

Understanding Turkish Classical *Makam*: Identifying Modes Through Characteristic Melodies

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Adem Merter Birson (Hofstra University)

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Abstract for
Understanding Turkish Classical *Makam*:
Identifying Modes Through Characteristic Melodies

by Adem Merter Birson, *SMT-V 7.5*

This article offers an entry point for the non-expert to hear Turkish classical music in an informed way by arguing for the significance of characteristic melodies. These melodies, often referred to as *çeşni-s* (pronounced chesh-nee), are presented here as essential building blocks in *makam*, the modal system of the Middle East. Turkish music has an Ottoman legacy rooted in oral tradition. Modern music theory, however, dates relatively recently to the beginning of the Turkish Republic (1923). During this period, Turkish musicologists adapted the *makam* system for Western staff notation and devised an approach to music theory based on scales. This approach, while currently widespread, has its limitations; the *makam* scales do not reflect the characteristic melodies that are often so important to the idiomatic expression of *makam*. For this reason, one needs extended interaction with experienced musicians in order to learn how to interpret the scores, an oral form of pedagogy traditionally known as *meşk* (mesh-k). Professional musicians and informed listeners today can identify these melodies, or *çeşni-s*, both upon hearing them and seeing them notated. This article provides analysis of individual *çeşni-s*—along with audio samples—as they appear in pieces of music and concludes with a performance of a Turkish art song featuring special guest, singer Ahmet Erdoğan. The performance highlights the previously discussed *çeşni-s*, giving listeners access to an “insider”-style Turkish musical experience.

Short Keyword List

makam, modes, Turkish music, characteristic melody

Extensive Keyword List

music, meşk, modeling, Ottoman Empire, oud, Turkish lute, vocal music, song, characteristic melody, çeşni, nağme, seyir, spice, flavor, hicaz, motivic analysis, stereotyped motives, phrase, schema theory, scales, scale fragments, tetrachords, pentachords, microtonality, interval, contour, augmented second, minor scale, musical

notation, Western staff notation, theory and practice, musical style, intonation, Dede Efendi, performance, improvisation, variation, ornaments, virtuosity, formulas, hands-on, craft, imitation, meşk, modeling, Ottoman Empire, melody, çeşni, nağme, seyir, spice, flavor, hicaz, motivic analysis, stereotyped motives, phrase, schema theory, scales, scale fragments, tetrachords, pentachords, microtonality, interval, contour, augmented second, minor scale, musical notation, Western staff notation, theory and practice, musical style, intonation, Dede Efendi, performance, improvisation, variation, ornaments, virtuosity, formulas, hands-on, craft, imitation, pedagogy, westernization, modernization, connoisseur, convention, appreciation, makam, modality, modes, Middle East, Turkish oral tradition, oud, Turkish lute, vocal music, song, characteristic melodies, appreciation makam, modality, modes, Middle East, Turkish music, oral tradition, pedagogy, westernization, modernization, connoisseur, convention.

About the Contributors

Adem Merter Birson, author, narrator, oud: Adem Merter Birson specializes in history and analysis of both eighteenth-century music and Turkish classical music in the Ottoman tradition. After receiving his PhD from Cornell University (2015), Dr. Birson went on to become the Director of the Conservatory at Ipek University, in Ankara, Turkey. While there, he laid the groundwork for a conservatory that offered training in both Western and Turkish music. He also studied *oud* (lute) performance and *makam* theory with artists from the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Currently an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Music at Hofstra University, Dr. Birson teaches undergraduate courses in music theory, ear training, and music appreciation. He founded and directs the Hofstra Turkish Ensemble and performs in the New York City area as a member of the early music ensemble, Eurasia Consort. He serves as the Secretary of the Haydn Society of North America and his research has been published in *HAYDN: The Online Journal of the Haydn Society of North America*, *The Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy Online*, and *Engaging Students: Essays in Music Pedagogy*.

Ahmet Erdoğdular, vocalist: Ahmet Erdoğdular is renowned for his sophisticated singing style and superior command of vocal techniques of the Ottoman musical tradition. Starting music at an early age with his father and continuing under the guidance of the renowned Niyazi Sayın, Erdoğdular performed as a lead singer while still a teenager. Erdoğdular also studied makam and improvisation techniques with Necdet Yaşar and Kani Karaca, and later performed with them. He successively completed his bachelors and master's degrees in Turkish Classical Music at the Istanbul Technical University State Conservatory, where he specialized in Turkish gazel (vocal improvisation) technique. He is the founder and artistic director of Makam New York, Inc. (www.makamnewyork.org), a non-profit organization for Ottoman classical music and arts. He founded the Turkish Music Institute Workshop in 2011 – a first in North America, to bring the foremost masters of modal music to New York City for an intensive week of music immersion. The Ahmet Erdoğdular Ensemble performed the first ever Turkish classical music concert in the history of Carnegie Hall in 2017.

Compositions

Beyâtî ayini şerifi, Mustafa Dede (d. 1684)

“Gönül hayran oluptur aşk elinden” (TRT Rep. No. 14194), Anonymous

Hicaz Peşrevi (TRT Rep. No. SE 0875), Neyzen Aziz Dede (1835–1905)

“İndim yârin bahçesine” (TRT Rep. No. 6699), Dede Efendi (1778–1846)

“Şeb Cünûn-i Dil Dimagam” (TRT Rep. No. 10384), Seyyid Nuh (d. 1714)

“Leyla gibi hıçkırsa” (TRT Rep. No. 7395), Selahattin Pınar (1902–60)

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