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Musical Intimacy, Model Citizenship, and Sufism in the Life of Niyazi Sayın

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Abstract

Niyazi Sayın is an Istanbul-born *ney* (reed flute) virtuoso, and the most acclaimed musician of a musical tradition controversially called “Ottoman-Turkish classical music.” Now 94 years old, Sayın has been called *insan-i kamil* (a perfect human), *kutb-ı nayı*, (the musical spiritual axis of his age), and *hezarfen* (master of a thousand arts). What do such titles mean? Building upon the work of Martin Stokes on popular music and its fashioning of intimate publics, this paper explores Sayın’s musical life. We argue that it provides an exemplary expression of cultural intimacy for listeners and students, one that (as reflected in his titles) demonstrates a particular way of becoming a person, a Muslim, and a model citizen. In contrast with more official constructions of citizenship, as well as with the political neo-Ottomanism of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Sayın’s life and music open up alternative possibilities of self-alteration for those who engage with it.

Keywords: citizenship; Istanbul; music; *ney*; Niyazi Sayın; Turkey

It is November 2014. Inside the presidential palace in Ankara, a prize ceremony honors the recipients of the Turkish Republic’s Grand Awards for Art and Culture. As host, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan delivers the keynote speech, recognizing the exemplary contribution that each recipient has made to the nation’s cultural and intellectual life in the fields of music, literature, cinema, and history.

In the category of music, the artist selected for honor is Neyzen (*ney* player) Niyazi Sayın (1927–).

Acknowledging Sayın’s “exceptional contribution to Turkish classical music as well as to sufi (*tasavvuf*) music,” Erdoğan conveys his gratitude for Sayın’s dedication, not only to the *ney* (an end-blown flute), but at the same time to “our classical art forms.” “May God bless him,” he continues. “For he expresses us to ourselves” (*Bize bizi anlattığı için*).

Yet alongside the celebratory notes, Erdoğan strikes a characteristically aggrieved tone:

For too long, we have heard the claim that no artist, scholar, or intellectual emerges from us. But despite all their efforts to blunt the soul of our nation and our civilization, despite their aiming at the veins of our knowledge, wisdom and morals, they could not stop our arts and artists from growing. . . . Thanks be to God. Despite their endeavor to estrange us from ourselves (*yabancılaştırma*) we still have masters who know themselves, their nation, and their civilization. . . . How ungrateful would it be to orphan our old (*kadim*) music, our art of calligraphy, marbling (*ebru*), and *tezhîp* and *tezyin*

(the Islamic arts of illumination), just because they are not appreciated and recognized in certain parts of the world.¹

An aged Niyazi Sayın shuffles on stage to receive the award.²

Art, Cultural Intimacy, and Politics

In his book *The Republic of Love*, Martin Stokes explores the voices of three iconic Turkish musicians, each of whose music he claims captured and contributed something central to mass-mediated popular culture and public life in Istanbul in the 1950s, 1970s, and 1990s respectively: queer nightclub singer Zeki Müren; pioneer of the *arabesk* genre Orhan Gencebay; and pop diva Sezen Aksu. Interpreting these artists as “voices of *cultural intimacy*,” Stokes makes a vital connection between music and affective registers of national identity.³ Each of these popular figures, he suggests, has helped orchestrate public sentiments that diverge from those manufactured by the Turkish state. By zooming onto the particular decades in which these artists played an especially significant role, Stokes constructs a cultural timeline that is less a disaggregated account of discrete musical genres, historical moments, and isolated discourses of sentimentality and more an account of complex interconnections between the musical and the political, self and nation, and private and public worlds. Stokes provides us with an alternative history of what he calls the post-1950 liberal period in Turkey, a history that recognizes the constitutive role of popular music and aesthetic musical genres in fashioning intimate and multiple publics, and in generating varieties of citizenly belonging. As we have seen, and more polemically, Tayyip Erdoğan, too, constructs connections between music, cultural intimacy, and historicized identities. Yet unlike Stokes, in his speech Erdoğan identifies and lionizes Neyzen Niyazi Sayın as a musical figure of great national and cultural significance. And unlike Stokes as well, Erdoğan both analyzes and performs politics, manipulating the figure of Sayın to generate an affective politics of Muslim pride and resentment as alive as the music that assembles (or disassembles) publics.

But is the sound of Sayın’s *ney* really best heard as a sonic expression of an essential Turkish-Muslim “we” voiced against those (secularists) who set themselves to stunt the growth of the nation and to alienate “us” from ourselves?

In this article we write about the musical life of Niyazi Sayın, exploring how it relates to both official and alternative ideas of the nation. Adapting elements of Stokes’s framework and disregarding others, we examine the complex intertwining of Sayın’s life with the politics of the intimate and the everyday, investigating how over the course of his long career his music intersects with new imaginaries of citizenship and citizen relations with the state. Far from being an easy recruit for Erdoğan’s polarizing politics, we show that Sayın’s life and

¹ “2014 Presidency Grand Awards for Art and Culture,” YouTube video, November 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVJaI6j6SGM&t=30s>.

² In 2009 Niyazi Sayın and *tanbur* artist Necdet Yaşar had been awarded an earlier version of this prize for their duo work. As much as a reflection of government esteem for Sayın, the prizes demonstrate the long-term interest of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP) in constituting the *ney* as an essentially religious and even Muslim instrument. The AKP’s preference for a particular instrument has a broader context. In the 1930s Kemalists similarly made a national symbol of the *saz* (long-necked lute) in their invigoration of Turkish folk music. The contrasting rhetorical tone of Tayyip Erdoğan’s congratulatory speech in 2009, in which he praised Sayın and Yaşar’s contribution to our “civilization of love,” fits neatly within a standard periodization of AKP’s history, with its first decade at the center of Turkish politics characterized by a self-protective democratization project, and its second by much more authoritarian governance. For the 2009 prize ceremony, see “Kültür ve Sanat Büyük Ödülü Verildi,” 30 January 2010, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/kultur-ve-sanat-buyuk-odulu-verildi-116278>.

³ Martin Stokes, *The Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 15, italics in original.

music opens very different possibilities of self-alteration and self-knowledge for those who engage with it.

In other words, Sayın's musical life provides a different complex of art, cultural intimacy, and politics than those articulated by both Stokes and Erdoğan. For example, the social-artistic field that Sayın has contributed to and actively enlarged is not best described as mass-mediated, commercially oriented, "pop(ular)" music.⁴ Indeed, unlike Müren, Gencebay, and Aksu, even when Sayın's *ney* established itself as a "national institution" in the second half of the 20th century (especially in the 1970s and 1980s), he maintained a principled distanced stance from the commercial music industry. His sole solo album *Sada* (sound, cry), a compilation of some of his improvisations, was released only in 2001 by an Istanbul-based company called Mega Music, almost a decade after Sayın had withdrawn from public performances. A second album comprising recordings of joint instrumental performances from the 1960s and 1970s with his duo partner, the *tanbur* (long-necked, plucked lute) musician Necdet Yaşar (1930–2017), came out a few years later in 2005 (produced by Kalan Müzik).⁵

This delay reveals that his career encompasses a different temporality than the other three popular artists, both because it extends over five decades and because his emergence as a voice of alternative musical intimacy has been less spectacular, waiting as it were for more propitious cultural and political circumstances. In short, unlike the music and person of Sezen Aksu (for example), whose songs, in the main, became meaningful to segments of Turkey's population in the politically suppressed 1980s and 1990s, Sayın's influence has grown in a subtler fashion over decades.

Even so, since the 1970s Sayın has been the most acclaimed sound of an urban art musical tradition dubbed "Ottoman-Turkish classical music (Fig. 1)."⁶ We say dubbed because there is a revealing political ambiguity in the naming of the musical enterprise that bears upon the alternative "citizenly belonging" it produces.⁷ The term "Ottoman classical music" has been subject to much polemical debate over the 20th century, and a number of other labels have been applied to this music—for example, court music (*saray müziği*), *alla turca*, art music (*sanat müziği*), classical Turkish music (*klasik Türk müziği*), and traditional music (*geleneksel müzik*). Sayın himself calls it Istanbul music. Similar to the genre of arabesk music, which was intensely disliked by the Republic's cultural elites in the 1970s and temporarily suspended from public broadcast on state television or radio, the social life of Ottoman classical music was radically interrupted by the music reform project of the Kemalist state in the foundational decades of the Republic. Any creative revival of Ottoman music cannot help but be imbricated within wider cultural and political developments, both since the 1950s and today with the AKP's political practice of neo-Ottomanism.⁸

⁴ Despite this fact, it also is important to distinguish between two overlapping meanings of the term "popular music." Stokes notes that popular music in Turkey is an "inchoate category," referring to a "great variety of vernacular and mass-mediated genres which range from nightclub popularizations of the art music repertory (*fasıl*), to Arab-oriented hybrids (*arabesk*) and Western-style pop and rock"; *ibid.*, 15. A second meaning is more literal: some kinds of [this] music are more or less popular, involving larger or smaller audiences of appreciative listeners, for example, Turkish heavy metal. Niyazi Sayın's music is popular in this second sense.

⁵ Niyazi Sayın, *Sada: Sufi Music of Turkey*, vol. 8, compact disc (Istanbul: Mega Müzik, 2001); Niyazi Sayın and Necdet Yaşar, *Masters of Turkish Music*, 2 compact discs (Istanbul: Kalan Müzik, 2006). In 2009, the Turkish Ministry of Culture published another audio CD titled *Kutbū'n Niyazi Sayın*, which compiled some of Sayın's solo improvisations.

⁶ On Ottoman-Turkish classical music, see Walter Feldman, *Music of the Ottoman Court: Makam, Composition and the Early Ottoman Instrumental Repertoire* (Berlin: Verlag Für Wissenschaft und Bildung, 1996); Cem Behar, *Aşk Olmayınca Meşk Olmaz: Geleneksel Osmanlı/Türk Müziğinde Öğretim ve İntikal* (Istanbul: YKY, [1998] 2012); and Cem Behar, *Osmanlı/Türk Musikisinin Kısa Tarihi* (Istanbul: YKY, 2015).

⁷ Martin Stokes, "Migration and Music," *Music Research Annual* 1 (2020): 1–29.

⁸ Neo-Ottomanism is a political project geared toward the selective revival of the Ottoman past in a variety of public domains. On the intellectual origins of the term, see Hakan Yavuz, "Social and Intellectual Origins of Neo-Ottomanism: Searching for a Post-National Vision," *Die Welt des Islams* 56 (2016): 438–65.



Figure 1. Niyazi Sayin (left) and Salih Bilgin (right), Galata Mevlevihanesi, 2015. Photograph by Turgut Dalar.

Nevertheless, in spite of clear differences between Sayin and the aforementioned performers, certain shared features make it possible to compare their musical lives. One common element is how their voice or sound produces cultural intimacy in the public sphere. Thus, one of our aims in writing this article is to trace the sentiments that the sound of Sayin's *ney* elicits from his listeners: his students, his musical peers, the general public, and a recent new generation of Ottoman classical musicians. In what ways has it provided alternative articulations of cultural rapport in Turkish public life, crafting other possible ways of being Turkish—"an intimate, as opposed to official, idea of the nation"?⁹

Second, the public narratives that help constitute meaning about these singers (for example, as figures of "civility," "cosmopolitanism," or "ideal citizens") also can be usefully understood as narratives of "intimate citizenship" (as opposed to official constructions of citizenship).¹⁰ We show that examination of the affective and embodied dimensions of the "model citizen" narrative directed and inspired by Sayin contributes further answers to a deeper question that runs through *The Republic of Love*; that is, how to account for the vital connections between music and multiple affective registers of national identity in post-1950s Turkey.

Disentangling Sayin's musical life from Erdoğan's broader political project is easier, despite the president's public praise. In his ceremony speech that recreates the bitter disputes over aesthetic distinctions in Turkey, as well as his assertion of the value, weight, and importance of Islam in the Turkish national character, vindication of Islam's superiority in the external "clash of civilizations" merges with the AKP's resentment of the Republican elite's perceived distaste for Muslim mores and norms. As important as ideology and economy, it is affect—fear, mockery, sentimentality, victimhood, vengefulness, and paranoia—that empowers different visions of politics in Turkey today. In her recent analysis of the public tears shed by AKP politicians, Senem Aslan maintains that their crying dramatizes the party's production of an "antagonistic divide between the people and the elite, the

⁹ Stokes, *Republic of Love*, 16.

¹⁰ Stokes discusses this idea more fully in his lecture series "The Musical Citizen," accessed 16 March 2020, <http://www.the-imr.uk/media>.

claim to represent the people who are victimized and suffering, and the evocation of crisis and threat.”¹¹ Muslim pride against secularist contempt becomes the AKP’s rancorous inter-subjective mood in the present, politically malleable yet explicable in terms of a particular perception of Republican history.

We demonstrate below that Sayın is unvexed by such emotions. Indeed, Erdoğan’s attempted appropriation of Sayın’s art to support the AKP and a certain way of being Muslim runs directly counter to Sayın’s own understandings of Islam and his musical practice.

A Neyzen in the Making

Who is Niyazi Sayın? Sayın was born in Istanbul’s old Bosphorus suburb of Üsküdar in 1927, four years after the founding of the Turkish Republic, in a period of great political, social, and cultural change. Many *ney* players today describe Üsküdar as a spiritual (*maneviyatlı*) place as it has been home to a large number of dervish lodges (*tekkes*), including one of Istanbul’s five Mevlevi lodges, as well as numerous old mosques and cemeteries from the Ottoman era.

As has been well established, the public life of Ottoman classical music was particularly vulnerable to the large-scale changes that Kemalist cultural brokers put into place as part of their political project to fashion citizens with new habits, embodied skills, and aesthetic tastes.¹² In this context, the ruling cadres’ attitude toward Ottoman music was at best ambivalent, and at worst one of unconcealed hostility. This manifested not only in their positivist, modernist assertions demeaning Ottoman music as a sonic emblem of “backwardness” and “irrationality,” but in their aggressive actions that replaced the institutional sites of this artistic tradition with newly opened Western music schools.¹³ The year before Sayın was born, the teaching of Ottoman art music was discontinued at the Darül Elhan (House of Tunes), the only Istanbul conservatory to remain from the Ottoman era. This followed the Republic’s proscription of the instruction of Ottoman music in all schools under the Law on Unification of National Education issued in 1925. With the closing of the Sufi lodges in the same year, Ottoman classical music was left with no institutional scaffolding to foster its skilled transmission. To put it another way, Sayın was born into an Istanbul whose “old *musiki*” had already entered a phase of muffled public life. This is brilliantly shown in Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar’s iconic modernist novel *Huzur* (A Mind at Peace), first published in 1949 and periodically re-appreciated in the present.¹⁴ Set in late-1930s Istanbul, the novel captures the anxieties of cosmopolitan Muslim urbanites, disillusioned and uneasy with living in a city estranged from its immediate modern past in the face of its radical spatial and sonic reconstruction. Familiar with the social practices and cultural history of late-Ottoman Istanbul, Tanpınar (1901–62) has his characters listen to and sing discredited Ottoman classical music in house gatherings throughout the novel. In its most revealing scene, it is the sound of the *ney* that incites its characters’ lack of peace: not just any *ney*, but the *ney* of the *neyzen*-calligrapher and Mevlevi dervish Emin Dede (1883–1945) and his *talebe* (pupil) Neyzen Halil Dikmen (1906–64; he appears in the novel as Painter Cemil).

¹¹ Senem Aslan, “Public Tears: Populism and the Politics of Emotion in AKP’s Turkey,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53, no. 1 (2021): 4.

¹² See, among others, Martin Stokes, *The Arabesk Debate: Music and Musicians in Modern Turkey* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Christopher Houston, “Anthropology, Autonomy and the Art of Cultural Revolution,” *Anthropological Theory* 12 (2012): 252–70.

¹³ Alongside the attempted muting of “high” Ottoman and “low” Kurdish music, new musical genres also were developed that sought to “Europeanize” it. For a significant account of the performance practices, fashions, and economic opportunities of this new musical style in Atatürk’s years, see John O’Connell’s study of Münir Nurettin Selçuk, a committed modernist who sought to blend *alafranga* and *alla turca* music. John M. O’Connell, *Alaturka: Style in Turkish Music (1923–1938)* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2013).

¹⁴ Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *A Mind at Peace*, trans. Erdağ Göknar (New York: Archipelago Books, 2011).

Who were Emin Dede and Halil Dikmen? Both were important figures in Niyazi Sayın's life, especially Dikmen.¹⁵ At 22, when Sayın developed an interest in learning the *ney*, the calligrapher Necmeddin Okyay (1883–1976) took him to meet Dikmen, professional painter and director of the Academy of Fine Arts and Sculpture Museum in Istanbul, opened in 1937 upon a directive from Mustafa Kemal. The year was 1949. For the next fifteen years, up until Dikmen's death, Sayın took lessons from him every Thursday in his museum office. "Ney and *ahlak* (ethics) lessons," he called them.¹⁶ Which ethics? His firsthand account describing the unmatched tone of his master's sound and respectfully foregrounding his master's superior musicianship reveals an education in modesty:

This person [Dikmen] was a magnificent *ney* player. He was a *talebe* (student) of Neyzen Emin Dede. He only played the *şah ney*, never played any other tuning.¹⁷ He had this *şah ney*, 91.5 centimetre-length. I have never, yet, obtained a sound like his from my *ney*. . . . The morals, the kindness of Hoca, his grace, his humanity. There was this fellow *talebe* who also was taking lessons from Hoca. One day I saw him coming out of the building. "Did you have your lesson?" I asked. "I did, but I'm giving up," he said. "I realized that I will never get a sound from the *ney* like the sound of Hoca. But I will continue to come to him to learn morals (*ahlak*) from him," he said. I never forgot this. Hoca was an incredibly virtuous (*faziletli*) man, incomparable to anyone. He always dressed up respectfully. He had this small bag; he would carry some bread and cheese in it. He smoked a third-class cigarette. May God rest his soul. I have never heard a *ney* sound like his in my life. Today they say for *gazelhan* (vocalist) Hafız Sami (1874–1943) that his voice can't be fully captured in his recordings. The same is true for Halil Dikmen. We have his sound, but it can't be fully comprehended today.¹⁸

As these fragments from Sayın's biography show, although the ideological antagonism of the Republic left Ottoman classical music without official support, the musical engineering of the Kemalist elites did not destroy the civil pedagogical domain of apprentice-style learning, or *meşk*.¹⁹ Grounded in the slow learning relationship of master and pupil that continued in Istanbul within the cracks of Kemalist revolutionary modernity, the practice of *meşk* in the 1950s ensured the informal continuity of the *neyzen* lineage into which Sayın was grafted, and which his own teaching practice in the second half of the 20th century referenced.²⁰

Just as Sayın's relationship with Dikmen formed the cornerstone of his musical and ethical training, other civil practices of musical sociality also contributed to his artistic-ethical self-formation. Among these, the pedagogical function of private musical and *sohbet* (conversation) gatherings (*meclis*) should be mentioned.²¹ Sayın's biography demonstrates that these informal sites of exchange occupied a crucial place in his musical socialization in these formative years. This is revealed in his exposure to the religious repertoire through his

¹⁵ For biographical accounts of Emin Dede (Yazıcı) and Halil Dikmen, see Beşir Ayvazoğlu, *Neyin Sırrı* (Istanbul: Kapı Yayınları, 2008).

¹⁶ Personal interview with Sayın, 26 March 2014, Istanbul.

¹⁷ Neys come in a number of standard lengths based on their tuning. The *şah ney* is the second longest, and very difficult to play.

¹⁸ Personal interview with Sayın, 26 March 2014, Istanbul.

¹⁹ On *meşk* in Ottoman-Turkish classical music, see Behar, *Aşk Olmayınca Meşk*; on *meşk* in Islamic calligraphy, see Zoe Griffith, "Calligraphy and the Art of Statecraft in the Late Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkish Republic," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31, no. 3 (2011): 601–14.

²⁰ Although a complete genealogy cannot be recited, Sayın traces his lineage back five generations, including to Dikmen and his teacher Emin Dede; to Dede's teacher in turn Aziz Dede (1835–1905; also a Mevlevi dervish); to Salim Bey (d. 1885), an initiate of the Sadiyye order; and then to Armenian Neyzen Oskiyam (d. 1870), who taught at the music school of the palace during the reign of Mahmud II.

²¹ On musical *meclis*, see Panagiotis Poulos, "At the House of Kemal: Private Musical Assemblies in Istanbul from the Late Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic," in *Theory and Practice in the Music of the Islamic World*, ed. Rachel Harris and Martin Stokes (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2018), 106–24.

attendance at the communal *meşk* gatherings held at Mustafa Düzgünman's (1920–90) Üsküdar home in the late 1940s.²²

This practice of urban conviviality was important for another reason. It enabled Sayın's personal contact with numerous cultivated and urbane figures from the late Ottoman and early Republic period. Among them were not only master musicians and aficionados of Ottoman music, but knowledgeable sufis who deeply influenced Sayın's religious subjectivity, as well as a circle of skilled people highly trained in Islamic art and craft practices, from calligraphy to marbling (*ebru*).²³ Sayın himself would say that all of these experiences were influential in creating the sound of his *ney*. As he has famously (and ethically) pronounced on several occasions, *sanat muhit işidir* (art is the work of one's cultural milieu).²⁴

In attributing success in his art to the particular environment of Istanbul's Üsküdar, we see here both a connection as well as a difference between Sayın and Tanpınar that illuminates the urban sensibility and type of intimate citizenship Sayın exemplifies. According to Erdağ Göknaar, Tanpınar's *Huzur* is simultaneously a "literary homage to Istanbul" and a "Republican national anti-epic."²⁵ In it Tanpınar presents an "ambivalent portrayal of commitment to cultural revolution and secular modernity. Instead of advocating a secular teleology, the novel explores the remnants of continuity with Ottoman modernization from a destitute, interwar Istanbul on the margins of the nation-state."²⁶ The result is a description of *hüzün* (melancholy), a "state of lament that is a symptom of both Ottoman imperial loss and anxiety about future-oriented national-secularism."²⁷ In short, Tanpınar is a writer "who reminds us that the historical rupture between Empire and Republic also divides the self."²⁸

By contrast, Sayın's learning of Ottoman music through *meşk* and his broad education in Üsküdar combined to make him a person who in his playing, teaching, and living of music appears unvexed by a range of binary oppositions that constituted an intellectual crisis for Tanpınar, and a political opportunity for Tayyip Erdoğan. As will become clear, he is disinterested in associating himself with or disassociating himself from Islamic superiority or inferiority; unfussed about steering Turkey into the club of modern nations, or about its lost Ottoman culture; and not attracted to discourses advocating either "contemporary civilization" or chauvinistic Turkish nationalism. He is free from angst about whether Turkey is of Europe or not, and from dread that Turkey is lagging behind the West. He is neither a political Islamist nor a neo-Ottomanist.

Sayın's artistic self-fashioning was largely enabled in those civil realms that were somewhat autonomous from the encroachments of the institutions of the nation-state. Nevertheless, his professional career began on the radio, the institution central to the dissemination of the state's official cultural policy. Although there were periods when the radio took a hostile attitude toward Ottoman classical music (for example, in the ban on its broadcasting between 1934 and 1936), it was not able to exclude this music entirely from its airwaves. Sayın's career at Istanbul Radio started in the early 1950s with an invitation from *ney*

²² Personal interview with Sayın, 26 March 2014, Istanbul. Mustafa Düzgünman was a master of the Islamic art of marbling.

²³ Among them, Hafız Eşref Ede (1876–1954), Hafız Nafız Uncu (1887–1958), and the Mevlevi dervish Ali Fani Dede (d. 1956) should be especially mentioned. We get a glimpse of this rich social life in the memoirs of Ahmet Yüksel Özemre, a close friend of Sayın and Üsküdar resident; Ahmet Y. Özemre, *Üsküdar'da Bir Attar Dükkânı* (Istanbul: Kubbealtı Yayınları, 1996). *Ebru* is an Islamic art that involves brushing color pigments on a tray and transferring this pattern to paper.

²⁴ See the commentary by Süleyman Seyfi Öğün, "Neyzenlerin Kutbu Niyazi Sayın," *Yeni Safak*, 28 May 2012, <http://yenisafak.com.tr/Yazarlar/?t=28.05.2012&y=SuleymanSeyfiOgun>.

²⁵ Erdağ Göknaar, *Orhan Pamuk, Secularism and Blasphemy: The Politics of the Turkish Novel* (London: Routledge, 2013), 113, 117.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

musician Süleyman Erguner (1902–53) to join him (and his son Ulvi Erguner) in the weekly “Instrumental Pieces on the Ney” program, which encouraged an appreciation of the *ney* sound for wider audiences. The program repertoires included not only instrumental works in the forms of *peşrev* (instrumental prelude) and *saz semaisi* (instrumental postlude), but also the vocal genres of Mevlevi *ayini* and *ilahis* (religious hymns), purposefully played without their lyrics. This discretionary tactic enabled *ney* artists to feature various examples of the religious repertoire in the program, even as it illustrates the continuing pressures upon, and even censorship of, religious music at the time. This despite the election of a supposedly more religion-sympathetic Democrat Party to government in Turkey’s first multi-party poll in 1950.

Following thirty years of an influential performance career on the radio, Sayın’s institutional life changed its course when he became a *ney* teacher at the new Conservatory of Turkish Music at Istanbul Technical University in 1975, the first time the republic facilitated the learning of Ottoman music. In the sections to follow, we discuss how both radio and the conservatory enabled Sayın to generate and shape new intimate publics in post-1950s Turkey, as his *ney* gently asserted a sonic influence over the aesthetic life of what became known as Ottoman-Turkish classical music.

The Ney Before and After Sayın

There is wide consensus among classical musicians in Turkey today that *ney* history has two parts, before and after Niyazi Sayın.²⁹ His intervention in the instrument’s biography has been so significant that today the aesthetics of *ney* playing cannot be imagined without him. How did he restart the *ney*’s timeline?

In the first place, Sayın innovated in central elements of its style, clustered around developments in pitch articulation, melodic structure, and tonal expression. Taken together, these changes transformed the aesthetic parameters of *ney* playing in the second half of the 20th century. Further, it was through his teaching of the first generation of *ney* players at the state conservatory that these aesthetic breakthroughs became the new orthodoxy in playing the instrument. Although it is difficult to find and listen to earlier recordings, it seems that before Sayın *ney* performance aesthetics were artistically less expressive, with a plain melodic style. Given that until 1925 the Sufi *tekkes* constituted the key sites of *ney* performance as well as its teaching and learning, it is no surprise that the instrument’s prestigious use in ritual musical contexts was influential in shaping its sound aesthetics. Known as “*tekke tavri*” (*tekke* style), this style was characterized by long, sustained sounds and a less ornamented melodic texture.³⁰

With the innovations he developed on his instrument (among other things, a new vibrato technique done with the lip, new fingering positions, ornamentation techniques adapted to the *ney*, and rhythmic manipulation), Sayın not only expanded the technical possibilities of the *ney*, but also pioneered a new way of playing that featured emotional richness and remarkable intricacy of melodic figuration. As he opted for a more lyrical and technically agile performance style, his sound did not lose its tonal quality. Indeed, a prime aspect of his virtuosity was the extraordinary sense of nuance he crafted in pitch articulation, a skill honed through years of aural discipline, listening to the recordings of the great multi-instrumentalist and composer Tanburi Cemil Bey (1873–1916).³¹ The command of pitch subtleties that Sayın accomplished on the notoriously recalcitrant reed—an instrument that

²⁹ See Sema Özbek’s interview with Niyazi Sayın published in *Zeck Magazine*, 23 October 2008, accessed 24 January 2022, <http://neyniyaz.blogspot.com/2008/10/niyazi-sayin-zeck-dergisi-rportaj.html>; see also Ayvazoğlu, *Neyin Sırrı*, 102.

³⁰ Behar, *Osmanlı/Türk Musikisinin*, 102–3.

³¹ On the topic of virtuosity in Ottoman-Turkish classical music, *ibid.*, 67–104. For specific references to Sayın’s virtuosity, see pages 102–3.

defies standardization with respect to both tuning and playing—and the ease with which he interwove pleasurable relationships between pitches across a large terrain of tonal areas have given an extraordinary emotional effect to his renditions.³²

These virtuosic elements are easily recognizable in Sayın's improvisatory solos (*taksim*), the musical form that gives players the greatest freedom to demonstrate their skill in attuning listeners to the mood of a certain melodic mode (*makam*). The masterful assembly of his improvisations brings listeners into a whole new experience as he creates and resolves tension by means of unpredictable melodic phrasings, brilliantly executed contrapuntal traversing of octaves, and dramatic tonal variations, combined with his unique sonority and unmatched breath control. Even some of his shortest solos performed on radio programs under time pressure reveal a high degree of aesthetic complexity.³³ With current circulation via the Internet, today Sayın's historic *taksims* are regarded as key educational aural "texts" for learning the musical modes of Ottoman classical music.³⁴ Their second life testifies to Stokes's insight that "recordings are not simply inert objects of social scientific or historical inquiry. They are energetic and conversational creatures, alive to us in time and in space."³⁵

Second, Sayın's musical contribution goes beyond bringing new breath and breadth to the *ney*. Along with his long-standing artistic companion *tanbur* virtuoso Necdet Yaşar, he also radically enlarged the scope of *makam* music's aesthetic possibilities (Fig. 2).³⁶ Over the years, Sayın and Yaşar also performed with the Istanbul Municipal Conservatory ensemble under the directorship of composer-vocalist Münir Nurettin Selçuk (1900–81). The bimonthly concerts of this chorus held at Şan Sineması attracted sellout audiences in the 1960s and 1970s and were broadcast live on the radio. These ensemble concerts were vital in disseminating the remarkable musical understanding that Sayın and Yaşar developed as early as the 1950s. The musical form that was the artistic pinnacle of this shared understanding became "joint *taksim*" (*müşterek taksim*).

"We chose to display our compositional skill in the form of *taksim* performance," remarks Necdet Yaşar in one interview, tracing their first experiment with joint improvisation back to an informal house gathering they attended in Istanbul in the mid-1950s.³⁷ Transforming this form into a sublime art, throughout the 1960s and 1970s the duo made it the highlight of their stage concerts.³⁸ As ethnomusicologist Frederick Stubbs emphasizes, their improvised melodies followed "a strategy of conversational phrasing that overlap[ped] progressively to

³² Sayın also acknowledges the role of the microphone in enhancing the intonational precision and nuance of his pitches. See Ünalı's interview with Sayın in Tolga Ünalı, "2000'li Yıllarda Türkiye'de Ney Sazı, Tavırları ve Bu Tavırların Belli Başlı İcracıları" (master's thesis, Yıldız Technical University, Istanbul, 2008), 25.

³³ Sayın's improvisatory solo in the Uşşak mode is a succinct example. Recorded at Istanbul Radio, this solo runs for just over a minute. Sayın's execution of a nearly 25-second-long legato movement gives a virtuosic quality to this unparalleled articulation of the mode; Niyazi Sayın, "Uşşak Taksim," YouTube video, 15 February 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kutm977gRSw>.

³⁴ For example, see the musicological work prepared by Neyzen Ahmet Toz that provides a detailed transcription of the solos of Sayın collected for the *Sada* album. Toz writes that he designed this book as a "visual atlas to the extraordinary artistic skill of this legendary *neyzen*," whose solos have played "an important role in the musical development of many *neyzens* and other instrumentalists"; Ahmet Toz, *Niyazi Sayın'ın Taksimlerinde İcrayı Oluşturan Elemanların Transkripsiyonu* (Istanbul: Pan, 2013), cover page.

³⁵ Stokes, *Republic of Love*, 8.

³⁶ Musical cooperation between these two great figures went back to the early 1950s when they both served in the Classical Chorus led by Mesud Cemil (1902–63) at Istanbul Radio. Son of beloved composer Tanburi Cemil Bey, Mesud Cemil not only passed along his father's legacy but played a significant role in both musicians' lives as artistic and spiritual guide. Sayın articulates this in a speech he delivered in 2012: Niyazi Sayın, "Tanburî Cemil Bey Hakkındaki Konuşması," YouTube video, 15 June 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATa2CgN6GZg>.

³⁷ Interview with Necdet Yaşar; "Necdet Yaşar: Niyazi Sayın'la Ses Uyumumuzun Sırrı Sarıkız'da Saklı," Müzik Söyleşileri, 7 September 2013, <https://muziksoylesileri.net/klasik-turk-muzigi/niyazi-sayinla-ses-uyumumuzun-sirri-sarikizda-sakli>.

³⁸ See Poulos's analysis of how listening to Cemil Bey's recordings shaped the musical understanding and joint *taksims* of Sayın and Özgen; Panagiotis Poulos, "Rethinking Orality in Turkish Classical Music: A Genealogy of Contemporary Musical Assemblages," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 4 (2011): 164–83.



Figure 2. Niyazi Sayın (left) and Necdet Yaşar, Toronto, 1980. Image courtesy of Niyazi Sayın.

form short moments of polyphony” rather than opting for a typical question-answer format.³⁹ The result was a vibrant sound with an intricate tonal texture and distinctive contrapuntal and harmonic effects. The aesthetic complexity and emotional power of their joint improvisations ascended to a new level when the sound of İhsan Özgen’s (1942–2021) *kemençe* (short bowed fiddle) joined them. In the late 1970s, the instrumental performances of this legendary trio aired on Istanbul Radio, and their stage concerts were highly valued among performers and audiences of the “classical” genre.

Musicologist Eleni Kallimopoulou reports that, in the 1980s, the joint voice of these virtuosos also was influential in triggering artistic curiosity in neighboring Greece.⁴⁰ Urban musicians there began to innovate with similar musical experiments which, despite the denials of a common Ottoman patrimony in both countries, were similarly enticing and significant for listeners. Stokes tells us that in metaphorizing the nation as a multiethnic “mosaic” in her 1994 breakthrough album *Işık Doğudan Yükselir* (Light Rises from the East), Sezen Aksu cautiously appealed to an alternative multiethnic history for Anatolia, even if she did not sing in Kurdish or other languages.⁴¹ Sayın’s music became cosmopolitan in a different and more practical sense. It enabled Greek musicians to re-hear a shared Ottoman aural genre and appropriate elements of it for their own musical tradition, against the official Hellenism of the Greek state. It was not just the virtuosic skill of Sayın and Yaşar that appealed, but their distinct performance and ensemble style that enabled the timbral nuances of each instrument to be heard and appreciated. Like the artists written about by Stokes, Sayın too is part of a “broader history of Turkish music,” given that his music is “listened to outside Turkey, by non-Turks, . . . [making him] part of other people’s music history.”⁴²

³⁹ Frederick W. Stubbs, “The Art and Science of Taksim: An Empirical Analysis of Traditional Improvisation from 20th-Century Istanbul” (PhD diss., Wesleyan University, 1994), 248.

⁴⁰ Eleni Kallimopoulou, *Paradosiaká: Music, Meaning and Identity in Modern Greece* (London: Ashgate, 2009), 118.

⁴¹ Stokes, *Republic of Love*, 131.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 14.

It was precisely this performance style that enabled Sayın, along with his musical partners, to generate a new sense of musical intimacy both at home and abroad. Cem Behar identifies the standardization that the performance practices of Ottoman classical music had been subject to during the Republic.⁴³ This is most strikingly seen in the big choruses and ensembles, led by a symphonic music-style conductor, that characterized the sterilized performance world of *makam* music. The dynamism, spontaneity, and explorative freedom articulated by the chamber music-style aesthetics of Sayın's music fashioned a sonic community that appreciated this distilled re-sounding of Ottoman music. In decluttering sonic space, Sayın shockingly—against the claims of the Kemalist cultural revolution—reminded his listeners of this music's adaptability and openness.⁴⁴

Against official Republican arrangements, this new musical style facilitated at the same time a different historical consciousness. Neither a restoration of an "authentic" Ottoman-Islamic tradition, nor a tradition-free, modernist creation that rejected continuity with the past, Sayın's musical work is even today characterized by the artist as creative engagement with Ottoman music, as well as bringing it into contact with other music traditions. Indeed, Sayın greatly esteemed the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and Amadeus Mozart and had pictures of both in his conservatory room.⁴⁵

An Exemplary Teacher

But the significance of Sayın's musical projects further than his artistic excellence as a music performer and innovator. Sayın's role as a model teacher is often noted in describing him as the greatest *neyzen* of the age, and the term "service" (*hizmet*) is commonly used to describe his teaching. The musical self he crafted as a teacher contributed to changing representations of the Turkish musical past, generated through his educating and inspiring of a new generation of *ney* musicians in Istanbul. This is revealed in the narratives of "exemplary figure" that publicly circulate and create meaning about Sayın's work. There is a citizenly dimension to these narratives.

Take, for example, the following remark by Nevzat Atlığ (1925–), the founder and long-time director of the State Choir for Classical Turkish Music (now the Presidential Choir). After recounting how Sayın transformed *ney* artistry, Atlığ says: "For many years Niyazi Sayın has imbued hundreds of students with enthusiasm for the magical instrument of our music. To me, this feature of Sayın is one of the greatest and most significant services ever done to our *musiki*. We have so few artists like him who have set themselves to be a guide (*rehber*) of their instrument and who have managed to make their instrument loved by many."⁴⁶

Multiple elements contribute to this narrative of service. First, one might note the timing of Sayın's conservatory career. Sayın took up the invitation to become the first *ney* teacher at the newly founded state conservatory in Istanbul in 1975, at the height of his fame as a performer and when he had built a rare international reputation for a classical musician. In 1980, after returning from the US where together with his duo partner, Necdet Yaşar, he had spent a year as a visiting teacher at the University of Washington in Seattle, he withdrew from public performances and reconfigured his professional life as a teacher. He taught there for twenty-five years.

⁴³ Cem Behar, *Klasik Türk Musikisi Üzerine Denemeler* (Istanbul: Bağlam, 1987), 65–82.

⁴⁴ Ibid. On musicological analyses of how Sayın exploited the openness of Ottoman-Turkish classical music, see, for example, Stubbs, "The Art and Science of Taksim"; and Hazar Ertürk and Aslihan Özel, "Neyzen Salih Dede'nin Acemaşiran Peşrevinin Niyazi Sayın'ın İcra Özellikleri ile Oluşan Farklı Versiyonlarının Tespiti," *Ahenk Müzikoloji Dergisi* 4 (2019), 55–80.

⁴⁵ Bekir Şahin Baloğlu, "Şimdiki Zamanda Geçmiş Kurmak: Tanburi Cemil Bey ve Niyazi Sayın Tarafından" (paper presented at Güzel Sanatlar Eğitimi, Toplum Bilimler Etkileşimi Sempozyumu, Istanbul, 2017).

⁴⁶ Ergun Balcı, *Nevzat Atlığ, Mûsikîgimizle Övünmemiz İçin* (Istanbul: Kubbealtı Neşriyatı, 2004), 81–82.

Even years after his official retirement from his teaching position in 2005, he continued to visit the conservatory, dedicating time to listen to the playing of willing students. It was during one of his occasional visits, in 2012, that we first met Sayın. Banu ran into him crossing the quadrangle. Gathering up her courage she told him that she was taking lessons from one of his former students, and they went inside to chat. Halfway through their conversation, which typically spanned every topic but the *ney*, a student knocked on the door. Upon learning that he had come from France to spend a semester at the conservatory, Sayın nodded his head, giving him permission to play. After listening to the young man's playing of a long instrumental piece from beginning to end, rather than damning or praising his performance, Sayın said: "Music is the spiritual (*manevi*) relationship between any two notes, at least, that's how I describe it to my *talebes*. Put the score away and spend time listening to Tanburi Cemil Bey."

But the conservatory was not the only place where Sayın taught. Indeed, long before he became an employed teacher there, he had opened up his house in Üsküdar to *talebes* who wanted to learn from him. The personal narratives of these pupils, some of whom are leading *ney* artists today, provide us with a variety of examples that testify to Sayın's musical self and go beyond the communitarian meaning embedded in the public narrative of *hizmet*. For example, in the following comment Sayın's most senior student, Neyzen Ömer Erdoğan (1949–), underscores how the virtue of his master's generosity established him as a model to emulate:

I started going to Niyazi Hoca in 1965. He used to live in Üsküdar then, in an old, two-story, wooden house remaining from his father . . . Hoca is a highly knowledgeable person, of course. When he was growing up in Üsküdar, he spent time with significant Sufi figures from the late Ottoman years. He would tell us about the renowned calligrapher Necmeddin Okyay, who also was the imam of the Yeni Valide mosque in Üsküdar, and Nafiz Uncu Efendi (1887–1958), the imam of the İskele mosque. Both were great hafiz of their time . . . Hoca was always generous to us, always hospitable. His house never lacked visitors. It is that generosity, his morals that give his *ney* its exceptional sound. When we used to go to his house, we were not allowed to take even a box of *lokum* with us. "You will come empty-handed," we would be told. He accepted nothing, but only gave. It is that generosity that makes up the sound of Niyazi Sayın's *ney*.⁴⁷

Erdoğan is not alone in giving us an intimate account of how Sayın influenced his students beyond mere musical development. Neyzen Bülent Özbek, another acclaimed artist who had become a student of Sayın in the late 1970s, remarked: "Even the way Hoca walks on the stage is a source of morals for us. He enters the stage in complete humility (*tevazu*). His body says to his audience: 'I take you seriously' (*Bir muhatabım var*)."⁴⁸

These insights provide us with firsthand testimony of the exemplary role Sayın played in the lives of his students, becoming a model for their own social relationships. Moreover, in taking his students around Istanbul as an aspect of mastering the *ney*, his classroom extended beyond the house to the city. "Hoca would want us to know where to eat the best *kurufasulye* (white beans) or where to find the best coffee in the city," says Neyzen Salih Bilgin, who was not only one of Sayın's first students at the conservatory but in the 1980s and 1990s also worked with him for years at his Üsküdar home. "We had great lessons with him walking around Tahtakale and Beyazit," he remembers, recounting how Sayın would involve students in his visits to secondhand markets in and around the city.⁴⁹ Discovering where to find the best *ebru* paint or calligraphy pen were things that one

⁴⁷ Personal conversation with Erdoğan, 10 December 2013, Istanbul.

⁴⁸ Personal conversation with Özbek, 1 June 2014, Istanbul.

⁴⁹ Personal conversation with Bilgin, 5 November 2016, Istanbul.

would learn as part of the musical apprenticeship. For these young musicians, becoming a *neyzen* also involved learning how to cook, how to sew, how to make prayer beads, how to repair old objects, and how to make a *ney* and its mouthpiece (*başpare*).

Equally importantly, these joint activities and lessons in attention enabled students to inhabit Istanbul in a certain way, to constitute a significance in its parts and to shape its meanings for themselves. Students were encouraged to constitute and use the city as a workshop, where purchasing the right goods for the right purposes was an intrinsic aspect of developing artistic mastery. Here, we suggest, was an education in an alternative citizenship of craft-skill, one that helped students become makers of objects themselves, inhabiting Istanbul through its artisanal affordances and by appreciating the use value of its things. As in Sufism more generally, pleasure (*keyif*) and discovery (*keşif*) were closely related, as teacher and students purposefully navigated the densely ordered urban conglomeration to make practical use of its possibilities, its artisans and material qualities.

A Gendered Pedagogy

What type of sponsored familiarity with the city is this? Is it that of the *flâneur*, a “new figure of intimacy that made an appearance in Turkish popular culture in the mid-1990s: a melancholic wanderer contemplating the cityscape”?⁵⁰ Stokes notes how the Greater Istanbul Municipality under the AKP recruited the melancholic wanderer as “exemplary citizen and urbanite” in its neoliberal transformation of Istanbul’s cityscape.⁵¹ One of its initiatives was to inscribe on newly placed benches overlooking Istanbul’s famous beauty spots equally well-known poems and songs written about the city from those very perspectives. The poems present the point of view of a male *flâneur*, who in his pleasurable strolling in the modern city watches a feminized Istanbul alongside his encounters with the sights and sounds of a rapidly changing cityscape.⁵²

Is there any correspondence between the civility of the masculine *flâneur* encouraged by the AKP and the urban pedagogy of Niyazi Sayın?

Clearly there is a gendered dimension to Sayın’s teaching of an artisanal citizenship, given that in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s it was overwhelmingly young men who attended both the conservatory and his home classroom. Nevertheless, we do not think that the practical engagement with the city modeled by his own exemplary dwelling overlaps with the romantic masculine intimacy that attends to Istanbul and its districts as a feminized and often lost love object. Neither does Sayın seek to foster in pious students an Islamic melancholy that would constitute and animate the heterogenous Kemalist city as Muslim space by “foregrounding Muslim elements and backgrounding other elements, by designating certain elements as significant and others as unimportant, and by visiting felicitous Muslim spaces.”⁵³

By contrast, Sayın’s lessons to his young male students in “domestic” skills fostered a different more pragmatic and practical way of being an urbane citizen and perhaps, also, a different, less romantic or alienated, mood of urban habitation. A core dimension of the ethical values embodied by Sayın himself involves more expansive understandings of masculinity. In valuing the competences performed in everyday practices like cooking or sewing that are often associated with women’s work in Turkey, and in offering a firsthand model for cultivating such skills, Sayın presented an alternative way of becoming a man (*adam olmak*) in Istanbul, where subjects’ gendered dispositions and natural attitudes also are powerfully

⁵⁰ Stokes, *Republic of Love*, 147.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁵² A more recent literature examines the possibilities and differences of the female *flâneuse*. See, for example, Aruna D’Souza and Tom McDonough, eds. *The Invisible Flâneuse? Gender, Public Space and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2006).

⁵³ Heiko Henkel, “The Location of Islam: Inhabiting Istanbul in a Muslim Way,” *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 1 (2007): 58.

shaped by compulsory male military conscription, the nationalist education system, a privileging patriarchy, and mass media.

Did these perceptual modifications sponsored in *ney* players through participation in Sayın's lessons have a long-term effect on students? The continuation of many of his practices in the teaching of his senior students is testimony that they did. "No matter whether you are a man or a woman, a *neyzen* should know how to cook," Neyzen Bilgin instructs his students. The musical apprenticeship offered to a new generation of *ney* students at his Üsküdar-based Hezarfen Ney School goes through the kitchen.⁵⁴ Teaching both men and women, Bilgin's skillful integration of cooking and commensality in the daily life of his school is itself a consequence of an earlier ethical transformation that he went through during two decades of an intense learning relationship with Sayın (Fig. 3).

The observations of Denise Gill in her study of Ottoman classical musicians in present-day Istanbul offers further insight into the extended influence of Sayın. Gill discusses her fieldwork with a particular circle of musicians and Islamic artisans in Üsküdar, who gather to enact the social practice of *muhabbet* (intimate companionship-in-conversation), involving pleasurable conversing, playing music, and listening. Niyazi Sayın is not only deeply familiar to this circle of people, but occasionally participates in the impromptu *muhabbet* events that take place in a pedestrian side street not far from where he lives. According to Gill, for these men "Sayın embodies an archetypal model of self-fashioning."⁵⁵ The point she develops is worth quoting:

While Niyazi Sayın no longer publicly plays the ney, attending to his narration of past musicians, hearing his jokes and anecdotes, watching him play backgammon with select *muhabbet* makers outdoors in the warmer months, and hearing his opinions on morality and aesthetics reflect the way *muhabbet* functions as a communal iteration of a master-apprentice relationship. In interviews, many men told me of their sincere desire to create themselves in Sayın's image, to mirror him and become [like him] an *insan-i kamil* (complete person).⁵⁶

This observation is striking for a number of reasons. First of all, it affirms that Sayın's exemplary masculinity is integral to the narrative of an alternative citizenship that surrounds him. According to Gill, this alternative masculinity, practiced through *muhabbet*, desires and values the virtues of subordination and humility, as well as the ability to be sensitive and vulnerable before others. What we find here, Gills says, is a type of masculinity "perceived by the men as a viable alternative to the options of being a man offered by the Turkish state, formations of secularism, or political Islamisms."⁵⁷

Second, as we noted earlier, Sayın's emergence as a voice of cultural intimacy has involved a different temporality than the musical figures, and their historical eras, analyzed by Stokes. Gill's observation reveals the continuing force of Sayın's constitution of an alternative citizenship—and alternative masculinity—among a new generation of classical musicians in present-day Istanbul, a circle that extends far beyond those *ney* artists educated firsthand by Sayın. His particular urban civility finds explicit articulation in the Islamic honorific title *insan-i kamil*, collectively bestowed upon him by his musical peers, literally, a "complete person" or "perfect human." Shahab Ahmed notes the deep-rooted religious and spiritual Sufi overtones that inhere in this phrase.⁵⁸ *insan-i kamil* is not the only

⁵⁴ See Banu Şenay's monograph on Hezarfen, *Musical Islam: The Art of Playing the Ney* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2020).

⁵⁵ Denise Gill, "Listening, Muhabbet, and the Practice of Masculinity," *Ethnomusicology* 62, no. 2 (2018): 180.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 182, 191.

⁵⁸ Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 20, 79. According to Ahmed, *insan-i kamil* is "the perfect *self* and the perfect *knower*, his perfect knowledge is precisely perfect self-knowledge" (333).



Figure 3. Cooking preparations at Hezarfen. Neyzen Salih Bilgin is second on the right. Photograph by Turgut Dalar, 2017.

honorific title used to talk about Sayın. He also is only the second *neyzen* in Ottoman-Turkish history (after the 18th-century Mevlevi *ney* player Osman Dede, d. 1730) to earn the title *kutb-ı nayı*, meaning “the musical spiritual axis of his time.”⁵⁹ Both of these Sufi titles of recognition confirm that there is more to his artistry than musical excellence, given that they acknowledge his mastery of the religious art of living.

The Spiritual Ney?

Even in his nineties Sayın still occasionally meets with *ney* students. One Saturday morning we were invited to a social breakfast at a tea garden in Istanbul’s Küçük Çamlıca, where an older *neyzen* taught by Sayın organized his own class to meet his mentor face-to-face. There were twenty or so young men and women in their early twenties, mostly students at various Istanbul universities. After breakfast, these young *ney* enthusiasts were given permission to ask questions of Sayın.

“Hocam, is it possible to think of the *ney* as a musical instrument only?” asked one. “Isn’t the *ney* different from other instruments in some way?”

“What is our religion’s position on music?” asked another.

“Could you say a few words on the relationship between spirituality (*maneviyat*) and the *ney*?” a third wanted to know.

Each of the questions were concerned with the extramusical meanings of the *ney*, presuming its possession of an authentic Islamic “spiritual” cache. Indeed, since the 2000s (and even earlier) a sonic and sentimental connection between the *ney*, sufi Islam, world music, and spirituality has flourished both globally and in Turkey, all contributing to the popularity of the instrument and new musical genres (e.g., sufi music) connected to it.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ See the commentary by Süleyman Seyfi Öğün, “Neyzenlerin Kutbu Niyazi Sayın,” *Yeni Safak*, 28 May 2012, <http://yenisafak.com.tr/Yazarlar/?t=28.05.2012&y=SuleymanSeyfiOgun>.

⁶⁰ In her article “The Fall and Rise of the Ney,” Şenay traces the varied reasons for this huge interest in the *ney* since the 1980s. She notes that in Turkey, despite the continuing illegal status of the sufi lodges, there has been “a

Uneasy with his audience's hyper-spiritualization and Islamization of the instrument, Sayın answered each supposition negatively:

The sound of every instrument is the sound of God (*Hak sedasidir*). To get a sound from the *ney*, a good sound must come from you first (*önce sizden güzel ses çıkacak*). You are the instrument (*Enstrüman sizsiniz*).

In deliberately downplaying the significance of the “spiritual *ney*,” Sayın challenged his listeners by shifting emphasis from the “instrument *ney*” to the “real *ney*,” the human being. One has to work first on oneself to achieve a forceful sound in life. Then one can play the *ney*. The language Sayın uses here seeks to integrate the sound of the *ney* with the “sound” of the human. In keeping with a consistent theme in his life, Sayın incorporates skilled competence in music, or in arts more generally, with how one lives one's life as a whole.

This connection exists beyond his spoken words. His life performs this artistic-ethical understanding that links excellence in arts with one's labors in life. Over and beyond the exceptional standard he created in music, Sayın was skilled in a large array of craft practices, from water marbling to carving wood, from bookbinding to making prayer beads, from growing roses to caring for pigeons, to photography, and inlaid pearl shells. All of these earned him a third honorific title of respect and admiration from his peers, a title that gestures to the defining characteristics of his musically intimate citizenship: *hezarfен*, or “master of a thousand arts.”

Typically, the title does not stop Sayın from describing himself or subjectively perceiving his own position in the world as a *talebe*. *Talebes* submit to their teachers. This is how he put it to us during an interview: “If you plant a flower and watch it grow each day, that too teaches you something. We have to constantly work on ourselves. I am eighty-seven years old now, but I am still learning. I am a *talebe*. ‘From cradle to grave’ (*beşikten mezara*), says our Prophet. I will continue to learn from cradle to grave.”⁶¹

Here, in prioritizing becoming and learning over being and position, he not only makes a claim about how “to live a pleasurable life,” but demonstrates an ethos that values doing the best one can do, an ethos that applies to living in the city and taking pleasure from its affordances, as well as from the qualities of its material craft objects.⁶² This ethos also applies to Sayın's fashioning of himself as a Muslim. In the intentions that constitute his religion, working on oneself, striving to get a good sound from the “human” *ney*, is an obligation that comes with being a Divine creation. “We must work hard to explore why we (*insan*) are precious (*kıymetli*),” he remarked during our interview. “*Insan* are precious because God created us in his own image.” His emphasis is on the endeavor of self-exploration and self-alteration as a means for attaining Divine knowledge. Thus, when Sayın says to his pious young audience that “you [not the *ney*] are the instrument,” he is creating meaning about what it means to be a Muslim in the world.

Conclusion

Accepting his Grand Award (for art and culture), Niyazi Sayın gives a brief response. He first warmly thanks the President. And then he concludes brusquely, saying:

There is a Qur'anic verse inscribed on the coffin: “*Küllü nefsin zaiketu'l- mevt*” (Every soul shall have a taste of death). The *nefs* (soul) dies, it says, but not the human being (*insan*).

complex co-opting of ‘Sufism’ by both the Turkish state (in the form of the Tourism and Culture Ministry) and governments at both national and local level”; Banu Şenay, “The Fall and Rise of the *Ney*: From the Sufi Lodge to the World Stage,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 23 (2014): 418.

⁶¹ Personal interview with Sayın, 26 March 2014, Istanbul.

⁶² This phrase is used by Ottoman music historian Murat Bardakçı in “The World of Niyazi Sayın,” *Habertürk*, 3 February 2010, <https://www.haberturk.com/yazarlar/murat-bardakci/225171-niyazi-sayinin-dunyasi>.

Insan never dies, and *insan* will never die, because it is the most excellent of all works of the Supreme Being. From God we expect everything. We are meant to know ourselves and then know the one that is to be known. As you know, there is a hadith saying, “*Men arefe nefsehu fekad arefe rabbehu*” (He who knows himself knows God).

The speech is extraordinary. In a night aggressively celebrating the national essence, Sayın shows no interest in becoming a cultural ambassador for Turkish Islamic culture. Nor does he enlist in the President’s constitution of an affective community of pride and victimhood by taking up and inhabiting the position of the great artist of the mis-recognized and mistreated Muslim Turkish Nation. Free, too, from the modernist anxieties that have characterized and sometimes plagued Turkish Republicanism (as seen in Tanpınar), Sayın refuses to engage with Tayyip Erdoğan’s polarizing address.

Instead Sayın references creaturely-ness as a shared human ontology. Equally universally, and perhaps even more centrally, he also emphasizes self-knowledge as a means to experience and perceive the Divine: “Whosoever knows himself knows his Lord.” Shahab Ahmed reminds us that this famous hadith has for centuries served as a “Sufi motto.”⁶³ For the lineage of Niyazi Sayın and his students, and for those in a much wider public familiar with him, it is his exploration of the potential of music to facilitate self-knowledge that inspires and enables them to consider other identities and ways of becoming a citizen-person.

The musical life of Niyazi Sayın, then, allows us to broaden discussion of cultural intimacy in Turkey, given that, like Zeki Müren, Sayın has been praised for his “ideal citizenship.” Yet Sayın’s is of a different kind. First, his musical life has provided an ethical example of how to dwell in Istanbul. The sound of his *ney*, his remaking of Ottoman music, his life as a teacher, and his skillful way of living have mediated for countless people alternative identifications of self and of nation. For some of his students, his dedication to teaching is seen as a crucial contribution to a different sociability and culture-making. As one *neyzen* said, “There is only one *hoca*, and he says that he is a *talebe*. . . He doesn’t view music instrumentally (i.e., as a product designed for the market to make money), but embraces its service.”⁶⁴

For others, his musical self is important for its radical reclamation of the role of the local in contributing to artistic-ethical formation. This locality is not Istanbul (or Üsküdar) as “mere” places of beauty, but rather of historical forms of sociality and pedagogy that inhabit places and that places foster. The distinction can be clarified by referencing both Yahya Kemal’s “Aziz Istanbul” poem and his other writings on the city, which not only celebrate Istanbul for its feminine beauty but more nationalistically also posit “Turkishness” (*Türklük*) as the source of its perfection.⁶⁵ Stokes summarizes some of the recent discourses that Istanbul’s emergence as a global city facilitates: “For Turkish Islamists ‘global Istanbul’ endorses a nostalgic vision of an Islamic social order supervised by Turks, free from petty ethnic squabbles and the ravages of modern capitalism. For secularists it resurrects Istanbul as the cosmopolitan and polyglot intellectual center it was before secular modernists relocated the capital to Ankara.”⁶⁶

Neither of these capture the nuances of Sayın’s nonparochial localism that rejects melancholy as an urban affect and explores the artisanal pleasures of living in Istanbul and becoming a model citizen. Sayın’s life and music help us hear that such binary thinking is redundant. In acknowledging his nourishment from a local religious musical milieu we do

⁶³ Ahmed, *What Is Islam?* 333. One of Ahmed’s concerns is to alert readers to the centrality of the idea of the self for Muslims in what he calls the “Balkans-to-Bengal complex” in Islam’s “post-formative” period from 1350 to 1850. Indeed, he asserts that when we think of Islam, “we should concomitantly think of the meaningful exploration of the self with its associated components of self-awareness, of personhood, of identity” (341).

⁶⁴ See Ögün, “Neyzenlerin Kutbu Niyazi Sayın.”

⁶⁵ See, for example, the ugly chauvinistic essay “Thesis for a Turk Istanbul Conference,” in Yahya Kemal, *Aziz Istanbul* (Istanbul: Istanbul Fethi Cemiyeti, 1964), 78.

⁶⁶ Stokes, *Republic of Love*, 11.

not need to deny his appropriation of a modernist freedom to experiment on the entities of his society.

In short, in all of this, there is the sound of Niyazi Sayın's *ney*, sonic equivalent of the tip of an iceberg. Below it, unheard but sensed, is a multiple and expansive soundscape, suggesting alternative possibilities of being Turkish, of being modern, of being religious, and of being from Istanbul.

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