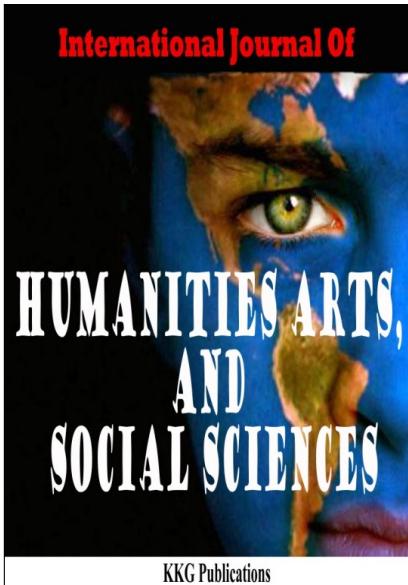


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# THE ART OF OPERA IN TURKEY WITHIN THE SCOPE OF CULTURE-ART POLICIES

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**Abstract.** The existence of the art of opera in Turkey dates back to the latest period of Ottoman Empire during the early 19th century. Considering that the development of the art of opera in Turkey is evaluated within the period, the first contact was obtained with opera in the Ottoman era, two different periods may be mentioned as before and after the Ottoman period; i.e. the Republic period. However, given two periods differently, the art of opera may be seen differently from various perspectives; when the difference between the more systematic cultural policies started with the Republic for the first time in this sense, the perspective of the Ottomans related to culture and art became prominent. The most important problem to be discussed at this point is questioning the extent to which this art has reached and was accepted during both the periods. Thus, it is seen that the art of opera under the Ottoman administration failed in stooping at public's level and was seen in the palace and its environment. During the period during the Republic, it may be stated that the art of opera was handled through more regular policies; yet, it encountered problems in reaching the public. In addition, the advancement which opera progressed from the Ottoman period to the Republic will be seen when the popularity and acceptance of the art opera in Turkey is analyzed.

## INTRODUCTION

During the process of the first westernization attempts and the application of the reforms in the Ottoman period, a special interest to the western music was seen to emerge. This concern may be regarded as the result of the Ottomans falling behind numerous steps taken in Europe in military and technical fields, and the efforts of renovation and reforms started upon the loss of lands in Europe and Balkans. It is seen that a closer relationship was established with Europe during this process of reforms when a transition to the new order especially in political and military fields and Ottoman became open to the social and cultural influences of the Europe. Thus, the Ottoman State and its society became closed to the external influences and a closed country until the process of reforms entered into a new process upon the intensified relationships with Europe and became open to the outer influences which would affect all sections of the society.

It is seen that the westernization perception beginning during the last period of the Ottoman State maintained its existence based on the idea of modernizing after the establishment of the Republic. Considering that the relationships with Europe continued in social and political fields, it may be stated that similar developments were also seen in cultural field. Thus, when the cultural life of the Republic period and the studies related to it are evaluated, the existence of some steps seen as

the continuation of the steps taken during the Ottoman period comes to the forth; hence, the concern given to the art of opera is an example for it. Again, it should be stated that the modernization efforts during the last period of the Ottoman State had no enough effects as both social and institutional meaning (Balkilic, 2009). However, it may be said that the steps taken during that process provided a basis for more regular attempts of the Republican period. However, the activities dealt with in a more systematic basis with the declaration of the Republic were far from the realistic approaches, since they were mostly under the influence of ideological applications of the period. Within this context, it was intended to establish the opera art under the ideological influences within a limited time without musicological evaluations when considered as a contemporary institution of art for the new state. For that reason, musically and aesthetically insufficient and problematic works were produced, and the art of opera failed in reaching public.

## Introduction to the Art of Opera

The attempts of modernizing and social transformation processes regarded as a result of convergence between the Ottoman and European societies, indeed, were in progress before the 19th century. The source of increasing social activities, weakening of the political power, the activities towards the market econ-

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omy and similar developments may be regarded as social and economic dynamics developing before the 19th century (Rubin, 2011). On this basis, it is possible to mention about some European influences prior to the innovation attempts from the point of artistic life, as well as those seen in almost all fields of life. The existence of this influence may be recognized through some new entertainment instruments seen around the palace. For example, it is known that a remarking play with European origin was exhibited prior to the access of information related to the art of opera in the Ottoman State in the 16th century. Sevengil (1969) emphasizes that the play was performed during a feast organized by Murat III in 1852.

The first contacts to the art of opera were provided through the reports under the name of “sefaretname (the book of embassy)” by the ambassadors appointed in Europe by the Ottoman Sultans. Through the reports submitted by these ambassadors, the first actual information about the western art reached the Ottoman State (Ozcengiz, 2006). In these reports, the ambassadors reporting all things they witnessed in the countries they worked or visited conveyed detailed information about the plays they saw. Perhaps by means of the impacts of those reports on the Ottoman Sultans, the foundations of the innovation efforts beginning in the Ottoman in the middle of the 19th century were established.

On this basis, Yore (2011) states that everything about the new concept of Europeanization began with “Nizam-i Cedid” meaning the New Order. He also adds that Nizam-i Cedid was a process starting in 1789 which aimed at providing Europeanization in military, political and cultural fields in the Ottoman. It is seen that the cultural life was shaped through the reform movements continuing in this direction and the works of significant European composers were performed in Istanbul during this process. Altar (2001) points out that Selim III, a composer providing huge contributions to Turkish music, read the reports by the ambassadors and paid attention to them. Thus, it is also known that Selim III giving importance to the movement of reforms and to novel developments watched the performance of a foreign opera in Topkapi Palace in 1797.

In the newly shaped cultural life that was opened to the western influence, it is seen that the Western arts became more popular with the influence of the foreign staff in embassies in Istanbul during the 19th century. The performances of theatres and operas gaining popularity mostly in Pera (known as Beyoglu today) shaped the social life of the period. A new concern about learning the piano or other western musical instruments started especially in wealthy families towards the western life style. However, it is also seen that the deficiency of the institutions giving education in Istanbul related to the field was intended to

be solved through foreign tutors. The rush of numerous European musicians to Istanbul may also be seen as an indication of increasing relationships between Europe and the Ottomans (Ozcengiz, 2006).

The contacts with opera in the Ottoman depended on the reform process in earlier periods and observations of the ambassadors in Europe. In this sense, the first contacts introduced opera to the Ottoman and provided a huge basis for the detailed attempts related to this art. As a matter of fact, it is seen that the art of opera gained a ground in the Ottoman, even if limited only to certain regions.

### **The Western Music and Opera in the Ottoman Period**

The innovation movements becoming clearer after the period of Selim III in the 18th century gained importance with Mahmud II and led to the birth of a western philosophy. The relationships with Europe increased during Selim III and reached at higher level during Mahmud II, and numerous foreign composers settled in Istanbul (Ozcengiz, 2006). Araci (2010) states that the concern with the art of opera increased during this time and also points out that the royal bands of the sultans played songs from Italian opera repertoires. The pianos produced in Wien were brought for the women’s quarters in the Ottoman palaces; the opera arias were heard in the mansions in Bosphorus; Italian prima donnas went to the mansions for singing lessons; and, more importantly, a new opera building was constructed in Pera. During the following period especially between the years of 1846 and 1885, it is seen that the operas composed by famous Italian composer Guiseppe Verdi were performed in Istanbul just a few years after their world premieres (Altar, 2001).

One of the significant steps during the process of innovation movements, as stated by Sevengil (1969), was the invitation of Giuseppe Donizetti, the brother of the famous Italian composer Gaetano Donizetti by Mahmut II. Donizetti became the director of the first musical band named “the Muzika-i Humayun (the royal band)” established by Mahmut II in 1831, resembling the military bands in Europe and maintaining its existence until the Republican period. Kolcak (2005) mentioning that the Muzika-i Humayun might be the first conservatory in Turkey also states that the Muzika-i Humayun provided the entrance of polyphonic music in the state, but served only the palace and its environment, since it failed in reaching the public. At this point, the establishment of the Muzika-i Humayun may be regarded as the official approval of the western music by the state. The instruments used here, the teaching methods and the interaction between Turkish and western musics showed its impact on the military music/the band music at first and then on civilian music (Kucukoncu, 2004). Within the context of innovation

in music, another factor carrying the Muzika-i Humayun to an important position was the transfer of this institution to Ankara in 1924 upon the request of Atatürk and changed its name into “Riyaset-i Cumhuriyet Musiki Heyeti (The Musical Group of the Presidency of the Republic)”. As a matter of fact, the idea of heading for the West in music beginning during the Ottoman period also maintained its existence during the Republican period (Özcengiz, 2006). One of the similar institutions is Dar-ul Elhan (The Conservatory of Istanbul Municipality). Dar-ul Elhan, the first official music school of the Ottoman, was established in 1914 and the western music was also taught here in addition to Turkish music. After the declaration of the Republic, this institution was re-organized and transformed into a conservatory based on the western music; its name was also changed into the Istanbul Conservatory.

In the study where the impact of the western music on traditional music was evaluated during this process, Sağlam (2009) emphasizes the attempts performed by Selim III and Mahmut II. In this sense, the objectives of both sultans for establishing a Europe-based system, equipments and education related to the military, and parallel to these attempts, institutional attempts also draw attention. Thus, the effect of Europe emerging in Ottoman/Turkish Mevlevi music related to teaching, performance, theory and concept, and the use of “gamut/serials” in the explanation of modes instead of the term “process” were developed.

### **The Republican Period**

Compared to the last period of the Ottomans, the most attention-drawing element during the Republican period is the maintenance of the concept of innovation and giving importance to the reform applications. In this sense, reform movements are seen as the common aspects between the process during the Ottoman and the Republican periods. On this basis, the comprehension of innovations directed to the West is marked, and the idea of becoming westernized is observed in the society and social life. However, significant differences become prominent from the point of the form and content of the reform applications between two periods. As a matter of fact, the attempts of improving the existing system during the Ottoman period substituted the total innovations and reform applications with the declaration of Republic. In this sense, it is seen that numerous institutions were completely closed or underwent radical changes; the most important aspect of the attempts taken accordingly is the rejection of the Ottoman period and institutions remaining from the Ottomans.

During the Republic process, it is also seen that more importance was given to activities and than the Ottoman. The attempts

of innovation and westernization starting during the Ottoman period were settled onto a basis with the Republic, and this occasion is related to consolidate the ideological foundation of the new state. Woodard (2007) states that it was aimed to integrate the new and secular state into Europe by supporting the roots of Turkish culture different from the Ottoman history in addition to the reforms in social field and language. Music has played a significant role in the application of these reforms. Because the reforms applied in music were closely related to the project of building a new state, new musical activities were used as instruments in political sense during the Republican period.

Along with the Republic, it is seen that the thoughts of Ziya Gökalp became prominent in the steps taken in the field of music in addition to their ideological effects. In the thoughts of Ziya Gökalp also influencing Atatürk deeply, the difference between the concepts of “culture” and “civilization” was emphasized. According to Gökalp stating that this difference may be seen in the existence of two different music types, one of those music types common among the Ottoman elites is considered to stem from and dates back to Byzantine civilization as a product of Arabian-Persian civilization. The other type is thought to belong to the folk and shows the real roots of Turks (Stokes, 2012). It was aimed that the reforms in the music field were based upon the Turkish music, namely the music existing in the villages or folk music. However, these types of music are seen to be exposed to some interferences. Since there is nationalist and democratic ideology in studies on folk music rather than deep musicological analysis, the reformists evaluate folk songs through the qualifications they determine, and thus folk music is invented while describing it (Balkılıç, 2009).

Of course, the processing of folk music through the western technique constitutes the most important part of the reform steps based on folk music. Because it is claimed that this music was insufficient for the new society, it should have been processed through the western technique and increased up to contemporary civilization. The first step taken for this purpose was to gather the public notes and transmit them into the polyphonic environments (Aracı, 2010). Accordingly, it was aimed to vocalize folk songs without losing their essence and processed suitably to new Turkish style; it is seen that the lyrics of some folk songs were changed on the account of the fact that they did not comply with new ideology. Within all the steps taken during the years in which ideological infrastructure of the Republic was consolidated, the attempts to establish “national opera” formed a significant stage of the reformation process. Within this scope, the composition and performance of the first operas were paid great importance. Finally, the first three

“national operas” (Ozsoy, Tasbebek, Bayonder) composed by Adnan Saygun and Necil Kazm Akses, the pioneer musicians of new republic in polyphonic music called “Turkish Quintet” were performed in June and December in 1934. However, the conspicuous point within the process of establishing those first operas is that those operas were established through Ataturk’s intervention. It is clearly seen that political and ideological targets are uttered here (Altar, 2001).

Within the context of presenting and putting across the western music to the new Republic, some strict precautions were taken. In his speech on November 1 1934, Ataturk stated “Today, the music we are forced to listen to is far from making us proud of it. We have to know it well...” and this resulted in the intervention to the radio broadcasts by the Interior Ministry and related institutions of the period. Accordingly, it is seen that two radio channels broadcasting in Turkey banned traditional Turkish music. Although interrupted due to the changing governmental structure after 1950, the attempts to institutionalize polyphonic music continued later on. During this process, the establishment of Turkish Radio Association (TRT) had great contributions. As a matter of fact, the polyphonic music was introduced to the public through the radio in 1964 and later, television broadcasting in 1968. In the academic fields, the studies related to the topic were continued in the musical departments of conservatories, faculties of fine arts and departments of music in education faculties (Oransay, 1985).

It is seen that similar efforts were maintained during the following years of Republic and after the period of Ataturk. At this point, the Republic period may be analyzed under two different titles within the context of the steps taken in the fields of culture and art. Some differences may be seen between the first years of the Republic frequently mentioned about art and music by Ataturk and the period after Ataturk. Of course, the prominent element here is the existence of intensive ideological reflections on the artistic activities during the first years of the Republic, and this effect decreased gradually during the following period because artistic activities were employed in the state policies. When evaluated in this direction, the nationalist approaches and discourses which were dominant during the first years gradually lost their existence and effects in the course of time changing their form although not vanishing completely. When the products of the early Republican period are compared to the contemporary ones, it is seen that “political nationalism” has turned into “cultural nationalism” (Yazici & Gokbudak, 2015). In this direction, it is seen that the artistic activities were performed in big cities in Turkey. First of all, the State Conservatory of Ankara was established in the capital in 1936. The German artist Carl Ebert was assigned as the director in the

opera department within the conservatory. This was important because Europe was taken as a model. Within the same period, the activities continued through the light stage works such as musical plays and operetta applications in Istanbul were the main elements preparing an environment for opera. On this basis, because the bourgeoisie class in Istanbul was a minority no more, an attempt was done to establish “the Istanbul City Opera” in 1950. In 1970, along with the General Directory of Opera and Ballet, the Directory of Istanbul Opera and Ballet was formed as a branch of the Ankara Opera Directory. In Izmir, the culturally convenient environment introduced opera to the public earlier thanks to Christian and Jewish minorities effective on the trade and social life. Especially after the 1950s, the infrastructure in culture and art became prominent in Izmir, and a “music school” was established in the late 1950s to set up a foundation for the conservatory. Then, this school was turned into a conservatory. As the branch office of the Ankara State Opera, the Directory of Izmir State Opera and Ballet was established in 1983. The Directory Mersin State Opera and Ballet was established in 1992, and the Directory of Antalya State Opera and Ballet was established in 1999 (Ertekin, 2007; Suharti & Pramono, 2016). Finally, the Directory of Samsun State Opera and Ballet was established in 2008.

In the aforementioned cities, the institutions of state opera and ballet have maintained their existences and activities today. It can be said that these activities conducted through their artists with experience in international field draw enormous interest. Although an increase is observed in the number of the performances conducted in those institutions on a monthly basis, the existence of some activities such as concerts, contests and festivals also continue in addition to the settled stages. The Aspendos Opera and Ballet Festival conducted by the Directory of State Opera and Ballet after 1998 is the most important one among such activities from the points of its extraverted structure and the concern of the audience, or may be from the point of opera art (Ozhanci, 2009).

However, significant deficiencies and problems cannot escape from attention when a more general evaluation is conducted, and the general perspective of the society is regarded except those designated activities and sustaining the activities of operas in big cities. Constitutively, no opera theatres are seen except for those in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Antalya, Mersin and Samsun. Accordingly, it can be stated that there are numerous people far from the opera culture except those in big cities. According to data obtained on the basis of statistical researches, while the rate of audiences of performance arts is about 38% abroad, the rate is about 5% in Turkey. In the light of these data, it may also be stated that the concern shown to opera is substantially

little even in the cities with opera buildings when compared to western countries. Within this scope, it is clear that the Republic period met no expected objectives based on the idea of the westernization and from the artistic perspective.

## CONCLUSION

The relationship between the western music and the art of opera beginning during the period of the Ottoman is seen to continue in contemporary Turkey, and this relationship developed as a part of cultural policies during both periods. The innovations within the art gaining importance in the reform applications based on developing the relationships with the West in both Ottoman and Republic periods mostly were not established on realistic and correct grounds, since they were primarily based on developing political relationships. In this sense, the steps taken in this field have always had political traces since the concern with The western music was provided through the state. This effect has always been clear and effective on artists performing during this period.

When the art of opera is discussed accordingly, it will be seen that the art of opera in the Ottoman period was almost imported as a part of "innovation attempts" in a different way from its birth in Europe as a result of a natural process. At this point, it is also seen that the sultans of the period showed interest in opera, but it is impossible to mention about the existence of opera except Istanbul in the Ottoman State since this interest went beyond no other places such as the palace and its environment. Thus, it is seen that the approach to the art of opera in the Ottoman period did not occur in accordance with the realistic and artistic objectives. The art of opera served only to the palace and a definite part of the society from the first performance in the palace until the declaration of the Republic. In this case, it can be stated that the existence of opera in the Ottoman State was based on the attempts of reforms. It is only a part of the innovations in the field of art within this context, and it is far from achieving a realistic and necessary target because the efforts could not reach the public.

Although more systematic steps were taken, and importance was given to institutionalization upon the declaration of the Republic, insufficient attempts in numerous applications in the field of art are observed. The biggest problem emerging at this point of cultural and artistic policies was based on the ideological infrastructure and political elements. The nationalist ideology emerging during the establishment of the new state and the consolidation of cultural infrastructure were completely influenced by the artistic attempts in the first years of the Republic, and this influence was consciously directed by the state. Within this context, the perception of innovation and the west-

ernization as a target emerging during the Republican period were handled in a nationalist framework, and that "national" elements should be employed in every step to be taken as a necessity of the westernization was defended. The comprehension of "synthesis" emerging accordingly forms the core of the cultural and artistic policies in the Republican period. Within this context, it is seen that the approach to the art of opera during the Republican period also developed through this synthesis. The most important common characteristic of the first opera works developed to achieve this aim is that they were formed directly through "nationalist" discourses and ideological factors on the political basis. The opera institution aimed at being shaped according to this approach was not handled in a realistic basis as in the Ottoman period, it served as an instrument to the political elements of the period, and necessary achievements could not be obtained in reaching public. As a matter of fact, it is seen that the steps taken in order to make the public accept this new music and to transmit it to the new environments public are not based on correct evaluations, and the best example for it is the banning of traditional Turkish music in the radio broadcast stream.

Perhaps, the innovation and the westernization steps taken without regarding correct evaluations and researches in the field of culture and art highlight the point where the point of art of opera has reached current Turkey. Thus, as it was stated above, we may mention about numerous problems related to the art of opera in modern Turkey which has turned its face to the West. First, it may be said that opera is a branch of art appealing only to definite parts of the society as opera was during previous periods if an evaluation is executed from the point of procuring acceptance of opera art and reaching the society. The existence of an opera stage only in definite cities is a significant problem from the point of popularizing this art throughout Turkey. Consequently, it may be stated that 70% of the population except definite regions of Turkey has no opportunity to meet opera and other performing arts when the statistical data are taken into account.

In conclusion, another point to be mentioned is that not the art of opera, but the audience has been left behind in Turkey. It is also seen that because every application related to the art of opera in Turkey since the Ottomans have been executed through giant steps. It is seen that the Ottoman palace gave importance to opera and invited the famous musicians of the period in Europe. The performances of European artists were performed in Istanbul only after a few months after their first performances in Europe; these efforts cannot be ignored from the point of opera art. During the Republic period, the musicians similarly came from Europe and talented Turkish youngs went to Europe

for musical education through a scholarship. Again, significant opera performances are being executed during this period, a great importance is given to compose a national opera, and future-looking steps are taken by establishing new conservatories. Today, the most important examples of the art of opera

are performed on well-equipped stages of big cities in Turkey, and numerous successful artists from Turkey exhibit successful performances in both national and international fields.

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