



FRANK LONDON

The World is a Ghetto

The American composer and trumpeter Frank London speaks to **Simon Broughton** about his latest project commemorating the Jewish ghetto of Venice

The word 'ghetto' as a place of segregation came into existence with the creation of the Venice ghetto in 1516. The name is thought to come from *geto*, meaning foundry, as a forge was formerly located in this part of the Italian city. Then, the word didn't have the dark overtones it has since acquired – whether referring to the Jewish ghettos of World War II or other ghettos inhabited by discriminated people. In the 16th century, Jews were excluded from many places across Europe, but as many of them were in banking they were seen as essential to Venice's mercantile economy. The ghetto, in the northern Cannaregio district, was sealed off each night by Christian guards. Outside, the ghetto Jews had to wear an identifying symbol, a yellow circle for men and a yellow scarf for women. During the 16th century, Ashkenazi, Sephardi (exiled from Spain and Portugal), Italian and Levantine Jews settled in the ghetto making it a crowded, but multicultural, place.

To celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Venice ghetto in 2016, trumpeter Frank London was invited as artist-in-residence. "I've always loved the city and can't get enough of Venice," he says. "Being artist-in-residence was mostly about learning – getting a feel of Venice, eating incredible food and imbibing the atmosphere."

London is best known as a founding member of New York-based band the Klezmatics, the Klezmer Brass Allstars and Hassidic New Wave, but he's also composed widely for film.

and theatre, including the Cuban Yiddish opera, *Hatuey: Memory of Fire*.

His invitation came from an organisation called Beit Venezia. "They had an international academic conference on the character of Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice*. Shaul Bassi [one of Beit Venezia's directors] calls him 'the most famous Venetian Jew,' even though he's a fictional character and Shakespeare never went to Italy!" As part of the 500th anniversary, he composed music for the first ever performance of *The Merchant of Venice* in the ghetto.

"The Venice ghetto hasn't turned into a Disneyland version like Kazimierz in Kraków," says London. "There are very few obvious signs in the square itself – there's one kosher restaurant and the synagogues are not obvious, so it's rather like a blank slate."

One of his ideas was an annual 'Ghetto Music' festival, with a focus on music from the many ghettos around the world. While the festival hasn't yet been realised, London has released an album, *Ghetto Songs* (on Felmay), which develops this idea. While over half of the dozen pieces relate to Venice or Italy, the rest come from different periods – from the 16th to the 21st century – and different places (with their associated music), including South African Township jive, a Yiddish song by Mordechai Gebirtig (who died in the Kraków ghetto in 1942), a Moroccan Jewish song, and 'The World is a Ghetto', the title-track from the best-selling 1973 album by the Californian band War.

"Those Polish Jewish ghettos of World War II, like Warsaw and Kraków, are the worst of the worst of what the word ghetto means," explains London. "Those were about rounding up a group of people, in this case Jews, and sending them off to their deaths. *Favelas*, in Brazil, are also ghettos, but it's not an intentional rounding up. And South African townships were segregated societies. Ghettos are complex phenomena. They offer both freedom and restriction, protection and imperilment, becoming cultural petri-dishes where particular groups thrive."

As well as drawing attention to different ghettos around the world, London's album also searches for a varied musical mix. Hence the instrumental South African 'Accordion Jive', with London giving himself a spirited trumpet part, plus solos on accordion and electric guitar, and the brooding trumpet solo in 'The World is a Ghetto'. Some of the songs come from Jewish liturgical tradition. 'Oseh Shalom' is a Hebrew prayer composed in Italy and 'Retsey' is from the repertoire of a celebrated cantor called Gershon Sirota, who was based at the Great Synagogue in Warsaw, but toured across Europe and to Carnegie Hall. He perished in the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto uprising. On *Ghetto Songs*, the cantor is Yaakov 'Yanky' Lemmer, one of the best of today's cantorial voices.

"I react against overly operatic interpretations," says London. "Cantors certainly became concert stars, but the form is very non-Western with connections to modes, *maqams* and *nusach* as we call it. This weird mix of East and West is the reason I love our cantor Yanky. What gets me is the emotional and spiritual intensity that we can get without understanding a



A Venetian ghetto rehearsal for *The Merchant of Venice*

Andrea Messana

"Ghettos are complex phenomena. They offer both freedom and restriction"

darn word, just as we understand the spirituality of Nusrat. And I get that when Lemmer sings the 'Retsey', which has the *kvetch* ornament throughout. Actually, I hate the word ornamentation which implies decoration, something on top. I believe these stylistic things are the thing itself in cantorial music. It's what makes this cantorial music particular."

With so many diverse styles of music from different periods on *Ghetto Songs*, one of the few things that unifies it is the ensemble of accordion, piano, trumpet, guitar, cello, bass and percussion – though none of the musicians come from London's other groups. "I could have had each song with a perfectly authentic band," London explains. "But I wanted the instrumentation to be the glue that makes this sound like one record, otherwise it would have just been a mixtape."

London sees this album as "a 21st-century song-recital with four wonderful voices and a common thematic element – ghettos." The four singers also come from different backgrounds. Ukrainian-born Sveta Kundish sings classical and cantorial music, the other singers, all American-born, are cantor Lemmer, classical vocalist Karim Sulayman and singer/jazz guitarist Brandon Ross. "Why can't we have a vocal recital and have Brandon Ross singing 'The World is a Ghetto' right next to Karim Sulayman singing 'La Barcheta', a gondoliers song by Reynaldo Hahn, and Yanky singing a cantorial piece? Hopefully it questions the idea of 'genre' – of classical versus popular versus religious versus secular music. It's the antithesis of the YouTube/Spotify algorithms that say, 'If you listen to this, you'll want to listen to that'. Certainly no algorithm would lead someone from [Italian Renaissance Jewish composer] Salomone Rossi to War."

The opening track of *Ghetto Songs* is a piece London composed for *The Merchant of Venice* production in the ghetto. 'Amore An' sounds rather like an Italian version of klezmer music, with the 16th-century Venetian lyrics sung by Sulayman, the piece influenced, says its composer, by Fellini, Nino Rota and carnival. It's an ebullient way of asking some serious questions. Is there a commonality in the human response to the ghetto experience? What can we learn from looking at ghettos across cultures, time and place? However, it will probably take many more albums, conferences and books to answer them. ♦

+ ALBUM Frank London's *Ghetto Songs* was reviewed last issue