
OPPOSITE: Ottoman *tanbūr* of the first quarter of the 20th century. From the collection of Bülent Ağacabay, Istanbul. Photo by the author.
The Ottoman Empire emerged in the early 14th century in Anatolia as a result of the disintegration of the Seljuk sultanate and following instability caused by the Mongol conquest and rule. The era that started with the reign of Sultan Mehmed II (r. 1444–1446 and 1451–1481) and ended with the reign of Sultan Süleyman I (r. 1520–1566) was the “Classical Age” of the Ottoman Empire, characterized by geographic expansion, trade, and economic growth, as well as momentous cultural and artistic achievements.
Music of the Ottoman Court and Mevlevî Order

Music played an important role at the Ottoman court in Istanbul and at the Anatolian princely courts, where the Ottoman sultans and princes initially modeled their courts on those of the Timurids, a Turko-Mongol empire (ca. 1370–1507), and the Safavids, a Persian dynasty (1501–1722). The music performed at these courts was not distinctly Ottoman, but reflected a broader regional tradition based on Persian models.

Ottoman classical music (Osmanlı klâsik Müziği) matured in the second half of the 17th century. The tanbûr—a long-necked, stringed instrument—evolved alongside it. The makam system, a tonal framework for composition and improvisation like the raga of Indian classical music, drove the development of the Ottoman tanbûr.

The frets of the Ottoman tanbûr reflect the modal structures—the way in which the notes are arranged in a scale. This was first described by Dimitrie Cantemir (1673–1723) in his Kitâb-i ‘Ilmû’l Müsîkî ala Vechî’l-Hurûfât (The Book of the Science of Music According to the Alphabetic Notation, ca. 1700). Cantemir was a highly regarded composer and virtuoso Ottoman tanbûr player. Sultan Ahmed III (r. 1703–1730) “reveled so much in his playing that he always kept him close to...
A European between Two Worlds

ABOVE LEFT: Dimitrie Cantemir, or Kantemiroğlu as he was affectionately surnamed by the Turks, was sent by his father Constantin Cantemir, Hospodar (a semi-independent ruler) of Moldavia (1685–1693) to Istanbul at the age of 14 where he lived between 1688 and 1710. He was educated at the Academy of the Orthodox Patriarchate in Fener and at the Enderun, the Ottoman court school. His house, located in Fener not far from the Golden Horn, was recently restored and became the Dimitrie Cantemir Müzesi.


his person," according to Charles Fonton (1725–1793), a French diplomat, in his Essai sur la musique orientale comparée à la musique européenne (ca. 1751).

The Mevlevî Sûfî spiritual order also played a key role in the development of Ottoman classical music. The Ottoman tanbûr is part of the Mevlevî instrumental ensemble, which accompanies a whirling dance during the highly ritualized Mevlevî ââyîn. This musical ceremony, a form of meditation or mystical journey, is performed by individuals in white stylized costumes with dark cloaks and tall hats, who are commonly referred to as “whirling dervishes.”

The Origin of the Tanbûr

The early development of the Ottoman tanbûr is not well understood due to the scarcity of iconographic and literary sources. The tanbûr probably originated in ancient Persia, where the name tanbûr appears for the first time in 5th-century CE text fragments written in Pahlawi, the official language of the Sâsânians, the last great Persian dynasty of antiquity (ca. 224–651 CE). Images of this musical instrument also appear on Sâsânian silver plates from the 5th–7th centuries CE.

The diffusion of the tanbûr into musical cultures along the Silk Road resulted in a variety of comparable instruments, each with its own characteristic sound, bowl shape, playing technique, and repertoire. Tanbûrs are found in classical, Sûfî, and folk music traditions of Western and Central Asia as far east as Xinjiang in China. Similar or identical instruments are also known by other names, such as the Turkish saz.

LEFT: A musician playing a Safavid six-stringed tanbûr (e târ) in a spring landscape. 18th-century Ottoman copy of a Savafid miniature. From Archive Walter Denny.
the Iranian setâr and dotâr, the Uzbek-Tajik and Uyghur duüä, the Uzbek-Tajik bowed satâr, and the Uyghur bowed satâr. These musical instruments, which can be found in many museums and private collections, are often beautifully ornamented with inlays of gold, precious stones, pearl, ivory, bone, tortoise shell, pear or apple wood, and even plastic.

Walter Feldman, a scholar of Ottoman music, mentioned a miniature painting from a 15th-century Shâhnâme (Book of Kings) from Herât depicting a Timûrid tanbûr. According to him, the painting proves that an instrument with a visible relationship to the later Ottoman tanbûr already existed in 15th-century Khorâsân, a region encompassing the northeast of Persia, western Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Another miniature painting indicating the presence of tanbûrs at or near the Timûrid courts shows the Timûrid Sultan Husayn Mîrzâ Bayqarâ (r. 1470–1506) listening to a musician playing a large Timûrid tanbûr. Even more than the Herâti tanbûr, its long, tapering, multi-fretted neck and large, almost hemispherical bowl is reminiscent of the early 18th-century Ottoman tanbûrs.

Wojciech Bobowski (1610–1675), a Polish prisoner of war who was sold as a slave in Istanbul where he became a court musician, and Evliya Çelebi (1611–1682), an explorer and travel writer, mention the tanbûr in their writings. An 18th-century Ottoman copy of a Safavid miniature painting from around 1600 shows a female musician playing a six-stringed tanbûr or şeştâr. Its shape, soundboard, and the strumming of the strings with a long piece of tortoise shell are characteristic of early 18th-century depictions of the instrument.

Timûrid and Safavid miniature paintings suggest a significant Persian influence in the evolution of the Ottoman tanbûr in the second half of the 17th century. The characteristics of the instruments in these paintings—a pear-shaped bowl and composite soundboard, a long multi-fretted neck, and plucking of the strings with a tortoise shell pick—are reminiscent of depictions of Ottoman tanbûrs in the early 18th century.

**Early Representations of the Ottoman Tanbûr**

Besides Cantemir’s extraordinarily shaped Ottoman tanbûr, the earliest representations of these instruments can be found in Levnî’s Surnâme-i Vehbî (Festival Book of Vehbî). Levnî depicted the Ottoman tanbûr several times in the Surnâmî-i Vehbî, one of the most comprehensive visual accounts of the Lâle Devri (Tulip Era, 1718–1730), which illustrated the circumcision rituals of four sons of Sultan Ahmed III in 1720. The festivities, which included musical performances on a variety of instruments, lasted 50 days and nights.
The Making of an Ottoman Tanbûr

The ottoman tanbûr is made by a master luthier, someone who builds or repairs stringed instruments. The measure and shape of the bowl, the length of the neck, and the number and tuning of the tied-on movable frets of the Ottoman tanbûr vary by luthier or musician. The fragile Ottoman tanbûr is extremely sensitive to climatic changes and therefore requires constant care. When not played, the strings must be loosened to prevent the neck from warping and the thin soundboard from collapsing.

The Soundboard

The rich and sonorous timbre of the Ottoman tanbûr results from the vibrating length of its strings and the thin and slightly inward curving soundboard made of resonant spruce.

The Neck

The attached long, straight, and slightly tapering neck is made of ebony or juniper and glued in a rectangular-joint of the neck block, a part of the bowl to which the ends of the ribs are glued.
The number of tied-on movable nylon frets and the way in which they are tuned to the modal scales of Ottoman classical music is still debated in musical treatises. In practice, the number of pitches and pitch intervals have a certain flexibility depending on the performer and Ottoman tanbûr maker.

The Strings
The Ottoman tanbûr has seven (2-2-2-1) or eight (2-2-2-2) strings. The strings are plucked with a thin strip, made of tortoise shell in the past, nowadays of synthetic materials, held between the thumb, index finger, and middle fingers with only a short extending part to pluck the strings.

The Frets
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Ornamentation
Contrary to Central Asian tanbûrs, Ottoman tanbûrs are generally not ornamented with the exception of the use of different colored types of woods for the ribs of the bowl. Lavishly ornamented Ottoman tanbûrs were previously found in a courtly or aristocratic setting reflecting the status and wealth of their owners. If ornamented, nacre, ivory, silver, or gilt are added.
Court Musicians

Miniature painting by Levni from the Surname-i Vehbi. On the far right, Sultan Ahmed III is sitting in the imperial tent. The large ensemble on the left consists of daires (frame drums), neys (end-blown flutes), the Ottoman tanbûr, kemânches (spike fiddles), and miskals (pan-pipes) players. The ney players and one of the Ottoman tanbûr players with their tall caps belong to one of the Mevlevi orders in Istanbul. The other musicians are, according to their dress, secular musicians. From Surname-i Vehbi.
European artwork, travel accounts, and musical treatises—such as Fonton’s *Essai sur la Musique Orientale Comparée a la Musique Européene*—also provide information about the Ottoman *tanbûr*. A painting by Jean-Etienne Liotard (1702–1789) shows Hélène Glavani, daughter of the French consul, sitting on a divan playing an Ottoman *tanbûr* with a hemispherical bowl. Beside her on the divan stands another Turkish long-necked lute, a six-stringed *saz*. Both instruments are ornamented with inlay work of nacre (mother of pearl), ivory, or gilt. Making music was a recurring theme in orientalist paintings.

**Music in the Ottoman Harem**

Musical entertainment played a vital role in the Ottoman harem, which was comprised of the sultan’s wives, concubines, servants, and other female members of the household. Some ladies of the harem were virtuoso *tanbûr* players, while the daughters of the sultan were highly educated and often musically talented. Şadiye Sultan (1887–1977), one of the daughters of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909), played various musical instruments including the Ottoman *tanbûr*. The large numbers of musical instruments in their estates underline the interest in music and the importance of musical entertainment at court. Certain instruments were adapted to the anatomy of women such as the *zenné tanbûr* (girl’s *tanbûr*) or the *zenné ûd* (the girl’s *ûd*).

We know of one 18th-century female composer of Ottoman classical music. Dilhayât Kalfa (d. 1737) was the most important female composer.
of the Ottoman era. Unfortunately, most of her compositions did not survive. She was also known to play the Ottoman tanbûr.

The Ottoman Tanbûr after the 17th Century

The shape of the bowl of the Ottoman tanbûrs depicted by Leveni in the Surnâme-i Vehbi and in European sources ranges from onion- to round-shaped with a long multi-fretted neck. Between 1700 and 1900 the bowl of the Ottoman tanbûr changed only slightly under the influence of the developing Ottoman classical music tradition and the makam system. In the early 18th century it had a large bowl, which was reduced in size in the mid-18th century and became slightly larger afterwards. The number of strings increased from six to eight and the tortoise-shell pick became standard. The rich and sonorous timbre of the Ottoman tanbûr not only results from its thin, inward-curving soundboard and fragile construction without sound holes, but also from the vibrating length of its strings (104–106 cm). The introduction of a bow to play the Ottoman tanbûr is attributed to Tanbûri Cemil Bey (1871–1916).

One of the first tanbûris (masters) of the Ottoman tanbûr was Tanbûri Isak (1745–1814). He taught Sultan Selim III (r. 1789–1807)—an accomplished composer and musician—to play the Ottoman tanbûr. The most famous of
THE OTTOMAN TANBÛR

LEFT: Illustration of an Ottoman tanbûr from Description Historique, Technique et Littéraire des Instruments de Musique des Orientaux, 1823, by Guillaume André Villoteau (1759–1839). Villoteau was a member of a large group of scholars who accompanied Napoleon Bonaparte’s Egyptian expedition between 1798 and 1801. Image from Wikimedia.

BELOW: A yaylı tanbûr and a contemporary Ottoman tanbûr made by Pâki Öktem, Istanbul. From the collection of Bülent Ağacabay, Istanbul. Photos by the author.
The old masters, however, was Tanbûrî Cemil Bey, a mediator between tradition and innovation with his non-classical performance style.

The Ottoman Tanbûr in Recent History
The establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 led to the decline of Ottoman classical music and, thus, the Ottoman tanbûr. There was no place for Ottoman classical music in modern Turkey, as it represented decadent Ottoman court life. Since the second half of the last century, however, the Turkish people have begun to reflect on their classical musical heritage. This has led to the rehabilitation of Ottoman classical music and the interest of scholars in the Ottoman tanbûr. It continues to play an important role in the education, performance, and theory of Ottoman classical music in the 21st century.

Necdet Yaşar (1930–2017)—celebrated for his tak-sims (improvisations), knowledge of the makam system, and familiarity with the classical, Sûfî, and modern repertoire—was an outstanding tanbûrî of the last century. One of the younger tanbûrîs is Murat Aydemir (b. 1971), who worked under the direction of Necdet Yaşar. Together with the ney player Salih Bilgin (b. 1960), he gave three concerts in January 2006 at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington during the exhibition Style and Status: Imperial Costumes from Ottoman Turkey. In 2008, he released his own album, Murat Aydemir Solo, and in 2010 he published Turkish Music Makam Guide including two CDs on which 60 different makams are recorded and analyzed.

To hear Ottoman tanbûr music, search YouTube for “Tanburi Cemil Bey Kulliyati,” “Necdet Yasar Tanbur,” or “Murat Aydemir Tanbur.”

HANS DE ZEEUW is a researcher working on the tanbûr tradition. His latest study, Tanbûr Long-Necked Lutes along the Silk Road, will be published in the near future.

FOR FURTHER READING