JANISSARY MUSIC IN THE WESTERN CLASSICAL IDIOM: 1775-1824

Kira Weiss
Music History 349: Music History 1750 - Present
Revised September 19, 2017
Janissary Music in the Western Classical Idiom: 1775-1824

As Europe became a more unified entity toward the end of the 18th century, the lands and people that existed “outside” of Europe became more boldly delineated in European consciousness. Present-day Turkey, then the Ottoman Empire, was just enough beyond the realm of what was considered European at the time, yet close enough to be in contact with Eastern European countries such as Austria and Hungary. Turkish janissary music came into vogue during the classical era because the music brought a sense of alterity and intrigue to European works. I will argue that the use of janissary music in the Western classical compositions of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven served to create the “Other” as a tool for defining what would become traditional European music.

The "Other" is a term coined by Edward Said in his monumental work, Orientalism.¹ Orientalism, as he defines it, is the Western manner of representing the global East in a way that both purports and permits cultural domination. Turkish music was an optimal choice for representation of the Other because it symbolized the “real Orient” as opposed to the “just-round-the-corner-Orient,” which would have been represented by approximations of Spanish music.² The

Turks were far enough from Western Europe to be considered truly Oriental, yet close enough to exist within the European consciousness.

“Janissary music” is the Western term for Ottoman ensembles of wind and percussion instruments called mehter. Mehter was introduced to Europe in the 17th century and was popularized during the periods of war with the Ottoman Empire. Although the term “janissary” (yeniçeri) refers to the Turkish military elite which adopted mehter around 1330, to date there is no evidence showing that the music was originally connected to the military.  

Similar music had been played across Asia for centuries in non-military contexts; the earliest example reported in a Chinese chronicle from 200 BC. When the Janissary Corps adopted mehter, the purpose was for musicians to play on the field to inspire soldiers and intimidate the enemy. Because the main contact Europeans had with the Ottoman Empire was through military combat, Europeans only associated mehter with the Janissary Corps.

Janissary mehter bands played in times of peace as well as war. The main duty of rakkas, köçek, and tavsan (the professional musicians of the Ottoman-Turkish court) was not to rally troops on the battlefield, but “to entertain the sultan and courtly dignities with dancing, playing instruments, singing, and showing acrobatics.” Ottoman musicians tended to be boys, aged ten to 18, who were nicknamed “the dancing boys” by European travelers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most of "the dancing boys" studied music at the Enderun Music School, a division of the Enderun Academy which was established to train promising young boys of the Ottoman Empire for

---

4 Ibid.
careers in government and science. The primary role of the “dancing boys” was ceremonial, not martial. They performed for weddings, births, circumcisions, and other ceremonies. Beyond the palace, they accompanied ambassadors to Vienna and other European cities, using music as a form of diplomacy. Despite the martial connotations of the Western term “janissary music,” playing at battle was secondary for mehter groups.

Janissary bands consisted of idiophones and aerophones, including single-headed round frame drums (dâire) with jingles (zil) attached to the frame, as well as zurna (similar to shawm or oboe), boru (similar to a trumpet), ney or düdük (similar to fife or small recorder), davul (double-headed drum hit with two differently-sized sticks), nakkaara (kettledrums), and kös (bass drum). These instruments were used ubiquitously across mehter ensembles, with the exception of the kös which was reserved for the sultan and chief general's mehters as a symbol of rank.

At first, Western composers imitated the sounds of these foreign instruments by changing traditional symphonic instrumentation to include piccolo and additional percussion instruments, eliciting the “exotic” timbre of “foreign” music. As Western composers became more exposed to janissary music and as the genre became more popular in the latter half of the eighteenth century, composers also began to incorporate melodic and rhythmic features of janissary music. Such techniques, as listed by Kurt Reinhard, Margaret Ross Griffel, Michael Pirker, and other scholars, included repeated notes, chromaticism, unison melodies, large intervallic leaps, simple harmonies,

---

8 Ibid.
10 Schmidt-Jones, Conexions, 2.
irregular phrasing, quick alterations of major and minor modes, duple meter with accents on strong beats, and sudden changes in dynamics. These techniques were gross approximations of authentic janissary musical characteristics, but nevertheless added melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic nuance to Western imitations of mehter to the more basic use of timbral devices.

Janissary music as performed on Western instruments is mainly referred to as music alla turca or Türkische Musik. While often conflated, these two terms refer to different things. Türkische Musik refers specifically to the enlargement of Austrian military hautboits, which originally consisted of drummers, pipers, shawms, bassoons, and horns. With the popularization of janissary music in Austria, the hautboits expanded to include more wind instruments and percussion instruments typical of mehter, including large drum, cymbal, triangle, and the Turkish crescent [an instrument I discuss on page 19]. Although Türkische Musik grew out of active Austrian military bands, whose function would have been to help soldiers march in sync, there are no pictorial documents that show Türkische Musik as part of battle scenes; all the images of Türkische Musik that survive show bands playing in front of the barracks of the main guard during the summer for entertainment. Alla Turca had even less to do with the military and battle and existed mainly as a style within Western art music, used primarily by W. A. Mozart [see section on Mozart beginning page 8].

The popularization of janissary music owed much to European court festivals, where European nobility co-opted Ottoman styles and cuisine as a theme for the carnivalesque festivals

---


14 Ibid.
they held. In addition to wearing imitations of Turkish clothing and eating Turkish foods, these festivals almost always included the Western equivalent of a janissary band that would often play horseback. In these festivals, Western instruments such as bagpipes, tenor fagott, and cornet were often mixed into the ensembles.\textsuperscript{15} Much of what was known about Ottoman culture and style came from the travel books of Europeans from as early as 1571, which often contained incorrect information.\textsuperscript{16}

It is possible that embracing Ottoman culture in the context of these festivals was connected to the Enlightenment “spirit of tolerance.”\textsuperscript{17} But more likely, the European nobility were simply Othering the concept of the Turk into a symbol of exoticism, intimidation, and luxury. One especially racist example of this Othering involved the hiring of black men to dress in "outlandish 'Oriental' costume" and parade as Turks.\textsuperscript{18} Eighteenth-century Europeans, with their “predilection for games of identity, masks, disguise, and mixing of social classes”\textsuperscript{19} were not so much embracing Turkishness out of cultural tolerance as caricaturing the Turk in a “public exhibit of mockery.”\textsuperscript{20}

These court festivals were the basis of the pan-European craze for Turkish culture and commodities

\textsuperscript{15} Edmund A. Bowles, “The Impact of Turkish Military Bands on European Court Festivals in the 17th and 18th Centuries,” in \textit{Early Music} (Oxford University Press: 2006), 540.
\textsuperscript{18} Schmidt-Jones, \textit{Conexions}, 8.
that began around 1650, known as “the age of turquerie.”21 Fascination was always accompanied by lingering fear, however– the quintessential recipe for Orientalism.

_Janissary Music in Haydn’s Compositions_

Franz Joseph Haydn, born in Austria in 1732, spent most of his professional life in Hungary at the Esterházy estate. During the thirty years at the estate, Haydn was geographically isolated from cultural centers which allowed him to innovate and experiment with many musical styles. Haydn famously said, “There was no one near to confuse me, so I was forced to become original.”22 Other composers had used Turkish music in their compositions previously, including Johann Wolfgang Franck (Cara Mustapha), Jean-Baptiste Lully (Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme), Jean-Philippe Rameau (Les Indes galantes), Christoph Willibald Gluck (La Rencontre imprevue), and Michael Haydn (Turkish Suite), but Joseph Haydn greatly expanded the genre.23 Haydn lived through the popularization of janissary music, beginning with Hungarian Franz von Trenck’s presentation of his Panduren slavonic military band in Vienna in 1741, which was met with enormous success.24 Not only were authentic mehter bands joining Ottoman diplomats on trips to Western Europe, but European nobles were beginning to form their own ensembles for both entertainment and military

23 Schmidt-Jones, Conexions, 4.
purposes. This trend began with Hungary and Poland in the 1740s and spread to Austria, Germany, France, and Russia by the 1770s.\(^{25}\)

Haydn included Turkish themes in his dramma giacosa *L'incontro improvviso* ("The Unexpected Encounter") of 1775. In this opera, the Turkish character Calender is traitorous, with a "corruptive and dangerous persona" which can be considered "shorthand for Turkish exoticism."\(^{26}\)

In the final scene of the first act, Haydn uses distinctively janissary-like rhythms related to *usul*, a term which refers to a recurrent rhythmic cycle throughout a piece of Turkish music.\(^{27}\)*L'incontro improvviso* sonically and visually shows the stereotypes of non-Europeans that existed at the time; the Ottoman character Calender serves as a foil to the virtuous Western hero, just as during the Romantic period the East served as a foil to Western Europe.

Haydn’s Symphony no. 100 “The Military” in G Major (1793) earns its sobriquet from Haydn’s orchestration of the *Allegretto* and *Presto* which calls for triangles, cymbals, and bass drums— all reminiscent of janissary instruments (see Fig. 1). On a smaller scale, Haydn’s String Quartet D Minor, Op. 76, No. 2 (1797) demonstrates the continued use of Turkish themes. In his essay “The Turk in the Mirror,” ethnomusicologist Paul Christiansen argues that the first movement of this quartet is orientalist, pointing out tropes such as “serpentine chromaticism,” “implied augmented 2nds” of the Phrygian mode, and other “Orientalist tricks European composers used to evoke the exotic and its distance.”\(^{28}\) There is scholarly debate today about whether this is an orientalist or merely transcultural use of exotic-sounding techniques. But certainly “The Military”

\(^{25}\) Schmidt-Jones, *Conexions*, 7.


symphony uses a distinctly binary representation of two sides in combat, musically creating a division between “Us” and “the Other.”

Figure 1: Haydn’s Symphony no. 100 (“The Military”) in G Major, 1793. Cymbals (Piatti), Triangle (Triangolo), and bass drum (Gran cassa) are included in the instrumentation along with a reedy melody.

Janissary Music in Mozart’s Compositions

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) continued along Haydn’s trajectory, including numerous Turkish elements in his compositions. As a composer, Mozart was known for his eclecticism. In the opening paragraph of their entry for W.A. Mozart, Oxford Dictionary of Music states, “He excelled in every medium current in his time. He may thus be regarded as the most
universal composer in the history of Western music.” It is no surprise that Mozart followed in Haydn’s footsteps, experimenting with Turkish themes in his compositions. Mozart’s most vivid use of Turkish themes occurs in the three-act opera Die Entführung aus dem Serail ("The Abduction from the Seraglio") in which he borrows musical ideas from Haydn’s abduction opera as well as from his own unfinished opera Zaide. As evidenced in the account book of the Viennese Hoftheater for the fiscal year 1782/83, Mozart hired an artillery band and conductor to participate in the opera.

In a letter to his father, dated the 26th of September, 1781, Mozart writes, “if you want him to sound angry, let him sing Turkish, and then it will sound really ridiculous,” referring to the aria Solche hergelaufne Laffen from his Die Entführung aus dem Serail. This letter reveals some of Mozart’s intention in his use of Turkish music; it appears, at least in this instance, that he used Turkish music for the purposes of caricature. Thomas Betzwieser notes in his article "Orientalism, Masquerade and Mozart's Turkish Music" that Osmin’s character (one of the Turkish characters in Die Entführung aus dem Serail) is “a figure who polices boundaries: the entrance of the harem, the limits of musical beauty, the sphere of rational and moral conduct.” The liminality of his character is reflective of the still-threatening but ever-weakening state of the Ottoman Empire in relation to Europe, itself in a liminal state.

At the same time, Mozart employs the trope of the "noble savage" in Die Entführung aus dem Serail with the character pasha Selim (the sultan), who aesthetically resembles Osmin but is

---

30 Pirker, RCMI, 9.
differentiated by his musical accompaniment and speaking parts. Unlike Osmin, his character appears as sophisticated and benevolent. The fact that clamorous Turkish janissary music was only used in association with Osmin’s character and not the pasha Selim confirms the general reason for employment of Turkish janissary music in the Western art tradition of the time: the music, specifically, was intended to to portray the enemy or Other.

Mozart’s violin concerto No. 5 in A Major, k. 219, coeval with Haydn’s *L’incontro improvviso*, has been nicknamed “The Turkish” because of the exotic-sounding episode in the last movement. This section incorporates extended techniques, sounding almost barbaric relative to the refined classical style of the rest of the work. It includes *col legno* for the celli and contrabasses, which requires hitting the wooden stick of the bow on the strings rather than playing with the hair. This creates a wild, percussive effect that contrasts with the traditional elegance of the Minuet.

Perhaps most famously, Mozart’s Piano Sonata no. 11 k. 331, *Rondo Alla Turca* composed circa 1783 uses Turkish musical elements. Of all the uses of janissary music in Mozart's oeuvre, this piece comes closest to resembling authentic *mehter*. The first eight measures precisely imitate the *davul* drum's alternating heavy (*dum*) and light (*tek*) rhythm as would be played with two differently-sized sticks (see Fig. 2). Many other lesser-known works by Mozart also employ Turkish elements, including the "Agnus Dei" of the Mass in C (K. 337), the variations on "Les hommes pieusement" (K. 455), Piano Sonatas K. 238 in G and K. 310 in A minor. In these examples, he uses janissary music more ambiguously, however, and for this reason they are not as frequently referenced as examples of Mozart’s incorporation of janissary music.

---

34 Schmidt-Jones, *Conexions*, 5.
Figure 2: Mozart Piano Sonata no. 11 k. 331, *Rondo Alla Turca*, ca. 1783. The left-hand of the piano imitates the heavy (*dum*) and light (*tek*) beats that would be played on the *davul* with different-sized sticks.

By the time Mozart wrote this sonata, Austria had been at war with the Ottoman Empire over two dozen times in a mere two centuries. There is skepticism over whether Mozart would have had the
opportunity to actually hear an authentic Turkish janissary band perform. Some scholars argue instead that his notion of Turkish music was taken from Hungarian representations of Turkish music (i.e. Hungarian törökös dance) and was, in essence, “a copy of a copy.” Others argue that many of Mozart’s compositions that are regarded as Turkish-influenced, such as the last movement of violin concerto No. 5 (KV 219), are actually more reflective of the all’ongherese (Hungarian) style.36 These scholars point out that “to ascribe quite different ethnicities to the same set of musical characteristics is, of course, entirely consistent with orientalist practice.”

The Ottoman Empire was far less threatening during Mozart’s time than it had been in the previous century. The defeat of the Ottomans in Vienna in 1683 marked the end of the golden age of the Ottoman Empire. In her article, "Janissary Music and Turkish Influences on Western Music," Catherine Schmidt-Jones describes the Ottoman Empire as a "paper tiger," still "frightening to the populace on an almost mythological level, but not a serious military danger." By the time of the classical period, the Turkish presence in Austria was more cultural than military. This could be seen in the presence of Turkish baths, coffeehouses, and performances by former military bands which played in the courts rather than on the battlefields. After 1683, “the enlightened interrogation of cultural difference replaced a genuine fear of religious distinction,” which allowed Western composers greater freedom to engage in Turkish styles. Still some argue that, “Turkish themes were employed to portray the threat of Islamic attacks upon Christian interests.” In either case, the

35 Matthew Head, Orientalism, Masquerade and Mozart's Turkish Music (University of Michigan: Royal Musical Association, 2000), 85.
36 Perl, Cambridge Opera Journal, 220.
37 Ibid.
38 Schmidt-Jones, Conexions, 4.
39 Christiansen, 19th Century Music, 185.
exposure to janissary music might have led Western classical composers to see this genre as a prototype for all Turkish music, rather than just one style.

*Janissary Music in Beethoven’s Compositions*

Ludwig van Beethoven continued the tradition of imitating Turkish music in his compositions. The most famous example of this is his orchestral work *Marcia alla turca* (“Turkish March”) whose theme he revived from *Six Variations on an Original Theme*, Op. 76 (1809) to include in his incidental music for the play *Die Ruinen von Athen* (“The Ruin of Athens”) Op. 113 (1811) by August von Kotzebue. The dynamics he notates evoke the soundscape of a procession of Turkish musicians approaching, passing by, and fading into the distance (see Fig. 3). The piece begins and ends pianissimo, reaching a fortissimo climax. The melody is in the woodwinds, characteristic of authentic Turkish style. In another piece from *Die Ruinen von Athen*, “The Chorus of Dervishes,” Beethoven used “all available noisy instruments, like castanets, bells, etc.” to represent the Turkish Other.\(^\text{41}\)

Figure 3: Beethoven’s *Marcia alla turca* (“Turkish March”). Triangle, cymbal, and bass drum accompany a melody in the upper reed instruments. The bassoon mimics the *davul’s* heavy and light beats. The excess of grace notes parodies the ornamentation of Turkish music.
Beethoven also used Turkish musical devices in the last movement of his Ninth Symphony Op. 125 (1824), scoring the already-established “Ode to Joy” theme with rhythmically-offset winds and percussion. His use of Turkish music here seems comical and even ironic when compared to the seriousness of preceding passages. Freidrich Schiller’s text “An die Freude,” to which Beethoven sets the music, uses words such as “brotherhood” and “humanity.” These terms dramatically contrast with the militaristic sounds of janissary music. Perhaps this section of the movement, in which all instruments begin tacet except for percussion, was meant to provide respite from the gravity and grandeur of the rest of the movement (see Fig. 4).

By the time Beethoven was using Turkish themes and devices in his music, the Janissary Corps had been severely weakened with the overall waning economic and political force of the Ottoman Empire. The Janissary Corps was officially terminated in 1826, two years after the premiere of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. Mehter ensembles were banned in favor of Western-style military bands, run predominantly by Italians.42 It is unlikely that Beethoven would have heard a janissary band himself and more plausible that he used Haydn and Mozart’s representations rather than interpreting mehter directly. In 1857, janissary performances were officially forbidden by Sultan Abdülmecid I (1832-1861) as part of the process of modernization and Westernization of the Ottoman Empire; after this, the inclusion of janissary music was much less fashionable.

Eventually, the janissary sound of percussion and wind instruments came to represent a general Other, without reference to the Turks in particular. Paul Christiansen states that, “it is not imperative—or even desirable—that listeners distinguish between the Oriental areas invoked (in this context, India and China are the same place); it is enough that the music is ‘exotic’ and marked

42 Schmidt-Jones, Conexions, 2.
as Other.” This is certainly the case in Beethoven’s *Wellingtons Sieg oder die Schlacht bei Vittoria* ("The Battle Symphony") Op. 91 in which he uses all the trappings of an imitation of janissary music, yet makes no programmatic reference to Turks. He uses the music to depict warfare between the English and French, symbolizing Wellington’s ultimate victory with a “Turkification” of the French battle song *Malbrouk s'en va-t-en guerre* and the English battle song *Rule Britannia*. What began as a parodical representation of a people under Haydn’s quill became instead a representation of an abstract concept of the Other, disconnected from the culture from which it was originally appropriated.

Interestingly, a common key among Beethoven’s janissary-influenced compositions was B-flat major while for Mozart’s *alla turca* compositions it was A minor. There is a supposition that janissary pieces may have tended to be performed in a key between A and B flat, as both tuning systems and notions of tonality differed between Western Europe and the Ottoman Empire. This is only a hypothesis, however, and Mozart gave a different rationale for putting Osmin’s “Erst geköpft dann gehangen” in A minor in a letter to his father (26 September 1781) saying,

> But as passions, whether violent or not, must never be expressed in such a way as to excite disgust, and as the music even in the most terrible situations, must never offend the ear, but must please the hearer [...] I have gone from F (the key in which the aria is written) not into a remote key but into a related one, not, however into its nearest relative D minor, but into the more remote A minor.

This concept fits well with the notion of using Turkish music in Western art compositions as a means of stimulating the listener’s ear by including unexpected music. Such music was still foreign to the classical genre, yet not exotic or jarring enough to cause the listener discomfort; most of the audience would already have some familiarity with janissary music.

---

After 1824

In the years leading up to 1824, the exposure to Turkish janissary music waned as did the faithfulness of Western imitations to the original source.\(^4^4\) Although the music would have first been heard during the Crusades, it was after the second failed siege of Vienna by the Ottomans in 1683 that janissary music spread.\(^4^5\) As the Ottoman Empire weakened, Europeans became increasingly less interested in the formerly exotic and intimidating Turkish music. By Beethoven’s time, Turkish devices were a commonly recognized trope for the Other and had taken a firm root in Western classical music.

Janissary music had a lasting impact on European military music. Starting with Hungary and Germany, European military ensembles began to adopt Ottoman percussion instruments as “spoils of war.”\(^4^6\) The popularity of these instruments spread throughout European military bands. Eventually the use of these instruments in military bands and in orchestral performances lost their former “ethno-cultural connotations” and became fixtures of Western classical music.\(^4^7\)

It is important to recognize the reverse influence Western Europe had on the Ottomans. Scholars have identified what we now consider Eastern Europe as the Ottoman ecumene, referring to “a geopolitical region where the persistent exchange of expressive culture manifests ‘intraregional confluences of styles.’”\(^4^8\) It is easy to forget that just as Turkish janissary music influenced Western art music, there was equal influence in the opposite direction. One particularly

\(^{4^5}\) Ibid., 44.
\(^{4^7}\) Ibid., 40.
interesting instance of intraregional confluence is the role of çağana in janissary bands. Scholars hypothesize that Europeans mistook the Ottoman iconography of a crescent shape with horsetails, that was used as a sign of rank or tugh, as a musical instrument. In attempting to recreate this instrument, they are thought to have invented what is now known as “the jingling johnny,” attaching bells to the crescent in place of horsetails.\textsuperscript{49} This misappropriation of badge of rank was actually re-appropriated by the Turks into janissary bands during the 19th century. They called this instrument çağana. In the same way that Europeans employed Alla Turca style, Turks employed Alla Franga or alafranga, which came to symbolize “modernity, change, and the new lifestyle.”\textsuperscript{50} Associated with Alla Franga was the gradual adaptation of the Western musical notation system to fit the traditional maqam system, albeit with a few modifications including the elimination of bar lines and reading from right to left.

Not all scholars agree that all janissary representations in Western art music were Orientalist. Some argue that composers weren’t necessarily attempting to parody Turks by using jarring intervals or noisy instrumentations. Janissary bands, they would argue, were meant to be as noisy and jarring as possible because of their role in the military. Western composers may have just been representing the music they heard, attempting to stay as close to the original as possible. Other scholars criticize the blanket-statements of calling all Western portrayals of janissary music “Orientalist” when Orientalism must be deconstructed into its more specific manifestations, i.e. Anglican Orientalism, German Orientalism, precolonial, colonial and postcolonial Orientalism.\textsuperscript{51}

---

\textsuperscript{49} Pirker, \textit{RCMI}, 5.

\textsuperscript{50} Ayangil, \textit{Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society}, 401.

Based on primary source information from composers about their intentions and the use of Turkish music mainly in moments of savagery, barbary, sensuality, irrationality, and war I conclude that Orientalism, in its various forms, did color the inclusion of janissary music in Western art music from 1775 to 1824. The use of janissary music in Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven’s compositions came to symbolize the Other. The musical caricatures of janissary bands aurally reinforced the biases and perceptions about Ottoman Turks that already existed in the cultural imaginary. The creation of the Other by way of exotic-sounding music served as a foil to Western music, setting the stage for the ensuing nationalist movements of the Romantic era. With an “us versus them” mentality, artists could define themselves through opposition. Romantic composers would go on to the musical tropes established in the classical period from Turkish music as a way of demarcating national borders and defining their own cultural and musical heritage.
Bibliography


