REVIEW ARTICLE

İstanbul: Music, cultural authenticity, and civility

Alan Duben

Martin Stokes, *The Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, xi + 219 pages.
Deniz Göktürk, Levent Soysal and İpek Türeli, eds., *Orienting Istanbul: Cultural Capital of Europe?* London and New York: Routledge, 2010, xv + 336 pages.

> "Istanbul is a place where, for the past 150 years, no one has been able to feel completely at home."[1]

> "*... cities are not 'read' as if they were texts or paintings. Rather, they are reckoned with* in the dual sense of that phrase—simultaneously *coped* with and *thought* with."[2]

Music, the most ephemeral of the arts, has the power to touch people and bind them in the deepest of ways. It may also divide them as well. Despite a deliberate state policy in force during the early years of the republic restricting both Turkish urban art music and popular music as part of a top-down effort to modernize and westernize society, the music of the city—be it high art music with its urban Ottoman roots, or various amalgams of Anatolian folk and Arab-inspired popular music bred in the city—proved incredibly resilient once the heavy hand of the

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1 Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, trans. Maureen Freely (New York: Vintage International, 2006), 115.

2 Donald Preziosi, "Introduction: The Mechanisms of Urban Meaning," in *The Ottoman City and its Parts: Urban Structure and Social Order*, eds. Irene A. Bierman, Rifa'at A. Abou-El-Haj, and Donald Preziosi (New Rochelle, NY: A.D. Caratzas, 1991), 4. Italics in original.

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state was removed over the decades following World War II. As cities like İstanbul expanded dramatically from the 1950s onwards, fed from rural and small-town Anatolia, a new, unsettled, urbanizing listenership emerged, with ears eagerly applied to radios, cassette players, and later TVs, finding and rebuilding their multiple identities as a people in the deeply familiar but changing sounds of their own culture(s) in ways that the more remote, elitist and monolithic Kemalist culture of the pre-war years could not provide. In all of this, İstanbul was the natural center and focal point of inspiration and challenge.

The place of İstanbul

Nearly 20 percent of the population and 30 percent of the gross national product of Turkey are located in İstanbul. İstanbul is both the commercial and cultural center of the country and exerts an enormous influence over peripheral cities and the vast Anatolian hinterland. Perhaps as important as who lives here and what İstanbul does as a metropolitan region is what this city stands for in the ever-contested battle for cultural authenticity and the identity of the Turkish republic. Two recent publications take up these issues, among others, from the vantage point of İstanbul, examining popular music and the arts (as well as the use of urban public space) in the construction and ongoing redefinition of national belonging. They both, in various ways, describe the engagement of the intimate in the public arena.

My main focus in this short essay on urban music and culture will be on *The Republic of Love*, with relevant essays in *Orienting Istanbul* providing an alternative grounding for a discussion of several issues important for understanding music and the culture of authenticity in contemporary İstanbul and Turkey. I offer no comprehensive review of the books. In any case, the two works are very different in purpose and direction, making balanced comparison a rather perilous undertaking. *Orienting Istanbul* is a diverse (and somewhat variable) collection of essays on urban and cultural issues, framed around İstanbul as the "2010 Cultural Capital of Europe," whereas *The Republic of Love* is an in-depth essay by a single author intensely focused on a unified subject.

In many ways, understanding İstanbul is understanding Turkey, given that the population of this city, more than three-quarters of which was born elsewhere, can in its diversity be viewed as a microcosm of the current diversity of the larger society.[3] Furthermore, İstanbul is, and

3 Alan Duben, "20. Yüzyılda İstanbul: Haneler, Aileler ve Demografik Gerçekler," in *Eski İstanbullular, Yeni İstanbullular*, ed. Murat Güvenç (İstanbul: Osmanlı Bankası Arşiv ve Araştırma Merkezi, 2009).

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throughout the course of its long imperial history has been, a trendsetter for its peripheries, variously defined. This has been most dramatically so from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, as İstanbul became the crucible for the ever-contested admixtures of western and Islamic civilizations and local, regional and international cultures that came to define the city and, in so many ways, the larger society. Culturally, İstanbul in the twentieth century has been a city under continuous contestation. To understand the bases of such contestation one must examine the dizzying movement of masses of people of various faiths and ethnicities in and out of the city, the upheavals in class structure, especially the loss of most of İstanbul's (non-Muslim) bourgeoisie, their replacement under state support during the first two-thirds of the century, and the more *laissez-faire* rise of new (in the early years largely nominal, but towards the end of the century, practicing) Muslim commercial classes. One must also understand the construction and reconstruction of identities in İstanbul throughout this human flux. And then one must understand the symbolic significance of the city for its various residents, for the Ottoman and then the republican state, and for the growing İstanbul diaspora.

At the turn of the twentieth century, İstanbul's population was approximately one million, and nearly half of the inhabitants were non-Muslims of various faiths and nationalities. The cruel impact of the nationalisms that swept the larger region from the Balkans to Arabia brought about extraordinary population redistribution and losses, some of them voluntary, some forced, almost all under duress. Throughout the region, millions were killed or died in the process. İstanbul was the vortex of this regional drama, and by the late 1920s it had lost population, Muslim and non-Muslim in absolute terms, but especially non-Muslims. This process continued after World War II, losing some momentum only in the 1980s. The old inter-faith cosmopolitanism of İstanbul was no longer to be. From the 1950s onwards, non-Muslims were "replaced" by the millions who migrated from Anatolia, all Muslims of various denominations and ethnicities, setting the ground for a new "local" Anatolian cosmopolitanism and hence a new local İstanbul culture, as well as a revitalized urban Islam—a renascent "tradition" perhaps bearing more resemblance to the provincial Anatolian urban Islam of its denizens than to the dismembered high Islamic traditions of the old Ottoman capital.

Although everyday lived realities were more complex and not easily dichotomized, the confrontation of civilizations came to be articulated during the late Ottoman years as one of the symbolic contestation between European or western life-styles and those of the Islamic East.

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With the founding of the republic in 1923, the confrontation was further forced, with İstanbul doubly tainted symbolically, bearing the compound burden of being both Islamic (in the first instance, the seat of the Caliphate) and a cosmopolitan Europeanized city, associated from the late nineteenth century onwards with European capitalism and imperialism and with those minorities who served the interests of the Europeans as well as their own nationalist aspirations. Hence, from the Kemalist perspective this was a tainted cosmopolitanism. İstanbul was also the imperial capital, meaning that it was once more tainted and marginalized in the eyes of the Kemalist nationalists with a less than honorable recent imperial past. Nevertheless, İstanbul was the focal point of a deep passion for the westernizers, the Islamists, and the majority somewhere in-between, as well as for those in its diaspora. Yahya Kemal's famous poetic declaration of love for İstanbul, "Aziz İstanbul," provided the words for art songs, verse, and prose expressing the ambivalence of the relationship with İstanbul of a long lineage of twentieth-century lovers, a theme taken up most prominently in recent years by Orhan Pamuk.[4]

All of this was in contrast to Ankara, the new capital, imagined as purely (though perhaps only nominally) Muslim, purely modern, and purely Turkish. This is the contested cultural burden İstanbul has had to bear as it moved through the twentieth century. How, then, could one demarcate an authentic İstanbul in the midst of this heterogeneity and flux? Since the 1980s the city has witnessed the emergence of new and increasingly powerful middle classes, on the one hand Islamist in life style, on the other hand westernist and secular, both largely subscribing to current neo-liberal political and economic preferences and both determinedly consumerist. As the economy gained speed in the new millennium, the Islamist middle class came to dominate not only İstanbul, but also the nation, politically. For the first time in at least half a century, the central and local governments were of like body and mind.

Public space, civic harmony

A number of articles in *Orienting Istanbul* provide insights into some of these issues of identity, belonging and authenticity in İstanbul. Çağlar Keyder points to what he refers to as an "inclusive Ottomanism,"[5] a shared interest that for a time provided a deceptively common ground for the secular elite and newly urbanized Islamists. Since the 1980s, the former developed a nostalgia for the no-longer existing cosmopolitan,

4 Pamuk, *Istanbul*.

5 Çağlar Keyder, "Istanbul in the Twenty-First Century," in *Orienting Istanbul: Cultural Capital of Europe?*, eds. Deniz Göktürk, Levent Soysal, and İpek Türeli (London: Routledge, 2010), 27.

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inter-faith and, in particular, non-Muslim İstanbul and were eager consumers of "Ottomania," all of which perhaps served them as a sort of tentative shelter against the threatening deluge of rural (largely unwanted and poorly understood) humanity from Anatolia. What would connect them to a people they now, perforce, confronted but perceived as alien to themselves? The Islamists, beginning around the same time, sought to construct a cultural bridge to an Ottoman-Islamist past with which they had no natural lineage as a cultural grounding for their new urban ventures. They carried the largely inchoate, newly urbanizing masses along with them in their dramatic rise to power.

İpek Türeli's analysis of Miniaturk shows how this Islamist municipality-supported miniature theme park located on the Golden Horn "stage-manages" Turkish history with an "ambiguous picture of societal harmony,"[6] under an inclusive Ottomanist banner, by featuring a miniaturized cosmopolitan world which privileges an inter-faith but Islamist İstanbul as a symbolic alternative to secular republican Ankara. The result, she argues, is a narrowing of the gap between the state and its citizens as they "naturally" identify with (the newly officialized version of) their indigenous past presented in the theme park.

Jeremy F. Walton, in his analysis of pious practices of the creation and use of space and place in İstanbul by Muslim organizations and individuals, observes what he believes to be a benign Islamic cosmopolitanism, which, he argues, allows for a "co-existence with Kemalist and étatist modalities of space and place,"[7] removed from Turkish partisan politics, and in the process "decoupling publicness (*sic*) from the assumptions and imperatives of Kemalist secularism."[8] Whether such genial segregation is desirable or sustainable in today's İstanbul remains to be seen. In both cases we observe a restructured urban heterogeneity, but one with purported foundations in a neo-Ottoman Islamic notion of public space. Despite the optimism of Türeli and Walton, while Islamists may choose to view the foundations of such tolerance and heterogeneity on the ground in their terms, it is highly doubtful whether secularists would accept the intentions or the legitimacy of such a particularistic venture. Without such reciprocity of intention, how can the diverse partners in this civil society be joined in a binding urban social contract? Let us now

6 İpek Türeli, "Modelling Citizenship in Turkey's Miniature Park," in *Orienting Istanbul: Cultural Capital of Europe?*, eds. Deniz Göktürk, Levent Soysal, and İpek Türeli (London: Routledge, 2010).

7 Jeremy F. Walton, "Practices of Neo-Ottomanism: Making Space and Place Virtuous in Istanbul," in *Orienting Istanbul: Cultural Capital of Europe?*, eds. Deniz Göktürk, Levent Soysal, and İpek Türeli (London: Routledge, 2010), 100.

8 Ibid., 97.

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focus on the question of popular music as a binding force in Turkish society.

Popular music binding the nation?

The Republic of Love,"a cultural history of Turkey since 1950 told through its music,"[9] is a strikingly insightful analysis of the intricate ways in which popular musicians—focal points of intense nostalgia, and voices of cultural intimacy,[10] as he calls them—have connected the private and public spheres of everyday life in Turkey, shaping an intimate as opposed to an official idea of the nation from the 1950s onwards, carrying society through a major urban transformation. The search for public intimacy and authenticity in popular culture and music made eminent sense in the aftermath of an official state cultural discourse bearing the alienating marks of an elite determined to minimalize the place of Turkish art music, popular urban music and ethnic music in the national repertoire and to replace those traditions with acceptable republican constructions.

Today, a new merging of official and intimate public discourse by the Islamist AKP, both at the city and national levels, has blurred the traditional republican dichotomy between "official" and popular culture.[11] It has also merged the more distanced public discourse of the political center with the familistic mode of the periphery, in the form of an intimate, strident, populist "street language" of the state which reverberates with all-too-familiar paternalistic tones of both love and coercion. Today, with the political dominance of the Islamist AKP at both municipal and central government levels deeply entrenched and with governments of both the center and the periphery Islamist in orientation, the once purportedly liberal democratic aspirations and projects of the AKP have morphed into a resilient, more locally resonant, and personalized authoritarian mode. Hence, in the few years since Stokes' book was written, it has become increasingly difficult to disentangle official from popular discourse in society. In this sense, authenticity is no longer an issue.

How does all of this relate to popular culture and music, the reader may ask? The three iconic musicians that provide the core focus of Stokes' book—Zeki Müren, Orhan Gencebay, and Sezen Aksu—

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

10 For an interesting discussion of the concept of intimacy, see Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998).

11 For an insightful discussion of state rituals and everyday life, see Esra Özyürek, *Nostalgia for the Modern: State Secularism and Everyday Politics in Turkey* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

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have all shaped what Stokes refers to as "an intimate sense of national identity,"[12] by validating ordinary lives and experience rather than the officially "fabricated" culture and history of the republic. In this sense, their voices are held to be the more authentic representations of national culture, presenting an intimate sense of national identity. All three singers, all three voices, represent either a connection with an historical art music tradition (Zeki Müren), with popular urban sentiments (Orhan Gencebay), or with the real ethnic and cultural diversity of the nation (Sezen Aksu). In all three cases the traditions have sources beyond the local, representing the rhythms of a "cosmopolitanism from below,"[13] rather than a force-fed, centrally-directed construction. It is in this sense that Stokes claims they are profoundly authentic voices. They are also voices of İstanbul, a contemporary İstanbul mediated by its rich musical history, by its newly urbanized masses and by its new "Anatolian" ethnic diversity, grounded in local terms of intimacy and affection. Like most of İstanbul, our singers are "neither of the country nor fully of the city."[14] Their reframing of "questions of national belonging and citizenly virtues"[15] in a highly affective popular discourse of love—propelled by the alluring force of their listeners' and their own liminality, and evocative of equally binding and equally liminal Sufi traditions of popular expression of divine as well as prosaic love—contrasts with the cool, remote westernizing musical projects of the old secularist center.

Cultural authenticity, and civility

Leaving aside the perturbing question of the meaning and authenticity (for whom?) of the Kemalist, modernist vision of Turkish culture and music, one cannot but wonder whether the capture and increasing entrenchment in the state by the former "periphery" and the current interweaving of official state and popular cultures and forms of everyday discourse will mute the search for authenticity as an alternative to official discourse. As state "performance" takes on a more demotic, a more intimate and familistic tone, might not a new counter to it come in the form of a revitalized and resurgent republican universalism with a more human, more plebeian face? Was that not the message and the basis of performance of the "new" CHP during the election campaign of 2011, a revised message inflected with an inclusive and affable intimacy, in contrast to the coercive, muscular and reproving paternalistic tone of the

12 Stokes, *The Republic of Love*, 20.
13 Ibid., 20.
14 Ibid., 25.
15 Ibid., 105.

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former CHP party head as well as of the current prime minister? Since the 1990s, familistic values and Sunni religious belief and practice have become more integrated into the rituals and discourse of the state than ever before, no doubt increasing the affection and identification of the religious-minded Sunni majority with the state. Despite sporadic efforts, heterodox alternatives such as Aleviism or Kurdish ethnicity continue to remain outside statist discourse.

Stokes sees İstanbul as the site of this new national intimacy, with love for the city and its music "reemerging as the ground for new configurations of civic and national virtue."[16] Bereft of its "alien" non-Muslim population, purified of its stigmatic past, and revitalized and re-energized under a successful embrace with global neo-liberal capitalism, İstanbul today comes to stand for the now widely beloved Islamist-Ottomanist heritage, ordinary popular culture, and the ethnic diversity of the country, as well as for the common currency of consumerist capitalism.

This is nothing less than a "relocation of İstanbul in the national imaginary,"[17] Stokes argues. This idealized İstanbul appears to him to be both an object of affection and resonant with the city's past and present. He views the sentimentalism evoked by popular music as a "kind of civic project, a way of imagining affable relations of dependence upon strangers in modern society."[18] This rather Durkheimian view of music as a binding social force,[19] a "civic project," raises serious questions about the role of popular culture and music in a complex urban environment. The kind of affable, "familial" model of society and citizenship to which Stokes points and which popular music serves does not, in its very particularism, carry the universalistic civic norms, or require the cool reciprocity necessary for a harmonious cosmopolitan urban life inevitably based on indissolvable difference. We must, alas, note here that music divides as much as it unites. What is the common ground connecting urban listeners of western classical music, local jazz, hybrid forms of rock, Arab-inspired "neo-arabesk," and emergent ethnic or religious forms of music today? Although universalist civic norms grounded in sociologically familiar conceptions of the exigencies of city life may, like twentieth-century "universal" human rights, carry the taint of their European origins, there seems to be little earthly alternative if we are to base our

16 Ibid., 145.

17 Ibid., 151.

18 Ibid., 193.

19 For a discussion of early republican thinking about music and the nation-state, see Cem Behar, "Ziya Gökalp ve Türk Musıkisinde Modernleşme/Sentez Arayışları," in *Musıkiden Müziğe: Osmanlı/Türk Müziği: Gelenek ve Modernlik*, ed. Cem Behar (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2005).

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"reckoning" in the city on terms of equality—the equality of *all* partners in the İstanbul civic venture. On what, then, will urban (and henceforth, national) civility be constructed? And what can the role of music be? After all, how big a national burden can music possibly shoulder?

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