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## **THE CLASSICAL STYLE: MODAL ANALYSIS OF A VOCAL IMPROVISATION IN TURKEY**

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This paper concerns the emergence of a new style of vocal performance in Turkey during the early-Republican period (1923–1938). Developed by the renowned artist Münir Nurettin Selçuk (1899–1981), the new manner of vocal rendition was considered to be ‘classical’ (Tr. ‘klâsik’) in style, a ‘western’ version of an ‘eastern’ tradition (then called: ‘alaturka’) suited to the modernist ideals and the ‘westernizing’ aspirations of the Turkish Republic (founded in 1923). Employing the musical techniques of a ‘western’ precedent by way of an innovative adaptation of bel canto in alaturka performance, Selçuk utilized the vocal methods of a western classical tradition (then called: ‘alafranga’) to present a unique interpretation of a national music (millî musiki). He also adopted the ‘western’ conventions of a concert artist (konsertist) to develop a new understanding of Turkish classical music (Türk klâsik musikisi), a development that was at once Turkish in spirit and at the same time non-Turkish in character. In this way, he sought to ‘alafrangize’ alaturka (see O’Connell, 2013: 2).

In this paper, I provide a representative example of the ‘classical’ style. Focusing on a vocal improvisation (gazel) by Selçuk, I analyze the modal characteristics and the stylistic attributes of a gazel in the makam Nihavend entitled: ‘L’âl Olusun’ by the Ottoman poet Nâcî (1850–1893). Conceived as an ‘artistic’ recording by the British company Sahibinin Sesi (Eng. His Master’s Voice), Selçuk demonstrates both a traditional knowledge of mode

(makam) and a non-traditional interpretation of style (tavır). Here, I foreground his innovative approach to modal exegesis especially from the perspectives of textual articulation and programmatic embellishment. I also examine his close relationship with the instrumental accompanist on the recording, the tanburî Mesut Cemil Tel (1902–1963). By utilizing the latest developments in recording technology, I show that the ‘classical’ style developed by Selçuk was not coincidental. Through my analysis of ornamental motifs and cadential flourishes in the gazel recording, I demonstrate how the artist created his version of the ‘classical’ in Turkish classical music.

### **Classicism in Music:**

Classicism has received extensive attention in the classical music (s) of the Christian world (see Chapin 2014). Considered to be a nostalgic reflection upon an ancient epoch, classicism involved excellence with restraint. As part of its civilizing project, classicism prioritized purity over artifice, the twin tenets of verbal abstraction and natural imitation underpinning an artistic ideal. As part of this process, classicism resulted in the canonization of both works and styles where artists could demonstrate their impeccable taste with grammatical precision. Although classicism has principally been associated with a ‘classical’ style during the eighteenth century, a ‘classical’ impulse can be found much earlier. Either, the reification of a ‘classical’ era finds expression in the artistic production of the more-recent Christian Renaissance. Or, the reiteration of a ‘classical’ ideal underscores the scientific experimentation of the less-recent Muslim renaissance. In each instance, philological inquiry informed a secular humanism and a sacred humanism, two types of humanism that sought either to counteract or to accommodate theological dogma (see O’Connell, 2015).

Classicism has received less attention in the classical musics of the Muslim world. Although the term ‘classical’ was not used explicitly until the twentieth century, the notion of classicism was invoked implicitly well before. As in the Christian Renaissance, the ‘man of letters’ was highly regarded in the Muslim renaissance, the twin abilities of verbal eloquence and written facility being admired in both traditions. In particular, music was a locus for scientific inquiry

and metaphysical conjecture. Here, the philosophers Pythagoras and Plotinus (amongst others) represented distinctive interpretations of music and mankind where arithmetic calculation and harmonic speculation respectively provoked conflicting readings of the natural and the supernatural. As in the Christian Renaissance too, eloquence in declamation and precision in syntax afforded standard principles in vocal performance be it in the realm of sacred chant or in the domain of secular rendition. That is, classicism in both traditions involved a taste for the pure in which the ‘word’ (Gk. ‘λόγος’) mediated strategically between the mundane and the divine.

Classicism has received even less attention in Turkish classical music. This is surprising given the frequent references to ‘a classical work’ (Tr. ‘klâsik bir eser’) in concert programs and a ‘classical style’ (Tr. ‘klâsik üslûp’) in music histories. Here, periods of classicism are identified or composers of classicism are highlighted. Critical in this matter is the conceptualization of music history. Following the dissolution of the Janissary band (mehter), advocates of alaturka had to address the growing significance of alaturka at court by adapting the musical principles of a ‘western’ precedent to elevate the musical status of an ‘eastern’ tradition (see O’Connell 2005, 2013). Accordingly, music histories for alaturka were written and music theories of alaturka were devised in imitation of alafanga. Although the word ‘classical’ was sometimes used during the Second Constitutional Period (1908–1922), the designation Turkish classical music (Türk klâsik musikisi) was coined during the early-Republican Period (1923–1938) when the study of alaturka was institutionalized in music academies and when the collection of alaturka was canonized in music anthologies.

Classicism had its advocates in Turkish classical music. Hüseyin Sadettin Arel (1880–1955) was one of its most ardent exponents. Addressing a polemical discourse that concerned the cosmopolitan origin and the immoral character of alaturka (see O’Connell, 2001), Arel sought consciously to ‘classicize’ alaturka by inserting the word ‘classical’ into Turkish music and by questioning the style alaturka as Turkish music. Here, Arel was not alone. While Rauf Yekta Bey (1871–1935) and İsmail Hakkı Bey (1865–1927) had already referenced the term ‘classical’ in musical scholarship and

musical performance respectively, Mesut Cemil Tel (1902–1963) explicitly employed the word ‘classical’ in his Classical Choir (Klâsik Koro), a new ensemble that performed in a new style. This style was performed in unison, allowing for the clear articulation of the song text and the subtle inscription of dynamic variation. It avoided melodic embellishment or metric elaboration. It was a pure style of vocal performance that was especially suited to electronic recording, be it on sound recordings or in radio broadcasts.

### **A Classical Vocalist:**

Selçuk was also an advocate of classicism. Having an aristocratic pedigree (by way of his mother) and benefitting from an imperial patronage (by way of his father), he fulfilled the refined attributes typical of the classical ideal (see O’Connell, 2013: 79–108). In this matter, he could have followed his father as a ‘man of letters’ (Tr. ‘edib’), a scholar and an educator who was versed both in Persian literature and French culture. That is, Selçuk was raised to be an intellectual of the Tanzimat (Tanzimat aydını) and to be a gentleman of Istanbul (İstanbul efendisi), two designations of social distinction coined to represent elevated erudition and élite conduct respectively. Unlike his father, Selçuk was not successful as a scholar. Unlike his father too, Selçuk was successful as a musician. In Turkey at the time, musical instruction in aristocratic salons was considered to be part of a ‘classical’ education. Accordingly, the father sought a tutor for the son, drawing upon a network of connections that was both socially acceptable and musically accomplished.

Selçuk received musical instruction in two ‘classical’ traditions. First, Selçuk studied with different traditions of Turkish classical music. On the one hand, Zekâizade Ahmet Irsoy (1869–1943) operated as a principal instructor (esas hocası), teaching the vocalist repertoire in a historic manner of musical instruction (called ‘meşk’). As Behar (1993) argues, meşk was an oral system of musical education that foregrounded musical memory while beating a metric cycle (usûl vurma). On the other hand, ‘Bestenigâr’ Hoca Ziyâ Bey (1877–1923) functioned as a stylistic instructor (üslûp hocası), coaching the vocalist in musical interpretation as part of a ‘western’ method of musical education (see O’Connell forth.). Second, Selçuk

studied western classical music to nurture this bridge between substance and style, between the ‘east’ (alaturka) and the ‘west’ (alafranga). Studying vocal performance ostensibly at the Conservatoire de Paris (in 1928), he aimed to advance an ‘alafrangized’ alaturka, a compromise between the past and the present, between tradition and modernity that was both ideologically astute and economically advantageous.

Selçuk showcased this synthetic style at his *début* performance (in February 1930) at the French Theater (Fransız Tiyatrosu), an established venue for concert presentations of western classical music. In imitation of a ‘classical’ recital (resital), he performed alone accompanied by a select group of musicians (that included Tel). Wearing black tie (smokin) and standing on stage, he aimed to exhibit a new reading of Turkish music, one that was elegant yet composed. His vocal style too showed a similar compromise between alaturka and alafranga. Adapting bel canto to Turkish music, Selçuk wished to foster a new discipline in vocal performance, one that obviated the pejorative stereotype of the alaturka singer (hanende) and one that advanced the tasteful aspiration of the alafranga artist (artist). Here, the ‘classical’ principal of control was especially noteworthy. As music reviews of the concert highlighted (*ibid.* 141–170), Selçuk brought a new discipline to Turkish music where the twin tenets of excellence and restraint inscribed a new classicism in Turkish classical music.

Selçuk was not universally lauded for his classicism. While some critics praised his purist aspiration towards ‘classical’ distinction, other critics denigrated his populist compromise between tradition and modernity. Here, such critics were especially concerned with his choice of repertoire and with his representation of music. In the former category, they criticized his admixture of the ‘classical’ with the non-‘classical’, the issue of tasteful selection in musical programming being particularly noticed. In the latter category, they censured the ‘alafrangized’ manner of alaturka performance believing it to be inappropriate and non-traditional. Interestingly, they noted that Selçuk sounded hoarse after two hours of musical exertion, perhaps correctly observing that the vocalist had yet to master the intricate techniques of western classical music. In this,

they had a point. Although advertised in concert programs and record catalogs, Selçuk's visit to Paris was something of a sham. It was a publicity stunt by a commercial concern to maximize market share and to establish political credibility. The company in question was His Master's Voice (Sahibinin Sesi).

### **Recording a Classic:**

Selçuk had already showcased his 'classical' style on sound recordings. Returning (in 1927) to Istanbul after completing his military service in Ankara, he signed a lucrative contract with Sahibinin Sesi. Although he had already recorded a number of discs with other companies, he completed sixteen items that were recorded under a special label (the FE series). As I show elsewhere (*ibid.* 92–107), these recordings encompassed a number of genres (ranging from the sacred to the secular) and a variety of styles (including 'classical' works and popular *fantezi*-s). Significant here was the use of electronic technology in sound recording. With his accompanist, the *tanburî* Refik Fersan (1893–1965), Selçuk experimented for the first time with the musical opportunities made possible by the latest media, especially from the perspectives of dynamic variation and timbral differentiation. In the first disc (FE 7), he also experimented with textual articulation, carefully crafting the poetic setting of the vocal improvisation (*gazel*) with literary skill (with respect to prosody) and musical taste (with respect to embellishment).

Selçuk continued to experiment with electronic technology. Returning from Paris (in 1928), he began to adapt 'western' techniques to *alaturka*, employing *bel canto* (especially with respect to voice production and breath control) in the re-presentation of a 'classical' style. Sahibinin Sesi was evidently impressed. Granting Selçuk an 'artistic' label (the FF series) (a designation usually reserved for 'western' virtuosi), the company was especially concerned with advertising the 'western' credentials of an 'eastern' artist. Here, Selçuk's studies at the Conservatoire de Paris were acknowledged in record catalogs and concert programs. Here too, Selçuk's interest in 'western' music was widely appraised in journal articles and newspaper interviews. While the word 'classical' was not as yet employed, Selçuk represented the 'classical' ideal for Sahibinin Sesi since

he was elegant in deportment and refined in taste. As his daughter Meral Selçuk would subsequently contend (interview March 1994), Selçuk had an impeccable sartorial sense as well as a faultless artistic sensibility. For her, Selçuk was chic (şık) in sight and in sound.

Selçuk employed the work şık when talking about his ‘classical’ style of musical performance. When describing a vocal improvisation (gazel), he would say: ‘şık bir gazel oldu’ (Eng. ‘that was a chic gazel’). As a representative example of a ‘chic’ gazel, Selçuk recorded the vocal improvisation entitled: ‘L’âl Olursun’ in the makam Nihavend as one of the items included in the ‘artistic’ label (FF 2). As an excellent example of traditional practice, Selçuk took great pains to pronounce each syllable and to articulate each word. In particular, he followed the prosodic meter (meter: ‘bahri remel’) with precision, eliding the words ‘L’âl olursun’ (see **Example 1**) and ‘açşam ağlar’ (see **Example 2**) as required and embellishing with ornaments the long rather than short syllables. As was usual, he ornamented the text by adding melismas to the last syllable of each foot (such as: ‘-sun’, ‘bir’, ‘b-i’ and ‘-den’ [in line 1]) or by including the vocables ‘aman’, ‘of’ and ‘yâre’ (at the beginning or the ending of each line).

Selçuk’s modal representation of the gazel was also traditional. Following an introductory improvisation (taksim) by Tel (playing tanbur), Selçuk repeated the first line (zemin) of the gazel, at first exploring the lower octave and then perusing the upper octave of the makam Nihavend. Here, he playfully elaborated upon the augmented interval in the Hicaz tetrachord (characteristic of the makam), by sharpening and flattening respectively the fourth (c, c#) and the seventh (f, f#) degrees of the mode in ascent and descent. In the second line (nakarât), he presented a full exegesis of the mode, complete with a descending stepwise sequence and a credential octave flourish (see **Example 3**). In the third line (miyan), Selçuk reached the climax of the gazel, by exploring the upper octave and by reaching d<sup>1</sup> (note: ‘tiz neva’). In the fourth line (nakarât), Selçuk repeated his interpretation of the second line by offering an extended realization of the principal makam in descent.

### **The Classical Style:**

Selçuk's vocal interpretation of the gazel was not traditional. In imitation of a 'western' precedent, the vocalist articulated each ornament (such as grace notes and trills) with great care. In imitation of coloratura, he thoughtfully prepared each gesture, executing every descending run, melodic sequence, cadential motif and melismatic passage with exquisite taste and exemplary skill. In contrast to other gazel performers, Selçuk exploited here the dynamic possibilities of electronic recording which enabled him to perform the softest pianissimos (especially during the zemin) and the loudest fortissimos (especially during the miyan) without upsetting the clarity of the text or the character of the mode. Indeed, the prosodic structure was complemented by metric variation, Selçuk choosing to add rubatos for effect, usually at the end of a poetic foot and sometimes to mark a dominant note (note: d) or 'güçlü' (note: 'neva perdesi'). Unusually, Selçuk even included a programmatic element by replicating a cry when singing the word 'ağlarsın' (Eng. 'you cry').

Selçuk's use of vocal techniques in the performance of this gazel was also not traditional. Avoiding the nasalized timber (goygoy) and the glottalized character (titrek) of other gazel performers, Selçuk adopted the full range of vocal timbres available to a 'western' performer, freely oscillating between a chest and a head register yet strictly controlling vocal production and larynx oscillation. Unusual among cotemporary singers, Selçuk attempted to use bel canto in alaturka. On the one hand, he employed the twin techniques of diaphragm control and voice projection so typical of a 'western' vocalist. On the other hand, he maintained the traditional values attached to textual articulation and melismatic embellishment, although he interrupted the prosodic pulse with sustained pauses and he extended the modal contour with melodic elaborations. The result was that Selçuk created a new kind of gazel, an 'alafrangized' version of alaturka in which he crafted a new sound in vocal improvisation. Selçuk described this sound as 'kalb sesi' (Eng. 'heart sound') or 'kalben ses' (Eng. 'heartfelt voice').

Selçuk's approach to vocal improvisation was anticipated by his instrumental accompanist, Tel. Framing the vocal improvisation



(gazel) with an instrumental improvisation (taksim), the accompanist prescribes the modal exegesis and the stylistic interpretation of the vocalist. In particular, the extended trill on the tanbur is replicated exactly by the vocalist (see **Example 4**) in his programmatic reading of the word ‘ağlarsın’ (Eng. ‘you cry’). This dialogue between the artists is also found in the tailored setting of the miyan and the nakarat sections. Interestingly, the serial number for this recording is given as CF 2218 [iv]. Unusual for contemporary recordings (in Turkey at least), the serial number indicates that this recording represented the fourth take of this item. Although detailed as an improvisation in record catalogues, the recording is in fact carefully conceived (being ‘almost already heard’ as Adorno might have it), Selçuk and Tel experimenting with technological improvements to develop a ‘classical’ style, a style that melded the ‘east’ with the ‘west’, that reframed tradition with modernity.

Selçuk’s choice of accompanist is especially interesting. Although he had previously signed a record contract with Fersan (in 1927), he now chose Tel to be his accompanist on this ‘artistic’ label. While Fersan and Tel both wished to modernize alaturka, it was Tel (rather than Fersan) who advanced an ‘alafrangized’ reading of vocal performance. Where Fersan coached Selçuk in the traditional craft of textual articulation, Tel followed Selçuk in the non-traditional art of melodic setting. Where Tel brought discipline to ensemble practice in his Classical Choir (Klâsik Koro), Selçuk advocated control in solo performance as an essential part of his ‘classical’ style. Here, Tel’s actual training as an instrumentalist in Berlin and Selçuk’s apparent instruction as a vocalist in Paris chimed well with the ‘westernizing’ and the modernizing climate of cultural reforms that were instituted during the early-Republican period. They also resonated with the artistic expectations of music critics and the commercial interests of music concerns. In short, the ‘classical’ style was socially acceptable and economically sustainable.

### **Turkish Classical Music:**

Selçuk and Tel played a significant role in the development of Turkish classical music. In terms of solo performance, Selçuk adapted the music conventions and the music techniques of western classical music to develop a ‘classical’ style of Turkish music. In terms of ensemble practice, Tel adopted the choral conventions and the choral techniques from western classical music also to develop a ‘classical’ style of Turkish music. However, both artists have left an indelible imprint upon Turkish classical music. Where Selçuk advanced the significance of the soloist, Tel promoted the importance of the choir. Although a precedent existed in Turkish music, Selçuk and Tel anticipated the future where solo performance and choral practice are now standard fare in concert programs of Turkish classical music. Significantly, both artists developed the role of the conductor (şef), an elevated position that ensured a unison texture through ensemble discipline and melodic restraint. Here, the word in song is still foregrounded, the logocentric emphasis of a classical epoch now finding expression in a ‘classical’ music.

Returning to the discussion of classicism by Chapin (2014), Turkish classical music is now canonized in published anthologies and on artistic recordings. It is now institutionalized in conservatories and in radio stations. It is performed with restraint where a refined texture is equated with discipline and taste. Critical here is the notion of order after chaos. In terms of music, Turkish classical music replaced alaturka as the appropriate style for a new nation state, the Turkish Republic replacing the Ottoman Empire following centuries of imperial decline and foreign encroachment. That the ‘classical’ style found expression in the early-Republican period is especially significant since peace replaced conflict as the everyday experience of the Turkish citizen. Here, classicism fulfilled its promise of civilization where Turkish classical music provided a sonic space for making good citizens and presented a symbolic space for censuring deviant citizenship. With its concern for verbal control and grammatical correctness, Turkish classical music is the music of the state, being today as powerful as it is beautiful.

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