CHAPTER 5

ŞERİF MUHİDDİN TARGAN: A VIRTUOSO WHO JOINED EAST AND WEST ON THE SAME STAGE AT THE END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Bilen İŞIKTAŞ¹

¹Istanbul University, State Conservatory, Istanbul, Turkey
e-mail: bilen.isiktas@istanbul.edu.tr

DOI: 10.26650/B/AA09.2021.007.05

ABSTRACT

The effects of modernization had reached their peak by the nineteenth century. By this point, major changes in the approach to fine arts had taken place, both in the East and the West. These reforms were particularly evident in the domain of fine arts, especially music. Many Muslim writers, thinkers, and artists belonged to the Eastern branch of European Renaissance. The centuries that followed the Renaissance also witnessed the emergence of personalities who established such connections, highlighting the existence of permeable borders between two civilizations. Simultaneously, these towering figures brilliantly articulated the cultural sphere they represented. On January 21, 1892, at the dawn of the 20th century, a privileged, 37th generation descendant of Prophet Muhammad's family was born in Çamlıca, an elite neighborhood in Ottoman Istanbul. This individual grew up to become the reputable master Şerif Muhiddin [Haydar] Targan, whose music influenced both Eastern and Western cultures. Targan earned the title Rabb'ul Ud (Lord of Oud) as a virtuoso performer of the Islamic world even as the two major world civilizations became lost in the tumultuous birth throes of a new concept of human culture that emerged during the "longest century of the Empire." Over time, Targan created a unique school in the oud style as he performed and advanced his instruments to meet global standards. He made history as a great artist by training students and passing on his legacy to the present. He impressed the greatest talents of his time with his personal qualities as well as by his skills and depth as a musician. This study does not advance a single "grand theory." Instead, this paper offers insights into comparable experiences of two global contexts by allowing a superior sociological and theoretical understanding of the ways in which Targan's musical experience was culturally sustained, contextually produced, and internationally processed.

Keywords: Şerif Muhiddin Targan, music, east, west, culture, modernization

Renowed Ottomonist Quataert states that “During the long nineteenth century, 1798–1922, the earlier Ottoman patterns of political and economic life remained generally recognizable. In many respects, this period continued processes of change and transformation that had begun in the eighteenth century, and sometimes before.” (Quataert, 2005, p. 54). The events and developments that took place in the 19th century were crucial for the Ottoman Empire’s modernization process. These changes and modernization in the daily life of Ottoman society led to the entire transformation of the political agenda and economic structure of the country. It was also a period of growth and differentiation in economic and social fields, and of ideological transformation. During the days that followed the adoption of the Second Constitution, the introduction of recording technology brought along technological musical products as well, helping a virtuoso such as Tanburî Cemil Bey to go beyond the confines of his own space. Historical information and documents about the musical metamorphosis taking place were now recorded in audio archives as well. Music was no exception during the transition period from the Ottoman Empire to the Republican era.¹ Following Cemil Bey, the most important virtuoso performer of Turkish instrumental music was Şerif Muhiddin Targan. This work will review his place within music history. This article will investigate interpretations of virtuosity by discussing his skills. He was a virtuoso of the oud and the cello, one who united the East and the West on the same stage.

Figure 1. Details of the bustling life in the streets of Istanbul in a map dating from the end of 19th century (Haidar, 1944).

1 The effect of modernization had been extensively felt in Turkish music particularly during the second part of 19th century, which is called “the romantic period.” This was an era of irreversible changes in structures, with new melodic structures borrowed from the West.

A Sociological Perspective: The Cultural Side of Music

Şerif Muhiddin Targan is one example of an individual from a society caught within the struggle for modernization in the period of transition between the 19th and 20th centuries; a character with full awareness of his age that was no different from that of Tanburî Cemil Bey. Şerif Muhiddin Targan is an artist who conceived a different world with a modern perspective without turning his back on “tradition,” or causing the old to clash with the *new*, without letting the previous world be demolished, but also changing that other world. He was an oud² and cello virtuoso who used his pick and string to record, in the history of music, the voices of a culture stored somewhere “between two worlds,” expressing the origin of notes the way no one else had expressed it before.³ In particular, he radically changed the oud and emerged as a cultural, mythical hero expected to return, and he is still closely associated with this instrument.⁴ A generation in advance, he sensed what was to come, and went after things that he was yet unable to express with his superior talents, with the extraordinary wish he made about music as a child. The moment he joined his inner boundaries with an independent artistic nature and artmaking, he found autonomy and success. The originality of his “unique” works of art, expressed with imagination, was in their showing traces of modern themes in music ahead of his contemporary society and age. Something new manifested in him. Şerif Muhiddin became the subject of artistic performance. His signature was impressed on each of his notes. The amount of emotion and the structure of the harmonic movement he built could be easily observed in his *taksims* [improvisations].⁵ In his music, a style that emphasized live musical performance, he gave prominence to instantaneous modal creations, and treated music as an ecstatic experience. He touched on an immense variety of musical subjects in it.

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- 2 The oud is a fretless, plucked short-necked lute with a half pear shaped body and 11 or 13 strings. More specifically about the oud and making music in the Arab world, see (Touma, 1996 and Racy, 2003). For more information on the history of musical instruments and their classifications, see (Sachs, 1940; Kartomi, 1990 and Baines, 1992).
 - 3 For a study of virtuosity and its criteria in traditional Ottoman/Turkish music, and a discussion of the identity of the virtuoso performer based on the examples of Tanburî Cemil Bey (1871-1916) and Şerif Muhiddin Targan, see (Behar, 2015).
 - 4 The association is to such an extent that in an interview with Hıfzı Topuz, a correspondent of *Akşam* newspaper, Gaspar Cassado (1897-1966), a world-famous cello virtuoso whom I frequently visited in Istanbul for concerts, talked about how impressed he was by Şerif Muhiddin: “This time in Istanbul, I had the chance to listen to the oud. Mr. Şerif Muhiddin gave me an oud concert. It was the first time I listened to this instrument but I am still under its spell. Most certainly the oud is a fantastic instrument and Şerif Muhiddin plays it magnificently. The sounds of the oud still ring in my ears. Three years ago, I’d listened to the kemancha and tanbur and was under their spell for days on end. The oud and Mr. Şerif Muhiddin too will leave indelible traces on me.” (p. 3).
 - 5 Taksim is a solo instrumental improvisational genre in Turkish and Arabic music. It is based on the *makam* of the vocal or instrumental piece. For a study on Şerif Muhiddin Targan’s distinctive qualities compared to other oud players through an analysis of composition in 6 oud partitions and *maqam* analyses, see (Işıktaş, 2011). For more information on these and other expressions in taksim and their connotations see (Racy, 2003).

Having discovered a new style, he blended in with the sounds, like a traveler. His singularity (individuality) went even beyond himself and reached the historical universality of the oud. His transformative power over sounds can only be explained by his ability to render things visible.

For Targan, an indispensable way to reach his ideals was to use his potential talent to its full extent with a desire to change artistic conditions. Entertaining the idea of a micro-cosmos, matchless melodies reaching from recordings to ears and motifs with prominent characteristics interlace with a separate *selfhood* that yearns for eternity along with the personal world of Targan. From a blessed and noble family, he most notably inherited a rich personality, an intense inner world, a sensitivity to everything around him that affected his thoughts, feelings, and concepts. Emotions, those raw materials of nature, came out in his pieces with an intense and delicate vigor like a panorama of madness, joy, yearnings, passions, and reunions. This musical aesthetic emerged from the victorious spirit of dreams, fantasies, time, and space. In a sense, his aesthetic was one and the same with that very victorious spirit. He developed a style of artistic performance that he considered a form of prayer. If only the oud could speak, imagine the many things it would tell. Şerif Muhiddin Targan traveled to many places: Baghdad, Beirut, Boston, Medina, Mecca, Egypt, New York, Paris and Syria, to name a few. These are only the ones we know of. We must keep in mind the fact that, deep down, he lived another, secret life. Dynamic processes of his spiritual life triggered spontaneous action and were further enriched by the sources he nurtured himself with as well as with the people around him. He is the son of Şerif Ali Haydar Pasha⁶, the last Emir of Mecca. His notable best friends included pianist Leopold Godowsky, national poet Mehmed Âkif Ersoy and Tanburî Mesud Cemil [Tel]. No information separating him from his environment can explain his level of understanding fueled with imagination. To come up with an intellectual landscape of Targan, one needs to resort to his experience in the context of cultural and artistic developments. He added new value to an inner, spiritual reality. Needless to say, external things also gained new value with him. In the words of John Dewey (2005), an inheritor of the Enlightenment, “in music we see intervals and what they represent, we hear distances and the power of sound” (p. 191). Targan heard the sounds of the time that came before him, took his oud far beyond ingenious hand work, and shortened the distance between sounds in different

6 A Şerif of Mecca, which meant he was a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. Ali Haydar, who became the deputy head of the Ottoman upper chamber of parliament, was an open, generous and loyal man. See the biography of his life which has been compiled largely from his diaries (Stitt, 1948). Also see *Arabesque*, which was written by the sister of Şerif Muhiddin Targan. It provides an insider's view of life in the final years before the foundation of the Turkish republic. The book shows a unique and extremely well-informed window onto the social, cultural and political events unfolding around her.

centuries. His *ability to sustain the tradition he took over* is what stands out especially in the works he composed in saz semai form.⁷ He had the capacity to bring together sounds in the common reservoir of music and culture to create images with a constructive, non-mechanical technique and incorporate patterns he reproduced and distilled from the past.⁸

Figure 2. He did not consider the oud solely as a musical instrument and a technique-based product, but he assigned an exclusive personality and individuality to it.⁹

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- 7 For centuries, the oud was the basic instrument of reference for the music theory and performance of the Middle Eastern/ Islamic civilization, and el-Kindi called it “the instrument of philosophers.” From the early seventeenth century onwards, the tanbur became the main Ottoman/Turkish instrument. Kantemiroğlu described it as the embodiment of “Ottoman style.” These two instruments went far beyond their theoretical descriptions in classical circles; they penetrated intellectual, literary and artistic practices, earned a social identity and became instruments of *soloists* (Şerif Muhiddin Targan with the oud, Cemil Bey with the tanbur).
- 8 Richard Sennett (2008) considers playing an instrument in perfect harmony as the result of intellectual comprehension and technical dexterity. In his words, concentration completes just one dimension of the technical development of dexterity. The hands are in the service of experiment, but this happens only with an objective standard; hands have learned how to coordinate, how to exert minimum power and how to relax. Therefore, hands are also a repertory of learned hand movements. Hand moves can be improved and refreshed with rhythmical processes through exercises which may perpetuate these processes. Comprehension guides every technical move and its every move has ethical consequences (p. 178).
- 9 Taha Toros Repository of Marmara University, <http://openaccess.marmara.edu.tr/handle/11424/141113/08.06.2021>.

Sophisticated Notes and Inspiration

Why does Şerif Muhiddin's music move us so profoundly? What makes it special as a listening experience? How does it really affect us? His understanding of music fell between theory, practice, technique, and expressiveness and focused on working and reflecting the experience of East and West on an instrument. These spheres of influence he created with a leap of imagination came closer to each other. This genuine, intuitive leap foreshadowed the conclusion with a studied calculation and design. He demonstrated his productivity with awareness and reason. This had to do with his aura. He created a spiritual electromagnetic field when the century was at a crisis and turned it into something "awash in its own light." He adorned every corner of this field of imagination with as many cultural materials as possible.

A special position was given to Targan by his contemporaries, who considered what he did with the oud equal to what Italian virtuoso Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840) did with the violin. One must note that these artists lived in different ages and that these instruments evolved.¹⁰ Both of them are members of a *community of creative geniuses*. Neither Paganini nor Targan gathered speed supernaturally but listened to traditional oral stories, epics, and mythological narratives from centuries before. Their talents lay in the deep roots of musical, vocal expression. These tangible steps go beyond a faith in the magic of images. Notes and recordings are two vocal substances that break this magic spell. They are independent pieces of evidence that do not serve a psychological basis. "Viewing the artist as a demigod may be considered a vestige of the Shamanic era when the creator was a doctor, judge and a magician all at once. Or perhaps it may be linked to opinions that held sway in the Romantic era when *inspiration* was deemed godly and the creative act was considered an *inspirational* effort. Some artists strive to develop current social and cultural values while others strive to change them. The latter ones are made to feel out of place and odd due to their behaviors and breakthroughs that run contrary to acceptable values (Velioglu, 1978, p. 71). Thanks to the virtuosity that played a great role in his artistic skills, Targan declared independence in a cultural atmosphere built on interpersonal relations.¹¹ He faced up to danger and risk. Targan sought what lay behind the notes. He was going through a process in which he was considered a novelty. With patient study and an awareness of knowledge and experience, he opposed established values, patterns and dogmas by paving the way to a whole different universe. He brought a different kind of sound

10 According to Curt Sachs (1955), "virtuosity, indeed, had its heyday in the eighteen thirties and forties. Virtuosos in the sense of accomplished masters of the voice or some instrument had always existed. All the great composers of whom the history of older music speaks were singers or players, but their ability was in the service of creative work." (p. 280). Nineteenth century was characterised by the cult of *genius*, as in the example of Liszt and Paganini and the idea of virtuosity, see (Samson 2003).

11 For a discussion on the concept of virtuosity in Turkish music through Şerif Muhiddin Targan, see (Işıktas, 2015).

to wood which was never heard before. Those who understood him best apart from Mehmed Âkif were the ones who lent an ear to music in societies abroad.¹² “An artist is not just a selfish creature immersed in his own, individual passions. He too wants to express himself and be understood, likes to see how his sentiments spread around and affect others. In other words, he too presents his works to the society. Only developed societies and individuals with developed aesthetics can comprehend the meaning and values of artworks and show the ability to notice the storm and the dynamic tragedy in the soul of the artist” (Sena, 1972, p. 155). Needless to say, being understood, joining territories with sounds, removing borders and replacing them with the strings of oud and cello were not easy tasks for Targan. One must remember the evolution in taste. Although the term *zeitgeist* (spirit of the age) refers to the shared gusto and habits of an age, the important thing is the level to which those who share the same spirit are understood in their own time. Remarks on Şerif Muhiddin can be linked to the intellectual, philosophical, and artistic climate of late-nineteenth-century Europe.

Figure 3. Targan put forth what was historically “new” with his cello.¹³

12 Having defined Şerif Muhiddin as the “Sole Genuis of the East” Mehmed Âkif eternalized his admiration for Targan by dedicating the poem “Gölgeler” [Shadows] to him in Volume VII of *Safahat*. For a study that portrays this friendship in various dimensions, see (Işıktas, 2017).

13 Taha Toros Repository of Istanbul Şehir University, <http://earsiv.sehir.edu.tr:8080/xmlui/> 12.03.2018.

Oud and cello are instruments representing two distinct worlds with different musical styles, fashion choices, languages, lives, and cultures at large. Targan brought them to the stage without falling into class polarities, reflected their commonalities in an objective, spiritual field built on a singular life experience. He brought worlds closer and introduced a *new* way of understanding symbols. His music was enriched by and adorned with lyrics. The sharp contours of his music remained outside the discussions of the age, they were not split apart like the Great Wall of China. A synthesis of East and West could be achieved with these two instruments he mastered.¹⁴ On December 3, 1928, he performed pieces from both cultures on the stage of Town Hall, one of the most popular art centers of New York.¹⁵ On one side was the cello, together with compositions by Saint-Saens, Locatelli, Bach, Debussy, Ravel and on the other side was the oud and his own compositions entitled *Kapris (Caprice)*, *Ferahfeza Saz Semai* and *Koşan Çocuk (Running Child)*. Just like Şerif Muhiddin Targan, Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984) also thought that the meaning of art was found in the advent of the *new* and the originality of works that have a sense of form and an aesthetic sense: “Art exists to communicate a feeling of life and of objects, a feeling of how a stone is made of stone. The purpose of art is to communicate a feeling of the object as a visible thing. The artistic technique lies not in rendering objects familiar and known but *changing* (alienating) them, rendering form incomprehensible and perception difficult and longer. The act of perceiving art is an end in itself and needs to take longer; art is an instrument that makes one feel the formation of the object, whatever is already “formed” has no significance for art” (Todorov, 2005, p. 78). The artistic creativity of Şerif Muhiddin is not limited to his dominance over sounds. He also depicted the world he lived in and reflected his inspirations through canvas and with the colors of his palette. Although it is little known, lines he scribbled in notebooks that contain personal details demonstrate his interest in poetry as well. His pursuit of a broader identity as a virtuoso led him to impressive technical innovations. He developed colors, textures, articulations, and sound effects that had never been heard from the oud before.

14 While doing this, Şerif Muhiddin drew attention to the sources that nurture an artist. In an interview in March, 1954, Z. Kâmrân Noyan asks him: “What do you think of folk music?” he answered: “in every country, the seeds and the real beginning of music lies with the public, with the folk. Folk music will be the most important source for future composers as well” (p. 13) With these words, Şerif Muhiddin argues that one must benefit from the roots of a culture.

15 Concerts and Recitals. (1928, December 14). *New York Evening Post*, p. 15. John Morgan O’Connell also (2013) mentions the concert details of Şerif Muhiddin Targan in New York (p. 146). Actually, the focus of O’Connell’s book is the exclusive public figure of the Turkish singer Münir Nurettin Selçuk (1899-1981) who put a greater effort into developing a vocal style in Turkey. O’Connell’s is an analysis of the *alaturka* - as a Turkish style musical genre - versus *alafranga* debate on music. In describing them, O’Connell points out that Münir Nurettin Selçuk and Şerif Muhiddin Targan were “both artists hoping to develop a modern style for a modern state.” (2013, p. 147).

True Passion and Emotion

Musical instruments are among the most important cultural tools to enable societies to develop an independent and distinguished spirit through truth and creativity. Şerif Muhiddin hoped to cure his pain with the unique charms of his imagination, rising with the wings of the sounds of his instruments. According to psychoanalyst Hanna Segal (1918-2011), the creative process “is the act of recreating an object –a worn-out inner world and selfhood–that was loved before and was whole, but now is lost and worn out. When our inner world is damaged, dead and loveless, those we cherish most are split into a thousand pieces and we fall into an exitless despair, that’s when we need to recreate our world; reconnect the pieces, give life to dead pieces and recreate life.” (Jacquet quoting from Segal, 2017). Sounds which gave direction to his feelings gave him courage in his works. He took them far beyond words and even images. As a sign of individuation, Targan drew a modern portrait in the context of Turkish music.¹⁶ He was “free” and aware of his distinction but what does freedom mean in this context? “Freedom is one’s ability to be in command of one’s own development. His capacity to shape himself. Freedom is the other side of our sense of selfhood.” (May, 1997, p. 150). He had a chance to plan and guide with such willpower. Through rational life and intellectual values, he used the techniques of the West in his instruments. He did so without changing his identity and by preserving his historical reference points with true passion and emotion. With an awareness of his experience, he was able to look back as well as ahead of his time. Last but not least, I must note that the expressions of Şerif Muhiddin, who passed away in Istanbul on September 13, 1967, his music, his life and his tastes fused into “a concept of beauty of Divine Aesthetics.”

Conclusion

In the light of the developments in the last period of the Ottoman Empire, Şerif Muhiddin benefited from Ottoman music tradition as well as updated his knowledge, in a process characterised by continuity. He believed that his modern, Western education, his knowledge of Europe and his languages, gave him the tools necessary to take his abilities into the modern world. The key to an understanding of the modernization process on his music may be the fact that he joined compositions in a new style together with new methods, both advanced

16 Notes, analyses and the characteristics of performance are naturally the main areas representing the world of sounds in texts that deal with music. Biographical studies on Şerif Muhiddin Targan emphasize solely his musical side or his basic life story. For an interdisciplinary (musicology, sociology and history) study that focuses on Şerif Muhiddin Targan in detail from the point of view of modernization, individuation and virtuosity from the Ottoman Times to the Republican Era, see (Işıktaş, 2018).

and original. For example, in Ottoman/Turkish music culture the musician as a performer was not confronted with the necessity of interpreting a written text (scores, notes). He had been playing his music by using all the musical tools he had always known, reproducing a melody from his memory. But throughout the nineteenth century the men of reforms were struggling to create modern principles. Şerif Muhiddin launched a new program of reforms which included techniques for his music, instrument and written sources. The most significant outcome of these changes was the creation of a new strategic individualization and virtuosity.

If we consider Targan's musical vision, we can find some traces of the adaptive nature of Ottoman reforms in it. When we look at his music, we can see it is characterised by elements from both Western and Turkish music. Some musicians adapted Western music elements to Turkish maqam music in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Targan himself incorporated chords, ornaments, dynamics and harmonic movements that were commonly found in Western classical music to Turkish maqam music. This practice cannot be understood without thinking about the political and social changes occurring throughout the years these musicians grew up in.

Targan and other musicians grew up in the late 19th century. Tanburî Cemil Bey was a major performer during the era of transformation in Ottoman/Turkish music. The reforms, which had started for political and military reasons, affected all aspects of social life. The musical vision of the musicians was also affected by this period of catastrophic transformation. Targan's music is a good example of its effects on the musical vision of the musicians living in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

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