Poetry Despite/Music Despite

ETERNAL WAR REQUIEM
The other side chose to turn every element, every aspect of life in Iraq into a battle and into a war zone. I chose to turn every corner of Iraq into a spot for civility, beauty and compassion.

—Karim Wasfi, 2015
Poetry Despite/Music Despite (Eternal War Requiem) connects artists across time and place, from World War I to the “Global War on Terror,” from the UK to Iraq. These connections acknowledge the recurring traumas of war and, conversely, the human connections that happen despite the pain.

The project emerged out of my personal reflections on Benjamin Britten’s War Requiem (originally written for the 1962 consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral), the nine poems by World War I poet Wilfred Owen featured in the War Requiem, and maestro Karim Wasfi’s “spontaneous compositions,” solo cello performances held at sites of recent bombings in Iraq. These works, along with my own memories of being a U.S. soldier in Iraq in 2003-2004, resonate with each other. They facilitate connections between our current state of endless war and its historical antecedents. Aptly, Wasfi has said of his cello performances: “I was connecting everything: death, spirits, bodies, life.” I was inspired to do something similar.

Building off these connections, Poetry Despite/Music Despite (Eternal War Requiem) is comprised of four core elements. The first includes nine large-scale woodblock prints that visualize the relationship between the horrors of World War I and the ongoing “Global War on Terror.” The prints respond to Owen’s nine poems in the War Requiem, while exploring current issues, including state-sanctioned extrajudicial killing, torture and detention, the refugee crisis, the rise of extremism, and the failure of states.

The second element of the project reimagines each of Owen’s War Requiem poems, placing this historic work into a contemporary context. These reimagined works of poetry and hip-hop were performed live at the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, UK in February 2019. Each poetry performance was accompanied by a solo cello performance by maestro Wasfi and presented within the structure of the traditional Latin Mass for the Dead, the same structure Britten used for the War Requiem.

Working with sound artist Nate Sandburg, recordings from these live performances were then mixed, edited, and mastered into the third element of the project, the Poetry Despite/Music Despite (Eternal War Requiem) limited edition double vinyl record. This new composition includes an original sound design and samples from Benjamin Britten’s War Requiem, performed at Coventry Cathedral on May 30, 1962 by the London Symphony Orchestra, Melos Ensemble, The Bach Choir and London Symphony Chorus, Highgate School Choir, Simon Preston on organ, and soloists Galina Vishnevskaya, Peter Pears, and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau.

The fourth and final element reflects on the music and poetry created by those most impacted by war. In a humble gesture of reparation for the destruction and instability that has resulted from the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, I donated my artist fee from the BALTIC Artists’ Award to maestro Wasfi. I invite members of the public—especially those from countries that supported the invasion of Iraq—to join me in supporting Iraqi musicians who play on, despite. The double vinyl record was offered as a gift to those who made a contribution to support Karim Wasfi’s work with young musicians in Iraq.

—Aaron Hughes, 2019
I. Requiem aeternam

Cello Prelude

Anyone There

I have come to talk about Syria and all that has occurred
Syria is torn as whether to cry for us or the land
I swear I don’t know what to say and what to choose
The screams of the martyr’s mother or the sounds of destruction
Aleppo was paradise yet now it’s all destroyed
Children died of hunger and the reason is the siege
In brief, this is what happened
Syria nestled all religions
Now it fights in the name of Islam
Good heavens, hearts turned into stone
Syria is calling, injustice has propagated
Injustice prevails and kills people*

I already feel like I’ve lost my place
My hometown has gone without a trace
Looking for something I can’t replace
Hoping I can find a better place

I can’t see my family at home
But I can still see them on my phone
It doesn’t really stop me from feeling alone
I’m carrying this sadness in my bones

The memories I have will never go away
When I go to sleep they start to replay
I’m never going back I’m here to stay
Gotta keep going to find another way

I’m starting to feel like people don’t care
I’ve got a story to tell, it’s my turn to share
I offer this dream, this hope my prayer
I’m shouting this out, is there anyone there?

By The Syrian Kings (Ahmed and Hussein, with contributions from
Jowan, Ali and Mohammad; supported by GemArts music leaders
Izy Finch and Pawel Jedrzejewski)

* First stanza translated from Arabic

Anthem for Doomed Youth

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
— Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls’ brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

By Wilfred Owen
**II. Dies irae**

**Permanent Stars**

I long to return and smell your scent again, Damascus
I long to return and remember those days
Days that will not return, not even in dreams
The people in exile got tired of illusions

We lived our childhood in exile, sorrow and illusions
Because of injustice, our eyes can't sleep anymore
Exile oh, people, made us taste poison

I long to return to my homeland,
To hear a knock on my door, open and find my friend
To go together to my school, to enter my classroom, to find my teacher.
To play in the schoolyard after my classes are over
How I miss my friends from school.

I'm tired, yes I am tired of exile
Everyone is far away, heartbroken, no one is by my side

My tears flow each time I put my head on the pillow
Lost in this world and I don't know what to do
Oh, world, lighten my heart a little
Many people I've seen cry,
their loved ones who drowned in the sea
Syria you are a paradise, and a paradise you shall remain
Oh, world, please,
Have some compassion with the Syrian people

[Chorus]
I remember the time I spent with my friends
It was the most beautiful days of my life
In exile, I've lost my days and my happiness
I lost most of my loved ones
They were my friends

So many people lost their loved ones in the sea
So many people are tired of the cruelness of destiny
The sight of you oh, my country, breaks one's back
How my heart breaks oh, Damascus,
whenever I remember the smell of roses
I open my phone for your memories oh, Damascus,
I am still searching

Home oh, my dear home, do you still remember me?
Or has destruction concealed you
Those days when I spent the evenings with my neighbor
Now there is no neighbor or home that remains
The destruction took them,
and the siege has exhausted them
My eyes cry from this scene that became war,
ruins and destruction
The day will come, God willing,
and we will return to you oh, homeland

**But I Was Looking at the Permanent Stars**

Bugles sang, saddening the evening air,
And bugles answered, sorrowful to hear.

Voices of boys were by the river-side.
Sleep mothered them; and left the twilight sad.
The shadow of the morrow weighed on men.

Voices of old despondency resigned,
Bowed by the shadow of the morrow, slept.

( ) dying tone
Of receding voices that will not return.
The wailing of the high far-travelling shells
And the deep cursing of the provoking ( )

The monstrous anger of our taciturn guns.
The majesty of the insults of their mouths.

By Wilfred Owen

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By The Syrian Kings (Ahmed and Hussein, with contributions from Jowan, Ali and Mohammad; supported by GemArts music leaders Izzy Finch and Pawel Jedrzejewski)
**Forever War**

War’s a joke for me and you,
While we know such dreams are true.

“Farmers, sent to kill farmers…”*

Out there,
In blinding light, or in black and white
We’ve walked quite friendly up to Death,—
Knocking teeth, ivory grinding, ghost of choking silent tones
Sat down and eaten
Him
with him,
Yes, it is always a Him.

Cool and bland,—
Clicking lips, dried and cracked, gnashing mush
Splattering cough, choking
Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.
Funny stories, body parts, coughing laughter, spewing mush.

We’ve sniffed the green thick odour
Night vision targets
Of his breath,—
“All the way to splash”

Our eyes wept, but our courage didn’t writhe.
No courage needed,
Numb, drained yet alive
Hanging from a bridge, swaying,
his finger, your tongue
We died.

He’s spat at us with bullets and he’s coughed
Floating up from deserts and down from oceans
We died with nothing,
He, America, said we were nothing, but
Shrapnel.

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**The Next War**

War’s a joke for me and you,
While we know such dreams are true.

—Siegfried Sassoon

Out there, we’ve walked quite friendly up to Death,—
Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland,—
Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.
We’ve sniffed the green thick odour of his breath,—
Our eyes wept, but our courage didn’t writhe.
He’s spat at us with bullets and he’s coughed Shrapnel. We chorussed when he sang aloft,
We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.

Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!
We laughed, —knowing that better men would come,
And greater wars: when each proud fighter brags
He wars on Death, for lives; not men, for flags.

By Wilfred Owen

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* From the song “Soldier’s Heart” by Jacob David George
Sonnet On Knowing Our Drones Hit Targets Wrongly Identified

Be slowly brought down, my smooth gray wasp,
High tech scouring the heavens, about to strike;
Great skill against them, as for months we train—
Grave implications for all future wars.
Teach them that precision which spares no evil,
We'll break them down before their sins spread far.
Take them one by one, Hell Fire—set! destroy
Lay flame to distant silhouettes, our kills so clean.

But for all those men we aim to exorcise
My soul does not escape this knowledge:
I am withdrawn, my son, the spoilure done,
Behind the safety of my screen
For I have seen the stats complete and true,
And I know, dear God, we have struck a school.

By Kevin Basl

Sonnet On Seeing a Piece of Our Artillery Brought Into Action

Be slowly lifted up, thou long black arm,
Great gun towering towards Heaven, about to curse;
Sway steep against them, and for years rehearse
Huge imprecations like a blasting charm!
Reach at that Arrogance which needs thy harm,
And beat it down before its sins grow worse;
Spend our resentment, cannon,—yea, disburse
Our gold in shapes of flame, our breaths in storm.

Yet, for men's sakes whom thy vast malison
Must wither innocent of enmity,
Be not withdrawn, dark arm, thy spoilure done,
Safe to the bosom of our prosperity.
But when thy spell be cast complete and whole,
May God curse thee, and cut thee from our soul!

By Wilfred Owen
Futility

Move him into the sun—
Bloated, rotting, yellow-purple hues
Face down, brown liquid dripping,
The body I never saw.
But his eyes—
I swear I was there
With you under that sun.

Gently its touch awoke him once,
From death
The body excretes.
Together we tasted the flies and maggots,
Mixed with dust stuck to our teeth.

At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
Covered in snow,
Grey winds numbing battered cheeks,
Chilling your fingers and toes.
Her thoughts no longer sweet,
Just cold.
—O what is that dying tone?

Always it woke him, ...
The touch of Grandmother’s cold hand,
In silk pine steel box.
You remember,
It was too cold to sleep.
You remember,
The blood rolling over dirt earth highway.
You remember, you could not take it with you,
Hands clasped with rigamortis
Brilliant sun dries red-black puddles

Until this morning and this snow.
Like the dust
Of everything,
Your purple toes crack,
Black fingers break,
As the ice melts and the
Cities and shores burn.

If anything might rouse him now
This Holy Ground for miles and miles.
His holy ground,
Your family ground,
Horizon broken with craters,
And unsown seeds.

The kind old sun will know.
You may want to let go
Now that we are holes
Burnt through you too
You and I go together

Think how it wakes the seeds—
But how you do not wake,
I do not wake
—O silent tone

Woke once the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth’s sleep at all?

By Aaron Hughes
The Parable of the Old Man and the Young

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
and builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

By Wilfred Owen

III. Offertorium

Cello Solo

Mote

Squeeze my heart, break His gaze, caress Her arms
not with hypoxic hands, you are a mote of dust.
Forty kills, one hundred oscillations of the spirit,
the crown a passport, each stamp a cinder block.

A hypoxic mote of dust you call my hand.
War talks of fortitude, says squeeze
each cinder block to crack Her crown.
_Transmute the factory in service of killing_

In the parable, the one we all know,
Abraham squeezes fortitude
into talk. _Isaac, you are a mote of dust_
in a barrel of rye, _He says._
_Father says kill! He says._
_Says destroy the mountain!_
_O Saada!_
_O Mosul!_
This day, like our wars, is long.
Behold everywhere the dead and living vacillate.
Squeeze my heart, break my gaze, break His Gaze,
caress Her arms.

By Carlos Sirah
IV. Sanctus

Cello Solo

After the blast of lightning from the east,  
The flourish of loud clouds, the Chariot Throne;  
After the drums of time have rolled and ceased ...

Plastic Death

In my childhood  
in Baghdad  
we played dead:  
we killed each other  
with plastic weapons.  
We lay on the floor,  
still as corpses  
for a minute  
or two.  
Then one of us laughed,  
exposing our plastic death;  
we held each other  
as the dying might  
life itself, but rose  
to play another game.  
The years turn over  
and Baghdad recedes  
with our childhoods  
into exile.  
From afar, we see children  
who look like we did.  
They kill each other,  
lie motionless  
on the floor.  
But none of them laugh  
or hold life  
and rise.

By Dunya Mikhail

“Plastic Death” by Dunya Mikhail, from IN HER FEMININE SIGN, copyright 2019 by Dunya Mikhail. Use by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

The War Works Hard

How magnificent the war is!  
How eager  
and efficient!  
Early in the morning  
it wakes up the sirens  
and dispatches ambulances  
to various places  
swings corpses through the air  
rolls stretchers to the wounded  
summons rain  
from the eyes of mothers  
digs into the earth  
dislodging many things  
from under the ruins...  
Some are lifeless and glistening  
others are pale and still throbbing...  
It produces the most questions  
in the minds of children  
entertains the gods  
by shooting fireworks and missiles  
into the sky  
sows mines in the fields  
and reaps punctures and blisters  
urges families to emigrate  
stands beside the clergymen  
as they curse the devil  
(poor devil, he remains  
with one hand in the searing fire)...  
The war continues working, day and night.  
It inspires tyrants  
to deliver long speeches  
awards medals to generals  
and themes to poets  
it contributes to the industry  
of artificial limbs  
provides food for flies  
adds pages to the history books  
achieves equality  
between killer and killed  
teaches lovers to write letters  
accustoms young women to waiting  
fills the newspapers  
with articles and pictures  
builds new houses  
for the orphans  
invigorates the coffin makers  
gives grave diggers  
a pat on the back  
and paints a smile on the leader’s face.  
It works with unparalleled diligence!  
Yet no one gives it  
a word of praise.

By Dunya Mikhail

“The War Works Hard” by Dunya Mikhail, translated from Arabic by Elizabeth Winslow, from THE WAR WORKS HARD, copyright 2005 by Dunya Mikhail. Use by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

The End

After the blast of lightning from the east,  
The flourish of loud clouds, the Chariot Throne;  
After the drums of time have rolled and ceased,  
And by the bronze west long retreat is blown,  
Shall Life renew these bodies? Of a truth  
All death will he annul, all tears assuage?—  
Or fill these void veins full again with youth,  
And wash, with an immortal water, Age?  
When I do ask white Age he saith not so:  
‘My head hangs weighed with snow.’  
And when I hearken to the Earth, she saith:  
‘My fiery heart shrinks, aching. It is death.  
Mine ancient scars shall not be glorified,  
Nor my titanic tears, the seas, be dried.’

By Wilfred Owen
At a Calvary Near the Ancre

One ever hangs where shelled roads part.
In this war He too lost a limb,
But His disciples hide apart;
And now the Soldiers bear with Him.

Near Golgotha strolls many a priest,
And in their faces there is pride
That they were flesh-marked by the Beast
By whom the gentle Christ's denied.

The scribes on all the people shove
And bawl allegiance to the state,
But they who love the greater love
Lay down their life; they do not hate.

By Wilfred Owen

V. Agnus Dei

Cello Solo

... there is no cereal
left in the city. That the days
of storage are over.

Men trap inside the silo
our food.
Men trap inside the mind
our days.
Men trap inside the cement
our bone.
So, we march from the city
into Night.

If there is cereal in the city,
the days of storage are near
to end. Tell Laila, go with God.

When it rains in the city, and
it will rain, the days of storage
may return. And in the next season,
we will dream of home.

And if there is no cereal in the city,
and the days of storage are only
memory, and fantasy, ask Laila to tell you
everything. And she will.

By Carlos Sirah
VI. Libera me

Cello Solo

Meeting Muhammad

I slip into the mineshaft of my memory
when I seek a poem to shape my voice,
search for faces, objects afloat in the dust,
struggle to name them.

In there, down a passage neglected, I am struck to find
the Iraqi boy
filling sandbags in flip flops, still
wading through smog and curses
shoveling away for dirt pay
all to protect our United States encampment.

His spirit is what I recall:
laughter-in-defiance, heavy metal t-shirt.

Yes, I am happy to find him,
however saddened to feel
the grit of my uniform
the heft of my rifle
observing him like a guard again,
sounding out the name of this person I meet again:

Ahmed or, Abadi?
Or Muhammad?
a name that breathes alliteration,
three syllables so fraught yet polished
Muhammad, refugee among a million?
Muhammad lost?
He sinks his spade into sands long-subsumed,
no answer to offer no words to speak.

Yet a poem is forming,
an exit from the opacity (a past-me).
We shall walk the cold star, the logic of dreams,
suns-like-dust in the dome of the universe
ask Muhammad (as you prod a soldier for a story long buried):
What might you teach? What might we share?

His sidelong stare—no comfort for certain
and I suspect what the boy may think: just stop
for ruins sprout up from the prophetic lands,
thousand-year-old structures balanced on a whim
Mosque of Mosul, towers shattered—
archeology of mourning in a world of needs
and there beyond the wreckage
an icy-black sea spans the horizon.

We proceed to find the rowboat in waiting, exactly as envisioned,
Muhammad’s kind gesture to step aboard
but my feet are anchors
and I cannot (will not yet) go.

Here, what is one to say?
Greet you in Lesvos? Send money for the cause?

No solace. He dips a hand into my pocket,
provides what I have sought.
His oars stir the glassy waters
as I stand ashore and read his poem,
repeat the sorrow of our exchange

By Kevin Basl

Strange Meeting

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

With a thousand fears that vision’s face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
“Strange friend,” I said, “here is no cause to mourn.”
“None,” said that other, “save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richtler than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery;
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.

“I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now. . . .”

By Wilfred Owen
Cello Solo

“I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now ....”

Let us sleep now ....
Let us sleep now ....
Let us sleep now ....

Cello Postlude

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SIDE D

Bonus Tracks

1. Eternal War Requiem Improvisation by Karim Wasfi
2. Baghdad Morning and Daily Melancholy ... by Karim Wasfi

My subject is War, and the pity of War.
The Poetry is in the pity.
All a poet can do today is warn.
—Wilfred Owen, 1918

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Aaron Hughes

*Poetry Despite/Music Despite (Eternal War Requiem)* was conceived of and organized by Aaron Hughes for the 2019 BALTIC Artists’ Award, a worldwide biennial art award judged solely by artists. Hughes was selected for the award by artist Michael Rakowitz.

Hughes is an artist, anti-war activist, teacher and Iraq War veteran, working collaboratively in diverse spaces and media. His work seeks out and shares the poetic connections that bind us together, reveal our shared humanity and make meaning out of personal and collective trauma.

Hughes works with a variety of art and activist projects including About Face: Veterans Against the War, Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative, emerging Veteran Art Movement, and Prison & Neighborhood Arts Project. He has shown his work internationally at institutions including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, Maruki Gallery in Tokyo, Ashkal Alwan in Beirut, Sullivan Gallery in Chicago, and the School of Visual Arts Museum in New York.

In addition to the BALTIC Artists’ Award, Hughes has been awarded grants, residencies, and fellowships from a variety of art institutions, including Ashkal Alwan, Blue Mountain Center, Lawrence Arts Center, Links Hall, The Kitchen, and Penland School of Craft. In 2014, Hughes was awarded the Edes Prize for Emerging Artists for his ongoing Tea Project.

Contributors

Carlos Sirah is a writer, performer, and cultural worker from the Mississippi Delta. His work encounters exile, rupture, and displacement in relation to institutions, local and beyond. His most recent works include *The Utterances*, *The Light Body*, and *Black ‘n da Blues: Stories and Songs from the Arkansas Delta, 1919-2019*.

Dunya Mikhail is an Iraqi-American poet. She is the author of *In Her Feminine Sign*, *The Beekeeper*, *The Iraqi Nights*, *Diary of A Wave Outside the Sea*, and *The War Works Hard*. Her honors include a Guggenheim fellowship (2018), Kresge fellowship (2013), Arab American Book Award (2010), and United Nations Prize in the Field of Human Rights (2001). She currently teaches Arabic at Oakland University in Michigan.

Kevin Basil is a writer, musician and activist living near Ithaca, New York. He holds an MFA in fiction from Temple University in Philadelphia, where he has taught writing. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *War, Literature and the Arts*, *O’Dark Thirty*, *Miramar Magazine*, *Truthout.org* and elsewhere. As a US Army mobile radar operator, he deployed to Iraq twice. He is currently a member of About Face: Veterans Against the War and Veterans for Peace.

Nate Sandberg is a composer, artist, and performer based in Chicago. He creates music and sound design for film, art installations, video games, and more. He composed scores for the Netflix Original series *Flint Town* as well as the award-winning film *T-Rex*.

The Syrian Kings is a hip-hop group featuring Ahmed and Hussein. The group formed out of GemArts, a leading arts organisation based in Gateshead, UK currently working with Syrian refugee young people on a songwriting and hip-hop project as part of their East by North East youth music programme. The core group of young people in this programme—Ahmed, Hussein, Jowan, Ali and Mohammad—have been working with music leaders Izzy Finch and Pawel Jedrzejewski to develop their musical skills and aspirations. These young people participate in sessions that are very much participant led resulting in lyrics that are often in Arabic and sometimes in English, with themes around the war in Syria, politics, nostalgia, love, lost love and friendship.

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