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The Aftermath of German World Music

Affective Dimensions of Collaborative Cultural Productions across Berlin and Beirut

Summary

This article is looking at the way the German world music debate affects collaborative experimental styles and artist-led institution and network building in Berlin. Locating experimenting musicians from Beirut in the de-ethnicised 'freie Szene' [independent performing arts community] I examine the way experimenting Lebanese, Jordanian and Egyptian musicians engage in friendship-based artist networks across Berlin that privilege sonic innovation and development of new, interdisciplinary aesthetic concepts. This is contrary to the separate ethnicised category of 'foreign' or world music¹ that many Palestinian and Syrian musicians find themselves in due to the variety of neo-orientalist narratives and anti-refugee, anti-Palestinian sentiments in Germany. Following the growing exchanges between German and Lebanese cultural institutions specifically, as well as adjacent musicians and curators, I argue for the growing social and aesthetic proximity of Beirut's and Berlin's free improvised music scenes based on affective labour and, based on an informant's observation of the space he operates in, 'labour art' (Beaini 2022). Reframing diasporic migrant productions in terms of their affective dimensions thus helps to develop a more nuanced understanding of Arab musicianship in Germany. It likewise encourages changing conceptions of experimentalism as practice underlaid with a perceived sense of community, creative agency, and the sensorial pleasure of experiencing sonic uncertainty in artist-led spaces as central values.

MultiKulti Germany?

This article will take a closer look at the local and cultural context that influences electroacoustic and sound art scenes in Berlin and its relationship with the migration

1 Kira Kosnick: *Migrant Media. Turkish Broadcasting and Multicultural Politics in Berlin*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2017.

discourse in Germany. First, I analyse the way in which class hierarchies in Middle Eastern popular culture play into the aesthetic preferences, institutional dependencies and cultural capital of experimenting musicians that integrate in the performing arts community in Berlin. Second, I outline the importance of negotiating aesthetic hierarchies in the context of diasporic music production. This constitutes revisiting literature on the world music debate with a specific focus on intersectional approaches to the experience of migrantised cultural producers in Germany and the role of federal and regional cultural policies in the music sector.² Finally, I outline the role that sensorial and affective approaches to noise and experimental music play in diasporic music production based scholarly approaches to music's affective affordances³, drawing on experiences of sonic intimacy as a framework that has previously been employed to research anti-capitalist public politics in the context of alternative black music.⁴ In doing so, I argue for a more nuanced narrative around diasporic music production that exceeds sonic agency and cultural resistance. This includes exploring how improvised, experimental music production privileges affective and embodied dimensions of noise, as well as its production techniques, that manage to 'aestheticise its overwhelming sound into recorded qualities of loudness and harshness'.⁵

The *MultiKulti* narrative⁶ in Germany has markedly shaped the way cultural institutions and funding bodies engage with 'migrantised'⁷ artists. Cultural essentialisms, orientalist tropes and exoticist sonic and visual expectations can be found long before the popularisation of the world music term in the 1980s with its 'celebratory',

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- 2 Mathias Maschat: *Frei improvisierte Musik im Spannungsfeld von Selbstorganisation und öffentlicher Förderung Studie zu Musikerkooperativen und zur kulturpolitischen Verankerung der improvisierten Musik in Deutschland*. Diplomarbeit. Universität Hildesheim. Hildesheim: 2006. See also Patrick Valiquet: Remediating Modernism: On the Digital Ends of Montreal's Electroacoustic Tradition. *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 144 (2019), no. 1, pp. 157–191. *How to Curate Diversity and Otherness in Global Performance Art*. Ed. by Lisa Gaupp, & Giulia Pelillo-Hestermeyer. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2021, pp. 289–320.
 - 3 Martin Stokes: *The Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music*. Chicago: 2010. See also David Hesmondhalgh: *Why Music Matters*. Malden, MA: 2013.
 - 4 Malcolm James: *Sonic Intimacy. Reggae Sound Systems, Jungle Pirate Radio and Grime YouTube Music Videos*. London: 2020.
 - 5 David Novak: *Japanese. Music at the Edge of Circulation*. Durham, NC: 2013, pp. 30–31.
 - 6 The term *MultiKulti* described the policy approaches to migrant population in Germany since the 1970s. It has been used as a slogan and marketing term in broadcasting and festival culture that been criticised for its tokenism of migrant voices and faces in signifying socio-cultural diversity and successful integration policy in Germany. It also draws on a binary of white Germans and migrantised Germans - so-called 'Ausländer' [foreigners].
 - 7 Fatima El-Tayeb: *Undeutsch. Die Konstruktion des Anderen in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft*. Bielefeld: Transcript 2016.

as well as ‘anxious’, narratives.⁸ Despite well-meaning efforts reflected in celebratory world music narratives praising world music as a ‘symbol for multiculturalism’,⁹ administrative structures and ideological histories of German institutions with ideas around music as cultural diplomacy often reproduce gendered narratives on Arab musicianship that reflect in the funding schemes international musicians can apply for.¹⁰

Upon the textual and discursive analysis of cultural policy frameworks, media representations and project calls addressing Arab cultural producers, one can see a trend towards white saviour tropes and resistance narratives since the so-called Arab spring which ‘marginalizes other equally important aspects of artistic practice’ and likewise ‘perpetuate[s] Euro-American imperialism’.¹¹ White saviour tropes are often the result of decolonising efforts and aims for diversification in German cultural institutions, thus often accompanied by a sense of tokenism in cases where musicians from a Kurdish or Arabic-speaking background are subsumed under the label ‘oppressed minority’, as Jordanian-born, Berlin-based singer-songwriter Zeina Azouqah outlines:

They try to use this whole thing of ‘we’re working with Arab women’. But no, I’m sorry, I’m not the same as a Syrian woman who has fled the war, I’m not the same as an Arab woman who is born and raised in London and looks white. They are different. You can’t just lump all the Arab women together and just say like ‘we’re working with Arab women, and they

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- 8 Steven Feld: A Sweet Lullaby for World Music. *Public Culture* 12 (2000), no. 1, pp. 145–171. See also Martin Stokes: Music and the Global Order. *Annual View of Anthropology* 33 (2004), pp. 47–72.
- 9 James Nissen: ‘Give us a voice!’. Voice, envoicement, and the politics of ‘world music’ at WOMAD, *Ethnomusicology Forum* 31 (2022), no. 2, pp. 236–259.
- 10 *Our women on the ground essays by Arab women reporting from the arab world*. Ed. by Zahra Hankir. London: 2020. See also *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum*. Ed. by Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah. Berlin: 2021. Joachim C. Häberlen: Flight to freedom? Narratives of Muslim women fleeing to Germany. *Clio. Women, Gender, History* 51 (2020), pp. 155–166.
- 11 Darci Sprengel: ‘Loud’ and ‘quiet’ politics: Questioning the role of ‘the artist’ in street art projects after the 2011 Egyptian revolution. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23 (2020), no. 2, pp. 208–226. See also Rayya El Zein: *Performing el rap el ‘Arabi 2005–2015. Feeling Politics amid Neoliberal Incursions*. Doctoral Dissertation. The Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY). New York: 2016. Cristina Moreno Almeida: *Rap beyond Resistance. Staging Power in Contemporary Morocco*. London: 2017. Laudan Nooshin: Whose liberation? Iranian popular music and the fetishization of resistance. *Popular Communication* 15 (2017), no 3, pp. 163–191. Shayna Silverstein and Darci Sprengel: An (Un)Marked Foreigner: Race-Making in Egyptian, Syrian, and German Popular Cultures. *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 10 (2021), no. 1. Online available via <https://csalateral.org/forum/cultural-constructions-race-racism-middle-east-north-africa-southwest-asia-mena-swana/unmarked-foreigner-race-egyptian-syrian-german-popular-cultures-silverstein-sprengel/>.

are oppressed'. It's unfair to people who are facing multiple intersections of oppression that play into each other.¹²

As it becomes clear, efforts of involving Arab musicians in festival programmes and orchestras that utilise narratives on Arab struggle are often dismissed by migrated musicians as articulations of 'white guilt' or a 'trend' towards decolonisation that does not aim for long-lasting change. Berlin-born Jewish literary voice Max Czollek describes this as an 'Integrations theater' [theatre of integration]¹³ that can be seen in the ways Othered musicians are assigned a specific role to stabilise modern German identity and the 'Wiedergutmachungsphantasie' [fantasy of reconciliation].¹⁴ In the context of diasporic music production, Michael O'Toole found that 'musicians can be instrumentalised by politicians seeking to make broader arguments about multicultural politics in Germany'.¹⁵ This becomes apparent when cultural institutions involve Arab migrant musicians with intersecting forms of discrimination as 'tokens' in funding applications and projects to enhance the multicultural credentials of state-aligned institutions and associated EDI policy requirements.¹⁶ Consequently, the discovery of voices from the Middle East becomes a tool for self-fashioning that constructs difference through colonial power.¹⁷

These dynamics thus play into already existing inequalities of power and agency of minority communities in the arts and culture sector in Europe. In addition, many world-music critical cultural institutions often position noise and experimental music produced by the Arab diaspora as cultural resistance towards aesthetic expectations of former world music projects. In doing so, they still embed experimental music within the confines of the world music context rather than outside of it. In this article, I argue that Lebanese-German collaborations in the field of experimental music in Berlin are adjacent to the cultural history, aesthetics, and social networks of the Berlin 'Echtzeitmusikszene'¹⁸ with its associated movement of 'Berlin Reductionism',

12 Interview with Zeina Azouqah in Berlin on 19 August 2022.

13 Max Czollek: *Desintegriert euch*. Munich: btb 2018.

14 Katrin Sieg: *Ethnic Drag: Performing Race, Nation, Sexuality in West Germany*. Ann Arbor: 2002.

15 Michael O'Toole: *Sonic Citizenship: Music, Migration, and Transnationalism in Berlin's Turkish and Anatolian Diasporas*. Doctoral Dissertation. University of Chicago. Chicago: 2014, p. 199.

16 Rim J. Irscheid: Radical Unintentionality. *Norient*. 2021. Online available via <https://norient.com/rim-jasmin-irscheid/radical-unintentionality>.

17 Patrick Burkart: Musical discovery as self-fashioning. *Popular Communication* 14 (2016), no. 3, p. 191. See also Timothy D. Taylor: *Beyond Exoticism: Western music and the world*. Durham, NC: 2007.

18 Echtzeitmusik [real-time music] describes a sub-group of improvising musicians of the Berlin independent music scene [freie Szene] that emerged in the mid-1990s already played in Berlin.

rather than a segregated category of ‘global’ or ‘world’ music. In conversations with musicians from Beirut, I found that many closely identify with the city of Berlin itself, rather than German or Lebanese identity. This sense of city belonging in the growing creative class is associated with low-cost accommodation and rehearsal spaces, a growing international performing arts scene, a relatively accessible arts funding landscape and a perceived sense of freedom and openness for artistic expression in the so-called ‘freie Szene’. Many newcomers to Berlin argue that they perceive Berlin residents to seem to value creative and cultural capital over financial capital. This raises another important argument regarding the affective dimensions of class dynamics in Berlin that encourage the growth of a creative, rather than the corporate elite. In our conversation, Park describes that in Berlin:

We hate the tech bros, same with bankers and landlords. I feel like, in Berlin it’s looked down upon if you don’t do something you love. I don’t think it punches down here, it punches up.¹⁹

The social capital of those engaging in affective labour stands in harsh contrast to the reputation of those accumulating financial capital in the cultural landscape. These negative sentiments towards financial superiority in the ‘freie Szene’ also shape the affective belonging to the independent performing art scene that privileges aesthetic development and sonic innovation over commercial success. I thereby follow sociologist Kira Kosnick’s approach to (post)migrant music making that examines what migrantised citizens ‘actually do, as opposed to how they identify’ by way of analysing affect-based network building in experimental collaborations.²⁰

This article is based on research carried out between December 2021 and April 2023 of both online and in-person fieldwork in Berlin, Mannheim and Beirut. Focusing on the experimental and free improvised music in the so-called ‘freie Szene’ in Berlin,²¹ I conducted interviews with Lebanese, Palestinian, Iraqi, Jordanian and

As *Blažanović* states, ‘Echtzeitmusik’ ‘was supposed to accentuate values such as spontaneity, authenticity, individuality and uniqueness (implied in the meaning of ‘echt’ as true, genuine, authentic, real), which ‘normal’ improvised music had allegedly already lost, becoming largely predictable in sound and gesture” (p.5). The movement is known for its development of the aesthetic of ‘Berlin Reductionism’ and the associated event calendar *Echtzeitmusikkalender*, one of the most prominent resources for contemporary music performances and gatherings in Berlin. See Marta *Blažanović*: *Echtzeitmusik. The social and discursive contexts of a contemporary music scene*. PhD Dissertation. Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Berlin: 2012.

19 Interview with Lucy Park in Berlin on 19 August 2022.

20 *Postmigrant Club Cultures in Urban Europe*. Ed. by Kira Kosnick. Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang 2015, p. 10.

21 The so called ‘freie Szene’ [free scene] has been a phenomenon across all artistic scenes and has been flourishing since the 1960s. Seeing itself as a progressive alternative to bourgeois music culture, the ‘freie Szene’ might be considered, and, in research contexts, been translated

Egyptian-born, as well as German-born musicians in the city's spaces for diasporic music production who describe their music predominantly as 'experimental'. My main research site has been Morphine Raum, a recording studio and venue in Kreuzberg founded and run by Lebanese-born producer and DJ Rabih Beaini. Most of my interlocutors are of Lebanese descent and settled in Berlin in the past ten years and have previously been classified as belonging to an 'Arab avant-garde' based on the genre's association with innovation, newness, progressiveness and challenging of music form and conservatism through compositional and improvisational techniques.²² Prominent figures of this community which are frequently featured in scholarly accounts on experimental music in Beirut include musicians and artists Raed Yassin, Sharif Sehnaoui, Mazen Kerbaj, Tony Elieh and Rabih Beaini who engage in interdisciplinary collaborations specifically with dance and visual arts. Findings from conversations with musicians, funding coordinators and cultural workers collaborating with many of these musicians, including listeners regularly attending Morphine Raum, will also be part of the qualitative analysis of the social and affective aspects of Lebanese-German collaborations in Berlin. Scholarly approaches in the field of German cultural policy, migration studies and postcolonial approaches to narratives of German multiculturalism provide further theoretical background for my argument.²³

World music critique as diversity strategy

Postcolonial criticisms of world music have become an integral part across the European arts and culture sector. In the past decade, specifically world music critique has become a popular subject of festival agendas, conferences as well as publications such

to, 'independent arts scene'. The scene is considered to pioneer new aesthetic concepts as a form of social protest and also associated with high culture habitus due to the academisation of actors in the 'Freie Szene' and the links to the aesthetics of contemporary art scenes and New Music. Another characteristic of the scene is the working concept of composer-as-performer that offers an antidote to the production mechanisms of 'commercial' cultural scenes. See Blažanović: *Echtzeitmusik* (see nt. 19).

22 Thomas Burkhalter: Multisited Avant-Gardes or World Music 2.0. Musicians from Beirut and Beyond between Local Production and Euro-American Reception. In: *The Arab Avantgarde. Music, Politics, Modernity*. Ed. by Thomas Burkhalter, Kay Dickinson and Benjamin Harbert. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press 2013, pp. 89–120.

23 Ruth Mandel: *Cosmopolitan Anxieties: Turkish Challenges to Citizenship and Belonging in Germany*. Durham, NC: 2008. Andrew Wright Hurley: Postnationalism, postmodernism and the German discourse(s) of Weltmusik. *New Formations* 66 (2008), pp. 100–117. Silverstein and Sprengel: (Un)Marked Foreigner (see nt. 12).

as this very one, aiming for the empowerment of global majorities through decolonisation of academic and popular discourse. The premise of this article is to uncover the ways in which ‘anti-world music’ sentiments may or may not give rise to affective networks formed around these criticisms. World music critique, as practiced by many German cultural institutions, often functions as a discursive strategy to address institutional racism and implement diversity-sensitive approaches to performance curation. However, the way this critique is engaged with by migrated artists from the SWANA (Southwest Asian/ North African) region itself is best summarised by DAAD programme coordinator Dahlia Borsche (see also the interview with Dahlia Borsche in this special issue). She describes that ‘Nothing comes from the artists themselves in terms of world music critique, but they engage with different issues that are far more complex and way more interesting.’ Reflecting on the work of artists Yara Mekawei over the course of her DAAD residency, Borsche stresses that she ‘would never call it world music and Yara would probably laugh her head off if this term were foisted on her, she probably wouldn't know what to do with it and what it is supposed to do in her practice.’²⁴

World music critique, often a cultural institution's effort to combat neo-oriental stereotypes, is not the incentive for Arab musicians to produce experimental music and harsh noise, but the critique is itself a local German phenomenon with a range of socio-cultural effects that will be examined in this article. However, it is accompanied by a more important movement with similar aims for diversification of media representations of Muslim-presenting musicians. In the realm of broadcasting, non-fiction literature and social media, one can see a growing number of those living in white-majority societies who aim to combat stereotypes around Arab identity. This is a crucial development within the German cultural context in which migrantised Germans have been subject to racialised categorisations in *MultiKulti* productions. Recent non-fiction publications such as *Our Women On The Ground: Essays By Women Reporting From The Arab World* present a range of female voices that challenge prominent clichés around everyday life in the SWANA region. Furthermore, Palestinian journalists such as Malcolm Ohanwe and Marcel Aburakia, their podcast *Kanackische Welle* – which can mean ‘kanak wave’ or ‘kanak movement’ as well as ‘kanak radio’ – alongside a rising number of Instagram accounts such as *amromaktabi* specifically aim at refuting misconceptions around Arab identity in North America and Europe from within while utilising the global reach through their followers on social media platforms. The rising visibility of these issues is following a general development of openly performing critical approaches to the history of Muslim migrants Germany, Turkish ‘Gastarbeiter’ [guest workers], and their mistreatment and labour market discrimination since the 1950s that hindered immigrants’ homemaking practices and

24 Interview with Dahlia Borsche in Berlin on 17 August 2022.

equal living conditions in the West Germany.²⁵ Often, the criticism of world music and Germany's history of discrimination of Arab and Turkish migrants may temporarily change performance programming and festival curation yet often still allude to a 'right amount of Orientalism' alongside popular white saviour tropes. This helps audiences to imagine an intimate sensory engagement in cultural imaginaries of different sound worlds while drawing on diversity-sensitive approaches to Germany's cultural legacy.

To this day, the German world music debate has mainly been examined through the prism of its alleged roots in 1980s British popular culture. Ethnomusicologists often look at the concept as a one-dimensional marketing term, yet there is little research that illuminates the cultural backdrop of orientalist phantasies in German popular culture preceding the label.²⁶ Describing how German musicologist Georg Capellen has used the term 'Weltmusik' in 1906, musicologist Britta Sweers outlines that 1987 should be seen as one of many points of reference, rather than the birth of world music (see also Britta Sweers's article in this volume). Therefore, the label world music cannot be seen as the result of industry decisions, but the marketing campaign can be seen as the result of the popularisation of this specific style of music that became world music. The cultural historian Andrew Hurley further sketches out the cultural context of German world music. He proposes that world music in Germany can be seen as a part of post-nationalist endeavours in the 1950s.²⁷ By providing a space for cultural fluidity, the aim of world music was to create musical encounters free from ideas of 'pure' culture and race, working almost as a 'surrogate for German domestic folklore'.²⁸ Steven Feld provides a comprehensive summary of the 'celebratory' and 'anxious' debates around world music, whereby neo-Marxist and Gramscian 'anxious' approaches stress the power imbalances between producer and musician. On the flip side, celebratory approaches utilise metaphors such as 'bridge building' and tired arguments of 'music as a universal language' as often seen in earlier state funded *MultiKulti* projects in Germany.²⁹ World music celebrations, however, draw on a certain form of hybridity that places specific aesthetic expectations on migrant performers shaped by what Marta Amico describes as the aesthetic formation

25 Andreas Goldberg, Dora Mourinho & Ursula Kulke: Labour market discrimination against foreign workers in Germany. *International Migration Papers* 7 (2010). Online available via https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---migrant/documents/publication/wcms_201039.pdf.

26 Britta Sweers: 'Weltmusik' im zeitlichen Kontext: Konzept und Rezeption eines schwierigen Begriffs. Conference Paper. Workshop *Weltmusik' in postkolonialer Perspektive – aktuelle Debatten in Forschung und Praxis*. Freiburg: 2022.

27 Hurley: Postnationalism (see nt. 24), p. 107.

28 Ibid, p. 105

29 Feld: Sweet Lullaby (see nt. 9).

of a ‘world music sound’.³⁰ This sound promised audiences a certain listening experience based on similar production mechanisms, as the anthropologist points out in her research on the production of Tuareg music in France.

The so-called ‘world music sound’ is thus an aesthetic on the basis of which indigenous music forms are tailored for the Western ear in recording studios through certain effects. In her research on a US-funded Lebanese American cultural exchange involving experimenting musicians Raed Yassin, Mazen Kerbaj, Sharif Sehnaoui and Christine Abdelnour, Marina Peterson outlines the way not only world music, but experimental improvised music projects are utilised for multicultural portfolio building, as an act of cultural diplomacy set up by state funded cultural organisations.³¹ However, despite ‘good intentions’, these efforts often involve a highly mobile creative class and disregard of the real ‘Other’ at the time. In Germany’s cultural history, this can be seen in the disregard of the musical activities of Turkish migrant labourers in favour of state-funded, institutionally organised cultural encounters. In these instances, selected Others symbolised the successful integration of different cultures into German society and would display these values on world music festival stages, projects and summits ‘benefiting wealthy German consumers, tourists and musicians’ while little progress was made in supporting migrating artists or initiating changes in cultural policy and public discourse.³²

In her ethnography of migrant media producers in Berlin, Kosnick outlines the multicultural politics at play in the production of Turkish broadcasting and German radio producers aiming for a representation of Berlin’s multicultural scene. Her findings show that the performativity of German ‘Weltoffenheit’ [openness to other cultures] often leans heavily into tokenism and what Ruth Mandel outlines as the mere ‘appearance of tolerance of difference and minorities’.³³ This can also be traced in the history of *MultiKulti* project work in Berlin involving Syrian musicians, as Shayna Silverstein points out in her ethnography on race-making in German popular culture.³⁴ During my time in Berlin, I spoke to Zeina Azouqah, a Berlin-based musician, composer and singer songwriter from Jordan, about the tokenism many musicians encounter, as well as the role of visibility, equal pay and the stigma surrounding different Arab identities. While we discussed her experiences as a female Jordanian musician in Germany, she explained how the often ‘well intended’ involvement of mi-

30 Marta Amico: La fabrique d’une musique touarègue. Analyse comparée, du Sahara à la World Music. *L’Homme* 227–228 (2018), pp. 179–208.

31 Marina Peterson: Sonic Cosmopolitanisms: Experimental Improvised Music and Cultural Exchange. In: *The Arab Avantgarde. Music, Politics, Modernity*. Ed. by Thomas Burkhalter, Kay Dickinson and Benjamin Harbert. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press 2013, pp. 185–208.

32 Hurley: Postnationalism (see nt. 24), p. 111.

33 Mandel: *Cosmopolitan* (see nt. 24), p. 12.

34 Silverstein and Sprengel: (Un)Marked Foreigner (see nt. 12).

grant musicians, often feeds into already exoticist representations of ‘Arabness’, specifically in the realm of Western art music. Zeina spoke about her identity as a Circassian, the way white Germans feel the urge to locate her based upon her appearance. She explained that she is not subject of/to the same issues as Syrian musicians seeking asylum, yet she experiences microaggressions on a regular basis. Speaking about Arab musicianship in Germany, she outlines the difficulties many musicians who seek stability and lack cultural, educational, or financial capital encounter upon their integration in the German cultural landscape:

With the Syrians, it's so horrible, so racist, like the exoticism is just as bad as the racism. I have seen a lot. But the musicians can't complain because well, 'they are giving me a job at the end of the day, I complain later when I have more stable footing here'. It's the tokenism, and not being given real credit and real chances to represent themselves authentically. But you have to represent this thing that 'we are putting you in this box. Oh, and please wear this.' It's kind of not explicitly said but manipulated into going into a certain direction. But people are scared of getting cancelled or not being able to secure funding or put on a kind of X-list. Especially for Syrians it's a tough time right now.³⁵

In our conversation, it became clear that despite many cultural, ethnic, religious and class differences among Arabic-speaking migrant communities in Germany, Syrian and Jordanian musicians, despite having entirely different reasons to migrate to Germany, become subject to the same cultural essentialisms and categorisations as ‘Arab migrants’ and may even be grouped together with members of the Turkish community. The reasons for Arabic-speaking cultural producers to move to Berlin may be entirely different yet disregarded in favour of narratives that deny the international networks and (sub)cultural capital that migrant musicians bring to Berlin. The essentialisms and neo-orientalisms that many musicians are subject to also neglect class as an important distinguishing factor between different communities of Arab migrant musicians who might not even call themselves ‘migrant musicians’ but ‘electronic musician hailing from Beirut’ when formerly operating in the local cosmopolitan music scenes.

World music, Arab popular culture and class

In Berlin, I used to be the lonely wolf on the Lebanese side. I never engaged with Lebanese people here because the ones that have shops or other businesses, I have no interest to share with them [sic]. I don't hang out with them. Sometimes when I walk past some Turkish places where they play cards and I'm like 'I wish I could play cards with them' [laughs]. And the contrast is that all the artist communities from Beirut are totally against that stuff because it's a class thing. Once I did the mistake of answering the phone while I was playing cards with my cousins, years ago. And the person was asking me 'what are you doing' and I

35 Interview with Zeina Azouqah in Berlin on 19 August 2022.

was like ‘I’m playing cards’ and he was like ‘do you think Marcel Dettman [German Techno DJ] is playing cards now in Berlin’. So I was like ‘Wow, can’t I play cards?’ ‘No, you should not because this is really not what you should be doing’. It’s a class thing, so I stopped playing cards, it’s mostly the big problem in Lebanon.³⁶

The act of playing card games as a working-class symbol across many Middle Eastern countries might seem like a very specific example but exposes the connection of different leisure time activities and their social connotations. Social class is an often-neglected aspect in the context of Arab popular culture and its ties to Berlin’s international music scene. Yet, it exerts significant influence on curatorial practices and the audience reception of diasporic cultural productions in Germany. Specifically in Lebanon, the concept of class does not map onto the Germany context and the inherent logic of a high-subculture classification system that concerns local cultural productions. In Lebanon, cultural class and capital is increasingly subject to changes in the class structure of a country torn by two decades of a civil war and an ongoing economic crisis affecting all areas of local social and cultural life. It also needs to encompass debates around religion, ethnic heritage, cosmopolitan affiliation and, most importantly, belonging to a political party in Lebanon, and how these aspects affect belonging to higher- or lower-class systems as Lebanese-born Amara Hatoum outlines in our conversation.³⁷

In the field of cultural sociology and ethnomusicology, those researching rock, hip hop or electronic music, and the ‘Arab Avant-Garde’³⁸ stress the importance of class and racial dimensions in popular culture in the Levante, Egypt and the Arabic-speaking diaspora in Germany.³⁹ In her research on Ramallah ravers and Palestinian popular culture, Polly Withers outlines that the identity formation and scene belonging of young people in Palestinian rave culture, specifically in their practices of undoing gender and their display of sexuality codes, reveals the implications of class-based hierarchies that can also be found in German electronic music scenes. Drawing on the relationship between class, gender and sexuality, she outlines that scenesters require money to acquire the dress styles, drinks, travel and tickets to enter spaces that allow for an undoing of gender and a display of sexuality codes and an inversion of heteropatriarchal identity norms ‘since these reimaginings depend, at least in part, on consumption’.⁴⁰ Looking at the way processes of race-making in Egypt follow conceptions of whiteness, Darci Sprengel outlines that the class hierarchies manifest in

36 Interview with Rabih Beaini in Berlin on 31 October 2022.

37 Interview with Amara Hatoum on 16 March 2023.

38 Burkhalter et al.: *Arab Avantgarde* (see nt. 23)

39 Burkhalter: Multisited (see nt. 23), Kosnick: Postmigrant (see nt. 21), Sprengel: ‘Loud’ and ‘quiet’ (see nt. 12).

40 Polly Withers: Ramallah Ravers and Haifa Hipsters. Gender, Class, and Nation in Palestinian Popular Culture. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48 (2021), no. 1, p. 19.

the ways a 'privileged class standing associated with expertise and an exemption from much of the scrutiny and brutality of security allow[s] freedom of movement and a heightened platform from which to disseminate one's knowledge and/or art, among other benefits'.⁴¹ In the realm of audience research, Burkhalter finds that listeners of the Arab Avant-Garde often remain 'well-educated elites only'.⁴² For this reason, German world music is often seen as a product consumed by the educated bourgeois elite with corresponding social mobility, financial set-up and political and aesthetic value system and was closely related to the racialised category of jazz music.⁴³ These claims for a cosmopolitan elitism are often due to its association with German high culture and access to a variety of funding. Magda Mayas explains why the fortunate state-funding situation does not successfully catapult the experimental scene in the realm of cosmopolitan elitism or high culture but why many experimenting artists, despite their affiliation with high culture institutions, find themselves in dire economic conditions:

I can't think of a less elitist scene than the experimental improvised music scene, both in the sense of its history, financial situation and sense of community. Most venues for this kind of music in Berlin operate on door money, with a few exceptions. The arts funding is not guaranteed for everyone- most funding is project based and hence short term and many artists have part time jobs to finance themselves. Some are lucky enough to still have old low rent contracts, otherwise the situation for cheap rents in Berlin is not existent anymore.⁴⁴

What further leads to the perception of the free experimental music scene as a privileged and elitist scene are the curatorial approaches and academisation of experimental music and sound art in the past decade. This is further encouraged by a rise of practice research approaches, interdisciplinary works among universities and cultural producers and their networks. This development of a cross-fertilisation of social theory and cultural production corresponds with what Schwegler analyses as a performativity of cultural productions. In this context, performing social theory enables new processes in the realm of contemporary cultural capitalism and allows for valorisation by emphasising the originality of a cultural product.⁴⁵

These findings show how beliefs and sentiments held towards the world music term on the one hand, and cosmopolitan affiliations on the other hand, continue to shape the location of Othered musicians in either ethnicised or de-ethnicised parts of the German cultural landscape. Not only do aesthetic choices, class and the belonging to international networks provide musicians with different kinds of agency, power

41 Sprenkel: 'Loud' and 'quiet' (see nt. 12).

42 Burkhalter: *Multisited* (see nt. 23), p. 99.

43 Hurley: *Postnationalism* (see nt. 24).

44 Interview with Magda Mayas on 29 October 2022.

45 Guy Schwegler: *Die Theorien in der Kulturproduktion: Aspekte der Performativität oder 'How to do things with theory'*. PhD Dissertation. Universität Luzern. Luzern: 2022.

and cultural capital; it also shows how the agency of navigating in a de-ethnicised scene presupposes cultural and educational capital, as well as already existing contacts to the international performance art community in Berlin. The building of infrastructures *outside* world music markets, as well as the use of strategic essentialisms *within*, which include the use of stereotypical narratives in order to remain competitive in the world music market, are only one of many performative reactions of migrantised musicians based on neo-colonial identity attributions in German curatorial and programming practices. The baggage of world music's thus manifests itself in the way in which migrantised musicians are able to navigate their agency, stylistic choices and freedom in either MultiKulti projects or experimental music of the 'freie Szene' in Berlin.

Affective labour

After outlining the socio-historical context of diasporic music productions in Germany, it becomes apparent in which ways the world music debate in Germany stays relevant as a cultural and political backdrop for diasporic cultural productions in Germany. Based on interviews with musicians, administrators, curators, and researchers in the field of experimental and free improvised music and through the discursive analysis of media texts on Arab musicianship, I found that affective and sensory approaches to cultural production, rather than cultural resistance or references to Middle Eastern identity and heritage, are the driving forces of artist-led institution building and collaborative experimental practices in the German capital. I thus argue that it is important to not merely focus on diasporic experimental practices as a form of 'anti-world-music' movement, or resistance of what Brandon LaBelle classifies as articulations of sonic agency of the 'invisible', 'overheard', 'weak' or 'itinerant',⁴⁶ but rather a loose social phenomenon within German society that shows the impact of affective Lebanese-German networks, often referred to as the 'Berlin-Beirut connection' and their way of artist-led institution building through acts of affective labour. This development gives rise to a shift in power dynamics between migrants-as-curators and German cultural institutions, partly due to a fluidity of roles occupied by practicing administrators, listener, producer and musician with their networks to club scenes and artist-led venues. The multiplicity of skill sets and positions in the social network enable improved communication and collaboration between institutions and musicians that further blurs different social spheres on a non-hierarchical level. The social proximity of administrative apparatus and cultural producer helps to no longer 'obstruct [the] communication between the institutionalised culture and the 'underground'⁴⁷ as it has been the case in past productions involving the 'freie

46 Brandon LaBelle: *Sonic Agency. Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*. London: 2018

47 Blažanović: *Echtzeitmusik* (see nt. 19), p. 117.

Szene' in Berlin. This development is further driven by the emotional and professional investment of administrators that contribute to the emergence of friendship-based networks. The productive capacity of trust and shared values in these social networks allow for a growing number of collaborations and performance opportunities in the field of noise, free improvised and experimental music. While describing her work for the DAAD Artist-in-Berlin programme, Dahlia Borsche outlines how her different roles as a curator, musicologist and coordinator foster a sense of mutual trust and credibility that helps to bring together different social institutions:

You can't develop the content of projects or lead a section if you're not also active in these scenes and are part of them yourself and understand the inner logic. This also comes from my work for the CTM festival, rather than from the institution. I moved from the independent scene into the institution but was in the independent scene for so long that the change was not taken amiss and the relationship of trust, which I have with CTM, is not simply gone once you have built it up. It's more along the lines of 'she's one of us in the institution and now we have a different approach to it'. It's not the foreign institutions where musicians have the attitude of 'you can get money there' but rather 'she is one of us'.⁴⁸

As one can see, a large factor that adjoins cultural institutions and musicians are administrators such as Dahlia Borsche (DAAD Artists-in-Berlin programme), Lisa Benjes (Initiative Neue Musik / FieldNotes) and Gregor Hotz (Musikfonds e.V.) whose roles are not purely advising and processing applications for residencies but to build connections between different musicians and venues, 'observe' the scene, structure and to support artist-led initiatives.

Other affective dimensions of musical experimentalism in these networks that cultural administrators, musicians and listeners I interviewed allude to are specifically of a sensory and emotional nature. Many mention a 'Sehnsucht' [longing] for extreme sounds whereby listeners experience sonic unpredictability and harshness as pleasurable and positively challenging. Outlining the somatic dimensions of affect and the bodily effects of experimental music styles, two of my interviewees describe how they seek out these very affects in their musical career:

I love to listen to noise, it's not a protest to me at all, it's not resistance. It's powerful to me, it's beautiful, it gives me pleasure, especially when it's loud. Of course, sometimes you have a person behind a laptop and there is no performance just noise but often you have people moving violently, crushing things, squeezing and shouting, it's like theatre. There is the show, and it can be wonderful, but I care less about that. To me it's the sound I care about, and I love it. To me it's music, it's not disruptive.⁴⁹

Joss Turnbull describes his longing for loud music and noise in similar terms while having to use an instrument that in itself, is not able to cross these sonic barriers without electronics:

48 Interview with Dahlia Borsche in Berlin on 17 August 2022.

49 Interview with Cedrik Fermont in Berlin on 30 December 2021.

I have a longing [Sehnsucht] for blatant beat music, I have a longing for extremely loud output, I have a longing for noise - but I play the tombak which doesn't happen at all in such contexts... I started to realise that that's how I end up making this music, combining tombak with electronics, and that's how I find myself with Stella Banger [collaborative project].⁵⁰

Displaying the ability to enjoy harsh noise, glitch, dark ambient drones, and the sporadic nature of sound production of free improvised performances as a form of sonic education distinguish listeners of experimental musical styles in the 'freie Szene' from electronic music considered 'commercial', 'predictable' and 'purpose build'. The hostility towards the commercialisation of electronic music in Berlin and associated 'techno tourism'⁵¹ have become an important factor that reveals the class aspects of experimental music productions and inherent conceptions of agency in migrant music scenes, accelerating the turn towards noise and experimental music for many diasporic musicians. This is to say, the more suitable it is for the 'commercial' market, the less agency and institutional independence is assumed to be held and acted upon, specifically due to the lack of unique sonic language. Selection criteria for residency programmes such as the DAAD's Artists-in-Berlin programme help outline the connection between the possibility of migrant musicians receiving funding, favoured sonic aesthetics and ideas around agency and independence. Director of the programme's division for music and sound Dahlia Borsche, who coordinates and connects international artists with the independent arts and culture scene in Berlin, explains:

You can also set a new accent without always claiming to reinvent the wheel. The most important thing for us is that people have their own sound language and that they somehow make a statement in their artistic practice. Most of them are extremely self-reflective and have a critical approach to social issues, to the world and their positioning in the world as artists, what they can contribute and what the social impact could be and it is always very specific, they are all very different. And that's how they are selected, this is an award scholarship for artists who have already made a substantial contribution to some music scene, i.e., they all already have a standing and have developed their own sound language, so it's not a scholarship for up-and-coming artists. So that's actually the biggest criterion, that they have somehow developed their own independence and that doesn't necessarily mean that it's always about progress and innovation, but it's about something of their own, something distinctly their own that has an expression.⁵²

The conversation with Dahlia brought up questions around the affective qualities of a unique sound language, the way it requires specific ways of listening. I interviewed

50 Interview with Joss Turnbull in Berlin on 31 October 2022.

51 Luis-Manuel Garcia: Techno-tourism and post-industrial neo-romanticism in Berlin's electronic dance music scenes. *Tourist Studies* 16 (2016), no. 3. Online available via <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1468797615618037>.

52 Interview with Dahlia Borsche in Berlin on 17 August 2022.

those frequently visiting artist-led spaces for collaborative experimental practices, focusing on the scene around Kreuzberg's Morphine Raum. During these conversations, I noticed a strong aversion towards 'easy listening' and 'commercial' music productions. Morphine Raum regular and British-born musician Lucy Park describes her longing for extreme, sonic discomfort and uncomfortable sounds while emphasising the negative sentiments experienced in the context of popular music and clubbing:

I listened to a lot of Krautrock and prog-rock. Then got more into noise and electro-acoustic improv music, developing a taste for more challenging sounds. Sounds that are a bit more extreme, push you a bit, make you feel uncomfortable and make you question what even constitutes music. The border between sound and music is really interesting. Nowadays I find it cheap to listen to music which is clean and smooth and supposed to make me feel 'good' [laughs] ... obviously, there is a time and a place for it. And I do like listening that makes me feel good, but generally speaking, I don't seek out 'easy listening' anymore. If it's too accessible, to pre-packaged and served on a platter, I don't feel anything. I don't feel involved. In the big techno clubs here, I can appreciate the architecture or the atmosphere, but musically, if it's easy, it just won't get me off. [...] I can't be part of a crowd that's dancing to uplifting disco music, for example. I can't move. I can't smile, I just feel angry. It's just not my taste at all. [...] I want to be activated and engaged. I saw Rabih play at Dekmantel festival a few years ago. It was one of the best sets because it was the first time I'd felt truly challenged on the dancefloor. It was like being asked to let your body *and* mind dance. I really appreciated not being treated like an idiot just because I'm partying. I followed him on Instagram and when I moved to Berlin, I went to every concert at Morphine. I saw Mohammad [Reza Mortazavi] play and asked if I could take lessons with him. Now I'm helping out at Morphine a couple times a week.⁵³

Based on my observations on the findings of David Hesmondhalgh's writing on music, affect and community-making, I argue that noise and experimental sounds in diasporic productions are used to engender individual pleasure while providing opportunities for humans to flourish and to evoke meaningful sensations, emotions, and feelings among practitioners, rather than functioning as a form of political resistance. As Hesmondhalgh points out, the 'political' in forms of music is related to the affective dimensions of community making. He observes that 'music's most significant effects on the world are not directly political, in the sense of contributing to forms of publicness that involve deliberation, or that of advance political struggle, but instead relate to the sustenance of a public sociability, which keeps alive feelings of solidarity and community'⁵⁴. These observations help reframe diasporic musicians' engagement in Berlin's local art and culture scene not as protest music, but as affective labour.

53 Interview with Lucy Park in Berlin on 19 August 2022.

54 Hesmondhalgh: *Music Matters* (see nt. 4), p. 10.

Lebanese-born producer, DJ Rabih and Morphine Raum founder Rabih Beaini is going as far as explaining his work as 'labour art', as 'there is a sort of dedication and meditation of work behind it and it's labour art – you're the artist actually working on building the thing and not just purchasing something that is already made by somebody else'⁵⁵. Reframing diasporic migrant productions as affective labour and 'labour art' encourages changing conceptions of experimentalism as practice underlaid with a perceived sense of community, creative agency, and the sensorial pleasure of experiencing sonic uncertainty in artist-led spaces as central values.

Conclusion: Affective dimensions changing the narrative of Arab musicianship

Diasporic musicians are no longer session musicians, providing exoticist imaginations and victimhood narratives in world music productions, or merely exercising ideas for cultural diplomacy purposes that benefit state-funded cultural institutions. Instead, they cultivate affective labour and deep listening as core values of their music productions while forming artist-led spaces based around an aesthetics of noise, discomfort, and uncertainty as sonic tools for human flourishing and pleasure. These tools become the breeding ground for productivity and sonic discovery in artist-led spaces. At the same time, uncertainty as a productive sensation provides musicians with huge amounts of responsibility to shape their instruments, compositions, and style of playing. It encourages failure as a gateway to agency. Experiencing noise, discomfort and sonic uncertainty as musician and listener likewise builds trust between musicians, administrators and listeners that share spaces like Morphine Raum, encouraging 'stranger-sociability' through the possibility and transparency of sonic failure. In uncovering the affective dimensions, rather than drawing on the tired binary of cultural assimilation and resistance in the context of diasporic music production and its discursive embeddedness in the German world music debate, I hope to have been able to outline the ways in which the boundaries between musician and listener dissolve to make room for articulations of power and agency. This article aimed to also illustrate the role that class hierarchies play in allowing for those intimacies to be articulated in the first place. While tension and discomfort specifically play a major role in shaping the sound in musical experimentation between diasporic musicians and German musicians, they are not an articulation of 'ethnic identity' but expose the transparency of insecurity and openness to failure as part of the stylistic and aesthetic principles in the free improvisation scene in Berlin.

55 Beaini, interview (see nt. 36).