



Reflections on Popular Music Studies in Turkey

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Abstract

This article reviews the state of popular music studies in Turkey in comparison to IASPM's Anglo-American history of popular music studies. The main focus is on the similarities and dissimilarities in studies based on shifts in paradigms: firstly the shift from the sociology of arabesk music in Turkey and sociology of rock music in the Anglo-American popular music studies, to the sociology of popular music; secondly, a parallel shift in theoretical premises, from Marxism to postmodern theories. Mapping the achievements of popular music studies in Turkey in relation to the study of popular musics that have dominated specific eras, it is shown that despite earlier divergences from the 1990s onwards, Turkish popular music studies gradually converged with international popular music studies.

Keywords: Turkey, arabesk music, popular music publications, popular music scholars

This review of Turkish popular music studies will focus on its main national and international publications to map out the state of Turkey's popular music studies in terms of its institutionalization, politics and legitimacy. The historical review of this highly multidisciplinary area begins in the 1970s and 80s, when the study of popular music was defined by the foundation of IASPM (International Association for the Study of Popular Music). In this respect, I will refer to a summary of the development of Anglo-American popular music studies in Frith (2004), which reveals scholarly commonalities and distinctions to its Turkish counterpart. Although common theoretical premises are shared, arising from the cultural studies that originated in Marxist-influenced schools of thought, the debate of arabesk music dominated the origins of popular music studies in Turkey in a similar manner to rock music elsewhere. This distinction is not only limited by the subject matter but also by the position of scholars; for example, while these Turkish scholars were not practitioners of arabesk music, during in the early days of IASPM this could be the case for scholars of rock music (Frith, 2004).

While rock music was initially considered at IASPM conferences in relation to youth and sub-culture as well as the ideological position *against* mainstream popular commercial music, in Turkey arabesk music was considered in relation to lower social classes and the associated "low culture" with an ideological position *in favor* of mainstream popular commercial music. This comparison was one of the main themes in arabesk debate during 1970s and 1980s. It can be said that the origins of this distinction lies in the particular quality of 1968 student movement in Turkey.

The cultural identity of the students of 1968 movement in Turkey was very much determined by the left wing politics. While rock music was considered to be part of cultural imperialism, students of the movement found their musical taste in folk music where folk performers justify the discourse of the movement by modifying the lyrics of

folk songs in favor of left wing politics (Gedik, 2009). Özer (2003) interprets such popularity of folk song in relation to migration, student movements and musical trends in the world, as follows:

While the political climate among the youth against “Western imperialism” identified itself with the lower classes through the use of folk music in western idioms, massive internal migration from rural to urban areas has permeated folk music into urban life more intensely than ever. The movement was also contemporary with the growing popularity of folk music around the world. (Özer, 2003, p. 203)

However, it was only by 1970s that a syncretic hybrid musical discourse composed of folk and rock music became possible, called *Anadolu Pop*, which evolved mainly in a left wing political realm through performers that were rock stars in 1960s. In this sense, the political *nueva canción* ("new song") movement of South America of the 1960s could find its reflections in Turkey only by the 1980s, after a military coup against the left wing movement. Corresponding to *nueva canción*, the name of the music group *Yeni Türkü* ("New Turks") demonstrates such deep effect, even though the sound of the group was more Mediterranean in style rather than folk music and also less politically oriented when compared to *nueva canción*. Derya Köroğlu, leading member of the group, provides some clues about the rationale of their sound:

I was involved in the political movement of the time as a member of the Students' Association at the University, but I have never put politics in the first place during my musical career. However, our first album included songs with a strong political content. The protest music of the time in Turkey had a pessimistic mode with slow rhythms and simplistic, mostly syllabic melodies, and, was “against” something. In my music, however, I have never tried to be against anything, but instead, to unify people in music. Therefore, rather than Turkish protest music, I was very much attracted by Latin American political pop, and notably music of the band Inti Illimani, which seemed to be more vivid and captivating. (Özer, 2003, p. 207-208)

Since folk music was also one of the musical ideals of the Turkish state in the formation of national identity, it is of interest to note that arabesk music was both criticized by left wing intellectuals and the state, which was governed by either right-wing politics or military juntas who were against left wing politics. In this sense, the centrality of the arabesk debate in the emerging years of popular music studies has also twofold meaning: On the one hand, this music was contradicting with the musical policies of the Turkish state where a synthesis of folk music and western classical music constitutes the musical ideals. On the other hand, intellectuals whom mainly belong to the political left, ranging from social democrats to communists, considered this music as a cultural tool that leads lower classes to fatalism instead of into political struggle. Nevertheless, it is not easy to present a unique meaning of arabesk music:

...no single, all-embracing definition is possible, since arabesk is and means, a lot of different things. Turkish definitions and explanations can be roughly divided into two basic categories: those in which the idea of Arab-influenced hybridity are significant (a position taken by intellectual commentators) and those in which it is not – a position taken mainly by musicians and fans (Stokes, 2000, p. 217)

However, the musical dimensions of this music could be defined as follows:

Arabesk does not have a ‘pure’ sound. It is a synthesis which incorporates many musical tastes. What I want to stress here is that it is more often than not simply a national blend of many indigenous and foreign styles. The *makam* (mode) and instruments of traditional Turkish art music and the *ayak* (scale) and musical instruments of Turkish folk music are the most important indigenous components of

the arabesk sound. The foreign musical components of arabesk are western musical materials and near-eastern musical traditions, which bear some resemblance to the Turkish musical heritage: "Arabesk combines these indigenous materials with western musical and technological elements such as electrified instruments, harmonies and the possibilities of the modern recording studio" (Erol, 2004, p. 193). (Erol, 2012, p. 47).

Therefore, in Turkey, sociology led the way in popular music studies through a sociology of arabesk music rather than a more general sociology of music. By contrast, in music departments either traditional music forms of Turkey or western art music were dominant, while ethnomusicological studies were mostly involved in traditional Turkish music, which is considered to be non-Western music.

One distinction in the development of popular music studies in Turkey was that Marxists in academy were either banished or resigned from universities as the result of successive military coups in 1971 and 1980. Therefore, Marxists could only find a place in left-wing journals in critical theory, arts and culture, which operated outside the universities. In this context, Murat Belge (1983) was a key figure during the 1970s and 1980s, considering popular culture (including popular music) from a cultural studies perspective. In contrast to the dominance of structuralist Marxism, influenced profoundly by the views of Frankfurt School, in cultural debates by most of the Turkish left, Belge instead applied a British Marxism perspective, as represented by Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson. This was despite the fact that Belge had initially introduced Althusser and his structuralist Marxism to Turkey; yet this is not surprising since his academic expertise was in British literature.

Within cultural studies, both Althusserian and Adornian critical perspectives can still find a place within the academy and the left (whose position weakened considerably after the military coup of 1980). In particular, important publications by Ünsal Oskay (1982) and Ahmet Oktay (1993) have maintained their theoretical position within the cultural debate. However, a significant theoretical shift occurred during the 1990s, following Stuart Hall's new formulation of Marxism based on Gramscian hegemony theory. For example in the pioneering book and article by Meral Özbek (1991; 1997) which were, again, in the sociology of arabesk music but this time introducing this field within cultural studies and popular music studies. Nevertheless, sociology of arabesk music survived in its old sense within the study by Nazife Güngör (1990) that presented arabesk music as a reflection of degeneration in society. The distinguishing quality of Güngör's study was presenting such perspectives on arabesk music in a new disciplinary format.

Another sign of theoretical shift during the 1990s was the translation and publication of key publications in cultural studies with only a few years delay. Of course, Marxism was not as attractive as before (Eagleton, 2003) and thus the effect of postmodernist theories became more prevailing in Turkey as well. During the mid-1990s the Internet age developed with the WWW, making it much easier for a colleague interested in popular music studies to find relevant publications; this synchronizes the studies in Turkey with the rest of the world faster than ever before. Furthermore, colleagues from abroad visited Turkey, such as ethnomusicologists Martin Stokes and Tom Solomon; the former started studying arabesk music in the mid-80s (Stokes, 1992; 2000) and the latter studied Turkish hip-hop music and its scene since the end of 1990s, in Istanbul and the Turkish diaspora in Western Europe (Solomon, 2005; 2006; 2009). Their presence had an indubitable positive effect on the study of popular music in Turkey, especially after Stokes' book of 1992 was published in the Turkish language (Stokes, 1998).

Postmodern theories have not been very dominant in popular music studies, even though this was the case in other intellectual areas in Turkey. Seminal international publications in this research area, such as Frith (1996), Middleton (1997), Shepperd and Wicke (1997) and Reebee Garafalo (1996) show that popular music

studies did not shift completely to a postmodernist position but either adopted only some concepts and approaches of postmodern theories or preserved their Marxist position. In this sense, a real groundbreaking study came with the book by Ayhan Erol (2002) who presented the accumulation of cultural studies and popular music studies published so far in the world by enriching it with his own fieldwork research as an ethnomusicologist. It encompasses almost all main themes of popular music studies such as music industry, standardization, authenticity, identity and meaning in popular music from various theoretical perspectives, ending with case studies in Turkey. The book explicitly marked a break from the sociology of arabesk music, even though another arabesk study was published the same year (Işık and Erol, 2002).

The second book by Ayhan Erol (2009) presents the collection of his individual articles, either published in journals or presented in symposiums, showing his wide interdisciplinary interest to popular music studies, ranging from semiology to folk music, from theoretical issues to rock music. Between these two publications, 2003 saw two other important publications on popular music: the first and unfortunately the last issue of journal *Popüler Müzik Yazıları* was, dedicated to popular music studies and a special edition of journal *Folklor/Edebiyat*, an issue dedicated to popular music studies. In addition, Orhan Tekelioğlu (2006) presents a collection of writings published both in academic journals (e.g. Tekelioğlu, 1996; 2001) and magazines, which clearly demonstrates the shift from a sociology of arabesk music to a sociology of popular music.

As a field, popular music studies in Turkey is gradually enriching both in the range of subjects and of theoretical approaches. Such enrichment finds its reflections both in new issues, as well as in new perspectives on the old issues and thus in increasing number of international publications of Turkish colleagues. In this sense arabesk music is still a subject to discussions as the papers of Erol (2004) and Yazar (2008) show. Similarly, the studies of Beken (1998; 2003) include an arabesk discussion focusing on the performance place of this music, *gazino*. Studies on Alevi music (Erol, 2008), an early popular music genre, *kanto* (Beşiroğlu, 2003) and general perspectives on Turkish popular musics (Karahasanoğlu and Skoog, 2009) are other relatively new issues that are published recently. Two publications of Erol (2011; 2012) introduce new theoretical perspectives to popular music studies in Turkey; while the former discusses Islamic pop, the latter applies Bourdieu's sociology to the cultural policies of Turkish state.

Finally, Aytar and Parmaksızoğlu (2011) summarize achievements in Turkish popular music studies by covering the history, sociology and politics of musical entertainment of İstanbul, including most of the important musical genres, such as jazz in 1940s; musical entertainment in Ottoman period; *Türkü* ("folk song") bars; musical entertainment in republic period; dance, rock music, musical entertainment of upper and lower classes; festivals; spare time practices; disco; *meyhane*; and *gazino*. It also seems that the interest of colleagues from abroad on popular musics of Turkey continues, as a recent publication by Stokes (2010) demonstrates.

In summary, despite certain divergences in the early days the development of popular music studies in Turkey parallels that of the popular music studies elsewhere, converging gradually from the 1990s onwards.

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