

Arts

**Beirut | The city's musicians**  
 have banded together to keep  
 their scene alive despite war,  
 economic crisis and last year's  
 port blast. By *Charles Shafaieh*

Just after the blast, for a brief moment I thought: "This is the end of the Lebanese music scene." So says Sharif Sehnaoui, musician and co-founder of Irtijal, the country's leading experimental music festival. The explosion at Beirut's port on August 4 last year devastated Mar Mikhael and Gemmayze, major cultural districts filled with musicians' apartments, studios and performance venues. "It wasn't rational, but I felt that all we had done was for nothing," he remembers.

Sehnaoui and his peers had much to lose. During the past two decades, they had helped to build a vibrant music scene with a massive proliferation of genres. Record labels such as Sehnaoui's Al Maslakh and Annihaya as well as Ruptured, co-founded by Irtijal managing director Ziad Nawfal and producer/composer Fadi Tabbal, had promoted emerging talent. International attention had been drawn to bands including Kinematik and Postcards, many of them nurtured by Tabbal at Tunefork Studios, a centre point of the community where mainstream and alternative artists intermingle.

Tabbal's reaction after the blast was similar to Sehnaoui's, but both men soon dismissed their pessimistic initial thoughts. As they note, it was not the first catastrophe they had overcome. In recent decades, Lebanese artists have lived through occupations by Israel and Syria, civil war and an economic crash that led to a bloody uprising. Then the pandemic arrived. Today, the Lebanese pound has lost 90 per cent of its value since late 2019, homes can go without power for up to 23 hours a day and nearly 80 per cent of the country is living below the poverty line.

Despite all this, last year's 20th anniversary edition of Irtijal went ahead, albeit in abridged form. Sehnaoui couldn't bear the thought of cancelling. On November 1, it became the first public arts event in the country since the



# Rhythms from the rubble



**From main:** Nadah al Shazly performs at Irtijal festival in 2019; **Ziad al-Shayzly**, left, and Saad Molaeb play guitar on their rooftop during last year's Covid lockdown in Beirut; **Sharif Sehnaoui**, musician and co-founder of Irtijal

*Sama Beydoun, Joseph Eid/AFP/Getty; Tony Elieh*

explosion, with a weekend of concerts featuring nine local acts. A second weekend of performances followed.

As a result of Covid restrictions, audience sizes were down but this did not diminish the event's importance. "I heard 'It's like you brought us back to life' from a great number of attendees," Sehnaoui says.

Other initiatives have helped bolster the artistic community. The Beirut Musicians' Fund was launched by Tabbal within two weeks of the blast through Tunefork, which sustains itself by providing sound engineering for concerts and festivals, and sound design and scores for film and TV productions, but allows local artists to pay what they can.

"I called everyone to make sure they were OK and then asked if they had lost anything [they required] to make music," Tabbal says. He knew no other organisation would be attending to these needs. The fund's goal of \$49,705 was met swiftly through myriad means, including word of mouth, a funding platform set up by Postcards' German agent, and international events including a 17-hour digital concert

organised by Morphine Records and Berlin's CTM Festival. It has since raised an additional \$23,562 for music schools, instrument makers and students who need aid.

Searching for capital is not new to the Lebanese arts community. "The scene is funded 100 per cent by private individuals, independent institutions and the underground," says Sehnaoui, who condemns the total lack of government assistance.

The need for funds also led Sehnaoui to Irtijal's office a few days after the blast, where the ceiling, windows and walls had collapsed. A friend had mentioned that a grant application to the Gwaertler Foundation in Switzerland was due imminently. He completed the application while sitting in the rubble at a computer that somehow still worked, hoping that this could provide the money required to launch a new album project.

This became *Istimrar* (Arabic for "continuity"), a digital album recently released on Bandcamp and streaming via SoundCloud. It was produced in partnership with the UK's renowned Huddersfield Contemporary Music Fes-



tival, which has collaborated with Irtijal since 2019. The project features 12 newly commissioned pieces that were recorded and mixed locally.

Thanks to this grant and Huddersfield's support, *Istimrar* has provided its contributors with a rare influx of cash: a \$1,000 fee, in addition to production costs. Composer Jad Atoui says this can sustain him for up to three months, unlike his last comparable job, which paid what is now worth about \$40. "Such initiatives allow us to continue working and exploring new ideas," he says.

*Istimrar* also gave its commissioned

artists total creative freedom, and the resulting pieces exemplify contemporary Lebanese music's dynamism and eclecticism.

Composer, DJ and producer Jana Saleh survived the blast because she knew to rush to her windowless bathroom, as she had done during the civil war. Almost everything in her apartment/studio near the port was destroyed, and her childhood piano lay upended on its keys. Rather than repair it or her recording equipment, she used them in their damaged forms for her piece, "Soupir". "I wanted to record not only the state of my instruments but also [to reflect] the conditions of the country," she says. She calls the result a "homage to what was taken from us".

"Vocal Bodies" by Nour Sokhon features a soundscape that blends field recordings, found objects inspired by material in a building ruined by the blast, and excerpts from a roundtable conversation between eight Arab women who discuss the impact of two years of catastrophes on their mental and physical health. "They voiced what isn't often heard — our sense of belong-

**'I wanted to record not only the state of my instruments but also [to reflect] the conditions of the country'**

ing and feeling safe where we live, how the environment we listen to affects how we feel," she says. "After three hours, they all screamed at the city that has oppressed us so much."

Sokhon and her peers' complex and nuanced compositions counter the Lebanese political class's dismissal of artists as unproductive and unworthy of attention — except when it comes to collecting taxes.

As a result, Irtijal's Nawfal considers these and other artistic acts "forms of resistance" against multiple threats to the community's existence, from the social revolution and financial crisis to the pandemic.

"In Lebanon, even if you have no financial constraints, you can never live in a bubble. You still have to create in the midst of catastrophe, because there is always some sort of hardship," he says. "You can decide to react to it or not, and most musicians I know do, through their music." No wonder then that, despite last year's explosion, the scene still resounds.

*'Istimrar Phase 1' can be streamed and purchased at irtijalfestival.bandcamp.com*

## Diversions

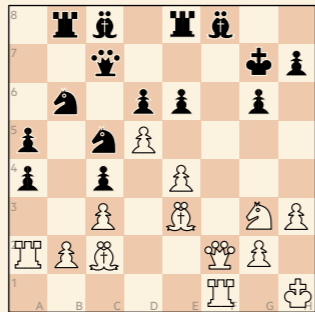
### CHESS LEONARD BARDEN

Magnus Carlsen plans an early strike as the \$2m, 14-game world title match in Dubai gets under way this weekend with games on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Play starts at 12.30 GMT, and can be followed live and free online with grandmaster commentaries.

Carlsen is on his fifth match since 2013, while it is the first for Russian opponent Ian Nepomniachtchi. Debut challengers can freeze at the start, as in Tigran Petrosian's

collapse in game one against Mikhail Botvinnik in 1963, and Bobby Fischer's capture of Boris Spassky's poisoned pawn in 1972, while Fabiano Caruana should have lost the first game in 2018.

"As a reigning champion, you have a good chance to strike at the start. That's definitely something I'm going to try," Carlsen said. He remains a prohibitive 1-4 on in the betting and I expect him to win by two or three points. Meanwhile, the



Crown Prince of chess, Alireza Firouzja, 18, surged last weekend at the European teams in Slovenia. Making his debut for France, Firouzja

totalled 8/9, won individual gold and team silver medals, jumped to world No2 and became the youngest ever to reach a 2800 rating, beating Carlsen's record by six months.

**2446**

Hou Yifan v James Jackson, Isle of Man 2016. White to move and win. The current No 1 woman sacrificed a knight for this position. How did she break Black's defensive wall?

*Solution, back page*

### BRIDGE PAUL MENDELSON

Hands where losers evaporate almost magically are one of the reasons that our game is so compellingly brilliant. Watch how declarer handled a seemingly hopeless situation.

West led **K♣**, revealing declarer's four losers. When declarer played trumps, the 3-0 split meant he actually had five. With no ruffs and no long suit to establish, there is only the bidding. West's vulnerable pre-emptive overall marks him

Dealer: South E/W Game

North	East	South	West
—	—	1H	3S

**4H**

cashed **A♠** and **♦AK**, hoping to strip West of these suits. Then, he exited with a third trump. West won and played **Q♣**, but is now endplayed, forced to lead spades, providing a ruff and discard — but this is not the end of the hand: declarer has two extra losers. On the third spade, South threw dummy's final diamond and a club from his hand. There

seven spades. Declarer finds out he holds three trumps, so West has only three cards in the minor suits.

Following **♥AK** South

A 5  
 ♠ 8 7 6 5 3  
 ♣ K 7 2  
 ♦ A 8 2

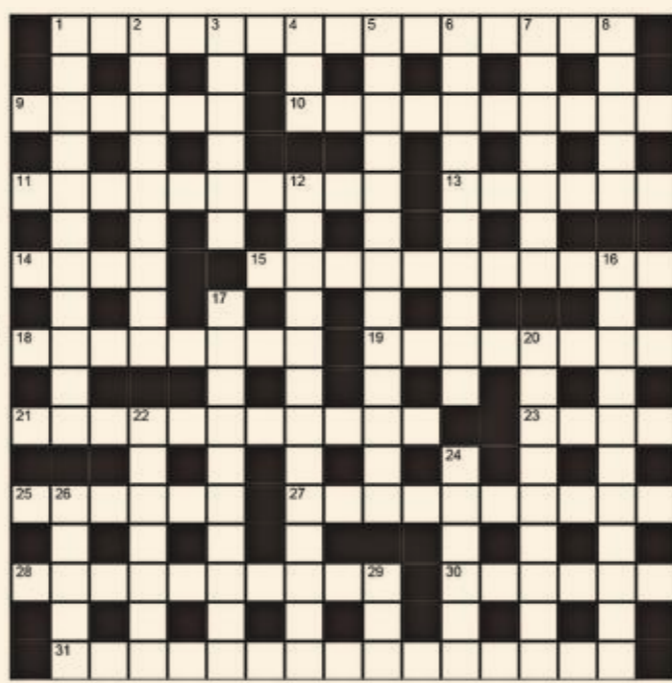
K Q J 10 9 8 6  
 ♠ Q J 2  
 ♥ 8 3  
 ♣ J

4 3  
 ♠ —  
 ♥ —  
 ♦ Q 10 9 5  
 ♣ K Q 9 7 5 4

7 2  
 ♠ A K 10 9 4  
 ♥ A 6 4  
 ♦ 10 6 3

### POLYMATH 1,154 SET BY BRADMAN

- ACROSS**
- A type of patriot with a narrow national perspective (6,9)
  - An oriental tree of the rose family (6)
  - Female public speakers (10)
  - Composer of *The Firebird* (10)
  - Developments deviating from expected norms (6)
  - The sister and wife of Zeus (4)
  - A book published in Milan giving its name to a group of Expressionist painters (5,6)
  - The legal status of property transferred inalienably (8)
  - The location of a church criticised in the New Testament for being lukewarm (8)
  - A photograph of a range of colours (11)
  - One of the commanding officers of The Yeomen of the Guard (4)
  - The sister of Moses (6)
  - Relating to the hollow that receives the head of the thigh bone (10)
  - Jack, who became a baron and who served in Tony Blair's cabinet (10)
  - The Japanese philosophy of continuous improvement in business (6)
  - An explosive chemical compound (15)
- DOWN**
- A flight manoeuvre involving a complete rotation in the vertical plane (4-3-4)
  - Entirely (French) (4,1,4)
  - A republic on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea (6)
  - An acronym for a Birmingham rock band founded in 1970 (3)
  - Informal, not restricted by rules (2-2-3-6)
  - An architectural ornament on a pedestal (10)
  - A loose colourful shirt worn by Africans (7)
  - A Scottish word for a sudden form of stubbornness (5)
  - One who studies the physical features of the moon (13)
  - An ---- illustrates retributive justice in the Bible (3,3,2,3)
  - An Australian river-fish (10)
  - Lacking the ability needed to solve many Polymath clues (9)
  - A dry red Italian wine (7)
  - A wild animal featured in the title of a novel by Frederick Forsyth (6)
  - A member of a people living in the Arctic (5)
  - A clever remark (3)

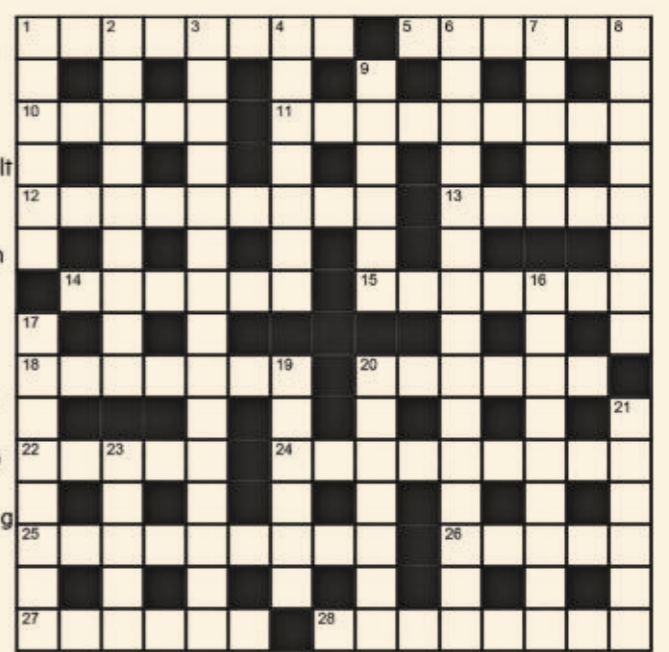


Solution Polymath 1,152



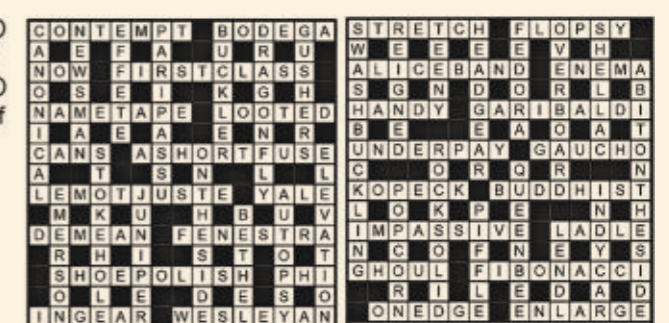
### CROSSWORD 16,954 SET BY ALBERICH

- ACROSS**
- Utterly surprise statement that prisoner's been located? (8)
  - Decadent female on European holiday (6)
  - Surpass alfresco party? (5)
  - Call it an ultimately tiresome loose end (9)
  - Graceless nannies oddly ignored support worker? (9)
  - Wait short time for bathroom fixture (5)
  - In public, he eschewed fruit (6)
  - European from Bern is a suspect (7)
  - Aim to keep good time as promised (7)
  - To snoop around is beginning to seem fussy (6)
  - Compassion making leader last to give ground (5)
  - Skill is reflected by speech without constant practice (9)
  - Make parting shot term for artist (9)
  - A couple to stay (5)
  - At home, daughter packs her hamper (6)
  - Aware of opinion millions expressed (8)
- DOWN**
- He scored century, batting after spring (6)
  - Having a yack, get rant in somehow (9)
  - Santa's first Ho Ho Ho sploit with sneering and acting haughtily (2,4,4,5)
  - What's used in fertiliser can upset class (7)
  - Liar admits beginning to like it up on gallows, creating gossip (15)
  - Dash with daughter to find antelope (5)
  - Choosing, after polling? (8)
  - Returned musical instrument good for nothing (6)
  - Begin to look into eliminating extremes of violence (9)
  - Study hard to follow different careers (8)
  - Diamonds on a ring becoming old-fashioned (6)
  - Penny wants toy rabbit (7)
  - Trendy outlet for design (6)
  - Springboks, say? It's part of their stomach (5)



Solution 16,953

Solution 16,942



Jotter pad