers, including librettist Bānoo Zan, director Amanda Smith, conductor Maziar Heidari, composers and musicians from varying backgrounds, and production staff who made a glimpse of this story possible. A specific theme of migration emerges in its unfolding narrative: displacement. Exile.

The Journey: Notes of Hope made an impression in that eight days later, I found myself waiting for a night bus bound for Montreal. Despite its peculiarities and faults, Montreal remains as a home close to my heart where I once felt unwillingly exiled to. The decision to visit was, nonetheless, a sentimental one. “How would Zorana’s character feel like if they ever went back home?” I wondered. But even a trip down memory lane didn’t deter me from meeting someone who places himself at a peculiar position. His name is Sandeep Bhagwati, an artist of many disciplines that include composition, poetry, theatre arts, research, and others. Cycling through the pastures of Montreal, Berlin and even Mumbai, his life experience is comparable to that of a nomad. Another theme of movement emerges in this story: nomadism. Rim-sider living.

Noise among Homelands

During our conversation, it was nostalgic for Sandeep to reflect on Mumbai’s noisy soundscapes. Beyond the tumultuous historical significance of Shivaji Park, from Mahatma Gandhi’s rallies to the fascist rallies of the Indian political right, he recorded sounds surrounding his ancestral residence right by the park as a personal memorial. “My grandfather had built this house in the 1930s when he came to Bombay from the North,” he said, with the knowledge that the family remaining there is shrinking as others gradually move in and take over the house. Sandeep intervenes at various points during the recordings he made, reflecting on normal life in Mumbai, wherein everyone’s sounds

infiltrate each other's spaces while remaining unintrusive.

Sandeep described this magical phenomenon as a blanket of noise, creating a sense of safety, security, and belonging.ⁱⁱ He told me that, "Mumbai has mostly 'people' noises, people making noises from religious [activities] to sports, from marketplaces to street conversations. All these things connect with each other too: a car may drive through with blaring loudspeakers playing Hindi film songs, then somebody on the next balcony takes on that tune and start singing it." That sounds familiar, I thought. Who wouldn't also think of Metro Manila, the capital metropolis of my homeland, as anything but that?



Sandeep Bhagwati, an Indian-German (and now Canadian) composer who resides in many places including Montreal, Berlin, and Mumbai.

On a different note, Iranian-Canadian poet Bänöö Zan aired an alarming description of home in my conversation with her. Prior to her fruitful involvement as the librettist in *The Journey: Notes of Hope*, she arrived in Canada from Iran with a watchful, vigilant gaze to her new surrounding. Fresh from years of teaching literature in some Iranian universities—where educating women was thought to be pointless—she scouted for poetry events around Toronto while looking for jobs during the daytime. If Sandeep's nostalgia of noisy hometowns brings the comforts of assurance, Bänöö tells otherwise.

I put this question to her: "What is home?" "Home is where I'm not under the illusion that I'm safe," she admitted without hesitation. Pressing on, she related further: "It was after the contested Iranian presidential elections in 2009 that a lot thought were rigged, where the elected person (Mahmoud Ahmadinejad) wasn't most people have voted for and the one we thought most of us voted is still under house arrest (referring to opposition candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi)." The following Green movement protest in Tehran met brutal security clampdown from the authorities, leading to thousands of arrests, Stalinist-type mass proceedings, and even two executions.ⁱⁱⁱ "My students were taken to jail and beaten. I got a phone call from one of them who said, 'They're coming in for us. We have nobody, [the militia] have surrounded the university grounds...' Even I was interrogated, and I'm not even a political activist. I'm a university professor, but they were coming after us just to give a sense of how much we are under surveillance."

Remembering that phone call, she told me: "Imagine how I felt. I'm teaching these people to think," followed by a long, unsettling silence. Homelands, as one later suspects, aren't always gardens of Eden for people who once lived in them.



Bänoo Zan, an Iranian-Canadian poet and the librettist of *The Journey: Notes of Hope*.

Another individual enters the big picture. Wanes Moubayed, a Syrian violinist and one of the musicians for *The Journey: Notes of Hope*, was born and raised in Aleppo within the large Armenian diaspora. Wanes received lessons from Russian teachers at a time when Syria reaped the benefits of allyship with the Soviet government. Currently, Wanes and his family call Toronto their home. “[Home is] the place where you’re giving your best,” he told me during our conversation. “To be able to give your best, you have to feel safe at the beginning, have the tools to give [your best], and have people who can accept [you].”

While Wanes finds Toronto’s diversity incomparable to European cities, Bänoo once asked upon arriving why Torontonians seem so distant to her. She thought for the longest time that it was racism. “But then I started realizing that I get this aloofness even from people of colour. It’s not just racism. It’s xenophobia; almost everybody wants to stick with others who look like them, who think like them.” From her observation of local poetry scenes, only few explore and intermingle. Communities miss out on people’s stories when they isolate their struggles among themselves. Bänoo admonished that, “this one-dimensional narrative is not even good for one’s writing.” This gave her the motivation to put up her open mic event (Shab-e She’r) where she pushed diverse programming to include everyone even among the mainstream scenes.

Saman Shahi, executive director of ICOT, shared a similar vision of bridging gaps across communities. The opera production, he stated, involved many musicians who are newcomers and immigrants themselves in Canada. “We mix them up with a lot of active professional musicians in Toronto just to get the integration process going. They can feel like they’re becoming part of the community.” And even the music, from electronic sounds and modernist approaches to hints of minimalism, tonality and Middle Eastern influences, aimed to reach not only a multicultural trajectory, but also a multi-intellectual one.



The Iranian-Canadian Composers of Toronto. From left to right: Saman Shahi, Keyan Emami, Pouya Hamidi, Afarin Mansouri Tehrani, Maziar Heidari.

Illusion: Weaponizing Home

In Eva Hoffman's essay "The New Nomads," she recounted a visit to her hometown Krakow after the family's departure during the Cold War, when her parents' choice to leave appeared overdetermined that she thought of it more as a forced departure. The experience of losing a hometown felt like an abrupt interruption in her formative years, and the old times came as nostalgia when she returned and encountered a very modern, Westernized city many decades later. The false bipolarity created from fixating "home" forced her to deal with a place where "everything is intermingled and no site is privileged—either in its deprivation or in its pleasures—than anywhere else." We tend to forget that it's not only exiles who undergo dramatic disruptions. Spaces themselves transform and experience their own passages of time, and she concluded that she would have to change her narrative of exile.^{iv}

Within the same lines, Sandeep warned me about being addicted to the idea of home. "If it becomes associated to an actual place, an actual ethnicity or an actual socio-political environment where you lived, you instrumentalize something primeval and 'weaponize' it. Home-addicts weaponize their home into excluding others, into creating exclusionary spaces." Moreover, it tends to cultivate the urge to defend it from outsiders, rendering it as a battleground and negating the true essence of home. Bänoo echoed this reflection: "We Iranians love Iran so much that we are ready to tear one another to pieces in the name of Iran. When one sings, 'Oh Iran, oh bejeweled land,' Iranians' hearts are beating, no matter [what] your politics are. But who deserves that [love]?"

And even the luxuries of apolitical living don't exist for Bänoo. In Western liberal societies, people can choose not to think about politics if they want to. In Iran, she observed the opposite: "we don't have it. Everything is politicized: from the things you wear, the person you love, the job you have, the things you say [to students] in class." Even a former romantic partner questioned the fruitfulness of her own self-empowerment as a Muslim queer feminist, as a female intellectual. Now that Toronto has become home for her, Bänoo found herself redefining her battles. Being shortlisted for an award from the Canadian League of Poets with her book *Songs of Exile* (2016), even self-identifying as a feminist suddenly came with some reservations. "Some feminists who deal with immigrants," she explained to me, "want to hear the same narrative they're already interested in: the narrative that women in the Middle East are powerless, that they have no voice, basically being victims. And I have a problem with that." She laughed that while she's well-respected, feared and hated enough back home as an

outspoken feminist, she now has to find new enemies in her newfound place.

Wanes' story of displacement from home narrates another battleground scenario. Back in Syria, he was enjoying his teaching practice and affiliations with the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) in Aleppo, leading him towards an artistic directorship role at the Komitas Chamber Orchestra. Wanes flew to Armenia in July 2012 to attend a summer music course which was intended as a brief trip, and this set the stage for his unforeseen, seemingly permanent move to Toronto.

"The plan," Wanes told me, "was that I will prepare a flat for my family [wife and two children] in a week and have them join me for fifteen days before coming back to Syria." Few people would have predicted what happened next, and Wanes could not have prepared for such a turning point: Syria's civil war worsened between Bashar al-Assad's government and numerous rebel forces. Wanes related further: "the Aleppo International Airport was closed exactly after my family arrived in Armenia. Aleppo became one of the most dangerous cities in the world. We were stuck...we were never prepared with clothes, money, everything." As they managed to temporarily move to Lebanon in 2015, the Canadian government ushered in multitudes of Syrian refugees from all over the region. Wanes and his family were luckily among them.



Wanes Moubayed, a Syrian-Canadian violinist of Armenian descent.

Saman and the ICOT aimed to reach an understanding and empathy with such a complex story under *The Journey: Notes of Hope*. He told me that, "with this extremist right-wing conservative mentality across the United States, Europe and in our own country...you'd find a way to turn the other person you don't care about into someone subhuman so you don't have to deal with them anymore." And even at this time of writing, the United States and Mexico are dealing with an ongoing crisis, where multitudes of Central Americans fleeing violence plead to cross the borders. Saman considered such adverse responses the result of "the lack of empathy, the dehumanization of the Other...that has

become normalized for all of us to think, ‘oh, it’s not a human being, it’s a refugee,’ not thinking that this human being also had a family, had a home, had a lot of memories.” The need to defend one’s home from displaced human lives perceived as intruders transforms places of belonging into places of battle and strife.



Zorana Sadiq (soprano) as the lead character Sargardan in *The Journey: Notes of Hope*. Photo: Farshid Photography.

Disillusionment: Warnings Written on the Wind

For all of the ways we struggle for them, homelands are not untouchable, sacred spaces for larger-than-life socio-political forces. As Charles Simic dismally shared in his essay “Refugees,” Yugoslavia’s disintegration in 1992 failed to stir up nationalistic sentiments that would have forced him to take sides. Fleeing the bombing of Belgrade during World War II, his family’s arrival in an optimistic melting pot of cultures in the United States finally quenched their fate of touring the world as displaced persons. Speaking as one of the “laboratory animals used in a series of historical experiments,” his distance from his homeland’s folly came with the realization that innocent bystanders and their naive

resistance become true enemies of massive ideological machineries.^v But how does that realization now translate within, say, the negative impact of global climate change, where “Asian cities account for 83% of the population affected by sea level rise” within projections by the year 2100?^{vi} And all of this mainly because of human society’s failure to keep watch over its sustainability?

Bänoo somewhat unraveled the frustration coming out of this. She said that, “the best art comes from love of all humanity. But when you love humanity in a deep way, you’re going to be angry. You’re going to be dissatisfied. You’re going to be disillusioned.” Glamourising the supremacy of the West invoked a sense of utopia for her that she discovered as false upon reaching the downtown streets of Toronto. Aware of the complexities in issues like cultural appropriation, she concluded that she was also having the same exotic impressions of the West and, therefore, can’t point fingers at them all the time.

As an artist, Sandeep was no exception from this dissatisfaction. Back in 2012, he heard an interview with a climate scientist on German radio, despondently relating how climate negotiations are conducted within governments across the world. At the time when the World Climate Summit took place in Doha, this scientist expressed the disdain for the slowness, the apparent stillness and the incapacity of the human species to confront this problem. Sandeep also recalled reading François Julien's *Les Transformations Silencieuses* (Silent Transformations, 2009), where "he discussed this problem that we, as humans, are incapable of conceiving such slow transformations, even when our hair turns gray, much less the ones that happen on a planetary scale." Receiving a commission from the Ernst von Siemens Musikstiftung that peculiarly includes Asian plucked string instruments, Korean *gugak* (court music) and its empty rhythmic spaces, became his departure point for conveying a very slow pageant. With this set of conditions, *Warnings Written on the Wind* was born. We're always predisposed to think that a memory of home might remain with us: physical traces may persist, but myriad forces act on a place and transform it without us realizing it.

Excerpt of the 2013 version of *Warnings Written on the Wind* (Sandeep Bhagwati). While writing a haiku forms part of its creation process, the vocal part of the gayageum player reveals the role of poetry as a source of imagery to propel the process and not as functional, visceral elements embedded in the music itself. The text shown here merely consists of random syllables.

Scored for a mixed ensemble of Western and Asian instruments including the Chinese *guzheng*, the Korean *gayageum*, and the Japanese *koto*, *Warnings Written on the Wind* runs around 15 minutes as evolving cycles of long multi-bar phrases. “While marked with hard punctuating events, the music progresses at a slow rate, too slow for us to really understand what’s going on,” Sandeep explained to me. One arrives in a completely different state from the beginning, even though nothing seemed to change. Writing a haiku prior to composing the music also functioned to inform and provide more depth and dimension to the work. As with Sandeep’s music, poetry remains a separate aesthetic element despite that conceptual function, buried within the processes of composing sounds and not emerging as tangible within the music’s surfaces.

The premiere of the piece in 2013 was a success that Il-Ryun Chung, the conductor of Berlin-based Asian Art Ensemble, liked it so much and wanted to perform it. Constraints in instrumentation forced Sandeep to revise the piece, and he included more vocal elements among instrumental parts this time. The new version, ending in a chord of vocal humming among musicians, projected this “hope that humanity will somehow be able to resolve it [the climate issue],” as he explained it.

69 70 71 72

Sng: *af* *fp* *mp* *p*

Dgm: *gf* *mp* *f* *p* *gf* *mp* *p*

ves[4]: K.IO TIA NAO CHO - K.IO TIA NAO CHO - K.IO TIANFO NAO

Koto: *gf* *mp* *mp* *p*

ves[5]: K.IO TIA NAO CHO - K.IO TIA NAO CHO - K.IO TIANFO NAO

Gyo: *f* *af* *mp* *p* *gf* *mp*

Chg: *fp* *gf* *p* *mp* *af* *pp*

ves[6]: K.IO TIA NAO CHO - K.IO TIA NAO CHO - K.IO TIANFO NAO

Perc. 1:

ves[7]: K.IO TIA NAO CHO - K.IO TIA NAO CHO - K.IO TIANFO NAO

Vib. 1: *af* *sp* *af* *sp* *af* *sp* *af* *sp*

ves[8]: K.IO TIA NAO CHO - K.IO TIA NAO CHO - K.IO TIANFO NAO

Vln: *af* *sp* *af* *sp* *af* *sp* *af* *sp*

ves[9]: K.IO TIA NAO CHO - K.IO TIA NAO CHO - K.IO TIANFO NAO

Vla: *af* *sp* *af* *sp* *af* *sp* *af* *sp*

all voices are held and the breaths break and the voices break and the last sound is the last sound of the piece!

69 70 71 72

Ves[10]: K.IO TIA NAO CHO - K.IO TIA NAO CHO - K.IO TIANFO NAO

Vlc: *af* *sp* *af* *sp* *af* *sp* *af* *sp*

Ves[11]: K.IO TIA NAO CHO - K.IO TIA NAO CHO - K.IO TIANFO NAO

Vcl: *af* *sp* *af* *sp* *af* *sp* *af* *sp*

Ves[12]: K.IO TIA NAO CHO - K.IO TIA NAO CHO - K.IO TIANFO NAO

Ch: *af* *sp* *af* *sp* *af* *sp* *af* *sp*

all voices are held and the breaths break and the voices break and the last sound is the last sound of the piece!

Vocal humming concludes the 2018 version of Warnings Written on the Wind. Sandeep Bhagwati describes the musical expression as a projection of hope that humanity will somehow heed the warnings and pay attention to the slow rate of change within today's global issues that could have otherwise been resolved with a sense of urgency.

Thinking about the passage of time, I asked Wanes for some insight on the Armenian Genocide. "What parallels can we draw from the earlier Armenian diaspora and today's forced displacement?" I asked. The answer was striking: "I think it's also similar, but at that time, the Ottoman Empire forced the Armenians to walk through the desert until they arrive at Syria, at Aleppo. Now, we use the plane." While Syria's civil war fights its battles outside ethnic and racial lines, the horrific massacres and massive displacement among its peoples retell the same story for him in spite of today's continental travel. He continued: "as I heard from older people who escaped the genocide, they told us that they left everything [in Armenia] when they moved to Syria, including their dreams. They had dreams that someday, they will return there. But they stayed in Aleppo, and now it's the new generation's genocide. It's hard to compare, but if you think about the main lines, it's the same."

Even with the political implications of writing a piece that comments on social issues, Sandeep remains cautious about what people would label as “political art.” “All art is implicitly political,” he wrote to me in an email, “especially when it claims to be unpolitical...but *Warnings Written on the Wind* is

more of a political allegory and not a call for political action. The problem for me with most political art is that it is impatient—it wants to act on the same ephemeral timeline as daily politics itself.”

The grave slowness of political arenas and societal changes confront far deeper issues than can be served by sloganeering, and Bänoo is acutely attuned to this fact. She shared that, “a lot of artists unfortunately tell me that, ‘I’m just writing for my community.’ But that’s the end of art! You should be writing for the whole world.” She asserted that art created for the immediacy of communities have expiry dates, and “we end up having artists whose visions are limited.”

Towards Rebirth: Notes of Hope

Charles Simic’s own visions carry dark, emotional depictions of life from a time when his family once grudgingly sought for a place that would welcome them. Queuing up all day in the police headquarters of Paris at that time, securing legal documents for resident permits can make or break one’s human existence. The bureaucratic cycle would go on endlessly: dealing with ever-changing rules, waiting for documents in the mail, having documents translated, talking with bad-tempered officials who made them feel unwanted. Coping with these persistent barriers, he recounted: “...if the weather was nice, we’d go and sit outside on a bench and watch the lucky Parisians stroll by carrying groceries...occasionally a couple would stop in front of us to smooch while we cursed the French and our rotten luck.^{vii}

Mounting *The Journey: Notes of Hope* may not reveal vivid accounts like Charles Simic’s, but the main thrust leaned towards providing a platform to address them through artistic expressions. Saman recalled applying for a Toronto Arts Council grant, rationalizing that ICOT is “an organization made up of newcomers, and a lot of our projects and even our mission statement [are geared to] connect cultures together.” Ticking all boxes in the checklist, they applied to the TAC Newcomer Refugee Arts Program with the dramatic production in mind. ICOT subsequently approached Bänoo to write a libretto—following a recommendation from someone in the Toronto Arts Council, they didn’t personally know her at all. Amanda Smith, the founding artistic director of FAWN Chamber Creative, also got onboard as director, and “we slowly attracted all the pieces of the puzzle; we got the set designer (Anahita Dehbonehie), then we got the lighting designer (Frank Donato).” They were even lucky to find a corporate partner (Parsai Immigration Services) as producer to help cover the rest of the expenses.

Having feelings of estrangement from the Iranian community due to cultural and personal issues, Bänoo admitted that she initially felt a bit of apprehension when they reached out to her. These feelings quickly evaporated, as it eventually became a very fulfilling collaboration for her: “it seemed from the very start that they are very professional and very focused. So we sat together and talked. I asked them to get the books (*Songs of Exile*, *Letters to my Father*) and have a look.” Given a very short time window, she offered to put up something fitting for a libretto from existing publications of her poetry.



Sargardan in a Sufi dress, with set/costume design by Anahita Dehbonehie, lightning design by Frank Donato, and stage direction by Amanda Smith. Librettist Bänoo Zan hints at the multilayered symbolism embodied within the Sufi dress, from allusions of God and the ideal meaning of life to its role in portraying gender and spiritual transformation.



Zorana and the chamber orchestra, led by composer/conductor Maziar Heidari.

The resulting libretto is neither autobiographical, nor theatrically dramatic. Saman told it as such: “it [has] essentially a very abstract way of storytelling. It’s not a linear storyline. I guess it lies within ‘the stream of consciousness’ type of writing.” Bänoo’s poetry pieces are arranged so that they tell us the story of Sargardan (literally “wandering”), a Syrian writer who flees from a war-torn city and arrives in Canada. Reaching that point, displacement-related issues come up such as negotiations with cultural identity, sexual identity, dealing with missing home and memories. Saman particularly noted that, “[the main character] is not sexualized or gendered. We don’t know the gender of that person.” One can surmise that a blank slate character procures an inclusive platform, embodying the voices and experiences of everyone regardless of gender.

Interestingly, Bänoo revealed more insights regarding Sargardan’s complex, intersectional character. More than being a Syrian who initiated a journey towards liberation, she saw them as someone wearing a sufi dress, as someone who eventually undergoes gender transformation. “Probably, what no one else could see...is that a change of identity is also a change of spiritual experience as well. It’s not only a biological, hormonal transformation; something deeper is happening here.” Along with the *ghazals* of the Persian poet Hafez, the Greek mythical character Tiresias provided a model for Sargardan’s character development. In another scene where Sargardan takes part in a candlelight vigil for freedom of speech, the line “I’m Sufi drunk with God” strikingly comes as foreground. “God is the least favourable term to use now in poetry, but it’s a powerful metaphor [to

represent] the ideal core and centre of life." The openness of the collaboration with ICOT allowed Bānoo to pursue extended conversations with Zorana, Amanda and the composers about her vision of the opera through the texts.

But as much as we can further extend the intersectional aspect of such a journey, is it accurate to say then that the exiled experience is a shared universal phenomenon?

Saman found that question very complex. "No two humans will ever have the same experience, let alone have the same exact experience," he told me. Even refugees have different experiences and sensory perceptions of the same event. He continued: "No two cultures will have the same [lived] experiences, because languages, traditions and customs are different." Bānoo thought the same thing. Given a set of conditions that nobody can directly control, she mused that, "focusing on them doesn't explain why two people born with the same circumstances, having almost the same education and family, act so differently." Nonetheless, Saman highlighted that refugees' lives, prior to displacement, are simply normal lives comparable to those who haven't experienced forceful displacement. To understand that fully, "having that compassion for other people going through similar challenges, setbacks and lives as you [makes] you become much more accepting of them."

As a case in point, Wanes gave me a glimpse of the large Armenian community in Syria. "The Syrian people like them a lot," he gladly informed me. "The community has a very old history, starting [mostly] when the Genocide happened. A lot of Armenians moved especially to Aleppo. We have a lot of high schools and churches. We lived in Syria as Armenians, we kept doing our traditions, and nobody was disturbing us." Even the Komitas Chamber Orchestra that he once directed in Aleppo still exists now, in spite of many musicians fleeing to the United States, Lebanon, and Europe.

This opened up a very crucial point in our conversation, and so I had to ask him. "Why do some still remain?" The thought of remaining in a war-torn country gave me the shivers.

"There are a lot of reasons," he told me. Some people own properties and can't let go; some professionals, doctors for instance, who have established practices can't afford to start careers all over again in another place; others were unfortunately forced to go into military service; and some just preferred to stay out of convenience. But moreover, others simply don't have any opportunity to leave at all. "If they don't have any relatives or sponsors for them, they don't get to leave," he said. Wanes is lucky; he has a sister living in Toronto who sponsored them when they applied for Canadian residency. Since their arrival, Sargardan's struggle with cultural tensions became Wanes' first real Canadian experience: "some of the parts [in the opera] were very close to me. For example, when she [Zorana] was singing about being lost between saffron and maple leaf, that's the struggle of two cultures which I'm feeling here very strongly."

Right: The embodiment of cultural tension between saffron and maple leaf, expressed in an excerpt of Saffronic (Bānoo Zan), published at "Panopoly" and part of the libretto for The Journey: Notes of Hope.

Extending the discussion on home-addiction, Sandeep reflected further about those who choose to flee: "refugees have already lost this very politicized allegiance to a home, and they discover that they found new home-like feelings in themselves for other places." The proliferating stories that we encounter, those that reaffirm a familiar narrative, imply that home drastically changes after the time of one's absence. He concluded that, "the refugee experience is then widening the concept of

She could not help
saffronizing
the roses and maple leaves

lost the freedom of stamens
and was packaged
for the consumption
of the exotic

She knew—
all along

that she was a lie—
that no colour could smell
so good

that she had to look
at her looks

and see the breaks
and the end of the sap

home. Everybody ends up composing their home instead.” On the other hand, Bänoo retorted that, “we have good jobs, good families, everything is in Iran...but Iranians usually are under this illusion that everywhere is utopia except Iran. Then they come [here] and a lot of them [become] disillusioned, seeing how marginalized they are. But then it’s too late, and they perpetuate this: they bring their friends and make a little community with their extended families and relatives.” The result? Marginalized, isolated community bubbles. Bänoo mostly discourages anyone to move to Canada if there is really no good reason at all.

But let’s go back to the universality of this exiled experience. Sandeep questioned this strongly. “It’s one of my favourite beefs,” he joked. His problem with perpetuating current discourses on exile has a lot to do with the way it is co-opted among spaces such as Western contemporary artistic expression to justify their marginality from society. “You have the distinction between the ‘accepted artist’ and the ‘avant-garde artist,’ who is exiled in their own culture. You could always get attention if you posed as an exile from the normal mechanisms of the art market.” With the influx of fleeing artists from political upheavals and wars in Europe (e.g. composers Arnold Schönberg and Igor Stravinsky, playwright Bertolt Brecht, writers Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov), the term “exile” gained prominence during the 20th century to valorize artistic experience under such conditions. The trend suddenly transformed marginality into a worthwhile pursuit for an avant-garde artist. If being an outsider within one’s society is what you consider as exile, he firmly questioned, then what of his own nomadic experience? Or others who truly experienced a profound disconnection from themselves upon crossing oceans?

“Maybe it’s all about reclaiming that space then? Redefining exile into its true essence?” I asked. He doubted the idea: “I’m really more on the assertive way rather than the insidious way, not the one where you find your way and co-opting the mainstream.” Besides, such reclamation might eventually render the word useless. “It was useful to the avant-garde to claim that special status, but will everybody acknowledge that special status for everyone else? No. What’s so interesting then about somebody coming from Manila?” What should be done about it then? His solution: look for a non-English word to encapsulate a new form of discourse.

“Niemandslandhymnen:” the birthplace of ephemerality

Migratory aesthetics (coined by Mieke Bal) denote aesthetic practices that form and develop as a result of migration and physical movement.^{viii} Instead of thinking about exiled artists under one generalized narrative, Sandeep instead focused his interest on transitions occurring among artists who experience border crossings. For example, one can draw comparisons with playwright Bertolt Brecht and composer Kurt Weill—both were German exiles who fled the Nazis. “If Brecht had profoundly changed his way of writing while he was in the United States, he would start having migratory aesthetics. But he didn’t do that; he wanted to stay who he was and wrote the same kind of thing. Whereas Kurt Weill, who was his collaborator in *The Threepenny Opera*, changed his way of writing music completely and wrote Broadway musicals.” Even within the Broadway musical mould, Kurt Weill’s subsequent work carry remnants of rowdy multicultural Berlin in the 1920s and his war-torn, highly fractious life. “That’s a migratory move, whereas the Brechtian move is not a migratory one,” he concluded. Moreover, this kind of discourse now enables culture to make different lifestyles comparable even in the aesthetic realm.

The phenomenon of migrating art practices emerges more elaborately with Sandeep’s collaboration with an Indian ensemble who approached him at one point to ask if they can learn how to play contemporary music. The resulting sessions culminated in a CD publication with very interesting results, although he particularly took note that, “they won’t say it’s ‘new music;’ it still sounds like Indian music to them, yet they have forbidden me to release it on the market because it’s absurd for them...they don’t want their reputation to be ruined with the CD.” Generally resisting Western music, Indian traditional musical scenes relegate such influences into marginal spaces, in stark contrast to

Bollywood film music's inclusive nature to sustain the industry and its market. Sandeep even admitted that he knew Indian musicians who moved elsewhere and yet rarely explored other musics to enrich their own.

Talking to Wanes about his current musical life in Toronto, a similar migratory practice surfaced out of his initial hardships. "When I first put an ad as a music teacher in the magazine, it didn't work. When somebody offered me a gig [here], he asked, 'Can you send me videos of your performance?'" He was shocked; having an established reputation in Aleppo, people simply called him up for a gig. "But he had the right to do that, so I prepared a website and videos with the help of some friends." Furthermore, he was suddenly compelled to deal with other musical styles, given Toronto's diverse clientele. "I know Armenian, Arabic and Western music a lot, but now I'm learning music I haven't heard about. Greek music, Bollywood music...now I'm preparing other videos too. I'm not familiar with modern pop music, but I'm learning a lot of pop songs now."

The task of birthing a new, evolving discourse on exile and displacement within art creation will surely be a herculean task, involving interdisciplinary approaches covering large swaths of ground. With Sandeep though, interdisciplinarity isn't something new. Instead, what comes as new will depend on the resulting collusion of artistic practices he currently employs in his creative output. If he's a nomad by physical means, he's definitely much more a nomad when it comes to artistic creation.

Take the example of Niemandslandhymnen, a large work of his that simply eludes classification. Is it a theatre piece? A concert piece? An opera? A large installation? We will set aside such taxonomical questions for now; take note that this work involved an organic collaboration with different musicians, functioning as sound producers and moving bodies within the physical space. The whole event unfolded in multiple scenes through sets of rules and procedures that define processes of *comprovisation*^{ix} alongside pre-determined, composed music and staging. And even the process of creating the work involved a complex relationship of interlocking poetic, musical, and theatrical elements.

So where do we start? Translated in English as "No-Man's Land Anthems," Sandeep explained that this work is about the very strange notion that Earth belongs to humans, while taking into account all human and natural phenomena transcending boundaries and borders: clouds, radiation, diasporic feelings, wind, even human greed. With thirteen scenarios exploring such ideas, "I wrote a complicated *terza rima* of twelve lines, a poetry form used by Dante in 'The Divine Comedy...' in order to understand what I was dealing with. Each line becomes the opening line of another *terza rima* poem, where one seed poem generates twelve more poems, with each ending line of one poem starting the next poem." With 13 in total, the children poems function as a close, expanded reading of the parent poem, while also containing "very complicated inner structures that correspond to the subject they're talking about."

Writing poetry then propelled the conception of the work's musical and performative totality. While texts remain buried and hidden for the most part, the imagery and ideas from them inform the creation of a score. "Each movement literally has a different concept of what a score is and how musicians use it," he explained further. Working on the confluence of executing composed material and improvising specific elements, each performer will need high awareness of the resulting different configurations, ensembles (even sub-ensembles), and distributions formed in the realization of each movement. That comes along with the fact that they have to memorize their parts, their movements across space, and their corresponding rules.

NLH 06 Clouds
Raag for Khyal singer and Ensemble

Sandeep Bhagwati

I MODE
AROHA (ascending) AVAROHA (descending)

II Drone Chords

Drone Chords are played strictly alternately by Harmonium/Shenre Box and by the ensemble (in random orchestration). While harmonium chords will be stable, chords played by the ensemble should consist of 'unstable' notes, i.e. musicians also sometimes evade to adjacent pitches of the mode, respecting the ascending and descending scales. The instabilities introduced by the musicians would be either long and slow glissandi (stretchings/ beatings) or short and fast hiccup trills modulations or turns (these could also follow each other in succession). Great care must be taken to a) not to establish a rhythmic pattern or melodic motif b) to never disturb/ counterpoint the solo singer. Dynamics, however, can vary greatly, and at some points even obscure the solo singer.

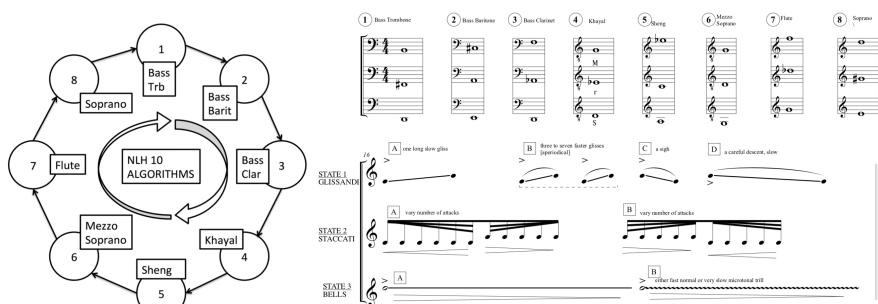
III Alap Melodies

Always try to blend chords into each other. Duration of chords: Harmonium - as long as musically interesting. Ensemble - as long as one deep breath

Excerpt of "Clouds" from *Niemandslanhymnen* (Sandeep Bhagwati).

Score

Sandeep Bhagwati NLH 10 Algorithms



Excerpt of "Algorithms" from *Niemandslanhymnen* (Sandeep Bhagwati). Performance notes reveal that the one-page score is "an algorithm in itself that generates its own evolution as each performer evaluates one other" and responds based on this evaluation.

Niemandslanhymnen received its sole performance during the 50th anniversary concert of the Société de musique contemporaine du Québec (SMCQ), where they invited all patrons who give financial support. "We're in the midst of a huge audience, and the audience could coagulate around us, dissipate, or focus their attention on somebody or the others. It became more like a ritual event than a concert. There's no guarantee that you'll experience the fullness of it, except that the fullness was the ritual experience you get." Going back to the question of classifying the work, both I and Sandeep agreed that it could simply be called a "ritual," a "fiesta." It was literally a celebration of the SMCQ's anniversary, but my personal take is more than that: *Niemandslanhymnen* is a commemoration of ephemerality. In affirmation, Sandeep revealed its fate: "it will never happen again like any feast. I'm going to cannibalize the score and make other pieces out of it." The overly particular nature of the work renders it as a fleeting encounter, and it will probably even resist being a living, stable entity. In its place will stand memorials: video documentation, some traces of the scores, the published poems. In its legacy, new works of art.

Dreams are ephemeral, and Wanes can't help but dream about symbolically regaining his memories. He shared to me that, "my parents have now arrived in Canada as well, and they asked if I needed anything from the apartment [back in Syria]. I asked only for the photos; photos are kind of my history. Unfortunately, they only brought photos of the kids, not my own. Hopefully, I will have the opportunity to go back and bring even my belongings here." And it's not just him; even his son has expressed yearnings for the past. Once asked about whether he liked living in Armenia, he expressed a wish that they could literally cut out their apartment from Aleppo and bring it with them, for this would make him happier. Just as Saman reminds us that people share similar dispositions in life, we need to be reminded that children have deep yearnings and memories as well.

Wanes now celebrates his life away from the horrors of being stuck in the middle of wars. He

currently teaches violin at the Arcadia Academy of Music and the University Settlement Community Centre, along with his involvement with the Canadian Arabic Orchestra and the Scarborough Philharmonic Orchestra. Even his family has a bright future. "My son is interested in robotics, and now he has the opportunity to go and attend some courses. My daughter was interested in playing the violin, but now she has more interest in writing. Every month, she's writing an article for the school magazine."

At the end of the day, everyone always wants happy endings for immigrant stories. That's what Bänoo learned during the course of her own accomplishments in Canada. "Now I'm asked a lot to go on panels, to give talks about immigrants and engaging immigrants in [the] arts because I kind of succeeded in their eyes." How about those who didn't? Luckily, she isn't one of them now. "I've seen immigrants who have given up, who have lost their sanity, even hope. And those stories would never be told, right? They're not going to be asked those questions. I happened to be asked those questions because I'm a fighter. I don't give up."

Giving up pushes someone at the opposite end of survival, and Saman concluded his apotheosis on the thought that borders become meaningless once we realize how mortality is very real. Love and compassion, he said, "are the only lens where you can see people coming together and working together as opposed to [working] against each other." Hence, ICOT named the opera not only as a journey (as Bänoo sees it), but also as optimistic reminders of hope: "...a hope that we can work together in this dark time to create something beautiful and accept each other." Bänoo ended the thought in a similar way: "I don't believe in ivory tower art, [where] I should do my work in private and people should discover me. If you're truly engaged with the community, you should help the community and make your mark. I think we need artists to be delusional enough to think that they can make a difference, so that they [can] actually [acquire] the energy to go on and make a difference."

Whether we constantly roam the world like Sandeep, or arrive and settle in a place far away from strife like Bänoo and Wanes, we are always sure to hope like Saman for resilience after the storm, a moment of rebirth after disenchantment. Despite the noise that makes us comfortable or restless, one can always safely assume that there will be a destination in every migratory departure--whether it is in the land of saffron or maple leaf, in a place we temporarily stop or permanently call home, in artistic worlds one creates or just navigate with towards more exciting worlds. With a big sigh of relief, we now momentarily end our journey here in a place where we can be ourselves. Welcome home, our destination for the day.

Endnotes:

ⁱ Stephan Bonfield, "Review: ICOT's *The Journey: Notes of Hope* is a moving story about migration, re-discovery and self-acceptance," *Opera Canada*, November 14, 2018, accessed November 29, 2018, <http://operacanada.ca/review-icot-journey-notes-hope>.

ⁱⁱ Sandeep Bhagwati, "Composing One's Home: Illusions of noise and silence," trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart, *Passages* No. 43 (December 2006): pp. 24-25.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Erdbrink, "As Iran Erupts in Protest, Tehran Is Notably Quiet," *New York Times*, January 3, 2018, accessed December 4, 2018, <http://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/03/world/middleeast/iran-protests.html>

^{iv} Eva Hoffman, "The New Nomads," *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss*, ed. André Aciman (1999): pp. 45-47.

^v Charles Simic, "Refugees," *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss*, ed. André Aciman (1999): pp. 132-134.

^{vi} Josh Holder, Niko Kommenda, and Jonathan Watts, "The three-degree world: the cities that will be drowned by global warming," *The Guardian*, November 3, 2017, accessed December 6, 2018, <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/ng-interactive/2017/nov/03/three-degree-world-cities-drowned-global-warming>.

^{vii} Charles Simic, *ibid.*, pp. 121-123.

^{viii} See Mieke Bal, "Migratory Aesthetics: Double Movement," *EXIT* No. 32 (2008): pp. 150–161; along with Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord (eds), *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: cultural practices between migration and art-making* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2007).

^{ix} Sandeep coined the term "comprovisation" in his creative output to denote a process of defining many musical parameters and performer-related actions in the score while leaving other parameters totally open for improvisation.

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