PAPERS AND MONOGRAPHS OF THE FINNISH INSTITUTE AT ATHENS VOL. XIX

OTTOMAN INTIMACIES, BALKAN MUSICAL REALITIES

Edited by Risto Pekka Pennanen, Panagiotis C. Poulos and Aspasia Theodosiou

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Text and Memory in Ottoman/Turkish Musical Tradition

Cem Behar

The status of the written text as compared to that of the essentially oral nature of the overall Ottoman/Turkish musical world is best represented by the following comparison: in Europe, the first piece of printed music appeared, in Parma to be more precise, barely fifteen years after Gutenberg's first edition of the Bible. In the capital city of the Ottoman Empire, however, this time-gap was of no less than a century and a half. Indeed, almost exactly a century and a half after the first book was produced by İbrahim Müteferrika's first Ottoman printing press in 1727, Hacı Emin Efendi set up the first printing press devoted entirely to the publication of Ottoman/Turkish music in Istanbul in 1875–1876.

The numerous possible technical or financial causes of this delay all point towards a wider and more pervasive reason. Basically, the almost totally oral Ottoman/Turkish musical world at large had no interest whatsoever in the written musical text. Even supposing that the technical problem of which precise kind of notational system to use could have been solved, no printer or publisher would have considered the publication of musical scores to be a profitable enterprise. The market for these scores simply did not exist. The teaching and transmission of music and the repertoire were done on an almost entirely oral basis, and no need was felt for written material, except perhaps for collections of song-texts. The use of notation and scores was frowned upon and even often considered totally unethical.

It is therefore not really surprising that most of the musical works published by Hacı Emin Efendi in the course of the last-quarter of the nineteenth century were pieces of Ottoman/Turkish music but "with a piano accompaniment". It appears that these publications mainly addressed the Levantine and European public of Istanbul and the district of Pera. *Bona fide* publications of Ottoman/Turkish music picked up only after the Constitutional Restoration of 1908 and a number of specialized publishing houses then appeared. Thereafter, the use of notation prevailed.[1]

I do not intend to digress at length on the technical details and the consequences of the prevalence of an oral system of teaching and transmission within the Ottoman/Turkish musical tradition until the beginning of the twentieth century. This system of transmission, which I have named *meşk,* has been studied and analyzed in detail elsewhere.[2] On a much more general level, the contrasts between an oral and a written cultural universe and the possible transitions and interfaces between them have been masterfully analyzed by the British cultural anthropologist Jack Goody.[3]

From the same anthropological perspective, oral cultural systems and those (mostly Western ones) where the written text prevails, have frequently been considered

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[1] A more complete picture of the state of literacy in the late Ottoman musical world would, of course, involve a consideration of the uses to which the Hamparsum musical notations were put by Armenian and other musicians, as well as the published collections (from the 1830s onwards), in the Greek-Orthodox church music notational system. One must emphasize, though, that these two notational systems had a very restricted and highly specialized readership.

[2] See Behar 2012.

[3] See Goody and Watt 1963; Goody 1986; *id.* 1987.

as clearly distinct and disjoined, if not as diametrically opposed. The strict oral-written duality, however, is often too simplistic and does not entirely do justice to the multiple overlaps and grey areas that necessarily prevail in a number of instances. I will attempt to offer a few examples of these overlaps. The examples have all been taken from the mainstream Ottoman/Turkish musical tradition. I will pick up two types of examples: firstly, those that stress the awkward and even paradoxical situations involving the widespread desire for a literal, textual memory within a totally oral musical environment. Secondly, those examples originating in a musical environment where notation and the use of written scores are pervasive, but where a large number of references to orality, to oral teaching and transmission as well as to the virtues of musical memorization still survive.

In today's world of Turkish classical music, the use of written scores is pervasive and notation is universal, as an instrument for teaching as well as for the transmission of the classical repertoire. Nevertheless, much of the ethical foundations of the purely oral teaching, transmission and performance processes of former times are still part and parcel of today's musical practice. On the other hand, the idea of absolute fidelity to the composer and the *verbatim* reproduction of a musical work, an idea that is normally attached to cultures based on the written text, was, paradoxically, also present and effective in the early Ottoman/Turkish musical universe (and even in the inceptive seventeenth century); a world that might seem, at first sight, to function on pure orality. The simultaneity and the overlap of characteristic items coming from both types of musical universes is what I will attempt to exemplify here.

The musical concept, around which all this seems to revolve, is the concept of fidelity/faithfulness (*sadakat*). Indeed, in the almost totally oral world of pre-twentieth-century Ottoman/Turkish music, one of the basic duties of all music masters was to transmit the repertoire, and thus to contribute to the reproduction of the collective musical memory. The composer himself is also under the same obligation, obviously. The pre-composed musical work, that has been memorized, must necessarily be transmitted; but what musical work are we talking about? Obviously, a work that has been learnt from a master, and that master has learnt it from yet another musician. It is all too clear that the notion of authenticity and the reference to a work's "original version" have no validity in a musical universe where orality prevails and more than one performance-generated variant or version of the same work coexist. Indeed, the composer has not put down his work on paper, and neither have those musicians who have memorized, performed or transmitted the same work. No one should therefore imagine being in possession of the only real, true rendering of a musical composition because more than one version or variant of the same work may be taught and in circulation at the same moment in time, and that is bound to be the usual course of things. This practice was probably particularly true in periods (the mid-eighteenth century, for instance) where the musical forms themselves were in a state of flux.

So, what does "faithfulness" mean in such a context? Faithfulness to what exactly? Obviously, musicians could and would be faithful to particular variants of the same work, but to a variant that had been learnt at a given moment in time from a particular master musician, who was himself the last link in a particular chain of transmission. Was this chain trustworthy? That remains to be seen. Was it unique? Certainly not: thence the possibility of debates and conflicts. The notion of "authenticity" is, by the same token, also laden with ambiguities and misconceptions.

In this musical universe, from a purely objective point of view, there is obviously

no room for the notion of an absolute fidelity, be it to the composer himself or to the "original" musical work. Each fidelity is therefore particular to a master-pupil relationship, and it is perceived not only as a musical duty, but most of all as an item of personal loyalty. We are thus brought back to the problem of *memory*, for in such a universe there can be no question of *textual memory* – or *verbatim memory*, as Jack Goody has so aptly called it.

Orality and the Musical Norm

However paradoxical this may seem (and, of course, it is this apparent paradox that is the real subject matter of the present paper), it seems that this state of things, with all the consequences of orality, was not universally perceived as "normal". Many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century traditional Ottoman/Turkish musicians took note of the existence and the circulation of multiple variants of the same musical work. Some of these musicians even seemed to disapprove of this state of affairs. I will give three of the most significan examples.

In chronological order, the first musician to mention the existence of multiple variants of the same work, without taking sides or making any particular value judgement, is Ali Ufki Bey. Wojciech Bobowski, also known as Ali Ufki, (1610?–1675), was a Polish renegade who was brought to Istanbul as a captive around the year 1635 and spent the rest of his life as a page, musician and music teacher in the Topkapı Palace and later as an official diplomatic translator in Istanbul. He also translated the Bible into Turkish, and parts of the Qur'an into Latin. Among the works he left behind are two large and important musical manuscripts containing hundreds of notations of Otoman/Turkish as well as European pieces. Both of these manuscripts were most probably written in the 1640s or the early 1650s. One of these manuscripts is now kept at the British Library in London, and the second one in the Oriental Manuscripts Section of the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris.[4]

One special item in the Paris manuscript is of particular relevance to the matter that is the object of this paper. On folio 293b of this manuscript, we have the notation of a rather short piece, an anonymous instrumental *semai* in *makam* Rast-Pençgah, and in three parts (three *hane*s). It seems that more than one version of this *semai* (or, at least, of one of its parts) was in circulation at the time, for just below the notated piece is another short line of notation which is accompanied by a comment in Italian: "The second *hane*, but in another manner/style".[5]

Indeed, this "second manner" is noticeably different from the first.[6] Ali Ufki had the immense advantage of using Western staff notation and, therefore, of being able to juxtapose the two renderings of the same piece on paper. He makes no other comment, however, and puts forth no judgment, but provides us nevertheless with an important testimony on the variability in performance of compositions of traditional Ottoman/Turkish music.

Our second, and more judgmental, witness to this state of affairs is the Moldavian prince Demetrius Cantemir (1673–1723) who was active about half a century after Ali Ufki. Ample evidence on the existence of variants is also provided by Cantemir who, in

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[4] GB-Lbl MS Sloane 3114 and F-Pn MS Turc 292.

[5] "*Il secondo hane in altra maniera.*"

[6] For an analysis of Ali Ufki's Paris manuscript, see Behar 2008.

a musical treatise composed in the first decade of the eighteenth century, and thanks to a system of notation of his own invention, put down on paper no less than 350 compositions – almost all of them instrumental – in the repertoire. Cantemir provides two examples of variants in this collection; that is, Cantemir has notated two significantly differing versions of two instrumental compositions (a *peşrev* and a *semai*).[7] Furthermore, he confirms that two rather different versions of a *hane* of a *peşrev* were being performed and provides the second version of this *hane* under the title "the third part in another version/account" (*hane-i salis bâ qavl-i ahir*).

Cantemir, however, does not seem to approach the existence of such widely differing variants with as much indifference as Ali Ufki did half a century before him. Basically, Cantemir was a musical critic and also a reformer, and he wished that all compositions were played as their author had intended them. As a matter of fact, one of the reasons why Cantemir says he set out to invent a system of notation that also includes tempo and beat indications is precisely to make sure that every single piece of traditional Ottoman/Turkish music could be performed in perfect conformity to the intentions of the composer. He says it himself in just as many words in his manuscript: "[T]ying it to the letter with a written measure, we can thus perform the *beste* or the *peşrev* as the composer designed it".[8]

One may object that the two authors that I have just cited, although themselves fully part and parcel of the oral Ottoman musical world, both had direct access to the written musical text.

As for the third author, musician and composer that I will call upon here to illustrate the paradox I am talking about, he had no access whatsoever to any sort of notational device. Mehmet Es'at Efendi (1685–1753), a member of the *'ulemâ* class, was a prominent member of the Muslim religious hierarchy. At one time in his career he served as the *kadı* (judge) of Salonica, and in 1748/49 he occupied the post of Şeyhülislâm, at the very top of the Ottoman religious establishment. Şeyhülislâm Es'at Efendi was also a theologian, a poet, a lexicographer and a musician. A few of his compositions have survived and are still performed today.

Among his more important works is a biographical dictionary (*tezkire*) of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Ottoman composers and musicians. This biographical dictionary, named *Atrabü'l Âsâr fi Tezkire-ti 'Urefâ-il Edvâr* is unique. In the Ottoman centuries, a considerably large number of biographical dictionaries of poets have been written in Turkish but *Atrabü'l Âsâ*r is the only known Ottoman *tezkire* of musicians. It was written in 1728/29 and contains short biographical notes concerning about one hundred composers. Es'at Efendi also provides examples of song-texts from each composer's works and, most importantly, a basic evaluation of each of these composers' musical achievements.

Among his criteria for evaluating the musical career of a composer, Es'at Efendi refers a few times to that musician's ability to perform the "original versions" of pieces of the repertoire. For example, in the biographical entry for Serhânende Mustafa ağa, we read: "[B]y completely acquiring the works of old masters as they were composed originally, he became a straightforward master himself […]".[9] In another biographical entry,

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[7] Wright 1992.

[8] "*[R]akam-ı vezn ile harfın altında bend idüp lâzım olan peşrevi yahut besteyi şart-ı musannif üzre okuruz […]*" (Cantemir 2001, 7–8).

[9] "*['A]lâ mâ-'umile fi'l asl âsâr-ı külliyât-ı selefi zabt ü tekmil etmekle üstâd-ı rast-kâr olmuştur […].*"

that for Molla Mehmet Efendi from Üsküdar, Es'at Efendi says: "[H]e used to sing the artful works of the old masters as they were originally composed […]".[10]

What is striking here is that there was absolutely no way Es'at Efendi could have known what the original compositions, those created a century or more before his time, could have initially sounded like. Nevertheless, Es'ad Efendi places a high value on the abstract notion of absolute fidelity to the original composition and is highly appreciative of those that appear to have conformed to this canon. For him, this notion of fidelity is obviously not a realistic requirement but rather an aesthetic construct, a product of his own historical and musical imagination. The attitude of Es'at Efendi, however, indicates that, in eighteenth-century Istanbul, while there was widespread awareness of the production of multiple variants and versions of the same piece within an almost totally oral musical world, high aesthetic value could still be placed upon the – albeit impossible and imagined – reproduction and intact transmission of "original" compositions.

Standard Versions

If we now turn to the ethos of Turkish music in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we may observe similar discrepancies and paradoxes involving, on one side, a real or imagined oral musical tradition, and the written musical text itself on the other. Of course, however, things are now turned the other way around. Notation and musical literacy have been, since the beginnings of the twentieth century, quasi-universal and the use of musical scores is the general rule. Teaching, transmission and performance take the written musical text as a basis, and learning Western staff notation is the unavoidable starting point of all Ottoman/Turkish music teaching processes. Moreover, nowadays, the Internet is also full of all sorts of notations of pieces of Ottoman/Turkish music, and these are easily accessible to all. Nevertheless, it appears that the basic logic of literacy, more adapted to a musical universe where everything is there, laid out on paper, is still far from fully functioning.

For one thing, the production of variants and versions of the same work has not ceased, as one would, *a priori* have expected. This may seem somewhat surprising, but the passage from the oral tradition to universal musical literacy, the use of staff notation, and the written score has not managed to stop the process of the branching-out of variants. Indeed, variants now are not anymore exclusively "performance-generated" than they were before the twentieth century. Different editions or printings of the same work may include variants. These might now even appear, unexpectedly sometimes, at some stage in the usage and the reproduction of a computer-generated score. In a recent article,[11] Owen Wright has traced the multiple variants of a single *peşrev* in *makam* Nihavend from its first notated appearance in Cantemir's treatise at the beginning of the eighteenth century to its latest publication in 1996. Surprisingly, he found that the greatest number of variants of this particular piece, variants that he traces from one publication to the other, had been produced in the course of the twentieth century.

Even I, in the course of my relatively short musical life as a performer, have been an eye-witness in both amateur and professional musical groups to the process of gen-

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[10] "*[Â]sâr-ı musannâat-ı seleft 'alâ mâ-umile fi'l-'asl hânende idi […].*" For Esat Efendi's work, see Behar 2010.

[11] Wright 2007.

erating a new variant of an old piece. The group begins performing any given, notated variant of the piece and then, in the course of the rehearsal, finding this or that bit of the notation not exactly to its taste, introduces slight modifications. The initiative may have come from the head of the group or from any one of the musicians. A discussion among the musicians may ensue, but in many instances the whole thing ends up in the production – with the help of music software – of a new variant. The modifications might have been minor but the result is nevertheless the same. As regards the initial motive for the change, it may have been the wish to be in line with another, previously learnt variant, or simply a pure matter of taste as expressed by a single person or by the group as a whole.

The basic problem that Ottoman/Turkish music has had to face, from the very beginning and throughout the twentieth century, is the absence of standard musical texts. There are simply no universally accepted "standard versions" or "standard editions" of classical works, no standard and authoritative publications to which teachers and musicians can always turn in case of doubt or of conflict. Some musical publications are more prestigious than others, of course. But even the most prestigious ones, for instance the collection published in the 1920s and early 1930s on behalf of the Istanbul Conservatory by a committee headed by Rauf Yekta Bey, a collection known as *Darülelhan Külliyatı*, even that collection has been the object of much criticism and doubt. No written version is, in fact, held as absolutely trustworthy. Given what we know about the multiplicity of versions and variants of the same piece in circulation, this is no real surprise.

The absence of universally acknowledged and authoritative musical publications has given rise to two diametrically opposed attitudes towards notation and notated works. At one extreme of the spectrum is the contempt in which the notated versions of musical works (as opposed to memorization, *meşk*) is held. At the other end is an attitude of quasi-veneration of which some musical publications are the object. I will offer some examples taken from both extremes that will illustrate both types of attitudes.

My first example concerns Hâfız Ahmet Efendi (1869–1943), who was the son of the famous nineteenth-century composer Zekâi Dede, better known as Zekâizâde (the son of Zekâi). Ahmet Efendi's musical life sits astride the traditional and the so-called modern periods of Ottoman/Turkish music. The musical stances Ahmet Efendi took now and then perfectly exemplify the paradox I am attempting to illustrate. Ahmet Efendi had, as a child, received a very traditional musical education from his father and, at an early age, had memorized an enormous repertoire of religious and secular music. He had, however, later in life, also learnt Western staff notation and used it when teaching his students in a high-school music class.[12] In the early 1920s, Ahmet Efendi was appointed to teach the religious repertoire at the newly founded Istanbul Conservatory (*Darülelhân*). At some point, however, he disagreed with the Director of the Conservatory and he resigned from his post.

The disagreement was about *one single note* in a piece that the Conservatory intended to publish. The director maintained that this precise note was an F# (*eviç perdesi*). Ahmet Efendi, however, was adamant: for him it was not an F# but an F (*acem perdesi*). That was indeed how, as a child, he had learnt that piece from his father. As a consequence of this fundamental disagreement, Ahmet Efendi resigned from his teaching post at the conservatory. In the background of his resignation was both a distrust of the process of musical notation as well as the idea of an absolute fidelity to the version of the work as he

[12] For Ahmet Efendi's biography and basic musical choices, see Behar 2005a.

had first learnt it from his own master.

The contempt, in which standard notated versions of a work were sometimes held, is nowhere better exemplified than in the attitude towards their own compositions of two other very well-known twentieth-century composers of Turkish music: Cevdet Çağla and Refik Fersan. Cevdet Çağla died in 1988 and Refik Fersan in 1965. The former composed mostly songs (*şarkı*), and the latter is better known for his instrumental music. Needless to say, both of them could read and write music perfectly. Nevertheless, neither of these two composers ever thought of setting down on paper and establishing once and for all *standard and non-controversial versions of their own compositions*. On the contrary, both of them personally and directly contributed to generate different versions of their own compositions.

Cevdet Çağla used to play the violin and the viola at the Istanbul Radio Ensemble. Eyewitnesses report that often, when one or other of his songs were to be performed at the Radio, some of the performers would ask him how they should play this or that passage and present him with two variants of the same passage. Invariably, Cevdet Çağla's answer would be that the two manners of rendering the same passage were both correct.

As for Refik Fersan, his manner of generating variants of his own works was much more straightforward. He personally put on paper more than one "original version" of some of his own instrumental compositions. It is as simple as that.

Variants and versions of the same work that used to be exclusively performance-generated – given the absence of notation – have now been manufactured with the help of musical scores, and, in this precise case, by these two composers themselves. These two composers seem to have regarded their pieces as a sort of "mobile", capable of being varied by themselves and also by performers. Is their composition, then, just a sort of "work in progress", an "open work" that may later acquire a varying number of possible "realizations"? What would have been just part of the normal course of things in previous centuries and could have been expected to disappear with the advent of universal notation and musical literacy, has been turned by some composers into an instrument of their own compositional fantasy. This type of attitude obviously raises questions about the ontological status of the "composer" and of his "compositions".[13]

At the other extreme, I can also point out a few cases of what could be called "score-veneration". I will provide only two examples. The first example concerns the early twentieth-century great virtuoso Tanburi Cemil Bey, and the second example concerns Dr Suphi Ezgi, who was, with Rauf Yekta Bey and Hüseyin Sadettin Arel, a member the trio of "modernizers" of Ottoman/Turkish music.

Tanburi Cemil Bey, who died in 1915, was, during his lifetime, better known as an instrumentalist, a virtuoso performer on the *tanbur* and the *kemençe*. As such, he also made a large number of recordings. He also composed a number of vocal and instrumental pieces, but never thought of publishing them himself. His collected compositions (and there are about 25 of them) were posthumously published in 1919 by the private music conservatory *Darüttalim-i musıki* under the editorship of Kemal Emin Bara.[14] Among these published pieces is also his very famous instrumental *semai* in the *makam* Şeddiarabân. This same piece, however, was also recorded by Tanburi Cemil himself, and this recorded version differs widely from the notated and published version.

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[13] For a thorough theoretical and historical review of this basic issue, see Neubauer 1997.

[14] Tanburî Cemil Bey 1919.

What is interesting in this instance is that almost all subsequent performers of this piece have remained faithful to the posthumously published version of the Şeddiaraban *semai* and not to the composer's recorded rendering of his own work. The posthumous 1919 version of the composition has been turned into an object of veneration, a sort of fetish, notwithstanding the fact that the composer himself has provided ample aural evidence to the contrary. The enormous aura of prestige, that still surrounds Tanburi Cemil, has not been sufficient to make his own rendering exemplary. For this piece, the standard version, that which every student of instrumental Otoman/Turkish music comes to memorize at some point during his or her education, is the posthumously published version.

As for Dr Suphi Ezgi (1869–1962), he is the author of straightforward attempts to create or recreate "original" and "standard" versions of sixteenth-, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century compositions. Ezgi, in his five volume *opus magnum* published between 1935 and 1955 attempted to establish "real", "authentic", "original" versions of hundreds of compositions. Suphi Ezgi knew perfectly well that there was no way he could reach the original versions of these compositions, that there was no solid and justifiable historical evidence and no valid musicological method he could use to reach out to the initial intentions of the composer. The only justifications that he ever put forward were references to his own personal musical experience based on his self-declared, infallible artistic intuition. Ezgi was, in fact, endeavouring to reinvent compositions which were two-three centuries old, whose current versions were simply not to his personal taste. Sometimes he proceeded, unfortunately, through outright forgery.[15] We cannot say that his attempts were very successful and that the versions he fabricated were widely used by musicians. Still, Suphi Ezgi was adamant and kept maintaining that he had managed to turn the clock backwards, that his published versions were the only trustworthy "originals", that he had managed to dig up the authoritative versions of pieces composed two or three centuries ago. He prided himself on having "purged" classical compositions from all later accretions and "deformations". He insisted that these recomposed works should be performed as he himself had defined them and put them on paper.

To conclude this long list of examples, I must add that I have been recently (October 2010) informed that a website in Turkey – a website presently "under construction", as the phrase goes – is attempting to collect, within the same website, the complete repertoire of Ottoman/Turkish music (about 70 000 compositions or notations, or so they say) together with all existing versions and variants of each single piece.

Assuming that this could really be possible (total exhaustivity, as we well know, is always something of an illusion), where will these almost infinitely branching versions and variants stand? Will the virtual world replace the real, and serve as a notated standard? Will the website, when and if it is completed, make all previous publications musically obsolete? In addition, what motive will determine the precise version or variant of a piece that the musician selects for performance and the master for teaching purposes? Perhaps we will just see, finally, yet another – but ironic and virtual – vindication of the well-known Latin saying: *Verba volant, scripta manent…*

[15] Behar 2005b.

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