

MAGNIFICENT MUSIC: IDENTITY IN TURKISH SOAP OPERA SOUNDTRACKS

Kimberley BOWEN ÇOLAKOĞLU,
Robert REIGLE, Şehvar BEŞİROĞLU

Abstract

This article looks at the function, and explores audience interpretation, of music as a transmitter of identity in the Turkish soap opera, *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*. This soap opera was broadcast from 2011-2014 in Turkey and gained popularity as a Turkish export to over 50 countries. The article discusses the ways in which the soundtrack weaves together “epic Hollywood” and Anatolian timbres and genres to help establish identity in the serial’s characters. The author uses themes associated with the major characters Sultan Süleyman and Pargalı İbrahim as examples. Following this, the article turns to the audience and interpretations of identity. Again the same major characters are used as examples, but this time discussion with, and observation of, audience members is the main source. Three major themes emerge. The first is the theme of “West” verses “East”. The second is that of motherhood particularly as it concerns the main character, Hürrem. The third theme is the contrasting sides of Süleyman’s character. These three themes are discussed along with other aspects of audience response to the soundtrack of the case study. This article is a brief exploration of how music functions in the case of *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*. It discusses the important role that music plays in connecting characters to their identities as well as to a diverse audience.

Music plays a crucial role helping viewers to associate television serial characters with their allotted identities. This article will discuss the function, and explore audience interpretation, of music as a transmitter of identity in the Turkish soap opera, *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*.

Muhteşem Yüzyıl first aired in Turkey in January of 2011 and broadcast its final episode four seasons later in June of 2014. It consisted of a total of 136 episodes ranging from 90 minutes to 140 minutes each. It was exported to over 50 countries including France, China, and the United States (in Spanish), but mainly throughout the regions of Southeastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Some of this broadcast continues almost two years later and a follow-up serial, *Kösem*, along with others done by different production teams,¹ is now in its first season. The series aroused a fair amount of controversy in Turkey due to its fictitious, and often racy, interpretation of the personal life of historical characters.

The soundtrack for *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*, known as “Magnificent Century” in English, was composed by three composers: Aytekin Ataş, Fahir Atakoğlu, and Soner Akalın. The theme library they created had well over 100 themes, many of which were variations. 63 of these were released to the public on two albums in 2013 and 2014. According to Aytekin Ataş, the original soundscape sought by screenwriter Meral Okay was a blend of “epic Hollywood” and U2 or Led Zeppelin.

1- Josh Carney’s 2015 dissertation has a long discussion of these follow up series.

Out of the 63 themes published on the albums, however, 42 of them had some sort of definite Anatolian instrumentation or vocal style. Granted some of these themes were only used once while others, such as the title theme, were used multiple times in every episode. 32 different forms of instruments are listed in the liner notes of the albums – categories such as percussion instruments and midi voices excluded. The graph in Table 1 shows some of them and how often they are used in the albums. Again, this unfortunately does not give us an actual idea of how often they are heard in the series, and how often audience members are exposed to these timbres. It does, however, give us an idea of overall instrument preferences and the make-up of the timbral soundscape.

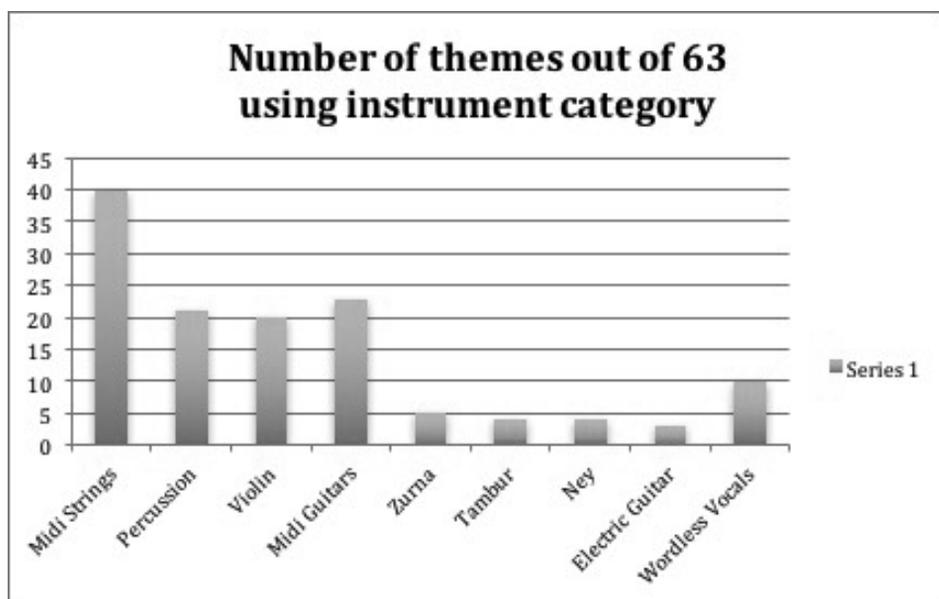


Table 1

Functions of Music and Identity²

Specific instruments, genres, and themes were used to conjure up important elements of identity connected to main characters in the series. The foremost use of this is in the sound of a solo violin used in association with Pargali Ibrahim, the first Grand Vizier of Sultan Süleyman and husband of Hatice Sultan. Ibrahim was kidnapped by pirates before making his way to the Ottoman courts and throughout the series viewers are reminded that his roots are in Parga, modern-day Greece, and that his village was Christian. His struggle with his identity is brought up in several episodes particularly through music and visual arts. The paintings and sculptures he commissions in his palace are looked upon with suspicion, the dining room table he is gifted from the Venetian

2- Albeit beyond the scope of this paper, there is a large body of literature on the use of music and the moving image which intersects with the subject of music and identity. See Kassabian (2001), Kalinak (1992), and Gorbman (1987).

ambassador upon his marriage makes his Ottoman royalty family uncomfortable because it is seen as belonging to “Christian” *gavur* culture, and the violin he was (according to the series) taught by his mother and hence passes on to his daughter is treated like his main connection to his roots. The title of the main theme associated with Ibrahim is *Dönme* [Return] which also references Ibrahim’s having “turned” from another religion to Islam rather than being born a Muslim—this carried significance in one’s position in Ottoman society. Composer Aytekin Ataş, in an interview, suggested that this theme shows the circles in which Ibrahim turns as he explores his identity and finally turns inward. The melody and meter both imply a circular motion. The melody is shared by solo tanbur, solo violin, and a string choir. Fig. 1 shows the introductory 3/4 motif played on the tanbur. The melody begins on a high E, spinning around and up a note and then around and down a note to finally land back in its starting place. Fig. 2 shows the main motif in 6/8 which is played on violin. The violin motif spins in the opposite direction of that of the tanbur starting out low, leaping up and moving back down to its resting place. Together they represent Ibrahim’s torn struggle back and forth between the different aspects of his identity.



Fig 1: Dönme, Tanbur motif



Fig 2: Dönme, Violin motif

Another, perhaps subtler but frequently used, connection is that of the title theme, *Jenerik*, to Sultan Süleyman. The title theme incorporates two contrasting motifs. It begins with a battle rhythm reminiscent of horse-hooves or military drums interlaced with grandiose melodic strings representing the sweeping and ever increasing presence of Ottoman sovereignty. Fig. 3 is a short transcription of the beginning of the *Jenerik*³ theme. The two boxes show the two contrasting motifs used in the opening. The reader can see how they continue to repeat as the theme continues. The first one is much more rhythmic, accented, and stable in feel. The second is very smooth and connected, melodically richer, and has a sense of horizontal direction. Both are monophonic.



Fig 3: Jenerik, contrasting motifs

3- [Title Theme] This is the theme played at the start of every episode and used in the episodes as well.

The contrasting motifs in this theme represent Sultan Süleyman's character: the conquering head of an expanding empire and a part of a grand family tree incorporating both an unquestioned beyond-the-limits-of-time aura contrasted with the intimate daily moments of his family life. Composer Aytekin Ataş used the words *görmeli ve dinamik* and *duygusa*⁴ to describe the contrasting elements he tried to incorporate into this theme (Ataş 2014). He notes that, while much of the plot is driven by Hürrem, it is ultimately Sultan Süleyman's story.

Süleyman faces the aforementioned identity struggle all four seasons of the series—on one hand a ruler, on the other a lover and father. The music calls this struggle to the mind of the viewer and is used at the start of each series to remind us that, while Hürrem's motherhood is one of the leading drivers of conflict in the plotline, Süleyman, and his struggle between these two identities, is the main character in the series. We are reminded of this by the multiple references to the title theme in every episode. As characters face the ramifications of the Sultan's decisions, for example, an audio nod is made to him by the presence of this theme. It is like the small globe hung, in Ottoman architecture, from the center of important rooms to represent the earth and the Sultan's justice even when he is not there. The theme is used, again and again, to establish and remind the audience of the Sultan's being and power even in his absence.

Interpretations of Identity

The television serial *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* attracted a demographically varied audience. Economic, ideological, and ethnic differences are present though, in general, viewership was driven by female household members. Audience members engaged with the content, as well as the music, in different ways. Many of these acts of engagement correspond to their own identities, but some were surprising.

Audience members with whom I spoke were all friends or colleagues of my own acquaintances or their friends found through the snowball method. Within this set of respondents, there is a lower-middle class Armenian grandmother who moved back to Turkey from Germany to marry in her early 20s. There is a middle class mother in her 30s from Rize in the Black Sea region. There is also a lower-middle class chauffeur, Ferhat Bey, in his upper 40s from Istanbul. All of these have a high-school education. In addition, there is an upper class, business owning couple, Salime and Seyit, in their upper 50s who, while not outwardly appearing to be conservative, seem to use a religious vocabulary and filter in how they process. There is a young university graduate, Ece, who was doing an internship in law. Finally, there is a middle-aged, middle-class mother who is also an academician and teaches the history of the republic at a prominent university.

The ethnographic methods of interviews and participant observation were used for this portion of the study. Interviews included demographic questions followed by interviewees viewing four selected scenes from the series. Participants were invited to either comment while viewing or in response to specific input replayed after the initial viewing. In addition, a fair amount of, perhaps more natural, response was gathered through participant observation. I spent Wednesday evenings viewing the latest episode with the families of some of the participants mentioned above to get a better idea of what serial consumption meant for them.

4- "majestic and dynamic" versus "emotional"

Three common themes emerged from my interviews with audience members. The first theme is that of the meeting of “West” and “East”⁵. East is also described as “Anatolian”, “Ottoman”, “Alaturca”, or “Tasavvuf” while “West” is either “*Batı*” [“West”] or “*Kilise*” [“church”]. Most participants mentioned this theme especially regarding the character of Ibrahim and the other *dönme* [converts]. The historic Ibrahim pasha was born to Greek Orthodox parents and later, upon being enslaved and educated in the Ottoman courts as a convert to Islam, was known for his “Western” habits. Besides sparse examples of diegetic music⁶ in which Ottoman ensembles play for celebrations or for the Sultan’s enjoyment, Ibrahim’s violin is the main onscreen music in the series. It is likely because of this that, when asked what they remember about music in the series, audience members generally recall Ibrahim’s violin music first. Ferhat Bey noted, in the theme most often associated with Ibrahim, *Dönmek*, the use of tanbur and violin sequentially as a blend of Turkish and Western culture (see example above). Another participant also commented on how Ibrahim’s use of violin was a reference to his European roots and mentioned her intrigue in historic Ottoman connections with Europe. She debated about to what extent the violin is “Western” or “Eastern” and contrasted it with assuredly “Eastern” sounds like tanbur or kanun. The Armenian grandmother, while walking out of the room to tend to a duty in the kitchen but clearly still listening to the latest episode of the series, showed without verbal comment that she was exceptionally moved by both a violin solo and voiceover done by Okan Yalabık, the actor who played Ibrahim, after the character’s death. Perhaps her connection to the character can be linked to her own European roots.

The blending of “East and West” is seen apart from individual characters as well. Salime Hanım saw a direct divide between “Ottoman” and “Western” music in the instrumentation – as noted earlier, over two-thirds of the themes used Anatolian instruments and many of these were heard with great frequency. She did not like the use of what she referred to as, “Hollywood sounds”. This meant midi pads, electric guitar, and string ensembles as opposed to ney and tanbur. Her husband noted the use of religious connotations in the soundtrack of Hatice’s dream sequence. He connected drumming and chanting with *zikr*, a ney solo with *tasavvuf*, and chimes and male choral singing with “church music”. Ferhat Bey noted that the use of zurna and *mehter*⁷ contrast with the use of polyphony in the title sequence. He also commented on the juxtaposition of “church music” and “Mevlana”.

The second theme is that of motherhood. In the 3rd and 4th seasons of the series many audience members began to interpret Hürrem’s character negatively as the main cause of conflict in the plot and even a threat to the sovereignty and success of the Ottoman family. In fact, more often than not her character is accompanied by deviant “*entrika*”⁸ music showing that she is, yet again, “up to no good.” Despite this, many viewers were huge fans of Hürrem. They saw her as someone who stood up to her fate and could perhaps relate to her role as a protector of her children amidst the challenges of the system in which she lived. The Armenian grandmother, in particular, was very fond of Hürrem and repeatedly mentioned the lullaby she sang as a sign that

5- The terms “*Batı*” and “*Doğu*” were used by participants.

6- Music which is shown being played in some form on the screen and, therefore, is part of the story.

7- A genre of Ottoman military music typically consisting mainly of davul and zurna and played by the Janissary.

8- [intrigue]. This term is used to describe background music—often parallel fourths moving up and down half steps and played by string ensembles—to accompany devious and secretive behavior.

everything she did was to protect her children. Perhaps she, at some point, had sung lullabies to her children in a language differing from that surrounding her.

Süleyman's character was also interpreted through music. One viewer stated that she felt "scared" of him for the first time because of the sounds connected with the stoic image of him in the door. Another noted that the music used in the background of a love poem "shows the softer side of Süleyman" being soft and emotional while still masculine. Yet another noted that the sound of the zurna immediately made her think "our ancestor has mounted a horse and is galloping off to war" and associated it with heroism.

While audience members were most likely to remember Ibrahim's violin as an instrument, the melody that they were most likely to recall was Sultan Süleyman's, the title theme, *Jenerik*. As discussed above, this title theme plays a joint role of announcing the start of the episode as well as referring to Süleyman in the show. A few participants suggested that this theme was very similar to Ramin Djawadi's title theme for *Game of Thrones*. Interestingly Djawadi suggests that his musical background was influenced by three different musical traditions: classical music; jazz and rock as a guitarist at Berklee College of Music; and Iranian music that he grew up loving with his Iranian father (Suatrilha 2009).

One unexpected connection was a nationalist one. Gülşah, from Rize, said that the music she found to be the most moving music was the *mehter* music – it often made her cry because she associated it with the men and boys who had died for her country – the martyrs. Rize is in the Eastern Black Sea region of Turkey which is known for its nationalism.

Other associations with music related more to the function and frequency of the music. Ferhat Bey talked about how the music shows that things have moved back into the normal flow of the plot or back into "norm". Ece commented on frequency stating, "*bu müzik çok kullanılıyor... ama kötü sahnelerde*" [This music is used a lot... but in evil(bad) scenes]. She also discussed the function of music when she heard the theme, *Dönmek*, and said, "*bu müzik kötü bir sahnede bile olsa aşk çağırıyor*" [This music would make you think of romance even in a bad scene]. Another similar comment belonged to Ferhat bey: "*O müzik farklı bir boyut getiriyor... müzik heyecanlandırıyor*" [The music brings a different dimension... the music gets you excited]. Also related to function, Ece noted that the *ney* solo at the end of "*Aynı Göğün Altında*", was, "*sonuç sesi, kapanış gibi*" [The sound of conclusion, like a closing].

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored a few major examples of the use of music by composers and viewers to associate and assist in recalling the identity of major characters in the television serial *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*. Television viewing is a multimedia experience. Different audience members engage in different ways but this case-study shows us how composers can use associations with specific instruments and rhythmic and melodic motifs to code meaning – in this case the identity of characters – in a way that communicates to audience members whose reception of this information is all but passive. The composers work within multiple frameworks – Anatolia, Hollywood epic, Ottoman – which allows them to use music in order to convey meaning to and summon recollections from a demographically (socio-economic, ethnic, linguistic) diverse audience.

This brief case study has taken a closer look at, in particular, three examples of how music firmly connects characters to their identities: the blurred East-West dichotomy, the "mother"

identity as an excusable driving force for any and all behavior, and the tension between historic characters and personal lives in period dramas. It would be an exaggeration to state that every audience member experiences the characters and plot of a Turkish serial through its music, but for many, music is like the central nervous system of a show – not only contributing, but generating meaning, continuity between the elements of the show, and direction.

References

- Ataş, Aytakin. 2014, November 25. Interview with Author in Istanbul.
- Carney, Joshua. 2015. *A Dizi-ying Past: Magnificent Century (Muhteşem Yüzyıl) and the Motivated Uses of History in Contemporary Turkey*. PhD. Dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington: USA.
- "Ece". 2014, July 7. Interview with Author in Istanbul.
- "Ferhat". 2014, June 10. Interview with Author in Istanbul.
- Gorbman, Claudia. 1987. *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Kalinak, Kathryn. 1992. *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Kassabian, Anahid. 2001. *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music*.
- "Salime and Seyit". 2014, May 24. Interview with Author in Istanbul.
- Savcı, Timur. (Producer). 2011, January 5 - 2014, June 11. *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*. [Television Program]. Istanbul: Tims Productions.
- [Suatrilha]. 2009, February 9. *Ramin Djawadi*. [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXr4WDVe4Vs>