With a rack full of iconic analogue equipment, Rabih Beaini aka Morphosis creates mutant Techno inspired by Sun Ra's organ grooves and the Lebanese folk forms of his youth. By Rory Gibb. Photography by Tanya Traboulsi

"In ancient Greek, 'morphosis' is development or change. It is the amount of knowledge you have learned during your lifetime," says Rabih Beaini, explaining the origins of his production name. "It’s not what you have already, but what you’re building throughout the years, throughout your travels and your research, what you’re seeing around you and what you’re finding."

Like the patch cables that connect his analogue and modular hardware, Beaini’s music is a conduit, tracing ley lines linking House and Techno to Sun Ra’s astral free jazz, electroacoustic composition and the traditional and popular musics of his home country of the Lebanon. As Morphosis and Ra.H, he channels his musical research into thrillingly raw Techno, laid down in real time during sessions of studio improvisation, re-rubbed, overdubbed and plunged into thick banks of reverb and delay. At high volume it’s at once cosmic and grounded, scorched with distortion, brimming with life.

At its heart is the man himself, his personality worked into the grain of the music. By playing almost all parts by hand and leaving room for error, Beaini cracks apart the mechanical precision of the loop, freeing Techno from the sequencer’s tick. Melodies are set adrift from the pulse, slipping slowly out of phase or hanging heavy like clouds of volcanic ash. His 2011 debut album What Have We Learned is one of the most involving Techno albums of recent memory — listening, you can almost see Beaini’s fingers moving across the keyboard, mapping out the album’s rippling grooves. Still, none of his recorded output can quite prepare you for a Morphosis live set, in which Beaini, half-hidden behind a rack of gear, coaxes riptides of glowing, almost choral drones to rise amid the drum machine clatter. His DJ sets are equally exploratory, sinking Techno tracks within sensual collages of jazz, modular electronics and Arabic music. Of both studio and live improvisation, he recounts some advice from his friend and fellow Techno producer Jochem Peteri, aka Neuworldaquarium: "You have to think like a band. You are a band, you are each element of the band."

Beaini speaks with the passion of someone who views their music primarily as a form of self-expression and personal development to be honed over time. Talking to him over Skype from his current base in Berlin, his enthusiasm for experimentation unimpeaded by generic considerations is palpable. The way his latest releases stray further from the conventions of the dancefloor supports the notion. A recent remix 12", The Morphosis Korg Response, gleefully rips a pair of originals by TM404 to tatters using a pair of favourite Korg machines, and two new EPs for Honest Jon’s — Dismantle and Music For Vampyr — are minimal aggregations of brittle beats and jagged Acidic noise. There are parallels between Beaini’s freewheeling aesthetic and the wildstyle productions of Theo Parrish or Hieroglyphic Being, whose numerous releases for Beaini’s label Morphine include last year’s Lost Transmissions EP. And he has fostered close links with Bill Kouligas’s Pan label, another Berlin operation which deals in this emerging form of underground electronic music that breaks Techno and House down with Noise and improvisation. But Beaini’s music remains of a piece only with itself.

Rabih Beaini grew up in Okaire, near Byblos on Lebanon’s Mediterranean coast. His early exposure to music came largely through traditional Lebanese folk. He cites the "very popular, but very arty and very bright" semi-improvised poetry and song forms such as astabae, mijana and zajal, and enthusiastically speaks of the "rawness" of a cassette by Ali Hayhel — who played the rebaab, a bowed string instrument with a distinctive scratchy tone — which he discovered in his father’s car. Another major presence was the Middle Eastern dance music dabble, traditionally played at celebratory occasions — electrified versions of the genre began emerging in the late 1980s. With its dusty beats and pirouetting melodies, it’s easy to imagine dabble opening Beaini’s ears to the potential of synthesized dance music. "It gave me a good sense of the beat," he nods. "I love the beats from that genre. It’s very strong in a way, very punk."

A new album, Albidaya, is in part a reflection on the traditional sounds of his childhood. It’s released under Beaini’s own name on Annihaya, the label run by the
Lebanese improviser Sharif Sehnaoui. I suggest that the label’s ethos, which is driven by the “displacement, deconstruction and ‘recycling’ of popular or folkloric musical cultures”, sounds in sync with Beaini’s own. “Arinrhythm’s approach to Arab folk music in a different, diverse way, so I embraced that concept,” he agrees. “I wanted a more introspective album, an album that would look more into my origins but without being that specific, using what I have now and what I have developed over the years. So it was not like going back to Lebanon [more like] bringing something back from outside.”

Almost entirely recorded in a day, and featuring cello, saxophone and drums in addition to electronics, AbidIQay doesn’t attempt to replicate Lebanese folk music. Instead, it articulates a sense of contact between various worlds. “Light Within The Light” cascades with bell-like tones plucked from a one-stringed Indian instrument Beaini chanced upon in a shop; the rich, buzzy resonances and loose tuning mould into the spaces between notes, along with the glinting droning of an Echo Tiger Duranog. The album’s centrepiece “Ya Shater” douses strident strings in watery electronic noise, so that the whole piece reverberates like a fountain trickling into a huge metal chandelier. It transpires that the track was partly recorded in Detroit, while Beaini was tinkering with Techno producer Mike Huckaby’s Waldorf Wave synth.

For most of Beaini’s childhood years, Lebanon was in a state of civil war. He steered clear of any military or political activity, and began to immerse himself in music. His introduction to House came via a risky source. “It was a blessing of a discovery when I first heard Lil Louis’s ‘French Kiss’,” he recalls. “That was the first House track I heard, and of course the content of the track, that was mindblowing. It would have been censured at home – I couldn’t hear it if my parents were there.”

During the war, turntables and records remained prohibitively expensive. “[We would] record cassettes from the radio or from other people,” he recalls. “or go to a record shop where they would pirate CDs or releases onto cassettes so we could play them out. A friend modified two tape decks – he put in something similar to a pitch control – and we used that for the very first parties we did in Lebanon. There was a really big one once, it was probably 2000 people and related to a summit in our small town. We only had these cassettes and we were freaking out: we have all these people, so we have to make them dance!”

After the war ended in 1990, record shops began to import more music. “We were buying almost everything, from hip-hop to House,” he continues. “It was both underground and mainstream but we didn’t know the difference, we were just following the feeling.”

In 1996 Beaini moved to Venice to study architecture, but he was soon DJing regularly and immersing himself more deeply in music, and he never finished his degree. He had moderate success as a House DJ, but the main rooms he was playing were demanding increasingly formulaic selections. So he pulled back and began listening to other music: free jazz, Afrobeat, broken beat, drum ‘n’ bass, Detroit’s Theo Parrish and Moodymann, and later Omar S. “For me, Techno was all these put together,” he says. “It still is somehow an abstract genre. I never quite closed it into the hard, banging thing that it generally gets attributed to be.” By now he was writing his own music, initially using software before gradually shifting to a hardware based approach.

He established his Morphine imprint in 2005, initially as a joint venture with Stefano Boati aka Kool. At first the label released a string of Beaini 12”s exploring Detroit-inspired Techno soul and cosmic electronics. Later it began to issue tracks by the likes of Maddeo, Anthony Shakir and Hieroglyphic Being. After moving to Berlin at the beginning of 2012, Beaini rebooted Morphine and has since released a series of extreme and distorted Techno tracks by himself, Container and Philadelphia’s Metasplice. Each takes a distinct approach – there’s nothing so straightforward as a coherent Morphine aesthetic – but all three share a desire to take Techno beyond the dancefloor. “It’s always been defined as an erratic label and to be honest, I like that,” Beaini says. “It’s still rooted in dance music, he insists, but takes “a totally different approach to what dance music is. The motto of the label since day one was ‘the new soul revolution’. For me it’s soul music. But in a revolutionary way.”

If broadening his listening opened Beaini’s mind to new possibilities for club music, the crucial event that fired him further from the beat grid was the formation in 2002 of The Upperground Orchestra, a quartet in which he plays electronics and synthezisers alongside reeds player Piero Bittolo Bon, drummer Tommaso Cappelato and bass player Alvisse Seggi. The group formed thanks to a fortuitous accident. In 2002 a double booking at a Venice venue led to Seggi and former Upperground member Max Bustreo (the current line-up was completed in 2007) being booked to play at the same time as Beaini was set to DJ. Rather than split their allotted time down the middle, they opted to share the stage, with Beaini using a pair of turntables and an effects pedal to roughly chop together rhythmic backdrops, while Seggi and Bustreo jammed on top. It was, he says, “a revelation. We played four or five gigs right after that in Venice that year, and then did a session in my studio.” Some material from that first session was released on The Upperground Orchestra’s Soloris Eremis 12” in 2008. But that first gig was Beaini’s entry point into an entirely new mindset – “everything changed afterwards,” he says – and he subsequently began recording all his solo music in live, improvised sessions.

Last year’s The Eupen Tapes, a recording of a 2011 live set, is the only other Upperground Orchestra release to date. The acoustic and electronic elements conduct a continual push-pull dialogue with one another – at points Beaini’s electronics are barely distinguishable from the frantic squawks of Bittolo Bon’s saxophone; at others a mass of synthetic tones rockets to the fore, momentarily knocking the other players off balance. “It’s just a natural thing,” Beaini explains. “Sometimes they’ll head off in a jazz moment and I’ll let them do it for minutes, then I’ll come in with a sound that’s totally alien to jazz and it turns into whatever it is – psychedelic stuff!”

He sends me a recording of a show in Padua in 2012, and it’s a more Technoid affair. Capellato’s drums move with breakneck momentum; the performance climaxes with the entire group assembling around a four-to-the-floor disco beat. Beaini stresses, however, that “I don’t want to be a jazz musician. It’s not my
path, it’s not my objective, you know?” Equally, the rest of the Orchestra members aren’t as versed in electronic music as he is. It’s where they meet, “these in-between territories, the unknown ones, that are most interesting,” he says.

Which brings the conversation neatly round to Sun Ra, the original Afronaut and explorer of unknown sonic worlds, and one of Beaini’s main inspirations. He was introduced to Ra’s music by a friend while living in Italy. “It totally opened up my mind,” he declares. There are definite parallels between Beaini’s work and Ra’s later electronic music, especially the drum machine skitter and meshed organs of the 1978 Disco 3000 album, and he’s happy to admit the influence. “His music is something you listen to deeply and that shapes your musical existence. Sun Ra was the most relevant influence on me to search into the instruments from the past that were, for him, instruments from the future. He was discovering them, at the time, as new instruments that could develop his language. I found myself wanting to use that same range of instruments for my own language. For example, the Eko Tiger organ I use was one of his most used instruments.

“I always wish I could have lived at the moments when things were discovered,” he reflects later. “Somewhere I’m trying to do that for myself, relive those moments and rediscover things, like modular systems, or electroacoustic music, or free jazz at the time when free jazz was developed. I will never live these moments, but somehow I try to create them again for me. This is my personal approach. I want to live that essence every time I’m doing something, music-wise. So it’s just my own story, in a way. Sometimes I think I’ve got something really cool, really new – but it’s not at all, because somebody did it before.”

So Beaini uses his studio like a laboratory, conducting his experiments on a range of vintage analogue instruments, and using those inspirational points in history as launch pads for his own explorations. The pieces of kit he mentions by name all trail rich legacies: a Roland TR-808 drum machine, a Space Echo tape delay, a Korg SQ-10 sequencer, and Korg MS-20, Juno-60 and EMS synthesizers. These instruments (and you suspect they are only the tip of the iceberg) are at the sharp end of a playful studio process in which live recordings are processed, overdubbed or fed into a computer to allow parts to be shifted around in the mix. And even while recording Beaini is searching for new ways to modify their properties, corroboring or fragmenting the signal by passing it through chains of effects, processors and sequencers. A new track called “Tamrat Version”, from Diamanté, is a good example, passing the Eko Tiger organ signal through the Korg MS-20 and SQ-10. “[The idea was] not to change the signal but to modify it,” he explains, “so it’s still an organ, but it has this groovy, modulated way of sounding.” The track is one of his grittiest transmissions. The organ is barely recognisable; its static-added pulsations seem to disintegrate as they play, lending them the air of archaic alien transmissions scarred by exposure to interstellar radiation. Meanwhile, “Diamanté” itself – which Beaini describes, perhaps optimistically, as “more on the dance side of things” – dials the drum machine right down so its presence is felt almost subliminally; on the surface its rhythms splinter into prismatic clicks that scuttle forward like an advancing column of army ants.

“It’s inspiring and it’s healthy to do things like this,” he says. “Music and sound is all about sculpture. And as with any type of sculpture, it depends on the type of material you’re using and the tool you’re using to shape this material. So there really shouldn’t only be one way of doing it.

“I’m somebody that’s always open for changes in music,” he continues about the evolution of his sound. “I search for new inspirations, new challenges.” Have his more recent works brought him closer to where he wants to be? “I don’t see an arrival point. I already reached it when I formed this playing mode, and from there it’s about the exploration of new and exciting things. Probably things that have been done millions of times before,” he shrugs, “but not by me.” Diamanté and Music For Vampyr are out now on Honest Jon’s; Albidyce is released this month on Annihaya. soundcloud.com/rabih

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