

## THE IMAGE OF THE TURK IN EUROPEAN PERFORMING ARTS

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One method of gaining an insight into European image of Turk in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is by examining the plots of the operas and theatrical entertainments that were popular at the time. Composers, along with philosophers, writers, and artists, were inspired by Orientalism, and for their operas, they frequently selected librettos based upon Oriental tales and the lives of Eastern emperors and sultans.

In most seventeenth-century productions, the Ottomans were presented as barbarians who were fierce in battle and who perpetrated unthinkable tortures; they were ruled by a murderous sultan who was dedicated to conquering Christian civilization – a man to be feared but also a man to be admired for his sexual prowess and martial skill. For audiences of that time, as well as for audiences of today, themes of sex and violence would have special appeal.

The most prominent of the Ottoman rulers, to be the subject of opera plots was Süleymân the Magnificent. It was primarily the melodramatic events of his family life during the latter part of his reign and the manipulations of his wife, Roxelena, that inspired countless operatic settings in the Baroque era.<sup>1</sup> The librettos emphasized the human emotions of ambition, fear, and jealousy, and from the European viewpoint, Süleymân was regarded as the epitome of the cruel Turk when he ordered the death of his own son.

<sup>1</sup> The first known European theatrical production about the sultan was a play, *Soliman*, by Prospero Bonarelli, 1619. of the many operatic settings, two of the most successful were by Johann Hase (*Solimano*, den, 1753) and David Perez (*Solimano*, Lisbon, 1757).

Although Süleymân and other Turkish sultans were presented as hostile enemies in the typical seventeenth-century production, there were a few exceptions, especially in countries that did not feel threatened by the Ottoman Empire. One example is a work written in 1656 that is generally believed to be the earliest English opera. The *Siege of Rhodes*;<sup>2</sup> in this work, Süleymân is portrayed as a benevolent ruler who spares the lives of his captives. Such a positive image may have been somewhat unusual in the mid-seventeenth century, but the European opinion of the Turks gradually improved after the final unsuccessful assault on Vienna in 1683 that marked the end of the Ottoman Empire's attempts to invade the West. As a result, Turkish sultans began to be presented a more charitable manner on the stage and in literature.

In addition to Süleymân, another popular figure in the Turkish operatic genre was Sultan Bâyezîd I, who was defeated by the great Tartar conqueror, Timur (Tamerlane), in the battle of Ankara in 1402. At least thirty-four composers created operas inspired by their conflict; the most famous of whom the composers was George Friderich Handel in 1724. One can easily understand why Europeans would glorify Timur, who provided a temporary block to the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, but in some of the librettos, it was Bâyezîd who was granted compassionate treatment. Handel's opera, for example, concentrates not on the battle and victory of Timur, but on Bâyezîd's captivity and the many humiliations that he and his family endured.

Although Handel and his librettist, Nicola Haym, chose to title the opera *Tamerlano*, they treated Bâyezîd as the noble hero. Bâyezîd is the dominant character in the opera, and he has the most memorable music. The high point and emotional climax of the entire work is his final scene in Act III when he sings his farewell and commits suicide by taking poison. Of course in an opera, a featured character never dies immediately, and this lengthy death scene has been described as one of the most powerful moments in all Baroque opera. His tragic action causes *Tamerlano* to have a complete change of heart; to become a generous

<sup>2</sup> The libretto was by William Davenant; the music, which was written by several composers, has been lost. As was typical of the time, the siege provided merely a framework for a fictional romantic tale.

and forgiving ruler and to free Bâyezîd's daughter, Asteria, and the man she loves, Andronico.<sup>3</sup>

One cannot glean much accurate information about Ottoman history by studying the librettos of operas on Turkish themes. In late Baroque opera, historic subjects, both Eastern and Western, were preferred, but the actual events were usually treated in a casual manner, with little concern for authenticity. Characters were freely inserted or omitted, and incidents were altered to suit the purposes of the drama. The historic events merely served as background for dramatic tales of love, jealousy, heroism, and passionate revenge.

One major reason for the interest in Ottoman history was that it afforded so many opportunities for magnificent staging, with its elaborate scenic representations of the mosque and the seraglio court and gardens. In addition, exotic costumes could be worn. Male Turkish dress included the turban, sash and long caftan, with a binding in rich material. Female costumes, however, tended to be less realistic, at least until the mid-eighteenth century; female performers normally appeared on stage in ornate versions of the latest European fashion, with only suggestions of foreign attire.<sup>4</sup>

Colorful staging and costuming led to the increasing popularity of Turkish themes in comic operas and ballets. By the second half of the eighteenth-century, operas based on comic and romantic subject matter completely overshadowed those on more serious historic and heroic topics.<sup>5</sup> Oriental tales, such as *Arabian Nights*, *Turkish Tales*, *Persian Tales*, and countless imitations, which pretended to be translations of Oriental manuscripts, were in great demand by the reading public. This world of magic, fantasy, and splendor provided colorful subject matter

<sup>3</sup> See J.Merrill Knapp, "Händel's *Tamerlano*: The Creation of an Opera," *Musical Quarterly* 56 (July 1970) pp. 405-430, for a detailed discussion of the opera and its origins.

<sup>4</sup> Theodore Komisarjevsky. *The Costume of the Theatre* (New York, 1968), pp. 98-99.

<sup>5</sup> See Eve R.Meyer, "Turquerie and Eighteenth-Century Music", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 7 (Summer 1974), pp.476-483, for a more detailed discussion of the Turk in comic operas. Also see W.Daniel Wilson, "Turks on the Eighteenth-Century Operatic Stage and European Political, Military, and Cultural History", *Eighteenth-Century Life* 2:9 (1985), pp.79-92.

for the theater, along with the requisite spectacular stage effects. Interest in musical representations of Oriental fairy tales extended even into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Most of the eighteenth-century musical settings of these exotic fables were not operas in the strictest sense, if one defines an opera as a work with continuous music. These productions were most often done in the manner of our musical comedies, with spoken instead of sung dialogue. Vocal solos, ensemble numbers, and ballet would be featured elements.

The favorite theme of the comic or romantic Turkish theatrical genre was the harem. European audiences found the institution of the harem to be so fascinating and tantalizing that they never seemed to tire of seraglio plots. Variations on a few standard scenarios were set to music countless times. One basic plan centered around rivalry among the women in the harem for the love of the sultan. Among the best settings of this genre was *Soliman II ou Les trois sultanes*, a French *opéra comique* written by Charles-Simon Favart in 1761. The story concerns three European concubines who are rivals for the sultan's love: the Spanish Elmire, the Circassian Delia, and the French Roxelane. In the end, the witty Roxelane, who resists and even insults the sultan, triumphs and becomes sultana.

The opera was such a success that it was performed throughout the century and was also done on the stage as a play without a music. It was soon translated into English and German, and in these languages, it was set to music by a number of composers.<sup>6</sup> The good fortune of *Soliman II* led to many derivatives, in which the powerful sultan succumbs to the will of the European woman. In some versions she convinces him to release her from the harem, and in the more extreme versions, the sultan gives up his harem and converts to Christianity in order to marry her.

A seraglio comedy that was particularly favored for its pairing of exoticism with suspense was the rescue plot. The heroine is normally a European woman who was abducted either recently or as child. She is being held captive by the sultan and is in imminent danger of losing either her virtue or her life. A rescue attempt is made by her lover or a close relative, and in one humorous variant, the lover disguises himself as a

<sup>6</sup> Haydn is believed to have composed the incidental music when the play was performed at the Esterháza palace in 1777; he probably incorporated this music into his Symphony No. 63, which is subtitled "La Roxelane."

female in order to penetrate the harem.

In some plots, the rescue is successful, but in the more complex situations, the rescue is failed, and the hero and his accomplices are caught. In all versions, the various complications are unraveled by the end of the opera, and the sultan either is outwitted by the Europeans or demonstrates his magnanimity by releasing his captives.

The rescue-from-the-harem plot was so popular that it appeared in dramatic works on all levels of entertainment, from the crude improvised plays in the marketplace and village fair to theatrical and operatic productions throughout the major cities of Europe. The most artistic of the Turkish operas, and the only one from the eighteenth century that is still standard in the operatic repertoire, is Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (The Abduction from the Seraglio), written in Vienna in 1782. The basic plot offers nothing innovative, but Mozart's musical setting of the standard story is so humorous and imaginative that the work rises above the clichés of the harem-rescue theme, and the opera is considered one of the masterpieces of the late eighteenth century.

The story tells of a Spanish woman, Constanza, and her maid, Blonde, both of whom have been captured by pirates and are being held prisoners by the Turkish ruler, Pasha Selim. Constanza's lover, Belmonte, discovers her whereabouts through his former servant, Pedrillo, who has also been captured by the Turks and is serving as gardener for the Pasha. Belmonte tries to rescue them, but of course he is caught too. As expected, the opera ends happily, and all are finally released by the Pasha.

The conflicting European opinions of the Turk are revealed by an examination of the role of Pasha Selim.<sup>7</sup> He is viewed first as the amorous Turk who is genuinely in love with Constanza and is reluctant to use force to overpower her. When she refuses his advances, he exhibits the characteristics of the cruel Turk, a tyrant whose orders must be obeyed under penalty of torture or death. Later, when Belmonte is captured, Selim recognizes that Belmonte is the son of his worst enemy, the man who stole all of his possessions and drove him into exile from his home in Spain. Selim relishes the pleasures of his intended vengeance. At the

<sup>7</sup> Prior to the start of the opera, the Pasha converted from Christianity to Islam. His role in the opera is most unusual because it is a speaking and not a singing part.

end of the opera, however, Pasha Selim shows still another side of his personality; he appears as a merciful and noble ruler when he reveals that he is above petty revenge. He frees the captives, and to show his generosity, he says in a message to Belmonte's father: "It gave me far greater pleasure to reward an injustice with justice than to keep on repaying evil with evil," and the opera ends with a hymn of praise to the pasha.

The image of the Turkish ruler as a man of high ethical standards, in this opera and other theatrical works, is a reflection of the humanistic ideals of the time and especially of the writings of Voltaire, who used pseudo-Oriental tales as vehicles for giving moral advice and for criticizing Western society, politics, and religion. In Voltaire's play *Zaire*, for example, Orosmane is considered one of the most influential Grand Turks in Western literature, since he became a prototype for later versions of the generous Turk.<sup>8</sup>

Although the noble Turkish sultan or pasha was a common character in eighteenth-century theatrical productions, the villainous Turk did not entirely disappear. His part was usually as one of the ruler's underlings. In Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio*, he is Osmin, the overseer of the Pasha's country palace. In two letters to his father, Mozart vividly describes Osmin as "stupid, surly, [and] malicious."<sup>9</sup> A "rude churl" who "oversteps all the bounds of order, moderation, and propriety."<sup>10</sup>

Mozart best illustrates the man's personality in Act I in Osmin's so-called "rage" aria. "Solche hergalauf'ne Laffen" (Such fobs who come running in here). At this point in the opera, Osmin is furious with Pedrillo, and his anger gradually increases until, at the end of his aria, he gleefully describes how Pedrillo will be killed: "First beheaded, then hanged, then impaled on red-hot spikes, then burned, then bound and drowned; finally flayed." The violence that he imagines is so excessive and unbelievable that Osmin is perceived as a crude, ill-tempered bully whose outbursts are more ludicrous than fearsome. Mozart explains that his "rage is

<sup>8</sup> Jack Rochford Vrooman, "Voltaire's Theatre : The Cycle from Oedipe to Merope," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, vol. 75, ed. Theodore Besterman (Geneva, 1970), p.86.

<sup>9</sup> Mozart to Leopold Mozart, 13 October 1781, *The letters of Mozart and His Family*, vol.2, 2nd ed., ed. and trans. Emily Anderson (London, 1966), no.428, p.772. Also see Thomas Bauman, W.A.Mozart: "Die Entführung aus dem Serail" (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 27-35, 62-71.

rendered comical by the use of Turkish music.”<sup>11</sup> Unlike Pasha Selim, Osmin is unforgiving; at the end of the opera he cannot comprehend the Pasha’s generosity, and he refuses to participate in the general rejoicing. In this work and in others of the genre, audiences would always be delighted when Osmin and his counterparts were outwitted by the Western characters.

The Turk in a farcical role was common in theatrical works. He was a foreigner who would amuse audiences with his unusual language and quaint mannerisms. To heighten the humor of a play, scenes with one or more Turkish characters were frequently inserted in plots that had nothing whatever to do with Turkey. In France, for example, during the reigns of Louis XIV and his successors, the appetite for Turkish exoticism was so strong that there was hardly an entertainment without at least one.<sup>12</sup> The language for the Turkish characters was often a type of gibberish that was sure to elicit laughter from the audience.

Europeans dressed in Turkish disguise were also considered humorous, as in the comedy *Lo Speciale* (The Apothecary) by Carlo Goldoni, the eighteenth century Italian dramatist. The drama was set as an opera by several composers, including Haydn in 1768. The climax of the opera is a marriage ceremony in the third act in which the entire cast is dressed à la turque to celebrate the wedding of the two leading ladies to their lovers who are disguised as Turks.<sup>13</sup> This is just one of countless Turkish ceremonial scenes in comic and even serious eighteenth-century operas.

But, one may ask, did they use authentic Turkish dance or music in

<sup>10</sup> Mozart to Leopold Mozart, 26 September 1781, no.426, p.769.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Alfred Einstein, *Mozart: His Character, His Work* (New York, 1962), p.458. considers Osmin to be Mozart’s “greatest creation in this work.” Because Osmin is not a mere “caricature, but (is) as realistic a rogue as Falstaff: coarse, irascible, infinitely comical.”

<sup>12</sup> The comic Turkish ceremonial scene in Molière’s *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670), with music by Lully established a model for later works. See Miriam K. Whaples, “Exoticism in Dramatic Music, 1600-1800” (Ph. D. Diss., Indiana University, 1958), pp. 95-124, for a discussion of the musical devices in this scene.

<sup>13</sup> Europeans also delighted in attending masked balls dressed in extravagant Turkish costumes. See Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf, *Autobiography*, trans. A.D. Coleridge (London, 1896, 1st ed. Leipzig, 1801), pp. 166-7, for a description of masqueraders in Turkish costumes accompanied by a “Turkish” band.

these productions? Of course not! Ethnic dances would have been too strange for the audiences, who preferred to watch the Turkish characters dance minutes, gavottes and similar stylish European court dances.

Turkish music was also ignored, although transcriptions of Turkish melodies and descriptions of Turkish performance practices were available. Mozart's remark that the composer should not offend the ear of the listener was typical. Europeans could more readily accept the visual arts and literature of the East than the music, which they considered to be primitive and unappealing.<sup>14</sup> The few occasional hints of pseudo-Turkish music were used to add a bit of color or humor to a composition.

There was, however, one aspect of Turkish music that exerted a strong impact on the West, and that was the military music of the Janissary band. By the end of the eighteenth-century, almost all European rulers had their own Turkish bands. The first was Augustus II of Poland, who received his Turkish military band as a gift from the sultan in the early part of the century. In 1725 Empress Anne of Russia acquired her own band, soon to be followed by the Austrian and Prussian rulers. The Austrian "Turkish" military bands continued until World War I.<sup>15</sup> Most of the original musicians in the bands were Turkish. The British, however, preferred to employ black musicians and dress them in splendid tunics with colorful sashes and high feathered turbans.<sup>16</sup>

The Janissary bands featured shrill wind instruments (such as the shawn and fif) and a large assortment of percussion instruments of the type that was never used in Western orchestral music. In eighteenth-century European orchestras, the only percussion instrument was the timpani. Composers soon realized that they could achieve new and unusual orchestral effects with the noisy Janissary instruments, and they began

<sup>14</sup> See Philip V. Bohlman, "The European Discovery of Music in the Islamic World and the Non-Western' in 19th-Century Music History", *Journal of Musicology* 5 (Spring 1987), pp. 147-63. for an examination of the "discovery" of Islamic music by Western scholars.

<sup>15</sup> Eva Badura-Skoda, "Turca, alla" *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol.19 (London, 1980), p.258.

<sup>16</sup> According to Henry George Farmer. *The Rise and Development of Military Music* (London, 1912). Pp. 72-7, black "Turkish" musicians continued to perform in England until the reign of Queen Victoria.



to introduce into some of their triangle.<sup>17</sup> Occasionally, a piccolo, which simulated the high Turkish fife, was also used.

Among the more famous orchestral works that feature “Turkish” instruments are Haydn’s Symphony No. 100 (the “Military”) and three compositions by Beethoven: the final movement of his Symphony No.9, his “Wellington’s Victory” Symphony, and the “Turkish March” and “Chorus of Dervishes” from *The Ruins of Athens*.

Composers also began to employ the Janissary instruments in their Turkish operas for local color. In Mozart’s *Abduction from the Seraglio*, he specifically describes particular sections of the opera as Turkish; for example, he loud music in the overture and in the grand entry march of the Pasha, with his Janissaries singing, “Raise songs to our great Pasha, lift your voices in acclaim.”<sup>18</sup> Another instance of Turkish music comes at the end of the opera when everybody honors the generous ruler and sings “Long live the Pasha Selim! Let honor be his due.” The music at this point sounds as though it might have been inspired by the whirling dervishes, and it certainly provides what Mozart wanted; a noisy, exciting, and brilliant conclusion to the opera. No doubt the colorful pseudo-Turkish music contributed to the fact that this opera was Mozart’s most successful during his lifetime.

In conclusion, we are aware that there was no single image of the Turk in the performing arts during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He was presented as both a fearful and a comic villain, as a ridiculous foreigner, and as a generous ruler to be admired and honored. Since Turkish operas had such wide popular appeal, and since composers

<sup>17</sup> The cymbals were smaller than those used in modern symphony orchestras. Triangles were not authentic Turkish instruments, but they came to be associated with European “Turkish” music. Bells were also sometimes used in “Turkish” ensembles. The *batterie turque* became so stylish that it affected the manufacture of many fortepianos of the late eighteenth century: pedal attachments were added to imitate the sounds of the bass drum, the clanging cymbals, and the jingling triangle and bells.

<sup>18</sup> Even without the “Turkish” instruments, certain musical features became associated with the *alla turca* style, such as strongly accented march rhythms in duple meter, repetitious rhythmic and melodic patterns (especially leaping thirds), static harmonies, melodic ornaments (grace notes), and rapid contrasts between major keys. A well-known example is Mozart’s Piano Sonata in A minor, K. 331 (K.330i), in which the final movement is marked *rondo alla turca*.”

and librettists catered to the taste of their audiences, and were careful not to offend their sensibilities or challenge their preconceived the image of the Turk as perceived by the European public.