

On Location

Festivals, concerts, clubs

Mazen Kerbaj's *Walls Will Fall: The Trumpets Of Jericho* at Kraftwerk, Berlin



Walls Will Fall: The Trumpets Of Jericho

Kraftwerk, Berlin, Germany

In May 2018 the Berlin based Lebanese sound artist Mazen Kerbaj premiered an ambitious site-specific work at a giant water reservoir of Berlin-Pankow called *Walls Will Fall: The 49 Trumpets Of Jericho*. As the title indicates, Kerbaj gathered 49 Berlin based musicians from all over the globe to perform a time-mapped array of extended techniques and gestures that lie at the heart of his musical kitbag.

A recording of the event released last year by Bohemian Drips captures the deep resonances of the space, inextricably linked to the articulation of clacked valves or unpitched breaths. While referencing the biblical story of the Battle of Jericho in its title, Kerbaj largely eschews those religious connections for something more universal and pressing, given the current state of the world.

Camille Blake

The piece hadn't been reprised until March 2019, when it received two performances as part of *The Long Now*, a 30 hour durational event held at the former Berlin power station, now named Kraftwerk, to close this year's MaerzMusik Festival. Amid a slew of often dreamy, meditative electronic music performances by the likes of Kassel Jaeger, Marja Ahti and Donato Dozzy, *Walls Will Fall* stands out from most of the other sets both for its embrace of acoustically generated sound – although there is amplification – and its performative essence. For this performance, Kerbaj organised a scaled down version of the piece with only 30 trumpeters – including Hilary Jeffery, Liz Albee and Brad Henkel, but that reduction in magnitude doesn't inhibit its gripping effectiveness.

In fact, Kerbaj himself isn't even part of the performance, as he is appearing at the long-running improvised music festival he co-founded in Beirut on the same

weekend, so he enlisted Axel Dörner as nominal leader.

Five other trumpeters flank Dörner on stage, while another 24 musicians are scattered around the massive space, spread out across two visible levels high up in the cavernous factory. There is no way to see them all, but they can all be heard. The work moves slowly through seven discrete sections, with each player moving between those parts in staggered fashion, following one by one: one musician introduces a particular sound from within a sonic cloud of the previous approach, until they all end up in the next section.

Dörner is the first musician to begin percussively manipulating the valves of his instrument, and in steady intervals the others join in, starting with those gathered on stage and extending to the trumpeters high aloft. Dörner then follows with a crude, grainy blown tone and the rest of the musicians repeat the same process, playing sustained tones to create

a kind of flickering effect, with the sounds arriving in regular blurts from all around the space.

In the next section, thudding slaps of the hand across the trumpet mouthpieces make the rounds, followed by sibilant columns of unpitched breath. Dörner heralds the return of those cascading tones, but as the piece winds down, all of the players from above descend to the main floor of the space and spill out onto an increasingly cramped stage. During the descent, listeners could hear the phrase "*walls will fall*" shouted by different players in different parts of the space, as if participating in a political demonstration.

The combination of an international cast of players and the repeated chant during the climax powerfully recasts the Bible story to address xenophobia, closed borders and the increasing intolerance visited upon refugees.

Peter Margasak