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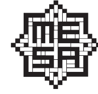

Music, Exile, and Edward Said: An Interview with Layale Chaker

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Abstract

The following interview with Layale Chaker, conducted on 14 September 2023, delves into her unique journey as a Palestinian-Lebanese composer, highlighting the pivotal role of music in shaping her sense of "home" following the Lebanese Civil War. Drawing from her diverse musical upbringing, spanning community choirs to formal conservatory education, Chaker elucidates the disparity between institutional training and the lived musical experiences of the Arab world, informing her quest for authenticity in composition.

Chaker recounts her involvement with the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, founded by Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said, juxtaposed with her decision to pursue an individual artistic trajectory. Central to the conversation is her composition "En Présence de l'Absence – Homáge à Edward Saïd," revealing a deeply personal connection to Said's legacy and a nuanced exploration of his ethos through music.

The interview culminates with insights into Chaker's forthcoming opera, "Ruinous Gods," co-crafted with playwright Lisa Schlesinger. Addressing the profound trauma of refugee children afflicted with *uppgivenhetssyndrom* (resignation syndrome), the opera promises a poignant musical narrative probing themes of parenthood, displacement, and societal obligation. Set for premiere at the 2024 Spoleto Festival USA, Chaker's work continues to blend artistry with advocacy, offering a resonant reflection on human resilience and responsibility.

Keywords: music; exile; displacement; Lebanon; Palestine

Andrea Shaheen Espinosa ("ASE"): You were born in Europe and grew up in Lebanon. How has your international upbringing impacted you as both a musician and a composer?

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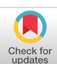

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Layale Chaker ("LC"): Well, I was born in France, and I lived there until I was six years old with my parents, who, at the time, were experiencing a form of exile. I think that [living in exile] informed their way of nurturing us and building a sense of home with us through music. So, for me, for the longest time, home equated music. It equated Fairuz songs, it equated the Arabic language, it equated Nasri Shamsedinne. So much so that in my mind, it actually formulated a very idealized place of what home is. Then, when we moved back to Lebanon when I was six, I experienced a cultural shock, because, you know, the land is not as green as the songs say! In other words, it's not the paradise that the songs describe. So, in my mind, I've always equated music with this idealized landscape – an idealized homeland that I inhabit almost only in my mind. And that has informed a lot of my musical experiences. I first came to musical training by singing in Syriac and Aramaic choirs in church when I was very young. Learning religious music in these languages was another tie to a world that doesn't really exist in my everyday life. Then, of course, later came the conservatory, formal training, and having this world where you are communicating mostly with the Russian teachers of classical music,[1] and the classical world which was very sheltered from real life. But I still heard music in the taxi on the way to my private music lessons and back, and there were still all the family celebrations and weddings and baptisms and all of that. So, there was always this different musical world that I lived in [vs. studied]. That was my musical landscape and I think this has ultimately fed into everything I do. But when I compose, I let all of this go. I try not to get in the way of myself and "put sticks in my own wheels," so to speak. I try to just let it all flow back onto the page in a manner that is as organic as possible. To do this requires a lifetime of practice because it basically requires that I unlearn my conservatory training.

ASE: So, when you say "unlearn my conservatory training," do you mean essentially unlearning Western Art Music training?

LC: Unlearning all of it, really. Just unlearning the idea that you are trained academically. I've struggled with that notion a lot – I never wanted to be the "academic musician" because I've always been critical, even when I was a student, of music being a scary monument that you're trying to tackle instead of being a free flow of expression. It's very, very easy for us to get lost in that notion and I think that this mentality has infiltrated [Arabic] music as well, actually. Arabic, or *maqam* music, was never a music that was meant to live on stage – this notion came later. It was always a music that was tied to our daily life, and I'm always trying to go back to that – how music [in the Arab world] lives in your daily ritual as opposed to an antique object that only belongs on stage and can only be presented as a finished product. In classical music, you don't see the kitchen, you don't see the preparations, it's all about

[1] In this context, the term "classical music" refers to Western Art Music (WAM) and styles and works derived from WAM traditions.

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showing a polished product, and I've always been interested in dissecting that.

ASE: It sounds like a practical approach to decolonizing performance practice.

LC: Yes, but you know where it started? Actually, it started from a very self-indulgent place. It was really simply because I wanted to understand why I've always struggled with stage fright – I've always wanted to get to the bottom of it. I asked myself, "Why? Why am I afraid?" It's because in my conservatory training, I understood from a certain age that the only time I ever performed for others was in a jury setting. So, my stage fright didn't improve until I unlearned (and I'm *still* unlearning) the practice of performing solely for evaluation, which is absolutely a colonial practice. In traditions of the Arab world, we don't do that, that's not why you practice, that's not why you sing, that's not why you dance, that's not why you play music! It's definitely not the traditional place of music in the Arab world, nor should it be. It's very difficult to unlearn, but it's essential to do so if you want to come to a place of authentic music making. It's a return to why you're making music and why you're a musician in the first place. It's a very empirical approach. I work on this with musicians who I'm teaching as well. I always encourage them to put it back into perspective: Why are you here? Why are you making music? You're not playing just to be told that whatever you're doing is right or wrong. But, the rest of the year, outside of studies with me, most of my students are only playing in those [evaluative] contexts.

ASE: This is getting to the heart of the way we study Western Art Music in the United States and Europe, and the emptiness that I believe plagues so many musicians. Many eventually leave the field to pursue other interests, and others continue to perform Western Art Music while pursuing styles outside of it – styles that value emotional and artistic expression over flawless technique. As a musician who does the latter, can you speak to the ways you move between your positionality in Western Art Music and styles outside of that field?

LC: I have to move between different mindsets, but it's also a logistical challenge. For instance, my agent is always struggling to book work for me, and because my output is so diverse, it's very difficult for her. "Layale is writing an opera, but she has this jazz quintet, but she's also writing a double concerto, etc." Venues and circuit managers can't figure out how to market my music. They want a label but can't figure it out. "But what is it then? We see on paper she's Palestinian-Lebanese, does that mean that she's in 'world music'?" While the lack of a simple label adds more challenge to booking work, I don't want to fit into a mold. Also, because of where I'm from, my work can be viewed as politically representational, which means I'm vulnerable to pigeonholing and preset expectations of how my work may sound. So many times, people comment, "Well that was beautiful, but that was not really Arabic music." My response is to question why Arabic music can only live as a canon of the past. Why, as Arabs, do we only get to play music of the past? Arabic music belongs in the present, and in a globalized world, Arabic music can

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sound as contemporary as the new Western classical music or jazz. I don't want to have to define my projects as this or that. So, it has always been a struggle to defend my work, but to me it's worth defending because again, I think that we artists need a platform to create and to exist. Not as an exception, but as just another artist on the bill for that year or that season – it's something I'm still working on. Sometimes I question if I'm getting the right gig for the wrong reason, you know, to fill some quota. But even if this is ever the case, I work to ensure that what I offer is my authentic expression that will outlive any trend, political agenda, or label of the moment.

ASE: Speaking of politics, your recent composition, "En Présence de l'Absence-Homáge a Edward Saïd," is a stunning tribute to the late Edward Said. What is your relationship with his work, and how did you come to write this piece?

LC: I just want to say that it's nice that we're speaking about it now because this year is the 20th anniversary of Edward Said's death, so I feel very fortunate to be able to reflect on it at this time. As a younger musician, my first encounter with his work had to do more with the practical experience of playing[2] with the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra (WEDO).[3] It was the product of the Said's imagination that became a reality through conversations and collaborations with Daniel Barenboim. My appointment in the orchestra led to me spending a lot of time with his partner, Mariam Said, who is fighting for Edward's legacy in so many different spaces, on so many different fronts. I read his work early on, the first book being *Orientalism*. The first time I read it I was very young and I feel like I didn't necessarily grasp it on as deep a level as I do now, but it certainly planted seeds. Then, after I played with Divan, I was very curious, so I read *Parallels and Paradoxes* and then re-read *Orientalism* again but under a very different lens given my experience. While I was reading more, Mariam gave me these recordings of [Said] playing piano recitals at Princeton and the American University of Beirut. One of them was a video recording, and it was very moving to watch because you could see him almost struggle to read the music – you see a very different side to him that was very humbled, very respectful of the score that was in front of him (he was playing Schubert.) I thought that was very moving and I wanted to amplify that part of his humility and humanity, sitting in front of that Schubert score. I had also spent time with his daughter, Najla, and some of his students. I could see his legacy live on in so many different ways that were outside of the legacy of his literature. I thought, "Why not create an experience that would allow his legacies –

[2] In addition to working as a composer, Layale Chaker is a conservatory-trained violinist.

[3] The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra was founded in 1999 by Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said. It began as a workshop to promote musical excellence and intercultural dialogue between young Arab and Israeli musicians. It now includes musicians from Turkey, Iran, and Spain as well.

https://west-eastern-divan.org/divan-orchestra. Accessed Friday, December 8, 2023.

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in words and in music – to come together at the same?" I can amplify that passing moment in the video I saw and make it last for almost forty minutes. So I composed "En Présence de l'Absence." I staged it very minimally: there's an empty piano on stage and musicians are positioned around it. The piano pedals are held down with weights throughout the performance so they resonate every time the musicians play. There are also microphones placed inside the piano picking up these sympathetic vibrations. An electronic track that I created from recordings of his piano playing, short selections of his lectures, and voices of people around him throughout his life – his wife, his daughter, students who had become professors – plays throughout the piece. I wanted to create an experience for people to inhabit, to listen but really to feel enveloped in an idea of the legacy of Edward Said.

ASE: How did you approach the aesthetic of a piece that should represent Said's multiple legacies given his predilection for Western Art Music but anti-colonial stance?

LC: I mean, that's also a very human contradiction. I thought it was a very interesting paradox to consider because in the recordings of him playing, the emotion we hear he had only for classical Western music – he didn't have that same appreciation for Arabic music. He didn't care for Umm Kulthum and he actually disliked Arabic music – he thought it was boring and that it all sounded the same. But I should add that he did say that it's because he was never given the keys to appreciate it. So, I wanted this piece to be something that sheds light on this side of him. And as I was writing it, I didn't feel like I was writing to express myself. I used the recordings of him and diluted them, slowed them, to create a soundscape. I used filters and I stretched out the time of those recordings that then released much slower harmonic progressions. And when you have much slower harmonies, you have the time to listen to the whole harmonic spectrum that is produced – especially when it's a piano; there are so many overtones that create a fog of sound which I treated with electronics and lots of filters. Then I wrote new lines for the string quartet – violin, viola, cello, and bass – to play over the tonal spectrum that was produced from these heavily treated recordings. I used a microtonality based on the stretched-out harmonies, but I didn't reference *maqāmāt* at all. I was trying to create a terra incognita of sound, stripped of the cultural references that can be found in the music of Schubert and Beethoven, turning the music Said loved into a terra incognita of sound in a way. I reduced the music that he was playing to this sound atmosphere where his postcolonialism discourse could exist to then play recordings of him speaking over these sounds. I wanted audiences to experience something unchartered in a way, for instance, when hearing Said read Édouard Glissant over stripped down, reappropriated versions of Beethoven and Schubert. I was going toward just abstraction of the material he played – my aim was to make it as abstract as possible and basically turn a text or literary statement

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into a lived sonic experience, taking the sounds that he made and pushing them in a different direction.

ASE: What was it like to consult with Mariam and Najla Said for this piece?

LC: Both Mariam and Najla were extremely generous with their time. I recorded hours and hours of them talking and there were lots of memories that they were sharing with me that became very touching moments in the piece. It was a very vulnerable and personal moment when you hear Najla speak about her father and what day-to-day life was like with him. She explained how it affected who she is now and how she views the world's response to him and his work. The way she sees his legacy, now twenty years later, was something she spoke a lot about and I loved hearing her thoughts on it.

ASE: And was there anything in particular that Mariam or Najla wanted you to be sure to include in this piece?

LC: I think they really were stressing that his legacy is so much more present today than many realize – that the way we live and experience identity politics today is very much informed by his legacy, and I have to agree with that. For better or for worse, the conversation has advanced to where it is because of the groundwork his work has laid for us. That's something that came up a lot in our conversations.

ASE: You played in the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra for years. What did playing in the orchestra mean in terms of your relationship to the work of Said?

LC: He was always a big influence, for sure. I felt closer to his thought when I was in the orchestra at first, and playing in it was, for me, part of my pathway to dig deeper into his work and continue to strive toward the utopia he had in mind for the orchestra. But what I experienced as a member of it was only tolerance – people were able to tolerate each other to share music stands and perform, but nothing was happening beyond that. It felt to me like we were just trying to forget the continuing injustices. While it was frustrating, it inspired me to dig deeper into what Said had dreamt of for this orchestra and music's potential in general. So, playing in WEDO pushed me further to work on pieces where I could explore his ideas more on my own terms.

ASE: Do you see your experience in WEDO and your inspiration to compose "En Présence de l'Absence" as connected? Or are they unrelated for you?

LC: No, they're related. The thing is, for me to become a composer of my own and a musician of my own, I had to take a step away from WEDO. I understood that I cannot be somebody who's creating on my own terms and still navigating that environment. I had to take a step back so I could interpret Said in

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my own way because I don't know that the orchestra is doing what it was intended to do.

ASE: As a former WEDO member, what do you see for the future of the project?

LC: It's a wonderful orchestra musically, but it's not in a place to accomplish its goal: to build bridges between Arab and Israeli youth. There's no way the orchestra can undo so much harm at this point. In its beginning, the baby steps it seemed to be making were maybe hopeful at the time. But I feel that these small steps are no longer enough, but that's where the project stops. Yes, reaching a point of tolerance is a small achievement. But it's time to fix the problem of occupation, it's time for reparations. For me to continue in it, I would have to make ethical and political compromises that I'm no longer willing to make, and especially not in the name of Edward Said – this is not what he wanted. The discourse about Palestine is moving much faster around the world than it is in the orchestra, and I don't know that it makes sense for Arabs to be there anymore, because they're upholding something that is not enough – we're pushing forward.

ASE: You recently wrote an opera that is related to Palestine, although not specifically focused on Palestine. Together with playwright and professor Lisa Schlesinger, you wrote Ruinous Gods, an opera set to premiere in the spring of 2024 with the Spoleto Festival USA. The subject matter is somber as it centers on the displacement and trauma of refugee children who suffer grave condition known as uppgivenhetssyndrom, or resignation syndrome.[4] How did this work come into being?

LC: It started with Lisa Schlesinger – she's the librettist on this piece. We were already working on another project, and about two months after we finished it, she wrote me saying, "I have another concept. I read this article that speaks about *uppgivenhetssyndrom* syndrome, or resignation syndrome, and I've been obsessing about it – about the sleeping children, and about how a child can shut down like that and why. I want to explore it more – do you think we can work on it?" I said yes. I had never really considered playing or writing for opera before, honestly. To be very frank, it's an aesthetic that I find very removed from me. I've always found it to be a very elitist artform that I cannot really relate to, especially since I had the experience of playing in the pit for opera orchestras. I had some experiences playing Mozart, I did *Tristan*, from the pit. Obviously it's beautiful, it's grandiose, but it's not at the tip of *my* fingers you know, as a composer. But the more she spoke about the subject, the more I felt like it needed to live in a continuous flux of music. Paradoxically now, I'm tackling it very differently as I'm writing it. But I said to her, "I think it needs to be a different, alternative world of music, where time doesn't

[4] Resignation Syndrome, or *uppgivenhetssyndrom* (Swedish), causes a comatose state accompanied by no diagnosable disease that would physically cause it. Still a mystery to the medical society, this syndrome affects children and adolescents who have been traumatized during a migration process.

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exist and place doesn't exist – can it be an opera?" She said yes, so we started working on it. At the time I had this offer from Dumbarton Oaks in D.C. to go and spend some time there, a semester as a composer in residence. So I went there, and I started working on it full time. And also, I was like eight or nine months postpartum, so I wasn't really touring. I wanted to just stay with my baby and work and I think that informed the piece a lot because I was a new mother, I was learning about this unconditional love and how this becomes your life – your child becomes your life. At the same time, I was working with something where basically children are suffering, and it was very hard for me to come to terms with this: the idea that children are suffering so much, to the point of not wanting to be part of the life you gave them. You've given them life and they're refusing it because, for reasons out of your control, that life has not been what you thought it would be. What you promised your future child, what you had in your mind – you promised them more than what has been the case and what you are offering them. So, parenthood informed my way of tackling this work. The thing is, when I started working on *Ruinous Gods*, I wasn't even pregnant yet! So in the course of writing this work, I became pregnant, experienced pregnancy, experienced labor, experienced motherhood, and this all has very much fed into this opera. Lisa also is a mother of three, and every time we would speak about *Ruinous Gods* or would work on it, it would always become a back-and-forth between talking about the piece and talking about our children. I think we really both embraced that, and the fact that she's a mother comforted me so much throughout the experience of composing for it – I felt like everything was gelling together so naturally. We've created this fantasy, this modern mythology, out of our collaboration. I was able to delve back into Aramaic, Syriac texts from Ashtar to Shamash,[5] and put them back into the opera. This gave yet more emphasis on this idea of different times and spaces. It's a project I'm extremely fascinated with because it's really pushing my musical language to places I've never been before, and it's pouring out into everything else that I'm working on. It's tackling that big question, what I think is the mother of all questions: If children don't want to be part of the future, what does this mean about the kind of world we're leaving to them?

ASE: How do you envision this collaboration within the opera canon, especially given that it will premiere at the prestigious Spoleto Festival?

LC: It's interesting because it lived in our minds – it was only between Lisa and me up until somebody else came on board to commission its completion. Somebody came along and said, "I believe in you, let's do this!" They are giving us a seat at the opera table, and we are giving them a seat at the production of this work. We're embracing this process and we're excited about where this opera and its subject matter are going.

[5] In ancient Mesopotamia, Ishtar was regarded as a fertility goddess in Sumerian traditions and Shamash was the god of the sun.

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ASE: When you say "somebody," do you mean Spoleto Festival USA?

LC: I'm really talking about Mena Hanna, who is the General Director of Spoleto Festival USA. He's been working to include new voices in the festival – he commissioned *Omar* from Rhiannon Giddens and he wanted to commission our opera as well. We knew each other from WEDO – he was Founding Dean and Professor of Musicology and Composition at the Barenboim-Said Akademie. He knew from the beginning I was working on this and he said he was very interested, that he believes in me, and that he wanted me to do this and would give me the platform to do this. I often am asked in interviews, "Why this moment, now? Why are you talking about this now?" I always say this subject – forced migration – has been going on for so long and it's going to keep going on. Now, because somebody gave us a microphone and the opportunity to talk about it, we're going to take it. We have been given a voice now, at this time, to talk about it. But the thing is, it's not a problem that we will only have to deal with now, it's a problem that we're going to have to face and keep facing moving forward as war, economic collapses, and climate change produce more refugee crises in the world.

**Layale Chaker began her musical training at the National Higher Conservatory of Beirut and pursued higher degrees at the Conservatoire de Paris and the Royal Academy of Music in London. She is a laureate of the 2019 Concours International de Chant-Piano Nadia et Lili Boulanger and a recipient of the 2019 Diaphonique Franco-British Commission Prize. Her debut album, Inner Rhyme (In a Circle Records, 2019), received praise in The New York Times, BBC Music Magazine, Strings Magazine, and Jazz World, among others. Chaker is also the recipient of the 2022 Opera America Discovery Award, which she was awarded to compose Ruinous Gods, her debut full-length chamber opera.*

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