Musical performance at the Ottoman court in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

M. Emin Soydaş
SOAS (University of London) & Çankırı Karatekin University
emin.soydas@hotmail.com

Abstract
Throughout the history of the Ottoman court, music was always a part of the daily life, and several genres were performed in various contexts and settings. Based on primary sources, this paper introduces a general outlook of musical performance at the Ottoman court in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which comprised genres of traditional Turkish music. Although these were also in practice in the preceding and following centuries, the two centuries in question are interesting for being at the heart of the court history. Some original depictions serve as the point of departure in this paper, and courtly musical life of the period is described through the setting and context of the performances, with an emphasis on musical instruments.

Keywords: Ottoman court, Ottoman Turkish music, musical instruments, performance.

From the beginning to the end of the history of the Ottoman court, music had an important place within its everyday life. Evidence of several genres of musical performances in various contexts and settings can be traced in sources such as archives, visual depictions and narratives from the fourteenth century onwards and most of these performances included various kinds of musical instruments (Soydaş 2007). Although many of them took place at the request and in the presence of the sultan, people living in the palace also performed music and dance for their own pleasure, and some other kinds of performances were designated by rule. The term "court music" is appropriate when we talk about the Ottoman court but I use here to refer to all the music performed at the court in general, rather than a specific genre. Because of the non-existence of such a specific genre, this should be the proper approach when the subject is the Ottoman court.
In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, all the genres performed at the court were traditional Turkish music, namely classical, dance, folk, military and religious. Not all of them were practiced at the same level, and the settings and occasions varied. When we want to talk about the aspects of musical performance at a specific place for a given period, it is possible to do this in several ways. In this paper, my departure point is original visual depictions: by examining them, I try to describe a general outlook of the courtly musical life of the period through the setting and context of the performances. Emphasis will be placed on the musical instruments that appear in those depictions.

Broadly, the settings of musical performance at the Ottoman court were the harem, the enderun, the birun and the presence of the sultan (Uzunçarşılı 1977; Soydaş 2007). Although it is not a specific location, the last is mentioned separately because a performance could occur at the request of the sultan in various places, even outside the palace. The harem was a separate complex in the palace, and it was the residence of the family of the sultan and their female servants. The enderun was a courtly institution and also a complex in the palace, used for the education and residence of the male servants of the sultan who were destined to become officials. The birun was another organization and a complex within the palace, outside the central enderun and harem, and it was also the residence of other servants. All these areas were places where the crowded day-to-day life of this great court went on (Uzunçarşılı 1988).

Classical music was performed in the presence of the sultan, in the enderun and in the harem. It is not possible to say with certainty, however, that it did not also exist in the birun. This genre, which is often wrongly identified with the court, was generally the one most preferred by the sultans. Figure 1 is a miniature painting dating from 1558 that depicts Sultan Süleyman I with musicians (Atıl 1986:29). Although this scene is related to a celebration of the circumcision of the princes, it also represents a usual performance for the sultan. There is no doubt that the sultan ordered a performance to entertain himself, but it is a fact that listening to music was also one of the courtly traditions that sultans were supposed to follow (Tursun Bey 1977:90). These performances were only for the sultan, but as he could never be left alone even
on such comparatively informal occasions as these, there were naturally other people in that place listening to the music, servants with several different duties.

Figure 1

In this illustrated performance, the musicians comprise an ud player, a kemânçe player, a daire player and a singer. The performed songs were from the classical repertoire, and it may be assumed that, as was the case with the usual classical music performance, an improvisatory prelude and some instrumental pieces made up the other components. Regarding the number of its players which constitutes the largest group of court musicians (Uzunçarşılı, 1977:84-86), it is quite reasonable to argue that ud – the widespread short-necked lute – was the most popular instrument of classical music at the court in the sixteenth century. Its status did not differ much in the preceding centuries, and the records denote its existence throughout court history, except in the eighteenth century (Soydaş 2007). The only bowed instrument in the history of Ottoman music and accordingly in court music until the eighteenth century was the kemânçe – the widespread spike fiddle. It was used at the court from the fifteenth century until probably the end of court history, and was one of the prominent instruments of classical music, but it lost its status rapidly in the
nineteenth century (Pekin 2003). The principal percussion instrument of
Ottoman classical music was the daire – a tambourine with five cymbals – and it
was used throughout court history. The singer in this depiction probably holds a
manuscript book comprising the lyrics. The other popular instruments used in
classical music performances at the court in the sixteenth and seventeenth
centuries were çeng, kanun, kopuz, tanbur, ney and miskal.

Folk music was performed at the court in every setting mentioned above.
Although many of the Ottoman sultans liked to listen to folk music, it seems that
this genre was more often performed among the people of the court. Figure 2 is
a miniature dating from the reign of Sultan Murad IV and depicting him with a
tanbura player (And 2002:202). Being another example of a performance in the
presence of the sultan, this time in the seventeenth century, this illustration is
also an important representation of the status of folk music with respect to the
sultan’s taste. The similarity of the setting to the previous example is clear,
apart from the number of people in the scene. Although this is probably the
sultan’s private chamber, it should be noted that this place was also within the
complex of the enderun.
The musician in this performance is probably a çöğür (saz) şairi, a minstrel known for composing both lyrics and songs, and also singing and playing. The period of Sultan Murad IV is renowned especially for his interest in these minstrels, and according to the sources there were usually a number of them related to court in other periods as well (Köprülü 2004:470). In this performance, the pieces sung were definitely folk songs, which were probably either the musician’s own compositions, including improvisations, or popular tunes from the folk music repertoire of İstanbul. The tanbura – the widespread long-necked lute – was used, along with its variants, in the music of the court from the very early period until the end of court history, and, besides being the principal instrument of folk music, it always had a high level of popularity, especially in the harem (Soydaş 2007; Tuğlacı 1985). The çöğür, the tanbura variant, and perhaps the kopuz – a distinctive Turkish long-necked lute – were the other instruments used in folk music performances at the court in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Dance music was performed in the presence of the sultan and in the harem; and it also probably took place in the enderun and birun. In fact it is not always possible to distinguish this genre from classical or folk music, since most of the tunes could also be regarded as belonging to one of these two basic genres. Relevant information suggests, however, that it is appropriate to consider it as a separate genre. As dance was one of the significant traditions of the Ottoman court, dance music often found a place in daily life. Figure 3 is a painting dating from 1671 and depicting the “valide sultan” – the mother of the sultan – with musicians and dancers in the harem (Tuğlacı 1985:111), which was a common occurrence.
The illustrated performance, in which all the people are naturally female, could be a celebration or simply one of the regular occasions of entertainment. The valide sultan held a very prestigious status within the harem and could act like the sultan in some respects, so she could command a performance for herself. Likewise the traditions that the sultans were to follow, similar ones were in practice regarding the people of the harem and the other sections of the court. As seen in the depiction, there could be a number of people attending these performances, who might be the other family members of the sultan and some of the servants. The pieces performed in this performance were instrumental or vocal dance tunes, some of which were probably specifically composed for dance accompaniment. The musicians are playing a kemançe, a çeng, a miskal, a nakkare and two daires, and the dancers are playing pairs of çalparas; and all or some of them would sing the vocal tunes. The kemançe and daire, which were mentioned before, were also among the prominent instruments of dance music. The çeng – the Ottoman harp – was widely used in court music from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, and it was especially popular in the harem (Soydaş 2007; Tuğlacı 1985). The miskal – the Ottoman pan flute – existed at the court from the sixteenth century until the late nineteenth century; and the nakkare – the small kettledrum – was played at the court throughout the
whole of court history. The çalpara – the Turkish castanet – was the essential instrument of the dancers; and evidence denotes that it was played at the court from the sixteenth century on, although it is also likely to have been used before then (Soydaş 2007). All these instruments, except the nakkare, were those most typical of dance music performances; other popular ones used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were the tanbura and the ney.

Military music – or more properly “official ceremonial music” regarding the court – was performed by the mehter bands of the court, including daily and occasional performances. These performances were shaped by tradition, as was the case with the other genres, but they were also designated by state regulations regarding time and place (Uzunçarşılı 1988; Aksoy 2003); and this official and strictly specified aspect was the fundamental difference between this genre and the others that was more important than the music itself. Mehter music was performed in the enderun and birun, and sometimes in the presence of the sultan. As performances took place outdoors, and partly because of the high volume, they were listened to by most of the people at the court, albeit unintentionally in most cases. Figure 4 is a miniature painting dating from the sixteenth century that depicts a ceremony in the sultan’s presence celebrating a religious feast (And 2002:214). This was one of the occasions, other than the daily ones, when mehter music was performed, and there were many people, both from within and outside the court, who attended this ceremony.
The pieces performed were instrumental or vocal songs, some of which were specifically composed for mehter (military) music, and some belonged to the repertoires of classical or folk music (Sanal 1964). The instruments played by the musicians are the zurna, boru, davul, nakkare, kös and zil, which are grouped in certain numbers, and, except the kös which was peculiar to the sultan’s bands, these were the standard – and usually invariable – instruments of the mehter bands. The number of the instruments in numerous mehter bands that existed throughout the Ottoman Empire varied according to the rank of the official whom they served; and the sultan’s band was naturally the greatest of them all. The zurna, the widespread shawm, was the leading instrument of the mehter, and the records denote its existence at the court from the fifteenth century on, but it is possible, as for the other mehter instruments, to say that it was also used in the previous period. The boru, the natural trumpet, and the kös, the big kettledrum, were only used in mehter music until the nineteenth century: the boru was used as a rhythmic accompaniment, and the kös was played at the court only in performances related to a celebration. The davul, the Turkish bass drum, existed at the court from the very beginning to the mid-nineteenth century, and the zil, cymbal, was used until the end of court history (Soydaş 2007).
By examining these four illustrations, it is possible to gain a broad insight into the musical life of the Ottoman court in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which was comprised of different genres of Turkish music performed in various settings. In fact, despite the changes in some auxiliary elements, like the instruments, it was not very different in the other centuries except for the nineteenth century, but even in that period the basic contexts of musical performance remained the same. Of course, to describe the courtly musical life of these two centuries in full, many other sources would need to be referred to, and many other details presented. Because of the preferred method, religious music is not mentioned in this paper, but it was also performed at the court throughout the period in question. Although the performances depicted in the above illustrations are examples of different settings, it is apparent that they all have some connection with the sultan. But, as mentioned above, this should not lead to the misunderstanding that all the music at the court was centered around the sultan. If the context and reasons that are related to the production of these depictions are taken into consideration, it should be regarded natural that they were primarily concerned with the performances of this kind, rather than the ones among the other people of the court. We know from other primary sources, however, that these people, who lived in the harem, enderun and birun, also performed music for their own pleasure (Soydaş 2007). So, by considering these facts as a whole, one can easily argue that musical performance was really a prominent component of the daily life of the Ottoman court.

References:


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**Author’s biography**

M. Emin Soydaş is an assistant professor within the Department of Music at Çankırı Karatekin University in Turkey. He completed his PhD in ‘Musicology and Music Theory’ at İstanbul Technical University. His research interests include several aspects of Turkish music, mainly its history. He is currently doing a post-doctoral research at SOAS, University of London as a visiting scholar.