Audio postcards | Andrea Liberovici is capturing the city's soundtrack in Instagram-friendly sonic snapshots. *Rachel Spence* meets the composer

Venice finds its voice

Venice, mid-February, two weeks before lockdown. Late-afternoon sunlight glimmering through a haze of mist so La Serenissima is at her most ephemeral. On the Giudecca waterfront, Andrea Liberovici ushers me into a pocket-sized bar noisy with regulars and their canines — small, bow-legged mongrels for the most part — who swirl about our feet hoovering up crisp flakes. Liberovici secures a table, drinks and a bowl of snacks while parrying questions as to the whereabouts of his own hound, a dachshund named Spissy.

Unwittingly, the Venice-based composer has plunged us into the work we aim to discuss. Entitled *Acoustic Postcards*, it is a sequence of minute-long, audio-images of Venice. Posted on a dedicated Instagram account, they include "Fog in San Marco", a medley of church bells, fractured voices and an unidentifiable creaking, and "Night Butterflies", an impromptu symphony of masts tinkling in the marina on San Giorgio Maggiore. Currently Liberovici and I have stepped into "Talking about Dogs", which captures Venetians discussing their pooches with a blend of exasperation and fondness.

With their fragmented intimacy, these soundscapes, into which Liberovici writes his own electronic score, evoke a city which eludes more linear representation. Liberovici's plan is to create a sequence of 36, with six recorded in each of Venice's six *sestieri* (districts) and post one a week.

Such abstract gestures are typical of a composer anchored in contemporary expression since his days as a teenage rock star. (When I told a Venetian female friend *d'un certain age* that I was about to interview him, she got quite fluttery.)

Liberovici is less enamoured by the memory. "It was a very violent world," he says, of a period which saw him "cut two discs with a good house" make "a lot of money" and get "treated like a star" yet feel that he was "in a little box" controlled by people who saw him as "a product to be marketed."

In truth, Liberovici was bred to follow a more classical path. Born in Turin in 1962 to Sergio Liberovici, a composer father, and Margot Galante Garrone, an acclaimed puppeteer, he moved to Venice as a child when his mother met his stepfather — "who I think of as a father" — the musicologist Giovanni Morelli.

His parents had broad tastes — "at home, I was as likely to hear Frank Zappa and Peter Gabriel as Mozart" — but Liberovici was always prone to pushing boundaries. His passion for rock music was ignited on a trip to the UK when he saw the Rolling Stones at Knebworth Park. "I thought, 'That's it!'"

The back story to this trip, which saw him enter Britain on a false passport that belonged to a young female friend — "I had long hair, it was easy!" — betrays the streak of anarchy that bubbled within.

From top: a canal near St Mark's Square — Venice is itself 'a big musical instrument,' says Liberovici; one of his 'Acoustic Postcards' features Venetians talking about their dogs with exasperation and fondness
Reuters/Manuel Silvestri; Alamy

That rebel spirit saw him drop out of the Venice conservatory to pursue his rock career, then abandon that path also. Rather than remain in Venice with his family, he transferred to Genoa. "It was my responsibility to find my own way," he says. After studying acting at the Scuola del Teatro Stabile, he forged a new identity as a contemporary classical composer and theatre director, often fusing the two disciplines in avant-garde collaborations with the likes of poet Edoardo Sanguineti, film-maker Peter Greenaway, and actors Claudia Cardinale and Vittorio Gassman.

Yet his heart remained in Venice. Ten years ago, Liberovici returned to Giudecca to care for his elderly parents.

A few weeks after our encounter in Venice, we pick up our conversation via Skype. He is by now locked down in Genoa, where he still spends time, and I am confined to south London. The first minutes are devoted to our mutual longing for the lagoon island that is our second home.

Acoustic Postcards is one strand in a vision Liberovici has evolved for a city written off by many as a doomed Arcadia. Describing Venice as "the most modern city in the world", he believes that after the "huge stress" of Covid-19, it can be recognised as a "truly sustainable city because it's remained as it was, all *centro storico*."

Furthermore, it has a "humanism that expresses itself through the daily encounters, the connection to a different time. To go to the bank in Genoa takes five minutes, in Venice it takes all morning because I'll meet six or seven people with whom I'll chat. We'll look each other in the eyes, complain together, celebrate together, maybe drink a spritz together."

> He hopes to transform 'Acoustic Postcards' into a memorial to the city's capacity for survival

As a composer, not only is he "revitalised" by this slow pulse but he believes it is intrinsically bound up with the notion that Venice is itself a "big musical instrument". The city's structure, he points out, is based on wood and water. (Venice's historic buildings were erected on wooden piles driven into the marshy lagoon ground.) "It vibrates like a huge drum," he continues, as he recalls that the Venetian engineer Franco Pianon observed "if you place a glass sphere on a Venetian floor it moves because nowhere is ever still or straight."

When he began *Acoustic Postcards* earlier this year, he never envisaged that their digital format would take on a poignant new relevance due to the confinement of their audience. His hope now is to transform the work into a project that will assist in the post-Covid healing. At the end of the 36-part cycle, he explains, the postcards will finish in time for the anniversary of "the great flood on November 12 last year". That week he hopes to transform *Acoustic Postcards* into a sound installation mounted in a venue in the city "as a memorial to the devastation and to the city's capacity for survival." He then hopes to launch it internationally to "introduce the wider world to the invisible acoustic mosaic that is Venice's beautiful voice".

Right now, the city needs every ounce of its fighting spirit. After the damage to homes, businesses and historic sites caused by the flood, estimated at €1bn, the dearth of tourists due to the pandemic, while environmentally beneficial, has inflicted further acute economic pain.

Liberovici believes not only that his beloved phoenix will rise once more but that its resurrection could inspire other struggling cities. "The cello," he continues, "has a point called the *anima* (soul). It's where all the vibrations gather. If the anima is good, it plays well. Venice is the anima of the world."

liberovici.it
instagram.com/p/B-C87pvhryL

Rock 'n' roll poetry

Simon Armitage | In a rich northern English tradition, Britain's poet laureate brings unique lyricism to his band. By *Ludovic Hunter-Tilney*

The magazine Poetry Review once described Simon Armitage, the current British poet laureate, as "the frontman of his generation" of poets, a phrase in keeping with Armitage's interest in rock music. Although Armitage cites a former laureate, Ted Hughes, as his main inspiration for becoming a writer, there are bands in his literary make-up, too. Many come from the north of England, like him, and are celebrated for their lyrics — the likes of Joy Division, The Smiths and Pulp.

"I woke up to music in the punk era, when it was all slogans and shouting," he says. "Then suddenly I heard people describing life with more articulation and wit, like Paddy McAloon of Prefab Sprout. Those are the songwriters I admire most."

Armitage, 56, looks not so much like a Hughesian poetic shaman as the leader of a reformed Britpop outfit. In his 2008 book *Gig*, he wrote about trying to start a rock band in his forties. "Thought of a name yet?" his father asks. "How about Midlife Crisis?" Hearing about his failed trip to buy a guitar from a defunct local music shop, his mother offers a judgment as final as the last full stop in a poem: "You're too late."

Yet Armitage did manage to form a band, The Scaremongers, who released an album in 2009 before receding back into the haze of middle-aged fantasies of rock stardom. But "the frontman of his generation" had not finished with music. He is back with a new band, Land Yacht Regatta, and a new album, *Call in the Crash Team*.

I meet the three members of LYR, as they are known, in the London office of their record label, Universal Music, before the UK's lockdown in late March. Armitage sits on one side of a large table, with his younger bandmates Patrick Pearson, 33, and Richard Walters, 37. The laureate drily adopts the role of tyrannical leader when discussing the band name ("I just told them what we were going to be called"). Yet he admits: "I don't know if I'm the frontman of this band. I haven't worked out where I'm going to stand on stage." He recites the song's lyrics in a deadpan tone. Pearson plays keyboards and has produced the music. Walters sings in a melodious voice that complements Armitage's spoken-word recitations.

The project's origins lie in Walters' admiration for Armitage's poems, which he first encountered at school. "For me at the time, really enamoured with Jarvis Cocker and that very British style of song lyrics, I saw the humour in it," he says. "That was a turning point for me in my love of poetry."

Years later, as a singer-songwriter, the younger man invited Armitage to collaborate with him on a song. Recorded in 2012, it prompted the notion of a spoken-word album with music. Walters recruited Pearson, a multi-instrumentalist and producer, and the pair sent a Dictaphone with musical sketches to Armitage at his West Yorkshire home.

LYR bandmates, from left: Richard Walters, Patrick Pearson and Simon Armitage
Daniel Broadley

Eventually, the poet returned the device with recordings of new poems. The musicians fleshed them out as songs, using a more electronic style than the guitar music that Armitage favours.

"I was really nervous that they were going to send something back that sounded like out-takes from a *Doctor Who* theme tune," Armitage remembers. But the results are emotive and intense, a brooding accompaniment to his downbeat verses.

In "Adam's Apple", an elderly man tries to keep painful memories at bay through the ritual of getting dressed, easing a black tie to his throat like a noose as he regards himself balefully in the mirror. An actual suicide occurs in "33⅓", which is based on the death by hanging of Joy Division singer Ian Curtis. The lyrics focus on the record that was revolving on a turntable when Curtis was found, its "arm still ploughing/the run-out spiral" in morbid mimicry of the body swinging from the rope.

If Armitage's former band could have been jokingly called Midlife Crisis, his new one takes the concept of emotional crisis seriously. "I noticed an accumulation of those themes and that tone of voice as the pieces were coming together," he says. "I think it was Richard who said that the characters are all in some moment or phase of crisis."

> 'I heard people describing life with articulation and wit. Those are the songwriters I admire'

British poetry is no stranger to crisis. But the days of cultural marginality are in abeyance. Book sales reached an all-time high in 2018, fuelled by a youthful readership: the majority of buyers were under 34. Poetry's profile has been transformed by performers such as Kate Tempest, operating at an intersection between spoken word, slam poetry and hip-hop. "Kate has put the body back into the lyric, she's an amazing physical presence on stage," Armitage says. His daughter Emmeline is a slam poet who grew up listening to rap. "That's the music that was coming through the bedroom wall," Armitage says. But he is not about to start bounding around the stage spitting out words himself. "If you write for the page and then you give a reading, you hope the drama will be in the language rather than the presentation," he says. "I brought some of that to these tracks."

LYR's formation predates his poet laureateship, which began last year and will end in 2029. He is not the first laureate to make an album. "I committed a lapse in taste last month, and I will not be surprised if I am dismissed from my honourable office," John Betjeman wrote in a letter in 1974 after releasing a "pop record" with the "frightful" title *Betjeman's Banana Blush*.

Armitage does not allow thoughts of his own "honourable office" to weigh heavily on him. "I honestly don't go around thinking every minute of the day, 'I'm the poet laureate,'" he says. "From my point of view, this is just a continuation of what I've been doing for the last three decades. I've always been keen to prove that poetry has got a life and a purpose outside the printed page." He pauses, poetically. "There's a lot of p's in that."

'Call in the Crash Team' is out on June 26 on Mercury KX. LYR's version of Simon Armitage's poem 'Lockdown', featuring Florence Pugh, is out now