

Neither Dates nor Sources: A Methodological Problem in Writing the History of Ottoman Music

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Endless reasons could be put forward to justify why a study of any artistic field calls for the necessity to analyze the work of art. First of all, one needs to understand that it is the work of art (e.g. a composition) that gives an artistic field the reason for its existence. However, within the context of “Ottoman Art,” what is the uniqueness of a work of art? We need to answer this question in order to determine the methodology for history of art that includes music. A structural analysis of a work of art allows us, on the one hand, to gain knowledge about that art and thus compile data while, on the other hand, comprehend the relationships and interactions involved as the works of art progress through time. The writing of history of art depends on the possibilities of examining the relationship between works of art and time.¹ The question that this article thus dwells upon is: Is it possible to conduct a historical study in the field of Ottoman music based on works of art, hence on compositions?

The notion of work of art refers to the artist him- or herself. However, in Ottoman culture the artist who “creates” a work of art does not seem to be a subject of a particular domain, since such a particular “creative domain” did not exist.² Everyone in contact with the society who ended up in the role of an Ottoman painter (*musavvir*, *nakkas*), calligrapher, architect, poet, or composer creates his or her works of art according to the *a priori* aesthetic rules of their respective artistic field. We can say that the work of art is the result of these aesthetic rules, and not the other way round. Therefore we cannot anticipate the change of meaning in a work of art, its renewal and its variations. In Ottoman arts the criticism of a work of art by another work of art or its positioning against another one was never an issue. Conservation instead of change, repetition instead of renewal, and refinement instead of variation are the qualities that define the parameters of a work of art. Critiques remain in a competitive framework of fine/coarse and secret/open. Competition did not intend to develop a new aesthetics containing new meanings by means of criticism, but rather to improve, to increase the existing beauty and excellence. At this point the fundamental question should not be the “crea-

¹ I refer to time, not in the sense of rhythmic characteristics, which are part of music’s inner dynamics, but as defined by the science of history.

² In addition, it is necessary to deal with the concept of the “creative artist” in the context of Ottoman culture. As it is beyond the limits of this article, for now it is more appropriate to only mention this epistemological subject.

tive level” of a work of art. The question is about the relationship of a given work of art to all the works of art preceding it and about the artist’s resources and sources. The meaning of a work of art will – possibly – be found in the elements of information one receives whilst searching for the answer to this epistemological question.

The relationship between music and composition, between the composer and the performer, has to be seen in this context. The correlation between composer and performer implies that the performer is also considered among the creators of a work of music. This implication is correct. The grounds on which this article is based on include the fact that the creative process can be endlessly sustained through performance, an issue I will touch upon later.

Please allow me to state this right from the beginning: I see it as necessary to emphasise the distinction between art/music itself and the writing of its history. Both fields should not intermingle. An attitude which might be right and perhaps necessary in music, might lead the researcher/historian in researching and writing history of music along the wrong path and to incorrect conclusions. From this perspective I need to underline that our research of music only refers to the field of “Ottoman music history”. My aim is to point out a problematic area on the methodology regarding the research and writing Ottoman music history. An engagement with history cannot be one-dimensional. Archaeology, for instance, with its methods of excavation, tries to understand civilisations erased from cultural memory long ago by looking at de-contextualized objects and putting them in relevance with similar findings. This is one of dimensions of history. Another one emerges by the observation that the recent past, which lives on in the cultural memory of particular groups – possibly relating to a given group’s violent history or political history – has a unifying function. Another dimension related to this article’s topic would be: certain groups, in spite of the “floating gaps”, believe that Ottoman music is still alive, and for that reason alone we have to consider this music in the framework of “communicative memory”.³

Taking a word which used to refer most of the time and in most places, from Asia to Middle Europe to special peoples, in a different period of time to nations, or at again different places and times and loaded with ideological connotations for races, and making it the adjective of a vague noun phrase that is “Turkish music”, carries a potential to create prejudices especially in historical studies.⁴ Many articles written under the heading “Turkish Music History” could not escape the trap of this definition, which compels writers to be biased. In the light of social ruptures caused by economic, military and political reasons many writers had the desire to take the notion of “Turkish music” under protection, as if music would

³ Regarding the concepts “*floating gap*”, “cultural memory” and “communicative memory” see Assmann 2001:51.

⁴ For a discussion of the notion of “Turkish music” see Aksoy 2008:133-138. For a discussion of the problem of the roots of Turkish music see Aksoy 2008:139-156.

have suffered from such ruptures as well. To be able to speak historically about compositions created in a cultural environment characterized by religious and cultural diversity, however, might require an objective approach. Moreover, when we talk about what we call the “Ottoman” period, we obviously talk about the past. When we look at a certain period in history, at a certain geography and at the people from this period who jointly created certain developments, aren’t we simultaneously constructing a cultural framework? Looking at music first-hand and analysing the features of a composition can only be achieved by remaining within the boundaries of this cultural framework and staying away from ideological and political concerns.

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Compositions in Ottoman music are data that are transmitted through an oral transmission from the master to his/her apprentice.⁵ Whilst this description appears to be correct considering the form of teaching and transmission, it comes up short when the music itself is at stake. It evokes the fallacy that there was another way of transmission but that oral transmission was only chosen from other options. In fact, the Ottoman mentality enabled the existence of a composition only through its performance. For a composition no other form of representation existed, such as writing, or to use musical terminology: notation. A composition, just like a work of art in any other artistic field, exists only through itself. However, this basic question only becomes visible in art forms with a difference between the “creator” and the “performer” of a work of art. For this reason we will not refer here to art forms such as painting, poetry, calligraphy, or sculpture, where the works of art are created by the artists themselves. Architecture, however, reminds us of music in this context; just as architecture requires executive masters, music would not exist without an instrumentalist and a singer. Architecture, like music, does not require a written schematic plan to represent its product.⁶ The difference between architecture and music is that the building is finished once the master builders have completed it; even if there are interventions later, the work’s initial state is fixed. In music, however, performers repeat a composition by changing it endlessly according to their own aesthetic understanding. The composition of art is thus forever open to alterations. However, the society⁷ does not permit boundless changes and prefers to control the parameters of change. One way to do this is to create methods for educating those who produce the composition, in other words by teaching art students by the means of *meşk*.

⁵ In his repeatedly reprinted book Behar (2006) emphasized the importance of oral transmission with the *meşk* as method of teaching.

⁶ On this subject see Köksal 2009:28-40.

⁷ When I refer to this abstract notion of “society,” it evokes a set of values which belong to people ranging from sultan to peasant.

Meşk

Meşk is a method that is practiced in music as well as in calligraphy. In calligraphy, by definition, writing is compulsory, but there are no written rules about calligraphy's *meşk*. In music as well in calligraphy the relationship between master and apprentice, teacher and student, the one who gives the *meşk* and the one who receives it, is characterized by concepts such as talent, hard work, competence and commitment that all indicate an esoteric structure. Today we can speak about an authoritarian formation in this context; one cannot even think about stepping out of what has been taught. No student would have this intention anyhow. What catches one's attention is that both fields are *spontaneous* arts: the "practicing artist" creates these arts by him- or herself in the very moment. The student who fulfills the *meşk* of calligraphy receives from his or her teacher a certificate (*icazetname*) and thereby commits him- or herself to not changing the new writing of the calligraphy. Music has to be like that as well! Although we do not have any information regarding the existence of a written certificate for the field of music, to receive the master's *meşk* should serve as a guarantee for the protection of the music's structure. The fact that the calligrapher is the one who writes the Qur'an – a practice bound to very strict rules – and has his/her signature under his/her works is the evidence that he or she carries the responsibility of his or her works in front of the society and the whole history by means of the lineage of the *meşk* he or she belongs to. Although in music no signature can guarantee that a given music is definite and fixed, the student who accomplishes the *meşk* accepts his or her responsibility towards his or her master and the art.

Is a musician who makes this promise really able to remain loyal to the commitment of protecting the structure of the music? Does not, in fact, a method, which relays a collective memory prone to amnesia already entail transformation? Jean-Jacques Rousseau believes early languages "were first sung with melodies and emotional languages" and claims that "the writing which seems to be determined by language is something that affects it; it doesn't change its words but its way of thinking, and replaces narration with accuracy" (Rousseau 2007:22). It is obvious that a notation that aims to write down all subtleties of a composition as much as possible also fixates this work as such. Moreover, the musical notation is a compulsory means for a European composer who wants his/her composition to be played as he/she imagined it, is something unavoidable when composing a *polyphonic* orchestral work. Mesut Cemil, who claims that the writing, the notation "is only something consisting of half signs that help musicians who work with an educated ear and auditory methods to express something" deplores the loss of the musical works that were not notated with the words "how great would it have been if only some more of Şeyh Abdülbâkî Dede's compositions would have been written down" (Cemil 1940:125-130). This is the articulation of the sadness of an artist, Mesul Cemil, who played a very important role in the formation of music in the

20th century, when looking at the state of music history and the lack of sound recordings of compositions. Besides that, I assume that he is of the opinion that the character of music as performed live necessarily implies changes. How can it otherwise be explained that his composition, *nihavend saz semâ'îsi*, was constantly played in different versions by musicians, including himself? These were the words that a music-loving friend. He replied in a radio programme in which Hafız Osman, accompanied by Tanburi Cemil Bey, performed a *hüseynî gazel* starting with the line “*Her zaman bir Vâmik u Azrâ olur, alem bu ya!*” (“There is always a lover and a maiden, this is the world”), continuing that “for some musicians the *makam* becomes a heavy burden on their back, given which they can barely walk. And there are such musicians who climb on the back of the *makam* and walk away lightly [...] Tonight, perhaps, the musicians are the cavalry on the back of heavenly horses!”⁸ Let us continue with Rousseau who speaks about language that gains life through speech and which, once written, would lose its musicality: “If you think that accent marks [in the text] can substitute for the emphasis in the sound, you’re mistaken. The stress marks were found when the emphasis in the sound had already disappeared” (Rousseau 2007:27). The beginning of the practice of writing inflicted some losses that affected both music and language, each of which were developed by humans to express themselves and exercised by means only of bodily talents (such as, for instance, articulation). Music in Ottoman culture was not notated, because – similar to jazz musicians – no one was willing to accept such loss.

Amongst the notations of the same songs, which were written during different periods of time, we can detect an increasing elaboration in the newer ones. This development cannot be limited to changes in their external form. Nayî Osman Dede (1652-1729), in his work *Rabt-ı Tâbirat-ı Mûsikî*, wrote that he titled his *risale* with musical terms “binding and definition” following the suggestions of his friends. The network of the sheikh of the *Mevlevî* lodge in *Galata*, Nayî Osman Dede, which comprises musicians of that period were concerned that music could be corrupted and believed that the correct musical information (*makam*, *şu'be* etc) should be written down by experts. According to Osman Dede, it would be necessary to consult the books of ‘Abd al-Qâdir Marâgî (d. 1435) as a source.⁹ Obviously the persistent structural changes in the music disturbed Osman Dede and his network, contemporaries of Cantemir (1673-1723), who themselves introduced a new perspective to the theory of Ottoman musical culture.

By means of *meşk*, it becomes possible to transmit a composition to the following generations. Apart from its vertical formation that has been continued dia-

⁸ Taken from a talk given by Mesut Cemil about Hafız Osman on Istanbul Radio. This was published in the first volume of a two series CD album under the title *Gazeller*, arranged by Cemal Ünlü (Kalan Müzik, CD067, Istanbul 1977). Furthermore, it was broadcasted on a program that Bülent Aksoy made for Mesut Cemil: *Musiki Arşivi Programı* (Açık Radyo, 30 April 2006).

⁹ Akdoğan 1991:8-9, 16-18, 42, 48.

chronically, synchronically speaking a composition also finds other settings of performance in different societal networks. The most common and prevalent venues for performance are gatherings (*meclis*) and the *Mevlevi* lodges. The gatherings (*meclis*) that the Ottoman higher classes and refined people assembled was another formation which had its own rules due to its ceremonial quality¹⁰ and social positioning, although they did not adhere to a strict discipline like *meşk*. On the one hand, a “vocational” training was practiced by means of *meşk*; on the other hand, the presence of music in Ottoman culture became widespread on a horizontal level through the gatherings practiced in every strata of society. The place where music compositions lived was this point of intersection where vertical and horizontal platforms overlapped. These numerous intersections formed in time and space (*zemin ü zaman*) justified the structural changes in compositions.

Constant Reproduction

The composer, who submitted his/her song to this legitimate field, started an open-ended process of reproduction.¹¹ This process had the potential to anonymise the composition over a period of time. For example a composition created in the 17th century which reaches the 20th century, becomes so estranged from its original form that we cannot detect its traces and initial qualities and it gains a cumulative quality. The reasons are due both to its transformation over time and the separation between the differing styles. Both the structural elements of all performed “older” compositions that have been obtained in the intervening period, and the “new” composed structural characteristics are accepted. The process of constant regeneration that enables this accumulation, results in the loss of the original source. Although this constant regeneration could yield different and efficient outcomes in terms of the inner dynamics of the music, this brings about a deficiency which is a matter of concern for a historian: the original form of the song gets lost and we are confronted with a “lack of sources.” The old composition after giving birth to a new one disappeared. We thus also face a state of being timeless, a situation in which we have to comprehend these compositions in the context of Ottoman musical accumulation – that burns to a cinder – synchronically. The concept of being “original” in Ottoman music can only exist in the context of this “cinder,” not in specific compositions. Because the original form of the

¹⁰ For more details on the cultural structuring of the play, consult Huizinga 2006.

¹¹ We should not overlook the fact that “re-creation of a composition by the performer” formed according to a traditional societal structure and devoid of a personal style at first reminds one of the *open work* (*opera aperta*) of Umberto Eco. As I mentioned above, because an artist can perform a song in a “narrow area” which was limited by aesthetic rules that only exist alongside the preconceptions of the given society means that we cannot talk about “freedom” in terms of the song and its performance. This terminology does not belong to the Ottoman musical field.

composition has disappeared, we cannot compare it with its new form. Yet, an analogy applied to other fields of art may be useful in defining how changes of imagery in Ottoman art have affected the concept.

Structural and Functional Transformation

Fig.1 a-b: Nakkaş Osman encountered Western European painting methods based on *raccourci*, which systematizes the front-rear relation in paintings (perspective). It was imported by Bellini during the period of Mehmet II the Conqueror and afterwards introduced in Istanbul along with the paintings of the Veronese school. Nakkaş Osman acknowledged the style, but did not adapt it. He chose a method suitable to the old traditions (we do not know whether such a choice was made in music, but we have evidence of such a method dating back as late as the 19th century). One of the sultan portraits in *Zübdetü't-tevârih* (The Essence of the Histories) – all of them painted by Nakkaş Osman – is this portrait of Murad III (1574-95), dated 1583.

Konstantin Kapıdağlı was an artist who worked in the palace and painted many portraits for Selim III (1789-1807). 220 years after Master Osman, miniature art was no longer exercised and painting methods were completely altered. Meaning was no longer sought by being based on a depiction painted on a surface in two dimensions, rather it was sought in the creation of a third dimension that did not exist merely in two physical dimensions. Although we can perceive a difference in iconographic features between these two pictures, the structure that is used in the depiction of the concept of the royalty remained unchanged. The things that changed were the structural features of the imagery. Since the time of Abdülhamid I (1774–89), the function of painting also changed: it was taken out of the pages of books and transformed into objects that were publicly exhibited and hung on walls.¹²

The Transformation of the Appearance of Composers

Fig. 2a-b-c: In 1720 circumcision ceremonies were held for the children of Ahmed III (1703-30). The ceremonies continued for fifteen days and nights and took place in Okmeydanı and Haliç. The conductor of the *fasıl*, which was performed a few times during the festival, was Burnaz Hasan Çelebi (Enfi Hasan Ağa, poet Hulûs). I recognized Burnaz, who was in charge of music affairs, by his characteristic nose in the paintings of Levnî and İbrahim in two copies of the *Surname* written by Vehbi. In these artworks Burnaz was sitting in the front, facing the *fasıl* ensemble and conducting the *fasıl* with a *def* (framedrum) in his hands. When we

¹² For Ottoman works of art cf. Anonymous 2000; Bağcı et al. 2006.



Fig. 1a: 1583: “Sultan III. Murad”, Nakkaş Osman, miniature, *Zübdetü't-tevârih* (TİEM 1973) fol. 88b.



Fig. 1b: 1803: "Sultan III. Selim", Kostantin Kapıdağlı, oil painting on canvas (TSM 17/30).



Fig. 2a:1720:
“Burnaz Hasan Çelebi / Enfi Hasan Ağa”, Nak-
kaş İbrahim, miniature, *Surnâme-i Vebbi* (TSM
A3594) fol. 80a.



Fig. 2b: 1720:
“Burnaz Hasan Çelebi / Enfi Hasan Ağa”,
Levnî, miniature, *Surnâme-i Vebbi* (TSM
A3593) fol. 115b.



Fig. 2c:
The second half of the 19th century:
Performer: Hacı Arif Bey.

compare the pictures of two musicians who worked in the palace, Burnaz Hasan Çelebi, who was in the palace pantry (*kiler koğuşu*), and Hacı Arif Bey (1831-85), who gave music lessons to slave women (*cariye*) in the palace of Abdülmecid and was a member of *Muzika-i Hümayûn*, we have the opportunity to see differences apart from those involving their respective appearances.

Transformation of Attire

Fig. 3 a-b: It is interesting to witness the transformation in a sultan. Mahmud II (1808-39) always exercised revolutionary changes on himself first which would in turn change the wider society: even his style of beard changed.

The Road Leading to the Transformation of Music

Fig. 4a-b: The event that had a significant effect on music was the abolition of the Janissary bands (*mehterhane*) together with the Janissaries in 1826. I put two pictures side by side. One of these was painted in 1720 and the other one 100 years later. But this transformation should not be taken as a process that happened gradually, but rather it was a “shock” that happened over a very short time. In fact, the event did not directly affect the music of “civilian” life, instead the fact that music was influenced by this change should be attributed to changes in Istanbul lifestyles.

“Modernization” of Lifestyles

Fig. 5a-b-c-d: The fact that Sultan Abdülmecid (1839–61) moved the government’s administration building from Seraglio Point (*Sarayburnu*) (on the historical peninsula) to the opposite side of the Golden Horn and Pera where foreign embassies were located, to the Dolmabahçe Palace which was built by Garabed Balyan, is a good indicator of the changes in lifestyle in Istanbul. The Golden Horn that physically separates the European side of Istanbul in two, formed a boundary between two different cultures: firstly, the south of the Golden Horn where old Istanbul is located and traditional culture still survived and, secondly, Beyoğlu or Pera where “modern” lifestyles started to affect the lives of Istanbul’s Muslim society. Western European, and specifically French architectural style (İrepoğlu 1986), was studied during the Ahmed III period and was applied extensively only after the mid-19th century in Istanbul.

Returning to the topic of musical historiography, we can say that if we would examine the compositions that reached today in terms of performances, this examination would not be different from examining Abdülmecid’s Dolmabahçe



Fig. 3a: Before 1829: *Sultan II. Mahmud*, anonymous, gouache painting on paper (Sunan İnan Kıraç Collection).



Fig. 3b: End of the 19th century: *Sultan II. Mahmud*, Wilhelm Reuter, oil painting on canvas (TSM 17/36).



Fig. 4a: 1720: “Mehterhane”, Levnî, miniature, *Surnâme-i Vehbi* (TSM A3593) fol. 171b–172a.

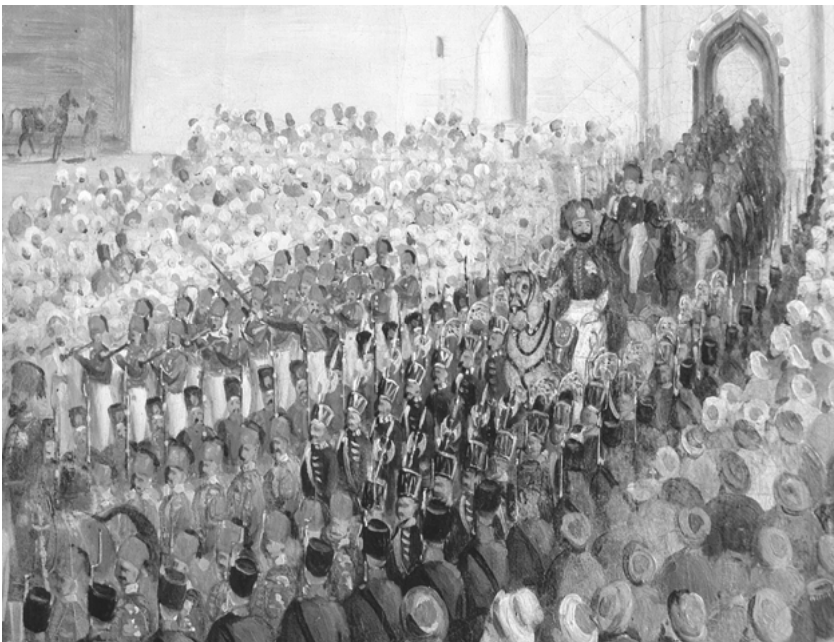


Fig. 4b: First half of the 19th century: “Muzika-i Hümâyûn”, *Selamlık Alayı*, detail, François Dubois, oil painting on canvas (IRHM).



Fig. 5a: From the 15th century: Topkapı Palace. The buildings seen in front of the palace were constructed by Fatih Sultan Mehmet. Today a large portion of the Ottoman treasury is exhibited in the palace.



Fig. 5b: 1856: Dolmabahçe Palace. It is an example of an architectural style that the Ottomans were trying to adopt until the mid-19th century.



Fig. 5c: 16th century: Topkapı Palace "Bâbü's-selâm". A plain middle period work.



Fig. 5d: 1856: ornate door of Dolmabahçe Palace, Luigi Querena, 1875, oil painting on canvas (private collection).

Palace, which came into service in 1856, in order to find results on the Topkapı Palace, which was constructed from the mid-15th century onwards after an initiative of Mehmet II.

The Work of Ottoman Music History

Are the written sources such as the existent theory books (*edvâr*) and the collections of lyrics (*mecmû'â*) able to fill the gap that exists due to the loss of sound? The answer to the question is negative. The *edvârs* provide information about *makam* and *usûl*. If we look at the state of musical scales over time with the help of information found in *edvârs*, and syntactical changes of notes – if there are any – we could attempt to find the original form of compositions. However, the results that we would achieve would certainly be debated. It is also possible to come across texts like Cantemir's that can bring new perspectives to the issue and help us to discover the musical practice of his time. But none of these enable us to find the original composition. Needless to mention, the *mecmû'âs* consist merely of poems. Perhaps they can help in the detection of the repertoire, but it is not possible to find the music itself in these books.

For the project of writing a history of art, which necessitates both a chronology and analysis of compositions, we have to face an anachronism and an absence of compositions as a methodological problem. Although they harbour many other questions, the musical content in the “written compositions” that Ali Ufkî Bey and Cantemir bequeathed to us are the first written documents of Ottoman musical works of art.¹³ We need to examine them, perform them with all available musicological insights and discuss them. But we should not forget that the education of the musicians who performed these songs was acquired from musical knowledge that reached today by changing over time. In studies about Ottoman music history we need not only theoretical works but also the performances of artists using their individual styles and with a musical sensitivity. I believe that the musical interpretations will become richer with time, given the stylistic differences between the performances of Yalçın Tura and *Bezmarâ* and, in a different category, the performance of the *Ayangil Orkestra ve Korosu* (Ruhi Ayangil Orchestra and Choir). Restricting the researches to only some styles of interpretation impoverishes the data generated. It is the sensitivity of the artist that will bring the music that is hidden in the notation to the surface.

I do not know if we can discover information about a musician of a period that tradition brought to us. But I know we should search for this information. I pre-

¹³ For the songs in these books to be indubitably correct, they need to be performed. Naturally we do not have any idea about how they were performed at the time. If the fact that Ali Ufkî played *santur* and Cantemir played *tanbur* leads us to assume that this was a factor that effected the form of their respective notations style. As their contemporary performances are a matter of assumption as well.

sume that advancing by combining the original musical work, the “cinder” paradox and methods of musicological historical research may shape theoretical studies. But, as a first step, cataloguing in a virtual space every version of the compositions at hand along with their existent performances will enable a researcher to reach the material at any given time. Although it would not take us to the original song, the examination of sources that are outside the musical context, like chronicles, *sûrnâmes*, *divans*, would help us to establish a societal context for the music and provide us with pictures of lost musical instruments. It would help minimize our lack of information. Linking the concepts which are obtained from different branches of art allows us the possibility to grasp concepts from the Ottoman mind-set. I am convinced that the interrelation between Ottoman musical compositions will be more comprehensible by recourse to interdisciplinary studies in terms of being “intersemiotics.”

It is obvious that Ottoman musical history cannot be written only on the basis of compositions. But, on the other hand, it cannot be denied that we need to develop a specific method that re-defines composition.