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Music

Injecting a virus into the system

June 18, 2011 02:05 AM

By Jim Quilty
The Daily Star



BEIRUT: One of the difficulties folks have with serious art is its inaccessibility. "Serious art," if the term is used at all, is usually taken to refer to work that ignores popular tastes, and often works in media that are distasteful to the international art market.

Take sound art, specifically the free improvisation music generated by the dozens of Lebanese and international artists who cluster around Irtijal, Beirut's international festival of experimental music. This stuff can be (and has been) packaged for sale in CDs, but the work really lives in performance, since it's in the nature of the form that no two shows are ever the same.

And the shows are challenging. Habitues will testify that a standard free improv set – whether it involves Mazen Kerbaj playing his trumpet through a severed balloon with the aid of a set of pincers, or his hose-and-funnel apparatus, or Sharif Sehnaoui tapping on the strings of his guitar with chopsticks – simply doesn't speak to audiences in the same way as conventional music.

Such work deconstructs the elements of conventional music, less likely to be soothing than aesthetically thought-provoking – just as intelligent conceptual art is more likely to make you say "Cool!" than "Lovely!"

Sound art betrayed its toe-tapping side at the Beirut Theater Thursday evening, when a handful of free improv musicians came together for a concert to launch "Made in Japan."

The latest CD by "Praed" – aka Lebanon's Raed Yassin and Paed Conca, a native of "the Lebanon of Mitteleurope" (Switzerland) – "Made in Japan" does somehow work better in concert than on CD, but the performance and the document of the performance both share a mischievous flirtation with contemporary pop music that's not unlike the scoop of ice cream parents use to conceal a foul-tasting pill.

Thursday's performance featured two acts. The second set featured a session with Scrambled Eggs and friends. In this case the post-punk trio of Tony Elieh, Charbel Haber and Malek Rizkallah were joined by Sehnaoui and Kerbaj. Though it had a rock'n'roll edge, this second act was remarkably melodic – being held together, from beginning to end,

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by Elieh's unflappably mutable baseline.

The jewel of the evening, though, was the performance of some numbers from "Made in Japan." The set commenced more or less as local free improv initiates might expect, with Conca moving back and forth from clarinet to electric guitar (electronically enhanced or otherwise).

When he wasn't presiding over the clutch of film and music samples employed by the record, Yassin focused on a cheesy-sounding electronic keyboard, doodling out snippets of what sounded like versions of pop tunes.

Then, maybe 30 minutes in, something odd happened. As his bank of machines began to sputter out an Egyptian pop tune (Mahmoud al-Housseini's "Cigara Bunni"), Yassin donned a pair of shades, bought a microphone to his face and joined the Egyptian in a mock duet, while Conca's clarinet improvisations moved the tune into completely different sphere.

In the best karaoke tradition, Yassin posed and preened, shimmied and jiggled in a piss-take of pop star performance convention that brought smiles to the faces of the entire audience – most of whom were also nodding their heads or otherwise keeping time with Housseini's pop tune.

"That's how it works. You have to put a virus in the system. You have to give your audience a hug," Yassin nodded after the concert, then laughed. "And then, when their defenses are down, you inject them with this virus that makes them hear things differently."

At first blush, the packaging for "Made in Japan" has a hand-made aspect that you might expect from locally produced CDs – it's on a Lebanese label called Annihaya. You have to actually purchase it to find the added value – a reproduction of a watercolor painting by Omar Khoury featuring Conca and Yassin. It's a reinterpretation, it seems, of a scene from one of Egyptian comedian Adel Imam's seminal comedies, the stage play "The Witness who didn't see anything."

"Two of the tunes on the record – 'The Suspect' and 'Hamada and Tutu' – are reinterpretations of tunes from Adel Imam films," Yassin remarked. "Rocket," the tune that marked Yassin's Beirut singing debut, reinterprets a tune from the Egyptian film "The Wedding."

"We're stealing these songs, it's true. But this is what the Egyptians do all the time. The first tune on the record – 'PRAED Horror Theme' – is for a film that hasn't been made yet.

"You can call this a concept record if you like. All the stuff that's coming out on the Annihaya label will be like this." The three minds behind Annihaya are artist-cartoonist Hatem Imam, free improv guitarist Sharif Sehnaoui and Yassin himself. When you suggest that "Made in Japan" is effectively self-published by vanity press, Yassin shrugs.

"Around here," he says, "if the artists don't do it themselves, it doesn't get done at all." The work on "Made in Japan" very much falls into a continuum with the thematic interests of Yassin's earlier work – the free-improv collaboration with Conca, of course, but also his interest in making new work from the detritus of 1980s pop culture.

This interest has been evident in Praed's use of video projections, borrowing from '70s- and '80s-era Egyptian B-movies during their performances. It was also the driving aesthetic of Yassin's award-winning 2008 installation "The Best of Sammy Clark."

"It is part of that," Yassin admits. "But it's more about our interest in images that don't exist. Usually Paed and I perform with projections but here the images we refer to are all absent. It's all cover versions and manipulations and collective memory.

"People came up to me after the show to ask, 'What was that tune you were playing ... ? I know it but I don't remember the title.' I love this," Yassin smiled. "They don't remember the song because it's not really the song. It's the tune that accompanied the scene from a film, an absent image."

One of the consequences of Yassin's approach to local pop culture – "trash culture" as he affectionately calls it – is that Praed's new work can be as appealing as it is challenging.

"Artists don't communicate at all," he sighs. "I'm interested in communicating with the audience because so much of my work comes from society – Arab society especially.

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"It's consumerism that makes this kind of music possible. If Nasser were still ruling Egypt, [music like Mahmoud al-Housseini's] wouldn't exist. You need to have someone like Mubarak, who introduced capitalism to this socialist country [and] makes the crazy inequities even worse.

"I don't want to sound like I hate capitalism. There's some things about this new capitalism that I like. Like Facebook and YouTube. When you use them, Facebook and YouTube make money. But it's free."

Praed's "Made in Japan" is released by Annihaya and can be found online.

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Daily Star on June 18, 2011, on page 16.

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