



SUPPORT REFUGEES

PAPER PIANOS
ALARM WILL SOUND

MARY KOUYOUMDJIAN COMPOSER
NIGEL MAISTER WRITER
ALAN PIERSON CONDUCTOR

PAPER PIANOS

performed by **ALARM WILL SOUND**

created by **MARY KOUYOUMDJIAN** and **NIGEL MAISTER**

conducted by **ALAN PIERSON**

Music: Mary Kouyoumdjian
Text: Nigel Maister

- I. Overture: This is Not a Choice (Gee-Gee's Primer)
- II. Child of War
- III. All Good Things
- IV. Bad to Worse
- V. Flight
- VI. An Open Fist

Produced by Mary Kouyoumdjian and Gavin Chuck
Recording and Mixing Engineer: Daniel Neumann
Recorded interviews and electronics: Mary Kouyoumdjian
Mastering: Bernd Klug

PAPER PIANOS

Live Recording

Mary Kouyoumdjian: Co-Creator, Composer, Documentarian
Nigel Maister: Co-Creator, Writer, Staging Director
Alan Pierson: Music Director

Alarm Will Sound:

Domenica Fossati, flute
Christa Robinson, oboe and voice
Bill Kalinkos, clarinet
Elisabeth Stimpert, bass clarinet
Michael Harley, bassoon and voice
Adedeji Ogunfolu, horn
Tim Leopold, trumpet
Michael Clayville, bass trombone
Chris P. Thompson, percussion
Matt Smallcomb, percussion
John Orfe, piano
Courtney Orlando, violin and voice
Andie Tanning, violin and voice
Gillian Gallagher, viola
Norbert Lewandowski, cello and voice
Miles Brown, bass
Daniel Neumann, audio engineer

Interviewees:

Milad Yousufi
Getachew Bashir
Hani Ali
Akil Aljaysh



PROGRAM NOTES

"A socially urgent multi-media work that boldly melds music and audio documentary with first-person stories of refugees, exploring how music serves as solace and inspiration under conditions of displacement."

-2024 Pulitzer Prize Committee

The plight of refugees and immigrants has perhaps never been more precarious in America than it does at the present moment. *Paper Planos* (2024 Pulitzer Prize in Music Finalist) is an evening-length music-theatre and sonic-documentary work that speaks eloquently and evocatively to this moment, hauntingly exploring the journeys and obstacles refugees confront as they uproot lives and livelihoods, families and friendships, in search of safer harbors.

Co-created by Armenian-American, GRAMMY®-nominated composer Mary Kouyoumdjian and South African-American director and writer Nigel Maister, and performed by the contemporary, GRAMMY® Award-winning ensemble Alarm Will Sound, the work examines dislocation, longing, and optimism—both from the perspective of refugees themselves and from those who provide services to them. Drawing on interviews conducted by Maister and Kouyoumdjian with refugees and refugee resettlement workers, *Paper Planos* resists abstraction in favor of deeply personal testimony.

The work is anchored in four distinct voices of refugees and resettlement workers who have immigrated to New York: Afghan pianist, Milad Yousufi, and refugee resettlement workers (themselves refugees), Getachew "Gee-Gee" Bashir (Ethiopia), Hani Ali (Somalia), and Akil Aljaysh (Iraq). Milad Yousufi fled to New York from Kabul, where he lived under the Taliban's threat for pursuing music. His experiences of drawing piano keys on paper to teach himself to play in silence, thus avoiding life-threatening censure from the authorities, gives the piece its name. Getachew Bashir, a high-ranking judge in Ethiopia, left his country when the judiciary and his independence threatened to become co-opted by the regime. Hani Ali was a child of the refugee experience, born on the run and coming of age as a young girl negotiating the terrors of being stateless in a displacement camp. Akil Aljaysh, from a prominent family, fled Iraq after being tortured and worked his way through Syria and Lebanon to the United States.

Their interwoven stories of turmoil, displacement, flight, and hope—and of the inevitable compromises imposed by starting anew in an unfamiliar country—provide a deeply universal and humanistic foundation upon which Kouyoumdjian and Maister build this singular multimedia work. *Paper Planos* aims to engage audiences viscerally in one of the pressing problems of today's world, focusing on the heartfelt immediacy of real-life experience.

NOTES FROM NIGEL MAISTER

Much has changed since Mary Kouyoumdjian and I first started working on *Paper Planos*. Beyond the turmoil of our broader, current world, the toxic politics of the United States and the brutality of our current political regime have made, not only our lives that much more fraught and laden with despair, but they have made this country—so long an emblem of plurality, diversity, and welcoming (however inconsistent and flawed)—an inwardly focused, xenophobic, and brutally hostile environment for those seeking a better, safer, and freer life. And the violence our government has meted out on foreign lands is, at the time of writing, both horrifying and deeply concerning when it comes to the displacement of peoples and the future of our ability to provide help to those in need.

What piqued my interest when we began this project, were the stories of those we seldom, if ever, hear from or about: the people who aid, resettle, comfort, greet on arrival, and provide orientation and guidance for newly arriving refugees, many who arrive on these shores with little more than their memories of home and the clothes on their backs. The public understanding of the refugee system ignores or is largely blind to the rigorous and time-consuming bureaucratic screening and processing that leaves individuals and families in limbo and imprisoned in squalid camps for years and, sometimes, for decades.

Equally, we tend to envision the refugee's arrival on our shores as an ending—the happy resolution of a long and arduous journey towards "freedom." In fact, it's the beginning of another, equally difficult journey and one with very little governmental support. Brave and selfless non-governmental agencies shoulder the bulk of its burdens. Few of us can imagine what it would be like to arrive in a foreign place with little if any language skills or comprehension, facing cultural mores that are challenging at best, frightening at worst, and with only 90 days of assistance before one is expected to be self-sufficient and employed. It is a terrifying prospect.

Interviewing the four extraordinarily generous individuals whose stories make up *Paper Planos* gave us insight into all these journeys. Though each story is unique, all share one element: that the gratitude they have for being given a second chance in this country is tempered by real and painful sacrifice: of family, friends, comfort, the familiar, dreams, aspirations, and more. When one considers the depth and the cost of their sacrifice, the current closing of this country's door to those who come here seeking safety and protection, who have paid dearly for the opportunity to become part of this country's "melting pot," is shameful and egregious.

The text of the piece melds our interviews with our four protagonists into a structure that does not follow a strictly linear narrative. Instead, it collages them into a broadly thematic arc. It is anchored by Milad's story which forms a spine onto which the others' experiences are tethered. All the narratives share the experience of sacrifice and deliverance: though the nature of that deliverance is not always the one that had originally been dreamed of.

Just as Milad Yousufi's story of imagination, resilience, and determination in the face of war and terror, spoke originally to us of a kind of redemption from despair and loss through music, so we hope that *Paper Planos* might provoke in the listener an empathy and greater understanding for the plight of those "huddled masses" that once were promised succor in these flawed and deeply troubled United States.

Nigel Maister, Rochester, NY - April 2026

NOTES FROM MARY KOUYOUMDJIAN

I am the sister, daughter, cousin, niece, and granddaughter of refugees—from the Armenian Genocide, the Lebanese Civil War, and the conflicts that have continued in Lebanon since. These histories have profoundly shaped my work, drawing me toward themes of socio-political conflict, diasporic identity, and inviting understanding between audiences and storytellers through music-documentary practices. My own family was not in a position to speak openly about the atrocities they endured, and it is heartbreaking to witness history continue to repeat itself with ongoing global violence and displacement today. As a result, I feel both a deep responsibility and a strong urgency to use my own privilege—my freedom of expression—to draw attention to experiences of displacement.

Activism can take many different forms, and I believe the arts have a unique ability to speak difficult truths in hopes for a more promising reality. For my own work, my humble approach is to create projects that center on empathy: work that allows listeners to hear directly from real voices—individuals who have endured and persisted through humanitarian conflict—so seemingly distant experiences may resonate more closely through our shared desires for home, love, and freedom. It is my hope that this recognition can foster a more compassionate community—one more inclined to act. *Paper Pianos* is one realization of this hope, and it began from a simple gesture of kindness from Alarm Will Sound.

In 2016, Matt Marks—my late partner, composer/performer, and founding member of Alarm Will Sound—forwarded me an email from the ensemble's bassoonist, Michael Harley. Michael had written that his family member, an immigration lawyer, was representing a young and extraordinary pianist, Milad Yousufi, who had recently fled Kabul, Afghanistan. Milad's life had been threatened by extremists for being a musician; under Taliban rule, musical expression had been forbidden. Milad was in search of a piano to practice on, and, after an unforgettable meeting with Milad and his lawyer, I invited Milad into our home, where he was always welcome to our upright piano. As our friendship grew, Milad shared his remarkable story and unwavering commitment to music—describing how, while in hiding, he would draw piano keys on paper to practice in silence. He generously contributed interviews to *Paper Pianos*, driven by a desire to share his experience and to remind those of us in the United States of the freedoms we hold and too often take for granted.

While an early version of *Paper Pianos* centered solely on Milad's story, following the 2017 U.S. travel bans targeting predominantly Muslim countries, co-creator Nigel Maister and I expanded the project to include interviews with refugee resettlement workers, seeking to better understand the increasingly difficult process facing those arriving in New York State. What we learned was that each of the resettlement workers we spoke with had been refugees themselves, coming from different parts of the world and now dedicating their lives to supporting others through the immigration process. Raising one's voice is essential for any community to move forward, and so I am immensely grateful to Milad, Gee-Gee, Hani, and Akil for so generously sharing their stories and for the cherished gift of their trust.

Special thanks to Alarm Will Sound, Nigel Maister, Kevork Mourad, Afsoon Pajoufar, and Seth Reiser for their belief in this work and for their immense care in presenting these stories. As Milad shares in this piece, "If we close our heart like a fist, it will be closed completely. If you open it, you might find something interesting."

Mary Kouyoumdjian, Brooklyn, NY - April 2026

CREDITS

Executive producers: Michael Gordon, David Lang, Kenny Savelson and Julia Wolfe
Cantaloupe Club Producers Circle: Patricia & Martin Angerman, Eric Scott Klein, Ken Nielsen, Roger Stude and Ola Torstensson
Label manager: Bill Murphy
Licensing manager: Brian Petuch
Cover art: Nigel Maister, Mary Kouyoumdjian
Graphic design: DM Stith

World Premiere performance recorded live on February 25, 2023 at Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC) in Troy, New York. The production was directed by Nigel Maister, with music direction by Alan Pierson, projection design by Kevork Mourad, scenic design by Afsoon Pajoufar, and lighting design by Seth Reiser.

Paper Pianos was commissioned by Alarm Will Sound, and received additional support from the Cheswaty Foundation; Charles S. Miller Award of Columbia University Music Department; Pacific Harmony Foundation; New York State Council on the Arts Individual Artist Composer Commission Grant with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature; National Endowment for the Arts; and a project grant from The MAP Fund. The MAP Fund is primarily supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. Additional funds come from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

The staged version of *Paper Pianos*, composed by Mary Kouyoumdjian and performed by Alarm Will Sound, was commissioned by EMPAC/Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY and supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and New Music USA, made possible by annual program support and/or endowment gifts from Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, Helen F. Whitaker Fund, The Aaron Copland Fund for Music, Inc., Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Howard Gilman Foundation, Anonymous.

Paper Pianos is published by Track Pack Productions
Libretto published by legeNd productions

This work includes pre-recorded sounds and interviews on topics of conflict and violence that some listeners may find disturbing, and may not be suitable for children

The reason that I practiced piano on a piece of paper was:
music was completely forbidden during the Taliban period.



Paper Pianos

Written by Nigel Maister

Edited from interviews conducted by
Nigel Maister and Mary Kouyoumdjian

Interview recordings and audio editing by Mary Kouyoumdjian

I. Overture: This is Not a Choice (Gee-Gee's Primer)

GETACHEW

When I see them, I just see them like someone like me. This is, all of us at some point. When there is a war, civil war or unrest in a country, they run to the next country. They just run for their lives.

When they go there, the United Nations set up a camp, a refugee camp, in agreement with the host country.

In the camp there is no running water. There is no educational facility. There is no medical facility.

A camp is designed for a temporary shelter. That is deliberate. They want to discourage others from coming and living there unless those who actually need that protection.

They spend many, many years in the camp. Some refugees who come here, they spent 20 years in the camp.

So, in the refugee camp, the UN compiles biographic information. They determine whether the person qualifies to be a refugee. It is a status, a protected status by law. There are criteria to qualify (those criteria are different from other immigrants): fear of persecution, for experiencing persecution, or for a perceived fear of persecution. For five reasons: nationality; ethnicity; religion; belonging to a certain political group; belonging to a certain social group.

So, if a person is persecuted or has a perceived fear of persecution for these five reasons and left his country, that is one of the conditions to be a refugee.

The main difference between refugees and other immigrants is the choice they make. Refugees didn't make a choice to leave their countries.

The UN assigns the refugees to the different countries that resettle refugees, and one of them is the US. The US sends its own staff, different staff.

They interview them, they screen them.

And that screening process is very intense.

The Homeland Security gets involved, the FBI gets involved, the Department of Defense. The State Department definitely, but Homeland Security, yes.

So, the different security agencies they screen the interview, collect biological data.

And they go through all the documents and information; they match that with the data they have.

And if there is any red flag, they repeat the process.

On average it takes about two years to get screened.

And once they are done with that, they go for medical screening.

And they get cultural orientation before coming here.

And once they are done with that and they can be admissible to the US, they assign the case to one of the nine ... voluntary agencies, and those voluntary agencies, they assign the case to agencies like ours.

That is the time that I get the information.

OK. My name is Getachew Bashir. But here no one calls me with Getachew. So, I had to pick a name and they call me Gee-Gee. I'm known by this name.

I work at Catholic Family Center in Rochester, New York, and I am a refugee resettlement program manager.

I accept or reject the refugees before they come here.

I make the decision.

I want everybody to understand: they didn't choose. They are forced to be refugees.

And once they leave ... their number one goal is to go back home.

But when that home is destroyed and there is no chance of going back to home—

They run to the next country. They just run for their lives.

These are fellow human beings like us who are falling in a hard time and looking for a safe place to live their lives.

I try to help them as much as I can. Because we all have just the same desire to live a better and safer life. And I do my best. That is what I am here for.

That is how when I see them. I just see them like someone like me. Just someone like me and all of us.

We got help. All of us. No one just born and just did everything by him by his own or her own.



II. Child of War

MILAD speaks.

MILAD

I was in love with the piano's keys.

Black and white, black and white.

It's quite similar to my life.

Like black and white and black and white.

So, I used to paint pianos there on the paper. Two black keys and three blacks. With

the ruler I made something similar to the piano keys.

And I knew that this side could sound very high...

...and the other side could sound very low.

I don't like the word impossible, but to be realistic it was impossible to find a piano or even a keyboard or a harmonium there.

On the other hand, I was feeling safe because it doesn't make any sound to play on paper piano.

Sometimes also playing drums on my bed. I used to find some sticks from the trees and then play some drums on my pillows.

The reason that I practiced piano on a piece of paper was music was completely forbidden during the Taliban period. And even the paintings were forbidden during the Taliban period.

They say "music is forbidden in Islam."

"Someone who plays music is like non-Muslims...

... and you know

we have to kill non-Muslims."

That's why I used to draw that and then play and imagine the sound in my mind there.

I could never think that one day I would be able to play on a real piano.

*

My name is Milad Yousufi.

I was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, June 6, 1994, during the extreme civil war.

A new voice.

HANI

My mom said that we were in the middle of nowhere just running to this next safest country.

My name is Hani Ali. I'm a program director at Mary's Place Refugee Outreach Center, Rochester, New York.

I'm from Somalia. But I have never seen Somalia. I was born in the war in 1982 in, um, in a truck where my family were migrating and my mom was pregnant, so nobody even thought that I was going to be alive.

In the middle of nowhere just running.

Just running and running and running. And they finally settled in Uganda. Trying to find the safest camp that would take them.

We was in there for 10 years.

MILAD

When you live in a war for five or six or seven years, then it becomes like a habit.

I've been in a poor family during the civil war. My father could barely feed us.

When my sister born, my...my father barely could find a doll for her so that she could play with that.

My father always telling me: "you're not a kid." Kids in our country, they're supporting a family. They work. They do not go to school. I was lucky enough to have a family they never let me work on the streets. They realized I wanted to be an artist.

HANI

I was a soccer player. We was going to school whenever it was available; whenever they got a teacher.

That school sometimes were, you know, under just under a tree where the shade is.

The school was walking distance. It was scary. It would get dark and, if you're a girl, obviously it was more scarier.

As a female growing in that camp itself, you know, what's going to happen to you.

MILAD

One day I remember I was standing near to the window. I was trying to watch the yard, and finally I've been witnessing a rocket coming and then destroyed the neighbor's house.

And then it was one of the worst days of my life.

We have been waiting, like, when is it our turn to die?

HANI

Back then I was a girl. We were young, we were not going to think about all that crazy stuff.

MILAD

It really affects five-year old children to see that kind of thing.

Still when I hear some extreme loud sounds, it makes me sometimes mad, because I can't bear that.

HANI

Sending your daughter to school that's like probably 10 miles and you have to walk.

My Mom was concerned about my safety.

MILAD

There were lots of bullets in our yard, because when the Taliban had been fighting, some of the bullets would come into our yard, so we had been playing with those bullets.

We used to play with mines. We didn't know what they looked like. Most of the mines, if you see it, looks something like a plaything—a doll, something ... or a pen.

My mom was always telling me, "It could explode at any time, so you have to be careful," but, we didn't have anything else to play with.

HANI

Now that I think back to it as a parent, I would never, if I had the choice, I would not send my daughter for school. I would just keep her home.



MILAD

In the morning I've been playing with a friend. And by night I've heard like he died because the Taliban have been fighting and a bullet cut his head off. It was hard for me to believe at the time, like, how it's possible to play with a friend in the morning and afternoon you realize that you lose it?

So, my childhood was playing with bullets, hearing rocket sounds, and witnessing my friend's funeral and seeing people, I mean seeing Taliban cutting hands off the people. I mean it was completely of violence there that I've been living.

That's why I'm telling like I never had a childhood.

I see the death like in front of me.

III. All Good Things

A new voice, AKIL.

AKIL

We have a really wonderful childhood especially in wintertime. Like those days we have we go out and play and we getting wet and we see all the pigeons coming out. Old friends, and everybody there. And I remember we go and we buy—we call it over there [Arabic word]—is just like a bagels. We build a small fire and just heat them up and eat them while it's raining outside. It's a really great memory.

My name is Akil and I work at uh Catholic Family Center as a job counselor.

I'm from Iraq, south of Iraq.

I have two brothers. One of them a doctor and the other one he is a math teacher. And my older brother, the doctor, he started working in some ... some hospital and at night the Baath Party, they bring somebody, they beat almost to death. And they tell him: "Ok, you have—". And they give him [my brother] a shot.

They told him you have to inject him with this shot. He know what the shot is. So, it's going to kill him right away. So, he said: "I spent all my life studying medicine to help people but not to kill people."

He said: "I know what you're doing, but I know my job and I cannot do that. And he left the room.

Next day they come into the hospital and took him, and we don't know that, like, for about six months, we don't know what's going on.

They call my father and, back there in our culture if you say "dog" it mean really like a "bitch" here, so: "Come in and take your dog."

And they told him to bring—

And they told him to bring the money for—

And they told him to bring the money for the bullet that they shot him with.

A moment here.

Few months after, they took my other brother.

They took him and he got killed because...

MILAD

Most of the time the Taliban, if they've been hear the news from anyone that they have musical instrument, they ... they used to come and then they used search for it.

AKIL

They said: "You start to create a kind of underground party and you planning to do uprising and all of that."

MILAD

The people used to afraid of the Taliban and they used to dig and bury their instruments under the ground. And there was a family who was burying their piano under the ground.

AKIL

And you know my dad always told me you know just keep your mouth shut. Do not say anything.

Keep your mouth shut

Keep your mouth shut

MILAD

And then, when the Taliban left in the Karzai time, they took it out.

They took the piano out of that yard.

But it was under the rain and snow and sand for two years and there's a lot of things that were broken.

And then, finally, I could convince my father to buy that piano for a couple of hundred dollars. I mean, we have no hope that I could fix that one day. The piano was like 60 percent destroyed.

There was a guy who was making harmonium and living in Pakistan, and I could find him, finally, and he could fix the keys for me, and it could sound like a piano. It was not professionally in a good situation, but at least it was the piano.

AKIL

You know in college and in every class, there is somebody who is writing to the government what's happening in class. So, I have someone in our class that he hate me.

And the end of the third years of college, they came in and they took me from classroom. So, they come and knock the door, say: "Akil Aljaysh." They took me like that ... even ... I couldn't take my books and stuff.

So, I've been tortured.

They used to put us in one meter corner. About 17 people, standing, all the day all the night.

MILAD

It was a dream come true. I couldn't sleep. I've been practicing all the time. I've been cleaning my piano, and I've been sleeping under the piano.

I used sleep under it. It was a dream come true. But at the end of this story, I sold it because of my mother.

AKIL

So, I've been tortured in prison. Those, um, my two fingers. This one been chopped because this is—I used to be left-handed ... so, like, that this metal door—they closed the door for two or three hours—so, this one survive. But this one is being chopped off.

MILAD

And because we had to buy a LED TV for our house.

AKIL

They closed the door for two three hours.

MILAD

I could notice the, sort of the sadness in my mother's face when guests were coming and we didn't have any TV.

AKIL

I never thought that a human being can take this much.

MILAD

That is a very common thing to have TV in our house. And I sold it for a few hundreds. And then we bought a TV. And then I lied to my mom, and I said I can find much, much better than this piano. She didn't know that there is no pianos in the country like that. I knew it was one of the very few that could survive from the war.

AKIL

You will think nobody will survive. But we still—

And because my father he has some influence, so he pay bribe. And after about six

months and half I just got out of jail, and he said "You know what? You're not going to stay here. I don't want to lose you just like I lost your brothers."

Becoming fractured.

I don't want to lose you—

This metal door they closed.

I lost your brothers—

Because in the beginning—

This metal door they closed—

You're not going to stay here—

You cannot imagine how—it's not about—

Just the feeling—

They closed the door—

Your family they will never see you—

You're sitting with yourself; this what happened to me—

And I have to—

And I have to—

I have to deal with it.

After... when they start beating you, you feel it in the beginning and then something is like stone inside you. You don't feel it. I mean you feel it but it's just like you don't.

You will think nobody will survive.

Pause.



IV. *Bad to Worse*

MILAD sings a lullaby.

MILAD

"Oh, my dear son, go to sleep very calmly. One day, my son, will be all ... will be older, and then he'll be an authority and a lawyer, or in charge of someone."

GETACHEW

So, ok: I am originally from Ethiopia. I came to the U.S. about 14 years ago. Before coming here, I went to a law school in Ethiopia and have my law degree—Bachelor of Law degree.

Worked as a high court judge. And worked as a legal researcher. And, on the side, I went back to school and studied sociology.

MILAD

"I pray that one day you'll be successful. Go to sleep, oh my dear son. There will be no darkness after that. I'm with you, and I will support you. Go to sleep, oh my dear son."

GETACHEW

While working in the court as a high court judge, we used to see politically charged cases. And there was intervention from the administration: what to do or not to do.

The lullaby returns.

So, that wasn't easy for a judge.

I just couldn't work under that condition.

You cannot just say, "I stay independent." That wasn't an option.

Either you take orders or you don't.

I just couldn't live and work in that kind of environment.

I just couldn't live and work—

I just couldn't live—

I just couldn't—

MILAD

"Oh, my son. What did you bring for me from Kabul?"

And then the son: "I brought to you a pair of shoes which is orange."

"Go to sleep, oh my son. I'll be with you. Don't be afraid of the darkness. I'll be with you."

"Don't be afraid of the darkness. I'll be with you."

The lullaby ends.

A moment.

One day we've been in a concert hall. I've been among the audience.

In 2014.

In Kabul. This is in Kabul, Afghanistan. The CCF, which is cultural center of France.

My students have been performing there.

And then we had been playing background music for theatre.

And I had to sit there as an audience to encourage them.

And they've been playing the theater about the people who explodes themselves—how bad it is; when a person explodes themselves, how it feels and why they do it.

It was like a part of a play. He'd sort of put up ... put a paper all over himself, somehow. And then he acted like he died ... to play the role of a suicide bomber.

And the actor exploded himself like in an act. He was pretending that he exploded himself on the stage. It was an act—acting like ... uh ... Broadway here.

And then on the same time: an actual—a real explosion.

At the same time, it happened. The actual suicide bomber exploded himself.

In the concert hall.

A guy explodes himself among the audience in the concert hall and then everything, like, comes ... the glass and all the lights come down, and then the people who survived and who have been a bit far from the accident thought that's part of the program.

Because you're seeing the same thing on the stage. And then, a couple of them started clapping and whistling. They thought it's part of an act, but it wasn't actually.

And then the roof came down and then the people started screaming. And then it was completely blurred and dust and everything was all over.

But when ... when the lights come on again, they see it ... like there was blood on the floor and parts of human body: the hands, the feet, and then it was the—I mean, it was the time that my friends—one of my friends told me—he said, like, there was a piece of someone's mid-leg just came in to his shoulders. And his clothes was completely blood, full of blood and red.

You can smell only some gunpowder ... and dust ... and sometimes blood and...

...smells like death.

And, uh ...

You sort of feel that it's the last day you have.

That's it. This pretty much it.

You are done.

A moment.

We couldn't practice for months; couldn't laugh, we couldn't smile; just talking about what happened and what do you do next.

No one goes there anymore for concert. It was the only concert hall we had.

My friends survived, but they left the music school. And there is no one from my friends in my period in the school anymore.

I wanted to be with my mother—support her—but she wanted me to survive somehow rather than staying in Afghanistan and get killed in an explosion.

V. Flight

AKIL

And I flee.

And the last person I saw is my dad. And he gave me a hug and—he was crying—and he tell me:

“Son...if you love me, I don’t want to see you again. As long as the government here, I don’t want to see you. So, wherever you go and you have your freedom, it is your country.”

And I flee the Iraq without any passport.

HANI

...just running to this next safest country

...just running and running / and running

At / above:

AKIL

So I flee Iraq to the north. I went to Syria from Syria I went to Lebanon and from Lebanon I went / to Jordan and then I came back to Lebanon.

At / above:

GETACHEW

When there is a war, they run / to the next country.

They run to the next country.*

At / above:

HANI

...just running and running and running

At * above:

AKIL

I went from Lebanon without passport to Italy ... to some places / coming back and ‘til I apply with the United Nations.*

At / above:

GETACHEW

They just they run for their lives.

At * above:

AKIL

And I got accepted as a refugee.

And I came here.

Beat.

HANI

We knew that we were going to go somewhere in the New York State.

We have no idea.

He thought they were going to take us from there to another refugee camp in, you know, the New York State.

AKIL

It’s more than just a plane ride. It’s kind of a freedom ride. It’s just like the ride that you wait all your life for.

So, it’s amazing feeling. It was like between crying and laughing and, you know, you feel you left everything behind.

HANI

And the snow. The snow was just shocking. We’re like what is this white stuff? And then we touch it, oh my God, it’s something cold. And we were not cold.

I think we just had that blood of African-ness still heated up in us.

The most difficult thing was, I think, just the food. What I ate back—, did not look like what’s here. I was kinda scared. And being a Muslim woman, you know how to read ingredients and not knowing that, you know, a /pepperoni could come in the beef.



At / above:

AKIL

pepperoni pizza. So, came here knowing nobody, zero language. The first hot meal I get—you know, I'm Muslim, I'm coming from Iraq—ok, I may eat pizza, but not pepperoni pizza. I don't eat this. OK?

HANI

So, that whole food—, was hard to assimilate to.

AKIL

So, it's inside me: I need to help people who's coming just like me—refugee.

I need to help people.

I need to help.

And you see them. You say: “Welcome home, you ... you been arrived and everything OK.” And you see the smile on their face.

And they say: "We will never ever forget the first time you say ‘Salaam Alaykum’ in the airport. Oh my God, you coming from heaven!"

HANI

You know ... we have ... we have everything we want. Yes. The basic things. You know what I mean ... just, you know ... going back and just resting in your couch that's yours, and you know it's not going anywhere. So, that's home.

AKIL

Welcome home. You been arrived.

VI. *An Open Fist*

MILAD

Most of the day when I wake up, and then I cry for no reason.

GETACHEW

When I came here as an immigrant, I had to take any job that I can find. So, I was working as a store assistant—not even a cashier.

I had worked as a room service ... a room server in a hotel.

So. It wasn't easy just from being a high court judge then to come here and mop the floor.

That wasn't easy. And, at first, I didn't share my background story because people, I thought, they wouldn't believe me. So, I didn't share for some time who I was. And it took me some time just to let people know.

You just feel extremely lonely here.

AKIL

I was hoping to become a lawyer since I was little boy.

And then that changed.

HANI

And, yes, it didn't come true. I'm not going for OBGYN surgeon anymore.

GETACHEW

That is how I just see ... when I see them, I just see them like someone like me.

Just someone like me.

There was an Iraqi family that I work with. The father was a statistician back in Iraq.

And they came here. And he was determined to go to school.

But he has a wife and two or three children. But here, there is no help to go to school.

If you are able-bodied you have to work. There is no chance of going to school.

So, he was just torn apart. So, while he was trying to ... just trying to figure out what to do, their public assistance got stopped.

And because of that, couldn't pay rent. And they told them they have to leave ... the house. Eviction. Now they didn't have a place to go. No ... no family here.

And I don't remember how...

Just when you cannot ... when your hands are tied, but you see these people just need help and there is no one ... no family, no community, no government. Just good family getting evicted.

We just talked to public assistance.

And I don't remember how ... we just talked to public assistance. And they agreed to pay the rent. They were behind two—. Public assistance—. They would pay.

And when I told them, just—I cannot forget the scream of his wife. I didn't do that much. She was talking in Arabic. And I knew it was just a praise and some kind of prayer and something like—.

The excitement and the joy.

Because they were scared that they would be kicked out and be homeless. Just the scream. I cannot just forget ... just she was screaming and talking in Arabic ... just a praise and a prayer.

MILAD

I cry for no reason. Sometimes I even don't know what is the reason. And then I realize it's that there's something. I am living in a New York.

I'm safe, that's a good thing. It's a hope for me one day I'll be able to invite my family.

But 'til then, every day—sort of every single moment—I'm dying inside of myself.

GETACHEW

Now, a home a home can be lots of things for different people. When I came, home meant just where my parents lived and my brothers and I lived. And where we get together and just share our stories, share our dreams. That was home.

So, at first I missed the home that I had in Ethiopia.

But now I got married and have my own children. Home for me is a place where my wife and children feel free, feel safe.

Now what I miss is just...no one is around.

When something personal happens, no one is coming.

We go to the hospital, have the baby. And no one is waiting, no one is cooking for my wife, and ... it is just ... no one around.

No one is coming.

There is no one to share.

MILAD

If I do this with my hands, if I make a fist, I can never see something. If I open it, I can definitely see it. If we close our heart like a fist, it will be closed completely; if you

open it, you might find something interesting.

GETACHEW

There is no small help in refugee resettlement. All ... all any kind of help is a big deal. How to ride a bus, where to stand, how to pay, how to ask for a stop. This is all of us at some point. We got help. All of us. No one just was born and just did everything by his own or her own.

MILAD

Here, all the time, I've been asked the same question: what do I do for a living. I was already tired of this question.

When we ask each other, the first question is, like: how are you? And, may God be happy with you. We pray for each other.

It was a long time that I haven't seen any to come to me and then tell me in Persian that may God bless me. The blessings of God be upon me. We pray for each other.

How are you?

What are you doing?

How are you?

We say: "Salam alaykum rahmatullah."

May God be ... may God's blessing be upon you. "Assalamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuah."

May you be safe

May you be safe

Assalamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuah.

May you be safe and sound.

A moment.

America changed me.

All the things that my father used to tell me: one day you will be a real man, and you have to manage your life. And it's all happening here.

It feels really amazing to pursue music like this, alive, rather than imagining it or drawing the piano on papers.

It feels really amazing.

I really feel alive. It's as if you see a ... a wonderful picture from Greenland on the wallpaper of your computer, and you go there and then actually see the actual location landscape.

It is the same feeling.

END





ALARM WILL SOUND

ALARM WILL SOUND is “one of the most vital and original ensembles on the American music scene” (*The New York Times*). A GRAMMY®-winning, 22-member band committed to innovative performances and recordings of today’s music, they have established a reputation for performing demanding music with energetic virtuosity.

With classical skill and unlimited curiosity, Alarm Will Sound takes on music from a wide variety of styles. “Stylistically omnivorous and physically versatile” (*The Log Journal*), their repertoire comes from around the world, and ranges from the arch-modernist to the pop-influenced. Since its inception, Alarm Will Sound has been associated with composers at the forefront of contemporary music. The group itself includes many composer-performers, which allows for an unusual degree of insight into the creation and performance of new work.

Alarm Will Sound is the resident ensemble at the Mizzou International Composers Festival. Held each July at the University of Missouri in Columbia, the festival features eight world premieres by early-career composers. In 2013-14, Alarm Will Sound served as artists-in-residence at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Alarm Will Sound may be heard on nineteen recordings, including *Land of Winter*, their most recent release featuring music of Donnacha Dennehy, and the premiere recording of Steve Reich’s *Radio Rewrite*. *Acoustica*, their genre-bending, critically-acclaimed album, features live-performance arrangements of music by electronica guru Aphex Twin. alarmwillsound.com



Photo credit: Thomas Fichter



Photo credit: Nir Arieli

ALAN PIERSON

GRAMMY®-winning conductor **ALAN PIERSON** has been praised by *The New York Times* as “a dynamic conductor and musical visionary” and by *The New Yorker* as “a sensational force” with “powerful ideas about how to renovate the concert experience.” He is the founding Artistic Director and conductor of the acclaimed ensemble Alarm Will Sound. Pierson cultivates deep relationships with living composers, including Steve Reich, Donnacha Dennehy, Mary Kouyoumdjian, David T. Little, Jlin, and many others. He centers interdisciplinary collaboration and is a premier interpreter of contemporary opera. His signature theatrical performances engross audiences in deep and affecting experiences of contemporary music. In fall 2026 the Park Avenue Armory premieres his latest production, Steve Reich’s *Music for 18 Musicians: Staged Variations*. Pierson has released more than 30 albums and is Co-Director of the Northwestern University Contemporary Music Ensemble. He previously served as Artistic Director of the Brooklyn Philharmonic and Principal Conductor of the Dublin-based Crash Ensemble. As a guest conductor, he has appeared with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, London Sinfonietta, and LA Opera. alanpierson.com

MARY KOUYOUMDJIAN

MARY KOUYOUMDJIAN is a GRAMMY®-nominated composer and documentarian with projects ranging from concert works to multimedia collaborations and film scores. As a first-generation Armenian-American and having come from a family directly affected by the Lebanese Civil War and Armenian Genocide, her compositional work often integrates recorded testimonies with resilient individuals and field recordings of place to invite empathy by humanizing complex experiences around social and political conflict. A finalist for the 2024 Pulitzer Prize in Music for her music-documentary *Paper Pianos*, Kouyoumdjian has received commissions for the New York Philharmonic, Kronos Quartet, Carnegie Hall, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Beth Morrison Projects, Alarm Will Sound, Bang on a Can, Brooklyn Youth Chorus, and Roomful of Teeth among others. Her work has been featured internationally at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, LA Opera, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MASS MoCA, the Barbican Centre, Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), Millennium Park, Benaroya Hall, Prototype Festival, Cabrillo Festival, Big Ears Festival, Cal Performances, Tribeca Film Festival, and PBS. Her debut portrait album, *WITNESS* with the Kronos Quartet, was released in 2025, and the world premiere recording of her opera, *Adoration*, was nominated for a 2025 GRAMMY® Award for Best Opera Recording. Kouyoumdjian is on faculty at The New School and is based in Brooklyn, NY. marykouyoumdjian.com



Photo credit: Desmond White/Osheen Harruthoonyan



Photo credit: Lydia Jimenez

NIGEL MAISTER

NIGEL MAISTER is a director, writer, designer and visual artist, and performer, and a founding member of Alarm Will Sound. Nigel has staged, developed and/or designed concerts at venues throughout the country and internationally including Columbia's Miller Theatre, The Kitchen, Zankel Hall, Cal Performances, the Holland and River to River festivals, and in Korea. He wrote the libretto for and directed *I Was Here I Was I*, a site-specific music-theatre work created for the Temple of Dendur (music by Kate Soper) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, co-developed/directed AWS's acclaimed 1969, *Conceived*, designed, and directed John Cage's *Song Books* for the Holland Festival, and performed his own text, *Paper Trails* (music by Stefan Freund), at the John Adams-curated *In Your Ear* Festival at Zankel Hall. Nigel wrote and is developing *A Young Person's Guide to New Music* and its accompanying piece, *Anindi, Wilson, and the Super Super* for Alarm Will Sound. Nigel is a MacDowell fellow and currently serves as the Artistic Director of the International Theatre Program at the University of Rochester.

KEVORK MOURAD

KEVORK MOURAD, born in Qamishli, Syria, studied at the Yerevan Institute of Fine Art and now lives in New York. A painter and video artist, he creates animated and live visuals presented worldwide, including at the Spoleto Festival (2022), Korea National Opera (2020), Washington National Cathedral (2020), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2010–2019), Aga Khan Museum (2018), Walt Disney Concert Hall (2018), Elbphilharmonie (2017), and MuCEM (2013–2015). His work is held in major collections such as the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, the Spurlock Museum, and the Aga Khan Museum, which acquired *Seeing Through Babel* in 2023. A longtime member of the Silkroad Ensemble, Mourad was featured in *The Music of Strangers* (dir. Morgan Neville). He received the Robert Bosch Stiftung Prize (2016) and NYSCA grant (2023), and was a Fountainhead resident (2024). His work has been widely exhibited across the US, Europe, and the Middle East. kevorkmourad.com



Photo credit: Mark Gurevich



Photo credit: Maria Baranova

AFSOON PAJOUFAR

AFSOON PAJOUFAR is an Obie Award–winning stage designer originally from Tehran, Iran, and based in New York City. She works across theatre, opera, and other live performances. Her work has been presented at institutions including Lincoln Center, Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), Theatre for a New Audience (TFANA), Playwrights Horizons, MCC Theater, the Fisher Center at Bard, Berkeley Rep, and LA Opera. Internationally, her work has been shown at Schauspiel Köln in Cologne and Alte Münze in Berlin. afsoonpajoufar.com

SETH REISER

SETH REISER is a New York based designer who works in theatre, opera, dance, and music. Seth's work has been seen throughout the United States and internationally. Recent work in music includes Schoenberg's *Erwartung* at San Francisco Symphony directed by Peter Sellars; Handel's *Aci Galatea é Polifemo* with the Philharmonia Baroque Opera in San Francisco directed by Christopher Alden; Henze's *El Cimarrón* at Festival Impulso in Mexico City directed by Robert Castro; the set and lighting design for Bernstein's *MASS* at the LA Philharmonic and NY Philharmonic, directed by Elkhannah Pulitzer; JS Bach's *Matthew Passion* (Berlin Philharmonic) at the Park Avenue Armory directed by Peter Sellars; Alisa Weilerstein's *Fragments* directed by Elkhannah Pulitzer. Seth received his Bachelor's Degree from Ohio Wesleyan University and MFA from NYU/Tisch School of the Arts.
sethreiserdesign.com



Photo credit: Hanako Yamaguchi



For more about everything you hear on this recording, visit cantaloupemusic.com, alarmwillsound.com, and marykouyoumdjian.com. To get specially priced advance copies of all our new releases, as well as catalog discounts and other perks, sign up for the Cantaloupe Club or our digital subscription service at cantaloupemusic.com/fans. As always, we thank you for your support.



CANTALOUPE MUSIC IS FROM THE CREATORS OF BANG ON A CAN.
© & © 2026 Cantaloupe Music, LLC. All rights reserved.
Unauthorized duplication is a violation of applicable laws.
Cantaloupe Music, 80 Hanson Place, Suite 301, Brooklyn, NY 11217
www.cantaloupemusic.com | CA21223
UPC/EAN: 713746322328