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Expanded inspiration: metric improvisation and compositional tools in contemporary modal music

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Citation

Liontou Mochament, M. (2023, October 18). *Expanded inspiration: metric improvisation and compositional tools in contemporary modal music*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3645808>

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

**Expanded inspiration:
metric improvisation and compositional tools
in contemporary modal music**

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van
de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,
op gezag van rector magnificus prof.dr.ir. H. Bijl,
volgens besluit van het college voor promoties
te verdedigen op woensdag 18 oktober 2023
klokke 11:15 uur

door

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geboren te Athens (GR)
in 1984

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Acknowledgements

This project has involved a long and painstaking journey, and at the same time a journey towards knowledge and artistic growth.

I acknowledge the selfless support of my supervising committee. Prof Dr Joep Bor was one of the reasons that I undertook this trajectory, and I am grateful for his persistence, his belief in this project and his constant support. Special thanks to Dr Anne Van Oostrum, who has constantly encouraged me to finish this project, accompanied me through the extremely difficult time of the pandemic, corrected all the texts over and over and pushed me in the right direction. Her input into this project has been invaluable. I would also like to express my gratitude to Prof Frans de Ruiter for setting an example of professionalism and critical thought that has influenced me professionally and artistically, and for always being there for my delays and setbacks. Finally, I thank Prof Rachel Beckles Willson, for her positive energy, her availability, and her key input during the final stages of this trajectory.

I owe acknowledgement to all the artists who were willing to participate in this project throughout the years. Thank you: Ara Dinkjian and Tamer Pınarbaşı, for your music and for your availability; Harris Lambrakis, for being a teacher and an endless inspiration; Apostolos Sideris, for sharing your vast music knowledge with me; Alexandros Rizopoulos and Evi Kanellou for your rhythmic input into this project; Nizar Rohana for your constant support with finishing this project; Konstantinos Kopanitsanos, for sharing your sources on the recording industry; Elena Moudiri Chasiotou, for giving me the opportunity to share my research project through olipoli; Michalis Cholevas, for being a true colleague and a firm supporter of this work; and finally, Asineth-Fotini Kokkala, for being my long-lasting companion in my music making journey.

Thank you as well to ACPA, Leiden University for your kind support, and the Orpheus Institute team and teachers for opening new horizons in my thinking.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, Eleni, Tag-el-din and Alexandros, for putting up with all my crazy endeavours, and my friends, Sofia, Manolis, Drosos, Zoi, and Evgenia, for their love, support and patience.

Abstract

Thanks to recording technologies that emerged at the end of the 19th century, we have access to the work of recorded artists who flourished from that time onwards. As regards *makam* music in the Late Ottoman Empire, recordings span numerous genres and repertoires, including *türkü* and other song types in different languages, instrumental tunes and improvised performances, free vocal (*gazel*, *amanes*) and instrumental (*taksim*) genres. From among the improvised genres, this research is preoccupied with a little-acknowledged type, one that appears in recordings throughout the 20th century without a distinct label. This is *taksim*-like performances that follow a rhythmic cycle.¹ When noticed, it is sometimes referred to as rhythmic improvisation, or otherwise it is called *usulü taksimler* (*taksim* following an *usul*), or, in the Arab countries, *taqsim 'ala al-wahda*.

The first part of this thesis is devoted to the acknowledgment of the practice. It engages with its ontology and provides a discussion about the terms in use to set the framework of the research trajectory as a whole. It also provides an overview of performances of various artists through the mid-20th century until the beginning of the 21st century, aiming to show the functionality of the genre in different times, and in varied performance environments. For this, a historical method has been employed with selected performances from the mid-20th century through the early 21st century, showing the various ways in which artists shape their improvisations, the repertoires and styles that can serve as a framework for improvisation, and the different performance settings in which artists choose to improvise within rhythmic contexts.

In this short overview, the choice of artists is influenced primarily by personal artistic needs and criteria; i.e., their closeness to the writer's instrument and repertoires of knowledge, relevance to her personal artistic goals, and so on. For this reason, the decision was taken early on to concentrate on players whose genealogies can be traced back to the Turkish and Greek-speaking communities of the Ottoman ecumene, and not to engage with quite distinct traditions that evolved in Cairo and Damascus, for example. Even within the chosen constraints, the overview is by no means exhaustive. There are many artists not included in this research, musicians from different areas and eras, who have created monumental improvisations based on this style. In this sense, the project opens the door to further research in the same, or at least contiguous, fields.

The second part of the thesis is dedicated to the creative path. Following the diverse settings, models, tools, and materials discovered in the first part of the research, here the focus is on experimentation and creation of new works by the author, both improvised performances in various settings and newly created pre-composed material. As a final addition, this second part suggests the diffusion of knowledge acquired from research for educational purposes by means of workshops.

¹ 'Rhythmic cycle' will be explained and substituted later in this thesis with the term 'metric entity'.

Glossary

alap: Non-metric introductory, improvised presentation of *Raga*.

alaturka (Turk.) / *αλα τούρκα* (Greek) / *alla turca*: In Western classical music *alla turca* is:

A term applied to music of the classical period composed in a supposedly Turkish style, often involving percussion instruments, derived from the traditions of jannisary music. Notable examples are Mozart's Rondo alla turca (Piano Sonata in A K. 331/300i) and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*.²

It should be here noted, that *alaturka/alla turca* is used slightly differently by Greek musicians:

The term means “music that follows the ways adopted by Turkish people”. It is used by Greek musicians, probably since the end of the 19th century or the beginning of the 20th century, to define a group of music practices that were predominant in the Ottoman area during that period, incorporating intertemporal influences and impacts from the music practice of Istanbul, but also from the wider “East”.³

(a)manes: Vocal *makam* improvisation of the *café aman*

asma karar: ‘a suspended cadence; a note giving the impression of a temporary resolution.’⁴

buzuki: A long-necked fretted lute, with 3 or 4 strings, emblematic instrument of *rebetiko* and *laika* genres in Greece.

café aman: The term refers both to

1. musical establishments where *alaturka* music was performed (both in urban centres of the Ottoman Empire and the mainland of Greece)
2. The repertoire performed in the *café aman* places of entertainment.

ceşni: According to Markos Skoulios (2017), an ethnomusicologist and assistant professor at the University of Ioannina:

The meaning of the term is ‘color’, ‘aroma’, ‘taste’ and its theoretical definition to the moment is vague, despite the fact that in between musicians *ceşni*, regarded as the minimum

² Sadie, S., *The Oxford Companion to Music*, s.v. “alla turca,” accessed March 7, 2023, <https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/display/10.1093/acref/9780199579037.001.0001/acref-9780199579037-e-183?rkey=h4IX8r&result=217>.

³ Ατζακάς, Ε. 2012. Οι άνθρωποι του ξύλου: το ούτι από τις παρυφές του ανατολικού μουσικού πολιτισμού στη σύγχρονη αστική κουλτούρα του ελληνικού χώρου (People of the wood: The oud-istic art from the outskirts of eastern music world to the contemporary Greek urban culture). Doctoral diss., University of the Aegean, 34. <http://dx.doi.org/10.12681.eadd/29900>, accessed March 7, 2023.

⁴ <http://www.turkishmusicportal.org/en/turkish-music-dictionary>, accessed June 26, 2023. More information can be found in Aydemir, M., & Dirikcan, E. *Turkish music makam guide*. Istanbul: Pan Yayıncılık, 2010.

melodic idea that defines the particular character of known formations, constitutes a highly important dimension of the modal phenomenon of *makam*.⁵

contemporary modal music: In Ross Daly's personal website we read:

Ross Daly is the originator of the term Contemporary Modal Music, which refers to contemporary compositional works which draw their influences and inspiration from the broader world of Modal musical traditions which are found primarily (although not exclusively) in the vast geographical region between Western Africa and Western China.⁶

çiftetelli (shaftatalli (Arabic), tsifteteli (Greek): Both a dance and an *usül*, extremely common in Greece, Turkey and the Arab countries.

fasıl: A secular 'cyclical performance format'⁷ or series of compositional forms and *taksims* in one *makam* or in an environment of neighbouring *makams*. Its origin can be traced back to the 16th and 17th centuries.

gazel: A form of *makam* vocal improvisation.

gazino: Type of night club mainly found in Istanbul.

halk müziği: (lit. people's music) Folk music of Anatolia.

geçki: modulation, modal alteration.

karşılama: The term refers both to:

1. the dance of *karşılama*. *karşılama* originates from the Turkish root *karşılama*, which means to meet someone. The dance is usually performed in pairs facing each other.
2. the rhythmic structure of the dance family of *karşılama* (usually a 9/8 meter with 2+2+2+3/8 subdivision). *karşılama* rhythmic structure, however, can be found in 2/4, 11/8 and other meters with the most common in Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey being the 9/8.

kef: A state of feeling good, being in a good mood, a state of bliss. Turkish *keyif* and Greek *κέφι* also have the same meaning and they seem to refer etymologically to the Arabic *kayf* كيف [#: kyf].

kemençe: A bowed, pear shaped instrument, also known as the *politiki lyra*.

⁵ Skoulis, M. 2017. "Theory and practice in eastern melodic multimodality: a comparative analysis of the Ottoman-Turkish Makam and the Hindustani Raga modal systems." Doctoral diss., Ionian University, Corfu, 102. <http://hdl.handle.net/10442/hedi/41719.10.12681/eadd/41719>. (Author's translation.)

⁶ Ross Daly's personal website, accessed March 7, 2023, <https://www.rossdaly.gr/>.

⁷ Feldman, W. "Ottoman Sources on the Development of the Taksîm." *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 25 (1993): 1-28. <https://doi.org/10.2307/768680>, (5).

köçekçe: A macroform suite of compositions (mainly in 9/8 meter), performed to facilitate the dance of *Köçek* (pre teenage or teenage boys dressed with women's clothes). This practice flourished in the 17th to 19th centuries in the Ottoman empire.

laika: A genre of urban music, developed in Greece after the mid-war, played mainly with *buzuki*.

lavta: A long-necked lute with frets that allow the interpretation of non-well-tempered intervals.

Mevlevi: Sufi monk order founded during the 13th century by the Persian philosopher jalāl al-dīn Rūmī (also known as Mevlana).

meyhane: Musical establishment usually serving food and alcohol

makam: The system of melodic modes used in Turkish and Arabic music. *Makam* acts as a melodic framework for improvisation and composition.

mode: In *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music* we read:

(5) Any of a series of loosely related concepts employed in the study and classification of both scales and melodies. The term is often restricted to scale types defined as collections of pitches arranged from lower to highest, each including one pitch that is regarded as central. At another extreme some concepts of mode emphasize melody types; any given mode is defined principally by characteristic melodic elements. Other concepts of mode range between these extremes.⁸

modal music: Music based on modes.

motif: In general, a motif is a recurring melodic figure or melodic idea. The use of the term motif in this research denotes a melodic/rhythmic nucleus (that may recur or not in one improvisation, but most probably can be identified in other improvised performances). In this sense, even if a rhythmic/melodic nucleus does not reappear in one transcribed improvisation, it will still be called a motif due to the relationship of the small rhythmic/melodic ideas with the primary entity of the *makam*. The term was also preferred due to the use of it in Greek language (Gr. *μοτίβο*) as it is often used by musicians of the *makam* genre in Greece.

ney: A reed flute used extensively in Ottoman classical, Persian and Arabic music.

paradosiaka: Urban revival movement of folk music in post-dictatorship Greece.

⁸ Randel, D.M., *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music* (1986), s.v. "mode."

Eleni Kallimopoulou, an assistant professor of Ethnomusicology at the University of Athens, defines *paradosiaka* as:

(...) an urban musical movement which emerged in post-dictatorship Greece out of a renewed interest among Athenian youth in exploring and drawing upon various musical traditions of Greece and Asia Minor.⁹

phrase: For this research project Arnold Schoenberg's definition provides the operative framework for the definition of phrase, which is:

A kind of a musical molecule consisting of a number of integrated musical events, possessing certain completeness, and well adapted to combination with other similar units. The term phrase means, structurally, a unit approximating to what one could sing in a single breath. Its ending suggests a form of punctuation such as a comma [...] Rhythm [...] is often the determining factor in establishing the unity of a phrase [...] Phrase endings may be marked by a combination of distinguishing features [...] The length of a phrase may vary within wide limits.¹⁰

piyasa: (lit. market) The term refers to the music business.

radif: According to Laudan Nooshin (2013):

For the past 100 years and more, the performance of Iranian classical music has been based on a repertoire known as radif, a collection of pieces organized according to mode and memorized by pupils for later use as the basis for creative performance.¹¹

raga: According to Rao, der Meer and Harvey (1999):

[...] a raga can be regarded as a tonal framework for composition; a dynamic musical entity with a unique form, embodying a unique musical idea.¹²

rebetiko: urban genre of Greek music that developed originally in the urban centres of Athens and Piraeus in the beginning of the 20th century. Connected with the underworld and the working classes of the time.

roman oyun havası: Roma dance tune.

⁹ Kallimopoulou, E. 2006. *Music, meaning and identity in a contemporary Greek urban movement: The 'paradosiaka' phenomenon* (Order No. U210098). Doctoral Diss., University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies (United Kingdom), 2.

<https://login.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/music-meaning-identity-contemporary-greek-urban/docview/301689127/se-2>.

¹⁰ Schoenberg, A. *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, (Faber and Faber LTD, 1967), 3.

¹¹ Nooshin, L. 2013. "Beyond the Radif: New Forms of Improvisational Practice in Iranian Music". *Music Theory Online*, 19 (2), 1.

¹² Rao, S., der Meer, W., Harvey, J. 1999. *The Raga Guide: A Survey of 74 Hindustani Ragas*, Nimbus Records with Rotterdam Conservatory of Music, 1999, 1.

sanat muzik: Art music (semi-classical genre of Turkish music).

sentence: In this thesis, I will use the term to define “the smallest period in a musical composition [or improvisation] that can give in any sense the impression of a complete statement.”¹³

seyir: (lit. course, development) The course of the melodic progression of a *makam*.¹⁴

taksim: Instrumental performance-generated form of *makam* improvisation, with its first origins tracing back to the 17th century.

taqsim 'ala al-wahda: A metric type of *taksim* in Arabic music.

taqasim muqayyadah: lit. restricted *taksim*.

taqasim muwaqqa'ah: lit. measured *taksim*.

tihai: A polyrhythmic technique used in Indian music, usually to conclude a piece. *Tihai* often is a motif repeated three times and ends the improvisation or a precomposed part on *sam* (the first beat of the next bar).

Türk Klasik Müzikisi: Turkish classical music.

türkü: Folk song of Anatolia, song of the *halk müziği* repertoire, mainly of anonymous composers.

şarki: A semiclassical vocal composition of the Ottoman music repertoire.

usül (usûl): metric schema and the metric system of Ottoman classical music. It is considered a rhythmic-poetic entity, in the sense that it acts as a compositional framework for the precomposed forms of Ottoman classical music.

usulü(usûlü) taksim: instrumental improvisation with the concurrent existence of an *usûl*.

ρυθμικός αυτοσχεδιασμός (rythmikós aftoschediasmós): rhythmic improvisation. (Alternatively, it is called *tempolu taksim*. For this thesis, I will use the terms equivalently.)

¹³ MacPherson, S, *Form in Music*, (London: Joseph Williams Ltd., 1930), 25.

¹⁴ Skoulios, M. (2017) devotes a whole chapter to explaining the notion of *seyir* in Ottoman classical music.

Preface

In this study, my intention is to research how rhythm and the related idiomatic genre of modal improvisation can contribute to enhancing the creative processes of improvisation and composition in contemporary modal music. My work focuses firstly on the practice of metric modal improvisation as seen in the performances of selected artists from the mid-20th century until the early 21st century, in discography and live performance. I examine agents of Middle Eastern music that performed (and continue to perform) improvised and precomposed music related to the *makam* and its presence in the late Ottoman Empire, Greece and – because of their diasporic movement – in the United States of America (especially in its urban manifestations).¹⁵ My focus is selective: I concentrate on players whose genealogies can be traced back to the Turkish and Greek-speaking communities of the Ottoman ecumene, rather than to those representing traditions that evolved in Cairo and Damascus, for example, or indeed in Baghdad, from the 1930s onwards. All these hubs shaped distinct practices and warrant separate studies.

After the Introduction, the first part of this thesis provides an overview of the discourse on the terms ‘improvisation’ and ‘composition’. The purpose here is not to define or redefine these terms, a task already undertaken by many scholars and researchers, but to re-examine their relevance to non-Western music practices, as the ones at stake in this project. The last part of the first chapter is devoted to the actual practice. Transcriptions of selected artists, analysed and commented on in detail, aim to provide readers (both those familiar and unfamiliar with the theme) with tools, vocabulary, material, and models of improvised practices. The purpose is twofold; firstly, to examine the different ways in which artists in different time moments express their creativity in this particular improvised practice; and secondly, to make explicit the rhythmic-melodic and development tools, as well as the compositional strategies, that each artist employs in order to create a ‘tool library’ for artists (myself included) to ‘expand inspiration’ in their own creative practice.

With this aim in mind, the second part of this thesis is devoted to the creative path. Putting the researcher/artist in focus, through concrete musical examples, I describe ways of utilising the results of transcription and analysis of metric modal improvisation for the creation of original compositions and improvised performances that belong in the genre of contemporary modal music. In addition, I provide examples of my experiments with artists/students, to underpin ways that the material from research can be incorporated into the educational processes concerning musical improvisation.

¹⁵ It should be noted, however, that metric modal improvisation can be found in other music cultures (Arabic, Persian, Indian and the Balkan region). To cover the subject as presented in every culture is beyond the scope of this research. However, the model of research developed in this project can hopefully provide useful tools for further researchers.