

Gencebay and his Arabesk: Contesting Modernity through Popular Culture

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Introduction

ORHAN GENCEBAY (BORN ON AUGUST 4TH, 1944) is a renowned contemporary Turkish musician and actor. Despite his own rejection of the term ‘Arabesk’, he is often credited with establishing and popularizing the Arabesk style of Turkish popular music.¹ Not unsimilar to the word Orientalism itself, the term arabesque originated from the lexicons of early modern European artists: the Italian word *arabesco* and its French equivalence *arabesque* both signify artistic styles, either in fine art or music, that consist of certain elements pertaining to that of the Arabs.² Thus, the term Arabesk, itself the Turkish spelling of the French word *arabesque*, came to signify a musical genre that is often perceived to bear great influence from Arab, or Oriental, musical traditions in the Turkish context. As a young musician who was known for his skill in playing the traditional Anatolian bağlama and grew up immersing in the Turkish nightclub (*gasino*) culture, Orhan Gencebay first became known as a *saz* (long-necked folk lute) virtuoso through the radio service of the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT).³ In 1968, he released his first record *Musalla Taşı* (the Gravestone) which sold over 45,000 copies. Then in 1970, his first single, *Bir Teselli Ver* (Console me), sold a remarkable number of 600,000 copies in the Turkish market.⁴ Even for Gencebay himself, this commercial success was unanticipated. It marked the emergence of a new popular music style, which Gencebay initially referred to as “the free/flexible performance of Turkish Music (*Türk Müziğinin özgür icraası*)”, and would later receive the name “Arabesk” from urban intellectuals.⁵ In a very short period of time, Gencebay’s Arabesk became disseminated and popularized throughout the country. It achieved such a high level of popularity among the population that it soon seems that Arabesk became, by all means, the first real popular music of Turkey since the establishment of the republic in 1923. However, despite this great popularity and commercial success, the newly-emerged popular musical style was met with consistent indifference and condemnation in the official discourses of the Turkish state up until the 1980s.⁶

My research focuses on the Arabesk debate (*Arabesk tartışması*) that Orhan Gencebay’s “Arabesk” music stimulated. I study state interventions in music and public culture and am most interested in how the person of Gencebay and his Arabesk subverted the narrative of Turkish modernity which dominated the social and political life of Turkey since the declaration of the Republic on October 29th, 1923. In her book *Modernity, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey*, Alev Çınar follows

¹Martin Stokes, *The Arabesk Debate: Music and Musicians in Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 89-132.

²Harold Osborne, *The Oxford Companion to the Decorative Arts* (Oxford, the United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1975), 34.

³Martin Stokes, *The Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music* (Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press, 2010), 73-106.

⁴Betül Yazar, “Politics and/of Popular Music: an Analysis of the History of Arabesk music from the 1960s to the 1990s in Turkey.” *Cultural Studies*, 22:1, 35-79. DOI: 10.1080/09502380701480402.

⁵Meral Özbek, *Popüler Kültür ve Orhan Gencebay Arabeski* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2013), 248.

⁶Yazar, “Politics”, 35-79.

Foucault's understanding of modernity to define it in the context of Turkish history as "a ruling metanarrative or a large discursive field" under which different political parties and movements promulgate their own social or political narratives.⁷ Just like the vague ideological umbrella of Kemalism which gave rise to the idea of Turkish modernity in the first place, "to become modern" (*modern olmak/modernleşmek*) is an ideal that, at different moments in the history of the Turkish Republic, encompassed vastly different ideologies and programs under its very banner.⁸ Along this line, Çınar analyzes how modernity as a national metanarrative has been inscribed on Turkish bodies, places, and time with markedly different visions in mind by the western-oriented secularist reformers in the Atatürk era compared to the Islamist administration of the Welfare Party in the 1990s.⁹ In my research, I follow Çınar's understanding of modernity as a discursive field characterized by a critical attitude towards the immediate past with modernization being a process that must be constantly underway in order for the nation to progress towards an ideal future. In terms of subversion of established public orders, I also agree with Çınar's take on the interpellative function of the "public gaze" in Foucault's Panopticon. Çınar points out the limitation of Michel de Certeau's and Michael Warner's understanding of contestation and subversion as anonymous acts such as reading, shopping, or creating graffiti and rather argues for Judith Butler's view that real subversive acts must be able to "gain public visibility in ways that escape and undermine existing categorizations".¹⁰ This understanding of subversion as publicly visible behaviors that disrupt established social constructions and norms provides Çınar with an useful analytical tool through which the Welfare party's subversion of the original Westernist and secular order can be highlighted. By basing my research on Çınar's definitions of modernity and subversion, however, I depart from her focus on the secularist-Islamist divide which became a major field of contestation in Turkish politics only in the 1980s but rather focus on the Arabesk phenomenon, which, as I argue, marked an earlier instance where the early Republic narrative of Turkish modernity was contested and subverted in the popular culture. For this purpose, I examine two periods of modern Turkish history that are critical to my interest: the two decades between 1923 and 1945, characterized by RPP's authoritarian administration and nation-wide social engineering projects, as well as the period from late 1960s to late 1970s, when Gencebay became the most prominent figure in Turkish popular music and when the newly emerged Arabesk was still largely considered a style of defiance. Through a thorough investigation into textual, visual, and acoustic primary sources as well as secondary sources related to this research, I argue that Orhan Gencebay and the Arabesk style he brought about posed a serious challenge to the dominant discourse of modernity that the founding elites of the Turkish Republic had established and upheld in Turkish music since the late 1920s. Focusing on the interplays between Turkish politics and Turkish popular music in the two periods of concern, my research also presents a useful case study for understanding the social dynamics behind a transformative period of the concept of being modern in the history of the Turkish Republic. To achieve this goal, this research synthesizes results from a diverse range of academic disciplines.

There has indeed been a range of scholarly literature that analyzes the Arabesk phenomenon in late twentieth century Turkey from perspectives ranging from that of ethnomusicology, sociology, anthropology, political science, to that of historical studies. Among the secondary sources that have been conducive to my research, Orhan Tekelioğlu's chapter on the historical background of Turkish popular music has provided me with a fairly comprehensive overview regarding the Turkish

⁷Alev Çınar, *Modernity, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey: Body, Places, and Time* (Minneapolis, MN: the University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

⁸M. Şükrü Hanioglu, "the Historical Roots of Kemalism," in *Democracy, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey*, ed. Ahmet T. Kuru, et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 32-56.

⁹Çınar, *Modernity*, 1-32.

¹⁰Çınar, *Modernity*, 33-52.

state's music-related policies in the early Republic period.¹¹ Meral Özbek's work, *Popular Culture and Orhan Gencebay's Arabesk (Popüler Kültür ve Orhan Gencebay Arabeski)*, written in Turkish, builds on the theoretical premises of Marxist scholars including Marshall Berman and Stuart Hall to present a detailed study on the significance of Orhan Gencebay's Arabesk in relation to the changing dynamics of Turkish popular culture in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, Özbek's work also proves valuable for the full transcriptions of the interviews between the author and Orhan Gencebay himself recorded in its appendix. These transcriptions serve as one of the major primary sources I use for understanding the experiences and thoughts of Orhan Gencebay throughout his musical career.¹² Martin Stokes's *The Arabesk Debate: Music and Musicians in Modern Turkey*, is another insightful monograph that provides social and musical backgrounds of Arabesk for my research from the perspective of cultural studies, anthropology, as well as ethnomusicology. Stokes's participation in several Arabesk performances as well as his personal relationship with many early audiences of Arabesk enables him to present valuable and, indeed, authentic insights into the social and political dynamics behind the making of Arabesk as a popular musical genre.¹³ *The Republic of Love*, another monograph of Stokes, also contains a chapter where Gencebay's music and influence are presented as a case study for understanding the framework of "cultural intimacy" in the context of Turkish music.¹⁴

I Westernism, Turkism, and Statism: State Regulation on Turkish Music from 1923 to 1945

The two decades between 1923 and 1945 saw radical transformations taking place in various aspects of political and social life in what had become the Republic of Turkey. With the declaration of the republic on October 29th, 1923, the Republican People's Party (RPP) under the leadership of its charismatic leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk established a one-party regime in the country by drawing on the unassailable legitimacy it secured through military victories during the Turkish war of independence.¹⁵ During these formative years of the republic, the RPP leadership took advantage of its monopolizing position in the country's affairs to mobilize the population in implementing nationalist and modernization projects, many of which ranking among the most revolutionary of the Muslim world in the twentieth century.¹⁶ As Hanioglu points out, despite that Kemalism is often too vague to be considered a consistent political or social ideology, most of the "Kemalist" founding elites of the newly established republic shared in common a western-oriented positivism regarding modernity and thus a hostile attitude towards religions resulted from their belief in Western European model of secularism being a necessary precondition for progress towards modernity.¹⁷ Indeed, for Atatürk, Westernization and secularization were taken for granted as imperative steps towards modernity, civilization, and progress.¹⁸ With the aim of raising the Turkish nation to "the level of contemporary civilization (*Çağdaş medeniyet seviyesi*)", this leadership of the Turkish Republic brought about a host of reform projects with an overarching goal of westernizing and secularizing

¹¹Orhan Tekelioğlu, "The Rise of a Spontaneous Synthesis: the Historical Background of Turkish Popular Music," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 32:2, 194-215.

¹²Özbek, *Popüler*.

¹³Stokes, *Arabesk*.

¹⁴Stokes, *Republic*.

¹⁵Hale Yılmaz, *Becoming Turkish: Nationalist Reforms and Cultural Negotiations in Early Republican Turkey, 1923-1945* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2013), 1-21.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Hanioglu, "Historical".

¹⁸Çınar, *Modernity*, 1-32.

the newly established nation-state of the Turks through means of social engineering.¹⁹

Besides Westernism and secularism, Turkish nationalism is another major guiding ideology in RPP's modernization project. Çınar points out how an overarching component in the national narrative that RPP constructed and disseminated is indeed a contrast between the Turkish nation's glorious pre-Ottoman past and the degradation it suffered under the corrupted rule of the Ottoman state.²⁰ Thereby, RPP posited itself in this national-historical argument as a savior of the nation whose *raison d'être* was to bring back the ancient glory that the Turkish nation had lost but deserved to enjoy.²¹ Such a narrative lent authority to the RPP leadership, who made the construction of the Turkish national identity a political necessity. Indeed, among the most important components of Atatürk's modernization projects was the construction of a unified Turkish national identity in place of the original Ottoman national identity which was by nature multi-ethnic.²² The Republic of Turkey that RPP inherited from the defeated Ottoman state, though greatly diminished in size, provided the new leadership with a much more ethnically homogenous population for which Turkish nationalism became a feasible and reasonable choice for national identity construction. In the nationalist aspect of his reforms, Atatürk was greatly influenced by Ziya Gökalp, a prominent early proponent of Pan-Turkism (*Türkçülük*) and Turanism (*Turancılık*) during the late Ottoman period.²³ Atatürk largely adopted what Gökalp conveys in *Principles of Turkism* (*Türkçülüğün esasları*), one of his most renowned and influential books on his nationalist philosophy, as the guiding principles in determining the specifics of a presumably authentic Turkish national identity.²⁴ In *the Principles of Turkism*, Gökalp presents a modernist argument for a total Turkification of the Ottoman empire by imposing the Turkish language as well as various aspects of what he considers to be the Turkish culture on the entire Ottoman citizenry. The Westernist influence is strong in Gökalp's writings as he argues throughout the book for the wedding of Turkish culture and the contemporary civilization, by which he singularly means the Western culture, as the goal of the nationalist program that he envisioned.²⁵ Once actually implemented as the guiding principle of identity building, Gökalp's Turkism provides justification for often radical, and sometimes unsuccessful, social engineering policies.

In the first decades of the history of Turkish Republic, a Western-oriented modernism and a positivist Turkish nationalism combined to form the basis of all major social engineering policies that the RPP government pushed forward. The historical necessity of implementing these policies was seen as self-evident. Although reforms were not always made mandatory, the state, aided by his near monopolizing role in Turkish political and social discourses, put an effort in at least enforcing a certain degree of influence or control into aspects of life previously unregulated by the state. This is perhaps best exemplified by the regulation that the state imposed on Islam, where secularist ideals materialized as the establishment of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA) which directed all religious activities under the control of the secular state.²⁶ The Turkification project also extended into religious affairs where language use and national soundscape became a matter of concern. The Muslim call to prayer (*ezan*), recited five times a day in Arabic, is arguably the most characteristic in the soundscape of any Muslim city.²⁷ A 1932 edict of DRA, however, made it obligatory for all mosques in Turkey to change the recitation of the *ezan* to an official

¹⁹Yılmaz, *Becoming*, 1-21.

²⁰Çınar, *Modernity*, 138-167.

²¹Ibid.

²²Tekelioğlu, "The Rise".

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ziya Gökalp, *Türkçülüğün Esasları* (İstanbul: Bordo Siyah Klasik Yayınlar, 2006).

²⁶Çınar, *Modernity*, 1-32.

²⁷Scott L. Marcus, *Music in Egypt: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1-30.

version in the Turkish language where even Allah, the Arabic word for God used by Muslims all around the world, became substituted with the Pure-Turkish (*Öztürkçe*) word Tanrı.²⁸ Despite that this edict was later abolished due to popular aversion, it is very telling in terms of how the RPP leadership employed their understanding of modernity as an ideological tool in projecting power into spheres of social and cultural life previously unchecked by state authorities. Indeed, an essential component of the modernization project was for the state to establish a patrimonial control over all public affairs through modern means such as bureaucratization and categorizations.

In *the Principles of Turkism*, Gökalp includes his view on how modern Turkish music should progress in the section of “National Music” (*Ulusal Müzik*).²⁹ Here, typical of the Orientalist arguments he makes throughout the book, Gökalp takes it for granted a three way distinction between “Eastern music”, “Turkish folk music”, as well as “Western music” as the basis for envisioning the future of Turkish national music. According to Gökalp, the “Turkish folk music” represented by the various Anatolian musical traditions should represent the musical tradition that is authentically Turkish. With the “Eastern music” and “Western music”, while they can both be traced back to the monophonic musical traditions of the ancient Greeks, Gökalp argues that “Eastern music” preserved by the Arabs remained stagnant throughout the centuries while the “Western music”, seated in Europe, was “saved” from monotony through the invention of opera and the development of the system of harmony by European musicians. Hence, the “Eastern music” is “sick (*hasta*)” while the “Western music” represents the bright future that Turkish national music should be set to advance towards:³⁰

*Today, we are thus confronted with three kinds of music, Eastern, Western, and folk. I wonder which of them is our real national music? We have noted that Eastern music is both sick and non-national, whereas neither folk nor Western music is foreign to us since the first is the music of our culture and the second of our new civilization. I submit, therefore, that our national music will be born of a marriage between folk and western music*³¹

In conclusion, Gökalp decides that the “corrupted” Eastern music should be discarded while Turkish folk music and Western music should combine to fill the future national soundscape of the Turkish nation state. In terms of how this “marriage” can be practically realized, however, Gökalp only gives the very vague suggestion that Turkish musicians should take the many melodies (*ezgi*) that folk music supplies and try to harmonize them in the Western manner.³² Here, the Westernist outlook of Gökalp’s modernity also becomes obvious.

Despite the radical purist nationalist philosophy that he upholds, Gökalp, like the many young Turks who were his contemporaries, took it as a fundamental assumption that Modernity is a concrete direction intricately connected to Western models and experiences. As Tekelioglu argues, the musical reform that Gökalp proposed calls for a “West-East synthesis”, but one that is not at all symmetric for the Western and Eastern elements to be synthesized.³³ According to Gökalp, the wide range of melodies that Anatolian folk music provided did serve to demonstrate the musical wealth and genius of the Turkish nation. But it was also imperative that these traditional melodies be transformed according to the Western fashion so that they can truly represent the Turkish

²⁸Umut Azak, “Secularism in Turkey as a Nationalist Search for Vernacular Islam,” *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, no. 124(2008), 161-179.

²⁹Gökalp, *Türkçülüğün*, 191-192.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ziya Gökalp, *the Principles of Turkism*, translated from the Turkish and Annotated by Robert Deveyeux (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1968) 98-99; Gökalp, *Türkçülüğün*, 191-192.

³²Ibid.

³³Tekelioglu, “Rise”.

national music in the modern time. In other words, the order of “West” before “East” matters in this “West-East synthesis” as the West served as the perpetual model that is ahead of the current Turkish, or Eastern, music and which the Turkish musicians should endeavour to catch up with under the motivation of nationalism. This positivist view on Modernity and nationalism confirms to the view that the RPP leaders of the early Republic period predominantly held. In his speech made during the Turkish parliament’s 1934 sessions, Atatürk said:

*The measure of the change undergone by a nation is its capacity to absorb, and grasp, a change in music. The music which they are trying to get people to listen to today is not our music, so it can hardly fill the bill. We must not lose sight of this fact. What is required is to collect national expression that conveys fine thoughts and feelings, and without delay to put it to music following the most modern rules. Only thus can Turkish national music rise to take its place among the music of the world.*³⁴

Here, the influence from Gökalp’s model of a “West-East synthesis” in *the Principles of Turkism* is clear in the direction of reform pointed out by Atatürk as, by “following the most modern rules”, he specifically meant to transform Turkish music in accordance with the rules of Western music.

With this goal in mind, the RPP leadership devised reform projects to regulate music in Turkey. Despite that these policies are often overlooked by scholars of modern Turkish history, they can in fact well match the radicality of reforms implemented in other fields of Turkey’s social and cultural life in these decades. Seeing the Ottoman musical tradition as corrupted and outdated, the first rulers of the Republic were determined to break completely with the country’s Ottoman past in the cultural sphere that music belongs to, a fact testified by their outright rejection of any kind of alliance with the late Ottoman elites in promulgating their own musical reforms.³⁵ Therefore, the year 1926 saw the first instances that demonstrate the RPP leadership’s interest in extending their reforms and social engineering projects into the field of music with the closing down of the *Doğu Müziği Şubesi* (Oriental Music Section) in the *Darü l-Elhan*, the only official conservatoire-like institution from the late Ottoman period.³⁶ In the years to come, one of the most urgent goals of the Turkish leaders in terms of musical reforms is to encourage Turkish citizens to appreciate the polyphonic musical form that Gökalp identified as the foundational characteristic of the Western music, the music of the civilized world, that distinguishes it from the backward monophonic musical traditions of the East. Immediately after the aforementioned 1934 parliament sessions where Atatürk made his interest regarding musical reforms obvious, another meeting was held where eight prominent Turkish exponents of western music gathered to discuss possible reforms in quickly bringing in the transformations that Atatürk had desired. According to one of the participants, during the meeting, phone calls frequently came in from the Presidential Palace to inquire on how the music reforms were coming along. As a result of the pressure in this process, one of the participants actually suggested that all singing of monophonic music should be banned in Turkey.³⁷ While this radical proposal was never adopted, the attempt to monopolize on the control of the national soundscape did culminate with a national radio ban of Turkish music that lasted for twenty months after its announcement on November 3rd, 1934. Even after this ban was rescinded, the regulation on music was, according to Tekelioğlu, only substituted with a much more comprehensive system of control where a more systematic censorship was institutionalized to regulate what type of Turkish music was allowed to play on the radio or, later, on TV.³⁸

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

Parallel to this control over the national soundscape were adjustments in musical education. Western musical pieces were introduced into school curriculums and newly established conservatories started serious attempts to merge Turkish folk musical traditions with Western music. However, the policy of “West-East Synthesis” was met with indifference among the Turkish populace. During the period of radio ban against Turkish music, many Turkish people simply chose to tune in and listen to Arab radio stations playing Arab songs instead of getting used to the polyphonic style of Western music as the elites had wished.³⁹ The defiance of state control was widespread, but it nevertheless remained limited to the private sphere.⁴⁰ Regardless of this public reaction, the strict and systematic state regulation of music continued based on the same Westernist ideal throughout these decades. It was only when with Gencebay and the new music genre that he brought to the market that this official stance on modern Turkish music started to get seriously contested.

II “A Desire for Uncertainty”: the Subversive Arabesk of Orhan Gencebay

Up until he made up his mind to leave TRT, Orhan Gencebay’s musical education and career actually sounded like what Gökalp would consider an ideal musical life led by a Turkish musician. Gencebay came from the city of Samsun, a large industrial town on the central Black Sea coast, where Gencebay grew up receiving a musical education that encompassed not only Turkish art and folk music but also Western classical music. This education that combined Eastern and Western musical traditions did not come from any state-sponsored conservatories but was rather provided by Gencebay’s father and family friends. It continued after his family moved to Edirne and finally to Istanbul. There, Gencebay made his way into TRT, the state-affiliated organization where he initially became part of the modernization project of Turkish music that the state had been regulating since the 1920s.⁴¹ As mentioned in the introduction, Gencebay started his musical career at TRT. He had made his name first on the TRT in the early 1960s as a young saz virtuoso and he had also composed a number of pieces for well-known popular folk musicians outside the TRT’s ambit, such as Ahmet Sezgin, in the mid-1960s. Nevertheless, Gencebay soon left the TRT because he considered its patrimonial cultural policy too restrictive while opportunities seemed more attractive in the freer commercial market.⁴² In addition, dissatisfied with the state-sponsored Western-style folk and pop songs that national radio broadcasts offered, Gencebay conceived the idea of conducting his own experiments in music. From there, he started to deviate from the state’s guidance and entered the commercial market where he could eventually create a syncretic musical genre that draws from a more diverse range of both indigenous and foreign musical styles.⁴³ Despite the boycott imposed by all state-regulated media, Gencebay’s Arabesk survived and developed in the underground Gazinos (nightclubs), which, during this period, were often associated with the new class of enriched landowners from rural areas. Then, the new style was disseminated across urban centers of Turkey through the increasingly privatized media technologies of the mass culture.⁴⁴

The life story of Gencebay demonstrates how his creation of Arabesk itself marked an act of dissent against the already well-established structures and regulations that the state bolstered in

³⁹Kathryn Woodard, “Music Mediating Politics in Turkey: The Case of Ahmed Adnan Saygun”, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Volume 27, Number 3, 2007, pp. 552-562; Tekelioğlu, “Rise”.

⁴⁰Çınar, *Modernity*, 1-32.

⁴¹Stokes, *The Republic*, 73-106.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Yarar, “Politics”, 35-79.

⁴⁴Betül Yarar, “Arabesk: Looking at the History of Popular Meanings and Feelings in Turkey,” *Made in Turkey: Studies in Popular Music*, edited by Ali C. Gedik (Routledge, 2017), 179-191.

Turkish music. But what made the story possess subversive power lies in the fact that it is the life story of the first Arabesk master that is widely circulated in Turkey and one that Gencebay's fans can easily identify and empathize with.⁴⁵ Even before the turning point in life where Gencebay decided to leave TRT, the early experience and the musical education that he received already turned out to possess a potentially disruptive quality. As a musical style, Arabesk was associated by its critics with poor and uneducated migrants that entered big cities from the rural areas.⁴⁶ However, Samsun, the birthplace of Gencebay, was in its own way a thriving, modern, and cosmopolitan city. One of the Gencebay's fans that Stokes talked to during his field study specifically stressed how Gencebay's Black Sea roots, cosmopolitanism, education, and general cultural seriousness were among the factors that allowed him to enjoy Gencebay's arabesk while isolating himself from whatever stereotypes that the intelligentsia had created.⁴⁷ For this fan, the fact that there was something category-breaking in this background of Gencebay was constitutive of his appeal as a popular musician. This fan was definitely not alone in seeing in Gencebay's background this quality that could invalidate the categories set by elites to differentiate musicians of different registers, where equivalences were drawn between urbanness and Westernized modern music as well as between ruralness and music of Oriental quality.

Gencebay's fans have always seen him as an artist that is not only intelligent and cosmopolitan but also characterized by a consistent sense of self-sufficiency.⁴⁸ Oftentimes, these characteristics of Gencebay seemed self-evident just by his look. Gencebay's body was also a site which consistently displays the artist's modern outlook, one that rendered the categories that Westernist intellectuals established to stratify registers in Turkish music useless. As briefly mentioned above, in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, the dominant political elites of Turkey often assigned to generalize both the listeners and composers of Arabesk the image of a poor, uneducated, and, thus, uncivilized rural migrant. This was partially due to the fact that the rise of Arabesk was often associated with the waves of migrants that migrated from the countryside into urban areas, where they lived in what are called *gecekondus*, or houses set up quickly without permission.⁴⁹ For many Western-oriented Turks such as the Turkish friend of Stokes who voiced his distaste for Arabesk, these rural migrants, together with their musical taste, only represented what they conceived as the problem of provincials taking over and hindering Turkey's efforts to be Western, modern, and civilized.⁵⁰ Gencebay's birthplace Samsun was by no means a rural area. However, it might still be considered somehow representing the backwardness of Turkish small towns in Anatolia or the Black Sea region from the perspective of urban elites in larger cities such as Istanbul. However, Gencebay's elegant pose and civilized manner, impressively visible in his movies and music videos, were completely incompatible with the image of backward rural migrants that urban intellectuals associated with the genre. A girl that Stokes mentions saw in Gencebay's pictures the very definition of *poz* (pose).⁵¹ Typical of publicity shots of Turkish popular celebrities, Gencebay's publicity pictures presented his face brightly lit against a neutral background. In these pictures, Gencebay usually leans in slightly towards the camera and, with a faint smile and eyes focusing on somewhere behind the camera, engages the viewer suggestively with a contemplative expression. The clothes (often a leather jacket or a matching T-shirt and sweater combination) and the well-cut hair and mustache he appears with are no doubt in line with what was considered modern conventions. At the same time, they also suggested proletarian decency and a lack of pretentiousness.⁵² Gencebay's fans were

⁴⁵Stokes, *The Republic*, 76.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Stokes, *The Republic*, 77.

⁴⁹Stokes, *Arabesk*, 89-132.

⁵⁰Stokes, *The Republic*, 78.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid.

quite familiar with this iconography and would enjoy its subtlety in different pictures of the artist. And even critics of Gencebay, represented by Stokes' friend who disliked Arabesk, could not refute the fact that Gencebay always possessed an outstanding look and posture anywhere he appeared.⁵³ Therefore, Gencebay's civilized look and manner posed a powerful challenge to the association that elites forged between the musical genre of Arabesk and rural migrants that are uneducated and incompatible with modernity. In other words, the potential subversiveness of Gencebay was inscribed not only in his life story but also in his person itself.

Despite the name Arabesk, which gives emphasis only to the influence of Arab music on the genre, Gencebay's music is actually characterized by a great musical eclecticism. Gencebay's songs apparently drew upon influences not just from the Turkish folk music that he had extensive experience with or the monophonic Eastern music that Gökalp argues against, but also from Western popular music, Indian music, as well as his contemporary Egyptian art music. These musical traditions were all making inroads into the Turkish market despite the harsh regulations that the RRP administration imposed on the national soundscape during this period.⁵⁴ The Turkish audience had already been familiarized with these foreign musical styles since songs from these musical styles often featured in the soundtracks of imported movies and had been a source for curious Turkish musicians to imitate and learn from.⁵⁵ The introduction part to one of Gencebay's masterpieces *Nereden Bileceksin* (From where will you know) exemplifies this drawing together of different contemporary musical traditions. The intro part of the song starts with a sitar solo with darbuka marking the beats. Then, at the 23rd second, the electric guitar and violins come in to join the sitar and darbuka in forming the motif of the music. The Turkish lyrics conveyed by Gencebay's burning (*yanık*) voice later come in.⁵⁶ It is apparent that the part of Electric guitar marks the influence of Western popular music. The mesmerizing melody of violins reminds the song's audience with the melodic lines in the long songs of Umm Kulthum, the Egyptian diva active from the 1920s to the 1970s.⁵⁷ The darbuka/tabla features in many musical traditions from the Near East all the way to South Asia. And sitar undoubtedly represents the influence of Indian music on Gencebay's composition. In fact, there is a widely-circulated promotional postcard of Gencebay playing the sitar while surrounded by the traditional Turkish instrument of *Bağlama* (see Image 1).⁵⁸ The description for the YouTube video of *Nereden Bileceksin* also accounts a story that, regardless of its authenticity, publicly celebrates Gencebay's ability in playing the Indian instrument. The story states: "did you know that the first artist in Turkey to play the sitar given to him by the world-famous sitar virtuoso Ravi Shankar is Orhan Gencebay...[a]lso Orhan Gencebay is among the 5 or 6 sitar players in Turkey ...".⁵⁹

Gencebay personally objected to the idea that his music should be labeled "Arabesk" but rather preferred to call it "the free/flexible performance of Turkish Music (*Türk Müziğinin özgür icraası*)".⁶¹ Furthermore, he provided five different musical typologies to categorize what Turkish people know as Arabesk according to the dominance of influence, either from Turkish art music, folk music, Oriental or Western music. The five categories are (1) Turkish art music-oriented arabesk, (2) Turkish folk music-oriented arabesk, (3) Oriental music-oriented arabesk, (4) Western music-oriented arabesk and (5) in between (*Ortada*). Among these five variations, the one that Gencebay believed his own

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Stokes, *Arabesk*, 89-132.

⁵⁵Tekelioğlu, "Rise".

⁵⁶Sercan Karataş, "Orhan Gencebay - Nereden Bileceksin," Youtube video, 6:08, September 26th, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCdnA790PBE>.

⁵⁷Virginia Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian society in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 1-20.

⁵⁸Stokes, *Arabesk*, 96.

⁵⁹Karataş, "Orhan".

⁶¹Ibid.

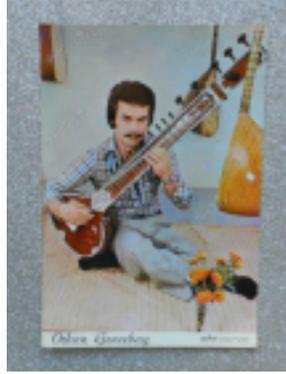


Image 1: a postcard with Gencebay playing the sitar⁶⁰

music should be identified with is the one called *Ortada*. It is this one in which the ambivalent or hybrid character of arabesk reached its highest, most mature, and most innovative form.⁶²

According to musicologist Karşıcı, accusation of Arabesk for being a corrupted and distorted form of music came from the elite circle and has provided a reason for state issued restrictions on the broadcasting of Arabesk since the establishment of the genre.⁶³ During his interview with Özbek and when asked of how he thought about the criticism that denounces his musical style as representing “corruption (*yozaşma*) and distortion (*çarpıklık*)” in Turkish music, Gencebay responded:

*“...I was surprised. I was surprised why they reacted like that. Because when I looked again, I said that I am definitely not doing anything low in musicality. On the other hand, I was performing much better than the existing folk and art music in terms of performance. I was surprised why they reacted like that, but not the people. The public showed great interest. Certain circles reacted. Its musicality is not inferior. As for the lyric structure, I would say that I wrote lyrics that are quite understandable, up-to-date (*güncel*), and that I believe everyone can love and empathize with (*duygulanabileceği...*).”⁶⁴*

As Gencebay pointed out tactfully in his own reflection, people from the elite circles, musicians and non-musicians alike, had an inherent distaste for the quality of Arabesk, one that, upon first encounter, gave them an impression of the Oriental music that Gökalp labels to be “sick” and uncivilized. However, while they falsely judged Arabesk to be low in its artistic register or as a corrupted imitation of Arab popular music, real fans of Gencebay knew and celebrated the fact that Gencebay is a musician who mastered the performance of instruments from various traditions and creatively brought about the synthesis that his Arabesk represented. Furthermore, Gencebay emphasized that the lyrics he wrote fully conform to the linguistic conventions of modern Turkish. This was an important point to raise because Atatürk’s linguistic reform had rid the Turkish language of the arcane Arabic and Persian loanwords.⁶⁵ Here, Gencebay’s remark further stressed the modernness of his composition by pointing out that the lyrics are by no means full of archaic Ottoman-Arabic words that had fallen out of use as some intellectuals might have assumed. Therefore, seeing his

⁶²Özbek, *Popüler*, 178.

⁶³Gülay Karşıcı, “Müzik Türlerine İdeolojik Yaklaşım: 1970-1990 Yılları Arasındaki TRT Sansürü,” *Folklor/Edebiyat*, Vol 16, Number 61, January, 2010, 169-178.

⁶⁴Özbek, *Popüler*, 239.

⁶⁵Yılmaz, *Becoming*, 139-178.

music as an innovation that conforms to the spirit of being modern, Gencebay was “surprised” upon learning the fact that his innovative and popular compositions were degraded and resisted by “certain circles”.

This conflict between Gencebay and the elites was not only a debate on the musical aspects of the new popular genre. Rather, it reflected the conflict between two competing visions on modernity in Turkish music that manifested itself and escalated quickly as Gencebay became among the most successful popular musicians in modern Turkish history. In terms of its musical quality, Arabesk was undoubtedly innovative. It also symbolized an attempt of synthesis, albeit one that differed from that desired by the founding elites of the republic in terms of how it weighed the various musical elements to be synthesized. In establishing a musical style with marked Eastern flavor and one that could be appreciated by the wider Turkish audience, Gencebay significantly subverted the Westernist elites’ ideal of a “West-East synthesis” by creating an alternative “East-West synthesis” with its Eastern elements being the major anchor point on which the synthesis is formulated.⁶⁶ This subversiveness was as much a product of modernity as the Westernist ideals upheld by the founding elites because, as made clear by Gencebay’s life story, the starting point of this subversion is Gencebay’s critical attitudes towards the restrictiveness of official music as well as a strong desire for change towards the musical better, a desire that he and his fans shared. Therefore, during his interview with Özbek, Gencebay made the following comments regarding the popularity that his music enjoyed:

“...If TRT and the people in its circle could find that thing which is or can be loved so intensely, whatever it is, or at least had said: We are the first to respect every idea that comes to us and our door is open to everyone who would contribute to Turkish music, or if they had said ‘let’s explore what we can do together’, if they had ever pondered upon such a thought, the so-called Arabesk style of music would not have been created. Because, as I said, Arabesk originated from a desire for variability/uncertainty (değişkenlik).”⁶⁷

Here, the great popularity of Arabesk was attributed by Gencebay to a widespread “desire for variability or uncertainty” among the consumers of music in Turkey as a response to the narrow-minded cultural policies that the state imposed. Arguably, the fact that Gencebay’s music became the first Turkish popular music in its literary sense marked the failure of the Westernist model of musical modernity that ruling elites had pushed forward since the establishment of the republic. Realizing the potential political repercussions of this subversion, the elites of the 1970s protested against, degraded, and tried to silence Arabesk music in an attempt to confront the challenge that the Arabesk phenomenon posed against their long-held Westernist orthodoxy.⁶⁸

III Conclusion

As founders of the Turkish Republic, the RPP officials under the leadership of Atatürk established firm control over various spheres of Turkish political and social life and imposed secularist, Westernist, and nationalist model of modernity, one that they firmly believed to be the only means through which the nation can progress to reach “the level of contemporary civilization”. The same guiding principle was also applied to the field of music as founding elites of the republic pushed forward their project of “West-East synthesis” according to Ziya Gökalp’s instructions, identifying Eastern music as inherently inferior and unsuited for modern nations and thus urging Turkish

⁶⁶Tekelioğlu, “Rise”.

⁶⁷Özbek, *Popüler*, 248.

⁶⁸Karşıcı, “Müzik”.

musicians to “uplift” Turkish folk and art music to the standard of Western classical music. In this process, the Western-oriented elites implemented a series of cultural policies such as the 1934 radio ban of Turkish music in the hope of fully transforming the musical taste of the Turkish public along Western lines. However, efforts in transforming people’s music tastes were mostly met with indifference, if not aversion, from most of the population. Many people started to tune into Arab radio stations or listen to soundtracks of Arab movies whose music they could readily enjoy.

Within this context, Orhan Gencebay’s Arabesk emerged in the late 1960s and immediately gained a popularity that was unprecedented in the history of modern Turkish music through the newly available technologies of the mass culture. In this paper, I argue that Gencebay and the Arabesk style he brought about were subversive to the official understanding of modernity in Turkish music, one that had dominated music-related discourses in Turkey since the late 1920s. 68 Karşıcı, “Müzik”. The subversion resulted first of all from the background and person of the artist himself as the widely known cosmopolitanism and cultured manner of the artist had a category-breaking effect by shattering the urban intellectual’s association between Arabesk and uneducated rural migrants. Furthermore, in terms of musicality, Gencebay’s Arabesk also provided an alternative model of modernity for Turkish music by reversing the fixed order in the official Westernist ideal of “West-East synthesis” and creating his own “East-West synthesis” where Western elements were to serve the Eastern fashion, instead of the other way around. The popularity that Gencebay and his music enjoyed reflected the seriousness of this subversion on the official modernization project in music. Consequently, the state responded by acerbically denouncing the new genre as corrupted and low in musically and banning the music on all official channels. However, as Arabesk became increasingly popular in Turkey, officials in the 1980s had to think of new ways to incorporate Arabesk into the narrative of Turkish modernity.⁶⁹

⁶⁹Stokes, *Arabesk*, 89-132.

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