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# Glimpses of Turkish Music in the Balkans during the Ottoman Period

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Traditional music throughout the Balkan territory displays many similarities, and the impact of Turkish music is one of the leading factors in its formation. However, it is unreasonable, even for the regions in which this impact was more dominant, to argue that Turkish music was the only agent in the formation of traditional music. The whole peninsula has a long history and is composed of different ethnic communities, all of which have their own musical traditions. It is fair to say that the urban areas in the territory were the main places in which Turkish music flourished. This is also in accordance with the fact that Turkish culture in the Balkans was mainly centered in the cities, most of which developed under Ottoman rule.<sup>1</sup> Even when the Turkish population in a specific area did not constitute a majority, the existence of Turkish culture and music developed because of the above-mentioned urbanization process, and this might well have been a more influential factor in the dissemination and transmission of Turkish music.

There have been attempts either within or without the Balkans to deny or underestimate the Ottoman musical heritage, stimulated by ideological obsessions regarding nationalistic or anti-Ottoman developments.<sup>2</sup> This article does not try to prove the existence of this heritage, which would be preposterous; rather it tries to describe a general perspective by referring to some relevant historical evidence of Turkish music in the Balkans throughout the Ottoman era. It is reasonable to argue that the existence of Turkish music in the Balkans dates back to the fourteenth century, when Ottoman

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1 İsen 1997, 512-15.

2 Pennanen 2008.

Turks entered the Balkans and settled in many regions. After the end of Ottoman rule, Turkish music, or rather its obvious influence, persisted in the Balkans, having become indigenous long before.

### Classical Music

The local courts of the Ottoman administrators in the Balkans may have been the primary locations for the performance of classical music, but it was also widely performed in the cities by ordinary people, displaying a characteristic that was also prevalent in other regions of the Ottoman State. In the sixteenth century, Hungarian lyrics were written for some Turkish songs in Hungary. The forms of these songs are not clear but they were most probably classical, if not urban, folk songs.<sup>3</sup> In 1657, Nicolas Rolamb listened to a *fasıl* in Eflak (Wallachia in Romania) at the court of the *Bey* (Prince). The instruments he mentions include the *çeng*, *kemançe*, *ney*, *daire* and some others.<sup>4</sup> Again, in the seventeenth century, Evliya Çelebi talked about many people playing and singing *fasıl* music in famous picnic areas, one in Manastır (Bitola in Macedonia) and the other in Çayniçe (in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Another example of his witnessing classical music was in Budin (Budapest in Hungary).<sup>5</sup>

Joseph Sulzer, who listened to different genres of Turkish music in Eflak in 1779, calls classical music 'Turkish chamber music' and describes it in detail. He gives information concerning tonalities, modes, rhythmic patterns, forms, instruments and performing practice, and it is clear from his descriptions that, despite some subordinate elements, it was the same music with all its features, as played and sung in İstanbul. He also talks of dance music, which accompanied dancers who played *zils* held in their hands.<sup>6</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century the most typical ensemble in Albania consisted of a *saz* or a *lavta*, a clarinet, a violin and a *def* or a goblet drum. The repertoire of such ensembles was based on the system of classi-

3 Szabolcsi 1937, 361-62.

4 Aksoy 2003, 71.

5 Evliya Çelebi 1996-2007, 5: 309; 6: 152, 254.

6 Sulzer 2003.

cal Turkish music and included locally created songs and dance tunes along with Ottoman compositions and modal improvisations.<sup>7</sup>

While a wide ranging repertoire of Turkish compositions was performed, classical music in the Balkans had some local features as well. Although they were composed in accordance with the classical tradition, locally created songs might have had some distinctive styles and the instruments might have differed in different locations. However, it may be assumed that most of the instruments used in this genre were the same as in the other regions of the Ottoman State.

### Religious Music

The presence of Turkish dervish lodges (*tekkes*) in the Balkans is contemporaneous with Ottoman settlement. Although they were the principal venues for religious music, this genre was not confined to *tekkes*; in fact, various forms of compositions were also performed in mosques and other locations related to daily life. Among the *sufi* orders, most of which involved music, *Bektaşilik* occupied a special place in many parts of the Balkans as being the most popular. The *Bektaşis* made an effective use of music in their ceremonies as did the *Mevlevi* order too, which was also widespread in the Balkans. A *Bektaşî* ceremony in Salonica (Thessaloniki) in Greece and also a *Mevlevi* ceremony in Peçoy (Pécs) in Hungary were witnessed by Evliya Çelebi in the seventeenth century. He also notes some instruments in a *Bektaşî tekke* in Budin and mentions that *ilahis* (Turkish hymns) were sung in the city.<sup>8</sup> Sulzer, who provides us with information about Turkish music in Eflak in the eighteenth century, mentions a performance of *Mevlevi* music at the court of the *Bey*.<sup>9</sup>

In the above-mentioned performances the *ney*, *kudüm* (*nakkare*), *nefir*, *def* and *zil* were the instruments employed in *sufi* music of this kind, although not all of them were played in every *tekke*. As in the case of classical

7 Sugarman 2010.

8 Evliya Çelebi 1996-2007, 5: 314; 6: 116, 149, 152.

9 Sulzer 2003.

music, religious music in the Balkans displayed some local differences in style, form and other features. Beside compositions written in the Turkish language, there were also religious songs in regional languages.

### Military Music

*Mehters* were the Ottoman official bands, which had the duty of playing regular music at the courts and fortresses of the capital and the other provinces. These regular performances had been the main occasions for Turkish military music in the Balkans since the beginning of Ottoman rule or the construction of fortresses and appointment of local governors in the territory. There were numerous *mehter* bands in the Ottoman fortresses throughout the Balkans in the seventeenth century.<sup>10</sup> According to Evliya Çelebi, one characteristic feature of these bands was their performance of music every night.<sup>11</sup>

Sulzer also mentioned Turkish military music in the court of the Prince of Eflak in the late eighteenth century. According to him, it was also called 'evening court music', denoting the daily time of performance. He describes an instrumental *mehter* performance in accordance with the general tradition and mentions the following instruments, the *zurna*, *boru*, *davul*, *nakkare*, *daire* and *zil*.<sup>12</sup> Also in the same period, there was still a *mehter* band at the Boğdan court.<sup>13</sup> Apart from the regular performances military music was also performed in the Balkans in the course of campaigns and battles.

### Folk Music

The Turks in the peninsula also performed their own folk songs in rural areas, but Turkish folk music in the Balkans primarily had certain characteristics of urban folk music. *Saz* or *çöğür şairleri* were Turkish minstrels who played the *tanbura* or its variant, the *çöğür*, and sang poems and songs. In 1433, there were a number of them at the Ottoman court in Edirne.

10 Sanal 1964, 22-23.

11 Evliya Çelebi 1996-2007, 5: 186.

12 Sulzer 2003.

13 Toderini 2003.

Records from the seventeenth century tell us that there were many *çöğür şairis* in Budin and that two of them performed in the ensemble of a *Paşa* in Bosnia.<sup>14</sup>

An ensemble consisting of a varying number of instruments was commonly to be found at Turkish weddings and some other ceremonies. We have two accounts of such an ensemble, one in Edirne in the fifteenth century and the other in Eflak in the seventeenth century.<sup>15</sup> Although both of these were related to formal occasions, the smallest variant of this ensemble, with two *zurnas* and a *davul*, was much more common among people in the Balkans and the repertoires mainly included dance tunes.<sup>16</sup> Besides those mentioned, other instruments from Turkish folk music were also widely adopted in the Balkans; *tanbura* (*saz*), the long-necked fretted lute, and its variants were the most widespread.

The *kopuz* or Turkish lute was associated with some parts of the Balkans in the Ottoman period. It was a plucked lute bearing some similarities to the *tanbura* family but was a distinct instrument, with half of its sound box covered with skin and with a fretless neck. In the sixteenth century, Belon du Mans described the *kopuz* as a lute, mostly used by Turkish seamen residing in Greece and the Aegean islands rather than by the Anatolian people.<sup>17</sup> This supports the fact that the *kopuz* was used mainly in some parts of the Balkans, which was also described clearly by Evliya Çelebi in the seventeenth century. Furthermore, Evliya Çelebi mentions *kopuz* players in Peçoy, who were *gazis* or warriors at the Ottoman frontier, and he mentions that the instrument was peculiar to them. However, he also says that he witnessed *kopuz* players in Fethiislam (Kladovo) in Serbia who were not warriors but also lived at the frontier.<sup>18</sup> There are some other sources that give information about the popularity of the *kopuz* and its players in Hungary in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>19</sup>

14 Evliya Çelebi 1996-2007, 6: 152; Aksoy 2003, 29, 52.

15 Brocquière 2003; Aksoy 2003, 71.

16 Sugarman 2010; Szabolcsi 1937, 360.

17 Belon du Mans 2003.

18 Evliya Çelebi 1996-2007, 1: 304; 6: 118; 7: 176.

19 Szabolcsi 1937, 359-60.

*Rumeli türküleri* are the anonymous Turkish folk songs composed in the Rumelian part of the Ottoman State – the Balkans. One significant aspect is that most of them resemble the *şarkı* form of classical music, both in terms of their melodic style and in the way they apply modal features. This relationship with classical music should be considered with respect to the urban character of Turkish folk music in the Balkans. Many of these folk songs were also known in İstanbul and some parts of Anatolia, and this is the main reason why they were collected and included in the official repertoire of Turkish Radio and Television (TRT). More than 350 folk songs in this repertoire are found to have originated from Rumelia. Generally, the lyrics offer different kinds of information on people and their traditions, and include names of places from all over the Balkans. Most of these songs reflect a common specific style of performance.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

Sulzer, who gives first-hand accounts of Eflak and Boğdan (Moldavia and most of Romania) in the eighteenth century, says that Turkish music was also popular outside the court and was recognized by almost everyone in those regions.<sup>21</sup> This is significant sign for the status of Turkish music, even in distant parts of the Balkans. One similar and quite remarkable description from the preceding century is that given by Evliya Çelebi in his description of Budin (Budapest). He mentions that although music in Budin was not usually performed in accordance with the '*kitâb-ı edvâr*' (the book of *edvar*) – literally, the modal system of Turkish music and its counterparts – there were still many people playing and singing Turkish music.<sup>22</sup> Besides the information concerning the performers, however, the more important yet indirect fact in this description is that Turkish music had spread throughout the Ottoman Balkans and dominated the whole area, although Budin – and probably some other neighboring regions of Hungary – constituted an exception.

The urban aspect forms a characteristic thread that runs through the

<sup>20</sup> Kaçar 2008; Öztuna 2006, 237.

<sup>21</sup> Sulzer 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Evliya Çelebi 1996-2007, 6: 152.



history of traditional Turkish music in the Balkans, of which all the various genres were performed throughout the territory. When considered separately, each genre seems to have had its own dynamic in dissemination, popularity and influence. The direct influence of Turkish music in the Balkans gave way to local musical traditions that subsequently gained national identities, like the Greek *rebetika* and the Bosnian *sevdalinka*. After Ottoman rule, Western musical attitudes were also adopted, especially in the twentieth century, which affected the traditional music of the Balkan nations, including Western instrumentation and the application of the tempered tonal system (Petrović 2010; Sugarman 2010). However, these changes did not remove the evident influence of Turkish music, especially of folk music. The diversity of musical instruments in the Balkans is another product of the prevalence of Turkish music, which also contributed to the local styles. Most of these instruments, in either original or modified forms, are still in use in several kinds of music with their original Turkish names or altered versions, while some have even become national symbols, like the Greek *bouzouki*.

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