

Berklee College of Music

SHAKATA: Assembling, Leading and Producing An Ethnic-Fusion-Party Band

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Abstract

The main goal of this project is to develop and forge my artistic identity as a violinist, musician and a stage artist, and do so by extending and experimenting with my creative skills, and my administration, leadership and producing abilities. The key part of the project, and the main tool through which I'm implying these skills, is band-leading Shakata, an ethnic-fusion band I assembled with five other Berklee students. Through the course of the project, I created a five song EP (four originals and one arrangement), along with more visual and audio content for promotion and dissemination purposes. The intended outcome is to create both a strong platform for future activity of Shakata, and to enrich my own artistic portfolio for my future professional steps. Through monitoring and explaining my own creative process, as well as demonstrating how I'm incorporating influences from different genres (Balkan, Arabic, Flamenco, etc.) and musical styles into my original compositions, I hope to offer some helpful tools and insights that could also serve other musicians in their early creative steps.

Keywords: violin, creative project, compositional processes, world music

1. Introduction

My name is Mai Choma and I'm from Israel. Music and performance have been a part of my life since childhood. I've received a classical musical education since I was 5 years old and started to play the violin when I was 7, and continued playing classical violin during most of my life – through education in a high-school of arts in a classic-music department, to B.A. and M.A. degrees in several music academies in Israel and Europe (the Jerusalem Academy for Music and Dance, Franz Liszt Hochschule für Musik in Weimar, and the Escuela superior de Música Reina Sofía, Madrid).

During my 20's I've done many other things alongside the classical violin, both inside and outside the musical world. I played in different ensembles in various genres – the Irish-World-Music band “Black Velvet”, the Balkan-Klezmer band “Kbetch”, the Oriental-World-Music ensemble “Ensemble Habibti”, Shlomo Artzi band (a well-known Israeli Pop-Rock singer), Jerusalem Orchestra East-West etc. Besides that, I also volunteered as a teacher for immigrants while living in a commune, graduated with a degree in Earth Sciences in the Hebrew University Jerusalem, traveled around South America, Asia and Europe, and had (and still have) a great passion for dancing contemporary dance and hip-hop, scuba-diving and more.

Growing up in Israel had a big impact in shaping my musical taste and interests. Israel is quite an unusual place in many ways, especially when it comes to art and music. As it consists of immigrants from all over the world, it works as a big melting-pot of different cultures and this reflects everywhere and in everything – food, language, culture, art and music.

There is an enormous musical variety, especially in the field of world music and ethnic fusion, which derives from the diverse ethnic background of the population. That, among the vast influence of both American and European music and mainstream culture, creates a very colorful musical scene. Being exposed to this variety had opened my ears and my curiosity to many styles and genres, with emphasis on Balkan music and Arabic music. Fusions of each one of these two genres are very abundant in Israel, with Israeli bands such as Balkan Beat Box, Boom Pam, Yemen Blues and A-WA being massively acknowledge in the Israeli mainstream. Also, as I always loved dancing and going to parties, and since a lot of the music within these genres is very much tailored to dance, I often went to performances of bands in these styles, or to world-music parties where the DJs played this music, and one of my favorite experiences with the violin is to be on stage and play music to a dancing crowd.

Although I have had all these different musical interests, and the love of making people dance (which isn't typically met in a classical concert settings), I've always perceived it as something that should come along and in addition to the classical violin, and that required less resources from me to do, as I felt I can usually rely on my intuition and musicianship, along with my classical technic and the adrenalin of the performance, to guide me through these less familiar territories (such as improvising, and moreover in unfamiliar styles). And so, while I have dedicated time and efforts to attempt and study the different ethnic styles I was playing, and to practice improvisation in general, I haven't invested the same amount of work and dedication that I put into the classical violin into these other activities, especially as the classical violin takes tremendous amount of daily work and energy.

My general goal for my musical career was to combine my musical interests and to work as both classical and contemporary musician, playing for instance both in classical ensembles

and contemporary bands. Inside the contemporary musical field, I have always perceived myself only as a performing musician, who doesn't have the internal need to compose and create, nor the knowledge and the tools to do it. I also felt that I don't have the kind of personality that is required to initiate a band and to push it forward, and so I was looking to make myself available and familiar to other musicians, in order to join into existing projects and bands that can suit me, and so I could find my place inside them.

A main personal reason for this change of my focus to contemporary music and for the decision to attend Berklee is an orthopedic problem I have had in the past few years. When I was 28 an unfortunate chain of circumstances left me with a back problem, and all my attempts to solve so far have not prevailed, and so I'm physically incapable of playing seated for more than a short amount of time, or from playing many hours regularly in general. And so, in the recent years I've been unable to do what is demanded from a professional classical performer, such as playing seated in orchestras, ensembles, etc. Another thing that became more obvious for me in time is that playing in orchestras isn't something that I feel I can really enjoy doing, or could do for a long period of time, regardless of my back situation. As that is usually the main available livelihood source for classical professional musicians (apart of teaching), I realized more and more that, although the classical violin always felt for me like the ultimate challenge and my long-time dream goal, I might not be able to combine it in my life in a way that is truly suitable for me and for the career I'd like to have.

Therefore, the decision to take some distance from classical music for a while and to follow a more contemporary and creative path (which is less physically demanding), is a decision that I made also because other paths I had followed before got unexpectedly and unfortunately shut. However, I'm trying to accept my disabilities and adopt myself in ways that

allow me to pursue an exciting and fulfilling musical career, and that also may be more suitable to my personality and interests, and for the kind of life and work I'd like to have.

Here at Berklee, it is the first time I moved my principal focus out of the classical music, and gave my full attention to my other passions and curiosities, including discovering new ones that I didn't even know I had, especially in regards to creative aspects. It's the first time I'm experimenting and developing my creative skills such as composing, writing and arranging and for now I enjoy it a lot overall, all taking into account my past experience and incorporating it into my present projects. So far it has been a surprising and liberating journey outside my comfort zone and into areas I always explored a bit around, but never fully jumped head into.

2. Proposed Culminating Experience

My CE is based on exploring and forging my artistic identity as a musician, violinist and performer, and preparing a professional portfolio as a platform for my future musical career. The main goal is to showcase myself as a violinist and a stage artist, and to support and enrich that by experimenting and developing new creative and administrative skills, such as being a band leader and the composer-arranger of the music I perform and record.

A key part of the project is leading SHAKATA, a band I assembled with Michael Shanks (electric guitar and voice), Gillian Harwin (electric bass and voice), Luca Bordonaro (clarinet), Pedrinho Augusto (drums and percussion) and Katiana Vila (percussion and voice), and to prepare materials to release a five song EP in the first half of 2021. The original goal was to use our time at Berklee to forge an active band with a repertoire for a full concert, and create enough videos and media content in order to apply for music festivals, concerts and to arrange tours. Since the band consisted of musicians from all over the world, the idea was to create a strong

platform now, in order to be able to tour also if we aren't constantly active (for instance if we live in different countries, and get together once or twice a year for concentrated short period of rehearsals and performances).

As Covid-19 changed our lives completely, the main focus in the last several months has been to produce a five song EP, along with videos and online content. The goal is to have materials that could be used in the future for the same original purpose, if and when touring and music festivals occur, and also for each one of us to add it to his or her artistic portfolio for self-promotion in the meantime.

Another important part of the project is to experiment with various musical styles, which derives from my background and my life experience, both before arriving to Berklee and during my studies, and to develop a stylistic fusion both in my compositions and in my manner of playing and improvising. The music I've created for the band is inspired by different genres, from ethnic music such as Balkan and Arabic, with some influences of Blues, Jazz and Flamenco music I've taken in during my time in Berklee. The arrangement of the music within the band brings into it many more colors and influences, which derive from each band member's different origins and musical background (for example: rhythmic influences from Brazilian music and Flamenco, due to the musical and cultural background of Pedrinho and Katiana, to harmonies and licks derived from Blues and Psychedelic Rock due to the background of Michael and so on). Along that I had also composed two more compositions for different ensembles, also while incorporating influences from different genres of world music (mainly from Arabic and Jewish-Andalusian music in one, and from Flamenco in the other).

3. Objective & Sub-Objectives

The project aims to forge my identity as a musician, through developing and extending my abilities as a violinist and a performer, alongside exploring and experimenting new creative, administrative and producing skills. An important part would also be to attempt to develop a unique and original artistic voice for myself, by relating to different styles and exploring fusions between them, both in my compositions and arrangements, and my playing and improvising, taking both old and new influences into account. Another objective is to assemble a body of work that I could present and share with other musicians, festivals, venues etc., in order to promote myself for future professional opportunities and to take a part or to lead other ensembles and projects.

In order to fulfill this objective, the different areas of work are:

- A. Develop and experiment with my creative skills: composing, lyrics-writing, arranging, and improvising.
- B. Develop my leadership and management skills: leading a band for the first time.
- C. Research and analysis, in order to extend and deepen my understanding of specific musical styles: both of genres and concepts that I find generally inspiring or would like to incorporate into my music (for example: contemporary Flamenco music, violin in Gypsy-Jazz, the Arabic Maqamat (scaling system), etc.), and of specific artists or music tracks that I find influential or relevant to the music I'm composing, or that I'd like to borrow some concepts from them to create something similar to (such as Balkan Beat Box, Shantel, Ibrahim Maalouf, Avishai Cohen, Yemen Blues, Ana RF, Omer Avital, A-WA, etc.)

- D. Record a five song EP for Shakata, and more original material outside the working-frame of Shakata (the compositions “Egyptian Blue” and “Por la Tarde”).
- E. Create a dissemination strategy: create visual and audio content to use for dissemination purposes and promote it online via the media platforms I have created both for Shakata and for myself personally: Band-website, Instagram, YouTube channel, Facebook page, LinkedIn etc.

4. Methodology

My methodology is mainly self-ethnography, as I’m executing most of my processes on my own, although they might be within a collaborative context, or inspired by external stimulation.

Another method I use is research and analysis, either of specific artists and musical pieces or of genres and musical concepts. This method I might use before starting a creative process, in order to consciously take inspiration from a musical style or artist and incorporate it into my music, or more often as a tool in the further stages of my creative process. In this case, I start the creative process without forcing any presets of a concept or a style and, according to what I started to create, I turn to research and analyze music or artist that my creation reminds of or resonate with. In this manner I feel I can find my own artistic voice more purely and naturally, as I’m letting myself start the creative process first in a way that comes organically from within, without trying to force any specific style or sound intentionally. That allows me to use my insights from the research in a way that supports my creativity, but doesn’t dictate or limit it.

Another type of research is in wider perspective, that isn't strictly related to a specific genre or conscious process. Meaning, listening to different kinds of music, including ones I don't typically listen, and also analyzing parts of them that I find particularly interesting, in order to enrich my knowledge and my general pool of inspiration. Beside these methods, an action research inspires my process in general, as constant evaluation of the processes helps me to implement improvement from one step to the other.

4.1. Creative process and composition

First, I would explain the abstract of my creative process in general, as I've experienced it so far.

It is all relatively new to me, as before coming to Berklee I never tried composing or writing lyrics, so I'm still learning how this process works for me. In general, a musical idea can come to me either while improvising (usually on the violin, sometimes on the piano or singing) or as a musical idea I hear in my head. In the moment I feel that this musical idea gets clearer (for me it would usually be mainly a melodic idea, but it can also be harmonic or rhythmic), I would immediately record it as a voice memo with the tools I have at the moment (singing/violin/piano). I've learned that the best ideas, or at least the best ideas to start developing the composition further, tend to come right in the first moments of this process and so it's crucial to record it right away, before I forget or alternate something by mistake. This way, I can listen to it later on and keep working on it from this essence of idea. And so, I make sure to record everything I hear about this idea in these first moments, along with any further notes I have (the inspiration for it or what it reminds me of, the type of emotion or energy it conveys, in what orchestration I envision it to be, any harmonic/rhythmic/bass-line idea that goes

along with the melodic idea), regardless to the situation I'm at, as it can occur also in the most unexpected times and in any hour of the day or night.

I've noticed that motion, like walking by myself, or taking a public transportation from any sort, might stimulate or assist my creativity many times. I assume that a possible reason for that is that while you're moving alone, as you don't have any other occupation at the moment other than getting somewhere, and if you don't turn to other distractions (such as checking your cellphone, talking with someone or listening to music) - it frees your mind to wander without any specific purpose. That way your mind can have a break from the daily routine and concerns, and have the void that is necessary for an idea to jump into. Besides that, I've noticed there aren't too many rules, and a creative idea from any nature can come quite spontaneously anytime and anywhere.

A musical idea can come to me through any of these three main manners - unintentionally, intentionally, or creatively-oriented: Unintentionally, means spontaneously, without thinking about music at all beforehand (just have a musical idea popping into my head), or without me intentionally intending to compose (while improvising for the sake of improvising for instance). A product of unexpected inspiration. Intentionally, means that I'm consciously intending to compose something, using the violin or piano. Creatively-oriented process means it's a combination between those two states, when the creation is not completely unplanned inspiration but neither consciously intended. That happens when I have in mind to try to compose something new or to develop an existing composition for a while (can be any period of time, from hours to a few days) and so I'm generally oriented to creativity. Then I might come up with an idea that seems to pop into my head spontaneously, or that is developed by

improvisation that wasn't aimed to compose, but it feels strongly related to my general intention to direct my resources in a creative direction, also in sub-conscious manner.

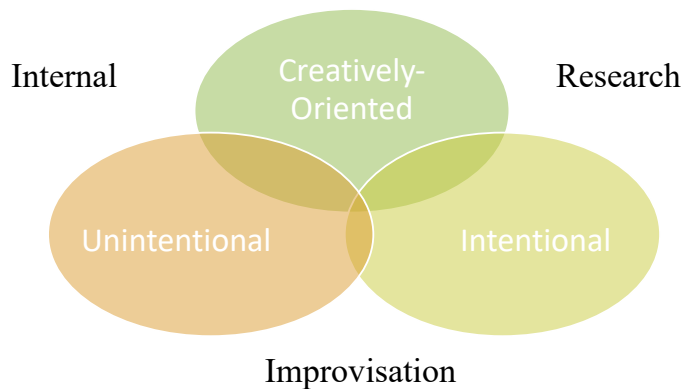


Figure 1. Creative Process Conditions

I have noticed that my best ideas tend to form as a result of unintentional or creatively oriented processes. However, the intentional process may many times provoke the creatively-oriented state of mind. Furthermore, it can come to more use in the later compositional stages, when I already have the main compositional materials and I need to develop them or create a few more (for instance, after I've had already composed a chorus and a riff of a song in an unintentional process, I might use intentional composing for the verse and an harmonic development of the same riff). Another point I've noticed is that good creative ideas tend to come right away and in big "chunks" (for instance several music parts in their almost final form together, or one part but with a whole arrangement concept of rhythm, harmony and melody for it). After that, I "clean-

up” and perfect the preliminary idea (alternating slightly the melody, checking the basic harmonic progression, the main idea for the rhythm idea) while recording my entire working process, and using these recordings while composing in order to find the best variation of each idea. These processes happen over a very short period of time (from an hour to a day or two).

These first stages are, as explained, usually more intuitive and less conscious, and I think that’s what makes them best, as this process happens organically and from a fun and playful place, and while intending to trust my first instincts and roll with them without much criticism and filtering. The later stages of completing the composition would normally be more conscious, either in a creatively oriented state of mind or in fully intentional one, while I’m developing the compositional ideas or composing new ones, and later on to the form of the musical piece and its arrangement. This stage would take much longer time (between a week to over a month) and often combines some research and analysis to assist the composition, like listening to music that I feel that subconsciously influenced my composition or that it is similar to. In this stage I’ll also try to understand the form of the piece, its tonal progression, what more (or less) it needs in order to be completed, and its orchestration and arrangement. Along the way I would usually try several options version in a trial-and-error process before deciding on the final, like adding or omitting musical parts, using different harmonies for the same melody, changing the order of the musical parts, etc. This part of the process often includes some frustration and struggle, and having some deadline usually helps in order to see it through.

During the different composition stages, I might consult with other people, both musicians and non-musicians, with whom I feel comfortable enough to share my work in process and whose opinion I value, to get their input and feedback. Although the compositional process itself is done solely by myself, the arrangement process can often be completed with a few

colloques, or in the context of the entire band, especially as I don't have background in arranging and I believe that, especially when it comes for the rhythm section, the players can come up with more interesting and versatile ideas than I can come up on my own, based on the basic concept I give them. Also, as for the final form of the composition, I normally bring the band some clear ideas but they can change and modify with the band. Trying out different things and listening to the compositions live is sometimes the best way to understand what works best for them, and it also can benefit from the creativity of the band members.

5. Execution

As I see myself as a performing artist above all, and that is my primary motivation and goal for my future career, all my project is performance-centered in its essence, although the process includes a heavy focus on creativity and management. I have decided to take band-leading SHAKATA as the key component of my CE, as it answers best my need to be a part of an ensemble to feel at my optimal in order to showcase my performance skills, and also to have a motivating frame of work for my attempts to create, arrange and produce my own music. It also answers another sub-objective, to explore how I feel and function in the position of a band leader, as something that can open for me more options and opportunities in my professional career, and also is a part of a personal growth process.

I feel that examining these abilities which are quite outside of my comfort zone are important, not only to my career as an independent musician, but also as a person/part of my personal growth. As I used to be only an "non-creative" performing artist, I normally worked with a "yes-man" attitude of joining in to existing projects and bands, I find it overall a liberating and empowering experience to have this control over the entire musical process, from a seed of

an idea to a final tangible product, instead of trying to be selected into an existing project and to find my niche inside it. It's not to say I won't join into projects of other musicians in the future, I still think it will be a main part of my future career. However, I hope that this experience opens the door for new possibilities and opportunities for me, that I didn't think existed before.

5.1. SHAKATA – Forming the band and first steps

This part intends to give the context for my project, including how it changed and evolved from my initial idea, though my objective and sub-objectives remained similar. My initial plan was to compose and/or arrange three to five musical pieces while collaborating with different musicians (according to the needs of each composition), and subsequently to record them, and have some of them videoed or performed. I recorded my first song “Egyptian Blue” at the beginning of the year with this vision, collaborating both with Berklee students from other departments and with guest musicians.

However, a series of events in December-January led to a deviation from this plan and into initiation of a different and unexpected project. As part of a small concert inside Berklee in December, which I was assigned to lead, I assembled a band of five people. We played an arrangement of a Balkan folk tune *Nejatov Cocek*¹, that I created in collaboration with the new ensemble members, and inspired from the arrangement by “Kbetch” – a Balkan-Klezmer band I played with some years ago.

The band worked very well together and seemed to have a special combination of good personal relationship, great stage presence and energy, and a unique multi-cultural sound,

¹ Kočani Orkestar, “Nejatov Cocek”, posted by Kočani Orkestar – Topic, July 4th, 2015, YouTube video, 5:54, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJWiqZrhuJw>

derived from both the different musical background of each band member who came from four different continents, and from the unusual instrumentation. The ensemble for this first concert consisted from: Michael Shanks (electric guitar and voice), Luca Bordonaro (clarinet) Gillian Harwin (electric bass and voice), Pedrinho Augusto (drums and percussion) and myself (violin). That was the first time I had ever put on the band-leader's hat, and that was an experience that have changed in some ways the way I perceive myself, and my decision for my CE project.

During the concert, all the band members felt great on stage together, and we received very positive feedback from our colleagues and faculty, both on the energetic performance and the communication between us, and on the natural way I've carried out the band-leader role. That led me to try to take this ensemble further, and so I applied to Berklee's Showcase on January, an event held in Sala Jerusalem, a well-known venue in Valencia which invites Berklee students and the wide public, along with venue owners, managers etc., using a video from the concert. That's when I also offered Katiana Vila (percussion and voice) to join to the band, and how the band in its final form was assembled. I thought about the name "SHAKATA!" as a name that sounds percussive and fun and reflects well the vibe that I'd like the band to convey, and which would be visually appealing as a logo. Worth mentioning that almost this exact band, only without Luca Bordonaro, was the band "Las Curitas" which we formed spontaneously on the very first week of the year for a Berklee concert we had. Although we all clicked well both rehearsing and performing, no one carried the band forward, although we talked about it.

The Berklee Showcase concert was a very special experience. It was the first time I performed my original composition, *Hafla Gitana* to a dancing crowd, and also my first experience band-leading in an open concert. The energy we had during the concert was electric and we got great response and support from the extended Berklee's family and the audience.

This experience united us more as a band, as we began to feel that the group shares something unique and powerful that functions very well, and it made the members more excited about and invested in the band. That also led me to decide to keep pursuing Shakata, and to make it the center of my CE. That both assisted to keep me committed to the band, and to support and even facilitate and enhance my original objective and sub-objective. It made me more motivated to compose for the band, as it is an existing and functioning ensemble in which I can record and perform my compositions, and practice my creative and administrative skills.

While I already knew that I can take an active and equal part in a band among the other band-members, I've never thought of myself as a leader of a band or a musical project. Both musically, since I always perceived myself only as a performer who doesn't have a creative need or ability; and personally, since I felt it's hard for me to initiate a big project, and that I miss the passion and the "dreamer" or "visioner" qualities to make it work, and moreover to inspire other people to follow. However, that process started happening step by step during and after these concerts in a gradual snow-ball effect.

5.2. Compositions for Shakata

5.2.1.a. *Hafla Gitana* - Context and outline of the compositional process

The context within which I had the first seed of idea to *Hafla Gitana* was when I was rehearsing for the Berklee concert on December with the band that I assembled that later became Shakata. I was also in a creatively oriented state of mind, as I previously tried to create a new composition to perform in the concert with an original composition instead of an arrangement. While I was practicing just before the concert on my violin-improvisation solo in my

arrangement to the tune *Nejatov Cocek*² that we were about to perform, I came up with a short melodic motif, as shown in figure 2.



Figure 2. Hafli Gitana, first Motif

This motif had developed rapidly into three full musical parts within the same day, as I later recognized to be typical in my preliminary compositional stage of an unintentional or creatively-oriented process. Some of the process happened while using improvisation on the violin, and some was internal, meaning just forming in my head, and according to my methodology I recorded a voice memo singing those parts (as it happened late at night, and I didn't have the violin with me), along with explanation of the ideas for the rhythm section, the orchestration I envision, the intended style, energy and emotion, and tracks I feel are influential for the composition.

The next step, taking place on the next day, was clarifying the exact version of the melodies of all three parts, and adding a fourth part. In order to do this, I used my recordings of all my experiments during my working stages, using improvisation on the violin as my main tool, and constantly listening back and revising my different musical ideas and choosing my best variations from them.

Out of these four parts, the first and second remained completely identical from this last voice memo on December 10th and until the final composition that was performed in the Berklee Showcase concert a month later. The rest of the composition though kept on changing and evolving through the later stages of my creative process, which was slower and often included

² Kočani Orkestar, "Nejatov Cocek"

more struggle. That included trials of intentional composing, which mostly didn't yield a result, but had invoked more creatively-oriented state of mind which led to creation of new musical parts, and generally a lot of trial-and-error as I was testing different ways to develop the core idea of the composition and as it took clearer direction and form.

The main experiments that didn't make it into the final composition were: working with a song-writer to add lyrics and convert this instrumental composition into a song; adding another musical part in the modulation to E, that included a transition of the meter from 4/4 to 11/8; and the elimination of the fourth part that I composed in the early stages. The main changes that remained were: alternating the third part in order to better fit the composition in rhythm and style; and adding a new part as a modulatory bridge into a solos section. These final two compositional processes occurred in creatively-oriented condition. The final structure and was decided only in a later stage while working with the band and finalizing the arrangement of the piece, which is a part I usually prefer to do in a collaborative work with the band.

During the entire process, the first two parts remained surprisingly untouched, which is what I think made the entire composition effective, with these two parts being the anchor for the composition and stirring its development. Also, the artists and reference tracks influencing the style and mood of the composition remained the same as in my initial vision. Another thing that helped to get through the more sisyphic stages and to complete the composition within a few weeks, was the deadline of the Berklee Showcase concert, in which I intended to perform this composition, that added the right amount of pressure to push this process forward.

5.2.1.b *Hafla Gitana* - Composition process and elements

I would divide the composition into its main elements to explain the creative process in detail more clearly, and address each category separately. One important note is that there are connections between these elements, as my creative process isn't linear, and so there is a great deal back and forth between those different ingredients. The three main categories are:

- A. Vision – Influences, references and analysis
- B. Musical components – Melody, harmony, rhythm
- C. Final form, arrangement and orchestration

A. Vision – Influences, references and analysis

As was clear for me from the first inspirational moments, the composition had a balanced and organic combination of influences both from Arabic and Balkan music equally. That's also the reason I chose the name "*Hafla Gitana*", as *hafla* in Arabic means "party", and *gitana* in Spanish means "gypsy", which was exactly what I was aiming for, setting the mood and style of the composition. Important to clarify that I'm aware that "Balkan music" or "Arabic music" are very broad terms, that contains many different sub-genres and a big variety of traditional music. I had studied to some extent the traditional music from each genre (like Hungarian and Bulgarian music, or Andalusian music (referring to the music of the Jewish community in the North-African Arabic countries), Turkish, and the general guidelines to use the "Maqamat" scales). However, the main music styles I was exposed to or that I'm taking inspiration from, are already a fusion of this traditional music with contemporary concepts.

From the Balkan music aspect, there were two main inspirations. First, as previously mentioned, the context in which the composition was conceived was while improvising on the

Balkan folk tune *Nejatov Cocek*³, so there was a significant natural influence coming from that music. Also the simple harmonic progressions - playing over one chord over several bars, and moving from the tonic to the minor 7th or lowered 2nd, are very typical in the genre.

Another sub-consciousness influence was hearing by chance the song *Hermetico* of Balkan Beat Box⁴ the day before the beginning of this composition. I knew and loved this song since I was a teenager, but this occasional incident definitely planted it in my mind and played a role in setting the general mood of my composition, and also specifically for its C part, taking inspiration from the B part of the instrumental bridge of *Hermetico*. Balkan Beat Box are known for fusing influences from traditional Balkan tunes and Middle-Eastern music, with influences from Hip-Hop, Dub, Gypsy Punk, Electronica and Reggae, with tracks that are very danceable and designed to be included in DJ's sets. My envisioning of the song was very much influenced from their sound, as I'll extend in the orchestration section, aiming for the composition to be very danceable, and utilize emphasis on the low end in order to help to achieve that. Also, as common in electronic music, Balkan Beat Box uses pedal points extensively in *Hermetico*, over one note or of an open fifth (omit3 chord). That also a musical element that is present in my composition, as all the intro and the A part are using mostly or only A(omit3) chord.

From the Arabic music aspect, I had influences both from the traditional music and the Maqamat, as I'll explain in detail in the melodic section, and also from a specific track, of Omar Souleyman of the song *Crystalline* by Björk.⁵ This track played a big part alongside *Hermetico*

³ Kočani Orkestar, "Nejatov Cocek"

⁴ Balkan Beat Box, "Balkan Beat Box - Hermetico (HD)", posted by AlexxMusicDe, July 4th, 2010, YouTube video, 5:10. The B part of the instrumental bridge 1:18-1:56.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Psuqys26J4&ab_channel=AlexxMusicDe

⁵ Björk and Omar Souleyman, "Björk - Crystalline (Omar Souleyman Remix)," posted by BjorkDiscography, August 13, 2012, YouTube video, 6:41,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vEjKrP6tOs>

in setting the mood for the composition. It uses extensively pedal points, which is habitual in Arabic music (since it traditionally doesn't contain harmony and chords, and includes a lot of improvisation over a pedal point), which I also used as mentioned above. Also, the intro of this track served specifically as a source of inspiration for the intro of *Hafla Gitana*: both starts only with the Malfuf rhythm, then add a long pedal point, then enters a free improvisation of melodic instruments on top of it. More influences related are the rhythm (called "Malfuf" with the rhythmic division of the eight notes to 3+3+2), which I used throughout most of the composition, and the usage of quarter tones within more of a mainstream context - as I used quarter tones in the C part, and intended for the composition enjoyable and easy to listen to also for audience who isn't familiar with this genre.

B. Musical components – Melody, harmony, rhythm

I'll explain how I have incorporated these different influences into the different musical components, starting with the melody and harmony. The principal mode of the composition as demonstrated in figure 3 is Phrygian, but there are also other modes hidden inside it.

♩ = 180 A Mai Choma
 A(omit3) A(omit3)

Figure 3 Hafila Gitana, A and B parts

Phrygian Mode

Hungarian Minor scale

Maqam Bayat on A

Figure 4 Hafila Gitana Modes

First is the Hungarian Scale, with the two augmented 2^{nds}. The chord A(omit3) repeats throughout those parts, and the trills are intentionally of a semi-tone and not a whole tone, and so both the notes C and C# are being played together simultaneously, suggesting both the Phrygian

Mode and the Hungarian Minor Scale, which gives the melody unusual color in my opinion. Besides that, also in the bridge section of the composition there's a modulation to E, which written mostly in the Hungarian Minor Scale over E.

Another color is coming from the Maqam Bayat over A. The Maqamat is the system of the melodic modes in the traditional Arabic music, that also dictates the general structure, possible developments and characteristic melodic progressions within the musical piece. As I was practicing improvising over Maqam Bayat around the time of writing this composition, it naturally provided some inspiration for it, as I used quarter tones, and specifically the B half-flat of Maqam Bayat over A. Also, the way I used it through the C part - using B half-flat when the melody goes up and B flat when the melody goes down - is a typical melodic behavior of the quarter tones in Arabic music (similar to the western Melodic Minor, where it uses a natural (♮) going up, and a flat going down. Also, semi-tones trills are more typical ornaments within this genre. Important to mention again that I use these influences and concepts from these different genres and modes freely, and don't intend to be "loyal" to a specific mode, but rather to use it as

a general inspiration, and to allow unusual mixes and fusions between those different concepts to occur.

During the composition process, the A and B parts remained the same, while the C part was modified significantly, as shown in figures 5 and 6.

The image shows the original C part of the piece 'Hafla Gitana'. It consists of four staves of music in a single system. The first staff is labeled 'Original C Part' and contains measures 1 through 5. The second staff starts at measure 6 and contains measures 6 through 9. The third staff starts at measure 10 and contains measures 10 through 13. The fourth staff starts at measure 14 and contains measures 14 through 17. The music is in a 3/4 time signature and features a mix of chords including Dm, C, G(omit3), and Am. The melody is characterized by long, flowing lines with many ties and some grace notes.

Figure 5 Hafla Gitana Original C part

The image shows the final C part of the piece 'Hafla Gitana'. It consists of four staves of music in a single system. The first staff is labeled 'C' and contains measures 21 through 24. The second staff contains measures 25 through 28. The third staff contains measures 29 through 32. The fourth staff contains measures 33 through 36. The music is in a 3/4 time signature and features a mix of chords including Dm, C, Gm, and A(omit3). The melody is characterized by a more rhythmic and complex structure than the original, with many sixteenth notes, eighth notes, and frequent trills.

Figure 6 Hafla Gitana Final C part

My original idea for this section was that the rhythmic A and B parts will open into the C part, which is more lyrical and slower, in a similar way that Balkan Beat Box instrumental

bridge in *Hermetico*⁶ opens into its the B section. Also, the inspiration for this part was more inclined to Arabic music, with usage of quarter tones. However, it seemed that the part I originally composed didn't fit well with the rest of the composition. When I played the developing composition for a few of my colleagues, they were excited about the A and B parts, but felt that the C part doesn't belong with the rest of the composition, as it struck them as a sharp and sudden change in the rhythm and style. While they suggested to eliminate this part and to not add any more parts for the composition, and to have a big solo section over the A and B parts instead, I still had a clear vision of this development in the composition, and so I tried to alternate the C part to fit better until I manage to write the final C part in a creatively-oriented condition. As shown in the sheet music - the harmony, the main notes emphasized by the melody, and the quarter tones remained very similar. The main change is the harmonic and melodic rhythm which is about twice as fast, with mainly quarter notes and eighth notes instead of whole notes and half notes, and chord change in every bar instead of every two bars. That worked well and fitted in both the evolving composition and with my original concept for the section.

The main rhythm of the composition is based on the division of the eight notes in the 4/4 bar to 3+3+2, which is widely used in many different genres around the world (with different variations and drums type). In the Arabic music, this rhythm on a fast bpm is called "Malfuf",

⁶ Balkan Beat Box, "Balkan Beat Box - Hermetico (HD)". The B part of the instrumental bridge 1:18-1:56.

and is used in music for weddings and dance. It's also the rhythm in the song *Crystalline* by Björk in the remix by Omar Souleyman⁷, which as aforementioned influenced this composition.

C. Final form, arrangement and orchestration

The final form and arrangement were decided during the rehearsals with the band before the Berklee Showcase concert. I came prepared with all the musical parts and general idea for the general groove and the form, but there were some important developments regarding the arrangement, orchestration and final form that took place in a collaborative trial-and-error process with the band. The intro section, the modulatory transition to the bridge, and the content of the solos section, were all decided in the rehearsals. Some important notes for these sections are the incorporation of Spanish and Flamenco music influences into the composition, with the usage of castanets in the intro and I the A part, and choosing a vocal solo by Katiana Vila, who improvises over Letras of Flamenco while the electric guitar accompanies and responds to her, as the climax of the solo section (derived from the musical background of Katiana). Another addition was an activation of the crowd as part of the modulatory transition to the bridge, which make the composition even more energetic and danceable in concert: that happens in a short improvised section when the violin, accompanied by drums, plays an improvisation over the A part, preparing the modulation to E, while the rest of the band yells “Hey!” on every 2nd and 4th beat and get the crowd to yell with them. When performed, this section was sixteen bars as we got the audience gradually involved, and in the recordings (as there's no live interaction) it was reduced to eight bars.

⁷ Björk and Omar Souleyman, “Björk - Crystalline (Omar Souleyman Remix)”

As for the instrumentation, the final result is similar to the reference tracks in some aspects, but much more acoustic and folkloric, and incorporates influences from more genres and musical styles due to the instruments and the musical background of the band members. The instrumentation of Balkan Beat Box (from whom I felt heavily influenced) is very contemporary, with the saxophone and electric guitar taking the traditional place of the horns section and play the melodies, extensive usage of samples and electronic affects, and boosted drums and low end. When I first envisioned the composition, my sonic image was very similar to this sound, as I imagined the melody to be played by saxophones, accompanied with a brass section, electric guitar, bass and drums. As the band I had available was Shakata, and the designed leading instrument was the violin (as my main goal is to use my music to showcase myself as a violinist), and as I don't have a lot of interest in electronic music in general, and prefer to play music that can be fully performed by a live ensemble - the final orchestration ended up with some similarities and differences. The composition has a danceable quality as intended, and emphasized drums and low end (as we also sampled the kick drum and boosted the low end in the final mix). Also, there's a strong presence of the electric guitar and bass. The main differences are: the leading instruments are the violin and the clarinet (which is very common in Balkan music, such as in Bulgarian and Moldavian traditional music) instead of saxophones and horns section; there is percussion alongside the drums, which brings in more influences from other world music genres (castanets, associated with Spain and Flamenco music, Güira from Dominican music, Pandero from Brazilian music, etc.); and there's no use of electronic affects and sampling. I feel that this orchestration creates a very special sound for the composition and for the band, as all the music is played in a live ensemble, with both folkloric and contemporary influences.

5.2.2.a *Going Down* - Context and outline of the compositional process

Going Down was my second composition for Shakata, and the first song with lyrics I had ever written, and also the first one I had sung the lead vocal. The first inspiration for this composition was on February 2020 when I tried to compose a short piece for my composition course in Berklee. That occurred while using both intentional and creatively-oriented writing processes, and using improvisation as a tool. I conceived the main melodic ideas for the violin riff and for the vocal chorus, including the first seed of idea for the lyrics (mainly the words “we’re going down” which became a key part of the lyrics, and for the general imagery of the song as a nocturnal party scene). However, I didn’t complete this initial inspiration into a full composition until April, mainly because I realized it’s going to be a song with lyrics (and not instrumental composition), and as I never wrote lyrics before nor sung I wasn’t sure how to proceed. Due to the decision to record this song as my composition for a production course in Berklee, and using the limited time of the course’s deadline, I managed to finish the entire composition and lyrics within ten days of intense work. That also occurred in creatively-oriented and intentional conditions, and using both improvisation and research as tools for the process, as well and internal process (no tools, only musical idea popping to my head).

As in these months there was a full quarantine in Spain, all the recording and production process happened in distance, which had a big impact on the arrangement of the song, as I couldn’t work on it collaboratively with the band, nor to monitor the exact part each band member records. That was an interesting experience: On one hand, it obliged me to be more responsible and take arrangement decisions already in an early stage of the process, and to instruct the band from distance as well as I could (providing them reference tracks, explanations of the desired sound, emotional impact and contour of the song, and specific requests for each

part). On the other hand, I had to work with the recordings that each band member sent me, which sometimes were close to what I envisioned, or different but in an interesting or even better way, but sometimes it didn't provide me what I wanted and I had to find my way around it. That obliged me to "compose" some parts, using editing and mixing techniques, or compromising and accepting things that weren't my desired result, and to do my best to make it blend and sound well in the final mix.

Another thing that the distance recordings enabled for my part was to try and sing for the first time, as I used to be extremely shy about singing, especially in front of a band or audience. Since I could record my singing by myself, it helped me to shed some of this shyness and in time to also enjoy it. However, as I was very unexperienced using my voice, I didn't realize that the key I chose for the composition, F# Phrygian, is very suitable for the violin and the guitar but too low for my voice.

As I wanted to include this song in Shakata EP, there was a need for new recording sessions, both due to the need to transfer it to a higher key for my voice (I chose A Phrygian as it sounded the most suitable for my voice), and to the low quality of most of the recorded parts, as when we all recorded it, we used our home's studio settings, with the acoustics and gear we had available. The new basic session took place on October 22nd, 2020 in Jazztone studio, Valencia, and currently (November-December) I'm in the process of editing and overdubbing parts. especially as we were facing many issues during the basic session (we didn't have the Bass player and the percussion player in the recordings, had a lot of problems in the sound of the violin and the guitar and so on). This process is designated to be completed by the end of January 2021, and the mixing and mastering should happen until the end of March. It would be included in the band's EP as the second track.

5.2.2.b *Going Down* - Composition process and elements

A. *Vision – Influences, references and analysis*

The inspiration for the song and specifically for its violin riff, started from my trials to compose for composition class. I've created a short composition while having in mind to try and find a way to mix Irish and Balkan influences, using improvising on the violin as a tool. As in my early twenties I played Irish music for several years, both as a part of an Irish band called "Black Velvet" and as a usual participant in Irish sessions, I was intrigued to see if such a connection can be made, as I have never heard this kind of fusion before and though it could be interesting. The composition had only A and B parts that repeats (which is very common in Irish tunes), which I'll discuss elaborately in the next section. Although I liked a lot the A part of this composition, I found it hard to develop it into something that would fit the instrumentation and evolving sonic identity of Shakata. Taking inspiration from this A part, and from horn section riff of the song "*Fige Ki Ase Me*" by Shantel⁸, I created a new melody that later become the violin riff of *Going Down*.

Close to that time I had a composing session in which I started improvising freely, both playing the piano and singing and playing, and conceived a part that quickly developed into what later become the chorus of *Going Down*. The melody and harmony of the chorus remained quite similar since those first improvisational experiments and until the final version. As for the lyrics I was improvising freely, letting the words come unconsciously and not worrying if they don't make much sense. From the beginning though I used repeatedly the words "going down", which

⁸ Shantel, "Greek Music - Shantel - Fige Ki Ase Me", posted by figo85kh, December 28th, 2010, YouTube video, 04:15 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UV6P2GFw8k&ab_channel=figo85kh

stuck and became the name of the song and the preliminary source of inspiration for the rest of the lyrics, with the imagery of late-night wild party. I felt that a strong influence for that part was the song “Night Train to Kairo” or in Hebrew “רכבת לילה לקהיר” by the Israeli Rock band Mashina⁹. I’m not sure how the inspiration from this song came to me, as I haven’t heard it in years, but I definitely felt the composition is heavily inspired by it. Also, this song is also written in Phrygian mode (a fun fact, I originally wrote *Going Down* in F#, but recently changed it to A, which is also the key of Mashina’s song). It mainly inspired the general sound I was imagining, influenced by old rock with middle-eastern color, and later on when composing intentionally more parts, I also borrowed some elements from it, especially for the verses and the vocal variation of the final chorus (use an ascending fifth to start the melody; moving in 2nds between the verse’s notes; second voice in a fifth interval - the tonic and fifth of the chord)

B. Musical components – Melody, harmony, rhythm, lyrics

As aforementioned, the inspiration for the violin riff came from the A part of a Balkan-Irish composition I created, as shown in figure 7. What creates the Irish sound is the use of the violin idiomatic of this style, applying typical techniques of Irish fiddling and its bow technique (rapid repeats on the same notes; emphasizing the 2nd and 4th beats of the bar by legato, with the bow weight leading to them; strings crossing while arpeggiating the chord notes; continuous playing, phrasing with the bow but almost without breaks; playing mostly on beat, no syncopation, eighth-notes even movement). However, the modes and harmony I chose suggested influences from other genres such as Balkan and Arabic music, and so did the rhythm I imagined for it as shown in the bass line I composed, which is based on the “Malfuf” rhythm once more.

⁹ Mashina, רכבת לילה לקהיר - משינה, posted by YallaBeitar7, January 1st, 2013, YouTube Video, 3:39 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0y0gaLiyiak&ab_channel=YallaBeitar7

Mai Choma

$\text{♩} = 170$ **A** F# Phrygian-Hizaz
Play with irish groove and add variations

F# (open/minor/major, vary) Em/G

5 F# Em

9 F# G

13 ^{1.}F# Em tr~

Figure 7 Balkan-Irish composition

In an attempt to develop this part in a manner that would fit Shakata, I tried to change it by creating more interesting rhythmical movement and syncopation, and spacing the melody with more breaks in between, also influenced by *Fige Ki Ase Me*¹⁰. And so, I developed the violin riff that served as the basis of inspiration and development to the entire composition.

¹⁰ Shantel, “Greek Music - Shantel - Fige Ki Ase Me”

violin Riff

The image shows two staves of musical notation for a violin riff. The first staff starts at measure 13 and includes chords F#m, Em, D, C, and F#(omit3), along with trill markings (tr). The second staff starts at measure 17 and includes chords F#m, F#, Em, D, C, and F#(omit3), also with trill markings. The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#).

Figure 8 Going Down, Violin Riff

The image shows three staves of musical notation for different modes. The first staff is labeled '28 Phrygian Mode' and shows a descending scale starting on F# with notes F#, E, D, C#, B, A, G#. The second staff is labeled '37 Maqam Saba' and shows a descending scale starting on F# with notes F#, E, D, C#, Bb, A, G#. The third staff is labeled '46 Blues Scale' and shows a descending scale starting on F# with notes F#, E, D, C#, Bb, A, G#.

Figure 9 Going Down Modes

As shown above, the most predominant mode of the composition is Phrygian. However, also here there are more influences from other modes inside it. First, there's Maqam Saba, another Maqam from the Arabic Maqamat. This time I didn't use quarter tones, but I used the lowered 4th degree (Bb in this case) throughout the song, especially in the bass line opening the song and the guitar riff. Another mode is the Blues scale, that comes into play more in the harmony, as I use frequently dominant chords or major triads over minor melody, and also as I use occasionally the blue note itself in my singing. The rhythm for this part remained based on rhythmic division of to the eight notes to 3+3+2 ("Malfuf").

As for the lyrics, I tried to proceed with associative process from my preliminary inspiration and imagery, keeping the words “going down” as the main idea. The writing process was mainly creatively-oriented and intentional, while using long walks in the park to stimulate my imagination and to get in touch with my senses. It resulted with the verses describing figuratively the settings of the scene, the pre-choruses addressing directly to the listener in second person, inviting him/her to join the band for a wild-night-out, and the choruses addressing both the band itself and the listener, as shown in the lyrics excerpt in figure 10.

Going Down

verse
The sun fades into the street light
The air moves the dusk beneath the night

pre-chorus
It's time to go
So take of, (of) all your worries
And go shake those hips, so put your party clothing
'Cause tonight we're going, and you're coming with us
So just loosen up and hop right on

first chorus
We're going down
We're going down tonight to town, and you should come
So just relax
Let the control room take a rest, and jump right in
'Cause we're going down

Figure 10 Going Down, Lyrics of first verse, pre-chorus and chorus

The rhythm of the chorus is mainly back-beat, taking into account the Rock influence, and so the rhythm of the song moves between back-beat (emphasis on the 2nd and 4th beats) and Malfuf rhythm (3+3+2 eight-notes division), and in a few points in the vocal bridge and the outro

also to triplets (division of the bar to 4 groups of triplets), inspired by African music (contribution of Pedrinho Augusto and Gillian Harwin and their musical background). That creates a special rhythmic movement of the song, inspired by different genres and traditions.

C. Final form, arrangement and orchestration

As the production of the song was through distance recordings, it obliged me to take decisions about the form and the arrangement in an early stage and mainly by myself, as a real collaborative process as I would have preferred wasn't possible at the time. However, I'm quite pleased with the final result. As for the form and arrangement, there were some notable decisions along the process:

- a. Due to a collaborative work from distance with Michael Shank, it was decided to use the guitar riff not only in the intro, but also as a counterpoint over the chorus. The initial melody was written by me, then Michael suggested to alternate it a bit and add more space to it, omitting notes and adding rests, and finally I created the final version of it. Michael tried to play it over the chorus when he recorded guitar for the demo, and fitted together perfectly, as both the vocal melody in the chorus and the guitar riff circle the same chords and emphasize the same principal notes. It added a lot of interest and motion to the chorus, and was a significant moment, finding the desired sound of the chorus.
- b. Another important step leading to the final composition, was my insistence to add a vocal bridge of sixteen bars over a chord progression of: G | Bm | Gmaj7 | B :||, one chord per bar and repeats four times (that written in the original key of F#). Although during the process other band members suggested it might be better to eliminate this part and leave the song shorter and simpler, I had a strong image of this section and stuck to it. It both enables the music to "breathe" after the re-harmonized violin riff and improvisation solo, while using very different harmonic

progression then the Phrygian harmony dominating the song, and to build the energy towards a climatic final chorus.

c. Another small but important decision was to make the first chorus half long (eight bars instead of sixteen, and half of the lyrics for it), and the second and final choruses in full length. That helped the forward motion of the song and not and maintain the interest through it, as the chorus itself already repeats the same melody twice.

As for the orchestration, in this song there's no clarinet. That happened originally because the clarinet player wasn't available in the time to record for the project, but it led me to realize that it isn't needed for this specific song, and I preferred that the violin took the place of the soloist in it. And so, I kept the arrangement the same also in the new recording session in October 2020. As the song takes inspiration from Rock music, the drums and electric guitar have a big roll in it, with many guitar overdubs (that create three different parts). Also, the vocal bridge section is designated to have a lot of back-ground vocals for it that are still to be recorded at the moment (about nine different parts of three different singers).

5.2.3.a *Eve from Tel-Aviv* - Context and outline of the compositional process

This composition was my first co-writing experience. It started from a short instrumental composition that my colleague and band-member Michael Shanks wrote for our composition course in Berklee on the end of January 2020, and called "Eve from Tel-Aviv". Michael suggested that it might be suitable for Shakata if we'll develop it into a full instrumental composition, and so I tried to think of how to develop it. The composition had two parts, from which I omitted the second, as I liked the first part but didn't feel that the second part is the right development for it. Shortly after, when Michael presented the composition in class, our colleague Yeidimar Ramos sang one time over the melody "Betty from Tel-Aviv, she danced for me, she

danced for me”. Although she did it for fun and as a joke, it ignited my inspiration to try and put lyrics over the melody. While spontaneously improvising singing lyrics over the A part, I came up with a first draft of lyrics, that was far from final but already set the principal scene of the song, of the narrator looking at a girl dancing in a bar in Tel-Aviv and charmed by her. I also changed a bit the melody to fit better to the singing. Worth to mention that was the very first time I had experimented with improvising while singing lyrics, and due to that, and to the encouragement I received from Michael afterwards, I tried again improvising with lyrics about a week later, conceiving the main idea for the chorus of *Going Down*. However, my initial intention for the lyrics was that they would be sang by Michael, as I never sang in performance or recordings by that time, and as the song felt very much as a song that a man sings to a woman, and I thought that it can be very suitable for Michael’s musical style.

I recorded myself on a voice memo (as I always do when I’m in a creative) and sent it to Michael for feedback. Although he didn’t think about the composition as a song initially, he adopted to the idea and sent me later on a short demo of himself singing lyrics which were based on mine but a bit different, and added a sketch for a post-chorus singing part. After that, I tried to keep developing the song, and had idea for more lyrics to be used as verses, setting the background and atmosphere of the scene and the narrator state of mind and thoughts. However, the song remained untouched for more than two months. Although we had already the draft for many components, including lyrics, chorus and post-chorus, it still was unclear for neither Michael or myself how these ideas will be glued together into a whole song.

The good experience I had while working on *Going Down*, with taking a clear initial idea into a final vocal composition with concentrated work over a short period of time using a firm deadline, motivated me to decide to do the same for *Eve from Tel Aviv* during May 2020.

Although I didn't have an external deadline, I put one to myself and decided to finish composing the song and recording a demo within 14 days, and that worked very well. This process was done solely by myself, consulting with Michael only after finishing the entire demo. From that point the composition and the final form remained the same, and so did the lyrics except of a few edits (done more due to the use of English than of the content). As usual, the final arrangement and orchestration were decided while rehearsing with the band, which happened only in October 2020 (as we weren't physically in the same place before that due to the situation caused by the covid-19 pandemic).

While the lyrics of the song came more freely and mainly in unintentional or creatively-oriented processes, most of the compositional processes occurred in intentional process, taking research and analysis of influential tracks as a big ingredient. I relate it to the fact that the core of the composition wasn't mine, and so developing it was harder and less intuitive for me. However, due to that it also led to different results than when I'm the sole composer, and was overall a very positive and interesting experience.

5.2.2.b *Eve from Tel-Aviv* - Composition process and elements

A. Vision – Influences, references and analysis

The main inspiration for the composition was the music by the German artist Shantel, and specifically his songs *Disko Boy*¹¹ and *Disko Partizani*¹². I introduced Michael Shanks to

¹¹ Shantel, “Shantel Disko Boy”, posted by Stefan Hantel – Topic, January 25th, 2015, YouTube video, 04:19 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1uotHKYHIg&ab_channel=StefanHantel-Topic

¹² Shantel, “Shantel DISKO PARTIZANI - Official Video”, posted by guilty76am, August 22nd, 2007, YouTube video, 04:19 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gViaOYgV8yI&ab_channel=guilty76am

Shantel as I thought his musical style can fit very well both to the evolving musical identity of Shakata, and also specifically to Michael's musical style. Shantel known to mix influences from traditional Balkan traditional music (including Greek and Turkish), with electronic beats and influences from Ska, Electronica and Pop. His lyrics in English are usually humoristic or "non-sense", or involves different languages as he takes traditional songs (for instance in Greek, Bulgarian, etc.). Michael related to his music and took him as an inspirational source when trying to compose for Shakata, and I took it as direct inspiration for this composition. Especially as my composition for the song was mostly in intentional condition, I analyzed of these two tracks as a way to understand how to develop the song, and borrow many concepts from them.

The most notable influences from Shantel that I incorporated into my composition were:

- a. The verses: It was clear from me that the lyrics I wrote for the verses are meant to be more spoken than really sang, and found that Shantel's manner of talking-singing his verses in *Disko Partizani* and *Disko Boy* to fit perfectly with the atmosphere I tried to create. I also chose similar harmonies, with simple chord progression cycles:

I | VI V7 | I | IV V7 :|| Afterward, when finding the groove with the band, Pedrinho Augusto and the bass player also composed their groove taking inspiration from these tracks, as I shared both of them as reference tracks for the composition.

- b. The instrumental bridge section: I took inspiration from the bridge section of *Disko Partizani*, bringing an instrumental melody that sounds like a traditional Balkan tune, on the dominant degree of the composition, followed by improvisation section.
- c. Harmonizing the vocal riff: Although the melody of this part didn't take direct influence from Shantel, I referred to the chorus of *Disko Boy* as a way of making a "simple"

melody sound more impactful by adding background vocals, adding 2nd and 3rd vocal lines to harmonize the principal melody creating a choir affect.

B. Musical components – Melody, harmony, rhythm, lyrics

The main melodic themes of the compositions are the A part of Michael's original tune that became the chorus *Eve from Tel-Aviv*, Michael's idea of post-chorus melody that became the vocal riff, and the instrumental bridge I composed. I'll review these different melodies and their evolution throughout the process in that order.

Worth mentioning that one of the major influences in Michael's background is Blues, and that he originally wrote the piece that inspired *Eve from Tel-Aviv* as part of an assignment to write a modal composition. The outcome was a twelve bars composition (as typical to Blues tunes): it started with four bars over G Phrygian; The next four bars move to the dominant chord D7, first with the note F natural and C repeating in the melody (typical in Blues, to play the notes of the minor7 chord over the dominant7), then it changes to F# and Eb, which can be interpret as part of the Melodic Minor over G, or an Hungarian Minor scale over D; then the last four bars end on the G Phrygian again, which sounds like a variation of the first four bars - they start with descending chromatic scale (with the same rhythmic motif as the beginning), and the last two bars are identical to the first two bars.

What caught my attention about this melody from the first time I heard it, was that it sounded to me clearly like a fusion between Balkan music and Blues, which wasn't something I have ever heard before. While Balkan-fusion music was something new to Michael (though he's interest in it grew through the year as I introduced him to different artists in the genre that he liked, and as we played this music in Shakata), the influences from the Blues are deeply inherited within him. And so, I believe that the Blues influences came into this composition that he

intended to write in Balkan style in a very natural and organic way. I changed the melody itself very slightly in order to fit the contour and rhythm of the singing, and took the basic harmony and enriched it with more dynamic chords movement, adding chromatic chord progression for the last four bars, and a few more chords, including diminished chord and lowered 2nd chord (as demonstrated in the sheet music I attached).

As for the post-chorus Michael created, I clarified its final variation, added second and third voice, and a short lick to be played by the violin and clarinet when the vocal's rest a bar (4th bar). As I intentionally tried to adopt Michael influential world of Blues and Jazz, I used briefly the whole-note scale for that lick, as you can see in the excerpt of the clarinet and violin in figure 11. As for the form, I used this melody to open and to close the song, and so it functions as a repeating vocal riff, rather than a post-chorus as Michael initially intended.

Figure 11 Violin and Clarinet part in Vocal Riff, Eve from Tel-Aviv

I wrote the instrumental bridge mainly in intentional process, taking inspiration from *Disko Partizani*¹³, and incorporating influences from Balkan, Blues and Jazz music to give this composition its special color. Therefore, while most of the bridge is played over a pedal point on D major triad, the melody mixes Hungarian Minor Scale with D major scale: mostly it emphasizes the Eb and F# of the Hungarian Minor Scale over D, but it also uses E natural and

¹³ Shantel, “Shantel DISKO PARTIZANI - Official Video”

both F natural and sharp as inspired Blues (suggesting both d minor and D major over D dominant chord), and chromatic passing notes and approach notes, as an influence from Jazz.

The image shows a musical score for an instrumental bridge. It consists of two staves of music in treble clef. The first staff starts at measure 46 and is labeled 'HITS!' and 'BRIDGE'. The second staff starts at measure 51. Chord symbols are written above the notes: Ab(omit3), G(omit3), D, tr, Cm, D, D, tr, Cm, D on the first staff; and D, D7, Eb, Cm7, D on the second staff. The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some trills and chromatic movement.

Figure 12 Instrumental Bridge, Eve from Tel-Aviv

The rhythm of the song is changing between the different sections: from up-beats on the verses (emphasizing the second eighth note of each beat of the bar), to back-beat in the choruses (emphasizing the 2nd and 4th beat of each bar), to 3+3+2 division on the instrumental bridge and solos (“Malfuf rhythm”).

The lyrics were the most spontaneous part of creating this song, and were meant to have a “goofy” vibe, similar to the style of Shantel, and also to the songs I played with “Kbetch” (a Balkan-Klezmer band I played with in the past). The idea is to take a known scene that can easily be a cliché (a boy meets a girl and falls instantly in love), and have a humorous and compassionate take on it, while setting it in a Israeli-Balkan party scene.

Eve from Tel-Aviv

(Pa-ra-ra-ra...)

Verse 1

Another night in Tel Aviv, feels like 40 degrees,
I'm walking down the street in the evening breeze to the
Local pub, to cool myself down,
just one beer, maybe one shot of rum,
Strolling through the smoky bar,
some hippie band is playing, people dancing around, then I
See you, shining through the crowd,
Oh man, so help me god...

Chorus 1

Eve from Tel-Aviv, oh how she dances, she dances all night,
Eve you got it on, you got all, you got it right
When you move it, oh how the Araq flows
Girl you've got me, you've got me out of control
When you're swinging how you're weaving my seams apart,
Eve won't you dance for me, please dance for me, just one more song

Figure 13 Eve from Tel-Aviv, lyrics for 1st verse and chorus

C. Final form, arrangement and orchestration

As for the form, the song starts and ends with the vocal riff. As it is quite a simple that repeats through the song, it meant to help to activate the audience in performance, while getting the audience to sing it along with the band. The violin and clarinet are playing as a section through this composition, taking the part of the horns sections in Shantel tracks which inspired it, while playing both composed lines and free improvisations. As usual the electric guitar, bass and drums are the groove section, with the specific percussion still not decided at the moment, as they are still to be overdubbed.

As for the singer, I wrote the song having in mind Michael as the singer, as it supposed to be a song that the narrator, who I imagined to be a man, sings to a woman (Eve), and I also thought it would fit him well in style. However, as I wrote all the lyrics and recorded the demo

by myself, I got the feedback from Michael and from other colleagues that it works well with me as a singer. The final decision was to do a mix and that Michael would sing-talk the verses, and I'll sing the choruses. That seemed like the best solution, making the arrangement of the song more dynamic with a male and female lead singers, and allows it to still be mainly a song that a man sings to a woman.

6. Conclusions

Before describing my conclusions from this project, worth to mention that I elaborated about three compositions but in the final EP there would be five songs. All the five songs were already recorded in a basic recording session in Jazztone, and most of them are in the process of editing, adding overdubs and creating a rough mix. As they are in different stages along the production process, I chose the compositions I feel that are the most advanced along the way and wanted to present in details.

Another notable point is that besides leading Shakata and write music for it, I also wrote a few more compositions for different ensembles. Although those compositions sound very different in style, instrumentation and in their intended emotional impact from the compositions for Shakata, they are still within the field of World-Music, and I had implied similar methods of incorporating different influences into them, as I demonstrated in the compositions I presented. They also serve the same principal objectives of showcasing myself as a violinist, finding my unique artistic voice while experimenting with different styles and genres, and enriching my artistic portfolio for my future benefit.

One of the biggest discoveries during this project and my studies in Berklee was composition. As I never tried to compose before coming to Berklee, it was an unexpected and

delightful surprise, and I definitely intend to keep composing in my future. On a personal note, as a very analytic person, I enjoy the playfulness and intuitiveness of this process, and feel that it connects me to different sides within myself that I didn't know that still exist, and made me trust more my initial instincts and my decisions.

On the less positive side, the administrative part of leading a band has proven to be difficult, as I initially suspected. While I enjoy a lot leading a band on stage during a performance and feel that it's quite a natural fit for me, I can't say the same about all the administrative tasks and responsibilities it includes. Although I am able to carry them out, it takes away a substantial amount of the enjoyment from the process.

Another thing I realized during the execution of the project is the enormous distance between getting a composition ready for performance or ready to record, and between recording a composition and having the final record done. As on stage there's the visual stimuli and the energy of a live performance, the recording relies only on the sound to impact the listener, which demands the music to be very well executed on the personal level of each player, and to have a very clear arrangement, contour and emotional intension, which demands a lot of thought and work to get a song that functions well on stage to function well in the studio. As for producing a record, coming from background of classical music and world music, where the live recordings are very similar to the final record (usually with no edits or overdubs, and with a clean mix), I am still overwhelmed by the tremendous work of getting a record ready, as I execute and supervise on most of this processes myself now.

That leads to another point – the DIY artist. During my studies in Berklee I was taught many skills and tools which were completely new to me in order to become a more self-sufficient artist (such as basics of recording and engineering, editing and mixing on DAW,

writing sheet music digitally, creating videos, and basics of music publication and dissemination). On the one hand, it opened for me a lot of options to carry out more processes by myself and saving a lot of costs by that, and being able to understand and control these processes much better. On the other hand, as it puts most of the responsibility for the execution of the production and publication processes on myself, it takes a lot of time and energy from me, and also get me to spend a lot of time doing things that has little to do with actually composing or performing music.

To summarize, leading this project has been overall a positive and unusual learning experience, both professionally and personally. However, leading a band and a project in this scale on my own was quite overwhelming, and not something I believe I could do on a regular basis. I feel that leading only specific parts of the process can be something I do well enjoy from (to only be a creative musician, writing the music and playing it in the band, or only working as a producer, managing the production and recordings of music of someone else, and so on), but to do everything by myself is just very hard to handle and robs most of the enjoyment from the process. Solutions that could work well for me personally would be: to co-lead the band in collaboration with one or more band members and divide the different responsibilities between us; lead only the musical aspect of a band, with producer and manager who **oversee** the administrative part; or to lead a project on a smaller scale, either of a smaller ensemble, or with less ambitious objectives.

6.1 Next steps

The next step for the project would be first to release the single of *Hafla Gitana* along with a video on January 22nd, 2021. Next would be to release the entire EP song by song,

creating musical videos and other content to promote it. All of these steps are also part of the dissemination strategy for Shakata, publishing promotional content online via different platforms (website, Facebook page, Instagram account and YouTube channel), and also for promotion of myself, publishing the same materials on my Facebook artist page and Instagram account (designed for professional use only).

Alongside that, I aim to find performance opportunities around Valencia and Spain (possibly in a reduced band size, without percussion and clarinet), and to apply for music festivals that could be relevant to the band in the moment that the world situation due to the covid-19 pandemic would allow it.

Moreover, I will continue working on creating more materials, both for Shakata and to other ensembles, and to look for opportunities to myself to perform with other musicians, both with my music or not.

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