

Fazıl Say: A Turkish Musician in Europe

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Identity isn't given once and for all:
it is built up and changes throughout a person's lifetime.¹

The aim of this paper is to determine how and to what extent Fazıl Say, whose inspiration, according to his own words, is the bridge between Europe and Asia, has become an ambassador between Europe and Turkey.² A further aim is to determine whether Fazıl Say may be referred to as 'hybrid' concerning both his person and his works. This will be done first by describing his background and then the conditions which led not only to his European, but also his global success. Assuming that not only his family, social environment and education were decisive in this process, the social changes that took place in Turkey following the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 are detailed, with special consideration of the reforms directly affecting art and music. To offer more insight into this context, the mutual influences on music between the Ottoman Empire and Europe are outlined.

The Developments in Art and Music in Turkey after the Establishment of the Republic in 1923

It is well known that Western music was influenced by Turkish music and especially by the military music of the Janissaries; the unfamiliar rhythms and exotic instruments fascinated composers such as Gluck, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. However, these early composers were exposed to only a fraction of the art and music of the Ottoman Empire. This music had been cultivated since the Middle Ages and continued to be refined up until the eighteenth century.

On the other hand, traces of Western musical influence in the Ottoman Empire can be shown in the sixteenth century. Selim III (1789–1807) proposed a military band following the Western model as part of his military reform plans. Resistance from the Janissaries, however, caused this plan to fail.

The European influence on Turkish culture with respect to instruments and playing style in the so-called 'Tulip Era' under Ahmad III at the beginning of the eighteenth century, became obvious. Piano music and opera were popular amongst the bourgeoisie of Istanbul in the nineteenth century. However, traditional music, folk dances and a complex art of song/Lied, the old Turkish bard music, were maintained.³

The real history of Western music in the Ottoman Empire began in 1826, when Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839) implemented the plans of Selim III and replaced the Janissary military bands and their music school in the palace with the *Großherrliche Musikkapelle* (*Musika-i Humayun*) in the course of dissolving the Janissary.⁴

This consisted primarily of a military marching band (*bando*) playing Western military music. Giuseppe Donizetti (1788–1856), the older brother of the famous Italian opera composer Gaetano Donizetti (1797–1848) conducted the band from 1828 to 1856. He transformed this into a palace orchestra according to the Western model. European music teachers were employed at the *Großherrliche Musikkapelle* from 1834 and they educated young Ottoman musicians. Over time, further departments emerged in addition to the military band and the orchestra, with the respective ensembles for opera, operetta, mandolin, choir and symphony.⁵ However, a major redirection of European music and musical education began with the establishment of modern Turkey in 1923 by Atatürk. Ankara was declared the capital and while Istanbul further continued its dominance in trade, Ankara became the artistic and intellectual centre of the republic.

The development of this Turkish music revolution unfolded in various stages: (1) an establishment phase (1923–1934); (2) a high phase under Atatürk (1934–1938); and (3) a continuation phase after his death (1938–1950). With the Democratic Party (DP) coming to power in 1950, the government-led music revolution policy came to an end.⁶

The main idea of the new music policy was not only to copy Western patterns, but also to promote the proper conservation and maintenance of Turkey's own culture. With the new ideas and the complete rejection of the past, the old state institutions were reformed along European lines and new musical institutions were established. A school for music teachers was founded for the first time in Ankara in 1924 and was specialised to work later in the provinces.

The 1923 reformed *Darülelhan* (House of Sound) was converted into the Conservatory of Istanbul in 1927. Shortly after the founding of the Republic some talented young musicians were sent to various cities of Europe to pursue their musical studies. Cemal Resit Rey (1904–1985), Hasan Ferit Alnar (1906–1978), Ulvi Cemal Erkin (1906–1972), Ahmet Adnan Saygun (1907–1991) and Necil Kazim Akses (1908–1991) were amongst them. Cemal Resit Rey studied at the Conservatory of Geneva, Hasan Ferit Alnar in the State Music Academy in Vienna, Ulvi Cemal Erkin in the Paris Conservatory and *Ecole Normale de Musique*, Ahmet Adnan Saygun in the *Schola Cantorum* and *Ecole Normale de Musique*, and Necil Kazim Akses in the State Music Academy of Vienna and the State Conservatory in Prague. Upon their return they constituted the first modern directorship of Turkish musical composition. They called themselves the 'Turkish Five'.⁷ The Turkish Five are considered to be the first modern Turkish composers. These five composers were working as teachers at Turkish conservatories and played a significant role in the development of contemporary Turkish music.

Atatürk's reforms led to other significant changes. In 1934, the National Music and Drama Academy was established. Further, Paul Hindemith was invited in 1935

as an expert to assist in the implementation of the music reforms. In a short time he submitted four reports to the Ministry of Education in Ankara on (1) the conditions for establishing a State Conservatory in Ankara, (2) conditions for the reorganisation of the Presidential Symphony Orchestra, (3) instrument procurement for the orchestra, and (4) his 'Thoughts for the Expulsion of Musical Renewal Efforts Across the Country' and his 'Proposals for the Establishment of the Turkish Musical Life'. Following Hindemith's ideas, conservatories were founded in Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir, music teacher training was organised, opera and concert life was encouraged and Turkish music education established.

Hindemith further proposed some German experts for the implementation of his plans, which envisaged that the conductor Ernst Praetorius, the opera director Carl Ebert and music educator Eduard Zuckmayer could come to Ankara. The German school therefore became a major influence on the musical institutions of Turkey.

According to the plans of Hindemith, the music teacher school, founded in 1924, became the Ankara State Conservatory in 1936. The music teacher education was separated from the Conservatory (1937) and affiliated to the College of Education (Gazi Egitim Enstitüsü), of which Eduard Zuckmayer was the first and long-time conductor. The Conservatory consisted of six departments: piano, strings, brass, opera, singing and acting.

The last two departments, opera and theatre, were under the direction of Carl Ebert for nine years. Ebert laid the foundation for opera in Ankara; his main occupation, however, was the training of a classical opera repertoire. In this respect, Carl Ebert is regarded as the founder of modern Turkish opera.

The reform movements in music education in recent decades have also brought a new Turkish song genre—the school song—which continues to enjoy increasing popularity. With these reform movements, the composers strove to use folksong-like modal melody shapes, so that Turkish music education could take its own place in the alliance of European peoples. Turkish folk instruments, alongside European instruments have become a feature of music education in music schools since the 1970s.

Ernst Praetorius, who came to Ankara in 1936 following Hindemith's recommendation, first reorganised the Presidential Symphony Orchestra. He worked successfully in this area for about 15 years. He also taught at the National Conservatory and led The Presidential Symphony Orchestra until his death.

Since 1926, Turkish folk music was collected and researched by various Turkish musicologists. This activity was given a special lift during Bela Bartok's journey to Turkey in 1936. The Hungarian folksong researcher collected Turkish folk songs in southern Turkey and demonstrated how to successfully conduct such field research. His sample collection of folk songs served as the foundation of the folk music archive, which was subsequently set up at the State Conservatory of Ankara.

In 1958, a state conservatory was founded in Izmir. The Symphony Orchestra of Izmir, founded in the same year, was disbanded in 1968 and re-founded in 1975 as a state symphony orchestra. According to Hindemith's plans, a second Conservatory (Istanbul Devlet Konservatuvarı) was founded in Istanbul in 1971.

The string orchestra, founded in Istanbul Cemal Resit Rey in 1934, was converted in 1972 to the State Symphony Orchestra of Istanbul. As a result of the reform movements further musical institutions were established in different cities: symphony orchestras, broadcasting orchestras, opera houses and ballet, music high schools (academies), and music departments were created at the colleges of education. Until today a further 70–80 composers have followed in the footsteps of the ‘Turkish Five’, forming the second, third and fourth generations of contemporary Turkish music.⁸

The first generation of composers contributed significantly to the formation of the second generation of composers. To name a few: Bülent Tarcan, Nevid Kodalli, Ferit Tüzün, Cenan Akın, Muammer Sun, İlhan Baran, Sabahattin Calendar Bülent Arel, İlhan Usmanbaş, İlhan Kemal Mimaroglu, Ertuğrul Oğuz Fırat and Cengiz Tanç—all of whom have played a significant role in the emergence of composers of modern Turkish polyphonic music through their compositions. Others who have returned to Turkey following their education abroad, such as Ekrem Zeki Ün, Cezmi Rıfkı Erinc, Fuat Koray and Halil Bedii Yönetken, have gone on to train many music teachers in Turkey.⁹

Those young pianists who were sent abroad, have been trained by world-famous names such as Wilhelm Kempff, Alfred Cortot, Nadia Boulanger, Lazare Levy, Lucette Descaves, David Levine, Rudolf Serkin, Claudio Arrau, Pierre Sancan and Friedrich Wührer.

Especially after 1950, many piano students received their initial training in Turkey and went on to continue their training in Paris or various music schools in Germany.¹⁰

However, many discussions continue today in Turkey. Disputes between different types of music, cultural policies, the principles of the Republic, the relationship between music and culture, music and politics, political parties and their music policy, and discussions about art as painting or literature are still relevant today.¹¹ Also Fazıl Say, the most prominent opponent of popular music in Turkey, questions why despite the extensive efforts the desired result has still not been achieved.

The Phenomenon of Fazıl Say

Myriad reports about Fazıl Say appear almost daily. He is mentioned or quoted every day in newspaper articles as well as in scientific publications.¹² The following quote is typical of the type of coverage that he gets: ‘The now legendary composer Aribert Reimann cried “You have to listen to him, this guy plays like a devil!” when he saw the then 17-year-old Fazıl Say for the first time at the piano.’¹³ On a website one may read ‘the exceptional Turkish pianist Fazıl Say skilfully builds a bridge between Orient and Occident’. Fazıl Say ‘brings Bach and Beethoven to Anatolia, he composes music in which classical influences and Turkish folk and jazz elements blend and fills halls and arenas with his concerts with thousands of spectators—a phenomenon which is hard to imagine in this form in Europe.’¹⁴ He is called a ‘phenomenon’. He is described as:

... an anomaly, rarely found in the classical music market. Power and technical perfection characterise his playing; his performances always deserve the predicate ‘exciting’. But Say is not only an interpreter of classical music, but also a composer of

contemporary music, jazz musician and expert of Turkish folklore. He is blessed with talent in abundance.¹⁵

Fazıl Say, was born in 1970 in Ankara into a family of intellectuals. His grandfather, also named Fazıl Say (d. 1951), was also a child prodigy. He studied mathematics and engineering in Germany, through a DAAD scholarship until 1925, having graduated from high school in Istanbul, and was also politically involved. His father, Ahmet Say, studied musicology in Germany. He was a musical and literary scholar and the author of music theory writings, a music encyclopaedia, books on Mozart and the musical folklore of Turkey. His mother, Gürgün Say, was a pharmacist, who noticed Say's talent and took care of his musical education until he was four and a half years old. After the early divorce of his parents, Say grew up mainly with his father, under the loving care of an Alevi Kurd Elif, whom Fazıl calls 'Nene'.

His first piano teacher was Mithat Fenmen, a student of Alfred Cortot and Nadia Boulanger. He was strongly influenced by the fascination of Cortot. Until the outbreak of the Second World War Fenmen had studied in Munich under Joseph Haas. Following his return to Turkey, he became director of the State Conservatory in Ankara. Say, at the age of three and a half, became a student of Fenmen, who didn't teach him notes until he was seven, instead encouraging him to improvise by demanding that he 'told' him his adventures and experiences through music. When he was ten, Say—who listened to music at home with his father whenever he was not playing the piano—already played *Etudes* by Czerny and Hanon, the Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach, pieces of Clementi, and some Mozart and Beethoven sonatas. Meanwhile, his father and Fenmen were convinced of his extraordinary talent. Consequently, Fenmen regarded Say's progress as payment and taught the boy for eight years without remuneration. In 1980, shortly after the military coup, Fazıl Say and his father Ahmet Say travelled to Germany, following an invitation Fazıl Say received from the Culture Festival in Oldenburg.

1983 was also an important year in Say's life. After passing several examinations he was able to study with 'special status' due to a 'Law for Highly Skilled Children' at the State Conservatory of Ankara University, where he became a student of İlhan Baran, who had studied in Paris with Henri Dutilleux.

Following the unexpected death of his first teacher, Mithat Fenmen, Say was lucky enough to be taken on by Kamuran Gündemir, a composer who had also studied in Paris. Ertuğrul Oğuz Fırat who was a friend of a composition teacher and owned a collection of 20,000 records played an important role in Say's development. Fırat enjoyed discussing the music of different countries in the twentieth century. Say was able to access further records, notes, etc, at the Goethe Institute in Ankara. The fact that his father was friendly with many poets and writers from the leftist literary scene where Say grew up had a significant impact on his cultural and intellectual development.

In February 1986, Fazıl Say had an encounter that would prove crucial for his further life and career. He met the German composer Aribert Reimann and the New Yorker pianist David Levine, who had come to Ankara as part of a concert tour and

wanted to listen to some students in the Conservatory. Reimann tells today how he and Levine were ‘stunned’ by Say’s performance, which he describes as an ‘incredible and indelible event’. It is this meeting that led to the fulfilment of Say’s dream of studying in Germany as a DAAD scholarship student after passing the exam and with the support of the two musicians. After learning the German language at the Goethe Institut in Freiburg, he began studying with Levine on his arrival in Düsseldorf in 1987. After his final examination he moved to Berlin, later participating in the Piano Competition of the European Union in 1992 where he was awarded a special prize. As far as his health would allow it, David Levine (who at this point was suffering from AIDS) continued to give Say lessons until his (Levine’s) death in 1993, an event which upset Say greatly. Levine would be his last teacher. Say spent his Berlin years with books and reading scores, visiting the opera and philharmonic concerts, frequenting piano recitals by Alfred Brendel, Maurizio Pollini and Andrés Schiff and practising piano extensively. His first piano concerto ‘Silk Road’ and other compositions originate from this period of time.

In 1995, Fazıl Say won the Young Concert Artists International Auditions, a drastic turn in his career, of which he had dreamed during the years after his graduation in Berlin. Subsequently, he performed in many American towns and villages. However, the highlight of the period in the US came when he performed in 1996 with Kurt Masur, who was the principal conductor of the New York Philharmonic. The performance drew strong praise from the *New York Times*. Throughout this period he continued to compose pieces and began working on his oratorio ‘Nazım’. This oratorio is a tribute to the great Turkish poet Nazım Hikmet. For Say, Nazım Hikmet was an idol and a role model concerning the self-determination of the Turkish people and their relationship with Europe. Meanwhile, Say was also known in Europe, giving, for example, 50 concerts in France, and 30 in Paris alone, commuting between Europe and the USA. He also made recordings, which found both praise and criticism and was contracted by Columbia Artists, ICM and IMG (concert agencies).

After the events of 11 September 2001, Fazıl decided to return to Turkey after living abroad for 14 years, returning with his then-wife and daughter to Istanbul in 2002.

After his return to Turkey, he continued to experience many successes; compositions, which became masterpieces, succeeded each other. His fame in Europe, in the USA and in Japan was growing and so he became a great name. He was, for example, encouraged by Benedikt Stampa, the director of the Konzerthaus Dortmund, to compose the Istanbul Symphony, which was deemed a great success. It is not for nothing that Stampa called Fazıl a ‘genius’.¹⁶

Fazıl Say is celebrated by many and is also popular in Turkey. He has many ‘followers’ and has become an icon, not least due to his bold or naive criticism of the situation in Turkey, especially in recent years. Those who partly idolise him are quite naturally urban, secular-oriented, intellectual Turks.

In 2007, Say criticised human rights violations, and publicly considered emigrating. In April 2012, the self-confessed atheist caused outrage amongst the

religious by making critical and sarcastic remarks about Islamic bigotry and hypocrisy through Twitter. An Istanbul court sentenced him to a ten-month suspended sentence after finding him guilty of violating religious values. Say rejected the allegations and appealed unsuccessfully on the grounds of freedom of expression according to the European Convention on Human Rights.

Some of his comments have led to a negative backlash in newspapers, on Facebook, and in online blogs. His music has been rejected by the majority of the population on the grounds that it is 'Western'. Those who insult or even threaten him are mostly reactionary and fundamentalist. He, along with many other intellectuals, scientists, doctors, writers, artists and journalists, is the most prominent opponent of the policies of the AKP party, which has been in power in Turkey since 2002.¹⁷

On the other hand, he makes every endeavour for Anatolia, mainly Eastern and Southern Anatolia. In 2002, with the support of sponsors, he launched a tour of Anatolia, where classical music is something unfamiliar. He played for school-children, answered their questions and let them play his piano, which he took with him as most villages did not have one for him to play. Later he visited universities and played for students and in the evenings he played in local concert halls. The project generated great interest but as no other artist agreed to take part he could only continue the Anatolian journeys until 2004.

In the framework of this project, he founded the Antalya Piano Festival, out of which he was effectively hounded out, due to the election of a member of the AKP as mayor of Antalya in March 2014.¹⁸ Even his long-planned concert appearances as part of the Borusan & Fazıl Say festival were recently cancelled for political reasons¹⁹ and his works have been ignored in the programmes of state orchestras.²⁰ So in Turkey he remains alone in his efforts to build intercultural bridges.

However, it is no surprise that Fazıl Say was appointed Ambassador for Intercultural Dialogue in 2008 by the European Parliament as his emphasis as an artist is: How do you reconcile East and West? How can you build a bridge?¹⁶

Fazıl Say says that he belongs here (Turkey) as well as there (Europe). To a certain extent he embodies his works, as the bridge between Europe and Turkey, between West and East. He feels no desire for one side or the other. He is driven only by the desire for both sides.¹⁶ 'One of Fazıl Say's hands coalesced with the piano, with emotional intensity and with thoughts in the East while the other is in the West. And love has settled in between. Love for music, passion for music!'²¹

Some consolation came with the news on 28 November 2014: Turkey's Supreme Court of Appeals demanded that the controversial judgment against Fazıl Say be reversed and that he should be acquitted. A year later and Turkey's Supreme Court of Appeals has reversed a ten-month jail sentence handed down to Fazıl Say on the grounds of blasphemy, stating his Twitter posts should be regarded within the concept of freedom of expression.²²

After the elections in November 2015, Fazıl Say shared the announcement, on his social media accounts, that he would stay away from the stressful and contentious atmosphere in Turkey. He continues to give over a hundred concerts a year in Turkey and at the best concert venues around the world, accompanied by the best artists and

orchestras and continues to compose and record as well. Recently (25 January 2016) he gave a recital in Ankara to honour the memory of his first piano teacher Mithat Fenmen and donated the profits of the concert to a fund dedicated to enabling music students with special talent to study abroad.

Concluding Remarks

When we ‘...think of cultural identities in the context of cultural relationships...’ and ‘... consider identities in terms of the experience of relationships, i.e. what can happen through relationships, and what happens to relationships’²³ we may argue that through the cultural relationships of Turkey and Europe, especially following the Turkish cultural reforms mentioned earlier in this paper, at least a certain part of Turkish society was exposed to Western culture. Fazıl Say’s family belongs to this group in society. Therefore, he grew up in an environment that was culturally both Turkish and European. After realising the extent of his talent he was supported by his family and therefore extensively exposed to Western classical music and western culture.

Following Bhabha who claims that identities are not fixed, harmonious, tangible and easily or at all accurately defined entities, and the identity of a person may change at any time and after every event that happens in their lives, it becomes easier to see Fazıl Say as an identity that is a product of different cultural influences, which came into being through interaction with other persons, i.e. relationships from various cultures. It is mainly the relationships that people have with others that is determinative, as Bhabha further suggests.

Concerning the question of whether Fazıl Say may be referred to as a ‘hybrid’ concerning both his person and his works, Bhabha’s words are important. According to Bhabha:

the act of cultural translation (both as representation and as reproduction) denies the essentialism of a prior given original or origin culture, then we see that all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity. [...] the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity [...] is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom.²⁴

According to Fassman, hybrid forms of life in more than one society and transnational commuting require adaptable and flexible actors, who are generally willing and capable to do everything and anything that is in demand on the labour market. The increasing similarity of the technology used and the transferability of qualifications support this process. He adds that the essential feature of transnational mobility is the maintenance of residential location in the home country, maintaining family and social structures over long distances and thus establishing a social space, regardless of borders and territories. He further notes that transnational commuting does not lead to definitively leaving the society of origin and a final placement in the target society, but to a process that is in between. Transnational pendulum migrants are at home both in

the society of origin and in the host society.²⁵ In our case, Fazıl Say is an adaptable and flexible actor who can perform on any stage in the world due to the transferability of his qualifications. His main residential location is in Istanbul, Turkey and even when he is far away he stays in touch not only with family and friends but also with fans through social media. His comments on events in Turkey clearly demonstrate that he follows the developments in Turkey, be it political, social or cultural. He has not left Turkey and he has not settled anywhere else. He is at home both in his society of origin and in the societies he gets involved with, especially European societies as he is involved in social structures there, having lived, studied and worked in Germany for many years before returning to Turkey. Therefore, it may be claimed that Fazıl Say is a transnational migrant with a hybrid identity, who produces hybrid works due to his background and education and way of living, especially since he went to Germany in order to study.²⁶

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this article to the memory of Professor Dr Richard Martinus Emge, my respected and dear ‘Doktorvater’ who passed away in November 2013. May he rest in peace.

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