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CM von Hausswolff – 800 000 Seconds in Harar (Touch)

By [Nick Giles](#) April 26, 2011



Harar is a small city located in the east of Ethiopia, with a population around 122,000 people. It is considered to be the fourth holiest city of Islam in the world, and has been a major commercial trading hub for centuries, linking a majority of northeast Africa and Arabia to the world. Apparently, they also have really good coffee. It is here that our sonic “postcard” is taken from.

800 000 Seconds in Harar was commissioned for a play entitled “Jag Ar En Annan” (I is Another), a work based on the life of poet Arthur Rimbaud, from his youth in Charleville ending with him being a trader in Harar. Swedish composer CM von Hausswolff spent 10 days in Harar recording various sounds and textures with focus on reflecting what the locale must have sounded like circa 1900. While this is not a pure field recording exercise, being that Hausswolff utilises several oscillators and an Ethiopian stringed instrument called the “Krar”, the work as a whole is pointed towards imagining the aural yesteryear through Rimbaud’s prose.

The first piece is divided into 3 parts. Beginning with ‘Day’, we are greeted by the sounds children in play and discussion, perhaps late afternoon, as a gentle breeze blows through the grass, carrying with it a quite chorus of insects. Crickets and flies buzz ubiquitously around, and the tones of the Krar ominously lift from the roadside. Much of the rest of this first stanza continues the same way, before the children and insects are left outside as we venture indoors. The persistent dripping of taps and thoughts of dark uncertainty abound in ‘Night’, as the piece lies awake in insecurity. Suspenseful and claustrophobic, we lapse into sleep as ‘Alas!’ sees multi tracked Krars sing as a ghoulish choir, their off key modes grinding against one another in fear. As they steadily crescendo together, i couldn’t help but feel sympathetic for anyone who’d dream in tones like this. The second piece proper is ‘The Sleeper in the Valley’, and employs a skilful use of oscillation. As each tone is set adrift across an open space, a single LFO blips and beeps below, persistently underscoring the tones above. However, far from being a random set of notes, it is actually morse code, punching out text from a poem Rimbaud penned in his youth, centered around a dead soldier in a field. As each oscillator steadily departs, we are left with a single low signal droning off into an eerie silence.