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## Compositional Strategies in Non-Western Music. The Case of Turkmen Music

### ABSTRACT

#### Background

In the cultures of the Near and Central East, music functions without notation, in principle – as the individual creative domain of a composer-performer that cannot be submitted to objective analysis and classification. The local musicographic tradition has not developed any theory of composition proposing the rules for creating artistic music and defining its aesthetic aim. The final form of the work and its *pathos* are always unpredictable. They depend not only on the artist's creative abilities and approach, but also on the combined circumstances of performance. The composition process in such a context will not follow any verbally formulated directives. The process is deeply dependent on unwritten principles of perception, communication and poetic imagination, which allow a piece of music to develop as a structured item and as an aesthetic object.

In Turkmen culture, the key aspect of the “musical journey” is the close and direct bond between the composer-performer and his audience, who share with him the experience of the music performed and its emotional content. The musician must meet the aesthetic expectations of his audience. He establishes direct personal contact with the listeners, skilfully adjusting the performance to the entire situational context and circumstances in which the concert takes place. In his choice of the presented repertoire, he must take into account the age, gender and social status of his audience, as well as their preferences and musical habits. The performance is not only targeted at those present, but also largely dependent on their active involvement in the musical process. The musician must not only encourage them to undertake the journey with him, but also – support their sensitivity and their will to reach the set destination. For this purpose, he must constantly provide them with new unpredictable impulses which maintain the tension and make them look forward to future “events” in the music. The fact that creative invention is directed toward the fulfilment of social expectations is fundamental to the choice of the composer's strategy. Unlike in a written work, the *bagşy*'s art is that of persuasion through narrated story and dialogue. “The path” is a rhetorical composition aiming to attract attention, to move and delight the listeners. This implies a colourful form abounding in contrasts and dynamic tensions.

The repertory of traditional Turkmen music consists of both epic narratives and selections from the rich lyrical tradition of Turkmen poets. During the highly ritualised social and family meetings that serve the purpose of music-making, the singer (*bagşy*) accompanies himself on a long-neck lute called *dutar*, sometimes also supported by other musicians. The performance, which frequently takes several hours, consists of an improvised sequence of songs, whose choice and order result from highly individual choices depending on the artist's personal preferences and momentary mood, but also aiming to satisfy audience expectations. The singer's fundamental strategy is to add more and more self-contained segments of musical construction (that is, songs selected from his repertoire) and arrange them into a sequence. The

songs function as interchangeable modules out of which the entire composition is constructed. The listeners' journey along “the path” is possible once they see the connections existing between the successive modules. The experience of music created live in the act of performance depends on cherishing the individual images appearing one after another in time and not bound by any cause-and-effect relations. The omission of any one of them or the addition of another is never considered as affecting the consistent plan of the whole.

If “the path” ought to keep the audience in suspense as a whole, then its successive modules are meant to provide, first and foremost, ingenious variability and contrasts. The clear-cut contrasts, which attract the audience's attention, result most of all from the differences in the metro-rhythmic structures of the successive songs, with an expansion of tessitura attained by extending the scale into higher registers and by broadening the ambitus. At the same time, the singer reaches ever more remote areas of sound space (which appear to represent the “destination” of the Turkmen performance cycle) by gradually retuning his *dutar* to higher registers. At the beginning of a performance, the musician adjusts the pitch of the strings to the lowest possible register of his own voice. From time to time, the instrument is retuned a quartertone or a semitone higher, while the successive songs are sung in a progressively higher register, which the audience greets with evident pleasure, as it expects a gradually heightened expression and the related rise in emotional tension. Frequent retuning of the *dutar* is considered as evidence of the singer's skill and mastery.

Despite the fact that during a concert the *dutar* may be tuned several times and the buildup of the absolute pitch is a continuous process, Turkmen musicians distinguish only three main tunings: (1) low, (2) middle, and (3) high. The three tunings have their equivalents in three stages of the „journey” in the tonal space. It should be added however that even when the absolute pitch of performance is not raised by retuning the instrument, the relative pitch goes up anyway because the entire sound space of the songs gradually shifts upwards. This is made possible through gradually widening the tessitura of the successive modules, which begin on ever higher tones of the scale represented by the *dutar* frets. This strategy ensures that the principle of contrast and variability – one of the key elements of processual form – should be upheld. The overall scheme of the forming process is shown in the diagram. Vertical axis represents the tonal pitch space whereas the horizontal axis represents the scale of the *dutar*. The Roman numerals denote three groups of tunings of the instrument: low, middle and high.

“The path” cannot be satisfyingly presented by simply accumulating contrasts. The process of composition and performance, which involves diversification of modules, implies the need for attractive and rich embellishment of the contrasted sections. “The path” must not be monotonous. It should allow the audience to savour the music, provide the listeners with pleasure and delight, attract their attention and stir their “appetite” – not only thanks to diversity and contrast, but also by introducing all kinds of ornamentation. Turkmen music is characterised by a great abundance of both musical and extramusical forms of embellishment, which – if performed skilfully – ensured that audience

attention and satisfaction be maintained. Apart from accumulative segmentation and contrast, ornamentation is the third major compositional strategy in orally transmitted music. Wandering along “the path” projects the listener’s mind into the musical here-and-now, without requiring any memory of past events or predictions about the future. Listening is here first and foremost an act of savouring the moment, without anticipating a solution or conclusion to the musical narrative.

The internal structure of the modules, based on repetition with variations, helps the listeners focus their attention on what is happening in the music. The melodic material of Turkmen songs is made up of short motifs, aiming first and foremost to fit the metro-rhythmic structure of the poetic text. The song form is rather stereotypical and comprises: 1. an instrumental theme exposition within an pre-established metro-rhythmic formula; 2. a vocal takeover, with variational repetition of the motif in the successive lines of the stanza; 3. introduction of new motivic material with a leap a fourth, a fifth or an octave upwards, and 4. descent and return to the initial motif. Repetition is the main source of emotional and aesthetic satisfaction for the audience. It is enhanced by subtle ornamentation, pitch oscillations, melismata, glissandi and other techniques of articulation.

Compositional strategy in Turkmen music can be summed up as follows:

1. Music is “a path” traversed by the composer-performer along with his audience. This “way” can be longer or shorter, but always follows the same general principles. This does not preclude a deeply individualised manner of performance, which in oral tradition is never fully pre-designed. Music does not exist as a static object, but is conceived exclusively in terms of a process unfolding in time.
2. Travelling along “the path” takes the form of accumulation of interchangeable modules, which form a cycle without necessarily being linked by cause and effect. During the frequently many-hour-long concerts, the participants who follow “the path” occasionally lose contact with the music, leave the place of performance or focus on other activities, such as socialising or conversation. These short breaks are of no consequence, however, for the reception of the music as a whole, and rejoining the “fellow-travellers” is possible at any moment of “the journey” and at any point of the well mapped-out itinerary.
3. The modules are grouped in accordance with the principle of contrast, which is achieved by changes in the rhythm and metre, as well as taking advantage of the expressive qualities of the given sound space.
4. The attractiveness of the modules selected for the composition process is significantly enhanced by ornamentation, which is one of the most interesting distinct qualities of Turkmen music. The sophisticated ornaments play a key role in music that functions without notation, since they decide about the type of expression and are a key source of emotional satisfaction for the audience.
5. A central role in structuring the music formed in actual live performance is played by variational repetition of individual motifs, i.e. of songs. Turkmen songs are never through-composed. Thanks to multiple repetitions of the same motif in the successive verses, the listeners may more easily assimilate, memorise and satisfy their demand for the poetic content transmitted through the music. It should be stressed that repetition on the level of individual modules or songs works as a technique in a manner opposite to the concept of a series consistently developed in accordance with the principles of diversity and contrast. Seasoned Turkmen singers claim that no given melody may be repeated again during one and the same concert.

## Aims and repertoire studied

The aim of the present paper is to demonstrate how the said principles are contained in the broad metaphoric notion of “the path” and “the journey”, which in many cultures refer to the organisation of music performance. The concepts of a path or wandering are used to describe the spontaneous process of composition in, among others, the Persian (*rah*), Arab (*tariqa*) and Turkmen traditions, where the music performance itself is referred to as “the path” (*yol*).

## Implications

The above described organisation of the music process is not an exclusive property of Turkmen music. The same paradigm of musical thinking is common to all oral cultures, or more precisely – to all those cultures in which music only exists in actual performance. The likely source and justification of “the path” lies in the cognitive and perceptive structures of the human mind, which determine the perception and conceptualisation of music in real performance time. Whatever the truth, hitherto research has demonstrated the persistence of similar composition strategies in Arab, Persian, Uzbek and Indian music. The concept of “the path”, originating in oral tradition and realised as a process, was also present in the early medieval culture of Europe, as described by Fritz Reckow in 1981. The modular or segmental form has also been a point of departure for interesting formal experiments undertaken by the contemporary Polish composer Zbigniew Bargielski in his *Ein Zimmer* of 1973 and *Brief an Milena* of 2005, aiming to attain full contact with the audience and a complete comprehension of the presented music.

## Keywords

segmental form, performance, Turkmen music, orally transmitted music, composition process

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