

Dün gece seyrim içinde/Last night I dreamt of...: Turkish Songs of Protest

Men and women in the Ottoman region from the 16th century to the present question political and religious authority and object to accepted traditions, offering alternative visions of power, race, sexuality and belief.

The Dünya Ensemble

Beth Bahia Cohen, *yaylı (bowed) tanbur/violin* **Borcu Güleç**, *voice*
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Mehmet Ali Sanlıkol, *voice/ud/ney/saz*

Jordan Hall, Thursday March 27, 2014, 8:00 pm

At first glance, American audiences may be disoriented by the scope of “protest” presented here. From an American perspective, the very idea of protest brings to mind the anti-slavery movement of the nineteenth century and the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s—social expressions which might seem foreign to the sprawling 600 year empire ruled by a single dynasty of all-powerful sultans. Even more, much of the poetry of this program may surprise because it draws heavily on the language of religion, and some of the poets are regarded as spiritual leaders who were members of non-conforming Muslim groups like the *Alevi* and *Bektaşî*. But for those Americans whose definition of protest was shaped by the nineteenth century anti-slavery movement and by the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s, references to scripture and the use of devotional poetry and musical forms and political leaders who are also religious leaders will also seem very familiar. In both the Ottoman and American cases, when earthly standards of human conduct seem to be lacking, heavenly standards are evoked.

The title of this program is a line from a famous song by the Sufi poet, Pir Sultan Abdal, who was hanged by the Ottoman authorities in 1550 both for speaking out against imperial authority and for blasphemy. According to legend, his protest against the cruelties of the “bloody tyrant” (*Şu kanlı zalimin ettiği işler*) in part two of this program were directed at Hızır Paşa, the regional Ottoman governor responsible for executing him. But it is also likely that the very name “Pir Sultan” was a *nom de plume* adopted by other folk poets over the centuries who shared his anti-authoritarian sympathies. Pir Sultan was a member of the ethno-religious minority known today as *Alevi*, whose unorthodox form of Islam and unconventional social practices have continuously brought them into conflict with civil and religious authorities up to the present day.

Inspiration for this program has another source much closer to home, from the spring and summer of 2013 when—nearly a century after the end of Ottoman dynastic rule—the streets of Turkish cities were filled with millions of people objecting to the exercise of power by the current, democratically elected government. These pieces suggest the spectrum of expressions of non-conformity, complaint, satire and questioning which fall between Pir Sultan Abdal in the sixteenth century and the Gezi Park protests in the twenty-first. The array encompasses classical compositions of the palace, blunt women's complaints from the countryside, songs which mingle the religious and the secular, songs which express longing and intimacy across ethnic and religious boundaries, “blasphemous” (and therefore politically incendiary) songs by heterodox Muslims, open professions of erotic love (conventional and unconventional), and defenses of controversial practices like music and the drinking of alcohol. This is public and private music, for entertainment, contemplation and devotion, expressing explicit border-crossings that defy official or societal norms: protest music, in the largest sense.

PROGRAM

1. *Yalan dünya/Deceitful world*

Starting the program with Sufi poetry places a philosophical perspective on “protest” up front. From the unorthodox perspective of certain mystical Islamic brotherhoods, the deceits, orthodoxies and rivalries, of the material world is not to be trusted. These Bektaşî and Alevî poets present a dream of a more just world modeled on their own enlightened and sometimes secret fellowship.

Hicaz Nefes (devotional song of the Bektasi dervishes)

Trakya, 20th c.

This song recorded by a Bektaşî woman in the Thracian part of Turkey in the 1970s is full of special vocabulary and references to secret practices.

*Medet ya Ali'm senden medet
Meşrebidir herkese yârân olur bekaşiler
Kimse bilmez sırlarını settar olur bekaşiler
Öldüler ölmezden evvel buldular Hakk'ı ayan
Zümreyi irfan içinde cân olur bekaşiler
Dest-i pirden bir kadeh nûş ettiler bezm-i elest
Dâima sermest gezip mestan olur bekaşiler
Tâc-ı rehi tığbent ile mürşide teslim olur
Ey Nesimi sinesi üryan olur bekaşiler
Medet ya Ali'm senden medet
Hakk Dost Dost*

Help Ali! I ask for your help.
It is in the nature of the Bektaşî to become companions of all
Nobody knows their secret, the Bektaşî become the forgivers of sin
They died yet evidently found God before.
They become brothers within the wisdom of their fellowship
They drank a cup from the hand of their master of devotion to God
The Bektaşî are always intoxicated and joyous.
With a crown of truth and a belt of rope they submit to the Master
O Nesimi, Bektaşî hearts are purely visible.
Help Ali! I ask for your help.
O God, O Friend, Friend

Bir Allah'ı tanıyalım (Alevî song)

Aşık Ali İzzet (recorded ca. 1970)

A skeptical Alevî view of competing religions by a 20th century *aşık* or folk singer-poet.
*Bir Allah'ı tanıyalım / Ayri gayrı bu din nedir?
Senlik benliği nidelim? / Bu kavga doğuştadır?
İssiz dünyayı doldurdu / Kendini bulabilirdi mi?
Habil Kabil'i öldürdü / Orta yerde ki kan nedir?
Musa Tevrat'a Hak dedi / Firavun aslı yok dedi.
İsa İncil'e bak dedi / Sonra gelen Kuran nedir?
Bu gavur Müslüman nedir? Dost, Dost, Dost.*

Let us all believe in one God / What are all these separate religions?
What is this 'yourself', 'myself'? / What is all this fighting about?
God filled the empty world / Was He able to find Himself?
Abel killed Cain / What is all this blood on the ground?
Moses said, 'The Torah is the Truth' / Pharoah said, 'It's not true.'
Jesus said, 'Look to the Bible' / Then comes the Koran: what is it?
What is this 'Muslim' and 'nonbeliever'? Friend, Friend, Friend.

Dün gece seyrim içinde

Pir Sultan's dream of a world where human conduct is modeled on Ali, not on worldly laws.

*Dün gece seyrim içinde
Ben Dedem Ali'yi gördüm
Eğildim niyaz eyleydim
Düldülün nalını gördüm*

In my journey last night
O, my Teacher, I saw Ali
I stooped and entreated
I saw the shoes of Düldül [Ali's legendary horse]

*Kanberi durur sağında
Salınır Cennet bağında
Ali, Musa Tur dağında
Ben Dedem Ali'yi gördüm*

His loyal servant on his righthand side
He rides in the gardens of Heaven
Ali and Moses on Mount Sinai
O my Teacher, I saw Ali

2. Questioning authority and myth

Singers and poets directly address the suffering of common people who are powerless in the hands of leaders, religious and secular.

Şu kanlı zalimin ettiği işler

words: Pir Sultan Abdal source: Aşık Feyzullah Çınar (1937-83)

The very real persecutions of the authorities are nothing compared to the pain of his love for God.

*Şu kanlı zalimin ettiği işler
Garip bülbül gibi zar eyler beni
Yağmur gibi yağar başıma taşlar
Dostun bir fiskeşi yaralar beni*

The cruel deeds of that bloody tyrant
Have made me cry out like a mad nightingale
Stones fall on my head like rain
And yet, I am wounded by a single touch of the Friend

*Dar günümde dost düşmanım bell'oldu
On derdim var ise şimdi ell'oldu
Ecel fermanı boynuma takıldı
Gerek asa gerek vuralar beni*

On this evil day I can tell my friends from my enemies
My afflictions were ten, but have now become fifty
My death sentence has been proclaimed
Either hang me or shoot me

*Pir Sultan Abdal'ım can göğe ağmaz
Hak'tan emrolmazsa irahmet yağmaz
Şu ellerin taşı hiç bana değmez
Elle dostun gülü yaralar beni*

I am Pir Sultan Abdal, my soul will not ascend to the heavens
And mercy will not rain down unless God commands it
The stones of my enemies are nothing to me
But, I am wounded by the rose of strangers and friends.

Zahid bizi ta'n eyleme

words: Muhyi

One of many songs defending the Bektaşî minority from the disapproval of the *zahit* or orthodox believer.

*Zahit bizi ta'n eyleme
Hak ismin okur dilimiz,
Sakın efsane söyleme
Hazrete varır yolumuz.*

Oh ascetic, do not slander us
Our tongues utter the name of God
Do not make up stories about us
Our road leads to the Lord.

*Sayılmayız parmak ile,
Tükenmeyiz kırmak ile.
Taşramızdan sormak ile,
Kimse bilmez ahvalimiz.*

We cannot be counted on the fingers
We will not be exterminated by attacks
From our province with interrogations
No one will know our affairs

İlim ilim bilmektir

The famous 13th century mystic Yunus Emre gives advice to religious scholars.

*İlim ilim bilmektir
İlim kendin bilmektir
Sen kendin bilmezsin
Ya nice okumaktır*

True knowledge is to understand
To understand yourself
If you do not know yourself
Then what is the use of all your learning?

*Okumaktan murad ne
Kişi Hakk'ı bilmektir
Çün okudun bilmezsin
Ha bir kuru ekmektir*

What is the purpose of learning?
A person must know the Truth
After all your study if you do not know the Truth
Then you are nothing but a piece of dry bread

*Yunus Emre der hoca
Gerekse bin var hacca
Hepisinden iyice
Bir gönüle girmektir*

Yunus Emre says, teacher:
You may go on a thousand pilgrimages,
But the best of all would be
To enter into one's heart

Sakın gelme İstanbul'a

Aşık İsmail Azeri (b. 1928)

A warning to those back home not to believe what they hear about city life.

*Kardeşim, haberin aldım
Sakın gelme İstanbul'a
Çok acele haber saldım
Aman gelme İstanbul'a*

Brother, I've gotten your news:
Beware of coming to Istanbul
I've just gotten urgent news:
My God, don't come to Istanbul

*İstanbul'a İstanbul'a
Kaçıp gelme İstanbul'a*

To Istanbul, Istanbul
Don't come running to Istanbul

*Olur olmaz lokma yutma
Çürük yerlere temel atma
Sakın tarlaların satma
N'olur gelme İstanbul'a*

Whether it's small or big
Don't lay a foundation on bad ground
Take care, don't sell your possessions
Whatever happens, don't come to Istanbul

3. Sex, religion, tradition

Open expressions of love can violate boundaries of propriety, religion and social custom. The final five pieces of this set are from the 17th century notation collection by Ali Ufki, a former Polish Protestant who became an Ottoman slave, converted to Islam and rose to a high position as a translator and as director of the palace orchestra. These five songs are addressed to young male Sufi initiates and to young male dancers in female dress (*köçek*) who were both public idols and the objects of public scandal. Like the expressions of affection for lovers of ambiguous gender in some Elizabethan songs, these Ottoman love expressions fell victim to changing sexual mores in the 19th c., when the *köçek* was outlawed and poems of this kind were marginalized or suppressed.

Müşterek taksim (group improvisation)

Buselik Aşiran beste: Lal'in emdir hikmetin sorma

Zaharya (18th c.)

Zaharya was a Greek musician celebrated as singer in the Greek Orthodox church and as a composer of songs in Turkish for the Ottoman upper classes. The language of physical passion in this song is in the elevated musical and poetic style of the court. This language may have been frowned on by certain authorities, both Christian and Muslim, but it is not atypical of many other songs of the period.

Lalin emdir hikmetin sorma dil-i şeyda bilir Let me suck your lips but do not ask why; my mad heart knows,
Çektiği cevr-i ceşay-ı aşkı bir mevla bilir The pain of cruel and unjust love only the Master knows.
Gamzen inkar eylesin devamı şahittir müjden Your dimple can deny but your eyelash is the witness of your willingness
Ey keman ebru bize ettiklerin dünya bilir Oh arched eyebrow, the world knows what you do to me

Muhayyer Türki

Text: Ali Music: Anonymous (17th c.)

A Sufi describes his affection for a young male apprentice.

Ahuya benzer gözleri His eyes are like an antelope
Bir yavru gördüm kimindir? Such a young one I've seen, who does he belong to?
Aşkı öldürür nazları His coyness is killing the one in love
Bir cenan gördüm kimindir? Such a heavenly soul I've seen, who does he belong to?

Dede külâhı başında, The hat of a Sufi master on his head
Henüz on onbir yaşında Only ten or eleven years old
Kudret kalemi kaşında His eyebrows are a testimony of God
Bir civan gördüm kimindir? Such a beautiful young boy I've seen, who does he belong to?

Türki-i Cansiner Halife beray-ı medh Hasen

Text: Meftuni Music: Cansiner (17th c.)

A song to another male dancer named Hasen.

Güzelliğini ermiş kemale beğim Your beauty has ripened to perfection, my dear sir
Hüsaniñ ser çeşmesinin meleğim You are the first fountain of both genders, my angel

Sultan İbrahim'in huzurunda oynanılan Raks / The dance performed before Sultan Ibrahim (17th c.)

text and music: anonymous (17th c.)

A song addressed to another famous dancer, either male or female, known as "Saçbağı" (lit. hair band).

Saçbağı takar saçına S/he puts on a hair band
Gider sarayın içine And goes to the palace
Güzel seveniñ suçu ne What's the guilt in loving someone beautiful?
Saçbağı devran seniñdir O Hair Band, this is your time

Hüseyni Türki Mahabbet

Text: Mustafa, Music: Anonymous (17th c.)

Mustafa der benim Alim, niçin sormaz garib halim?

Mustafa wonders why my Ali won't ask how sad I am

Hüseyni Raksiyye

text and music: anonymous (17th c.)

Sen oynadıkça kademi, sevindirirsin ademi

As you dance, your feet bring delight to all

INTERMISSION

Namus belası / Honor killing

Cem Karaca (1945-2004)

Following the military coup in 1980, the controversial rock musician Cem Karaca lived in exile in Germany under threat of arrest in Turkey, a response to his many songs which satirized or criticized aspects of Turkish policy and custom. Here, the topic is the rural practice of honor killing, carried out to avenge what is seen as a disgrace brought on the family. Sometimes the victim is a young women who has been raped and the killer is her brother.

*Düşüm mapus damlarına öğüt veren bol olur
Toplasam o öğütleri burdan köye yol olur
Ana baba bacı kardaş dar günümde el olur
Namus belasına kardaş döktüğümüz kan bizim*

As I am in jail now, there are so many people ready to give me advice
To write it all down will be as long as the road back to our village
My mom, dad, sister, brother are strangers to me on this troubled day
O brother, the blood that we spill for honor killings is ours

The Musicians

DÜNYA (the Turkish, Arabic, Persian, Greek word for "world") is a non-profit, tax exempt educational organization founded in Boston in 2004. Its goal is to present a contemporary view of a wide range of Turkish traditions, alone and in interaction with other world traditions, through performance, recording, and other educational activities. DÜNYA seeks to work with a wide range of cultural and religious organizations and musical groups, but relies on no particular political, governmental or religious affiliation or support of any kind.

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