

Turkish folk music in Ghent

Musical knowledge in a diaspora context

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Türkiye’de halk müziğine akademik bir şekilde yaklaşılması, konservatuvarlarda kurumlaşmış ve devletçe desteklenmiştir. Bu özel durum halk müziğiyle ilgili bilgi yapısını kolaylaştırmaktadır.

Diasporadaki durum tam tersidir. Orada Türk halk müziği neredeyse hiç resmî destek olmadığından dolayı, bilgi yapısı Türkiye’deki kadar aynı derecede gelişmemektedir.

Bu araştırmanın amacı, Belçika’nın Gent şehrinin diasporik bağlamındaki Türk halk müziği sanatçılarının müzik bilgilerini haritalamaktır. Hem teori, hem icra, hem de anlam alanlarındaki bilgileri detaylı görüşmeler aracılığıyla çıkarılmaktadır. Tamamlayıcı metotlar olarak, keşif konuşmaları, gözlemler ile yazılı kaynak başvuruları kullanılmıştır.

Araştırmanın sonucu olarak, hem ayrıntılı bir bilgi haritası, hem de genel eğilimler sunulmaktadır.

The question of musical knowledge is always a challenging one when applied to folk music. Folk musicians normally do not have great artistic or academic aspirations and its theory and praxis are often little documented. Still, folk musicians and their public possess the (implicit) knowledge necessary to produce and consume their music.

When we consider the folk music of Turkey, however, it appears to be academically approached, conservatory-institutionalised and state-supported. The reason for this remarkable situation is the fact that the Turkish republic’s official ideology has considered traditional Turkish folk music as the only genuine musical expression of Turkish national culture. This preferential treatment has unarguably benefitted the advancement of knowledge about the music, although it also involved political appropriation and biased views, along with inevitable musical adaptations, standardisations and the downsizing of its original variety (Stokes 1992).

In the Turkish diaspora on the other hand, the situation turned out completely differently. Outside Turkey, Turkish folk music does not get much official attention or support. Consequently, it will be virtually impossible to maintain the level and pace of the knowledge construction existing in Turkey. Furthermore, Turkish emigrants are likely to adopt new attitudes towards the music of their homeland.

The aim of this study is to map out the ‘musical knowledge’ of the Turkish folk musicians in the diasporic context of the Belgian city of Ghent. This has been

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accomplished by a series of interviews, complemented by many exploratory conversations, long-term observations and the consultation of music-theoretical written sources.

As for the research context, Ghent is a middle-sized city with a population of over 240,000 inhabitants. Around 15,000 or 6% of them possess or formerly possessed the Turkish nationality. The Turks constitute the largest group of ethnic-cultural minorities in Ghent. They live mostly concentrated in certain areas, in the city centre as well in the periphery (City of Ghent, no date).

In Ghent, the main public activities concerning Turkish folk music take place at three different yet linked venues. Two of them are so-called 'türkü bars', small music cafes where local or guest Turkish folk musicians perform their repertoire in close interaction with their audience, be it mainly Turkish or rather multicultural. The third place is a municipal intercultural centre, which presents international world music artists besides smaller local artists.

Turkish folk musicians in Ghent are generally more or less associated with one of these three venues, whereas there is also much interaction between them. All Turkish folk musicians in Ghent are 'amateur musicians', since no professional formation has been existing. For this study, only mature folk music practitioners, presenting themselves primarily as artists, and sometimes secondarily as teacher or entertainer, have been taken into consideration. Apprentice musicians or only privately performing musicians have not been included in this study.

Eleven musicians have participated in the interview series. Nine Turkish and one Belgian musician are primarily dealing with Turkish folk music, while one Turkish musician is occupying himself more with Turkish classical music than with folk music.

Possible knowledge aspects about Turkish folk music were divided into three main fields: a music-theoretical field, a performance-related field, and a music-sociological field. The music theory field concerns internal musical organisation: tonal organisation, time organisation and formal organisation. Music notation was also placed into this field. The performance field deals with aspects of performance practice and interpretation, such as variation, improvisation, ornamentation and texture. The music-sociological field focuses on original and actual contexts, meanings and functions of Turkish folk music.

Generally speaking, the musicians clearly preferred discussing the sociological field, while they were a little reluctant regarding the theoretical field. The performance field

was preferably turned into a more abstract, ‘philosophical’ discourse, in stead of a concrete, analytical one.

Before actually discussing the knowledge fields, the musicians were asked to provide a general overview of their repertoire. A few constants emerged: the aspiration to know the repertoire from all regions of Turkey, extra attention for the repertoire of their region of origin and the public’s influence on the choice of the performed repertoire.

Figure 1 shows the relation between the origin of the musicians and their mentioned interests in folk music of other regions.

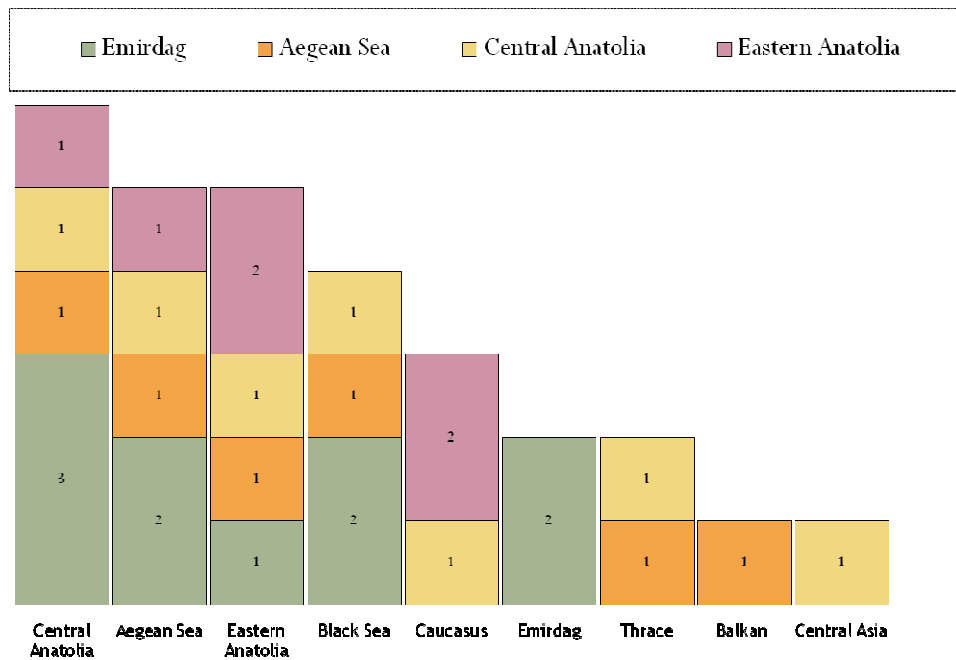


Figure 1

Besides the repertoire of traditional Turkish folk music, some of the musicians also perform Turkish classical music, new forms of Turkish folk songs, or folk music from culturally related countries.

A first topic discussed within the **music-theoretical knowledge field**, is music notation. Almost all of the interviewed musicians consider music notation skills as very important. Three of them state that they don’t really need this, as they are used to relying on a well-developed ear and memory.

The channels through which the musicians received their musical formation can be seen in Figure 2.

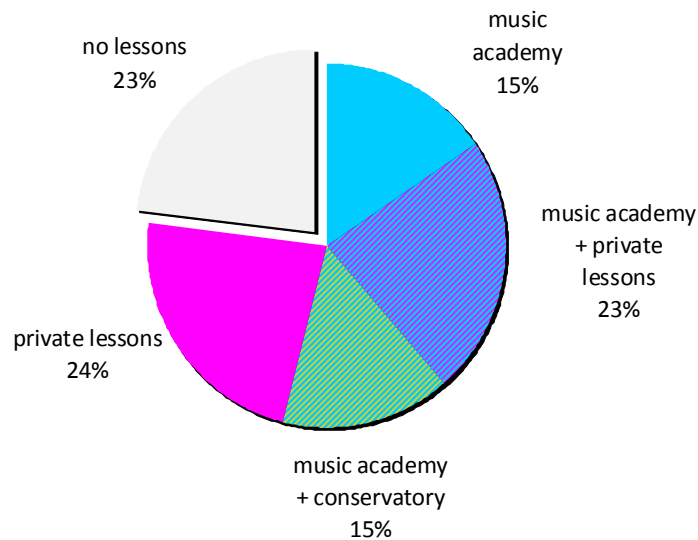


Figure 2

Music notation skills are mostly confined to following the contours of written music, while some musicians are able to write notes besides reading them. Most musicians admit that their skills are decreasing, as they do not practice enough. Enlarged musical insight and increased accessibility of the repertoire are mentioned as the most important advantages of knowing music notation.

A second topic discussed in the field of music theory is tonal organisation. The musicians' knowledge in this field is generally situated on a rather implicit or practical level, in stead of an explicit or theoretical level. Music theoretical questions are more easily illustrated on the instrument or by singing, than verbally explained.

Comparing with the Western system proved to be the most productive way to define the typical characteristics of the Turkish system, namely horizontality and monophony. Every musician is aware of the larger number of tonal subdivisions existing in the Turkish tonal system, but their exact place and quantity are not always known. The subdivisions are called 'commas' (3 musicians), 'microtones' (3 musicians) and most frequently 'quartertones' (5 musicians).

Some musicians are aware of the fact that Turkish folk music, compared to Turkish classical music, normally uses a smaller number of microtones, but that the gamut can be extended according to the needs of the music or the performer. Still, the exact difference between the classical and folk music system has not been defined throughout the interviews.

An interesting statement emerging from the interviews is that microtones are not confined to Eastern music, but were also found in certain kinds of Western music, such as ancient Greek and Byzantine music. Notable is the fact that very few musicians seem to notice the differences between the Turkish tuning system and the Western equal temperament.

All musicians possess at least some knowledge about the *makam* system, which is defined by the classical musician as a rule system for melody formation. Most of the musicians seem to transplant the makam system easily to folk music. The term *ayak* is known to some as the (academical) folk music equivalent of makam. The musicians consider the makams or ayaks of Turkish folk music either as differing in name or in number from the classical makams. Most of the musicians know some names of makams or ayaks, and are able to recognise, play or sing the most common ones.

After tonal organisation, the third theoretic topic concerns time organisation. Regarding terminology, *rhythm* was mostly used in the sense of *metre*, while the term *tempo* also caused confusion. Only the classical musician defined the Turkish metric *usul* system as being cyclic versus the rigid (divisive) Western system. Concerning the metrical construction, some musicians pointed out that all metres exist out of combined units of 2 or 3 beats. Symmetrical and asymmetrical metres are also mentioned, along with the fact that one time signature generally possesses different distribution possibilities.

Almost everyone spontaneously named or illustrated typical kinds of metre of certain regions or genres, which transformed the discourse into a more concrete level. Rhythm and metre are considered as essential aspects of Turkish folk music, connected to poetry and song texts (mentioned by 3 musicians), dance (3), melody (2) and performance aspects such as plectrum strokes (1 musician).

The last discussed topic of the theory field concerns formal organisation. While rhythm was related to the verses of song texts, the larger structures of poetry are seen as defining the longer musical phrases and the general shape of a Turkish folk song. A strophic structure (with repetitions) is discerned besides a through-composed form (without repetitions).

The question of defining musical forms and genres seems to be difficult to solve. It didn't become clear whether different genres should be associated with different regions, or general forms are existing under different names in the different regions. Most musicians know covering categories of Turkish folk music, such as *uzun* and *kırık hava*, or *türkü*. The characteristics of specific genres are not easily described. Most

often, genres are characterised by extra- or meta-musical parameters as region, instrument and/or dance, or by musical parameters as tempo and metre. Sometimes characterisation involves style, which in turn is defined by rhythm, melody and *tavır*. Tavır means ‘manner, style’ and is used by the musicians to denote region-specific playing styles, involving plectrum techniques or (under the name of its vocal pendant *ağız*) singing styles. Tavır and *ağız* are crucial concepts in defining regional styles and genres, as well as in the performance-related discourse.

Knowledge in the **performance field** is often situated on an implicit, non-verbal level, as was already the case in the music-theoretical field. Aspects of performance practice are easily illustrated on the instrument or by singing, while verbalising often unwittingly turns into a more abstract, almost philosophical approach.

Spontaneously mentioned, concrete constituting aspects of performance practice are ornamentation and trills (10 musicians), dialect and pronunciation (5), singing techniques (4), plectrum techniques and *tavır* (4), tempo (18%) and phrasing (1 musician). Dynamics were not spontaneously mentioned.

On the ‘philosophical’ level, different attitudes concerning performance practices of Turkish folk music have emerged from the interviews. These attitudes are mostly adopted in a flexible or ‘opportunistic’ way.

Rather ‘conservative’ attitudes mentioned by the musicians are: trying to imitate the original performer (mentioned by at least 3 musicians), following the *tavır/ağız* of the region in question (at least 5 musicians), relying on the scores published by the TRT¹ (2) and using the appropriate regional instrumentation (3 musicians).

Many musicians nonetheless emphasised the impracticability of equalling the specific *tavır* or *ağız* of another performer and of a region other than the own region of origin.

As rather ‘progressive’ attitudes can be seen: playing the music on alternative Turkish folk instruments (4 musicians), developing a personal style out of different examples (6), improvising on the basis of the existing repertoire (6) and adding Western elements, such as amplification or electronic instruments (1) or other Western instruments (4), harmonisation, chords or polyphony (3), and features of diverse Western music styles (1 musician).

¹ Turkish Radio and Television.

Variation is generally accepted if limited, in the form of ornamentation, small additions or omissions, tempo fluctuations and rhythmical variations.

More than about variation, views differ about improvisation. It is not clear to which extent and in which cases improvisation opportunities occur, as there is no unanimity about the question whether vocal or instrumental improvisation is more common. However, views converge on the recognition of the introductory *uzun hava* form as being the prevailing improvisation opportunity. Improvisation, as interpretation and performance practice in general, is always based on knowledge of existing models and repertoire.

The third and last discussed knowledge field, after music theory and performance practice, is the **music-sociological field**. Here too, concrete knowledge was alternated with more general opinions.

Unanimity exists about the impossibility of retrieving the exact context, reason and period of origin and the precise author of the largest part of Turkish folk music, apart from certain exceptions and the most recent repertoire. Only since the registration and notation of Turkish folk music by Turkish state organisations from the first half of the twentieth century, the (original) musician, together with the place and date of recording are known.

According to a few musicians, traditional folk songs are still being collected today, while others assert that only predictable, simple love songs are installing themselves in the TRT repertoire¹. A large difference is perceived between the actual and former meanings and functions of Turkish folk music. While it used to originate in an organic and functional way, present-day so-called ‘folk songs’ are composed in an artificial, non-functional way. Entertainment is said to have become their function and commerce their rationale, which evokes complaints about a loss of originality and quality.

Nevertheless, Turkish folk music is perceived as universal, still meeting present-day needs of public and musicians. As frequently occurring themes were mentioned: (often unattainable) love (5 musicians), homesickness (2), war, farewell and blood feud (1). Function-wise the following genres were named: religious songs (6), lamentations (4), political or social songs (3), dance music (recreation or ritual) (3), music within the

¹ The official repertoire of Turkish folk and classical music, collected and published by the Turkish Radio and Television (TRT).

marriage rituals (2), lullabies, children's songs, shepherds songs, market vendors songs and walking songs (1 musician).

Folk music is really seen as a way of life and considered to be closely related to all events happening during lifetime and all stages of life. The musical characteristics, texts and dances of Turkish folk music are closely interwoven with cultural traditions and living conditions, like the way of life, environment, financial situation, needs and national character of the people concerned. Certain old traditions still persist nowadays, like the *aşıks* (bards) with their improvisation duels or the Alevi¹ religious ceremonies.

Texts are considered as essential in Turkish folk music. Their interpretation often involves difficulties, as they are closely linked with, sometimes bygone, specific traditions or contexts. The used language is described as difficult, metaphoric or literary. Only the Belgian musician pointed out the sometimes nonsensical or superficial nature of Turkish folk music texts.

After covering all separate knowledge fields into some detail, musical knowledge of the Turkish musicians in Ghent can now be generally outlined.

In the music-theoretical field, notation skills are considered as very important, and turned out to be ready for further development. The tonal organisation of Turkish music is generally perceived as differing from the Western system, but not in a radical, incompatible way. Explicit theoretical knowledge about the pitch and melodic organisation of Turkish folk music (if necessary in comparison with the classical system) could be further developed. Metre and rhythm, as well as tonal organisation, are approached in a practical, rather implicit way and inextricably associated with concrete musical genres, as with song texts, dance forms and performance techniques. Musical forms are also related to textual structures; genres are usually defined by certain musical and meta-musical parameters, regional styles by specific performance-related aspects. Explicit formulation of concrete musical features is developable.

Performance-related knowledge invokes either an implicit and practical approach or an abstract-philosophical discourse. Depending on the musician's attitude or attitudes concerning the performance of the traditional repertoire, a broad range of interpretational styles is valid, involving 'authentic' performance as well as freer or westernised styles. Improvisation turned out to be one of the most debatable topics.

¹ Alevism is a subbranch of Shi'a Islam.

The original and actual meanings and functions of the repertoire are considered as very important and are thus generally well-known by the musicians. This knowledge is based on ad hoc source consulting and text interpretation, as well as on acquired acquaintance with cultural traditions and living conditions.

An interview series supported by complementary methods has provided insight about the actual state and further development possibilities of musical knowledge among the Turkish immigrant musicians in Ghent.

Projecting the same 'knowledge map' onto the existing Turkish folk music education, could indicate which aspects of musical knowledge are being transferred and which are not. Thus, underlying hierarchies in the appreciation of the knowledge aspects, as well as difficulties in the transfer of musical knowledge could be revealed.

As a pendant to the diasporic research, an analysis of the knowledge about Turkish folk music transferred at the universities and conservatories in Turkey could be carried out. A thus constituted 'matrix' of knowable and teachable aspects of Turkish folk music, could then be placed upon the immigrant musicians' mapped out knowledge, in order to find stable guidelines for future development of a professional diasporic Turkish music education.

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