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SINGERS OR PHOTOGRAPHS? THE DISCIPLINED BODY IN TURKISH CLASSICAL MUSIC CHOIRS*

Gizem Nur COPÇUOĞLU ÖZYILDIZ**

Abstract

This article scrutinizes the limited and disciplined body movement within contemporary Turkish classical music choirs and ensembles, drawing insights from the author's ethnographic study in Istanbul. The goal of the article is to raise questions about the extent to which Turkish classical music singing is embodied and how external entities, beyond the singers themselves, contribute to shaping this embodiment. In order to demonstrate the variety of body language used by singers and investigate the fundamental causes of this controlled and restricted body movement, this article will examine the historical, sociomusical, and structural elements that contribute to this shared body language among Turkish classical music singers. Employing a participant-observer approach within the framework of autoethnographic research, the study investigates the bodily, psychological, and musical experiences encountered while singing in a choir. Interviews conducted with fellow choir members further illuminate their personal experiences. Findings indicate that, in addition to the inherent musical features—such as slow rhythmic cycles, elongated syllables, intricate lyrics, and melancholic makams—singers limit their bodily movements due to multiple influences, including socio-political efforts to restore and modernize the music of a post-imperial republic. To compensate for this physical restraint, they rely on facial expressions, subtle gestures, and most importantly, vocal expression.

Keywords: Singing, Turkish classical music, choir, embodiment, discipline.

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** *Doctoral Student, Istanbul Technical University, Center for Advanced Studies in Music (ITU MIAM), copcuoglu15@itu. edu.tr https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0942-6676*

Şarkıcı mı Fotoğraf mı? Klasik Türk Müziği Korolarındaki Disiplinli Beden

Özet

Bu makale, yazarın İstanbul'daki etnografik çalışmasından yararlanarak, çağdaş Türk klasik makam müziği koroları ve toplulukları içindeki sınırlı ve disiplinli beden hareketlerini derinlemesine incelemektedir. Makalenin temel amacı, Türk makam müziği şarkıcılığının ne ölçüde bedenselleştiği ve müziğin dışındaki etkenlerin bu bedenselleşmenin şekillenmesine nasıl katkıda bulunduğu hakkında önemli sorular ortaya atmaktır. Şarkıcılar tarafından kullanılan beden dilinin çeşitliliğini göstermek ve bu kısıtlı beden hareketinin temel nedenlerini araştırmak amacıyla, bu makale Türk makam müziği şarkıcıları arasındaki ortak beden diline katkıda bulunan tarihsel, sosyo-müzikal ve yapısal unsurları inceleyecektir. Otoetnografik araştırma çerçevesinde katılımcı-gözlemci yaklaşımını benimseyen bu çalışma, bir koroda şarkı söylerken karşılaşılan bedensel, psikolojik ve müzikal deneyimleri detaylı bir şekilde araştırmaktadır. Diğer koro üyeleriyle yapılan röportajlar, onların kişisel deneyimlerini ve bu deneyimlerin anlamlarını daha da aydınlatmaktadır. Bulgular, ağır usuller, uzun heceler, genellikle Osmanlı Türkçesiyle yazılmış sözler ve melankolik makamlar gibi müzikal özelliklerin yanı sıra, şarkıcıların, Osmanlı dönemi müziğini restore etme ve modernleştirme çabaları da dahil olmak üzere çeşitli etkenler nedeniyle beden hareketlerini sınırladığını göstermektedir. Bu fiziksel kısıtlamayı telafi etmek için, şarkıcılar yüz ifadelerine, küçük jestlere ve en önemlisi vokal ifadeye başvurmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Şarkı söyleme, koro, beden, disiplin, Klasik Türk Müziği

Introduction: A Parody of Turkish Classical Music Choirs

> *People must think we are photographs. How are we different from a photograph? Only our lips are moving. Sometimes I don't even move my lips. Who will notice me if I sing? Or even if I sing another song, who will notice? Another song? Whoa! That's a good idea!*
>
> *(Olacak O Kadar,* 2000)

Almost anyone who used to watch Turkish television in the 90s remember the satirical TV show called *Olacak O Kadar*[1], directed by Turkey's iconical comedian and impersonator Levent Kırca. Kırca satired Turkish classical music choirs in two episodes of the show, once in 1993 with a sketch called "Klasik Türk Musikisi Cemiyeti Korosu" (Hakan Ç, 2017), that is

"Turkish Classical Music Society Choir", and then in 2000 with "Yurttan Sesler Korosu" (SEMİH ÖNEN music, 2017), that is Voices from the Homeland Choir. In the first one, the sketch opens with a choir of 16 chorists-nine men and seven women-singing the song *Mümkün mü unutmak güzelim, neydi o akşam*[2] in the *Nihavend* makam. The women stand at the front with their hands clasped in front of their bellies, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and a long indigo skirt. Men in tuxedos are behind them on a platform, and their hands are not seen. In front of the choir, there is a conductor in a tuxedo, leading the choir by waving his hands. The neat appearance of the choir stands out with their uniform attire and attitude: Their bodies below their shoulders do not move, and their tightly clasped hands remain still. In fact, nothing moves from the shoulders down. They only move their mouths to sing, shake their heads to left and right, frown and sometimes squint, until we start to hear the internal monologue of one of the choristers: "We have been standing like this for hours." Levent Kırca, playing a senior choir member who has never sung a solo once, starts speaking to himself. After this point, we begin to witness the inner world of a choir member who stands still like a person in a photograph that has lost its liveness, and turned into a frozen memory, amidst the uniformity and monotony of a group. Not only his voice but also his body has become invisible in that uniform image. He tries to make his voice heard, and make his body seen by standing on his tiptoes or changing his place in the choir. Finally, he breaks through the chorus, throws himself forward and says, "Enough is enough, I'm going to sing a solo!" and starts singing a popular song. When he shouts and sings at the top of his lungs, his body language suddenly changes. He starts to spread his arms wide, swinging from side to side of the stage and even jumping up and down.

In the second sketch played in 2000, we hear the internal monologues of more than one choir member. Aşkın Nur Yengi, a famous pop singer who played in this sketch as a guest actress, says "Why on earth did they dress us up like this? I have beautiful shoulders to show". This time one of the choir members sings solo, and we see that he starts waving his hand. Nevertheless, as soon as he realizes, he grabs it with the other hand and lowers it. Levent Kırca, who is again in the role of a choir member, likens this ensemble, standing side by side

with minimal movements, to a bathroom pitcher (*gusülhane ibriği*) and a menemen's jug (*menemen testisi),* which are inanimate objects that do not move*.* Believing that there is no difference between them and a photograph, he finally finds the courage to stand out in the choir by singing another song in the choir. Ayşen Gruda, starring in this episode, complains that she hasn't been able to live her life so far for the sake of being ladylike and dignified. Lamenting that she missed the opportunity to become famous by blending in with the choir, she finally takes off her dress and shows up in her belly dancer dress by taking advantage of the chaos initiated by Kırca.

These parodies are nothing but a satire of the State Choir (*Devlet Korosu)* which was founded in 1975 and whose concerts were broadcast on TRT during the single-channel television years. The resemblance of the images below and the comments on Youtube support this view: "What a boring choir it was. It would go on for hours. There were no other channels to change to" (sonerhiroshima-nagasaki3246, 2019). "That's right. How many people listened to this program on TRT in the past, especially during the single-channel days? People would say there was nothing on TV and turn it off" (ural3805, 2022). "Today's young people don't understand the skit, but when we were kids, when the choir would come out, we would wonder what their inner voice was saying, it was a sketch just for us" (sajda2766, 2022). Although put in an exaggerated manner since they are parodies, these sketches could be considered as a noteworthy representation of Turkish classical music choirs as a disciplined and standardized organization.

I approach this article with a self-reflexive perspective, drawing on my experience as a vocal artist currently working in a state choir in İstanbul, Turkey. During my ethnographic field research, conducted as a participant observer in three different choirs, including my own, I became increasingly aware of a topic that had previously escaped my consideration: the body. Although singing is inherently a physical act, observations revealed a noticeable lack of bodily comfort among choir members. Further exploration into this subject revealed that existing studies on Turkish music choirs have not sufficiently addressed the issue of the body. Consequently, this article scrutinizes the limited and disciplined body movement within

contemporary Turkish classical music choirs, drawing insights from my ethnographic study in Istanbul. By delving into the historical, sociomusical, and structural factors contributing to this shared body language among Turkish classical music singers, I aim to present the diverse ways choristers use their bodies and explore the underlying reasons for this disciplined and limited body movement. Throughout this article, my goal is to raise questions about the extent to which Turkish classical music singing is embodied and how external entities, beyond the singers themselves, contribute to shaping this embodiment. I have chosen to begin this article with the *Olacak O Kadar* sketch because this parody by Levent Kırca effectively encapsulates, in a striking five-minute format, a topic that would typically require extensive elaboration across numerous academic pages.

Figure 1. State Turkish Classical Music Choir conducted by Nevzat Atlığ (Nevzat Atlığ, 2014).

Figure 2. A scene from the sketch "Klasik Türk Musikisi Cemiyeti Korosu" in the TV Show *Olacak O Kadar* (Hakan Ç, 2017).

Is Turkish classical music a choral music? A brief history

One of the longstanding debates surrounding Turkish classical music revolves around its suitability for choral performance. Rather than proposing a definitive answer, this paper reflects on this question through a historical lens, examining whether the music itself or

external factors like Westernization contributed to the development of a more disciplined, choir-based performance practice in Turkish classical music, or both.

Turkish classical music, with its unique modal system, is deeply intertwined with Ottoman culture and was performed in diverse settings ranging from the Sultan's palace to public arenas such as coffeehouses, dervish lodges, and religious ceremonies (Popescu-Judetz, 2000, p. 21). Its rich repertoire reflects both religious and secular traditions. Oransay (1983) classifies Turkish classical music into two main categories: religious music, encompassing mosque and *tekke* (Sufi lodge) music, and secular music, including the courtly *fasıl* (classical suite), the military mehter (Ottoman janissary band), and urban entertainment music (p. 1496). Religious music, especially that performed in Sufi lodges, significantly influenced the development of Turkish classical music. Collective singing, in particular, became an essential element of religious practice in these settings, where prominent composers were often also Sufi practitioners who received both spiritual and musical training (Çetinkaya, 1999, p. 50).

Secular music in the form of the fasıl ensemble also played an important role in shaping Turkish classical music. The term fasıl refers to both a suite of compositions organized according to rhythmic and melodic principles, and the ensemble performing these compositions. Fasıl performances were typically led by a *serhânende*, a lead singer who guided the ensemble and played a rhythmic role. The serhanende sits among the performers, and he has multiple roles: Directing the ensemble, playing the rhythm, singing together with the ensemble, and singing a solo *gazel*. The fasıl, often performed in enclosed spaces, was also executed in open areas during festivities under the name of 'meydan faslı' (open-air fasıl). During the Ottoman era, both within the palace and outside, there were fasıl ensembles known as "*küme faslı*" (cluster fasıl literally), consisting of a large ensemble of voices and instruments. The performance style of küme faslı was characterized by the harmonious collaboration of vocalists and instrumentalists, maintaining a unified rhythm through the beats struck by percussion instruments. These ensembles, rich in musical instruments, varied in size, with examples ranging from twelve members during the reign of Sultan Murad IV to fifty to sixty members in the era of Sultan Selim III. Even larger ensembles, involving

around 80-100 artists, were organized for special occasions, such as the circumcision ceremony of Sultan Ahmed III's sons, under the direction of the composer Enfî Hasan Ağa. (Özkan, 1995). This wide array of sizes demonstrates the flexibility inherent in Turkish classical music's performance practice, which suggests that collective singing has always been always a natural part of this tradition.

In the 19th century, a distinctive ensemble emerged known as *incesaz*[3], which differed from larger ensembles like küme fasıls. İncesaz ensembles focused on songs composed in small rhythmic patterns, especially in slow and odd meters (*aksak*). Directed by a serhanende again, incesaz ensembles featured fewer members than küme fasıls (Yıldırım, 2011, p. 138). Additionally, as Özkan (1995) states, during the Ottoman era, there were "kaba saz"[4] ensembles that compiled and presented compositions derived from various popular tastes in a distinct style. These ensembles performed music forms known as "*köçekçe*"[5] and "*tavşanca*," and played dance tunes.

By the late 19th century, fasıl performances had evolved into two distinct categories: *Fasl-ı Atik* (The Old Fasıl) and *Fasl-ı Cedid* (The New Fasıl). While the former adhered to more traditional instruments and structures, the latter incorporated Western instruments and began harmonizing songs, marking the early influence of Western musical practices on Turkish classical music. A significant turning point came with the arrival of Giuseppe Donizetti Pasha in 1828, who introduced Western music genres and the concept of a Western-style choir to the Ottoman court (Aksoy, 1994). The *Mızıka-i Hümayun*, an imperial band established by Donizetti, replaced the traditional *Mehterhane-i Hümayun* (the Ottoman military band), and Western harmony and orchestration gradually entered the Ottoman musical landscape.

This Westernization process accelerated further toward the end of the 19th century and into the early 20th century, influencing the development of Turkish music in profound ways. Although Western-style choirs had not been a central feature of traditional Turkish music,

collective singing was already well-established, as evidenced by the large *küme fasıl*s that could include 20 to 60 members. The introduction of Western-style choral conducting to Turkish classical music is closely associated with the figure of Santuri Miralay Hilmi Bey, who led the Fasl-ı Cedid ensemble within the Mızıka-i Hümayun (Yıldırım, 2011, p. 139). His leadership marked a transition in how Turkish music ensembles were conducted, influenced by Western choral practices. The period between the late 19th century and the early 20th century saw a dramatic increase in the number of choirs and public concerts, establishing a modern choral tradition in Turkish classical music. Despite the rise of Western methods, the tradition of collective singing in Turkish classical music continued, reflecting a blend of influences.

The 20th century witnessed further modernization efforts that helped shape contemporary choral practices in Turkish classical music. Mesut Cemil, a pivotal figure in Turkish music, founded the *Tarihî Türk Mûsikî Ünison Erkekler Korosu* (Historical Turkish Music Unison Men's Chorus) at Ankara Radio in 1937 (Yıldırım, 2011, p.139). This choir marked the first structured attempt to introduce Western choral discipline to Turkish classical music on a national scale. Modeled after Western music choirs, this ensemble was a groundbreaking development in the performance of Turkish classical music. Mesut Cemil's innovations emphasized the importance of unity among singers, advocating for unison singing that contrasted with the earlier heterophonic performances (Elitaş, 2019, p. 7). His efforts aimed to reinvigorate a musical tradition he felt was in decline and gradually forgotten (Kıyak, 2018: 33).

Further institutionalization of choral performance in Turkish classical music came in the 1970s, with the Turkish Ministry of Culture establishing the *İstanbul Devlet Klasik Türk Müziği Korosu* (Istanbul State Turkish Classical Music Choir) in 1975 under the direction of Nevzat Atlığ (Doğruöz, 2018, p. 76). This choir represents the culmination of over a century of gradual adaptation of Turkish classical music to large-scale choir performance. Other state choirs and ensembles followed Devlet Korosu, such as *İzmir Devlet Klasik Türk Müziği Korosu* founded in 1985, *Ankara Devlet Klasik Türk Müziği Korosu* in 1986, İstanbul Devlet Türk

Müziği Topluluğu in 1987, and İstanbul Tarihi Türk Müziği Topluluğu in 1991. Today there are 13 choirs and ensembles affiliated with the General Directorate of Fine Arts under the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism (Güzel Sanatlar Genel Müdürlüğü, n.d.). Located in İstanbul, Ankara, Bursa, İzmir, Edirne, Diyarbakır, Elazığ, and Samsun, these choirs and ensembles continue to play an essential role in maintaining the tradition of Turkish classical music and introducing it to new generations of listeners.

In conclusion, Turkish classical music has a long-standing tradition of collective singing, from religious settings in Sufi lodges to secular fasıl performances at the Ottoman court. The introduction of Western-style choirs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries represented a significant shift in performance practice but did not erase the earlier forms of collective singing that had been integral to Turkish music. The debate over whether Turkish classical music is suited for choirs remains open to interpretation, but the historical evidence suggests that both small and large ensembles have long played a crucial role in its performance tradition.

Gesture and Movement in Turkish Classical Music Group Singing: Case Study

We know there are numerous ways to engage in music-making, whether by playing an instrument, creating rhythmic patterns by striking a pot, whistling, generating sounds from everyday objects, producing electronic music, or utilizing artificial intelligence, which has become highly popular these days. The majority of these musical practices are inherently physical and embodied activities. Singing, however, represents an activity that is uniquely grounded in the body, often emerging without the need for an external instrument. While one might initially think that singing solely involves specific parts of the body such as the vocal cords, oral cavity, diaphragm, and lungs, it is, in fact, a holistic activity that engages the entire body. Moreover, much like other forms of musical activity, it is a profoundly cognitive process. Rather than maintaining a body-mind duality, we can understand singing as a unified phenomenon that integrates both physical and mental dimensions.

Traditional training practices in Turkish classical music, known as *meşk*, emphasize the embodied nature of vocal performance. Instructional sessions are designed to integrate rhythm and vocalization through a technique called "usul vurmak", which translates to "striking the *usul*." The term usul refers to the rhythmic cycles in Turkish classical music. During lessons, the instructor demonstrates the *usul* by rhythmically striking their knees while vocalizing, with each strike corresponding to a specific pattern and bearing distinct names such as "Dü-üm te-ke dü-üm te-ek." Students are required to follow a sequential approach when learning new pieces: first, practicing the rhythmic patterns; then, performing the song with its lyrics while maintaining the usul. This traditional method is still applied in modern settings of Turkish classical music training, such as conservatories or private lessons. In these modern practices, students perform solfège while striking the usul at the same time. However, the embodied approach is largely confined to the instructional context. During modern stage performances, the physical act of striking the usul is typically omitted in favor of a more formal and static presentation style.

This difference in body engagement between the traditional training process and professional performance settings in Turkish classical music has become one of the key topics of this research. Through the participant-observer method employed in autoethnographic research, closer attention was given to the bodily, psychological, and musical experiences encountered while singing in a choir. Interviews with fellow choir members provided insights into their experiences. Additionally, video recordings captured during rehearsals and concerts facilitated a detailed analysis and interpretation of bodily movements. This section presents observations obtained from studies conducted in a state ensemble, the İstanbul Devlet Türk Müziği Araştırma ve Uygulama Topluluğu (İstanbul State Choir for the Research and Performance of Turkish Music), where I work as a singer.

The ensemble was founded in 2008 by Murat Salim Tokaç, a renowned neyzen and tanbur artist, with the aim of performing and recording Turkish music in its traditional form to leave an archive for the future generations. As the name indicates, İDTMAUT is not a choir but an ensemble, and since its establishment, it has generally consisted of 8 vocal artists, 4 women

and 4 men, distinguishing itself among state choirs[6]. The reason for this distinction is the ensemble's dedication to the tradition-bound principle of performance and its desire to showcase the nuances and unique styles of the artists more clearly, using a small number of artists trained by similar teachers in similar styles and with similar vocal ranges (Interview with Osman Kırklıkçı, 4 January 2023). As for the instruments, the ensemble features traditional instruments including tanbur, ney, kemençe, kanun, ud, daire, bendir, kudüm, as well as a cello. Another feature that makes İDTMAUT different from many of the state choirs is that it has no conductor in a Western sense, but an artistic director, who determines the repertoire, arranges the pieces, and leads the rehearsals. All the artistic directors of İDMAUT have had a common characteristic: They perform at the same time when they lead the choir. The first art director and founder of the ensemble, Tokaç, did not conduct the group in a Western style, standing on a raised podium with a baton in hand. Instead, he conducted using his gestures while simultaneously playing his tanbur at one end of the stage, alongside the other instrumentalists. The choir had to look at Tokaç, particularly at the beginning and end of the pieces. However, this was not as frequent as in a classical Western choir, since the conductor was often engaged with his instrument. The following artistic director was one of the vocalists of the ensemble, only led the rehearsals, and continued to be one of the choristers during the concerts. Today, the artistic director of the ensemble, Osman Kırklıkçı is also an oud player, and he is seated in the center during the concert, with his back turned to the choir, just like the other instrumentalists.[7] As a result, there is no direct eye contact between the choir and the conductor. Instead, the choir relies on visual cues from the percussionist or his *zahme* to begin the piece. Positioned at the far right of the choir, the percussionist raises the zahme or nods to signal the start of the singing. Beyond this initial cue, choristers typically focus on their sheet music or the audience. The unique conducting style practiced in the İDTMAUT plays a significant role in shaping the choir's visual focus. Choristers are not required to maintain constant eye contact with the artistic director, and, in fact, are unable to do so under the current circumstances. Thus, it could be argued that the choristers' gaze is less constrained compared to that of most choirs, allowing for greater freedom in visual focus.

İDTMAUT vocalists are distinguished from many other state choristers by the fact that they sit while they sing together. This stylistic choice has been adopted by the artistic director since the ensemble's inception, aligning with the objective of maintaining performance traditions. The smaller size of the ensemble reduces the spatial requirements on stage, thereby eliminating the necessity for standing. Although this practice may appear problematic from a vocal technique standpoint, performing lengthy and physically demanding classical suites—comprising *peşrev, kâr*, one or two *beste*s, one or two *ağır semai*s, *yürük semai*, and *saz semai*—while seated is more comfortable for the singers. Particularly in concert performances, it is notable that the ensemble's singers sit in an upright posture, typically resting their hands either in their laps or on one leg, presenting a dignified and composed appearance. The manner of hand placement varies between genders. Male singers often clasp their hands between their legs or rest each hand on a separate leg, while there are female singers who place their hands gracefully atop one another on a single leg.

To analyze the body movements, gestures, and facial expressions of the vocalists of İDTMAUT during group performances, it would be more appropriate to differentiate between rehearsals and concert performances. Beginning with rehearsals, they take place on the third floor of Üsküdar Tekel Deposu (Üsküdar Tobacco Warehouse), a historical building, in a room designed as a studio. Rehearsals start at 12:00 PM[8], and it has been observed that the vocalists do not engage in any physical preparations, such as vocal warm-ups or body stretching exercises, prior to the rehearsal. The vocalists and instrumentalists are seated in two rows along the sides of the room, facing each other. The percussionists are positioned in the middle, between the vocalists and instrumentalists, at the far end of the room. Female vocalists sit next to other female vocalists, and male vocalists sit next to other male vocalists. Since the vocalists are not seated in a semicircle, they have some difficulty seeing each other during rehearsals. As the instrumentalists are seated directly across from them, the vocalists tend to make more eye contact with them during the performance. It is quite common for vocalists and instrumentalists to exchange glances, smile at each other, and occasionally say something to one another during the performance. Communication among the vocalists, however, occurs more frequently between pieces due to the seating arrangement.

The choirs and ensembles affiliated with the Directorate General of Fine Arts are required to perform a specified number of concerts each month, typically ranging from three to four, though this number may increase with additional assignments. These performances are expected to feature distinct repertoires and themes, avoiding repetition. As previously emphasized, İDTMAUT is dedicated to the mission of preserving a musical archive for future generations by performing and recording works that have neither been previously performed nor recorded. Therefore, for ensemble performances, as opposed to solo concerts, classical repertoires are predominantly selected. Each concert necessitates a distinct repertoire, often consisting of works that have not been previously performed, and which are compiled through research in historical manuscripts. This process requires the performers to learn, decode, and rehearse these pieces from the very beginning, bringing them to performance level within a constrained timeframe. Consequently, this increases the performers' reliance on the musical score during rehearsals, thereby limiting their physical movements and restricting eye contact.

It can be posited that the vocalists exhibit greater physical comfort during rehearsals than on stage. Throughout the fieldwork, it has been seen that the singers predominantly rest their hands in their laps, often clasping them. Notably, there is increased upper body movement among the singers, including stretching, clasping hands behind their backs, adjusting their hair, and playing with their fingers, in comparison to their behavior during performances. Additionally, some singers occasionally tap their feet or kept tempo by tapping their hands on their thighs. However, almost all the singers sing in an upright posture for the ease of vocalization. In rehearsals, hand gestures typically employed to enhance musical or verbal expression during performances are noticeably less frequent. The head appear to be the most mobile part of the body while singing, with a significant degree of synchronicity observed in the head movements of the singers. It could be argued that there is an alignment between the melodic direction and the corresponding body movements. For example, when vocalizing a rising scale that culminates in a high pitch, the singers' upper bodies, particularly their heads,

tend to move slightly upward. In addition, some of the singers lean both forward and backward simultaneously during crescendo & decrescendos in the notation

A close examination of the singers' facial expressions indicates that frowning is the most characteristic expression observed. This solemn and melancholic demeanor may be attributed to the intrinsic qualities of the music. Many compositions in Turkish classical music possess an inherently melancholic nature, both in melody and lyrics, prioritizing artistic expression over entertainment. Larger forms, such as *beste*, are structured with expansive usuls, which can extend to 120/4, requiring performances at slower tempos that reduce dynamism. Additionally, the complexity of these pieces, characterized by intricate ornamentation and a wide vocal range that spans both low and high pitches, further complicates performance. Another significant factor is the tuning, which presents a complex issue within Turkish classical music. To achieve a balance between female and male voices, İDTMAUT employs the register known as *müstahsen* (explanation), situated between the *kız* and *sipürde* registers, the former being too low for male voices and the latter too high for female voices. However, this register varies according to the makam and repertoire, meaning that subsequent concerts may occur in different registers. This variability poses one of the main challenges of performing Turkish classical music, as frequent changes in tuning can lead to discomfort in the vocal cords, which may be reflected in the singers' facial expressions.

In addition to observation and documentation through video recordings, interviews were also conducted with the participants. These interviews indicate that the body practices of the ensemble singers differ among them. During discussions regarding bodily awareness, one ensemble member remarked:

> "I am conscious of my seating posture during rehearsals, particularly because the instrumentalists are positioned directly opposite us. I make an effort to avoid spreading my legs excessively to ensure I do not discomfort the person seated across from me. I am uncertain whether this consideration influences the musical performance, yet I acknowledge that attention to one's posture is often motivated by aesthetic concerns" (Respondent-1, personal interview, 10 November 2022).

In another interview, one ensemble singer said:

> "When I sit, I sing very comfortably because I can more easily control the flow of my breath. I feel it in my waist area rather than in my throat or nose. It also reflects in my movements. My hands and arms definitely move; I can't just stand still like a log. (…) When I sing, I use my entire body, from the tips of my nails to the roots of my hair, I use everything. That's why I do an exercise starting from the bottom, waking up my whole body from my toes. It prepares you, relaxes you, and also energizes you. It says, 'I'll use my knees too, my throat, my ears—you're with me" (Respondent-2, personal interview, 2 May 2023).

As previously mentioned, this study has an autoethnographic aspect, and in each choir where the fieldwork was conducted, the author's experiences have also been examined. As a vocal artist of İDTMAUT, I had never paid attention to what was happening in my body, nor had I reflected on this topic until I began my fieldwork. When reviewing video recordings, I noticed that I was furrowing my brow and did not appear to be very comfortable. As the focus on my body increased, I began to observe what was happening in different parts of it. Looking at my notes, it became evident that my body was often not at ease:

> "We had two full rehearsals and sang all the lyrics. Since we were singing in *kız* register, my throat hurt in the lower registers. The vocalist next to me also said her throat was hurting. There are some high *Hüseyni* notes in the upper registers. Towards the end, I really struggled. My blood pressure dropped, I got hungry, and I started feeling sleepy. I even yawned while singing, which never happens normally. I felt numbness and tingling around my mouth, jaw, nose, and the tip of my tongue. I got pain in my eye, which also never happens. I could barely keep my eyes open. I was scared something was going to happen" (Field notes).

Although proper diaphragmatic breathing while singing has always been a focus, this fieldwork revealed that it alone is not sufficient. Attempting to perform highly demanding classical pieces—characterized by few breath pauses, long syllables, and numerous high-pitched notes—without adequately preparing and relaxing the body over extended periods leads to various side effects. These effects have been observed not only personally, but also in those around me, as noted in comments received after rehearsals. In another fieldnote, it was written, "Makams like Saba or *Sünbüle* put a person into a certain mood. For example, singing a *Kürdilihicazkâr* fasıl would be more cheerful and lively, but with these makams,

there's a seriousness, a kind of melancholy that seems to settle on a person's face." In compositions familiar to all, with themes such as enjoying life, the beauty of a lover, leisure, and drinking, ensemble members tend to sing with more smiles, engage in greater eye contact, and demonstrate freer use of their hands.

Regarding the concerts of İDTMAUT, as previously mentioned, the seating arrangement in most ensemble performances mirrors that of the rehearsals. The positions of the vocalists remain the same as in the rehearsal setting. However, the instrumentalists typically sit in a slight semicircle in front of the vocalists, with their backs turned towards them, making it difficult to establish eye contact with most of the instrumentalists. Depending on the concert hall and the sound system, the arrangement is made such that either each vocalist has a microphone and a music stand, or one is shared between two vocalists. In cases where the music stand and microphone are not positioned between two vocalists, a large portion of the vocalist's upper body, up to the head, is obscured by the music stand and microphone. This situation prevents the audience from fully viewing the bodies of the performers. When discussing the bodily movements of the performers, it is evident that singing while seated on a chair primarily involves movement of the upper body. A significant point is that gestures and facial expressions, such as waving, are employed more frequently in concerts compared to rehearsals. This can be attributed to the effort to establish communication with the audience and to reinforce the emotions conveyed by the song through body language. Notably, the artistic director has frequently emphasized the importance of this aspect during rehearsals. In an interview, he articulated the following:

> "Since the lyrics belong to Divan literature or are attributed to a particular poet, we have the responsibility to convey the emotions that the poet experienced musically to the audience. When a performer engages with the artistic dimension of the music alongside its meaning, this is expressed physically. They demonstrate it through their facial expressions and gestures, allowing the audience to understand the affection the performer feels for the particular phrase and makam at that moment. A performer communicates their satisfaction through body language, making it evident to the audience" (Osman Kırklıkçı, personal interview, 4 January 2023).

A recent topic highlighted by the artistic director is the serious expressions of artists during their performances. He reminds the artists of the importance of presenting themselves with smiling faces rather than serious expressions and furrowed brows before the concert, underscoring its significance for the audience on numerous occasions. The effective use of gestures and facial expressions during the concert is directly proportional to the performers' command over the pieces being executed. When a piece is rehearsed within a limited timeframe and cannot be memorized—particularly when it involves unfamiliar works that have not previously been performed and lack familiarity—the focus tends to remain on the notation, resulting in gestures and expressions being relegated to the background. However, it can be observed that on stage, vocal artists often adopt a role, paying greater attention to their posture and presentation, and making a concerted effort to employ established gestures and expressions.

The physical posture and body movements of classical performers on stage can generally be described as follows: an artist standing before a fixed microphone, with minimal or no movement in the lower body (legs and hips), relatively more movement in the upper body, and hands and head moving in accordance with the rhythm and melodic progression of the piece. These movements are largely minimal, with careful attention given to ensuring that they do not dominate the stage or overshadow the music. One of the most used gestures is the act of waving. In İDTMAUT concerts, where vocalists are seated and anchored to their chairs on stage, bodily expression is conveyed through subtle hand movements. At times, both hands are lifted and opened, while at other times, a single hand moves in sync with the rhythm of the piece, the length of the note being sung, or the direction of the melody. Since the tempo of the pieces is generally slow and the compositions often melismatic, hand movements also tend to be slow. For instance, when reaching high pitches, this ascent in the voice is manifested through the upward movement of the hand, or when there is a cry, call, or exclamation in the lyrics, the artist raises their hand to embody the musical expression physically.

It is crucial to note that there are instances where artists appear to perform identical gestures as if predetermined. To explore the connection between these movements and melodic progressions, a gesture analysis methodology has been employed. For instance, the analysis of the *Şedaraban* classical suite concert performed by İDTMAUT on April 3, 2023 showed that in a section of the *Yürük Semai*, which is a composition form, some vocalists moved their heads in a manner that corresponded to the musical notes as the melody ascended stepwise from *yegâh* (re) to *dügâh* (la), While their heads were slightly inclined downwards at yegâh, as the melody rose towards dügâh, the movement of their heads also followed an upward trajectory. [9]

Figure 3. Gesture transcription of İDTMAUT singers in an ascending melody in Sultaniyegah Yürük Semai.

As another example, during the Hüseyni classical ensemble concert on March 13, 2023, the vocalists moved their heads three times in a manner that corresponded to the musical note in a triolet section of the Yürük Semai.[10]

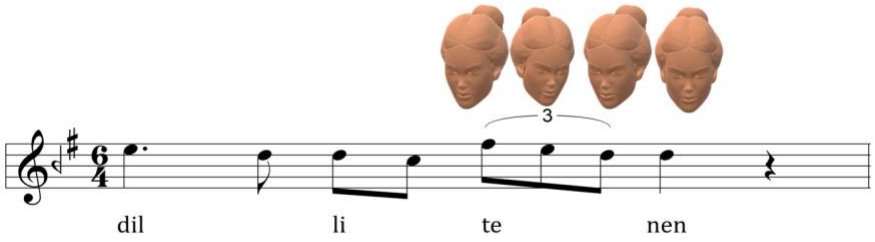

Figure 4. Gesture transcription of İDTMAUT singers in a triolet in Hüseyni Yürük Semai, 13 March 2023.

In summary, it can be argued that the ensemble singers compensate for their restricted bodily movements through vocal expression, facial expressions, and subtle gestures, thereby enriching the emotional depth and communicative power of their performances.

The Disciplined Body

While conducting field research on Turkish music choirs, it quickly became apparent that being deeply immersed in the field made it challenging to adopt an external perspective and identify anything particularly noteworthy. As a result, it seemed beneficial to examine choirs from other musical traditions around the world. To this end, I attended a concert during the World Choral Music Symposium, organized by the International Federation for Choral Music between April 25-30, 2023, in Istanbul. The performance by the Taipei Philharmonic Chamber Choir was structurally quite different from any Turkish classical music choir that have been seen so far. The positions of the choir members shifted with each song; in some pieces, they swayed and danced, while in others, they stomped their feet to produce sound. Additionally, when a member performed a solo, they would walk slowly to the front of the stage while singing and then return to their position in the same manner once the solo ended. Although the body was not entirely free in this choir, where everyone moved in predetermined, synchronized motions, it was far more active than the Turkish music choirs previously observed.

Later, the VoiceUp A Cappella Festival took place from August 22-27, 2023, where I joined a workshop led by Panda van Proosdij. She specializes in a method called Voice & Physique, which combines dance and music to create "choireography" for choirs. This method, aimed at enhancing vocal support and the quality of singing through physical awareness, is based on three key components: energy, concentration, and focus. In her choir rehearsals that begin with at least an hour of physical exercises focusing on these three elements, the choir member not only engages with their own body while singing but also interacts and makes contact with the bodies of other members. When it comes to the musical section, choir members learn dance movements—choireography—that reflect the emotion of the song and strengthen its

expression. This experience was undoubtedly eye-opening for someone performing music from a deeply classical tradition. Panda van Proosdij's words, in which she explained that singing is a form of sport and that singing without preparation, relaxation, and comfortable body use on stage would be exhausting, were particularly striking. It raised the question: Why do Turkish classical music choirs not even perform vocal warm-up exercises? And why do the majority of them adopt a uniform, motionless, and static choir posture?

Before addressing the external factors that contribute to uniformity and constrained bodily movements, it is essential to examine the influence of the intrinsic characteristics of the music itself. Primarily, the music that the İDTMAUT specializes in and has concentrated its repertoire upon is Turkish classical music. This genre was cultivated and refined within the Mevlevi lodges and tekkes, and reached its zenith through court patronage, consistently appealing to a discerning audience and seldom being composed for entertainment purposes outside certain established forms. Notably, classical suits often feature compositions set to the Divan poetry tradition, or the works of Sufi poets such as Fuzuli and Şeyh Galip, frequently exploring themes such as divine love. The lyrics, often in Ottoman Turkish and occasionally in Persian, are set to large usuls, rhythmic cycles that can encompass up to 120/4 and are generally performed at a slow tempo. In terms of lyrics, these compositions are predominantly melismatic, demanding long breaths, thereby rendering the vocal performance considerably challenging. Thus, both in terms of composition and lyrical content, a pervasive sense of gravity, dignity, and seriousness characterizes this music.

Many prominent composers of Turkish classical music, such as Dede Efendi, Hafız Post, and Zekai Dede, held authoritative roles within Sufism. This dual role contributed to a performative atmosphere of reverence in Turkish classical music. Even if the music being performed is not religious, the performers are expected to approach these pieces with the seriousness and respect typically found in religious music settings. Another significant aspect is the pervasive sense of melancholy present in much of this musical tradition. Turkish classical music is rich in makams that evoke a sense of melancholy and sorrow (*hüzün*),

addressing recurrent themes such as separation and longing for the beloved. Indeed, certain makams are imbued with meanings that connote deep emotional pain. As Denise Gill (2017) articulates in *Melancholic Modalities: Affect, Islam, and Turkish Classical Musicians*, sonic melancholy in Turkish classical music is not only conveyed through musical structures and modes but is also deeply embodied in the physical practices of musicians and listeners. It is plausible to suggest that musicians who have long declared Turkish music to be "dead" may, in fact, be mourning this deceased music. The "loss narrative," as Denise Gill (2017, pp. 30-31) defines it, may have been internalized by some musicians of this classical genre, especially given its enduring struggle to find a sufficiently broad popular audience.

After addressing these internal factors pertaining to the structure of Turkish music, it is necessary to consider external influences, which demand a return to the historical trajectory of the genre. The emergence of Turkish music choirs bearing resemblance to Western-style ensembles in their present form is neither a coincidental nor an arbitrary development. As Onur Güneş Ayas (2013) meticulously details in his doctoral dissertation, criticisms directed at Turkish music during the early Republican period predominantly revolved around issues of perception and image. These criticisms portrayed the music as lacking in seriousness and attention, with musicians looking untidy, hitting their knees while singing, and showing signs of facial swelling and redness when performing in higher vocal ranges (Ayas, 2013, p. 294). Following Atatürk's speech after attending a concert by the Eyüp Music Society at Sarayburnu Gazino in 1928, in which he asserted that alaturka music was incompatible with the nature of the Turkish nation, these debates were further exacerbated, leading to a ban on Ottoman music on the radio between 1934 and 1936 (Ayas, 2013, p. 310).

Ayas underscores the significant efforts by Turkish music authorities to dissociate the music from this negative image and secure its acceptance by the state. In a top-down approach, the state established polyphonic and Turkish folk music choirs, while Turkish classical music choirs were predominantly formed through individual endeavors (Ayas, 2013, p. 295). In an effort to enhance the prestige of Turkish music, there was a concerted effort to introduce the

genre into large concert halls and reconfigure it as a concert music tradition aligned with European conventions. To achieve this, the number of performers was increased to fill the venues, which in turn necessitated the introduction of a conductor to manage the larger ensembles, thus instituting a model in which the conductor was distinct from the performers, similar to Western musical practices. Consequently, performances became marked by a formal, unembellished, and disciplined approach, eschewing improvisation or ornamentation. As a result, as satirized in Levent Kırca's parodies, choir members were reduced to passive performers stripped of their individual interpretive autonomy (p. 297).

In attempting to confer legitimacy upon Turkish music, these choirs ultimately became bound to an exaggerated classicism and an excessive seriousness, which gradually solidified into a tradition. During the fieldwork, one of the conductors interviewed uttered these words:

> "The choir must be a center of discipline and seriousness. That means during a performance, there should be no laughing, smiling, turning around, or movements resembling dancing. The soloists must also adhere to the same etiquette because Turkish classical music deserves this respect. While this discipline should be observed in all aspects, it is especially crucial in a classical choir" (Respondent-4, personal interview, 18 June 2023).

Drawing on Eric Hobsbawm's concept of "invented traditions," Ayas argues that these choirs—represented initially by Mesut Cemil's Classical Choir at Ankara Radio and subsequently by the Presidential Turkish Classical Music Choir established by Nevzat Atlığ—constitute the earliest examples of modern choral formations within the context of Turkish music's modernization efforts (Ayas, 2013, p. 299). Ayas's analysis, which focuses on these choirs, suggests that their style of performance became the standardized model for later ensembles. While this assertion holds considerable validity, as evidenced in this case study, there are contemporary ensembles within state institutions that, like traditional performances, do not separate the conductor from the performers, emphasize ornamentation and nuanced interpretation, and consist of smaller numbers of musicians. Nonetheless, the seriousness, gravitas, and classicism discussed earlier remain conspicuously evident in these ensembles as well. These choirs, after all, are established by the state and operate under its supervision. All artists employed in state choirs and

ensembles are, in essence, salaried civil servants. They are selected through state-administered examinations, and the repertoires, performance practices, and even the artists' attire are regulated by the state. Given this historical shift from traditional fasıl performers, who sang while rhythmically striking their knees, to contemporary practices, it would be accurate to suggest that the body has also undergone a process of discipline. Thus, in Foucauldian terms, the lack of physical expressivity among choir members can thus be interpreted as a form of *docile body* where the individual's autonomy is subsumed under the collective discipline of the ensemble (Foucault, 1995). We can argue that the formal and traditional educational institutions of Turkish classical music function as disciplinary forces that ensure the uniformity and conformity of bodily expression. This creates a visual representation of control, homogeneity, and seriousness, reinforcing the legitimacy and authority of the music as a traditional and refined art form.

Lastly, another factor to consider is the efforts of Turkish classical music artists to distinguish themselves from *piyasa*[11] artists who belong to a subculture characterized by a significantly less serious and more freeform approach. A similar phenomenon is described by Matthew Rahaim in his work *Musicking Bodies: Gesture and Voice in Hindustani Music* (2013), where he explores comparable dynamics within the context of Hindustani music. He notes that middle-class women sought to distance themselves from courtesans who both sang and danced, opting for minimal gestures as singing became a respectable activity. Additionally, Amanda Weidman (2021) examines the women singers in light music troupes in India during the 1970s in her work "Anxieties of Embodiment: Liveness and Deadness in the New Dispensation". She observes that the stage is perceived as a space where women who do not adhere to societal norms of respectability perform. When respectable singers take the stage, they often seek to minimize the live performance context by singing as if in a studio, using a music stand and microphone to obscure the visibility of their bodies (p. 159). Although these examples come from a different culture, it is evident that the distinction between high culture and low culture, as well as between classicism and popular culture, has direct implications for the performer's body.

Conclusion

Music "does not exist until bodies make it," asserts Suzanne Cusick (1994, p. 10). Body serves as the primary instrument of the voice, and when singing, our entire body is engaged in the process. However, we are often unaware of this and tend to perceive singing as solely involving the voice, thereby attempting to suppress much of the body's involvement. When we perform on stage, we are present not merely with our voice but with our entire body. As a singer who realized this aspect rather late, I noticed that the topic has not been sufficiently examined in the literature, particularly in relation to Turkish classical music, and thus decided to conduct a study on it. Despite having performed in a choir—such as the one featured in the parody on *Olacak O Kadar*—where my fingers went numb from immobility and my entire body ached, in this article, I focused on a relatively more traditional formation. One reason for this choice is that the State Choir, parodied in *Olacak O Kadar,* has already been analyzed in studies on choirs. The other is my belief that focusing on the ensemble in which I also work professionally, and which constitutes the most comprehensive part of my fieldwork, would yield more productive results. As a result of this research, it can be stated that certain body movements differ between rehearsals and performances, that singing while seated stabilizes the lower body while simultaneously providing comfort for the singers, that the absence of a conductor during performances increases eye contact with the audience, and that performers adopt a shared body language, especially in concerts. When singing in a seated position, the upper body—particularly the head and hands—engages in movement, although the range of these movements is quite limited. Interestingly, it has been observed that hand and head movements shaped by the melodic contour and dynamic structure of the music are performed simultaneously by multiple singers. Additionally, while performing Turkish classical music, a serious facial expression is adopted, and the eyebrows are unconsciously furrowed. Beyond the inherent musical elements—such as slow rhythmic cycles, elongated syllables, elaborate lyrics, and melancholic makams—singers, constrained by numerous factors, including the socio-political efforts to restore and modernize the music of a post-imperial republic, are compelled to restrict their bodily movements. To compensate for this physical restraint, they rely on facial expressions, subtle gestures, and most importantly, vocal expression.

Although the aim of the article is not to make judgments about the benefits or harms of this disciplined body but rather to identify the reasons behind it, it can be said that singing without relaxing the body and straining the body for the sake of a serious and disciplined posture may have negative effects on singing. These might include tension in vocal chords, ache in throat, and limitations in expressiveness in performance. To conclude, the subject of the body in Turkish classical music choirs and ensembles requires much more in-depth examination, and it is obviously impossible to draw conclusions based on a single case study. Analyzing various professional and amateur choirs with different sociocultural and socioeconomic backgrounds from different regions of Turkey, and even the world, would significantly contribute to research in this area.

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[1] The name of the show means “well that happens” or “that much can be expected”.

[2] This very first line of the song can be translated as: “How can one forget it, my beauty, what a night it was!” The song was written by Ahmed Rifat Moralı (1900-1977), and composed by Rakım Elkutlu (1872-1948).

[3] İncesaz literally means “fine instrument”. It refers to fine or delicate music.

[4] Kaba means crude or rough. Kaba saz music refers to entertainment music.

[5] Köçekçes are dancing tunes and composed for the dance of köçeks, male dancers wearing colorful skirts.

[6] During the time I was conducting my fieldwork in this ensemble, there were 9 singers in total. In October 2024, three female and two male singers joined the ensemble after a national examination.

[7] There was one exception when Kırklıkçı led the choir by standing up with his face turned to the choir on 24 January 2024.

[8] After September 2024, the rehearsal time became 13.00.

[9]The transcription can be accessed at
https://drive.google.com/file/d/16zPTBO0bWf25kFfmRGtMBuEccNXp_KbB/view?usp=sharing

[10] I also made a gesture transcription in video format. It can be accessed via URL - . https://drive.google.com/file/d/11jU-nb8xILzSvy7EEihykmmHfPazQ46n/view?usp=sharing

[11] The word *piyasa* literally means marketplace. It also refers to a social scene within a certain context, such as nightlife or a particular industry. The idiom *piyasaya çıkmak*, for instance, means “to go out and socialize". In Turkish classical music jargon, it refers to the mainstream and entertainment music.

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