



# bulbul

*a solo recorder album*

**fatima laham** *recorder and voice*

Recorded in Cambridge (Christ's College Chapel and the West Road Concert Hall)  
on December 14-16 2021.

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The extract of Mahmoud Darwish's reading of his poem *In Damascus* on Track 08 appears by kind permission of the Mahmoud Darwish Foundation, and is copyright © The Mahmoud Darwish Foundation. All rights reserved.



## *about the artist*

Fatima Lahham is an improvising recorder player. She has performed all over the UK and Europe, both as a soloist and with collaborators. Fatima's music-making takes inspiration from medieval to contemporary music, Fairuz, birdsong, politics, and the idea of home. Her aim is to tell stories about what is not being heard, that push at the boundaries of the imagination to create new worlds.

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*Improvisation: how we live now; the way creativity seeks freedom; an alternative way to imagine the world. The way I relate to you across an ocean of difference. A mode of listening; a rhythm of breathing. The song of the nightingale, the buzz of the bee, the opening of a flower. How I read texts, and how you write my thoughts. The communities we dream to find, the cities and sonicities we dream to inhabit.*

## about the music

### *Asfour tal men el shebbak*

[01]

This song is about a bird who comes to the window and asks to be hidden.

Where is he from? The neighbour's house, the bounds of the sky.

What is he scared of? The cage that he fled.

Where are his feathers? Time has ravaged them.

It is a song about a bird's freedom, but about other freedoms too: the freedom of everyone who has escaped a cage, and who remains incarcerated in one; our freedom to live under the sky, within her bounds. The freedom to recognise our interconnectedness: how birds in the sky are in community with neighbours living side-by-side, how the trees and the stars yearn to meet, residing alongside us within the skies. We recorded this track in total darkness.

### *Division by Mr Gorton*

[02]

Playing these solo divisions from *The Division Flute* (London, 1706) feels like an example of how one should improvise; playing out the movements of someone else's body before you. I wonder, how do you re-inhabit this space, once it's already been mapped out in the text? Is it a matter of timing, articulation, playfulness – trying to put the extemporary back in, imagining the improvisation that inspired someone to write it down?

### *Ali Ufki, Semaii Huseyni*

[03]

This piece is from a collection that represents the earliest-known example of Ottoman music notation, the *Mecmuâ-I Sâz u Söz* (c.1650). The book was compiled by Ali Ufki (c.1610-1675), born in Poland as Wojciech Bobowski and known as a court musician and interpreter in the early modern Istanbul court. His music

collection contains instrumental and vocal music from court and folk genres ordered according to their maqamat (modes). While these pieces of music are notated and not necessarily representative of improvised music, they form an important source for the understanding for music of this period from Turkey, Egypt, and the Levant, and their presence should disrupt the Eurocentrism of 'baroque' music-making today. I wanted to imagine the effects of this music being brought to England from Turkey by English travellers in the 17th century, what it would have sounded like on an instrument like the recorder. This re-imagining also took me away from the score, free to take 'liberties' and create my own version of this music.

**Jacob van Eyck, *Engels Nachtegaeltje* [04]**

The improvised divisions of renaissance Dutch recorder-player Jacob van Eyck (c.1590-1657) are well-known to recorder players. This set of improvised variations takes a popular English song about

the nightingale as its theme, and the recorder's proximity to birdsong melts into the proximity of the printed text to transcription.

***Zourouni* [05]**

This song is by the Egyptian composer Sayyed Darwish (1892-1923), and known to me (and many others) as sung by Fairuz. The title means 'visit me', and the refrain repeats it over and over, tinging the otherwise optimistic melody with melancholy. This recording is just one version of the song imagined on solo recorder.

**Improvisation: *The Bee* [06]**

I improvise here with a sample of a queen bee 'piping', the sound she makes when it is time to swarm. One of the inspirations for this track is a beekeeping treatise by a 17th-century beekeeper called Charles Butler, in which he notated the piping song, exactly as it sounds here. In the 1632 edition of his book *The Feminine Monarchie*, Butler writes that 'in the Bees Song are the grounds of

Musicke', alluding to the song of the bee as the ground (repeating bass line) of music. I wanted to re-imagine what we could do as historically informed musicians with this historical text – how we could perform our own musical improvisations today over the ground bass of the bee.

*A Chantar* [07]

This song by Beatriz de Dia (c.1160-1212) is known for being the only *canço* by a *troibaritz* (female troubadour) that exists with its music intact. The music for *A Chantar* is found in *Le manuscript di roi*, a collection of songs copied around 1270 for Charles of Anjou, the brother of Louis IX. The lyrics of this poem cast her as a betrayed lover, and in performing the song without words, I use my own voice, trapped in the recorder as a drone, to evoke her frustration and betrayal.

J.S. Bach, *Partita BWV 1013: Allemande* [08]

The pairing of J.S. Bach's *Partita* and Mahmoud Darwish's *In Damascus* is one that happened naturally for me. I learned to play this *Partita* in Damascus in 2010 – the first and only trip I made there. Years later when I first read Darwish's poem *In Damascus*, it had a violin soundtrack accompanying his reading. I longed to replace it with this movement, to respond to Darwish's sampled stanza about the revolving dialogues between violin and oud with the revolving semiquavers of Bach's *Allemande*, to imagine them both together despite the huge gap between both worlds.

*In Damascus:*

*Dialogues revolve*

*Between violin and 'oud*

*About the question of wujud (existence)*

*And about the endings...*

[my translation]

In advance of the recording, we made a loop of the Palestinian author Mahmoud Darwish reading a stanza from his poem *Fe Dimishq* (*In Damascus*). My intention

has been to play the *Allemande* over the top of the reading, to respond to it with my recorder, to dialogue with the poem about the question of existence and improvise the endings with my breath and phrasing.

I am grateful to the Mahmoud Darwish Foundation in Ramallah, Palestine, for granting me permission to use this sample of Darwish's voice.

*Ya Shady el-Alhan* [09]

Written by the Egyptian composer Sayyed Darwish (1892-1923), this song's title calls upon Shady 'of the melodies' to make music. To me it's a song about singing, about finding community with others through sound (how I first got to know the piece), and about how we choose songs. This was the first song we recorded, and it set the tone of the album in some ways, allowing me to feel my way around the space and my instrument.

*Free Improvisation: Home* [10]

Recording improvisation is always some form of contradiction; by attempting to fix and capture something, some of the improvisatory quality is lost. Yet it was important to me to include some free improvisation on the album too, while acknowledging that some parameters are lost here – that of the audience, the space, the extraneous sounds that always make up an improvisation. Perhaps your (the listener's) space and surroundings as you listen to this track will add yet another layer to the improvisation. You too are an active part of the music.

*Istanpitta: Tre Fontane* [11]

Listening to this piece is what made me originally want to learn the recorder. To my ears, the piece seemed to inhabit so many different worlds – and in fact, several scholars have commented on the incongruity of the istanpitta dances within contemporaneous 14th-century repertoires,

and their proximity to elements of Turkish and Arabic music. I have enjoyed playing with this ambiguity and overlap, as well as with the rhythms made from my breath that underlay the track.

*Ya Tayr el-Werwar* [12]

The third and last ‘bird song’ on this album, composed by Elias Rahbani (1938-2021), sung by Fairuz, and reimagined here on recorder. The song takes place in the sky, flying with the bird on their way to greet the singer’s loved ones and ask how they are...

*Dido’s Lament* [13]

The ground bass of *Dido’s Lament* is well-known, as is the story of Dido the Queen of Carthage who falls to her own death after being abandoned by Aeneas. My recreation of this song re-imagines it from the bottom up, layering bass lines and singing distractedly over them with multiple voices. I wanted to ask, what does

it mean to perform such grief? And despite the historical origin of the song, how could we not use it as a place to sing of our own griefs? I take the composer Henry Purcell’s original song as an example of how he imagined her to sound at this moment, and use the bass line that he composed her improvisations over as the basis for my own improvised song.

There is something grounding about a ground bass. It brings us close to the earth, its smell and its feel under our feet. Perhaps this is why so much music from so many different contexts use a repeating bass-line, the comfort and earthiness is a way of making music that plants us. And throughout this album I have found myself outside, in nature, under the sky, and so the earth seems a natural place to stop.