

Ersoy Çak, Ş. (2019), *The republic of love: cultural intimacy in Turkish popular music (2010)*, Martin Stokes book review, *Rast Musicology Journal*, 7(2), s.2209-2212. Doi:<https://doi.org/10.12975/pp2209-2212>

The republic of love: cultural intimacy in Turkish popular music (2010), Martin Stokes book review

Şeyma Ersoy Çak*

Corresponding Author:

*Dr. Faculty Member, Faculty of Fine Arts, Design and Architecture, Department of Music, Turkish Music Main Art Branch.

After the interaction of Turkish maqam (tune) music elements with arabesque tunes and popular music types after 1960s, the combination of lyrics, composition and performance were moved to different dimensions and significant transformations in terms of music were experienced in the second half of the 20th century. In the music history of Turkey, each period, which can be separately categorized into 1960s, 1980s and 1990s, determined its own actors representing different musical elements it contains. From the recording technologies used in records, cassettes and CDs to composition techniques, and from preferred instruments and performing techniques to visual elements, musical periods fed from different sources emerged. Zeki Müren, Orhan Gencebay and Sezen Aksu, whom Martin Stokes masterfully chose to include in his book published in 2010 *The Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music (Aşk Cumhuriyeti: Türk Popüler Müziğinde Kültürel Mahrem)*¹ with their common characteristics of lyrics writer, composer and soloist, are among the important representatives of the mentioned periods. This abstract, written for the purpose of promoting the book, examines the conceptualization of these iconic artists selected as period representatives.

In Stoke's book, Zeki Müren, who started

¹ The Turkish version of the book was published in 2012 from Koç University publications.

his stage life between the years of 1950-85 as a Turkish music soloist at TRT Radio Institution and later became a popular icon with his records, as casino soloist and film actor, is examined through the concept of cultural intimacy in terms of his musical performance, pronunciation, sound as well as features such as 'queer nightclub star' representation and 'model citizen' following his demise. The book continues with another representative of the period, Orhan Gencebay, described by the author as the² 'inventor' of the arabesque music which is also the subject of his field study in Turkey, who started his music life in TRT as a young saz (Turkish musical instrument) master in the early 1960s. In addition to the narration of his life through his entering the market with his first song 'Bir Teselli Ver' (1969) (Give me a Consolation) and his gaining popularity by entering the movie sector, Gencebay's influence on the arabesque culture in Turkey is also examined. Another biographical narrative in the book is the section where the identity of Sezen Aksu, crowned as the 'diva of pop', as female songwriter, composer and soloist is emphasized and the view of the popular music world of the 1990s is conceptualized. Stokes associated these

² As a result of his field work in Turkey in 1980, the book that he wrote about the arabesque music and its representatives named *The Arabesque Debate: Music and Musicians in Modern Turkey* was published in 1992 with the title *The Arabesque Incident in Turkey* from İletişim publications.

names whom he examined through their fame and presence almost everywhere, though in representation, and through the analyses of their musical careers and musical works with cultural intimacy representing periodic changes within the context of popular music. By referring to modern Turkey, he also reviewed political and cultural transformations after 1950. Through these figures whom he reviewed within the framework of cultural intimacy which he conceptualized as ‘structuring of private sphere and individualism by the government and scrutinizing its effects on both the individual and the public’, Stokes emphasizes the significant role played by the popular culture disseminated by mass media and especially popular music in the continuity of public life in Turkey with a view to ensure to comprehend the reincarnation of popular music genres, their influence, identities, urbanization and macro-politic transformation from a historical perspective.

In the book where Zeki Müren is described as a “queer emotional person and model citizen”, his representation of gender as a figure that reflects remarkable transformations in the history of music was also examined. As the musical representative of the political transformation in the 1950s and in line with the description ‘he passed away as he lived: expressing an emotional irony unique to him in front of the public’, the ironic representation of his musical life was emphasized. The fantastic song composed by Sadettin Kaynak in Nihavend maqam and the lyrics written by Vecdi Bingöl “Menekşelendi Sular” and Müren’s performance were examined in terms of lyrics and music, and theoretical ideas regarding its different tunes and form of performance were developed. Müren’s attitude diverging from his early performance and directing towards arabesque was noted, and his highly emotional way of expression was decorated with theoretical approaches. The contrasts

which the ironic situation in his image as film actor and casino soloist and his being different in terms of gender representation sometimes created through these media were discussed, and various evaluations were made as the representative artist of the transformation that played a big role in the local circulation of emotional movies and music types which were identified with revolutionary politics.

In the period after 1970, in the background of modernization efforts of the Turkish Republic, Orhan Gencebay³’s life, one of the founders of arabesque, and his musical career were discussed. In his musical analysis of the song “Batsın Bu Dünya” (Let this world End) which plays a key role in understanding the political view underlying ‘Gencebay Arabesque’, Stokes states that this performance is appreciated in terms instrumental sound, rhythmic innovations and musicians’ skills while it is criticized from a vocal point of view. And he adds that in an interview with him, Gencebay described his music using such expressions as “free improvisations called arabesque”, “A common music culture in Turkey... a sense of freedom, living the day, carrying on the world.” Stokes argues that experimental trends and searching for modernity are persistently misunderstood and that national institutions such as TRT are not the only determiners of modernism in the Turkish music and that

³ Within the same period, he carried out other studies in which he included his evaluations regarding the popularization of Orhan Gencebay and the rise of the arabesque through the political situation in Turkey. The book written by the sociologist Meral Özbek named *Popular Culture and Orhan Gencebay Arabesque* is the first comprehensive book in this field, describing the arabesque culture, music and one of its most famous performers, Orhan Gencebay, in a socio-cultural context. Another book written by Caner Işık and Nuran Erol in 2002 with the name *The Meaning World of Arabesque, Müslüm Gürses Example* is one of the significant studies in this field examining this issue which is closely related to Turkish music history in 1990s and conveying another arabesque performer example.

cosmopolitanism is deeply rooted in the Turkish music culture and should be seen as a progressive power. He finally points out that the arabesque cannot be interpreted only with the popular religious inclination motivated by the official channels in the 1980s. Doing this, he draws attention to the fact that, based on the arguments that it has deeper and more humane roots, Gencebay has a tendency to own the dominant discourse of Turkish modernism in his expression in the infrastructure. How can search for modernity be made “Turkish” without resorting to violence (as was frequently experienced before)? How can this really be put forward as a democratic and popular demand? How can this search encompass the establishment of dialogue and cultural exchange between Turkey and its regional neighbors? To such questions, he responds that ‘Gencebay Project’ offered musical alternatives which found a basis in the popular media and popular historical experience and became public property. In his book, Stokes proposes that Gencebay helped establish a dialogue between Turkey’s elite and the people from different classes who came together for a little while in the 1980s and early the 1990, and he argues that Gencebay led to a radical change in questions related to hyper-liberalism, national belonging and civic values which occurred after the 1980 coup. He also states that while the public and private spheres created a new framework in this process, gender and sexual issues were once again brought to the fore. While he defines the rise of arabesque music as ‘the centralization of popular music genre named as arabesque based on the national sentimentality in the public and the reflection of this emotional intensity’, he points out that a singer and his songs, which turned into a social icon that interpreted the feelings of the masses in time and even marked the cultural flow within a structure that determined the expression of the people with his songs and works, changed and transformed according

to the reactions of his fans or the public in general.

The 1990s was a period of remarkable musical transformation when technology accelerated, the transition from tape cassettes to Compact Discs occurred and, with the establishment of private channels, the broadcasting of music videos for 24 hours a day appealed not only to the ears but also to the eyes of the audience. Stokes has tried to explain this process under the title ‘ Why do you cry? Sezen Aksu’s Diva Citizenship’ through Sezen Aksu as a female artist with her qualities such as composer, songwriter and performer. He discusses that modernity designed the political struggles by referring to imaginations and narratives that portrayed women’s bodies as scientists, pilots and intellectuals on the one hand, and on the other hand, positioned them with romantic love, love marriages and heterosexual narratives that supported the core family-centered order. Stokes evaluates Sezen Aksu’s strong position and being in the public forefront to be a result of intense political pressure experienced in the aftermath of the September 12, 1980 military coup, the austerity period and liberalism during the first years of Turgut Özal’s political term. He has made the musical analysis of the arrangement song on her first record named “Haydi Şansım / Gel Bana“ of 1975. In spite of the failure of this song in the year it was released, Stokes attributes the musical distinctiveness of Sezen Aksu who became the diva of pop music with her different musical sound in her successive records and arrangements with the Onno Tunç Orchestra in the 1980s to the harmony, counterpoint flows and characteristic instrument choices used in the arrangements. Sezen Aksu’s increasing success is attributed to the transformation in her voice, to the female songwriter Aysel Gürel’s intense and rich language in her songs such as ‘Firuze’, to the lyrics of the personal, intimate and with sad and fateful themes and subjects related

to women, which did not exist before 1980. Stokes considers Aksu's increasing sentimentality in her vocal performance as her desire to differ from the past. He points out that Aksu's vocals that became prominent in this new market image came into play with a new style of intimacy and a new style of sadness. He states that Sezen Aksu combined her vocal art with intimacy concerns in the execution of sexuality and gender and finalized it by expressing that rather than men, it was women as self-shaping mediators who desired Turkish modernity, narrated it, and consumed it at the very center. As a result of his study of iconic artists in the Turkish popular culture, Stokes expresses his criticism that Zeki Müren was directly responsible for the smearing of the classical tradition by the market, and he adds that apart from his political track in the early 1970s, Orhan Gencebay's sound that was transformed in the 1980s should be noticed and should not be despised. He narrates how the music of these artists including Sezen Aksu interacted with the views unique to Turkish people regarding nation, citizenship awareness and their place in the world and how these artists transformed the existing insights.