

A “Local and National” Issue: The Place of Turkish National Opera in Opera Education in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between opera education and Turkish national opera in Turkey is significant and has also been overlooked. National Opera and opera education, which came into being after the foundation of the Republic, are far from where they should be today when we look at the ninety years it has left behind. Turkish operas are rarely staged on Turkey’s opera stages. And in this case, it is also rare to come across operas among the works of Turkish composers. The place occupied by Turkish opera in opera education is equally small.

This article examines Turkish opera and opera education’s historical roots, artistic content, and interrelationships. The study’s primary aim is to reveal the current situation’s problematic aspects and make suggestions to solve these problems. According to the results, the problems are quite numerous and deep. With the help of the sources used, an attempt has been made to reveal the reasons for the problems. The conclusion and suggestion section aims to draw attention to the existence of these problems and to close the gap between Turkish opera and Turkish opera education with suggestions. The study shows a qualitative character.

Keywords: Turkish Opera, Opera in Turkish Language, Turkish Opera Education, National Opera

Introduction

Thanks to its multifaceted richness, opera is at the forefront of performing arts both in terms of providing high aesthetic perception and as a political power. It dramatizes the stages that humanity has gone through for four centuries with complex and intense music and thus has proven to be an immortal art. The fact that opera art was the art that most effectively reflected national feelings and the struggles for independence given for them at the time when nation states emerged is one of the turning points in music history.

Turkish opera, which started to live with the republic in Turkey, is in a promising but still crawling position with its composed works, high-quality artists, and ever-increasing audience. Another thing that started to live with the republic is that opera became a part of art education with modern methods in an inclusive and specialized way. In the contemporary Turkish state, where national consciousness is at the forefront, this intensive and qualified education, which aims to create a unique opera that is oriented towards the West but unique to this state and its nation, is born with great ideals, but today it is nowhere near being unique.

Objectives Of the Study

The relationship between opera education in Turkey and the Turkish opera tradition is complex. Although opera as an art form has a rich global history, its integration into the Turkish educational context has faced unique challenges. This article will examine these challenges and explore the historical, cultural, and institutional factors that shape this dynamic. Furthermore, it will make recommendations to close the existing gap and develop a more vibrant and inclusive approach to opera education in Turkey.

1- National Opera:

According to Ther, national opera played an important role in nation-building, especially in Central Europe in the 19th century. National operas served as a powerful tool for creating a shared sense of national identity. By using local languages, historical narratives, and folk songs, these operas helped to solidify a sense of belonging

and cultural unity among diverse populations. According to him, national opera provides a platform for expressing and representing a nation's unique cultural values, traditions, and historical experiences. This artistic expression serves as a powerful symbol of national pride and cultural distinctiveness. Operas also often serve as a vehicle for political and social commentary, reflecting a nation's contemporary concerns and aspirations. They are used to promote patriotic sentiment, challenge existing power structures, or advocate for social change. By using local languages, national operas make the art form more accessible to a wider audience and encourage a sense of cultural ownership and participation. This accessibility contributes to the popularization of opera and its integration into the broader cultural landscape. National operas also play a role in gaining international recognition and promoting cultural diplomacy. By showcasing a nation's unique artistic achievements, they help elevate the nation's cultural position on the global stage. (Ther, 2014)

Atatürk, the founder of the Republic, found both the country's musical culture and musical education to be very important within Turkey's ancient and colorful structure and elevated the issue of music to the highest level in establishing the national spirit. According to him, "The measure of a nation's new change is its ability to accept and comprehend music changes. The music that is attempted to be listened to today is far from being of a proud value; we should know this. It is necessary to collect high sayings and expressions that express national, delicate feelings and thoughts and to process them as soon as possible according to the latest general musical rules. Only at this level can Turkish national music rise and take its place in universal music." (1934 Parliament Opening Speech)

It would be appropriate to define the character of contemporary Turkish music, which was formed with such intense guidance by Atatürk, with the words of Uçan, one of Turkey's important music educator professors: "The musical revolution in Turkish musical life is a change from monophony to polyphony, in other words, a polarized "contemporary" civilization, while preserving the national essence, by uniting the East and the West. In the Republic of Turkey, Turkish musical culture has been re-founded, re-organized and re-institutionalized in line with the principles and purposes of renewal and westernization, modernization and universalization, while remaining Turkish" (Uçan, 2005, pp. 57-84).

This understanding in the national sense reveals how political culture and, therefore, art are. Concepts such as cultural unity, shared values, collective memory, and national consciousness, which constitute the national identity, are rooted and survive thanks to art. The contemporary Turkish state has also decided to follow this path.

2- Turkish National Opera and Opera in Turkish:

The history of Turkish opera is intertwined with the nation's complex cultural evolution. While Western opera influenced its development, Turkish opera has forged its path, drawing inspiration from traditional Turkish music, folklore, and literary works. The first Turkish opera, Özsoy, composed by Ahmed Adnan Saygun at Atatürk's request and with a libretto by Münir Hayri Egeli, premiered in 1934. The opera's theme, based on Firdavsi's Shahnameh, reflects a conscious effort to connect to a shared cultural heritage and foster friendship between Turkey and Iran. This event was a significant first step in the establishment of a distinct Turkish operatic identity.

Turkish opera, which emerged in the early 20th century, has been deeply influenced by the country's diverse musical traditions, including Ottoman classical music, Turkish folk music, and Western classical influences. This fusion of cultural elements has resulted in a distinct Turkish operatic style characterized by rich harmonies, complex rhythmic patterns, and strong emotional expressions. The integration of these elements not only reflects the country's cultural identity but also provides a unique opportunity for opera education to move beyond the traditional Western canon. (Fleeger, 2008)

The opera world has long been dominated by the works of European composers, with Italian, German, and French operas often taking center stage. However, Turkey's rich cultural fabric also has the potential to produce a unique and vibrant operatic tradition that is struggling to gain widespread recognition and appreciation. The main challenge facing Turkish opera with Turkish libretti is its lack of recognition and visibility within the broader operatic landscape. Furthermore, the perception of opera as an "elite and extravagant" art form further marginalizes the Turkish operatic tradition. Yet the unique cultural perspectives and narratives presented in Turkish works remain, with the potential to enrich and diversify the operatic canon. The value of Turkish opera is in its unique contribution to the operatic canon. It offers fresh perspectives, narratives, and musical idioms that enrich global opera. Turkish opera has the potential to bridge cultural gaps and foster understanding and appreciation among diverse communities. Integrating Turkish musical traditions and storytelling into the operatic framework creates a powerful medium for cultural expression and exchange. Furthermore, exploring Turkish opera provides valuable insights into the country's history, cultural values, and artistic sensibilities. (Learning with Opera: Options and Resources, 1979).

However, the Turkish opera industry faces a unique set of challenges stemming from fundamental differences between the linguistic traditions of classical European opera and the Turkish language. (Fleeger, 2008) One of the main problems is the striking contrast between the structure and phonetics of Italian and Turkish. Italian, the dominant language of classical opera, is known for its melodic fluidity and open vowel sounds, which lend itself well to the demands of opera singing. In contrast, Turkish is a Ural-Altaic language that relies more on a more complex vowel system and consonant clusters, presenting challenges for opera singers (Learning with Opera: Options and Resources, 1979).

Beyond this, the language problem in Turkish opera also affects the audience's interaction with the art form. Although Western operas staged with Turkified librettos for a certain period facilitated this interaction, this situation can be seen as a wrong interference in the artistic quality of the works in the art of opera, where libretto and music are closely linked. It was noticed and removed from the practice. Although today, a Turkish translation of the libretto is provided on a screen above the stage, it is clear that this practice also undermines the artistic pleasure of watching the stage. This linguistic barrier prevents the Turkish people from truly engaging with opera and causes them to perceive the art form as an alien and inaccessible art form, disconnected from the people's daily lives and cultural experiences. In addition, the people's difficulty in relating to the linguistic and cultural elements of the classical Western repertoire prevents opera from growing and becoming popular in the country. This linguistic gap is further exacerbated by the fact that the vast majority of Turkish opera education continues to be heavily influenced by European traditions. Many music teachers in Turkey have difficulty integrating opera into their curricula, viewing it as "exotic, elitist and exaggerated" and at odds with "purer forms of music." (Learning with Opera: Options and Resources, 1979) In this case, the need for Turkish operas composed by Turkish composers for the development and popularity of Turkish opera seems to be the most important and urgent situation facing this art today.

3- The Place of Turkish Opera in Opera Education in Turkey:

Modern opera education, which began in 1936 in Turkey at the Ankara State Conservatory, which was established within the Music Teachers' School and affiliated with it, has been in a position worthy of appreciation since then. Hundreds of Turkish opera artists, most notably Leyla Gencer, who has taken part in the world's most important opera stages, have made their voices heard throughout the world. With its unique location under various geographical influences and deep history, Turkey has a rich source of talent to train opera artists. The program and implementation of opera education are no different from its examples in the West. This course aims to provide the student with the vocal and respiratory skills and coordination required for opera singing in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grades of the Opera Main Branches of Today's Conservatories and to ensure that the student develops opera culture in practice by using the techniques taught under the supervision of a vocal instructor within the framework of the repertoire foreseen in the curriculum. The training given for 2 hours per week for four years includes breathing techniques, simple and improved voice exercises, ancient arias, lieds, Turkish pieces, oratorios, opera arias from every period, and opera arias with recitative. (İktu, 2008).

Although the information provided by İktu mentions that Turkish pieces are included in the opera training repertoire, the situation is not encouraging at all. Although the area covered by Turkish pieces in intensive training given for four years seems sufficient on paper, in practice, it is almost non-existent. Although the music revolution, one of the most important cultural revolutions of a national republic, has advanced considerably in terms of modernization and specialization, the national part of the work has been ignored. According to Yüksel's study on the place of Turkish works in opera education, 55% of the sample group consisting of opera educators in the study, in addition to stating that they use the works of Turkish composers in vocal education, think that the area allocated to the works of Turkish composers in the vocal education curriculum is limited. Again, 75% of this sample group thinks that Turkish works are not sufficiently suitable for vocal education. However, they think that students are willing and more successful in vocal lessons in vocal lessons. Again, 70% of this sample group thinks that the works of Turkish composers used in vocal education are not of international quality and that there are a limited number of works of Turkish composers to be used in vocal education. 85% of the majority stated that they have difficulty accessing printed sources consisting of the works of Turkish composers and that they cannot find enough works for different voice groups. (Yüksel, 2009)

These results reflect the sad state of the place of Turkish works in opera education. The relationship between Turkish national opera and opera education is a complex and multifaceted issue. Therefore, the importance of incorporating Turkish national opera into opera education curricula is immense. On the one hand, the development of a strong national opera tradition provides a foundation for comprehensive opera education programs by providing aspiring artists and audiences with a rich cultural heritage to draw on. More importantly, one of the key benefits of the relationship between Turkish national opera and opera education is its potential to preserve and disseminate culture. By integrating the study of Turkish opera into the music curriculum, students can gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of their national artistic heritage and a sense of cultural identity and pride. Furthermore, exposure to Turkish operatic works can encourage young artists to contribute to the ongoing evolution of the art form, ensuring that it remains relevant and vibrant within the country. On the other hand, by being exposed to the unique aesthetics and cultural nuances of Turkish opera, students can gain a deeper understanding of the diversity of their operatic traditions and challenge the traditional Eurocentric perspectives that have long dominated the field. (Fleeger, 2008)

However, the challenges faced by the Turkish opera industry, such as limited funding and lack of public interest, may also hinder the effectiveness and desirability of opera education. (Learning with Opera: Options and Resources, 1979) As stated in the article Reflections from a Matte Surface, the Turkish Higher Education System in Fine Arts has been faced with several challenges, including "the absence and in some cases the existence of mandatory legal frameworks, the role of art and art education in the university context, and the mutual and separate motivations of academics and students in the field. These systemic problems can directly

affect the quality and accessibility of opera education programs and effectively prepare future generations of opera professionals and enthusiasts.”

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Integrating Turkish opera into opera education is crucial for its preservation and wider recognition. At the same time, the use of Turkish opera works in opera education has both a practical and ideological character in terms of students performing in their language. Educational institutions should broaden students' understanding of the rich and unique world of Turkish opera by including Turkish works in the curriculum. This inclusion will challenge the Eurocentric dominance in opera education and provide a more inclusive perspective on the art form.

Furthermore, studying Turkish opera will bring valuable discussions about cultural change, artistic innovation, and the role of opera in reflecting and shaping social values. However, the difficulty in accessing Turkish sources and the fact that the state has not yet established a regular archiving tradition in this regard pose a practical challenge for educators who want to include Turkish opera in their teaching. Collaborative efforts are needed to overcome this challenge, create accessible educational materials, and encourage the study of Turkish opera in academic settings.

In addition to all this, it is also important to discuss the connections between art and academia, as Malicki also says. The identity construction and spiritual values of an academy that increasingly measures its success with the collaboration of industry and its ability to produce profitable knowledge, and is therefore increasingly shaped by an idea of education and research that is defined as commercially oriented and industrial, will, of course, be disregarded. According to Malicki, it is very important to position academic and artistic ways of thinking about each other on equal terms, thus reimagining art education and reimagining the academy. We need to defend a model of thinking in and through art, independent of the commercial influence of the market on the one hand and an educational "banking system" that determines which questions are worth asking on the other. (Malicki, 2018) The relationship of art, which has great political importance and power, with formative institutions such as education needs to be addressed from a deep and qualified perspective, far from a neopolitical perspective. In this sense, the task falls on states, not market instruments. Here are a few suggestions to bridge the gap between opera education and the Turkish opera tradition:

Promoting Cultural Relevance: Opera education should emphasize the cultural significance of Turkish opera, highlighting its connection to local traditions, history, and artistic expression. This could include incorporating Turkish operas into school curricula, organizing workshops and performances, and showcasing works by Turkish composers and librettists. Educators can create a sense of ownership and pride among students by emphasizing the cultural significance of Turkish opera.

Increasing Accessibility: Making opera more accessible to a wider audience is crucial to its long-term sustainability. This could include offering subsidized tickets, organizing outreach programs in underserved communities, and using digital platforms to reach a wider audience. Additionally, creating educational materials in Turkish, including translations of librettos, could significantly increase accessibility for students and the general public.

Strengthening Teacher Education: Equipping educators with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively teach opera is essential. Teacher training programs should include modules on Turkish opera history, music analysis, and performance practice. This will enable teachers to confidently introduce opera to their students and foster a deeper appreciation for the art form.

Encouraging Collaboration: Collaboration between educational institutions, opera houses, and cultural organizations is crucial to creating a vibrant and sustainable opera ecosystem. Joint projects, workshops, and performance opportunities can provide valuable learning experiences for students and introduce them to the professional world of opera.

Integrating Technology: Leveraging technology can enhance opera education and reach a broader audience. Online resources, virtual performances, and interactive learning platforms can provide engaging and accessible learning experiences for students of all ages. Technology can also facilitate cross-cultural exchange and collaboration among opera educators and artists worldwide.

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