

Singing with Style: the Turkish Choral Landscape

Burak Onur Erdem, conductor, Turkey



Turkey is a country where a unique choral style has been blossoming since the early 20th century. The heritage of the Anatolian soil embraced a variety of musical backgrounds watered by the east and the west, and so it also shaped the collective singing culture of the country. Throughout the century, as choirs and choral societies began to flourish, a particular compositional output also followed this trend. As we look to the past from the 21st century, it is apparent that the uniting of the western polyphony and the eastern microtonal culture is coming true in this land of cultural bridges.

The choral tradition of Turkey dates back to the first years of the Republic. Despite there being some individual choral initiatives in the late Ottoman Empire period, which were mainly founded by minorities, the first organised choral activities actually started around the 1920s. The School for Music Teachers, founded in 1924, constitutes a milestone in the new Republic's music politics. Various choral societies began to blossom in the early 1930s in big cities such as İstanbul, Ankara and İzmir. In the later decades, conservatories and music schools were an important hub for choral music to be produced and performed. The Turkish choral life was not only limited to school music; symphonic and a

capella choral output has also been present since the beginning of the Republic. The late 70s and 80s coincide with the founding of the first professional a capella and symphonic choirs with public support, and the 90s and 2000s can be characterised by the blooming of the amateur choirs organised around Turkey's different key cities. Since 2010, Turkey has been blessed with numerous choral festivals, various choral organisations, internationally renowned choirs and a sharp rise in educational activities in choral conducting.

Before delving into the choral world of Turkey, one must get to grips with the terminology that the country uses to distinguish polyphonic choral music from so-called monophonic choral music. The choir scene in Turkey contains a number of choirs whose names include "polyphonic", and there is a large number that define themselves as polyphonic, touching on the Western musical heritage. In contrast, folk music or classical Turkish music choirs are described as monophonic, where the singers sing one microtonal line with traditional ornamentation. The author however does not believe in purely technical distinctions of the choral society, since the very fact of collective singing is the main common denominator of each choir that takes part in this musical journey. The function of the choral societies, the quality of the compositional technique and performance, and the expression of musical content through common practice are much more interesting ways to approach a choral landscape of a country.



Rezons Chamber Choir, conducted by Burak Onur Erdem, performing a special concert titled Vox Luminis on December 8, 2019, at Şerefiye Cistern, one of the extraordinary historic venues of Istanbul, also known as Theodosius Cistern, which was built around 1600 years ago to store water of the use of the Byzantine Capital

Choral composition in Turkey started with material from folk music. Mainly written in the 1930s and 1940s, the first compositional school of Turkish classical music was "The Turkish Five"; Ahmed Adnan Saygun, Ulvi Cemal Erkin, Cemal Reşit Rey, Hasan Ferid Alnar and Necil Kazım Akses, who were all born in the 20th century, were the fundamentals of the new Republic's musical output. Though the material was mostly folk tunes, the very first Turkish oratorio was composed by Saygun in 1943. "Yunus Emre Oratorio" tells the story of the 13th century mystic Yunus Emre, written in the form of a classical oratorio and embellished with a taste of Turkish religious music. The second generation of composers includes names like Muammer Sun, Cenani Akın, Nevit Kodallı, Yalçın Tura and others. The main influence of the composers who were born in the 20s and 30s were themes of national epics and folk material. Avant-garde composers with choral output of the

early 20th century also include İlhan Usmanbaş and Ertuğrul Oğuz Fırat.

Composers born in the 50s and 60s have a considerable amount of output in choral music: Turgay Erdener, Kamran İnce, Hasan Uçarsu, Özkan Manav and Mehmet Nemutlu. Uçarsu is most probably not only the composer with the largest number of a capella works composed for choir, but he also represents a stylistic maturity of choral writing. His works accommodate a very fine fuse of Turkish classical music, folk music and original polyphonic material. It is not surprising that Uçarsu is one of the most popular composers among choirs in the country.

Fazıl Say, an internationally renowned Turkish pianist, has made a notable contribution to the choral repertoire with the Nazım Oratorio, which contains substantial storytelling on the 20th century Turkish poet Nazım Hikmet. Then comes the new generation, born in the late 70s and 80s. These contemporaries include names like Mesruh Savaş, Volkan Akkoç and Recep Gül. The young composers of the country are especially strong in blending the new timbres of 21st century choral music into the rare recipe of Turkish choral writing that has existed for almost one century now.

It would be accurate to suggest that Turkish choral writing has a few trademark qualities exclusive to the country. One common feature is the irregular rhythmical structure where meters like 5/8, 7/8 or 9/8 are considered as usual time signatures. This can also be observed in the choral output of South-eastern Europe and the Balkans. Another quality that is significant to Anatolia is the microtonal background in the melodic structure. The *makam*, which corresponds to the scale structure of classical Turkish music, is one of the main influences on the contemporary composers. Furthermore, the influence of *makam* music also has its own harmonic implications where a major second or a minor second interval

has a totally different connotation in Turkish choral music than in the traditional European music. On top of that, the modal structure of the folk music brings about a harmonical approach based on the fourth as a unit, rather than the third. This allows a suspended fourth chord to function as a resolution rather than a suspension as in western harmony.

More characteristics of this specific compositional style can be explained in detail in a separate article in the future. Nevertheless, the reader can get a general idea of the Turkish choral landscape through this article, which by no means is intended to be a comprehensive guide to the choral composition scene in Turkey. More information on each composer and more established composers can be found online through the performances of Turkish choirs and the publications of music schools and conservatories.

Edited by Charlotte Sullivan, UK



Dr. BURAK ONUR ERDEM (*1986) studied music theory & conducting in Istanbul and a political science & international relations degree. He has refined his choral conducting skills in mas-terclasses with Johannes Prinz, Maria Guinand, Volker Hempfling, Anders Eby, Denes Szabo and Michael Gohl. He finished his postgraduate studies on choral conducting with Prof. Johannes Prinz in Kunstuniversität Graz, Austria. Erdem is a board member of the European Choral Association and International Federation of Choral Music. He is currently the chair of the Music Commission of Leading Voices 2022. He has been awarded 'The Best Young Con-ductor's Prize' in the 38th International Varna Choral Competition and he has served as a jury member in the 66th International Arezzo Choral Competition. Erdem is the principal conductor of the Turkish State Choir and the Istanbul-based Rezonans chamber choir. Email: boerdem@ifcm.net