

Özsoy: The First Turkish Opera That Was Desired by Ataturk

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Abstract—M. Kemal Ataturk was a great leader who was fond of art and he had displayed his being fond of art many times. In his speeches and writings you can see that he had showed his approval to art and the importance of artists and art for the society. During the foundation of republic, he also wanted renovation in art as in other fields and ordered many novelties both in art and society. One of the greatest steps in realizing this was to prepare a national Turkish opera. In this study, it was studied how a Turkish opera, Özsoy was prepared in the context of social and political conditions of that time and what kind of processes it passed. As a result, it is seen that there was two main aims for Ataturk with this opera. First, Ataturk wanted to abolish the sectarian conflict between Iran and Turkey going on for centuries. The second and maybe the most important is that he wanted to make a revolution in the field of art and aimed to reach the level of civilized countries.

Keywords—Opera, Atatürk, Özsoy, Adnan Saygun, The first Turkish opera.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE introduction of polyphonic music, symphonic orchestra, musicals, even the first opera experiments are before Ataturk. But those elements of music belonging to a high level of music understanding was firstly established and institutionalized by the directives of Ataturk in his time, and became the elements determining the cultural basements of new republic [1]. Even this institutionalizing was realized in the time of republic, a true analysis of art movements aiming to westernize needs a large perspective focusing the pre-republic era. With this aim, the experiments and some cases were studied and mentioned to better understand the discourse of Turkish opera in this study.

Yöre [2] said that it can be firstly thought the discourse of opera was in the 17th century because the lexis opera was firstly used in a poem by Eremya Kömürcüyan (1637–1695). Hence, the indirect information about the relation of opera and Ottoman Empire can go on 17th century. On the other hand, Aracı [3] mentioned that the lexis opera started to be used by the ottoman travelers and ambassadors having travelled to European countries in their reports. It can be seen that those ambassadors used the lexis opera or opare. Those ambassadors gave every detail of the operas that they had watched in Paris and Vienna. Thanks to the effect of those reports on the ottoman kings, the novel and western foundations in the field of music in 19th century was laid easily.

Altar [4] mentioned that especially in the years of 1846 – 1885 famous operas of Giuseppe Verdi were displayed in

Istanbul after a few years later of their first world premiers. Turkish premier of one of the most important works of Verdi, *Il Trovatore* was on 13th November 1853. Considering the fact that Rome premier was on 19th January 1853, the opera's being staged in then months explicitly show that there was a great interest in opera in those times. The more interesting is that the premiers of Paris, Vienna, Warsaw and New York were held later.

As Sevengil [5] mentioned that one of the greatest steps taken in this renovation process was that king II. Mahmut invited Giuseppe Donizetti to Istanbul, who is the brother of famous composer Gaetano Donizetti. Donizetti came to Istanbul on 17th September 1828 and worked continuously in the palace for 28 years. Donizetti led Muzika-i Hümayun, which was the first regular military music band in Ottoman Empire resembling the European military bands. This band continued to the foundation of republic. Kolçak [6] mentioned about this situation that Muzika-i Hümayun could be counted as the first conservatory in turkey but it only served within the palace and didn't integrate with the public. Mimaroglu [7] mentioned about "Muzika-i Hümayun" as the first and unique music institution which conducted western music before the republic. According to Say [8] one of the most eminent works of that day was the symphonic orchestra founded by Donizetti. The first members of the orchestra were selected from Muzika-i Hümayun and it started to give concerts at soonest.

It is seen that the westernization or modernization movements just before the republic formed the basement of the music after the republic. In the time of republic, there happened so many renovations in many fields such as language revolution (1932), which was based on the purification of the language; meanwhile another big renovation was in the field of music. Tarlakazan [9] mentioned that with the republic more importance was given to culture and art, the interest in art became a government policy, art became the main culture question, the problems of art education became the problem of national education. Balkılıç [10] talks about in his book about difference between the republic and final period of Ottoman: the main difference between final period of ottoman and republic is that in the latter period the westernization and modernization in the area of music is more focused, concentrated, in the control of government and more systematically carried.

II. ATATURK'S APPROACH TO ART AND MUSIC IN THE PERIOD OF THE REPUBLIC

Ataturk defined the Turkish Revolution as destructing the institutions leaving the Turkish nation behind the civilized

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nations, and placing them with the new institutions which will make the nation progress according to the most contemporary necessities of the new age. Moreover, he defined the aim of the Revolution as to carry the people of Turkish republic to a civilized society with its all spiritual and picturesque aspects [11]. As it is to be understood from his point of view to the revolution that he saw the modernization as a whole, and in this direction he included the nation actively in this renovation movement. In this movement and reformation, cultural dynamics and economic, politic and psychological alterations were interactive and inter-supportive. [12]

Woodard [13] stated that music played an important role in the reformation process during the first period of the republic. According to Woodard it was intended to make drastic and radical changes according to their Turkic roots different from the ottoman history supporting the laic and democratic nation aiming to integrate with the western world. Musical reforms were close related with building the new nation and all the aspects of musical life were being constructed in political sense. Ataturk stressed about the importance of fine arts and other aspects of art at different opportunities such as “a nation, which cannot draw and paint, a nation, which cannot sculpt, a nation, which is not into science, it is surely no on the path of progress”. Evcin [14] quotes from Ataturk’s speech in the tenth year of the republic that the foundation of Turkish republic is Turkish culture and the Turks could progress on the path of civilization through love with fine arts and science. He adds that the historical aspect of Turks is to love fine arts and to improve in this field. For this reason, our national purpose is to support the progress of our nation’s characteristic intelligence, its high character, its being dependant on science, its love with fine arts, and feeling of national unity with its whole aspects and with every instrument. Küçüköncü [15] quotes about the art policy of Ataturk in his speech to the parliament and says that he wanted to install the art policy into government policy with his sentences: “I want to renovate your interest in fine arts. It is a pleasure for me to mention that a conservatory and presentation academy is being founded in Ankara. Every effort of the parliament for those establishments will be very effective upon the building of a civilized society which is diligent and humane.”

Öztoprak [16] says that Ataturk believed in that artistry was intrinsically a gift of the god and the artists were the carriers of this unique talent, and a great importance must be shown to those people. If there is to be an example of this, some artists tried to kiss the hand of Ataturk after a concert in Ankara but Ataturk responded them: “The artist should not kiss hand; people should kiss the hands of the artists”. In his another speech in 1930, he mentioned the importance of the artists by saying: “Everybody can be a parliamentarian, a minister or even prime minister, but not artist”.

Tan [17] stresses that Ataturk was a bookish person who uses what he has learnt for his nation. According to Tan, Ataturk knew that classical Greek and roman literature and mythology is widely used in western works and even in Shakespeare’s works. So the western literature created masterpieces. Hence, Ataturk wanted the artists and folklorists

study the Turkish mythology and folklore and use them in rebuilding the new literature, opera and drama. On 20th march 1920 he talked to the youth and talked about the importance of culture. “There are many intellectuals among our enlightened people, but generally it is our mistake that we didn’t see our own culture, folklore and ground for our field of study. Our enlightened people know all the nations, all the world but they are not into us”.

Even if Ataturk loved the traditional Turkish music he believed in that classical western education in the area of music should have been used and stepped in this path. Kahramankaptan [18] quotes those steps taken in this process as: in 1924 Muzika-i Hümayun was moved to Ankara and transformed into presidency symphonic orchestra. Anew in 1924, musical education faculty was founded. In 1926 including Ahmed Adnan Saygun, Halil Bedii Yönetken, Ulvi Cemal Erkin, young musicians journeyed Anatolia to compile the folkloric samples. From 1925 government started to send young talented musicians to Europe for music education. From 1932 the government started to invite the leading talents of Europe to Turkey (Joseph Marx, Paul Hindemith, Bela Bartok, and Eduard Zuckmayer). Again in those years Nurullah Şevket Taşkıran and Miss Afife were sent to Europe for voice (singing) education. In 1936 German scientist Carl Ebert was invited to turkey to establish a presentation department and its curriculum after conservatory preparations. As a result, that scientist helped found the conservatory, opera and drama departments and their curriculum [14].

Aracı [19] tells that Ataturk also displayed revolutions done in Turkey to Europe. The Ship named Karadeniz journeyed to many European cities to show the changes in Turkey as a mobile museum. Between the dates 7th July - 5th September including the Scandinavian countries, Karadeniz journeyed many cities with its orchestra and gave so many concerts. Here Ataturk tried to show new republic was really interested in western values and music.

Refig [1] also stresses that those renovationist approaches were quite important but it was also carrying some misgivings. In the year 1926, Darülelhan was transformed into Istanbul municipality conservatory but the first mishap was that the education of traditional Turkish music was banned in this institution. What a pity but from that point there has occurred a deep gap between the traditionist and the modernist still going on. Again Balkılıç [10] sees another problem that the reformists of this process based their studies on nationalism more than scientific musical analysis in folkloric musical analysis.

Balkılıç [10] mentions that after an Ataturk’s speech about the renovation in the field of music, efforts on composing a national Turkish opera started. In this direction, opera society founded in 1931 by the permission of government formed a chorus and conducted some musical tasks such as preparing duets and quartets, translating from Italian into Turkish and gathering the amateurs of Istanbul and turning those elements into a school of music. Thus, the first and regular opera works started by the will and back of Ataturk in the government era. Establishing an opera basing on own resources was one of the

greatest wills of Atatürk. Moreover, Ahmed Adnan Saygun brought to presidency symphonic orchestra in 1934 composed the first Turkish operas named *Özsoy* and *Taşbebek*.

III. SAYGUN AND ÖZSOY OPERA

One of the first musicians of the republic era and the composer of the first Turkish opera, Ahmed Adnan Saygun was born in 7th September 1907. Kolçak [6] stresses that Saygun's family was not into music but his father Celaleddin bey was a member of Mevlevi Sufi way. So he was into Sufi music. In this concept Saygun took the first musical education in traditional field, and made his first composition in traditional way. Altar [4] stresses that Saygun's first introduction with western music was under the direction of İsmail Zühtü Kuşçuoğlu. He was the piano teacher of Saygun and Saygun took piano lessons from him. From 1922, Saygun started to study in this field, and took lessons from leading musicians. In 1925 he started to teach music in a primary school. With the scholarship he got, he went to Paris in 1928, and worked with the eminent musicians of the period. Gönen [21] says that Saygun, who returned to country in 1931, firstly started to work music education school. Besides, he was appointed as maestro to the presidency symphonic orchestra. Later on, he was assigned to Istanbul municipality conservatory as a teacher. Yöre [20] quotes about Saygun that he rebuilt his own ideology and perspective with the education he took, from the surrounding he was in, from the government policy and ideology and Atatürk, and he went on his musical career as a composer, educator, and ethnomusicologist in this way. According to Yöre, [20] Saygun believed in that a national polyphonic music should have been based on people's culture and its roots without losing its roots including old traditions in a national perspective.

Refiğ [1] quotes that Atatürk regulated the new national cultural policy for its nation to be able to have the national identity and national unity in the following years Saygun returned from France, and Atatürk was mainly interested in the field of music. Saygun, who is the chief of musical teaching department, tells that: "it was 1933 when Atatürk was making his great national speech for the tenth year of the republic, he talked about fine arts. I listened to the radio. I took great pleasure because that was my way, which was my point of view. So the great leader was leading us."

In this renovation process, maybe the most important one was the *Özsoy* Opera, which was based on Iran mythology of the book *Şehname* written by Firdevsi. This opportunity came by with the visit of Shah Rıza Pehlevi, who was the king of Iran in that time. Atatürk assigned Saygun to composing an opera. Saygun thought this event as a miracle in his life. So he started to realize this miraculous event [19]. Münir Hayri Egelî wrote the libretto of Saygun's opera. Moreover, Atatürk gave the main idea of the work. [22] Aracı [19] quotes in his book from Saygun about Atatürk's determining the main idea of the opera: "According to my understanding he wanted to impress the Iran Shah so he wanted me to base the opera on an Iranian element. For this aim, he focused on the myth of Feridun. From the legend the Tur was the birthplace of the

Turks, and the İraç, who was a person, was the birthplace of Iranians. Atatürk wanted the opera to be processed in this direction". Altar [4] stresses that Atatürk looked over the text so many times and made some corrections on it which was formed of three stages and 12 tablets.

And [23] quotes in his article that the old religion of Asian Turks, shamanism, was left in the plot of the opera and passed to Islam and that was also a part of the play, so the bard in the play tells this case, too. The play was normally about the Turk and Iran mythologies. The chiefs of the Turkish clans gather for the birth of twins of Feridun in the first stage. The Hatun (chief woman) brings the children and calls them as double wolves. 7 skies (7 planets) bless the children, and reward them with their wishes. Later on, Hatun and two children meet with Ahriman, the god of badness of the Zoroastrians'. Ahriman was very angry with the case that he was not invited to birth festival. Hatun begs that Ahriman did not harm the children. Already Ahriman is not powerful enough to kill the children. Hatun prays to the god that Ahriman cannot harm the children. The second stage takes place in the independence war, and the third stage takes place in the improvement part of the Anatolia. And [23] stresses that the best part is the first part and the second and third parts are not explicit and clear; moreover, there is no consistency. Aracı [19] quotes that the first stage of the play is mythologically very powerful. Saygun converted the play into a one stage mythological opera in 1980.

According to Refiğ [1], *Özsoy* is a three-stage dramatic opera, and you can follow the lines of originality and the composer is strong even in the first chords of the overture. Intense and complex structure carried by the folk music elements of the latter works by Saygun does not seem in this work. Oppositely, the deep density and powerful musical appeal in Wagner's music, which is one of the top points of tonal music seems. Aracı [19] stresses that it is hard to analyze the first notes of *Özsoy* because it is not valuable today, however, according to Gazimihal, the pentatonic structure which was dominant on that day affected *Özsoy*. Gazimihal [24] talks about the musical structure of the opera in that way: "The invoke chorus of the first stage, the music in its prayer stage and parts about festivals base on Anatolian motifs. The second stage is nearly alike. The preludes of the both stages are written freely. The rest of the work is written in tonal verse because of time deficiency and to make the vocals learn more easily.

Refiğ [1] tells that *Özsoy*, which is the most concrete examples of Atatürk's culture policies, both conceptually and structurally, was almost forgotten after its first staging in 1934 and never again staged until 1981, which is the hundredth birth date of M. K. Atatürk. *Özsoy* was later staged only once on 13 October 1998 by Ankara State Opera and Ballet with the concept of republic's 75th celebration.

IV. ATATÜRK AND ÖZSOY OPERA

The most concrete example of Renovation movement in the field of art of the new republic started by Atatürk is *Özsoy Opera*. *Özsoy* is not only a part of a renovation movement but

also a piece of art work which a politician was interested in and contributed to its formation. There is no doubt that the will and interest of Atatürk can not be only explained with love of art. Saygun, who is the composer of the work and part of this renovation process, already stresses that Atatürk had two main purposes with this opera. The first one is to affect the Iran Shah by showing the new peaceful policies of the republic and establish a long-term peace with this country. The second one is that Atatürk wanted a new art movement in Turkey [18]. Here, it can be said that the first aim of Atatürk was political. So Atatürk wanted to abolish the animosity because of the sectarian animosity ongoing for centuries, and establish a new friendship and brotherliness between two countries.

The conflict between Iran and Turkey started in the Ottoman era. Çetinsaya [25] stresses that there was always conflict after the foundation of Safevi Empire and this conflict sometimes resulted in war. Both countries economically and financially had to gain land and sometimes had to face with each other because of ideological reasons. Can [26] writes in his article that the greatest rival of the Ottoman emperor in Middle East was Shah of Iran (Iran king) and this rivalry was mainly due to the sectarian conflict. Ottomans were the supporters of Sunni belief and Iranians were the supporters of shia belief.

In the era of republic, with the rule of Rıza Khan by alone taking the title of Shah, a new process was aimed between two countries. However, even Rıza Shah wanted to start an amicable process in the first years of his rule, the problems occurring from the tribal conflicts and border problems did not end [27]. Finally, in the months of January and March of 1932 two treaties were signed between siding countries one of which is for border security and the other for border determining. Later on, in November, a treaty was signed for friendship, security, impartiality, and economical cooperation. Saray [28] mentions the amicable relations progressed after the last treaty.

Tunçay [22] stresses that while Atatürk tries to establish the republican values on robust foundations; on the other hand he was trying to establish amicable relations with the neighboring countries. His epigram; "peace in the homeland, peace in the world" shows this movement. In this meaning, a powerful relation with a strong Iran including all neighboring countries would be very beneficial. The revolution happened in Turkey under the leadership of Atatürk had great reflections in Islamic countries. Saray [28] stresses in his book that the general secretary of the Iran army Rıza Khan, who was following the deeds of Atatürk in great awe, also mentioned that he was willing to conduct the same revolutions in his country after his rule. Erden [27] quotes that Rıza Shah couldn't establish a republic in his country despite all the suggestions of Atatürk, but he saw Atatürk as an example for a civilized country.

Iran had a great importance with peaceful foreign policy of the new republic. At the same time, the new actions taken in Iran formed a good ground for these relations. Saray [28] mentions that Shah Rıza visited Turkey after the peace treaties and new relations in peace, and Turkish media wrote about

this relation and the importance of this relation.

Atatürk, who was giving great importance to the visit of Shah, showed great importance to the coming of Shah. Atatürk was willing to satisfy Shah and by this opportunity wanted to build an unbreakable friendship between two countries. So, making an opera deriving from Iranian mythology would be very effective for this situation. *Özsoy* opera was based on this intention. Münir Hayri Egeli wrote an opera text which was based on the idea that Turks and Iranians are both nations [29]. The premier of the opera was done in front of Atatürk and Shah under the maestro of Saygun on 19 June 1934. The subject of the opera includes the losing of two sons of Feridun and many adventures, the independence war and the peaceful days. In the last episode, Feridun asks where his sons Tur and İraç are. Upon the question, the bard appears in front of the stage and points the Shah and Atatürk, and says here Tur and İraç. Every Turk is Tur and every Iranian is İraç [6]. Saygun quotes after the play that Shah, who knew the Azerbaijani dialect of Turkish embraced Atatürk in tears by saying my brother [19].

The success obtained from this opera, and Shah's having been affected from both from the musical change in Turkey and the subject of the opera excited Atatürk and he saw this work truly a revolution. Therefore, it can be said that Atatürk's second aim, renovation in the field of music, started in this way. Aracı [19] stresses why Atatürk chose opera instead of symphony or orchestra was that Ziya Gökalp wrote in his book, the Principles of Turkism that opera was the highest point in European art, and Atatürk was highly affected from his point of view. In this direction, Atatürk saw the opera as the greatest art branch and wanted a work piece to be written in this branch. After the presentation of *Özsoy*, he wanted another opera to be composed. The second opera, *Taşbebek*, which was composed for the honour of Atatürk's coming to Ankara in its fifteenth year, tells the birth of a new nation. With the same purpose, Necil Kazım Akses composed another opera named *Bayönder* and those two operas were staged under the control of Saygun on 27 and 28 December 1934.

Those first national operas resulted positively and by the directives of Atatürk a state conservatory was started. Abidin Özmen, who was the minister of national education in that time called upon the members to join the congress in Ankara: "With the directives of our great leader, the main purpose of our new musical movement is to find national music and progress it. We have way to take to reach this aim". After the decision of this congress, a fine arts department was founded under control of national education ministry. Upon the invitation of Paul Hindemith and Carl Ebert in 1935 and 1936 education year, state conservatory classes were started in the same department [4]. It can be seen that so many renovations and novelties were done in this short period and were reached to a success. So Atatürk was successful and willing in his movement.

V. RESULT

Özsoy has an important place in the world music literature because it is a co-production of a politician and a musician. However, when it is evaluated according to musical aesthetics, it can be more counted as a musical play or an opera trial already mentioned by Saygun. It can not be ignored that the political worries also affected the construction of the work. In other words, the political purposes were superior to aesthetic purposes. In this meaning, Saygun also defines *Özsoy* as functional. *Özsoy* was composed with a purpose and its components were prepared according to this purpose. It is also said that Atatürk had said this cannot be staged again because of its political motivation. That Saygun recomposed the work by removing the political parts and regulating the existing mythological can be related to Atatürk's words.

As it is mentioned above *Özsoy* was composed in short time and in negativities and there were not enough experiences for the artists. But the makers of the opera fearlessly tried to make an opera against all negativities. Even the work seems with its mistakes and deficiencies because of the political surrounding and negativities, it can be counted as a great success in its time. Already, politically it served successfully because Turkish-Iranian relations lived its best years from 1934 to 1941. It can be clearly said that *Özsoy* is a foundation stone for Turkish fine arts and national cultural policy. *Özsoy* can be counted as a good example of Atatürk's national culture policies and its aims. After *Özsoy* Opera, many institutions for art and music were founded and so many musicians and artists were brought up in these institutions.

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