SONGÜL KARAHASANOĞLU AND GABRIEL SKOOG

Innovative Neglect: Contextual Divergence and the Development of the Mey in Turkey

Like the Azerbaijan balaban and the Armenian duduk or nay, the Turkish mey consists of a short cylindrical body with seven or more finger holes and a thumb hole, which is played using a large double reed fitted with a bridle or tuning regulator (see Figure 1 in the colour section). The physical features of these three instruments are, in fact, so similar that it is not uncommon for performers to play all three and for some people to consider them as a single instrument with a variety of regional names, whose origin may be attributed to a single nation. Indeed, there has been significant debate concerning the origin and ownership of this cluster of instruments, particularly in popular discourse coloured by nationalist sentiment. Such argument is ultimately futile, however, since it both oversimplifies the complex nexus of cultural, religious and social interaction within Anatolia and Central Asia, while simultaneously disregarding the nuanced histories and developments of these instruments within the emerging nation state system of the last one hundred years. If we wish to talk of instruments that are essentially the same, yet in many ways fundamentally different, it is necessary to find a system of evaluation that can incorporate both of these elements.

One such system has been put forward by Andy Nercessian, who has argued that the Armenian duduk should be understood both as a representative of a common instrument type in the region and as a unique instrument in its own right. His approach has been to extend the discussion of the instrument beyond the physical to include those conceptual and symbolic elements that accompany the duduk and its performance in Armenia. This 'trialectic' approach takes the form of three levels of analysis: the physical or the 'capacities and limitations of its physicality;' the contextual or the 'context(s) in which the instrument generates meaning;' and the symbolic or 'the subject or beholder.'[1] In his book, however, Nercessian limits himself to just the first two areas of examination, leaving the third to 'be explored in greater depth as the impact of globalization is felt more strongly in the future.'[2]

It is important to stress that while the structure of the mey, the duduk and the balaban is essentially the same their respective historical and cultural contexts have affected them very differently. The duduk, for instance, has achieved astounding success both in Armenia itself and internationally due to the former Soviet Union's policies of Westernization and modernization: the government encouraged improvements in the instrument itself, altering its shape and changing the tuning to equal temperament. The mey, on the other hand, has been somewhat neglected by the Turkish state and, as a consequence, remains relatively unknown by the majority of Turkish nationals. When mentioning that you play the mey, it is not unusual to receive a confused look and the question 'you mean the ney?' (An end-blown

[1] See Andy Nercessian, *The Duduk and National Identity in Armenia* (London: The Scarecrow Press, 2001), p.16.

[2] ibid., p.16

reed flute most commonly associated with art and religious music). Ironically, while many Turks are familiar with the sound of the mey, its profile as an instrument is surprisingly limited. Indeed, the mey's place in the Turkish musical landscape is marked by a sort of innovative neglect, which is suspended between the limitations of the mey on the one hand and the inability of many musical institutions to accept attempts at innovation on the other.

THE MEY: AN OVERVIEW

The mey (Figure 2) is found most widely in the eastern region of Turkey,[3] perhaps because the structure of the instrument is most suitable for the character of this region's music, and consists of three main sections: the body (gövde), the reed (kamış) and the tuning bridle (kıskaç). Originally, there was only one size of instrument, but musicians initially added two more sizes and then increased the set to include eight different sizes, and now modern alterations has led to additional variants of the instrument. The instrument has a range of just one octave, is limited to certain modes (maqams),[4] and is played with the left hand at the top and the right hand at the bottom of the instrument; the little finger of the left hand and the right-hand thumb are not used. The pitch is varied through a combination of lip pressure and the uncovering of the finger holes. The cylindrical body is traditionally made from plum wood, although walnut, mulberry, beech, apricot, acacia, olive and rose are also used, and contemporary makers are now using imported African woods for their instruments. Modern instruments have seven finger holes, spaced equidistantly apart, and one thumb hole.[5]

The characteristic timbre of the instrument comes from the extremely large double reed (Figure 3 below). The size of the reed allows for

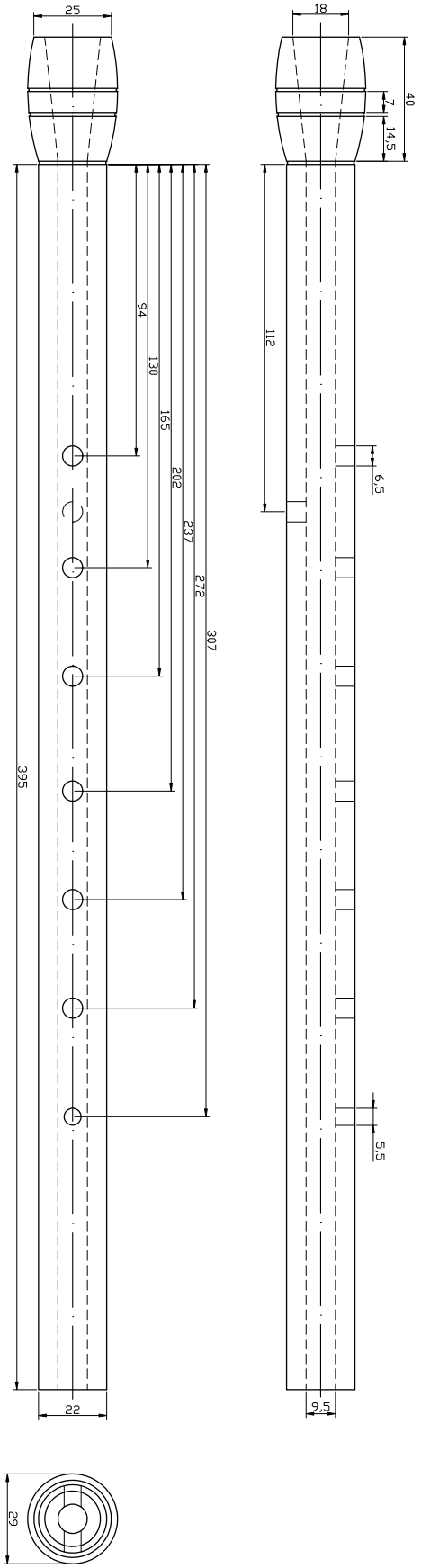

Figure 2. *Diagram of a mey (drawn by the luthier Safak Köksal)*

[3] Such as Erzurum, Bayburt, Kars, Erzincan, Hakkâri, Tunceli, Artvin, Gümüshane, Van, Agri, Mus, Diyarbakir and Gaziantep.

[4] Makams available to the mey player are: Hüseyni, Rast, Neveser, Hicaz, Ussak, Kürdi, Hüzzam, Saba, Karcığar, Nihavent, Segâh and Buselik.

[5] In contrast, meys manufactured in the 1930s and 1940s were constructed with eight finger holes and one thumb hole. See Adnan Saygun, *Rize, Artvin, Kars Havalisi Türkü ve Saz Oyunlari* (Istanbul: Numune Matbaasi, 1937), p.50; Kasim Ülgen, *Dogu Anadolu Oyunlari ve Havalari* (Istanbul: Kars Halkevi Yayinlari, 1944), p.36; and Mahmut R. Gazimihal, *Türk Nefesli Çalgilari* (Ankara: Kültür Bakanligi MIFAT Yayinlari, 1975), p.74. These older meys are also marked by their non-standard body size.

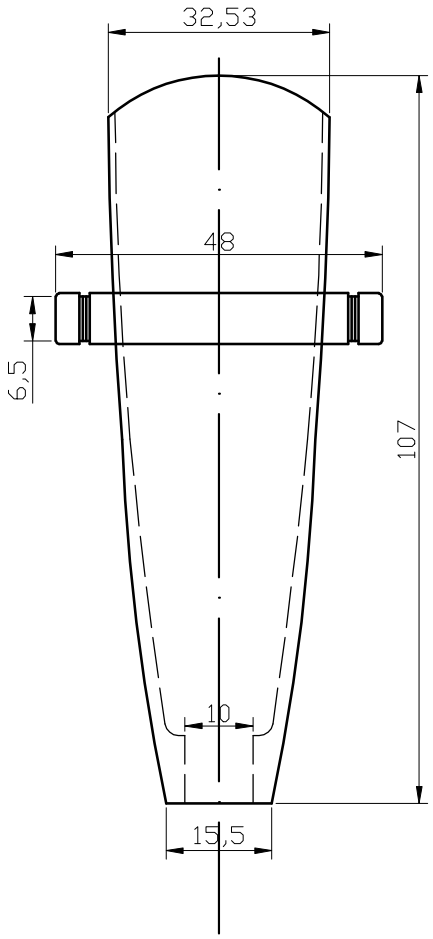

Figure 3. *Diagram of a double reed with tuning bridle (drawn by luthier Safak Köksal)*

microtonal changes in pitch, a fundamental feature of traditional Turkish music, but also makes the instrument difficult to control and for this reason it is generally accompanied by a second drone instrument. The use of the large double reed also explains the continuous vibrato of the instrument, although a skilled player can increase the amount of vibrato being heard by rapidly moving their jaw or by shaking the instrument with both hands. The tuning bridle, which fits over the reed, makes the playing of the instrument more comfortable, and can also be used to adjust the tone quality and for tuning. When not being played, a cap (ağızlik) is sometimes placed over the end of the reed to protect it.

The mellow, non-strident sound of the mey is particularly suited for indoor use, although musicians will often play the repertoire of louder outdoor instruments, such as the zurna,[6] an instrument also played by most Turkish mey players. Musicians generally play a short un-metered improvisation before each piece, called yol gösterme, gezinti or açış, and one of the most important things a novice needs to learn is how to perfect the art of circular breathing in order to play the tune continuously. Traditionally, the mey is accompanied by a frame drum (def) or by another mey sounding a drone (dem); when played in mixed ensembles the drone is often supplied by a different instrument. In contrast, when used as a minstrel's instrument (aşık sazı) to perform a song the soloist will alternate the playing of the melody with the singing of the words. While their status has generally improved over the last few decades, players were traditionally of low social status and most earned their living simply as wedding musicians.

The 1960s was an important period of change for the mey as it slowly began to be integrated into Turkey's professional music world. Musicians also started to use three different sizes of mey, referred to as large (ana), medium (orta) and small (cura),[7] each with a different starting pitch (but still with a range of one octave), to enable the instrument to be played in mixed ensembles. Difficulties of integration remained, however, even when musicians used an adaptor (boğaz) to raise and lower the pitch of the mey by a major second. Transposition is very difficult on a mey and in order to play in an ensemble musicians needed to change instruments whenever the key changed. More recently, with the development of mass media, the increase in the number of institutions offering musical education, the growth of traditional music conservatories (since 1976) and particularly the impact of professional performance there has been a shift away from three sizes of mey to the production of full diatonic sets of instruments. As a consequence, the mey is now widely used in almost all parts of Turkey in popular and traditional music, both solo and ensemble.

THE CONSTRUCTION PROCESS: MASTERS, MAKERS AND METHODS

Mey players traditionally made their own instruments and reeds but changing economic and technological conditions, as well as the increase in the number of players, prompted some performers and craftsmen to manufacture mey bodies and reeds professionally. Most of the older generation (usta) of makers have now retired or died. They were often carpenters and furniture makers, and their instruments are now highly sought after although the lack of maker's stamps and signatures makes identification of their work difficult. Two of the best

[6] The zurna is a double reed wind instrument known for its powerful sound.

[7] Information from Binali Selman (personal correspondence).

known makers of this older generation are Dikran Nisan and Cabbar Bozkurtlar (Figure 4 in the colour section).

The Armenian Dikran Nisan, who was called Nişo Usta (1911–1999),[8] was a professional maker who sold his instruments throughout Anatolia, as well as the neighbouring countries of Iraq and Iran. He was born in Diyarbakır province and it was there that he learned to make instruments from Master Maybalı Popo. In addition to the mey he produced a wide range of traditional instruments, including the zurna, the kaval (shepherd's pipe) and two different kinds of pipe: the 'dilli kaval' and the 'dilsiz kaval.' When Niso Usta was interviewed in 1992 his eyes were very poor and he was too old to work anymore, he no longer owned any of the instruments he had made and was unable to remember any of their characteristic details. As he did not sign his instruments it takes a trained eye to identify those still in circulation.[9]

Cabbar Bozkurtlar (1924–2004), another of the great older master craftsmen, lived in a rural area of the province of Artvin and manufactured meys using a hand lathe. On interview he said that he had started making meys between 1940 and 1945, and that he had learned to play the mey from the best known player in Artvin, Cevri Altıntaş. Bozkurtlar was a self taught and devoted craftsman and continued making two meys a month until his death in 2004. Interestingly, rather than using a series of set measurements to construct his instruments, he followed a conceptual pattern developed and refined over decades of mey production and performance.[10]

The manufacture of meys and zurnas is now a thriving business in Istanbul and many of the younger generation of craftsmen have adopted new technologies, notably electric lathes. While there are many instrument makers in the city, three of the main manufacturers are: Hasan Fehmi An, Ali Riza Acar and Ayhan Kahraman. Born in 1975, Hasan Fehmi An is the third generation of his family to produce meys in an atelier originally set up by his grandfather. He learned to make meys by working in his father's atelier in his free time and prefers using ebony, plum and acacia wood. Ali Riza Acar (*b* 1956), who has a workshop in Esenler, was born in Cide, Kastamonu. Like Hasan Fehmi An, he learned to make instruments from his father, Nuri Acar, and makes a variety of instruments, including drums, bongos, defs, benders, davuls, reed flutes, meys and zurnas. Since many famous mey performers, such as Haydar Kekeç and Binali Selman, went to his father's workshop while he was working there, Acar was able to respond directly to the needs and concerns of skilled musicians. Today, he is known as the best instrument maker after Ayhan Kahraman; he prefers using plum, apricot and cherry wood for his instruments.

Ayhan Kahraman (*b* 1956) is the best known and respected of the mey makers working in Istanbul today, whose innovations (such as the production of diatonic sets of meys) have been imitated by other makers. He has been making instruments since 1980 and is famous for the quality of the materials he uses and for his attention to detail; he only makes zurnas and meys. Because he is an accomplished mey and zurna player, he is able to add the 'musician's ear' to the 'craftsman's gaze' when making an instrument. Indeed, Kahraman is so well known that he does not need to run a shop: performers go directly to his studio to purchase his instruments. Occasionally, if one of his instruments does not meet his high personal standards, he will sell it to an instrument dealer, but insists that they don't say who made it. He was the first to produce eight separate sizes of mey, each corresponding to a note of the diatonic scale, c to c^1 (see Table 1).

THE BODY (GÖVDE)

Kahraman pays careful attention to the manufacture of his instruments: he uses special tools (such as industrial drills and electric lathes) from Germany and prefers the relatively hard timber from trees grown slowly in the dry eastern regions of Turkey and from the south-facing side of the tree.

After purchasing the raw tree trunk, Kahraman cuts and coats the faces with plaster adhesive to prevent the wood from drying out too rapidly and cracking, and then stores it in a dark and humid place for one year. After the wood has aged sufficiently, he will begin to work it on the lathe: he cuts the exterior to a cylindrical shape roughly 40mm in diameter and uses a drill with a special bit to bore a hole 10mm in diameter through the middle. The inside of the

[8] Two other Anatolian mey masters based in Erzurum, who earned their living primarily as carpenters, were Master Tosun and Master Hakki. Infornation from Suat Isikli (personal communication, 1992).

[9] Information from Dikran Nisan (personal communication, 1992). Karahasanoğlu has two meys made by Dikran Nişan. They are 295mm long and have inner diameters ranging from 18mm (upper part) to 10mm (lower part). The distance from the head to the first hole is 40mm and the interval between the finger holes varies from 15mm to 20mm.

[10] Information from Cabbar Bozkurtlar (personal communication, 2001).

Table 1. Dimensions (in millimeters) of the eight sizes of mey as constructed by Ayhan Kahraman.

Size	Overall length	Distance of finger holes from the proximal end of the instrument (not including the reed)							
		1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	Thumb hole
c[1]	217	36	56	77	97	118	138	159	47
b	231	44	66	87	110	132	154	176	55
a	270	52	78	102	125	150	175	200	65
g	303	67	93	120	145	172	197	224	80
f	339	81	110	139	168	197	226	254	95
e	362	94	125	155	186	217	247	278	110
d	389	112	145	178	211	242	275	309	130
c	437	135	171	206	242	278	313	348	153

instrument is then burnt to ensure that the 'tone is set', with any minor adjustments being made by the application of more plaster. No sandpaper is used. To prevent warping the wood is again set aside in a dark and humid place for a week in the summer and up to fifteen days in the winter. If the wood warps, the hole will either be re-bored or the instrument discarded.

Once he is sure that the wood is set, Kahraman begins by carving and enlarging the reed hole at the top of the body and then moves on to shape the exterior of the body using various knives. The body is then cleaned and the sound holes marked out using a template; the holes are then burnt into the body of the instrument and the instrument again set aside to dry for one month. The instrument is then varnished with engine oil or almond oil and the tuning checked. The bodies of five instruments at different stages of construction may be seen in Figure 5 of the colour section.

THE DOUBLE REED (KAMIŞ) AND THE TUNING BRIDLE (KıSKAÇ)

The mey owes its distinctive timbre to the large double reed, which is fitted with a special tuning bridle or regulator (kiskaç). Mey reeds measure some 80–150mm long and 20–40mm wide at the mouth, while the tuning bridle is made from a piece of wood folded in half and tied on both sides. As with the manufacture of mey bodies, previous generations of players often made their own reeds, but recently there has been a rise in the number of professional reed makers. One such maker is Ali Zeynel Çiftçi (*b* 1967), who purchases the raw reeds from Aydın, Tarsus, Samandağ and Syria. Çiftçi chooses his reeds from groves growing by the sea, which are carefully planted to protect them from the wind. The reeds are collected in March and April and spread out on the grass to dry and strengthen during the day and taken indoors after sunset to avoid the humid night air. This drying process, referred to by Çiftçi as 'çiğleme' is repeated for some fifteen days. Once the reeds are dried, they are cut to appropriate lengths at a knot, the outer bark stripped off and the surface smoothed with sandpaper. The reeds are then dipped into boiling water to soften them prior to shaping. All shaping is made with just the fingers to avoid cracks in the edges of the reed and the reed is then left to dry for up to five days, with several temporary tuning bridles attached to help set the shape. According to Çiftçi, he plays every reed for at least an hour and does not sell any reed that does not meet his high personal standards.

ATTEMPTS AT STRUCTURAL INNOVATION

My experience with the mey has been that of both instructor and performer. As a graduate of the Turkish State Conservatory of Music in Istanbul, I was schooled in both Western and traditional Turkish music; I also play the flute. Indeed, my familiarity with the flute inspired me to explore the possibilities of modifying the mey in order to overcome its technical limitations: the execution of specific intervals; transposition and modulation. I also wanted to improve the sound and range of the mey without changing its unique tone quality. In order to do this I worked with an instrument maker in Istanbul, who was open to experimentation. Various attempts were made, including drilling holes in the reed, but in the end, eight Western style keys were added to the body of an instrument. This increased the range of a modified mey from an octave to an octave and a fourth, the number of pitches from nine to 22 and enabled semitones and microtonal pitches to be produced more easily without sacrificing the instrument's distinctive sound.

Musicians and musicologists had for decades been bemoaning the limited use of the mey, and it was my hope that this new mey body would give the instrument a stronger place in multi-instrument ensembles. The new mey body was, however, received

rather coldly. While many mey instructors and players wished that the mey could be modernized, their rigid conceptualization of the place of the mey did not allow for any innovation. The incompatibility of the mey with modern ensembles was not seen as an obstacle to overcome, but rather as a limitation that had to be accepted. This is indicative of the sort of innovative neglect that the mey has suffered throughout the history of the Turkish Republic. It is arguable that the mey's sister instruments, the Armenian duduk and Azeri balaban have received more innovative attention and, as a consequence, are more widely known in their respective countries.

CONCLUSION

For some people, the process of nation building includes the construction and presentation of a national musical identity. This national musical identity is often portrayed as special and even unique to a particular state. In attempting to articulate these unique characteristics, conflicting narratives and cross-border disputes of ownership can and do arise. These disputes of cultural character and ownership are more often than not the product of larger overarching international tensions. As Eriksen has pointed out, 'The use of presumably typical ethnic symbols in nationalism is intended to stimulate reflection on one's own cultural distinctiveness and thereby to create a feeling of nationhood.'[11] This feeling of nationhood is usually accompanied by a sense of inalterable timelessness, a solid shared foundation that 'enables people to talk about their culture as though it were a constant.'[12] Ambiguous academic discourse which suggests an ever-shifting reading of the mey as both Turkish and non-Turkish runs counter to the impulse in nationalism to standardize and codify. To even enter into a debate about national 'ownership' of instruments is to miss the point, which is that music is more a bridge than a wall, more in flux than static. The mey is both a unique instrument with its own particular usages and circumstances, and part of a larger family of instruments spread across borders in the region.

The status of the mey in modern Turkey is thus an ambiguous one. While not ubiquitous, it is far from uncommon. It is performed in the countryside and in the cities, by amateurs and by professionals. Its makers have adapted modern trends in construction and it has institutional support both at the state radio and in universities. Yet at the same time the mey has not been incorporated into the national image of Turkey. It is in many ways an invisible instrument; many hear it but few in Turkey know what it is they hear. While instruments like the zurna in Turkey and the duduk in Armenia have received strong state support, the mey has essentially been unsupported in the Turkish Republic. Institutional support is a direct manifestation of what Stokes calls the 'propagation of dominant classifications.'[13] Emerging nation states have often used music and instruments to construct a static and homogeneous national face, or, in the case of music, national voice of the nation. The mey, because of its limitations of tuning and range, was not chosen to be one of the main representatives of Turkey's national character and as such has faded into the background. It has neither been actively persecuted, nor has it been supported. Yet because national identity reduces culture to a constant, attempts at innovation are viewed as assaults on tradition. While craftsmen have modernized the construction process, the few attempts that have been made to broaden the capabilities of the instrument have been met with strong resistance. This innovative neglect has made the mey a living museum piece, for many a historical curio to be briefly admired before turning to what many believe to be more serious and valuable subjects.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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[11] Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press: 1993), p.103.

[12] ibid, p.103.

[13] Martin Stokes, *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music* (London: Oxford: Berg Publication: 1994), p.10.

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INTERVIEWS AND PERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS
(all interviews are by Karahasanoğlu)

Interview with Ali Rıza Acar (Istanbul, 2007)
Interview with Ali Zeynel (Hatay, 1999)
Interview with Aydin Konuk (Istanbul, 1992)
Interview with Ayhan Kahraman (Istanbul, 1992)
Interview with Binali Selman (Istanbul, 1990)
Interview with Cabbar Bozkurtlar (Artvin, 2001)
Interview with Dikran Nisan (Istanbul, 1992)
Interview with Hasan An (Istanbul, 1992)
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Interview with Sadi Yaver Ataman (Istanbul, 1992)
Interview with Sehamettin Tekin (Istanbul, 1992)
Interview with Suat Isikli (Istanbul, 1992)


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SONGÜL KARAHASANOĞLU AND GABRIEL SKOOG

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Figure 1. *A mey produced by Ayhan Kahraman, played by Songül Karahasanoğlu (photo courtesy Yalcın Savas from the author's collection).*

Figure 4. *Cabbar Bozkurtlar (1924–2004) at work in his atelier in 2001. (photo by the author)*

Figure 5. *The bodies of five instruments at various stages of construction, displayed in the workshop of Ahmet Er, Istanbul. (photo courtesy Yalcın Savas)*