



Ata Ebtekar in Tehran, August 2017

The conceptual
electronica of Ata
Ebtekar aka

Sote

sets up a collision
of Persian music
past and future
through traditional
instrumentation
and freeform
structure. By **Tom
Faber**. Photography
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Untimely Meditations

At the end of May, Ata Ebtekar posted a picture on his Facebook page that his six year old son had drawn on the eve of a European tour. The Technicolor scribbles form a figure: Ebtekar on stage performing a live set of electronic music. He is picked out by a spotlight, a yellow smudge sitting above his head, and to his side are green stabs of colour, gentle curves and furious zigzags. These are meant to be sounds. Listening to his music, the illustration seems curiously inspired. It twists simple lines of colour into wild, anarchic forms, much as Ebtekar's music recasts familiar sounds – orchestral strings, synthetic tones – in molten forms that force you to listen differently.

His recordings under the name Sote are characterised by frequent shifts in style, method and concept. He has issued weapons-grade techno on Warp and Repitch, hardcore sound experiments on Opal Tapes and dizzying deconstructions of traditional Persian music on Sub Rosa. It's all unified by a single goal: to make something new. Digging through his catalogue I came across just one release that sounded like anything contemporary, the 2016 track "Neuroenhancer" on Repitch, a throbbing industrial techno hybrid that fits perfectly in today's electronic landscape. But when I ask him about this one concession to modern trends, he laughs loudly. Those tracks, he tells me, were made more than 20 years ago.

He traces his obsession with new sounds back to his early childhood. His earliest musical memories are listening to Western pop in Iran, obsessing over weird synthesizer sounds. "I would rewind my cassette tape to those sounds that I loved, and listen to them 30, 40, 50 times," he tells me over Skype from Tehran. In the 1980s he played in a band in Germany, performing covers of Front 242 and Nitzer Ebb. They later began to write their own music in a freeform style that would later be called techno. He speaks nostalgically about those early days. "It was experimental music," he says, "all about freedom and emotion."

The key to his music lies in his ambivalent relationship to structure. He aims to borrow the affect of styles of music instead of their formula. As he puts it, techno is the sound of musical liberation; what he calls hardcore music is something "intense, which gives you a rush". But he is wary of structurelessness – he scorns "the kind of pure academic music that's obsessed only with process. There has to be structure, but conventional structures need to be broken in order to make something truly new."

For Ebtekar, each project demands a new framework. 2015's *Architectonic* realised techno using pitched sounds as rhythm instead of conventional drums; 2006's *Dastgah* imagined a "pure Persian electronic music" that breaks the traditional scale system. New album *Sacred Horror In Design*, meanwhile, explores electroacoustic music that leaves the Persian scale untouched. Recognisable sounds and tropes in his music offer the listener a crack in the doorway to survey his unfamiliar constructions. The tension between breaking and making rules lends his work an unpredictability but also a curious internal logic: a world governed by its own laws of physics.

As we chat, Ebtekar ponders whether his unwillingness to repeat himself has hampered his career. It explains his sole release on Warp in 2002,

the brutal IDM 12" *Electric Deaf*. Ebtekar had sent a demo of the track to Warp co-founder Steve Beckett; by the time Beckett called him about releasing it, he'd already moved on, making electronic music "without any beats at all". His ideas were moving faster than the industry around him. 15 years later, Repitch asked him to make new music like his old Warp material: "Absolutely not. I can't. My brain doesn't work like that. I would hate myself."

Instead, Ebtekar has determinedly pursued his own instincts. One of his most enduring directions is rooted in his relationship with Alireza Mashayekhi, the pioneering Iranian composer known mostly for his classical work. During a trip to Tehran in the early 2000s, Ebtekar heard a recording in a music shop that stopped him in his tracks – the shopkeeper told him it was an obscure electronic piece by Mashayekhi. At the time, Ebtekar was thinking of trying to make music that combined classical Persian structures with new electronic possibilities, and realised he was not alone in this pursuit. He eventually tracked Mashayekhi down in the lobby of a concert hall, and recalls telling him: "I heard your music. It's unbelievable. I need to introduce you to the whole world. Everyone needs to know that an Iranian composer made this kind of amazing electronic music 40 years ago."

Mashayekhi gave Ebtekar unrestricted access to his musical archives and his orchestra, which led to *Persian Electronic Music: Yesterday And Today*, released by Sub Rosa in 2007. Pairing a disc of Mashayekhi's haunting archival material with new work by Ebtekar, the set positioned the two in a lineage of Iranian electronic composers, and helped lay the groundwork for an experimental scene that would later emerge in Tehran, as surveyed by Fari Bradley in *The Wire* 392. Even the credit on the album's cover reads Alireza Mashayekhi > Ata Ebtekar, as if Ebtekar's music stems from Mashayekhi's, and they were writing a new history together.

2009's *Ornamental* saw Ebtekar working with Mashayekhi's Iranian Orchestra For New Music. He described his goal as wanting to "take Mr Mashayekhi's compositions, deconstruct the hell out of them and then bring in my noise and electronic elements". The results pit strings against synths, halfway between duet and duo. It's music that reaches into both the past and the future but never quite touches down in the present. "Hopefully in a hundred years this is going to be heard as a new kind of traditional music," Ebtekar observes.

This new traditional music was tested in a live setting for the first time for the *Sacred Horror In Design* project. After a commission for Berlin's CTM Festival (reviewed by Tristan Bath in *The Wire* 398), Ebtekar enlisted the help of two instrumentalist friends, Behrouz Pashaei on setar and Arash Bolouri on santoor, for a performance. The finished music, compiled for an album on Opal Tapes, is a series of structured collisions: peace and violence, tradition and modernity, the sacred and the arcane. On "Segaah", Bolouri's fingers fly across his hammered dulcimer so fast, it's like the strings are burning. Rehearsals were gruelling for the instrumentalists, as they struggled to find their cues in his polyrhythmic compositions. For "Holy Error", he asked them to perform extended techniques, playing on the wooden edges of their instruments.

Since moving back to Tehran permanently four years ago, Ebtekar has become a leading figure in the city's emerging electronic music scene. He teaches computer music to young producers, to whom he dedicated his recent *Hyper Urban 20 30* release on Ge-stell. A new school of Iranian experimental musicians, many of whom appeared on the 2016 Flaming Pines compilation *Absence*, have found a fresh generation of listeners in the West. He points to 9T Antiope as particularly accomplished, a duo that sets Sara Shamloo's jazz-inflected vocals adrift in a sea of unnerving ambient sounds. Another key producer, Siavash Amini, describes the compilation as an alternative to mainstream government-endorsed Iranian music, which "consists of very shallow imitations of various musical genres, cleared of any signs of cultural or political resistance."

Though he namechecks certain non-Iranian producers he loves – Rashad Becker, Chris Douglas, Mark Fell and most of all Autechre ("the best composers of the modern era") – the majority of Western noise and techno producers leave him cold. "It's supposed to be about freedom, about making something new," he complains. "I find it boring and honestly harmful to culture to just follow formulas and copy convention."

Ebtekar's time is also occupied by SET Festival, an annual experimental event he co-founded in Tehran as a platform to facilitate creative freedom for local artists. There are serious hurdles for setting up such events in Iran: dedicated venues are scarce, mixed gender dancing is forbidden, performances require government permission. But Ebtekar claims the staging of SET has been almost frictionless, which could be partly down to the gradual shift in Iran's domestic politics. "Politicians are seeing that, in order to stay in power, changes need to happen," he explains. It may be motivated by a desire to make money from tourism rather than to support experimental art, but the electronic scene is reaping the benefits. "Finally, over the past five years the waveforms are coming into phase," he declares. He also marvels at how quiet and attentive Iranian audiences are at experimental concerts compared to their Western counterparts. "Sometimes they don't even like the music," he notes, "but they keep coming back, they want to argue and discuss." This is down to a deeply ingrained Iranian love of the arts, he adds. I tell Ebtekar of my own travels in Iran in 2014, when I saw hundreds of daily mourners at the tomb of national poet Hafez in Shiraz, each reading verses aloud to their friends. He nods. "Even for people who can't read or write, art, particularly poetry, is a part of their daily lives."

He speaks like someone who, after much movement between worlds, has finally settled into a context of his own making. It's tempting to draw parallels between his sound and a lifetime of moving between east and west, yet Ebtekar feels that his vision is innate. "I think it's in my DNA. After three decades making music, I still get goosebumps from sound design.

"I think that's me, really," he concludes. "I've always composed music for the same reason: I need to hear something that has never existed before."

□ Sote's *Sacred Horror In Design* is released by Opal Tapes