



# Spektral Quartet x Tarek Yamani

UMS Digital Presentation  
Hosted on UMS.org

Maeve Feinberg / *Violin*  
Clara Lyon / *Violin*  
Doyle Armbrust / *Viola*  
Russell Rolen / *Cello*

*with*

Khaled Yassine / *Darbuka*

Wednesday Evening, October 27, 2021 at 7:30  
Streaming on demand through Saturday, November 27

Logan Center for the Arts, University of Chicago  
Chicago, Illinois

Second Performance of the 143rd Annual Season

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Spektral Quartet appears by arrangement with Alliance Artist Management.

## PROGRAM

*All pieces composed by Tarek Yamani*

### **Berytus** for string quartet (2021)

- I. Silocity
- II. Ambergate
- III. Hippodrome
- IV. 635

*World-premiere performance written for the Spektral Quartet.*

### **Skylines Ahead** for string quartet and Lebanese percussion (2021)

Mr. Yassine

*World-premiere performance written for Khaled Yassine and the Spektral Quartet.*



*Following the digital world-premiere presentation on October 27, please join us for a live post-performance Q&A with the artists on Facebook Live.*

## NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

In naming his first fully composed work after the city that he grew up in, Tarek Yamani is both paying homage to the deep cultural roots that define so much of his singular musical conception—and underlying how far he has traveled from them, geographically and spiritually.

“Berytus” was the name the Romans gave their east Mediterranean outpost, a Christian enclave that later became the Islamic state of Beirut, after falling to the Arabs in 635 CE (the transition was remembered as peaceful and the city remains, to this day, an imperfect example of two majority faiths coexisting). This suite’s anachronistic title, then, summons the rich traditions and cosmopolitan tapestry of the city that Mr. Yamani draws upon, while presaging a sense of progress, historically and personally. Indeed, the title also makes a direct reference to *Berytus: A City Beneath the Earth*, an Arab novel by Rabee Jaber, that imagines a subterranean mirror city beneath Beirut, where a part of the population has lived since escaping the turmoil of the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1990. “Just like in the novel where the underground city could be accessed from one of Beirut’s seven historical gates, the movements acted, in my mind, like four of those gates,” says the Lebanese musician-composer-producer.

Born in 1980, Tarek Yamani—whose name, paradoxically, means “from Yemen”—found his own departure gate later, 15 years after the conflict ended, leaving behind the city where

he first encountered formal music through childhood piano lessons, studying “the inventions of Bach and the exercises of Czerny.” The historic hub where, after teenage fixations on heavy metal and hip-hop, he discovered jazz by chance one afternoon after hearing Herbie Hancock in a record shop, an epiphany which was to set Mr. Yamani’s career and calling for life—a calling which has subsequently taken him from Lebanon to the Netherlands, New York, Dubai, UAE, and now Berlin, Germany.

The world of music is certainly richer for this journey, with Tarek Yamani’s simultaneous embrace and fearless assimilation of different musical dialects as the cornerstone of his sizeable achievements in the idiom of improvised music. As both a composer and musician, Mr. Yamani has come to embody his own self-dubbed realization of an “Afro-Tarab” music, which seamlessly integrates Arabic maqam (scales) into the harmony and aesthetics of modern small-group jazz—a feat progressively documented in the three studio albums he has led and performed on to date: *Ashur* (2012), *Lisan Al Tarab: Jazz Conceptions in Classical Arabic* (2014), and *Peninsular* (2017).

Tarek Yamani has also co-written and edited an academic book compiling the traditional rhythms of the Gulf, *The Percussion Ensemble of the Arabian Peninsula* (alongside Rony Afif), and most recently released an improvised electronic track, “King Matar,” in tribute to Lebanese/Syrian buzuq player Matar

Muhammad (1939–1995). But, by his own admission, he has never before penned a serious work of fully composed music or written for exclusively orchestral instruments. He recalls seriously listening to just one chamber work at length, Shostakovich’s String Quartet No. 8 (Op. 110). It’s easy to imagine (and comforting to confirm) how much of *Berytus*’ elaborate gestures grew from spontaneous piano improvisation, transposed and harmonized for four traditional strings via the help of software he discovered by chance, advertised on Instagram.

The opening movement—the four-act suite’s most restless, frenzied, and longest segment—was notably the first to be conceived. “Silocity” emerges as a jarring series of daring musical ideas often abrasively juxtaposed, arriving in swift blasts that never allow a sense of safety or continuum to emerge.

It begins with a playful pattern of plucked strings, passed passively between the players—a cartoonish, *pizzicato* game of cat and mouse we’ll hear reprised throughout the suite—but soon hints of gloom arrive in a four-bar series of doomy rising chords. Rapidly we emerge at a barrage of increasing dense passages and vertiginous crescendos in the discordant C altered scale (a common jazz device to create tension, also known as the super-Locrian or “Ravel scale,” which sees every tone except the third and minor seventh altered). As dizzying quasi-serialist two-bar spurts punctuate the mounting musical ideas, a wanton cut-and-

paste vibe pervades that proudly suggest the work’s spontaneous, yet meticulous, composition.

The influence of jazz is also highly evident in the virtuosic solo section written for viola, an ecstatic 54-bar workout delivered first over just the rhythmic pulse of the cello, joined by droning, driving violin stabs that “comp” like a rhythm section trading licks. Indeed, Mr. Yamani concedes these freewheeling showcases were inspired by his familiar bandstand practices, encouraging the players to interpret freely and embrace mistakes (he even flirted with writing multiple different solos, to be performed on rotation or at random each night).

The name “Silocity” is both a play on the word “plasticity,” and Tarek Yamani’s cryptic tribute to his hometown’s resilience—tellingly the grain silos, themselves a symbol of continuity amid the tumult of time, were the only buildings left standing following 2020’s Port of Beirut explosion. And knowing this, it’s not hard to imagine the mournful second movement as a response to the same August 4, 2020, tragedy, which left at least 218 dead—this tired, languorous lament offering a deliberate, grounding response to the sand-shifting dynamics of the first movement.

“Ambergate” is dominated by a single, muted tone, largely played in a faint *pianissimo* dirge, unwinding in ever-shifting irregular bar lengths, uncertain, neither a waltz nor a trot. A single tear-stained violin stands clear out front, emitting a slow, howling moan that conjures the image of

the lead mourner fronting a funeral procession—the rest of the strings falling unsteadily behind, swaying in and out of step, never quite sure of foot. This imagined vision may have been unintended, but its compositional method, rooted in a choral sense of counterpoint, betrays the effect: Tarek Yamani improvised the “right hand” lead line, before employing an interwoven “left hand,” harmonizing accompanying chordal triads in the Maqam Athar Kurd, a rare, modern, and highly chromatic Arab scale often used by the composer, understood as a hybrid of the Nawa Athar and Kurd maqams.

Moments of piercing anguish are dramatically punctuated with sudden silence, breaks for gasps of air unwind like a collective sigh. Following the example of Shostakovich’s treasured eighth quartet—written hastily in three days after the Russian composer reluctantly joined the Communist party, and cryptically dedicated to “victims of fascism and war”—Mr. Yamani reluctantly concedes that “Ambergate” is a “subliminal” reference to last August’s tragedy: the port warehouse where the explosive ammonium nitrate was stored was called Anbar #12, with “anbar” here an Arabic term for “door” but, which could also mean “amber.” Meanwhile allusions to Watergate, and every cover-up scandal since, are most evident.

As improvisational as Yamani’s compositional methods might be, there’s a traditional formalism to *Berytus’* formation and flow.

The modest third movement, “Hippodrome,” is a fleeting 56-bar sketch reprising the suite’s opening

melody, playfully unraveling temporal and harmonic leaps in a forward gallop, said to recall the Ancient Roman horse races and games hosted at the Beirut Hippodrome, another icon of history that still exists today. Underscored by brash *staccato* bass notes, a stark climbing passage plays out a fraught, unresolved conversation, spiraling lines neither chiming in agreement nor angrily clashing. Flayed, outreached limbs miss each other in movement, finally falling into a merry, momentary dance—a brief respite before the crowning, climactic achievement of the closing movement, “635,” an unambiguous reference to the year of *Berytus’* fall.

Here the composer draws most conspicuously from his past, journeying back through time to finally discard the shackles of Western harmony by employing a microtonal maqam. After brief, lone, exploratory viola riffing, the strings fall in from the 24th bar, establishing a proud theme in the classically Arab Huzam maqam, which includes a quarter-tone (a note outside, or rather between, the 12 notes of Western harmony, common in Arab and South Asian music). Clear, joyful references are paid to the traditional music of the Levant, self-conscious, stock-taking, and root-tracing which plays against the equally long opening movement’s rampant jazz-ish modernism.

While Spektral Quartet has ample experience in playing microtonal music, they display a nuanced and natural, unstudied feel to the use of quarter-tones in the Arab tradition.

Over a period of weeks Tarek Yamani shared vintage recordings

with the quartet musicians over Zoom, highlighting technique and ornamentation. This diligence becomes evident as the final movement spirals outwards and the strings are invited in turns to serve winding, folksy solo showcases over an extended drone section, built on repetitive rustic motifs and percussive thwacks, holding a constant, unshakeable harmony that conjures a mood of communal celebration and channels the spirits of centuries past.

Tarek Yamani's first foray into formal chamber composition was the surprise byproduct of recent history's unprecedented upheaval—booked to perform at UMS on the campus of the University of Michigan, he arrived in Ann Arbor on March 10, 2020, the same day pandemic restrictions were introduced to prohibit large gatherings. Thoughts of a commissioned work and digital artist residency instead gestated, and Mr. Yamani was able to find solace in the months where his primary mode of artistic expression (and employment) was impossible by applying his restless musical spirit to composing *Berytus*. Let us hope it will not take such a period of personal challenge and global upheaval for this feat to be repeated and built upon.

*Program note by Rob Garratt. Mr. Garratt is a writer and editor based in Hong Kong, who has written about Tarek Yamani's past three releases for the UAE's The National, All About Jazz, and Time Out Dubai.*

## ARTISTS

The three-time Grammy-nominated **Spektral Quartet** creates vivid conversations between exhilarating works of the past and the extraordinary works of today. With the *New York Times* writing that “they have everything: a supreme technical command that seems to come easily, a capacity to make complicated music clear, and, most notably...an ability to cast a magic spell,” Spektral is regarded as one of the most forward-thinking ensembles working today.

Actively touring some of the country’s most notable concert venues such as the Kennedy Center, American Academy in Rome, Miller Theater, Library of Congress, and NPR’s Tiny Desk Concerts, the Quartet also takes great pride in its home city of Chicago: championing the work of local composers, bridging social and aesthetic partitions, and collaborating with artists from a dizzying variety of disciplines.

Named “Chicagoans of the Year” by the *Chicago Tribune* in 2017, Spektral Quartet is most highly regarded for its creative and stylistic versatility: presenting seasons in which, for instance, a thematic program circling Beethoven seamlessly coexists with an improvised sonic meditation at sunrise, a talent show featuring Spektral fans, and the co-release of a jazz album traversing the folk traditions of Puerto Rico. This season, the ensemble released its latest record, *Enigma*: the world-premiere recording of Anna Thorvaldsdottir’s first string quartet, co-commissioned by Spektral, Carnegie Hall, and Washington Performing Arts. An ambitious, multi-year project, *Enigma* will be subsequently released as a virtual reality experience and toured to planetarium dome theaters.

First attracting national attention in 2013 with *Mobile Miniatures*—a project in which over 40 composers including David Lang, Shulamit Ran, and Nico Muhly were commissioned to write string quartet ringtones for mobile devices—Spektral has enhanced its scope and scale with each passing season to include new works from luminaries including Anna Thorvaldsdottir, George Lewis, and Augusta Read Thomas as well as launch the *Once More, With Feeling!* series, which answers contemporary music’s most daunting hurdle by presenting an unfamiliar work twice on the same program, with a charismatic composer interview in between.

Distinguished artistic collaborators include Claire Chase (flutist, International Contemporary Ensemble founder, MacArthur fellow), Theaster Gates (artist, Rebuild Foundation founder), Julia Holter (critically acclaimed songwriter), Nathalie Joachim (composer, Flutronic co-founder), Mark DeChiazza (choreographer with credits including Kronos Quartet, John Luther Adams, and Steven Mackey), Miguel Zenón (saxophonist, MacArthur and Guggenheim fellow), and Tarek Yamani (Lebanese-American pianist, composer, pedagogue, and band leader).

Committed to not only sustaining, but transforming the string quartet tradition, Spektral Quartet is in demand for its presentations on inclusion, progressive programming, and entrepreneurship at leading institutions around the country including Carnegie Hall’s Ensemble Connect, the New World Symphony, and the National Association of Schools of Music.

Born and raised in Lebanon, **Khaled Yassine** (*darbuka*) is a self-taught musician, mostly known for his work with Anouar Brahem Quartet (ECM Records), and Alif. His unique approach to percussions made him one of most sought-after musicians in the region. Alongside performing, Mr. Yassine is also known for his collaborations within different art forms such as writing music for theater, video installations, documentaries, and dance performances.

Born and raised in Beirut, **Tarek Yamani** (*composer*) is a pianist and composer who taught himself jazz at the age of 19. He has been exploring crossroads between Black American and Arabic music, most evident in his second album *Lisan Al Tarab: Jazz Conceptions in Classical Arabic*, and in his third release, *Peninsular*, which fuses jazz with quarter-tones and Arabian Peninsula rhythms.

A recipient of many prestigious awards such as the Thelonious Monk Jazz Composers Competition, the Baryshnikov Artist-in-Residence, the Huygens Scholarship, and the Abu Dhabi Festival Commission, Mr. Yamani was commissioned by the UMS Digital Artist Residency to write a new piece for multi-Grammy-nominated Spektral Quartet.

Mr. Yamani has been part of three editions of the International Jazz Day all-star concerts and performed in venues such as the Smithsonian (DC), Barcelona Cathedral at La Merce, Atrium at Lincoln Center (New York), Boulez Saal (Berlin), MuCEM (Marseille), the UN Assembly Hall (New York), Aaron Davis Hall, Melbourne Arts Center, Sejong Center for the Arts (Seoul), and Gran Teatro de la Habana (Cuba).

He is also an educator, author of two self-published music books on rhythm, and a film score composer of films screened in over 100 festivals around the world and broadcast on AMC, BBC, and Sundance TV.

## UMS ARCHIVES

This digital world-premiere presentation marks the **Spektral Quartet**'s second performance under UMS auspices, following the Quartet's UMS debut in November 2014 at Hill Auditorium as part of *The Big Squeeze: An Accordion Festival* alongside bandoneonist and accordionist Julien Labro. UMS welcomes **Khaled Yassine**, who makes his UMS debut in this digital presentation.

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Performer: Tarek Yamani

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