

# Middle East



An Israeli soldier confronts a visibly terrified Palestinian child

## Sami Moukaddem The Facts of Life for the Palestinian

Sami Moukaddem  
Mid Price (68 mins)

★★★  
Unflinching collage of politicised music & poetry



It's impossible to pick up the lavish booklet that accompanies this CD and not be moved, especially given the recent situation in Gaza. Extraordinarily vivid photos of Israeli soldiers pointing rifles at Palestinian children and other scenes of the day-to-day horror of life in the West Bank are juxtaposed with notes explaining the political background to pieces of music and poems by Lebanese guitarist Sami Moukaddem. They have such no-holds-barred titles as 'Dispossession', 'Re-writing History' and 'The New Auschwitz Living Exhibition'. Not being of Palestinian origin perhaps makes Moukaddem an even more powerful advocate for the cause. The music on his self-released album is clearly heartfelt and born of a deep compassion and a justifiable anger.

In a letter that arrived with the CD, Moukaddem wrote: 'I am not sure what category it would go under; it has Arabic flavours with wider influences.' That's probably as close as it's possible to get. Much of the material has a sombre, Middle Eastern jazz flavour and perhaps the closest analogue is the recent work of the Jewish saxophonist Gilad Atzmon, who plays on the album. The Irish singer Riona Hartman handles most of the vocals, augmenting Moukaddem's spoken word passages. You can download the entire package – music, photos and text – for free at [www.samimoukaddem.com](http://www.samimoukaddem.com).

Nigel Williamson

## Ulaş Özdemir Bu Dem: This Breath

Kalan CD 453  
Full Price (48 mins)

★★★★  
Intimate poems from a saz master



Turkish saz player Ulaş Özdemir accompanies Iranian Kurdish *tanbur* player Ali Akbar Moradi on their duo

CD *The Companion* (Hermes), and Moradi with Kayhan Kalhor on their album *The Wind* (ECM), but this is a new solo disc. It features music collected by Özdemir and his father in Kahramanmara province in southern Turkey, from the Alevi-Bektashi repertoire of the local *aşık* folk poets. Özdemir knows many such performers and his music recreates the intimacy and directness of their style. These songs are traditionally heard within the *muhabbet* (intimate gathering) section of religious ceremonies of the Alevi-Bektashi. The word *dem* in Turkish has several meanings – not simply breath, but a moment, an era, and even wine. In Alevi-Bektashi poetry there's always a spiritual dimension to the texts and a song such as 'Aşık Oldur' is about how the *aşık* gives himself to his lover/God. It's a shame that the texts are not translated, as many of them are by important and outspoken Alevi Sufi mystics like Niyazi Misri (17th century) and Nesimi (14th century), who was skinned alive in Aleppo for his heretical beliefs.

Özdemir has a good singing voice, but it's as an instrumentalist that he makes the strongest impression here. He plays two old kinds of *saz* (lute) – the larger *dede sazi* (holy man's *saz*) which is sacred for the Alevi and played not with a plectrum, but with the fingers, and the small two-string *ruzba*, which has a delicate, treble sound. The eight poems are framed with three instrumentals

on *dede sazi* at the opening, *ruzba* in the middle, and the two instruments together at the end.

Simon Broughton

## Charbel Rouhana & The Beirut Oriental Ensemble Hand Made

Forward Music FWD014  
Mid Price (41 mins)

★★★★  
Filigree craftsmanship from some of Beirut's finest



It's now widely recognised that post-civil war Beirut has become the cultural capital city that it deserves to be and musicians like Charbel Rouhana are symbolic of the city's renaissance. Traditionally, formally educated players looked West for their inspiration but the new generation are more conscious of their Eastern heritage. However, Lebanon has always been at the crossroads and the Beirut Oriental Ensemble's Mediterranean sound reflects this meeting of styles. Using a small collection of established Eastern instruments, the group's sense of ensemble is faultless and the improvisations scintillatingly fresh: it's especially delightful to hear the Lebanese *bouzok* – a wire strung, long-necked lute – so prominently featured. Arab music purists may raise an eyebrow at the inclusion of a bass guitar but, in this context, it underpins the other instruments perfectly and you wonder why it isn't heard more often. The mood of the recording shifts with each composition; always erring on the tasteful side of easy listening, the thoughtful side of relaxing and the measured side of frantic virtuosity.

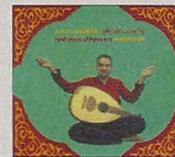
Lebanon's blend of urbane sophistication and exotic allure makes it an ideal first stop on a wary European's journey into Arabia. If you consider Arab music to be impenetrable, *Hand Made*, with its rich diversity of colour and feel, is probably the album to win you round.

Bill Badley

## Mustafa Said Roubaiyat El Khayam

Forward Music FWD016  
Mid Price (60 mins)

★★★★  
Persian poetry set beautifully



The 12th century poem 'Roubaiyat El Khayam' is one of the towering monuments of world literature; it has been translated from the original Persian into almost 50

languages. The beauty of the text has inspired numerous musicians, the latest being the virtuoso *oud* player, singer and composer Mustafa Said. His approach is quite minimal – using only a quartet of musicians, playing *rik* (tambourine), *qanun* (psaltery), *nay* (flute) and *oud* (lute) – allowing for the greatest flexibility in improvisation. The style of performance is very much that of a classical *takht* (ensemble) with the musicians clearly influenced by both medieval and 19th century traditions – a sound that suits the atmosphere of the poetry especially well. The playing is measured and graceful throughout and Said's vocal improvisations are impressively athletic, though the sound he produces may not be to all tastes. Translations of the poetry are not provided with the CD, but they can easily be downloaded from the Forward Music website, and the recording is certainly best appreciated when listened to as a whole with these to guide you. As many Arab musicians are exploring new musical avenues to create a contemporary Oriental sound, it's reassuring that someone like Mustafa Said should also be looking back and seeking inspiration from the glories of the past.

Bill Badley

## Mahsa & Marjan Vahdat I Am Eve

Kirkelig Kulturveksted FXCD 335  
Full Price: (60 mins)

★★★★  
Soulful singing from Iranian sisters



'Singing is a blessing'. The opening line of Mahsa Vahdat's web homepage speaks from the heart of a singer who is unable to perform in her home country, Iran, where public solo singing by women is restricted to all-female audiences. Most of Mahsa and her sister Marjan's recordings have therefore been released outside Iran, including their earlier collaboration with a group of Norwegian jazz musicians on *Songs from a Persian Garden* (reviewed in #50) and appearances on *Lullabies from the Axis of Evil*, both released by Norwegian label Kirkelig Kulturveksted.

On this new album, the sisters are joined by composer Atabak Elyasi (Mahsa's husband) and an ensemble of some of Iran's finest performers, as well as vocalist Christophe Rezai (of the Nour Ensemble; heard on 'Mirage'). There is something indescribably soulful and deeply magical about the voices of these two women. They really are a treat to listen to, particularly the passages where the two

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voices weave in and out of each other, as they do on several tracks. The music draws on both Iranian classical and folk music traditions and the instrumentalists themselves come from a diverse range of musical backgrounds. The liner notes are beautifully put together with all of the lyrics presented in both Persian, Kurdish and English.

This CD is a statement of the power of the female voice, as reflected both in the music, the lyrics – including one track set to the poetry of 19th female poet Tahereh Ghorratolein, a pioneer of women's rights in Iran – and the liner visuals which include a statue of the ancient Iranian goddess of fertility from 1,200 BC; as the opening title-track says: *'my body is the first verse in the poem of creation'*. Above all, the album is a testimony to the resilience and creativity of women musicians in Iran who, despite many odds, continue making their voices heard through albums such as this. They are certainly worth listening to. Mahsa Vahdat sings as part of the Iranian Women's Voices concert at Cadogan Hall on February 11.

Laudan Nooshin

disappeared. The three musicians on this recording lived in the port of Fethiye, close to the prime Turkish cruising destination of Lüdeniz. The three veteran musicians – Ramazan Güngör, Ali Kivrak and Hayri Dev – play a small three-stringed *saz* known as *baglama* or *üçtelli* (literally 'three-strings'). The instrument has a light, delicate sound and, like a lot of nomadic music, is played solo – often with percussive and rhythmic effects, as much of the music was intended for dancing.

This repertoire is from another age and these players were probably the last of their kind. They are playing instruments homemade from apricot, mulberry and juniper wood, with great skill and dexterity. At least they have been recognised by some of Turkey's leading *saz* players – Arif Sağ, Erdal Erzincan and Erol Parlak – who all performed in a 1995 concert in Fethiye in honour of Ramazan Güngör. Since the mid-90s, when the recordings were made, Güngör and Kivrak have passed away, so it's great that this CD, with detailed notes and diagrams of their playing techniques, exists as a testament to their art.

Simon Broughton

**In Jerusalem, every corner has its own martyr or monument, saint or shrine**

*Jerusalem: The City of Two Peaces*

Persians, Greeks and Romans; here the Arabs eventually succeeded them only to lose control successively to the Crusaders, the Turks, the British and the Israelis. In Jerusalem, every street corner has its own martyr or monument, saint or shrine. Its soil is drenched in blood spilt in the name of religion; its mental hospitals are full of whole hagiarchies of lunatics claiming to be David, Isaiah, Jesus or Mohammed.

Jordi Savall's new project, a highly ambitious and massive two CD celebration of the music of this bloodiest of cities, holy to three religions and the cause of centuries of bloodshed between them, is little short of a revelation. It is certainly much more successful than the clumsy translation of its French title: *La Ville des Deux Paix* as 'The City of Two Peaces' would indicate. Two pieces maybe, as the Palestinians would certainly hope, but even one peace is usually stretching it in Jerusalem.

The project, which involves musicians and collaborators from 14 nations, is most successful on the early music ground that is most familiar to Savall and the set contains some superb renditions of the *chanson* of the Crusaders that compares favourably with earlier attempts to bring similar pieces to life by David Munrow and others. One of the stars here is Savall's longtime collaborator, the Catalan *tambour* player, Pedro Estevan.

Perhaps the biggest surprise on the album is the fabulous Sufi music, performed by the Palestinian group, al-Darwish from Galilee with Omar Bashir on *oud*. There is a wonderful track called 'Danse du Soma' which is probably the liveliest on the set, and which perfectly captures the excitement of a Sufi dance session.

The ancient Jewish temple music recreated with frequent use of the Abrahamic *shofar* (ram's horn) is haunting and beautiful, partly thanks to the ethereal voice of Savall's wife, the wonderful Montserrat Figueras. There is also a heartbreaking lament for the victims of Auschwitz, 'El Male Rahamim', composed in 1941 and recorded in 1950. The old pre-digital recording sits oddly beside the other material; yet it remains probably the single most beautiful track on the CD.

The only flaw in the set are the moments when the conceptual framework of the CD means that some tracks are included for completeness – a Quranic call to prayer for example – which would not justify themselves on artistic grounds, and are more of anthropological rather than great musical interest.

William Dalrymple

## VARIOUS ARTISTS

### The Baglama of the Yayla

Ocora CD560213

Full Price (71 mins)

★★★★

Three *saz* masters get their due



Over the past 15 years, Ocora has released four discs of music from the Yayla – the pastures of south-western Turkey. In the old days, shepherds – generally of nomadic Turkmen roots – spent the summers up in the mountains and then brought their animals down for the winter. Now this way of life has

### Jerusalem: The City of Two Peaces

Alia Vox AVSA9863

Full Price (2 CDs; 142 mins; Hardback 435 pages)

★★★★★

Jordi Savall's ambitious musical project



Despite the reference in the psalms to 'the peace of Jerusalem', the Holy City has probably seen more rapine and pillage, more regularly, than any other comparable patch of ground on the planet. Here the Israelites battled with the Jesubites, Canaanites, Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians,



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