

“Nothing in the world that could stop me”: competing notions of progress and resistance within 20th-century Turkish music

After thirty years of losing the Eurovision Song Contest, Turkey finally found success with Sertab Erener in 2003 and her song “Everyway That I Can”¹, beating out fan favourites t.A.T.u. to claim Turkey’s first and only victory in the contest. As she competed, Erener was called to justify the reasons for Turkey’s first entrant to not feature any Turkish language, instead being solely in English: “It has to be in English to comply with world standards.” Since then, ethnomusicologists Karahasanoğlu and Skoog have suggested that Erener found success where previous acts performing “in straight European styles” had not because of the “self-orientalizing” features of the song: the driving *dümbelek* patterns, the combination of the *kürdi makam* and the Phrygian mode, and the barefooted belly dancing interlude punctuated by *zils*, they argue, are based upon “internalised foreign expectations of authentic Turkishness”. It is perhaps not a coincidence that this retrospective on Turkish music was published only a few months after Hadise’s 4th place entry in 2009, “Düm Tek Tek” (“Can you feel the rhythm in my heart? The beat's going Düm Tek Tek!”).

The response to Erener’s entry highlights many of the issues in defining progress that I aim to examine in this paper. Throughout the 20th century, the combination of Ottoman, European, and folk influences on Turkish culture meant that changes within Turkish music were not a unified motion. Progress to some was defined in European, secular, upper-middle-class terms, whereas to others the keys to modernity were found in the vernacular, the emotional, and the masses. This paper will give an account of the evolution of Turkish music in the 20th century as well as discussion and analysis of the spheres in which progress was both made and resisted.

The proclamation of the Turkish Republic in October 1923 sought to terminate the multi-cultured Ottoman influences and to project a single national identity. The “Reforms” enacted by the Republican People’s Party (coined by author Emre Kongar with reference to

¹ ... which features little lyrical content that could serve as a suitable title for this paper, with the only other viable option being “I want to be the everything you've been missing out”.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the first president) had two main qualities that impacted the music of the time: firstly, they were implemented to the public “via top to bottom of stratum” (Özgişi 2014, 51), and secondly, the members of the elite perpetuating these ideals believed that this synthesised image would fit neatly into a cultural landscape that “Turkey would inevitably become a part of” (Tekelioğlu 1996, 1). In shaping this new artistic order, music became a crucial battleground in policymaking as an example to how this new identity should be practised. In 1926, the Oriental Music Section (*Şark Musikisi Şubesi*) of the *Dârü'l-Elhan*, a remnant of late Ottoman influence and the only official public educational institution to teach music, was closed, and a further ban on the teaching of monophonic music (of Ottoman origin) in 1927 reinforced Kemal’s mandate that Ottoman music, “unsophisticated music [that] cannot feed the needs of the Turkish soul, the Turkish sensibility [...] to explore new paths” (Tekelioğlu 2001, 96) would not survive.

The primary resistance to this progress was found in the disapproval of and response to the erasure of cultural heritage. Many of the musicians of the now-closed Mevlevi Sufi lodges (*tekke*) left the country altogether, as the performance of the Melevi *sema* ceremony had been banned. Tekelioğlu argues that the musicians who instead began to commercialise their work, creating “a new genre, a new taste in popular music”, undertook a “spontaneous synthesis” of cultures that became another hindrance to the elite’s objective of an “imposed synthesis” between European influences and the Turkish Republic. More often, Tekelioğlu refers to the former of these as “West-East synthesis” and the latter as “East-West synthesis” to indicate the “direction of change that has taken place in the origin in question”, though I find this framework unsatisfactory. These two systems of cultural production are not as clearly delineated as their names suggest, as both systems are shaped by large-scale institutions—recording studios, censorship, and urban migration, for example—and both must cater to public interest to be accepted. Though a convenient method to express this dichotomy, these two terms are points on a continuum of cultural negotiation, as opposed to symmetrical extremes.

Indeed, not all these reforms were received as intended. Few of the terms used to describe classical Turkish art music survive today, including, but not limited to: “monophonic city music”, “music of the Ottoman palace”, and “music of drinking house”. (Tekelioğlu 1996, 215). Coordinated efforts to uphold these cultural regulations were widespread: pre-1924, a state monopoly over the use of wireless communication, including radio, and the appointment of *komser* (commissars) to oversee the subsidisation and surveillance of a single radio station from 1927-1937 (Özkan 2023, 1229); *halkevleri* (“People’s Houses”) were to offer free courses in music with instructions from the Republican People’s Party to “curtail the style we call *alaturka*” (Parkinson and Muslu Gardner 2020, 369); and “State Balls” were organised by public servants that included waltzes, tangos, and foxtrots, encouraging the “bodily performance of European lifestyle” (Girgin 2023, 95). However, as noted by both local and international scholars, the urban masses often turned towards former *tekke* musicians (Stokes 1992, 93); they were vocal about their discontent with the Turkish Wireless Telephone Company’s (*Türk Telsiz Telefon Anonim Şirketi*, also referred to as “T*TTAŞ”) radio station. Özkan (2023) draws ideological parallels between T*TTAŞ’s refusal “failure” to play the national anthem until 1933 with the synecdoche of Radio Istanbul, as it was referred to by press, representing both T*TTAŞ and, symbolically, “the capital of the deceased past”.

Tekelioğlu (2001) attributes these obstacles to the cultural elite’s inability to advance “any harmonic form of popular music accepted by a broad segment of the people”, locating the specific failure of such a top-down strategy within the public’s failure to receive as opposed to the elite’s ability to broadcast. I believe that popular acceptance was hindered in three primary ways: material, auditory, and rhetorical barriers. “Widespread economic distress” (Emrence 2003, 1) in Turkey brought about by trade deficits and payment of the Ottoman debt fostered a wealth disparity preventing access to radio, magazines, and other media outlets; those who were able to engage receive the state’s unfamiliar “popular music” faced a sonic discomfort punctuated by comical characterisations of both monophonic and polyphonic music. İlyas Bey, chief

representative of the Fine Arts Branch of the People's House of Trabzon, reportedly called for any *makam* that was “not so different from one another” should be combined to form “new modalities [...] based on and classified according to the Western major and minor scales”. Bey’s call for immediate progress appears, in retrospect, rather facile.

However, the case of *Nota* also complicates this assumption of the public’s “failure to receive” elite broadcasts. According to the music magazine’s first editorial, published in 1933, *Nota* served to publish the “scores of popular contemporary tunes” (Tekelioğlu 2001, 97), with contrasting ideas on progress to Bey, as highlighted by its motto: “While defending our personality, gradually toward the New Music” (Tekelioğlu 2001, 97). Mildan Niyazi Ayomak, the magazine’s editor, was initially sympathetic to the plight of the struggling Ottoman musician, writing that “the fundamental aim of daily music is not mastery but rather profit”, showing that *alaturka* musicians and urban listeners did indeed propose their own models of musical progress. Eventually succumbing to “pressures [*Nota*] was receiving from those who supported the government's policy” (Tekelioğlu 2001, 99) to endorse official views, *Nota*’s disappearance symbolised the elite’s own rejection not of the public’s supposed backwardness, but of the possibility that modernity could emerge from within *alaturka* practice. The refusal to consider Ayomak’s proposals demonstrates that the official vision of progress was less concerned with cultural development, instead favouring cultural elimination: the denial of Ottoman musical heritage as a basis for contemporary innovation.

Other attempts at progress towards the occidental ideal were made with the establishment of the Presidential Symphony Orchestra in 1935 and the Ankara State Conservatory in 1936. Both Atatürk and his successor, İsmet İnönü’s aims regarding artistic reform were to “reach the level of contemporary [Western] civilisation” (Erol 2012, 38), as outlined by sociologist Ziya Gökalp; Turkey’s true cultural expression had long been suppressed by the imperial influences, both Byzantine and Ottoman; thus “Eastern music [was] morbid and non-national” (Yarar 2008, 51). Though latent, this authenticity could only be revived under the

freedom of expression only brought about by the modernity of European nations; regarding music specifically, Gökalp argued that this came in the form of “a national, polyphonic repertoire in the Western art music tradition using Anatolian folk melodies as source material” (Parkinson and Muslu Gardner, 368). Hindemith was thus invited to oversee the implementation of the project, and Bartók was invited in 1936 to advise on folklore studies (Signell 1976, 79); similarly, the first ballet school, the Yeşilköy Ballet School, was opened in 1948 with the cooperation of Dame Ninette de Valois, founder of the Royal Ballet School in London.

Turkey’s first national opera, *Özsoy*, exemplifies the Republican elite’s conception of cultural progress as symbolic alignment with occidental high art rather than as social transformation grounded in reception or participation. Conceived at Atatürk’s personal request and written by Adnan Saygun for a diplomatic occasion marking Turkish–Iranian relations, *Özsoy* functioned less as a musical intervention in public life than as a representational gesture aimed at foreign audiences and domestic elites, one that would “carry the people of Turkish republic to a civilized society with its all spiritual and picturesque aspect” (Yazıcı 2013, 2215). *Özsoy* can be examined through such a dichotomy—a performance of a nationalist myth from the Turkish Republic led by a conductor and received in the Western concert tradition. While *Özsoy* is framed as a milestone of cultural progress, its elevation returns to the Republican model of producing advancement for some and regression for others, particularly urban listeners and practicing musicians rooted in Ottoman-derived traditions. In my opinion, this model of progress was not only socially exclusionary but also impractical and inefficient: it expended considerable institutional energy on a single, highly formalised work with minimal capacity for circulation, repetition, or popular uptake. Indeed, Atatürk, dissatisfied with the entry of two further operas (*Bayönder* and *Taşbebek*) into the canon of Turkish polyphonic music, reportedly encouraged the works to be “severely criticised” (Tekelioğlu 1996, 205) amidst a period of sending gifted musicians abroad for education in Europe. Adnan Saygun, one of the “Turkish Five” composers who advanced the modal tradition within Turkey (and composer of *Özsoy*) won a grant in 1928 to

study in Paris, where he was taught composition by Vincent d'Indy. 20th-century writers appeared divided by works produced in this idiom. Saygun's "Horon" for clarinet and piano (1964) quotes Turkish folk motives "in a basically international style, apparently the desired result" (Signell 1976, 79), whereas a 1991 portrait of Saygun described him as "the grand old man of Turkish music, who was [...] what Béla Bartók is to Hungary". Ironically, Signell goes on to note that "Horon" only relates to "the style of the Black Sea dance by that name to the extent that, say, the 'Bulgarian Rhythms' of Bartok's *Mikrokosmos* relate to village folk dances in Bulgaria" (Signell 1976, 80).

Radio's influence on cultural policies of the Turkish Republic was not limited to musical censorship. Tekelioğlu's definition of the West-East synthesis suggests that pre-Republic folk music was a "fundamental source music" (Tekelioğlu 1996, 205), and so the new conservatory made great efforts, with the help of foreign scholars, to create a taxonomy of Turkish folk melodies. However, it was through the media of radio and television that this project flourished. With both the necessary recording equipment and stations in the countryside, folk songs sung and played on the *sağ* were recorded and transcribed by conservatory and radio staff. These were collected and broadcast on *Yurttan Sesler* ("Tunes from the Homeland") beginning in 1948, a programme intended to popularise folk music among the population. However, intentionally or otherwise, the programme was geared to serve Atatürk's aims in two primary ways: firstly, the monopoly in radio broadcasting meant that state-regulated radio was both the distributor and authority of the folk music and classical music of Turkey; and secondly, while notating the songs, the personal styles of the folk performers were standardised by Muzaffer Sarısozen, the head of the relevant radio department, to fit a presumed musical aesthetic of the local region. Not only did this "[succeed] in wiping out the traditional minstrel style in Turkish folk music" (Tekelioğlu 1996, 207), but also introduced a variety of practices completely foreign to folk music: in the versions broadcast on radio, previously improvised melodies were sung by a chorus in time marked out by a conductor. Broadcasts of classical Turkish art music were only available at

“hours with the fewest listeners as if this music belonged to another age, as if it were an ancient form” (Tekelioğlu 1996, 207).

Further favourable progress for the cultural elite was achieved through the distribution of foreign films throughout the 1930s. Özyılmaz (2018) summarises the accounts of filmmaker and writer Burhan Arpad that describe the lists of suggested works sent out by production companies so that conductors could cue live orchestras as the films played. Arpad wrote that, because of these cinema orchestras, he could embrace “everything from Italian operas to Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Schubert and Tchaikovsky”. Additionally, Arpad somewhat slyly remarks that he became so acquainted with these musics that he could “even” listen to works by Schoenberg and Berg. It is intriguing that hostility (or obtuseness) seems to follow the Second Viennese School regardless of time or place; there is a larger point to be examined in the objective and subjective progress of artistic movements.

It is worth noting that, while the preceding analysis highlights the exclusions and tensions produced by Republican cultural reforms, it also risks underestimating the structural necessity and long-term impact of these institutions when assessed beyond immediate popular reception. Initiatives such as the Presidential Symphony Orchestra, the Ankara State Conservatory, and even emblematic works like *Öğretmen* should be received not only as elite spectacles, but also as infrastructure without which more socially embedded musical developments would have been impossible. Though these projects reached only a narrow audience in the short term, they established professional training systems, performance standards, and institutional continuity that enabled subsequent generations of musicians to negotiate Western forms on their own terms; the Ankara State Conservatory continues to educate musicians from a global perspective today, with the opening of the 2010 Jazz Department supported by the U.S. Embassy in Ankara, which helped the university recruit scholars from the Fulbright Program. From this perspective, progress should not be measured exclusively by popularity or mass identification; rather, it may also lie in the slow cultivation of cultural negotiation. The standardisation of folk music through

radio, while flattening regional and individual styles, likewise facilitated preservation, dissemination, and a shared national musical vocabulary at a historical moment when these materials risked disappearance altogether. Thus, while these reforms were certainly authoritarian, characterising them as wholly impractical also overlooks their role in creating the conditions under which later, more hybrid musical syntheses could emerge.

Indeed, musicians whose livelihoods had previously been curtailed by legislation received frequent opportunities in the form of adapting songs for domestic cinema, a nascent industry that had struggled in the backdrop of the First World War, which prevented “the investment of major donors” until around 1922 (Hayir, 810). By the time the Republican’s People Party began to advise the Ministry of Internal Affairs that “Arab films were a threat to the Turkish language” (Aditama, Rachmanti and Soekarba 2019, 202) in the late 1940s, many international films had long been shown in theatre cinemas—largely Egyptian, but also some Indian and American (Stokes 1992, 95). This specific channel of cultural negotiation, unfortunately for the RPP, had been going on for more than a decade, as the 1934 ban of Turkish art music led to many rural populations to “tune their radios to Arab, or more specifically Egyptian, radio [...] mainly from Cairo” (Yarar 2008, 52). Prominent classical musicians, such as Sadettin Kaynak, were employed to either re-record Turkish lyrics over Arabic songs, or, in cases deemed most urgent, to rewrite the entire song “with only a faint hint of the original themes that had served as the source of inspiration” (Tekelioğlu 1996, 209). This expansion of Turkish art music’s domain into the popular sphere coincided with the rise of *gazino* culture, a new entertainment practice popular among the social elite, providing musical entertainment to accompany food and drink.

Influenced by this work, Kaynak’s largest contribution to Turkish music came in his development of *serbest icra* (unrestricted performance), an amalgamation of his various musical and theological influences: having been raised in the *tekke* tradition, Kaynak was a graduate of the Islamic school of divinity, and witnessed many of his fellow *hafız* (those who were able to recite the Qu’ran by heart) driven to performing popular music “in order to earn money”

(Karahasanoglu and Skoog 2009, 56). His interest in lyrical content enabled non-elite listeners—previously discouraged from listening to Turkish art music due to its lengthy forms, its focus on instrumental virtuosity, and the entire concept of the *makam* system—to appreciate *serbest icra* as an extension of Ottoman forms, with a central singer performing simplified melodies that replaced the focus on the elaborate ornamentation and improvisation of an instrumentalist. The *sarkı* grew in popularity as a light, metric piece that was marketable, and singers trained in Ottoman styles such as Müzeyyen Senar and Zeki Müren became popular following a diversion to an *alafranga* mode of vocal production, with their recordings finding great success within the film industry.

Following World War II, the “liberalization and Americanization Turkey underwent from the 1950s under the Democrat Party regime” (Cline 2019, 91) enabled a variety of other forms of popular music to emerge out of this confluence of Ottoman tradition and contemporary styles. Casual, foreign, and popular music that had previously been “rejected [...] as being ‘vulgar’” (Tekelioğlu 1996, 209), including the soundtracks to Arabic films as well as South American tangos with Turkish lyrics, once again became popular, rebranded as *Türkçe Sözlü Hafif Müzik* (“light music with Turkish lyrics”). This was supported by frequent broadcasts on Turkish radio, as was *Aranjam* (“arranged”) music: popular pieces, “in the form of rock and roll, cha cha, and chanson” (Karahasanoglu and Skoog 2009, 60) rewritten with Turkish lyrics. The jazz- and rock-influenced rise of Anatolian pop, as well as these other styles, is largely associated with writer and once-director of Ankara Radio (1938-1948) Vedat Nedim Tör, who advocated for “cultural revolution” by “actualizing the Kemalist Revolution in practical terms” (Özçin 2022, 70) amidst a newfound perspective “sensitive to social problems” surrounding Turkish cultural production (Yarar 2008, 53). Tör argued that the way for Turkey to enter the international (Euro-American) hierarchy was not to diminish national pride through the “inferiority complex” felt towards occidental art forms, but to utilise Anatolia’s rich cultural heritage. In this way, a “Turkish volksgeist” (Özçin 2022, 70) might be produced in the popular idiom after the many

attempts at a Turkish polyphonic tradition in decades past. So well-received was Anatolian pop that the competition “Altın Mikrofon” (Golden Microphone) was organised by the *Hürriyet* (Freedom) newspaper, a notably bipartisan media outlet, between 1965-68, aiming to “give a new direction to Turkish music making use of the rich techniques and forms of Western music and using Western music instruments” (Özçin 2022, 88). Less covered by the media were the “overtly political lyrics” (Karahasanoglu and Skoog 2009, 61) of an offshoot of Anatolian pop: *Özgün Müzik* (original music). These artists bore a “strong leftist agenda” (Karahasanoglu and Skoog 2009, 61), and so were more influenced by folk traditions than European styles.

At this stage, however, the imposed–spontaneous synthesis framework requires closer scrutiny, as the previous discussion risks reproducing the binaries it interrogates. In labelling *serbest icra*, *Türkçe Sözlü Hafif Müzik*, and Anatolian pop as products of a more “spontaneous” (or, at least, more socially grounded) synthesis, the degree to which these forms emerged independently of elite intervention might be overstated. While these genres were more well-received by the large population of urban migrants arriving from the countryside than earlier Republican projects, their development remained entangled with institutional mediation, particularly through the commercially oriented aims of radio and cinema; additionally, figures such as Sadettin Kaynak and Vedat Nedim Tör operated within, as opposed to against, state-approved infrastructures that continued to regulate taste, legitimacy, and circulation. The transition from an imposed West–East synthesis to a spontaneous East–West synthesis was not instantaneous, but instead a reorientation of similar means of cultural governance. Therefore, the existence of mediation remained unchanged, but its mode varied from (rather draconian) methods of prescription to subtler forms of standardisation and market validation, perhaps illustrated by a shift in attitudes from İlyas Bey’s call for the reclassification of *makam* to diatonic scales towards Anatolian pop’s gentler approaches to combining the Ottoman and European traditions. This lack of continuity complicates any strictly teleological narrative (and coherent paper structure) in which spontaneous synthesis neatly resolves the inefficiencies of the cultural

elite's imposed reform; instead, it suggests that Turkish musical "progress" was upheld by an asymmetry between musicians, government officials, and audiences.

The prior three decades or so of urbanisation, technological development, and political shifts culminated in the genre of arabesk music as a symbol of modernisation in the 1970s. Musician and composer Orhan Gencebay, often attributed with the founding of arabesk music, was greatly influenced by the "unrestricted performance" of the 1950s, yet also sought a genre that would appeal to the *gazino*-goers while combining traditional and modern forms and practices. Selling 600,000 copies of the "first 45 rpm single to be marketed as Arabesk" (Stokes 1999, 33), *Bir Teselli Ver* ("Console Me"), Gencebay found early and unexpected success in his explorations of this new genre, then dubbed *özgür* (free) and later termed *arabesk* by "urban intellectuals" (Yarar 2008, 53). The hybridity of the arabesk ensemble and form is that it "prevents us from being able to explain it in reference to a single musical tradition" (Yarar 2008, 54): a classical string section plays alongside an *electrosaz* to underscore *Tassavuf Edebiyatı*—Turkish mystic or Sufi literature—and *Divan Şirîi* or *Divan Edebiyatı*—the "Classical School of Poetry" (Yarar 2008, 54). Arabesk, therefore, is a product of a spontaneous East-West synthesis, one that aligns better with the interests of the popular masses more than any previous style. This is not to argue that such a synthesis was unintended, but rather emerged as a result of jazz and rock influences that were not native to Turkey yet had "an aesthetic resonance with performers and audiences" (Karahasanoğlu and Skoog 2009, 58). According to Yarar, arabesk's use of everyday language in its lyrical content constructs a narrative depicting love as something more than romantic attachment: a transcendental, "cathartic state of being, where nothing but love matters" (Yarar 2008, 55). However, arabesk was undisputably condemned as a genre for "lower-class, new urban immigrants" (Karahasanoğlu and Skoog 2009, 60) and was designated as *yoz* (degenerate) by Turkish radio and television outlets, who banned the genre altogether.

Following the military coup of September 1980, the rise of the New Right aimed to rehabilitate Ottoman history and Turkish art music as symbols of national authenticity, and so

resurrected the modernisation logic of the 1930s: the privileging of state-sanctioned cultural heritage as a tool for political legitimisation. To make the new Motherland Party's programme distinct from decades prior, cultural symbols such as music and football saw the "reconversion of [their] cultural capital by [...] transference of symbolic patrimony [here, relating to a single musical tradition] from one site to another in order to conserve it, increase its yield, and better the position of those who practice it" (Calcini and Staver 1992, 31). Thus, realising arabesk's potential as an already-popular preservation of the Ottoman past, Turkish media used arabesk as an intermediary in its aims of reforming the popular culture of the masses, an act of "populist elitism": the desire to weaponise arabesk through selective displays of appreciation (Grossberg 1992, 225). For the state, incorporating arabesk into official media and political campaigns signalled progress: a shift from rigid cultural engineering toward populist legitimacy within a market-oriented framework, as in 1988, the national broadcast policy was changed to allow arabesk music, and popular arabesk songs were used as campaign jingles during a referendum that year. Furthermore, at the First Music Congress² (sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism), it was acknowledged that Atatürk's attempts at musical reform "had not been entirely successful" and that the fusion music that filled the "cultural vacuum" suggested by Gökâlp had not been a polyphonic form based on folk melodies, but arabesk instead (Markoff 1990, 132). The Congress took this opportunity to further affirm *Acısız Arabesk* (translated by Stokes as "arabesk with the pain and grief removed" and by Yazar as "happy arabesk") as opposed to arabesk's common fatalist portrayals of love.

The development of recording technologies was instrumental in the propagation of arabesk in every stage of the process, from composition to distribution. Ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes outlines a variety of technical differences brought about by the combination of the *sağ* (long-necked lute) and electric guitar technologies that form the *elektrosağ*: the lack of natural

² Depending on which source you read, held either in Ankara, June 1988 (Markoff 1990, 132) or Istanbul, February 1989 (Yazar 2008, 62). Both allude to the same events, and other sources online also give one date or the other under the same name: "First Music Congress".

decay and the singular string emphasises “left-hand agility on the fretboard rather than right-hand agility with the plectrum”, and the smooth and highly ornamented sound is suited to the “the imitation of art music styles of instrumental *taksim* improvisation”. Indeed, the prominence of the *elektrosaz* itself spawned new appreciation for the *düz* (acoustic) *saz* amongst those wanting a more traditional sound, inspiring novel performance styles and recording techniques. The 1990s saw commercial recordings of folk *saz* players that saw small unison ensembles double tracked to create a large sound while retaining a small enough group “to enable the musicians to work out figurations and antiphonic alterations” (Stokes 1992, 98). Additionally, Turgut Özal’s desire to regulate cultural processes had a variety of interactions with the ever-expanding music industry. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism curated a list of 700 singers, including many arabesk artists, signifying their official status in an attempt get rid of “long lasting tensions” (Yarar 2008, 63) between the industry and the state, as well as to further encourage the privatisation of culture. Additionally, the government was happy to respond to growing pressures from the industry to curtail the economy of “rampant cassette piracy” by introducing legislation in 1989 that requiring that each cassette display a stamp indicating a tax had been paid, shortly before introducing copyright law (Yarar 2008, 64).

Arabesk’s consolidation in the 1980s and 1990s marked a moment of cultural expansion in which increased legitimacy, market dominance, and media exposure allowed the genre to diffuse across social strata, finding support in both the cultural elite and the urban masses. Under Özal, a period of great economic and social shift within which various social groups became “consumers with distinct demands and lifestyles” (Yarar 2018, 186). As such, arabesk saw itself fragmenting into distinct styles: a folk form, a Turkish art style, a Western style, and an oriental style (Stokes 1992, 4). From this perspective, progress might be understood largely in terms of visibility, flexibility, and market integration: arabesk became “successful” by absorbing pop and art music, enabling artists to strategically navigate identities both in the artistic and political spheres and catering to segmented audiences within a neoliberal cultural economy. For example,

Gencebay's surprise musical appearance on a New Year's Eve programme was the impetus for other programmes to invite arabesk singers to garner interest (Stokes 1992, 112). However, it is worth considering the extent to which such expansion constitutes cultural progress. Much of the material referenced here largely treats fragmentation and standardisation with ambivalence, ultimately categorising them as enabling processes. It is possible that the evolution of arabesk instead is indicative a redistribution rather than a resolution of power, in which its incorporation into mainstream taste neutralises its earlier capacity to articulate social antagonism.

During the 1990s, arabesk underwent a significant transformation as it became increasingly absorbed into the commercial culture industry; according to sociologist Meral Özbek, this was the decade in which arabesk was "admitted to the world of legitimate entertainment and was assimilated by the culture industry". The liberalisation of broadcasting and the explosion of private television and radio stations dramatically altered music production and consumption, and so arabesk artists adapted to these new conditions by incorporating elements of Turkish pop and Western popular music: electronic drum beats, prominent traditional instruments, lyrics of "acute loneliness", thus explaining why Gencebay's song *Batsun Bu Dünya* (Damn This World) "became the most requested song in high-end nightclubs after it was remixed with dance beats" (Özgür 2006, 183). Some arabesk artists even went so far as styling themselves after Turkish pop stars from their "video clips and cassette covers"; a questionnaire carried out by ethnomusicologist İren Özgür found that people were intrigued by artists depicted with jeans, Ray-Bans, shaved moustaches, "beautiful women", and luxurious lifestyles, all of which made these artists "more pleasing to look at".

The rise of arabesk was thus more than a musical phenomenon; demographic, political, and identity-based transformations in late twentieth-century Turkey all found common ground in arabesk. Urban migration and the political de-marginalisation of migrant populations were a large factor in moving arabesk from the cultural margins into the mainstream; previously limited to being the "counterculture of acculturating urban migrants living a marginal existence in the

squatter settlements of Turkey's major cities" (Markoff 1990, 132), arabesk has more recently become a representation of "oscillation or synthesis [in the colloquial sense] between East and West, rural and urban, [...] subculture and mainstream" (Başkan et al. 2022, 503) in the history of Turkey's modernisation. In this way, arabesk becomes a shared site through which multiple, often conflicting experiences of cultural negotiation are felt, and arabesk's lyrics concerning hope, despair, and fate spoke to the "feelings of alienation and powerlessness" of all Turks, not just urban migrants (Özgür 2006, 186). Central to this negotiation is the question of Turkish identity, which is indisputably hybrid and unsettled throughout all of Turkey's history; from this perspective, arabesk marks forward progress insofar as Turkey's Eastern and Ottoman influences became culturally speakable again after decades of Kemalist repression. Indeed, it is significant that a 1989 issue of the magazine *Tempo* featured intellectuals who were willing to go on record as fans of arabesk, as before this point these same intellectuals were viewed as "the torchbearers of Kemalism" (Markoff 1944, 234).

Some suggest that arabesk's popularity was a turning point in Turkey's relationship with "East-ness", and its situation between occidental and Islamic "cultures, institutions, and images" (Özgür 2006, 185). Though writing on the issue of Turkish identity is unending, only recently have scholars noticed that belief in the essentialist binaries established by the Republic's earlier project—emotional "East" versus rational "West", imperial legacy versus progressive innovation—have begun to subside (Başkan et al. 2022, 509). In its place, arabesk emerged as a collective outlet for "both the urban middle classes and more privileged Turks" (Özgür 2006, 186) to express their frustration in an era of geopolitical disappointment and cultural exclusion, such as in the nation's negotiation to join the European Union that is still facing setbacks today. As a result, political scientist Amikam Nachmani notes that "by 1997, a growing number of Turks no longer identified with the West or defined themselves as Europeans".

Arabesk thus embodies a paradox central to this thesis concerning progress: it advances cultural inclusion and expressive freedom while normalising a somewhat melancholic acceptance

of exclusion. This brings us neatly back to Sertap Erener at the 2003 Eurovision Song Contest, who, according to Martin Stokes, was often faced with remarks on the sentiment that “if only Turkey were to enter one of its own [folk] singers, Turkey would win, or would succeed in demonstrating that there was no need to compete on terms laid down by others in a musical language which was entirely alien to them.” This juxtaposition identified by Stokes encapsulates the tensions that have structured Turkish musical modernity in the last century. Erener’s victory is, on one level, as undeniable progress, yet the conditions of that success reveal that acceptance was contingent upon legibility within external expectations. Conversely, the proposition that Turkey might instead have proved a point by entering a folk singer presumes a stable, authentic musical language that could stand apart from international frameworks without mediation. As this paper has shown, such a position firstly risks reproducing the same essentialism that underpinned earlier Kemalist cultural engineering, and secondly would be increasingly hard to find as Turkey’s national identity evolves.

Turkish music thus cannot be understood as movement toward any stable endpoint: Westernisation, national authenticity, or popular legitimacy were and remain unfulfillable promises for many of Turkey’s twentieth-century cultural reforms. Musical change in Turkey has consistently emerged in the tension between legislation and practice, seen first in the RPP’s attempts to narrow the Turkish conception of music, and again in the syntheses of *serbest icra*, Anatolian pop, and most clearly arabesk. Where arabesk succeeded and where others failed was in creating a cultural language capable of reflecting conflicting experiences of displacement, aspiration, and identity. Progress, then, is not best measured by moments of international recognition or institutional approval, but by the gradual expansion of what is musically utterable and socially perceptible. In this sense, the journey of Turkish music over seventy years has culminated in neither regression nor triumph, but a historically grounded mode of cultural survival: Turkey’s musical future has always existed alongside contradiction.

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