

‘Music nourishes the soul’

*Ethnographic study into the use and functions
of musical performances in a diaspora context*

(CONFERENCE PAPER IMS CONGRESS 2012)

LISELOTTE SELS



Six settings

1. A first setting. A sunny Sunday on a public square in Ghent. A large stage, many food and drinks stalls and a bouncy castle for the kids have been set up. Around two in the afternoon, a marching Ottoman military band (mehter) tumultuously kicks off a long series of stage performances by different Turkish and other organizations. This one-day festival is organized by the ‘Turkish Union of Belgium’ together with the Municipality of Ghent. When the obligatory speeches are finished, diverse showcases pass in review: pop-style Turkish folk music is alternated with jazzy & folksy bands, street dance groups, Turkish-spoken stage plays and even whirling dervish performances, for this occasion provided with loud beats and synthesizer sounds... The audience consists mainly of Turkish and non-Turkish inhabitants of Ghent, plus a few tourists. Turkish organisations and media are permanently filming and interviewing. The surrounding outdoor cafés are doing great business, although the regular café-goer doesn’t understand very well what is going on at his familiar square. The event finishes when the dark has taken over from the sun for a good while already.



2. A second setting, a Monday evening in a medium-sized concert hall belonging to ‘Intercultural Centre’ De Centrale, located in a dominantly Turkish neighbourhood of the city. I’m surrounded by an almost completely Turkish public. Our patience is put to the test; the concert by ‘Grup Tını’, for this occasion consisting of eleven musicians (ten male, one female), begins 45 minutes late. Some short speeches are delivered, poems are recited and Turkish folk music from different regions of Turkey is performed. A small part of the programme consists of ‘özgün müzik’, a kind of protest music, which is often performed in combination with Turkish folk music repertoire. Most musicians are of a young age, seizing upon the opportunity to perform for a sympathetic and often familiar audience, while after the break, a respected somewhat older Turkish singer from Ghent enters the stage. During the whole concert, the public reacts enthusiastically, claps hands, sings along and does a dance. Although it’s Monday evening, the concert finishes at a quite late hour...



3. The third setting could be considered as related to the second one: it is in fact a kind of micro- or 'test-'setting of the previous one. It's Friday evening, around ten o'clock when I arrive in the "Musicians' Home", a music café situated within a stone's throw from Intercultural Centre De Centrale. About ten young people, boys and girls together, are sitting around a rustic wooden table, which is part of the Turkish countryside-inspired furniture and decoration of the café. A collection of song texts is placed in the middle of the table and everyone can suggest a new song to be performed. From time to time, the café owner and some regular guests of Turkish descent, join the jam. The young people who are playing and singing can be seen as probably a next-generation 'Grup Tini'. At present, they are in essence experimenting and practising, getting to know the repertoire and learning to play their instruments.



4. While the third setting was an example of a 'jam session', the next setting I want to introduce to you is a 'cem': the Turkish word for a kind of religious service, performed by the Alevi (Shi'i minority) communities of Turkey. I'm in a ballroom of the before-mentioned Intercultural Centre, on a Friday evening, the appropriate moment for such a ceremony to be held. The room becomes crowded with people: men, women and many children, exclusively Turkish and Alevi. Everyone brings some food or drinks to consume at the end of the session. The service is led by a spiritual guide, the 'Dede', who says most of the prayers. Next to him sits the 'Zakir', who plays the bağlama or saz (a long necked lute) during the sung prayers, in which everyone takes part. The ceremony is dominated by a succession of ritual dances, called 'sema', which are in fact another version of the whirling dervish dance from the festival I described before. The same traditional songs are repeated over and over again, until everyone has performed the sema. After the concluding meal, the room is cleaned up swiftly and the whole group leaves the building in orderly fashion.



5. Another setting which involves an exclusive Turkish presence, is a circumcision party organized by a Turkish family from Ghent, taking place on a Saturday evening in a large party hall in a town some 45 kilometres from Ghent. The hall is equipped with numerous ornamented chairs and tables, containing drinks and fruits. In the middle of the hall, there is a stage and a dance floor, on which tens of people are performing a 'halay' (a folk dance performed in large circles or lines). Everything is projected on two video screens at the walls. The celebrated boys are in an elated mood en run and dance across the hall in their special white-and-golden furry costumes. Turkish folk music from diverse regions is performed all night long, by two different bands, one invited from the Netherlands and one all the way from Turkey. In more than one respect, this whole setting resembles a wedding party: the location, décor and clothing are similar, the music is of the same kind, and the course of events is comparable (with the dancing, food and drinks being served and the inclusion of traditional ritual procedures).

Will these little boys stay up as late as a newly-married couple would?



6. A last setting also takes place in a very similar environment: a party hall in another town 45 kilometres from Ghent. This time, it is not a family gathering, but a gathering of fellow-villagers, mostly living in diaspora (in Belgium, the Netherlands, France,...), some of them still living in Turkey but invited specially for this evening. All attendees are 'Suvermezliiler', inhabitants of Suvermez, a village of the Central-Anatolian town Emirdağ, which is suffering (and in some respects also benefiting) from a large-scale exodus to Europe. As this Suvermez Evening has been organized to raise money for the village in question, the entry, food and drinks are not free this time. But the attendees get their money's worth: an extensive entertaining programme proceeds, including performances by some renowned musical guests from Turkey and by famous Suvermezliiler, many speeches and videos, and a lucrative tombola.

After the general public has left the party, a select company keeps on celebrating until the small hours...



Methodology & analysis

These six briefly described events are only a small sample from a larger series of 18 settings, which I studied ethnographically in order to shed light on the individual and collective roles of Turkish folk music performances in Ghent. The collective roles can be situated at different fields of interaction:

- a basic level of various kinds of subgroups within the Turkish diaspora in Ghent,
- a more general level of the Turkish diaspora in Ghent as a whole, and

- a third level concerning the interaction with other groups in society and society at large.

Methodologically, an ‘etic’, systematic observation-based approach is combined with an ‘emic’ perspective, based on semi-structured interviews with musicians, audience or attendees and (if present) employers. During the interviews, the research question is approached from three perspectives, inquiring the meaning or function of a) the event in question, b) the folk music performed during the event, and c) Turkish folk music in general.

The interviews were conducted in Turkish or in Dutch, according to the language preferred by the interviewee.

Before going into a brief analysis of my observations and interviews, I’ll give a few outlines about the overall context in which these Turkish folk music performances are to be situated.

The research context

Ghent is the province capital of East-Flanders and the second largest city of the Flemish region, after Antwerp. Of its population of about 250.000 inhabitants, up to 10% has roots in Turkey. The majority of these people is originating from particular rural regions, namely the West-Anatolian town of Emirdağ and the North-Eastern provinces of Kars and Ardahan, while other groups are former Balkan immigrants from Istanbul.

In general, the Turkish immigrants live concentrated in certain neighbourhoods of the city, displaying strong family and community ties. The language, religion and overall culture of their country of origin keep on playing an important role in their life. Generally speaking, the Turkish communities are socially and economically self-sufficient to a large extent.

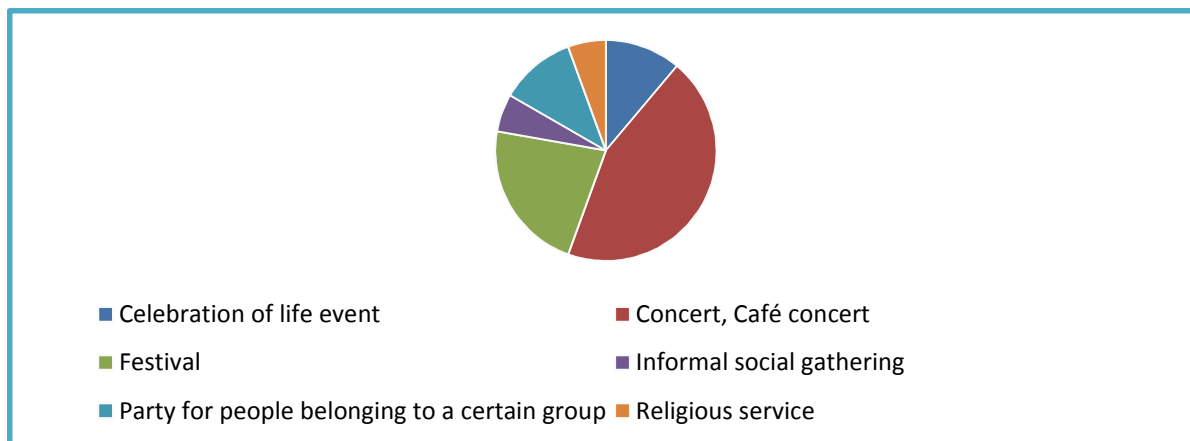
Properties of the events

Let us now have a closer look at the musical events. A first level of analysis is an observation-based categorization of the investigated musical events. The 18 events can be categorized along diverse parameters, for example audience composition, kind of event or overall musical programme.

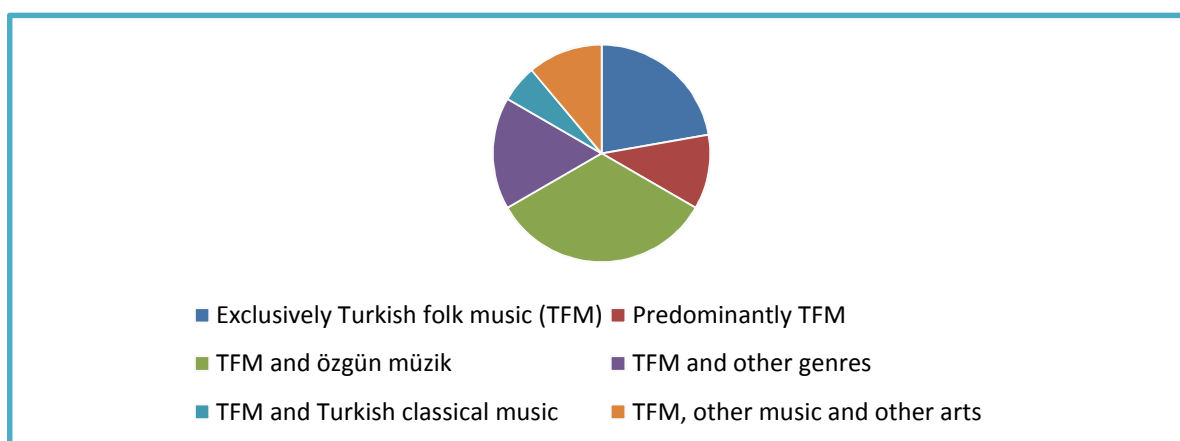
Regarding **audience composition**, 4 events involve a mixed audience of Turkish and non-Turkish people, 11 have a mainly Turkish audience, and 3 events have an exclusively Turkish audience. Audiences can also be general or specific, the latter meaning belonging to a certain group, or familiar to the venue or the musicians in question. 2 of the events (two festivals) attracted a general audience, while the rest involved a kind of specific audience.



With regard to the **kind of event**, I encountered 2 examples of a celebration of a life event (the circumcision party and a wedding party), 8 events can be considered as a concert (including 3 café concerts), 4 events are a kind of festival, 1 event can be described as an informal social gathering (the jam), 2 are parties for people belonging to a certain group (fellow-villagers and a student club respectively), and 1 event (the cem) is a religious service.



With regard to the **overall musical programme**, we can consider the extent to which Turkish folk music is combined with other genres. 6 events were exclusively confined to Turkish folk music or contained only very small amounts of other music, 6 events mixed Turkish folk music and özgün müzik, 3 combined Turkish folk music with other genres, 1 combined it with Turkish classical music, and 2 alternated Turkish folk music with other kinds of music and other art forms.



The role of Turkish folk music

I will now turn to a second level of analysis, the discourse analysis of the interviewed people. In total, I conducted 40 interviews: 16 with musicians, 15 with attendees and 9 with ‘employers’, mainly of Turkish origin. The evaluation of the meaning and function of the respective events, the folk music performed on them, and of Turkish folk music in general, takes a whole range of shapes and colours.

Not everyone could easily articulate his ideas clearly, and not everyone attached a special meaning to Turkish folk music. But generally speaking, much significance and value was assigned to the repertoire and performance of Turkish folk music.

In an attempt to interpret the evaluations expressed by the involved people, I discern different realms or spheres of meaning-giving.

1. First, concerning the overall status (condition, importance, value,...) of Turkish folk music – be it either in general, specifically in Turkey, specifically in diaspora or involving a comparison between Turkey and diaspora.
2. The second field of meaning-giving is **the personal and the social sphere**, where personally-oriented, quasi psychological, functions can be discerned besides social functions, mixed personal-social functions and **‘professional functions’** on the part of the musicians. The social interaction is mostly situated on a small-scale interpersonal level or on a family- or other subgroup-level within the Turkish diaspora in Ghent. A particular, large-scale and performative social function is **the political function**.
3. The third sphere is **the cultural sphere**, which can be considered as significant in terms of identity construction or affirmation, unless purely cultural functions are aimed at. The identity construction or affirmation can be

situated on different levels: Turkish culture as a whole (which of course is a construct), regional cultures within Turkish culture, or ethnic or religious subcultures within Turkish culture. When identity construction or affirmation in interaction with larger society is involved, we could speak of an **'intercultural function'** as a particular instance within the cultural or socio-cultural sphere.

The personal, social and cultural spheres are often interwoven.

4. The last sphere I discern is **the philosophical, ethical, mystical and religious sphere**. While the philosophical and ethical orientations are rather theoretical, the mystical and in particular the religious sphere is quite performative.
5. Some particular types of events seem to unite connotations from all the above mentioned spheres. These events can be described as celebrations of important life events.

Not so many interviewees explicitly attributed the capacity of 'expressing identity' to Turkish folk music. Some did, calling it "your visiting card, your identity" or equating it with themselves: "Turkish folk music, that's us" or "it's a part of us, always". Especially regarding the performance of the cem, the direct link with the religious identity of the involved people became clear from their discourse: "This is our culture" and "This is really a special culture, not everyone does it".

A recurring trope with regard to the identity question is the recognition of Turkish folk music as the music of their childhood, the music with which they were born and grew up.

Another way of expressing the identity-related meaning or function of Turkish folk music is equating this music with their culture, or describing it as "coming from the soil".

The fact that several interviewees described listening to Turkish folk music as restful even if the performed music was anything but calm, could point at a perceived feeling of 'coming home', a recognition of cultural products and the cultural values and other content expressed by them. Experiencing this recognition in the company of a congenial group of fellow Turks in Ghent, could possibly evoke feelings of connection to each other through shared culture.

But this is not the only, inescapable interpretation.

Maybe the whole setting does not evoke any cultural identity-related feelings or thoughts, maybe the whole experience just provides mental rest after a stressful week, diversion and entertainment in the pleasant company of good friends.

The music suddenly transforms from a factor in cultural identity construction or affirmation into a vehicle for personal and social objectives.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, we can only state that the performance and consumption of Turkish folk music in a diasporic context as Ghent, is not an unambiguous or one-sided phenomenon. The range of contexts, occasions, settings involving live Turkish folk music performance in public is very wide and the role or function of the performed music should be examined cautiously and from different angles in order to reveal its various facets. The role of Turkish folk music performances differs according to the context, the occasion, the attendant people, and so on. But maybe even more than displaying a vertical diversity, Turkish folk music performances are characterised by a horizontal diversity: every musician, every audience member and every employer will seek and find different meanings in the music, depending on his or her personality and state of mind. If the performed music has identity-related connotations, which is certainly not always the case, it is important to make a difference between individual and collective identity construction or confirmation. Collective identities are generally negotiated in relation with 'other groups'; in the case of Turkish music in Ghent 'the other' might be represented by the autochthonous people, but this view would ignore the diversity of the population of Ghent as much as the diversity within the 'Turkish communities' in the city. Still, this process of negotiation through interaction can be valid, especially if certain characteristics and behaviour belonging to a particular subgroup within Turkish culture are displayed. But the most important characteristic of identity (if we opt to continue using this highly charged concept), is that it is multiple. Like everyone on earth, the Turkish people living in Ghent play different roles in society depending on place, time and context. They can be Turk, Belgian, immigrant, musician, young person, teacher and what you want. Performing or listening to Turkish folk music can be compatible or not with all these roles and should be considered as such.