The Music Man: TUMATA and Turkish Music Therapy

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Abstract: This essay examines how the modern-day Turkish music therapy group TUMATA relates to a longer history of Islamic medical music treatment. It traces the history of music therapy in the Islamic Middle East, and then proceeds to examine the Muslim Sufi Mevlevi mystical sect within this context. The musical songs of TUMATA and its founder Dr. Oruc Güvenç shed light on how modern music drew upon the historical medicinal understanding of musical therapy. Their songs intertwine with the religious beliefs of the Sufi mystics, while simultaneously avoiding blind allegiance to their traditions. TUMATA retained artistic license and created music therapy within a deep Islamic tradition but did not hesitate to break from that heritage. Thus, the group and its founder provided a mechanism through which to explore the history of Islamic music therapy while examining the modern ways this practice manifests itself.

Keywords: Music; Therapy; Turkey; Islam’ Sufi
1. Introduction

Islamic cultures within the Middle East have a long history of musical production. Within this rich tradition, Turkish musician Dr. Oruc Güvenc reinvigorated the study and practice of Turkish music therapy in the late-twentieth century. In this paper, I will contextualize how Dr. Güvenc and TUMATA (Group for Research and Promotion of Turkish Music) – the research group he founded, and along with providing co-performers at several events placed their contemporary Turkish music therapy within a longer Islamic history of medicinal music treatments. I use several official and unofficial video and audio recordings of TUMATA’s performances to do so.¹ I argue that through these recordings, Dr. Güvenc and TUMATA draw upon the deep historical roots of Islamic music therapy to place their contemporary Turkish variety within the Sufi Mevlevi musical tradition.

First, an exploration of the history of medicine and music therapy in a Middle Eastern Islamic context is presented. Specifically, that exploration will focus on the Greek influence on Islamic medicinal practice and music as well as the use of music as a healing technique, primarily in hospitals.² Since Dr. Güvenc was Turkish, special attention will be given to how the Ottomans employed music in a healing capacity. Next, I give a brief biographical overview of Dr. Güvenc and TUMATA. Finally, I analyze various aspects of the group’s performances, which demonstrates their position within a Sufi Mevlevi musical tradition.

2. History of Medicine and Music in the Islamic Middle East

The emergence of music as a form of medicinal treatment in the Middle East did not occur in a vacuum.³ It derived from the larger context of medicinal knowledge as understood in the early ninth and tenth centuries C.E. At this time, "medical theory was indebted chiefly to Aristotle's doctrine of mixture. According to this doctrine, physicians established four humors of the human body—blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm—which corresponded to the four cosmic elements (earth, air, fire, water). They also envisaged four qualities of matter—heat, dryness, moisture and cold—consisting of two pairs of opposites. They then ascribed all material existence to the various mixtures of the four elements and qualities."⁴ The influential medicinal philosopher Galen also drew upon this humoral understanding of the body. In the ninth century, physicians Yuhanna ibn Masawa and Ali ibn Sahl al-Tabari became among the first to translate the Galenic medicinal texts into Arabic.⁵ Within this framework, music functioned as a way to restore the balance between the four humors since any disease could be explained by an imbalance between them.

¹ Dr. Güvenc also wrote two books, The Beloved of Allah – Hz. Mevlana as well as The History of Turkish Music and Turkish Therapy Music, during his lifetime. Unfortunately, due to complications associated with the COVID-19 pandemic I was not able to access nor draw upon these works as part of this paper.
² No recordings indicate that TUMATA or Dr. Guvenc played in hospitals for ill patients. However, the principal of using music for healing in a hospital serves as valuable background in regard to the history of Islamic musical therapy.
³ Before proceeding, a note the debates over the permissibility of music in Islam is needed. While theological questions regarding music did provoke scholarly debate and personal questioning among Muslims, the fact remains that hospitals from the Abbasids to the Ottomans employed music therapy with varying degrees of frequency. For this reason, in addition to the lack of relevance in understanding where to place TUMATA in an Islamic musical tradition, the debates over the permissibility of music in Islam will not be addressed in this paper.
⁴ Amnon Shiloah, The Dimension of Music in Islamic and Jewish Culture (Aldershot, Great Britain: Variorum, 1993), 147.
Music retained the ability to balance the four humors because of its mimetic power—the ability to imitate reality—which affects an individual’s character. Aristotle attributed qualities like anger and enthusiasm as the objects of music’s mimetic power. Music’s ability to imitate reality could lead to real changes in one’s body. Since one’s behavior and character could be explained by a humoral imbalance and music could affect an individual’s character, then music could also change the human body’s humoral balance. As the Islamic Middle East continued to absorb a Greek view of music, it inherited this mimetic framework.

Beyond the strictly humoral understanding of its earliest scholars, the field of medicinal music began to take on a newfound philosophical importance during the ninth and tenth centuries C.E. During this period, the translation of classical works from Greek into Arabic helped produce “the conception of harmony as order, linking music with cosmology. In this orientation, the study of music was considered a key to understanding the principles presiding over the universe.” The works of the ninth century Islamic philosopher al-Kindi further enforced this view by arguing that “instruments help in creating harmony between the soul and the universe.”

The importance of Greek influence on early Islamic views on medicine and music is hard to overstate. As the times evolved, Islamic scientific understanding did as well. The Greek-influenced Galenic humoral theory of the body eventually fell out of favor. However, as will be explained further on, the grounding of music in this humoral understanding remains to the present day in TUMATA’s work.

As a healing tool in hospitals has a long historical legacy in the Islamic Middle East. For example, under the Abbasids (556-653CE), this treatment took place at al-Adudi and al-Mansur Hospital. The practice continued, as seen via the Mamluk hospital Bimaristanal Arguni and the Seljuk construction of Gevher Nesibe Darussifa. The Ottomans also contributed Bursa Yildrim and Edirne Hospital to this list. In these hospitals, music therapy did not only consist of a musician playing music. Rather, natural sounds in conjunction with any melodies produced by the contours of the hospitals’ architecture also constituted part of the musical treatment.

It should come as no surprise that the Ottomans continued this medicinal tradition at hospitals like those previously mentioned. For a concrete example of how the Ottoman medicinal practice utilized music, one need only turn to the Mansuri Hospital in Cairo in the seventeenth century. At Mansuri Hospital, those “patients suffering from insomnia were placed in a separate hall; they listened to harmonious music, and skilled storytellers recited their tales to them... There [also] was a provision in the endowment of [the late fifteenth century Ottoman Sultan] Bayzid [II]’s hospital in Edirne for three singers, and seven musicians (a flutist, a violinist, a flageolet-player, a cymbalist, a harpist, a harp-cymbal player, and a lutenist) who were to visit the hospital three times a week. They played six different melodies, and many considered insane were reported to have been relieved by this.” This usage of musicians demonstrates the power, in certain cases, which Ottomans placed in

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8 Ibid., 149.
10 Ibid., 198. Though beyond the purview of this paper, the architectural designs of hospitals from the Abbasids to the Ottomans could shed further light on what degree this built in acoustic resonance played in a patient’s treatment.
music’s mimetic power to heal the body and restore balance between oneself and one’s environment. The philosophical search for understanding humanity’s place in the universe via music, inherited from the aforementioned ninth and tenth centuries, remained alive and well in the Ottoman Empire through at least the seventeenth century. Ottoman doctors used music both as a means to physically heal their patients while also using the treatment as an avenue to repair a potentially disturbed soul.

The musicians who played for the patients in an attempt to heal them raise several historical questions. In modern times, the term therapy refers to the treatment of individuals who are “not [able to] deal with [a] specific psychological or physical condition without professional assistance.” Thus, it would be tempting to associate the role of therapist to the musicians in the Ottoman hospitals. However, this was not the case. The institution employed caregivers, the closest role that existed at the time to a modern-day therapist, and the professional musicians played for the patients. The role of caregiver and musician did not overlap. Despite the investment made by hospitals in their musicians, the “use of music in Muslim hospitals was the exception rather than the rule.”

Music as a spiritual medicinal remedy extended beyond the hospital walls. Since the fifteenth century Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II, “two military groups played [music] for the public every morning and evening from their quarters.” One potential explanation for this was that the Sultan wished to provide entertainment to keep select cities’ populaces content, an Ottoman take on the Roman bread and games policies. An alternative justification rests in the aforementioned philosophical view held by the Ottomans concerning music. Since melodies, in their view, had the power to heal at least some illnesses and replenish the soul, the military groups’ concerts served a public health function. Their music ostensibly helped to keep the citizenry healthy, happy, and in spiritual balance with their environment. These military concerts show that public performances, like those of TUMATA, belong under the category of musical therapy.

Beyond these public performances and hospital treatments, several mystical Muslim religious orders took music therapy very seriously. The Mevlevi mystical order claims to trace its roots back to the moment when the thirteenth-century Sufi mystic Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, also known simply as Rūmī or Mevlânâ, began to whirl in the middle of a street after hearing goldsmiths hammering gold. While whirling, he only heard the repeated name of Allah. For modern-day Mevlevis, the sacred Sama Ceremony involves whirling and uttering the dhikr, 'la illaha illallah' (there is no god but God), heard by Mevlânâ.

To Mevlevis, music was an act of worshiping the divine. In the Mevlevi mystical order, “the music (and dance) accompanying the sacred text were studied and performed with great care. This very belief that music has the power to affect individuals (man as well as animals), societies, and even the universe was exactly what made music in the forms of dancing, singing, or playing

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 75.
15 Ibid., 72
17 Ibid., 20.
instruments such an important method for Sufis in their quest to reach ecstasy and unity with God.\footnote{Ibid., 77.} The Mevlevis used music not as a humoral balancing technique but as a means of spiritual transcendence. Their music was therapy for the soul and played a key role in their relationship with God. It is to Dr. Güvenç and TUMATA, both deeply impacted by the Sufi Mevlevi order, that we now turn.

3. Dr. Oruç Güvenç and TUMATA

In order to understand how TUMATA fits within the Sufi Mevlevi musical tradition, it is first necessary to know about Dr. Güvenç, the group’s founder. Born in 1948 in Tavşanlı, Turkey, Güvenç started learning music at the age of twelve and continued this study throughout his life. After graduating from Istanbul University, “he obtained his doctorate in Clinical Psychology at Cerrahpasa Faculty of Medicine [by] researching music therapy.”\footnote{TUMATA, n.d., https://tumata.com/} During his university years, he also wrote two books, The Beloved of Allah – Hz. Mevlana, as well as The History of Turkish Music and Turkish Therapy Music.\footnote{See the first footnote in this paper for the reason I did not draw upon these works for this paper.} In 1975 he founded TUMATA to research and promote Turkish music. Throughout his life, Dr. Güvenç remained a Sufi Muslim with an “interest in historical healing practices at Anatolian türbes (saintly tombs), especially in the different ‘sanctuaries’ (makam) of Karacaahmet Sultan in Western Anatolia, an Anatolian saint from the Middle Ages, also revered much by modern Alevi living in Istanbul.”\footnote{Robert Langer, “Transfer Processes within Sufi Rituals: An Example from Istanbul,” European Journal of Turkish Studies, no. 13 (2011), https://doi.org/10.4000/ejts.4584, 4.} Dr. Güvenç passed away on May 7, 2017.\footnote{TUMATA, n.d., https://tumata.com/}

With Dr. Güvenç singing, TUMATA released a song by the title \textit{La illaha ilallah},\footnote{La Illaha ilallah, n.d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmkf326EJ3k&feature=youtu.be.} in a direct reference to the dhikr uttered by Mevlânâ and his followers for hundreds of years. While the song does incorporate more than simply repeating the dhikr, the title itself reveals the religious base which inspired certain songs produced by TUMATA. To further support the point, one need only turn to the group’s song \textit{Allah, allah, allah}.\footnote{Allah, Allah, Allah, n.d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fo4P8GxIuKI&feature=youtu.be.} The title alone demonstrates the Islamic influence on the group’s songs. In another performance, three individuals whirled while the rest of TUMATA performed music. The Whirling Dervishes kept one hand palm up and the other palm down for the duration of their performance.\footnote{09 Çare Kendimde, Sema Özlemi, Mürşit Fani, Sema Neşesi, Davet-Cevap, Allah Gördüm Neyler, n.d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxWiYLZZLNA&feature=youtu.be.} This signified the spiritual desire to receive God’s presence, via the upward palm, and bring it to Earth, via the downward palm. The mystical influence of communicating with God, like Mevlânâ, is visible throughout the performance. The religious influence also shows how TUMATA engages in the historical tradition of viewing music as a philosophical and spiritual dialogue between the divine and humanity.

While TUMATA drew heavily upon the Mevlevi musical framework, it did not constrain their creative capacities. For example, the group’s “repertoire consists of songs with vocal singing whereas more contemplative solely instrumental parts, as in other Sufi contexts (including Mevlevi), are missing.”\footnote{Langer, \textit{Transfer Processes}, 9.} TUMATA expanded outside of the Mevlevi tradition and exercised their artistic prerogative when they saw fit. This fits with Dr. Güvenç’s view of “Dervish culture being an
Islamicised form of shamanism,” a religious view that runs dangerously close to idol worship and denying *tawhid*, the central Islamic belief in the oneness of God. TUMATA alleviated this tension by not always using their songs to serve an explicitly religious purpose. At one point, men and women perform a choreographed dance that did not appear to have any religiously oriented purpose whatsoever. By performing non-religious songs TUMATA rooted part of their music in a secular spiritual experience. Therefore, a song bordering on denying *tawhid* could be changed to base itself in a secular, rather than Islamic, experience and avoid the thorny issue of *tawhid*. For Dr. Güvenç and TUMATA, music occupied the purpose of both spiritual healing, of a religious or secular nature, as well as the potential for remedying physical ills.

Besides the Mevlevi tradition, TUMATA drew upon the rich history of Islamic medicine and music therapy. On the “Turkish music therapy” tab on their website, they state how each tonality affects a certain humor in the body. This reveals the influence that the Greek and Galenic view about the body being composed of four humoral elements has on how TUMATA views their music. Far from being a simple source of pleasure, the group considers their work as having the possibility to realign the body’s humoral balance in order to bring health back to the listener.

An average observer would most likely categorize TUMATA as a performance group rather than musical therapists. Using the modern definition of a therapist, a professional who helps patients “deal with specific psychological or physical condition[,]” this observer’s view rings true. However, by taking into consideration the Ottoman view of music itself being a therapy, one may persuasively argue that TUMATA occupied this historically continuous role of unstandardized musical therapists. They played for the public, as did the Ottoman military bands under Sultan Mehmed II, and by doing so allowed their audience to regain balance with the surrounding environment. The musicians in Ottoman hospitals like Edirne performed similar functions and exemplified the historical roots of TUMATA’s self-conception as musical therapists.

4. Conclusion

Dr. Oruç Güvenç and TUMATA situated themselves within the mystic Sufi Mevlevi tradition. They saw their music and performances, as demonstrated via the symbolism employed by the Whirling Dervishes’ hand positioning, as part of a philosophical discussion between God and man. However, they did not let this constrain their artistic vision and broke from this framework at several of their performances. The group also drew upon the Greek and subsequently Islamic view of health as being a function of humoral balance in the body. This does not suggest that the group rejected the modern scientific understanding of medicine. Instead, it demonstrated that TUMATA drew upon a deep historical conception of how their music could help heal their listeners. TUMATA, wittingly or unwittingly, followed the precedent set forth by the Ottomans of public musical performance being used as a means to bring listeners back into harmony with their environment. By drawing on the deep historical roots of Islamic medicine and musical therapy, Dr. Oruç Güvenç and TUMATA placed their work within a Sufi Mevlevi framework while simultaneously not shackling themselves to its traditions.

27 Ibid., 5.
30 Shefer-Mossensohn, [*Ottoman Medicine*], 72.
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