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Arabesk

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Music and Nationalism

If music can be associated with a supposed racial essence, it can be associated with nationalist essences as well. I noted at the last chapter how strongly Poles identify with Chopin, and how they consider his romantic and folk-inspired music to be an expression of the Polish national soul. For Americans, the very idea of a national soul may seem odd, since in principle anyone can become an American citizen; the only requirement is answering some not very difficult questions and swearing allegiance to the flag. In other words, being an American is an identity that anyone can achieve; it is not an essence one is born to. Thus, except for the institutionalized singing of the Star-spangled banner before sporting events and at school, for Americans music is a matter of personal taste or, in the case of the blues and other types of ‘black’ music, to racial qualities. But it is not connected to nationalism, despite the efforts of country music to wrap itself in the flag.

But while disconnection between cultural production and nationalism may be characteristic of the polyglot society of the United States, it is much less so in Old World countries, where musical tastes are assumed by outsiders and insiders alike to be typical of the nation and where immigrants nurture their native musical traditions as spiritual linkages to their homelands. All Italians, wherever they may roam, are supposed to love opera, Beethoven’s music is the heritage of all Germans, Portuguese are moved by fado, Spaniards by flamenco. As Martin Stokes explains, the association between music and nation is not accidental, since music "organizes collective memories and present experiences of place with an intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity…. it provides means by which people recognize identities and places, and
the boundaries which separate them."  

An Italian is an Italian in part because of love for Verdi; only a Portuguese can truly appreciate the depth and meaning of fado.

The connection between music, identity, and a sense of place works on a more regional level as well. For example, a musician friend of mine was born in Rome but has lived in Naples for much of his life. It has taken many years for Neapolitan musicians to allow him to play with them in public. Yet, while he can perform at dances and other civic events, he still is not permitted to play in more intimate situations, such as weddings and funerals. He is not ‘native’ and so his participation remains suspect. Similarly, during his fieldwork one of my American students studied the unusual polyphonic singing of Sardinia. Some of the locals were shocked when he began to learn the technique; it was, they thought, only possible for native-born Sardinians to sing in the traditional style. In these cases, local music is believed to be transmitted not by instruction, but by deeper factors of blood and belonging: much like the blues, it is not felt to be something outsiders can ever make their own, no matter how hard they may try. Only natives can truly know and express the music of their place, and in so doing identify themselves as authentic members of the community.

Music can be an important expression of local and national authenticity partially because it is easy and pleasant to listen to and to sing along with. As Celtic historian Malcolm Chapman says: “Music provides an entry into the practices and sentiments of ethnic belonging, for those whose commitment is small and who require entertainment rather than effort.”  

It is no surprise, then, that Celtic ethnic festivals – like other ethnic festivals in Europe and elsewhere – consist primarily of musical performances combined with those other enjoyable markers of authentic ethnic/national/racial identity: food and
drink. But the seemingly spontaneous association of music, authenticity and the nation is often a more complicated matter. For an example, consider the case of Turkey.

Modern Turkey is the product of an extraordinary act of cultural redefinition undertaken after the Treaty of Lausanne on November 2, 1922 officially marked the end of the cosmopolitan Ottoman Empire, which had fallen from its former greatness, lost its many satrapies, and had become the ‘sick man of Europe’. While the Empire had incorporated a huge variety of cultures, languages, and races, the new national Turkish identity was, like the identities of most other European nations, to be based on ethnicity and culture - ‘blood and belonging’. A true Turkish citizen was to be not only a native speaker of the Turkish language, but also a Turk by lineage and heritage. Consequently, Greek and Armenian minorities were expelled from the new nation and returned forcibly to their putative ‘native countries’ which many of them had never seen. In the case of the Armenians, many were exterminated. Kurds, whose homelands rest within Turkish boundaries, were redefined as Turks and denied the right to speak Kurdish.

The new ideology of ethnic/national Turkism was embodied by the great gazi or leader, Mustafa Kemal, who was self-designated as Ataturk, the Ata or father of the Turks. Along with the forced exclusion, extermination or absorption of ethnic minorities, his policies broke with all aspects of the past he and his followers saw as alien to the Turkish essence that was to be the basis for the nation’s modern identity. Islam, formerly deeply intertwined with the Ottoman Empire, was rejected as backward and anti-rational. More important for the argument I am making, Islam was portrayed as a foreign religion, imposed on Turks by Arabs, without connection to the fundamental ideals and character of the Turkish people. In place of the old Islamic moral order, derived from Eastern
civilizations officially scorned as senile and superstitious, Ataturk wished to turn toward the successful and secular West, which had values he believed to be more in tune with the deeply rational temperament of the Turks. In consequence, under Ataturk every expression of Turkish cultural identity was transformed. The West was embraced and the East was purged: a new calendar and new measures were adopted based on Western standards; new Europeanized surnames were imposed instead of the traditional, Arabic-based names; in place of Arabic writing, European script was introduced; new dress codes were enforced that obliged all Turks to wear Western styles. The fez, which allowed prostration in prayer, was summarily replaced by a Western hat with a brim.

As Martin Stokes has made clear, much of Ataturk’s radical reform was based on his reading of a therapeutic model of culture promoted by Ziya Gökalp in his Principles of Turkism. Heavily influenced by European sociology and philosophy, Gökalp argued that Turkey was suffering from a rupture between its local peasant and folk culture, hars, which was oriented towards its authentic Central Asian roots, and its urban elite civilization, medeniyet, which was oriented toward the polluting culture of the Middle East. According to Gökalp, this imbalance was causing instability and weakness in the body politic. The solution was to move away from the unhealthy and degraded influences of Arabia and toward the more rational and modern civilizations of the West. Following Gökalp’s theories, Ataturk did not radically change the economic structure of Turkey, but, as noted, undertook a total transformation of cultural symbols, providing a new sense of a Westernized national identity that was to be shared by the citizenry – that is, those who did not have Greek, Armenian or Kurdish heritages.
Ataturk’s radical Westernization of Turkey did not ignore the indigenous folk culture. Indeed, Gökalp’s theory required leavening Westernization through a renewed appreciation of the authentic rural pedigree of the Turks. In this, he followed the German romantic theory, derived from Herder, that each viable society was based upon the existence of a primordial ethnic culture. As we saw in earlier, the high valuation of indigenous rural society had a great influence on Dolmetsch and the historical performance movement. In Turkey as well, music was seen as a central mode for the rediscovery of the essential character of the people. Gökalp believed that the morbid, irrational and decadent Arab-Persian music of the elite had to be replaced by rural folk (halk) music, which directly expressed the genuine culture of the Turks. Ideally, as Turkish civilization inevitably moved toward Westernization and away from Arabic influence, Turkish folk music could be synthesized with the musical techniques of West, leading to a new flowering of Turkish genius.

In response to Gökalp’s theories, after the Ataturkian revolution the state subsidized the collection of folk melodies that could then be arranged rationally on the basis of modern Western musical techniques and taught to Turks in order to return them to their roots, but in a new and enlightened manner. The distortions these rationalizing techniques brought to largely improvised rural musical performance were ignored. As a result, the study of folk music was officially institutionalized in Turkish society, where to this day a great many people attend nationally supported folk music schools, learn to play the national instrument (the long necked lute, or baglama), and participate in state sponsored national and regional concerts and contests.
Though it was banned during the thirties during the heyday of the quest for authentic folk music, Turkish ‘art’ (sanat) music did not disappear from the scene. It too has been institutionalized along with folk music, though in a form that has been purified of its ‘emotional’ and ‘irrational’ Eastern origins. Sanat musicians are highly trained urban professionals who see themselves as the elite of the Turkish music world, composing original and purely Turkish pieces based on complex modal structures (maqam). They pride themselves not only on their skill as instrumentalists and composers, but also on their orderliness and systematic logic; it is a great compliment to a sanat musician to say that he plays with the precision of a machine. In contrast, halk music is said to be rural collective product; according to the official ideology, halk music has no composer; it is not innovative, but springs directly from the souls of the people. And, while art music is based on complicated modes, folk music is said to consist “of melodies, unfettered by rule, system, and technique, of sincere songs which express the heart of the Turk.”

The opposition between the two genres is often more mythical than factual. Sanat musicians can and do play (and compose) folk tunes, while folk musicians are often far more sophisticated and personal in their interpretations than the stereotype would allow. But myths have considerable power, regardless of their reality in fact. In this case, the dualism symbolizes the distinction between the supposed collective soul of the Turkish folk, who are thought to have an instinctive connection to their roots, and the more rational and individualistic artistry of the city, where musicians rival Europeans in their systematic approaches to composition. This opposition is neither hostile nor absolute. Taking their inspiration from folk tunes, sanat artists can, ideally speaking, begin to
realize Gökalp’s dream of unifying indigenous Turkish culture with the rationalistic individualism of Western civilization. Meanwhile, the broadcasting and recording of folk singers and musicians, and the widespread teaching of halk techniques in schools, can give an urban populace a renewed sense of its original ancestry, with all its nationalistic implications.

**Arabesk: Music Against the World, and For the Soul**

In Turkey folk music and art music seem to be gradually reaching a mutual understanding, integrating the soul of genuine Turkish culture with the universal civilizing force of Western rationality. All this would certainly have satisfied the nationalistic ambitions of Ataturk and Gökalp. But there is a fly in the ointment. This is arabesk, a musical genre that came into prominence in Turkey in the 1980s, though its roots go back to the 1950s and even earlier, dating from the influence of Egyptian movie music on Turkish popular culture. Stokes introduces the genre as follows: “Arabesk is a music of the city and for the city. It portrays a world of complex and turbulent emotions peopled by lovers doomed to solitude and a violent end. It describes a decaying city in which poverty-stricken migrant workers are exploited and abused, and calls on its listeners to pour another glass of *raki*, light another cigarette, and curse fate and the world.”

In Istanbul, arabesk blares loudly and incessantly from the shared public taxis and minibuses that ply the Istanbul streets; stereotypically, its male performers are violent and tasteless thugs sporting big moustaches, decked out in flashy suits and gold chains, who are often in trouble with the police. Or else they may be effeminate homosexuals and transvestites, flaunting their marginality and forbidden desires in a society where
patriarchal masculinity dominates. As one might expect, female arabesk singers are generally abused victims. The most famous, Bergen, ‘the woman of grief,’ was disfigured and finally killed by her jealous ex-husband. Children who perform arabesk are known as the children of pain; they sing pathetic laments describing how the city destroys families and produces hopeless orphans.

During free public performances of Arabesk some young men in the audience are so overcome that they slash their chests and arms with razors, while tearful women rush the stage to throw themselves at the feet of the singer. Less extravagant manifestations of emotion occur when the audience at an arabesk performance in a night club (gazino) form a circle which participant each enters in turn, shimmying like a belly dancer, head upturned, eyes half closed, in emulation of the entranced performances of the Sufis. The greater the appearance of ecstasy, the greater the approval from the audience, who cry out “Helal olsun!” “May it be permitted!”

Ironically, the dancers and their supporters are responding with rapture to lyrics that speak of unfulfilled longing and unbearable despair. In the world of arabesk, love is unattainable, life is hopeless; the singer is left alone, bitter and misunderstood in a city that is irredeemably heartless and immoral. The only refuge is alcohol and, perhaps, suicide. As one of the most famous arabesk lyrics puts it:

“Everything is dark, / Where is Humanity? / …This world should sink. / This dream should end. / Unfulfilled sufferings, unlived worries! / Should this heart full of longing be mine? / Fate, what did I do to you? / You sentenced me to myself. / Did I create, did I create / Pains and worries? Did I create those? / If sins were
pleasure, / If loyalty is exhausted, / If this order stinks, did I create it all?/ In
every breath I take there lie a thousand reproaches.”

Arabesk lyrics are constantly repeated as slogans and, until outlawed by the state
in 1986, they were emblazoned on the bumper stickers of every taxi and minibus.
According to one study, the most popular were:

This world should sink. This dream should end.
I died when I was being born.
Whoever does not love you, shall die.
Shame on the servants who serve the servant.
Don’t look down on the poor.
Give me a constellation.
Those who love are unhappy.
It has always been like this and it will remain the same.

Given what we have already learned about authenticity and popular music, it is
not surprising that arabesk performers are imagined by their fans to be ‘real people’
whose inner struggles and heartfelt emotions are directly expressed in their songs.
Followers say arabesk singing is *damardan* (coming from the vein); the burning pain
expressed so powerfully by singers sets listeners’ hearts on fire in a compulsive spasm of
identification. Because of their charisma, famous arabesk performers also star and sing
their songs in popular Turkish movies that stereotypically follow the downward spiral of
an immigrant’s life, as he falls inexorably into despair, degradation, and isolation,
powerless to oppose the evil and corrupt forces that rule the world. In these films real life
and staged life blur together, since the main characters and the stars portraying them have
the same names, and the films are assumed to be true accounts of events from the lives of their protagonists. This is so even though the most successful arabesk performers/film stars are in fact extremely wealthy and secure, far removed from the miserable conditions they sing about and portray.

Like blues and country music, arabesk is thought to be composed as a result of inspiration; songs are said to spontaneously arise from the heart without preparation or reflection. Many arabesk composers accept this narrative, and say they can only write if they are in the same dislocated state as their heroes; that is, alone, drinking heavily, lost in alienation and rootlessness, waiting passively for the muse to rescue them. But this impression does not coincide easily with the reality that some of these composers, like the arabesk singing stars, may be prosperous citizens and can even be well-known authors of ‘art’ songs. This contradiction is ignored by the audience, who are concerned mainly with the emotional presentation of the song and the romantic narrative of its inspiration. Also unremarked or repressed is the fact that in arabesk (as in other popular art forms in the modern world) public images of immediacy, inspiration, and authentic emotional expressivity are in radical tension with the hidden but necessary technical and bureaucratic skills that go into making and distributing recordings, shooting films, and organizing concerts.

Evidently, although the actual sounds produced are not comparable, blues, country and arabesk exhibit parallel identity-forming processes, ideologies, and tensions for both artists and audience. These underlying similarities occur because these genres originated in human experiences of oppression, marginalization, and dislocation in a modernizing world. Like the American blues and country performers who were initially
rural people adapting to an alienating industrial society, most arabesk stars are originally from the rustic areas of a Turkey that has been rapidly urbanized; many were born in provinces close to Syria and Iraq, so that their family backgrounds are often ‘Arab’ in a polity that is ideologically Turkish and hostile to Arabian influences; many of them came to Istanbul as immigrants, lived in the slums (‘the intestines of the city’), and shared the formative experiences, values and culture of those who have the same histories. For them, the world is indeed unjust and chaotic; traditional village ethics of family, clan, and personal honor have been lost in the inhuman whirl of the metropolis, where power and money seem to rule unchecked. In all these respects, arabesk performers are radically critical of the new, progressive Western model of Turkey proposed by Ataturk.

In return, Turkish modernizers see arabesk as simply ‘rubbish,’ without meaning or any redeeming features. Unlike folk or art music, it has no place in the narrative of the new ethnic Turkey but rather is perceived as turning backwards toward the passivity, emotional morbidity and irrationality of the rejected East. This view is promoted by professional Turkish musicologists who portray arabesk as self-indulgent and lax, too reliant on the emotionality of the voice, without the rigor and decorum, detail and skill, system and logic, of proper Turkish instrumental playing. The lyrics, as we have seen, are fatalistic, melancholy and supplicating – resembling banned Sufi poetry; they are also sung with a tense glottis, distorting and slurring the words, while ‘proper’ sanat singers pride themselves on their good diction. For all these reasons, arabesk is defined by Turkish musicologists as “a manifestation of the negative values associated with the Islamic cultural heritage of the Turks;” “a degenerate type that has appeared only
because the state did not educate the vulgar tastes of the masses by adequately promoting authentic Turkish folk and art music.

However, to an untrained Western ear like mine, the resemblances between the three genres are far greater than the differences. This impression is verified by Stokes, who says that arabesk combines techniques from both the folk and art traditions, just as these traditions combine techniques from one another. Arabesk also appropriates Western instruments, but so do the other forms. The main difference, it seems, is that arabesk drumming is more eclectic and free, while instrumental breaks (taksim) are longer and allow for more improvisation by the musicians. These aspects give Turkish listeners accustomed to the conventions of halk and sanat the sense that arabesk is chaotic and emotional, when what is actually presented is “a highly organized simulacra of disorder.” Because of the underlying similarities, accomplished musicians and composers can quite easily move back and forth between the genres, portraying themselves as arabesk performers sometimes, serious artists at other times, according the occasion; meanwhile students learning traditional techniques on the lute in schools of folk music commonly hope to turn their talents to playing arabesk, which is more lucrative and perhaps more conducive to romantic liaisons as well.

If arabesk is not as radically different and degenerate as it is represented to be in official discourse, neither is it actually so marginalized as it is said to be. As Stokes documents, in 1988 200 million music cassettes were purchased in Turkey; of these 150 million were defined as arabesk. In Istanbul, arabesk is to be found not only in the slums, but also in every music store, in every neighborhood, rich, poor, or middle class; furthermore, the relative number of available recordings is consistent everywhere. It is
clear that, although it may have arisen in the shantytowns, arabesk has gradually become the unofficial and private national music for the great majority of Turks, who may publicly disparage its morbidity and feel shame at its ‘backwardness’ and sentimentality, but who listen to it all the same in gatherings where (usually male) intimates (muhabbet), drink *raki*, eat raw meat in the traditional manner, share reminiscences, recite poetry, and perhaps shed a few tears. Such informal collective occasions are central to urban Turkish social life, where the old bonds of family, clan and village are under siege and where alienation is endemic.iii In this context, the plaintive sound of arabesk is the symbolic stimulus for an upwelling of communal feeling and the sharing of confidences and memories among inebriated friends. For most Turks, it is arabesk that signifies a break from the alienation of ordinary life and brings expectations of an authentic (felt) sense of community.

Paradoxically, this feeling of immediate participation is only won by rejecting (or more accurately, sublimating) the official portrait of what Turks are supposed to be. When playing, listening and dancing to arabesk, Turks immediately and physically realize a way to represent their identities to one another, and to themselves, that is not in correspondence with the ordered, rational universe demanded by state ideology. It is for this reason that arabesk was banned on television until the mid-80s: it is why its icons and slogans were removed from taxis and minibuses in 1986; it is why arabesk is still officially portrayed as music of degenerates, although most Turks clandestinely listen to it, and its stars have entered the mainstream as talk show hosts, while arabesk movies are commonly shown on daytime television. Why should this be?
The answer is complex, but one major reason that arabesk music has transcended its origins is because it symbolically expresses the collective national experiences of Turks trapped between the values of Europe and those of the Middle East. The organizing symbolic ethical polarity of Turkey discriminates between rationality and sentiment, order and chaos, capitalism and desire, work and pleasure, structure and laxity. We have seen how, after Ataturk’s reforms, the Turkish people were obliged to turn toward what they were told was the European model, repudiating their Arabic/Eastern heritage as primitive, illogical, and emotional. Having denied (or overcome) their history, Turks naturally prided themselves on their hard-won rationality and modernity. They presented themselves to the world and to themselves as reformed, wearing Western clothes, following a Western calendar, thinking and feeling in Western ways.

But the past does not disappear so easily. In Turkey, its disparate elements remain as an alternative symbolic system, to be used to critique the dominant ideology and as a model for intimate experience. This is the cultural dualism Michael Herzfeld has called disemia, an opposition between the official self-presentation of the nation to the outside world and the unofficial, private, shared understandings of the collective – the secret and inner life, as it were, of the society. While all social formations certainly have a public set of values and beliefs that is shown to the outside world and another that is displayed only among intimates, the dichotomy is rarely as radical as it has become in Turkey, where the split penetrates into the souls of the citizens, turning them against themselves and manifesting itself in the arabesk taste for despair.

This dichotomy has become painful because the officially promoted effort to turn Westward did not succeed. Europe has not accepted Turkish overtures, and to this day
Turkey remains excluded from the European Union, though of late it has been offered the possibility of joining in the distant future, if and only if it undertakes radical reforms. Rejected as suitors despite their best efforts and marginalized from a European society where Turks mainly serve as subservient migrant laborers, enslaved by economic forces over which they have no control, frightened by the threat of political chaos, confused by their relationship to their religious heritage, ordinary Turks have covertly and shamefacedly identified themselves with the stigmatized ‘inner others’ whose plight reflects their own. These are the Arabized immigrant slum dwellers whose music expresses the desperation and torment of Turks caught between West and East, and embodies the traditional values of honor and the primordial collective rejected in Atatürk’s modernization process. Among intimates, Turks can embrace arabesk, finding in its expression of sadness, injustice and loss a burning and painful, but authentic emotional connection to themselves, to one another, and to their own deeply conflicted past. Shared misery, rejection, shame, and hopelessness, it seems, are the glue that binds the society together.

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Endnotes:


ii Malcolm Chapman1994 “Thoughts on Celtic Music.” In Stokes op.cit.: 36

iii As we shall see in more detail later, basing membership in the nation on criterion of genealogical heritage often inspires internal ethnic minorities to make the same claims for themselves. In Turkey, violent demands for Kurdish recognition and regional autonomy continue to unsettle the state.
Martin Stokes 1992 The Arabesk Debate: Music and Musicians in Modern Turkey Oxford: Clarendon Press. The following section is largely adapted from Stokes’ excellent study.

At first Gökalp’s view of Eastern music as irrational seems itself irrational, since Arabic/Persian music is highly theorized and systematic. But Gökalp said Arabic musical theory has an irrational base since it derives from Ancient Greece, which had added quarter, eight and sixteenth tones to the natural tones and semitones of folk melodies. These artificial additions lead away toward “unnatural tones that involved a boring monotony, consisting of endless repetition of the same melody.” Gökalp quoted in Stokes, op. Cit.: 35.

Gökalp quoted in Ibid: 50.

Stokes plausibly argues that the presence of homosexuals and transvestites in arabesk is symbolic of the emasculation suffered by immigrants. Ibid: 13.


Stokes 1992: 98

Ibid: 202

For a more pragmatic view of the manner in which women construct collectives in urban Turkey, see Jenny White


For a literary instance of the prevalent Turkish sensibility see Orham Pamuk 1998 The New Life New York: Vintage. As Christopher Tayler writes, “Pamuk shows us people who fear that living, as he puts it, ‘in a Westernized fashion in a country that is essentially not Western’ has drained them of selfhood… his characters suffer from feelings of inauthenticity. They catch themselves acting like people in movies… On occasion they feel ‘completely empty inside.’” Christopher Tayler 2004 “A Turk, a Turk, a Turk.” London Review of Books Vol. 26, Number 15: 30-2: 30.
See Michael Herzfeld 1987 *Anthropology Through the Looking Glass: Critical Ethnography in the Margins of Europe* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for a parallel Greek case, in which the official Hellenic culture stands opposed to a repudiated and repressed barbarian ethos, though in this case the barbarians were the Ottomans, not the Arabs. Musically, the genre of rebetika was identified with refuges from Western Anatolia who arrived in Greece after destruction of Izmir by Turks in 1923. As with arabesk, rebetika was perceived in Greek official discourse as the music of orientalized outsiders settled on fringes of civilization. As with arabesk, rebetika was suppressed by the state, only to gain subversive popularity as the popular music of rebellion and authenticity.

M. Bakhtin famously showed how travesty and popular laughter provide alternative cultural modes that undermine official discourse. Perhaps popular sadness is another route to disintegrating fixed understandings – but with very different social implications. See M. Bakhtin *The Dialogic Imagination* 1981. Austin: University of Texas Press.