

JOHN KING (b. 1953)

FREE PALESTINE

THE SECRET QUARTET

80786-2

Free Palestine (2013–14)

- | | | |
|----|---------------------------------|------|
| 1 | Sultani Yakah—Ijlil al-Qibliyya | 3:38 |
| 2 | Bayati Shuri—Al-Sarafand | 2:33 |
| 3 | Nahawand Murassah—Sabbarin | 4:34 |
| 4 | Humayun—Nuris | 7:30 |
| 5 | Hijaz Kar Kurd Nahawand—Gaza | 1:10 |
| 6 | Athar Kurd—Deir Yassin | 9:52 |
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| 12 | Rast—Ma'alul | 5:20 |
| 13 | Kurd Nahawand—Qalunya | 4:13 |
| 14 | Huzam—Khan Yunis* | 6:05 |
| 15 | Hisar Nahawand—Saffuriya | 4:06 |

Cornelius Dufallo, Jennifer Choi, violins; Ljova Zhurbin, viola;

Yves Dharamraj, cello

* with John King, oud

TT: 65:19

New World Records, 20 Jay Street, Suite 1001, Brooklyn, NY 11201

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“FREE PALESTINE.”

Even before you’ve heard a single note of this recent long-form work by the composer and instrumentalist **John King** (b. 1953), the work may well have made an impact for its title alone: a seeming reference to one of the more daunting, divisive sociopolitical conditions in modern global history.

Can a work of classical music make a political statement?

The answer seems so evident that the question hardly seems to bear asking, yet when encountering a new piece like *Free Palestine*—a title in which King means for the word *free* to bear equal significance in both the political and musical senses—the query rises anew. Where to begin? With familiar works pressed into modes of service for which they were never intended? One only need think of Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy,” the choral apotheosis of his Ninth Symphony, co-opted for some grandiose convocation, whether democratic or despotic.

Other such works have been made to measure. Composers, at least those who have had to answer to the patrons and partisans who might fund their labors, have been pressed at times to write works expressly meant for this or that civic function or festive occasion. Such occasional works frequently fall into the category of minor output, a sideline within a composer’s primary body of work. (*Finlandia*, by Jean Sibelius, is among the exceptions: a genuinely fine piece motivated by activism.)

But political expression can manifest in different ways within a composition, and certainly there have been composers who have labored to make sociopolitical points with their works. Think again of Beethoven, who surely had in mind one kind of statement when he initially dedicated what would become his avant-garde Third Symphony (“Eroica”) to Napoleon Bonaparte, but then took a different position when, upon learning that Bonaparte had declared himself emperor, he withdrew his endorsement, by some accounts destroying the work’s title page.

Since Beethoven’s time, and cognizant of his example, other composers have found the classical music tradition a willing vessel for social critique. Some, including Luigi Nono and Cornelius Cardew, embraced aesthetic activism wholly, transcending the political to verge on the polemical.

Others made points through rigorous and learned manipulation of culturally freighted source material, such as Stockhausen’s manipulation of national anthems to utopian ends in *Hymnen* (1966–67) and Frederic Rzewski’s virtuosic variations on a Chilean protest song in *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* (1975). In a 1983 speech at the University of Wisconsin, Rzewski offered this perspective:

Art and politics are not the same thing. There are points where they converge, and points where they diverge. One cannot easily be put into the service of the other without weakening it, depriving it of some of its force as a vehicle of communication. The politics of the art world tends to be fairly irrelevant to politics in general. Whereas the kind of art which satisfies the political world is often pretty feeble as art. An effective combination of the two is nonetheless theoretic-

cally possible, perhaps because it is practically necessary; a condition that may exist only in certain moments of history.¹

For King—who became politically active during his late teenage years in Minneapolis during the Vietnam War era, participating in labor actions and protests, and later wrote music inspired by the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa—the question of Palestine has been an issue of particular interest. He educated himself by reading the work of Hannah Arendt, the political philosopher and social critic, the poetry and fiction of Mahmoud Darwish, first-person histories of Palestinians from the *al-Nakbah* period, and by following Middle Eastern news sources on the Internet. It follows, then, that *Free Palestine*, a unified sequence of relatively brief string quartet pieces composed from May 2013 to August 2014, is to some extent politically motivated.

Crucially, though, the work—wholly instrumental and essentially abstract in nature—does not convey a specific agenda. It is neither overt protest, nor a rallying cry. Instead, what *Free Palestine* ultimately represents is a kind of personal idealism, expressed in the action of a North American composer in the 21st century negotiating a new personal relationship with traditional Arabic music: experimenting with melodic modes (*maqam'at*) and rhythmic cycles (*iqa'at*), and transforming those elements for conventional Western instruments—personalizing the music, in a very real sense, in order to embed it within his own cultural milieu.

“I was listening to Arabic music, looking at their scale structure, how their music was put together, how their rhythmic things were put together, and it sort

of was a swirl that just kept spinning,”² King says. A hands-on explorer, King enacted his investigations with his viola, and determined that the appropriate forum for working out his discoveries was the string quartet—a format to which he had turned fruitfully many times before, including previous genre-hybrid works such as *Sweet HardWood* (1998), *AllSteel* (2003), and *10 Mysteries* (2007).

“If I’m thinking about new ways of dealing with time, I write a string quartet that has that,” King says. “And if I’m doing something with these Arabic scales and rhythmic modes, then I go to the string quartet.”

The way King approached elements of Arabic music and adapted them for his own use might be described as a kind of musicological idealism, one resembling the manner in which he previously had wrought transformations of elements derived from American blues and rock-based idioms for earlier string-quartet compositions—and even, in a sense, the traditional concepts he inherited from the European concert-music lineage. Asked in 2010 by the violinist and composer Cornelius Dufallo—a member of The Secret Quartet, which made the present recording—to name his musical influences, King cited an illuminating tally:

Muddy Waters, J. S. Bach, Jimi Hendrix, W. A. Mozart, Little Walter, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Eric Clapton, Erik Satie, John Cage, Radiohead, I. Xenakis, Perotin, Anonymous 4, Buddy Guy, and again Jimi Hendrix... and probably again W. A. Mozart... (mostly his ‘singspiele’).³

¹ Frederic Rzewski: http://musicmavericks.publicradio.org/features/archive_rzewski.html

² In-person interview with the composer, January 31, 2017. All subsequent quotes by the composer, except where noted, are taken from this interview.

³ Cornelius Dufallo interview: <http://blog.corneliusdufallo.com/index.php?itemid=211>

In approaching what would become *Free Palestine*, King turned his attention to recordings by a wide variety of Middle Eastern performers. Prominent among the artists whose work he absorbed were the contemporary Lebanese singer, composer, and oud player Marcel Khalife (b. 1970); the iconic Egyptian singer, songwriter, and actress Umm Kulthum (birthdate uncertain—d. 1975); the Iraqi oud player Naseer Shamma (b. 1963), and the Tunisian musicologist, conductor, composer, and flutist Salah El Mahdi (1925–2014).

The gesture with which King’s compositional process started, as he describes it, was simplicity itself: “I was improvising one day on viola, and I came up with these kinds of grooves that worked,” he says. The urge to experiment and elaborate took hold quickly.

“I read that all Arabic music is linear and it’s all unison. And I thought, that is the tradition, but let’s look at it again,” he says. “I was looking at it with different eyes and different ears. What happens if we include the improvisation of Time? Improvisation that comes out of whenever the group wants to improvise? Or put it in a certain mode and then have it transform, not in a traditional way of transposing the music, but have it happen in different ways: fluid, blending, changing tempos at different times. So I was exploring all of that.”

The initial product of King’s experimentation “Humayun—Nuris,” set the tone for what would follow: a thematically unified set of brief string quartet compositions, each with a composite name citing its melodic mode and a former Palestinian village depopulated during the Arab-Israeli War of 1948. “The titles of the pieces—it’s basically like saying ‘C Major—Minneapolis’ or ‘F-sharp Minor—Dallas,’” King explains.

In approaching the idiosyncrasies of microtonal tuning in Arabic music, the specifics of which can vary from one country to another, King received expert guidance from Kinan Abou-afach, a Syrian cellist based in Philadelphia. “I was e-mailing a lot, asking questions especially about the microtonality, which I don’t really get into so much because that requires another kind of performative practice,” King says. “Depending on what country you’re in, in a particular scale the quarter-flat would be a little bit more flat,” he explains, citing scales comprising 24 and 32 notes to the octave. He offers high praise for his collaborators in The Secret Quartet—violinists Dufallo and Jennifer Choi, violist Ljova Zhurbin, and cellist Yves Dharamraj: “It’s a very, very difficult piece, because as you get higher up, with the dissonant notes, it’s very hard to keep it in tune. But they do such an amazing job.”

Rather than attempting to duplicate such subtleties literally and precisely, King devised his own approaches to adapting the *maqam’at* and *iqa’at* he had selected for use. “I’d look at the scale, I’d listen to it, I’d look at the rhythmic modes, and play around with it, and I’d just let my mind imagine,” he says, “using that as the kind of skeletal structure of the pieces, but then let my Western knowledge of how to put music together come into play as well.”

One further aspect of each composition in *Free Palestine* involves King’s use of improvisation. Each section of the composition uses a combination of pre-determined composed material notated according to Western convention, spontaneous improvisation, and chance-derived methods. Each section of the score is prefaced with textual instructions that direct the performers what to watch for, in some cases designating a particular leader whose cues are to be followed.

“It was freeing for me, so that’s one of the musical reasons why I called it ‘Free Palestine,’ to think about these modes and scales and rhythmic units in a free way, and then putting the music together giving freedom to the performers to make decisions, which often happens in the music,” King says.

In fact, inspiration did not end with the completion of the fifteen initial pieces. King soon began to create a second book of *Free Palestine* compositions. When the time came to make the present recording, he omitted some of the pieces from Book 1 in its original form, replacing them with newer material. The version of *Free Palestine, Book 1* on this recording represents the work’s definitive version in content and ordering.

The point of embarkation, “Sultani Yakah—Ijlil al-Qibliyya,” is one of two selections in *Free Palestine* that acknowledges a forebear in the Western musical canon: the seminal minimalist work *In C* (1964) by Terry Riley (b. 1935). King assigns no time signature; according to his written instructions, “Each bar is repeated any number of times, and players move from bar to bar independently, always maintaining the very fast eighth-note pulse (established by 1st player in m1).” Departing from Riley’s methods, though, King includes repeated incursions of a unison riff and a slow-motion final bar with a staggered ending.

Most of the subsequent pieces were derived through King’s hands-on experimentation. “I played some melodic stuff and some rhythmic stuff and said, OK, that’s going to be the heart of the piece,” he says. “But then my composer hat would go on, and I’d go, I’m going to get there this way, and the players are going to get out of it in this other way, and there’s going to be solos here. Each of the things was kind of an exploration of, ‘What is this

mode? How does this mode work? What kind of rhythms do I hear going along with it?”

A vivid demonstration of the practical alchemy King describes is evident in “Bayati Shuri—Al-Sarafand,” with its leisurely, hypnotic 5/8 rhythm pattern, voluptuously singing arco lines, and European-classical feeling of balance and proportion. “Nahawand Murassah—Sabbarin” alternates between a slow 13/8 rhythm with keening lines in the first violin and hushed chords from its companions, and a bristling 14/8 uptempo scamper flecked with individual improvisation.

“Humayun—Nuris,” the original starting point from which King derived the *Free Palestine* series, shifts between free-flowing non-metered measures and urgent, rigorous segments in strict 6/4 time. “Hijaz Kar Kurd Nahawand—Gaza” moves in brusque fits and starts in 13/8 and 11/8 time, punctuated with noisy incursions and precipitously plunging glissandi.

“Athar Kurd—Deir Yassin,” in 10/8, strikes an elegiac tone with its brooding rhythm and gritty dissonance. In working on this particular piece, King was reminded of a perhaps unlikely precedent: “In my head I was hearing the slow movement of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony, that kind of slightly funereal but slightly uplifting thing,” he recalls. “It’s like a struggle, but there was something kind of exultant about it to me, too. I would play the string quartet in my head and hear that Beethoven movement—even the shape of it, the form, is very similar. And I kept thinking, I want this to be just as embedded with those things I felt from Beethoven, until I would sing the quartet and not know if I was in this world or that world.”

“Hijaz Kar Kurd—Tulkarm,” non-metrical and mercurial, alternates between near-motionlessness and brittle eighth-note rigor; the players move from one measure to the next with near-complete autonomy, yet the piece maintains integrity throughout. “Nawa Athar Nahawand—Al-Quds” loosely unites distinct strands in free time at a fortissimo dynamic; “Hisar Nahawand—Saffuriya,” nearly identical in structure and gesture, closes the 15-movement sequence at a pianississimo shiver.

“Ushaq Masri—Umm Khalid” begins with a driving unison figure in a piquant minor mode, comes unbound in bright gestures determined individually, and then repeatedly coalesces. “Nikriz—Qamun” emerges quietly as if from smoke, with sultry solos providing cues for group advances. The boisterous, bristling “Athar Kurd Hijaz—Rafah” moves in mysterious fits and starts, clamorous activity alternating with eerie repose. The viola is at its most songful during the free-time suspensions of “Rast—Ma’alul,” other players following its example in brisk 9/8 and 11/8 ensemble passages. Hushed pizzicato rhythms drive “Kurd Nahawand—Qalunya,” shifting between unison and individual iterations behind sweetly soaring violin.

Free Palestine reaches an emotional apotheosis in its penultimate section, “Huzam—Khan Yunis,” inspired by an experience King had during his sole visit to Jerusalem, when he performed with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company at the Israel Museum under the auspices of the Israel Festival 2011. Each day during his visit, he trekked into East Jerusalem with a specific intent in mind.

“My goal was to get lost and be in a place where I’m foreign,” he says. “I’m the outsider, I’m the other, and I’m just going to wander around and see how it feels.”

Stopping by chance one day in a tearoom, King recalls, he paid attention to the ebb and flow of conversation among the local men gathered there. When he entered, the volume of conversation dipped noticeably. As he sat for a time, one voice might rise up, then another; a conversation would gather steam, and then dissipate again.

“I thought that was such a beautiful way of experiencing things, so I put this piece together where I made cells, and people can play them at any time and jump around in any way,” King says. One specific cell, a tremolo figure, functions as a call to unanimous response: “It coalesces, and everyone gets louder and then softer at different times. And then it gets very soft again, quiet again.”

Rooted in personal sensation, “Huzam—Khan Yunis” fittingly is the sole piece on this recording in which King opted to participate as a performer, playing the oud.

A playful nod to Terry Riley... Arab-inspired music that evokes Beethoven... a potent composition derived from overheard conversation in an East Jerusalem tearoom: Here, it seems, is the actual political thrust of *Free Palestine*. The work’s lesson is not a blunt statement urging some particular form of action, but rather a simple acknowledgement of the invisible strands binding us in common humanity and intrinsic dignity, couched in a musical idiom invented not just to accommodate that commonality but to celebrate it.

Yes, the work’s title is intended to achieve a reaction—just not the one that might seem most evident at first brush. “It puts the phrase *Free Palestine* on people’s lips and in people’s minds,” King says. “I feel like when people come

up to me and talk to me, and they just use that phrase, there are possibilities there. The world is not filled with hate. It's possible to see a situation and imagine it being peaceful, united, democratic—without injustice, without apartheid.”

—Steve Smith

Steve Smith is the director of publications for National Sawdust, a performing-arts venue in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. His writing has appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Village Voice, and other publications, and he previously served as a staff editor and writer for The Boston Globe and Time Out New York.

Composer's note

“*Free Palestine* is an ongoing set of pieces employing Arabic pitch and rhythmic modes which explore sonic, structural, and temporal freedoms. The pieces are titled with the predominant *maqam* used, as well as with the names of the Palestinian villages from the pre-1948 pre-*Nakbah* period. These “de-populated” villages are significant historically for what happened to the people who lived there as well as the ongoing conditions of apartheid, occupation, and dispossession in both the 1948 and 1967 territories of historic Palestine. These villages and their former, current, and future inhabitants cannot be forgotten.”

John King (b. 1953), composer, guitarist, and violist, has received commissions from the Kronos Quartet, ETHEL, Bang on a Can All-Stars, Mannheim Ballet, New York City Ballet/Diamond Project, Belgrade Philharmonic (a co-

commission with Aleksandra Vrebalov), Stuttgart Ballet, and Ballets de Monte Carlo, as well as the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. His string quartets have also been performed by the Eclipse Quartet (LA) and the Mondriaan Quartet (Amsterdam), in addition to The Secret Quartet, which has premiered many of his compositions.

He has written seven operas: *ping* and *WHAT IS THE WORD*, with texts by Samuel Beckett; *impropera*, which used randomly selected text messages from the singers' cell phones; *SapphOpera*, a chamber opera with text-fragments by Sappho translated by Anne Carson; *herzstück/heartpiece*, based on the text of Heiner Müller; *la belle captive* based on texts by Alain Robbe-Grillet; and also *Dice Thrown*, based on the Stéphane Mallarmé poem.

He has also been commissioned numerous times by the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, and collaborated with them on their *Black Mountain Songs* project, which premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in November 2014 and went on to tour in Europe. The CD of *Black Mountain Songs* will be released in 2017.

He has three recent CD releases of music for string quartet: *10 Mysteries* and *AllSteel* (Tzadik); and *ETHEL* (Cantaloupe). He was Music Curator at The Kitchen from 1999–2003 and from 2002–2011 was a co-director of the Music Committee at MCDC. He received the 2014 Award for Sound/Music from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, and is also the recipient of the 2009 Alpert Award in the Arts for Music. He has been a Rockefeller Foundation/Bellagio Center Fellow as well as in residence at the Emily Harvey Foundation in Venice, Italy. johnkingmusic.com

The Secret Quartet is a string quartet comprising four individual artists known for championing new music. Cornelius Dufallo (ETHEL, Ne(x)tworks), Jennifer Choi (ETHEL, Either/Or), Ljova Zhurbin (Ljova and the Kontraband), and Yves Dharamraj (Ne(x)tworks, Ensemble ACJW) join forces in engaging performances of the contemporary repertoire. The Secret Quartet has served as the resident new music ensemble at Vermont College of Fine Arts, and has premiered and performed works by John King, Raz Mesinai, Wadada Leo Smith, Joan Jeanrenaud, Guy Barash, and Trevor Dunn.

Cornelius Dufallo is an innovative composer and violinist, and a dedicated advocate of contemporary music. For the past two decades Dufallo has performed and promoted new music, as a soloist and as a collaborator. Dufallo has been a member of several notable ensembles, including the FLUX Quartet (1996–2001), Ne(x)tworks (2003–2011), and ETHEL (2005–2012). Dufallo's *Journaling* album (listed as “Album of the Week” by WQXR in 2012) includes works for solo violin and violin + electronics by John King, Joan Jeanrenaud, Huang Ruo, Vijay Iyer, John Luther Adams, and Kenji Bunch.

Jennifer Choi has charted a career that breaks through the conventional boundaries of solo violin, chamber music, and the art of improvisation. She has performed worldwide to critical acclaim as a soloist and chamber musician having garnered a significant reputation as “a leading New York new music violinist,” (Boston Globe) and continues to play an integral role in this century's movement towards bringing contemporary music to the forefront.

Ljova (Lev) Zhurbin was born in 1978 in Moscow, Russia, and moved to New York with his parents, composer Alexander Zhurbin and writer Irena Ginzburg, in 1990. He divides his time between composing for the concert stage, contemporary dance and film, leading his own ensemble Ljova and the Kontraband, as well as a busy career as a freelance violist and musical arranger. Among recent projects are commissions from the City of London Sinfonia, the Louisville Orchestra, a string quartet for Brooklyn Rider, new works for Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble, The Knights, DuoJalal, and A Far Cry.

As soloist, chamber musician, teaching artist, and composer, the Franco-American cellist **Yves Dharamraj** enjoys a multifaceted career that takes him to the major stages of the United States and abroad, including appearances at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center, Ravinia Festival, the Chicago Cultural Center, Disney Hall, Spoleto USA, the National Arts Center, Berliner Festspiele, Panama Jazz Festival, and the Thailand National Cultural Center. Dr. Dharamraj co-founded New Docta International Music Festival in 2013 to bring world-class musicians to Argentina to perform and nurture Latin American talent. He is a founding member of the genre-defying Bohemian Trio, and Decoda, official affiliate ensemble of Carnegie Hall.

HUMAYUN - NURIS

vn1: *freely/SOLO 30°-45°* *gliss > F#* *tr > F#* *gliss > A*
mp *mp* *cresc/dim ad lib* *f* *f* *mp* *cresc/dim ad lib*

vn2: *freely/independently 30°-45°* *mp* *tr > A* *gliss > G* *tr > A* *gliss > D*

vla: *pp* *freely/independently 30°-45°* *mp* *tr > F#* *gliss > Bb* *gliss > A* *tr > D*

vc: *pp* *freely/independently 30°-45°* *mp* *tr > C* *gliss > A* *gliss > D*

2 *freely/independently 30°-45°* *trill > Eb* *gliss > D* *trill > D* *gliss > G* *trem/open G* *gliss > Bb*
mp *tr > A* *gliss > D* *gliss > Bb*
freely/SOLO 30°-45° *tr > A* *gliss > D* *gliss > Bb*
mp *ff* *mp* *ff* *mp* *ff* *mp*
freely/independently 30°-45° *trill > A* *gliss > D*
mp *gliss > G > Eb*
freely/independently 30°-45° *trill > D* *gliss > D*

①

Free Palestine, Humayun—Nuris, p. 1

SULTANI YAKAH - IJLIL AL-QIBLIYYA

♩ = 296 *arco/pizz ad lib* *each bar repeated any number of times*
f *[mostly loud>very loud, but can change within GROUP dynamics]* *players progress individually but staying within 3-4 bars of each other throughout*
[repeated riffs especially can go from pizz>arco or arco>pizz ad lib]

2 *3*

3 *3*

4 *3*

5 *3* *3*

6 *3* *3* *3*

7 *3* *3*

8 *3* *LV*

①

Free Palestine, Sultani Yakah—Ijlil al-Qibliyya, p. 1

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

10 Mysteries. Crucible Quartet. Tzadik 8071.

AllSteel. ETHEL. Tzadik 8023.

blues '99 (excerpt), *gliss in sighs*, *longtermparking* (excerpt). Included on *Music for Merce* (1952–2009). New World Records 80712-2.

No Nickel Blues. Included on *Heavy*. ETHEL. Innova Records INN820.

Prima Volta. Included on *Journaling*. Cornelius Dufallo. Innova Records INN831.

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Engineering and editing assistant: Jeanne Velonis

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Francis Goelet (1926–1998), *In Memoriam*

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