

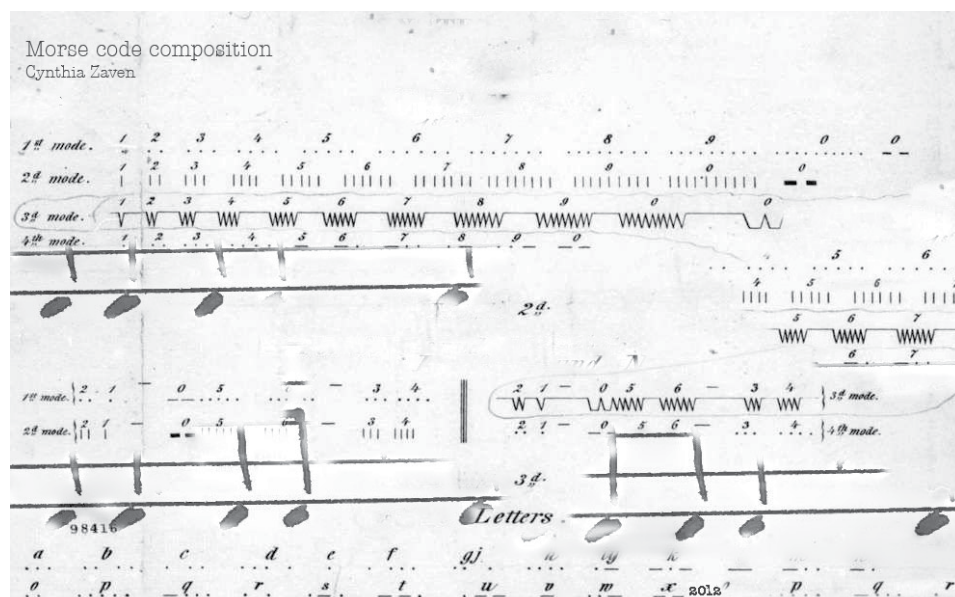
## Interview

# Sonic Diaries

Cynthia Zaven in  
conversation with  
Basak Senova

In 2012, Cynthia Zaven composed *Morse Code Composition* for flute and accordion by transcribing a William Faulkner quote into Morse code. Alessandra Rombolà on flute and Esteban Algora on accordion performed the composition during Irtijal, an experimental music festival that takes place in Lebanon annually. A longer version commissioned by the Institute of Contemporary Art was presented within *Soundworks*, as part of Bruce Nauman's exhibition *Days*, and presented in the lower gallery of ICA, London (19th June to 16th September 2012). For Zaven, the musicians/improvisers performing the piece take on the role of the 'protagonist', while the audience

Cynthia Zaven, *Morse Code Composition*, 2012, excerpt of score. Courtesy of the artist.



Morse code composition  
Cynthia Zaven

1<sup>st</sup> mode. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 0  
2<sup>nd</sup> mode. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 0  
3<sup>rd</sup> mode. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 0  
4<sup>th</sup> mode. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 0

2<sup>nd</sup>. 5 6 7  
3<sup>rd</sup>. 5 6 7  
4<sup>th</sup> mode. 5 6 7

1<sup>st</sup> mode. 2 1 0 5 3 4  
2<sup>nd</sup> mode. 2 1 0 5 6 3 4  
3<sup>rd</sup> mode. 2 1 0 5 6 3 4  
4<sup>th</sup> mode. 2 1 0 5 6 3 4

98416 Letters  
a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z 2012



Cynthia Zaven, *Untuned Piano Concerto With Delhi Traffic Orchestra*, 2006, performance, New Delhi. Photo by Michael Northam.



the performance I had in mind. We drove around the busy roads of Delhi with me sitting in the back of a truck improvising on an untuned, upright piano, challenging the instrument to connect with the urban environment, almost like trying to fit in a place I didn't belong to. I had taken it out of its normal 'habitat' therefore decontextualising an ordinary setting, turning it into a purely sonic interface to communicate with cars, rickshaws and trucks. It was a very intense experiment. At one point during the two hours spent on tortuous roads, the piano mechanism disconnected from the soundboard.

For *Morse Code Composition*, I wrote the music as a way to transfer a situation from mind to paper, extracting it from time, placing it somewhere else and letting others do whatever they wanted with it. Interpret it, manipulate it, improvise on it. I transcribed Faulkner's words into Morse code and wrote it into notes for the flute, then wrote another part for the accordion. Two voices that would narrate in different ways, one repeating a single note in varying length and tempo, in an almost stubborn obsessive manner, as if resisting change, and the other playing long chords modulating the harmony: more flexible, resilient, free. Improvisation took the composition further; the original concept evolved. It was dissected and deconstructed by two incredible musicians who raised the piece to another level. I then worked on a longer version for the ICA that includes electronics.

**BS:** What was your point of departure for *Morse Code Composition*?

**CZ:** Alessandra Rombola, a flutist from Spain asked me to write a piece for her. She was invited along with the accordionist Esteban Algora to perform at Irtijal, the experimental music festival that takes place in Beirut every year. The piece would include a part for free improvisation.

**BS:** How did you link it with the Morse code?

**CZ:** At that time I was going through the process of untangling emotional nets in my mind. Sometimes, signs or signals are never clear between two people; signs or signals are often ‘transmitted’ in a different language, one that has to be deciphered in order to be understood. The Morse code came to my mind very naturally. It is already a rhythmic means of communication, where the letters of the alphabet are represented by long and short signals of sounds (or light). It is known to be the most secure and guaranteed communication method for conveying information when all other means have failed.

**BS:** What does Morse Code Composition document?

**CZ:** William Faulkner has always been one of my favourite writers. His narrative style is an incredible magma of intensity, complexity and beauty. Sometimes reading him can be a real disorienting struggle, before the story clears itself up and consumes your entire attention and interest. It’s almost as if his writing itself needed decoding. The stream of consciousness, the narrative mode with which Faulkner was associated, depicting ‘the multitudinous thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind. Another phrase for it is ‘interior monologue’.’ (J.A. Cuddon). Composing the *Morse Code Composition* was like giving voice to my own interior monologue.

Cynthia Zaven, *Three-piano improvised music concert*, 2012, Irtijal Festival, Beirut. Photo by Tony Elieh.



**BS:** So, this monologue and *Morse Code Composition* has a linear time conception, which overlaps different layers. Hence, the act of notation records this monologue.

**CZ:** The reason to notate the score for accordion and flute was to repeat the musical experience at a later time, and evaluate the process of emotional memory in regards to one particular event.

**BS:** How do you perceive the time components throughout your creative process?

**CZ:** I think art only simulates the truth and therefore composing music is more than just putting notes together and seeing how they

sound. But making art requires a huge contradiction that is to be completely involved with the subject, yet somehow detached from it. You need that sort of distance in order to create. Unlike drawing or improvising music on stage, where thoughts are conveyed immediately, composing music is more connected with a progression in time where emotions and ideas are ultimately rendered into a different language. To me, when the work ends the subject matter is already somehow in the past.

**BS:** How do you link the aural with the visual?

**CZ:** Working with sound and music through different collaborations with stage directors, filmmakers and visual artists over the years brought me to other mediums such as video and installations. Concepts require a vehicle; the vehicle comes into being through the process of developing the idea. The two must work together, whether it's a video performance (*Untuned Piano Concerto With Delhi Traffic Orchestra*, 2006), an installation with photos and sound (*Missing Links*, 2009), a video (*Dear Victoria*, 2011) or a film soundtrack (*The Last Man*, Dir. Ghassan Salhab, 2006). During the creative process everything becomes intrinsic. It's always fascinating to see an image altering as soon as sound or music comes into play. Parallel narratives are created generating sensorial links on different levels. As a student, I was only able to perform a piece after imagining a shape, a movement, a story. Visualising music was always necessary: sound is a natural extension of images in my mind.

**Cynthia Zaven** is a musician and artist based in Beirut. Since 1993, she has collaborated with filmmakers, visual artists and stage directors in live acts, as well as compositions and sound designs for theater and dance. Her solo projects combine a variety of media including video, photography, performance and the use of archive material to explore the relationship between sound, memory and identity through interwoven narratives. Recent works include *Camouflage Lounge* (installation, 2005), *Untuned Piano Concerto With Delhi Traffic Orchestra* (performance, 2006), *Missing Links* (installation, 2007-2009), *Octophonic Diary* (8-channel sound installation, 2009), and *Dear Victoria* (video, 2011).

In addition to performing as a pianist in various venues for improvised music, she has written soundtracks for award winning documentaries, experimental films and features which have been shown in festivals around the world, including IDFA, the Tribeca Film Festival, the Kassel Documentary film and Video Festival, Videobrasil, the Bern Kunstmuseum, the Institute of Contemporary Art and Oxford's Museum of Modern Art.

Her music has been published by the Berlin based label Staalplaat. She is currently a professor of piano at the Higher National Conservatory of Music in Beirut

## About the author

**Basak Senova** is a curator and designer, who has been writing on art, technology and media, initiating and developing projects and curating exhibitions since 1995. She studied Literature and Graphic Design (MFA in Graphic Design and Ph.D. in Art, Design and Architecture at Bilkent University) and attended the 7th Curatorial Training Programme of Stichting De Appel, Amsterdam. Senova is the editor of art-ist 6, Kontrol Online Magazine, Lapses Book series and many other publications. She is one of the founding members of NOMAD, as well as the organiser of ctrl\_alt\_del and Upgrade!Istanbul. She curated the Pavilion of Turkey at the 53rd Venice Biennale (2009) and lectured (Assist.Prof.Dr.) at the Faculty of Communication, Kadir Has University, Istanbul (2006-2010). Currently, she co-curates the UNCOVERED (2010-2013) project in Cyprus and the 2nd Biennial of Contemporary Art, D-0 ARK Underground (2013), Bosnia and Herzegovina.