



6-21-2019

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Recommended Citation

Olivier, Max and Howard, Luke (2019) "A New Turkish Voice: Culture, Politics, and Expression in the Cello Works of Ahmed Adnan Saygun," *Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 2019: Iss. 2019, Article 69.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jur/vol2019/iss2019/69>

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A New Turkish Voice: Culture, Politics, and Expression in the Cello Works of Ahmed Adnan Saygun

JUNE 21, 2019 BY [ADMIN](#)

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A few years ago, I happened upon a little-known recording of the cello concerto of 20th-century Turkish composer Ahmed Adnan Saygun (1907-1991), and I immediately knew that I had discovered a gem. From the opening bars, Saygun drew me into his unique soundworld and captured my attention. Since then, my interest in this unduly unknown composer deepened, culminating in this grant-funded project. Saygun is especially interesting as an area of study because of his direct and enduring connections to reform politics and his role in the creation of a new Turkish national identity. His music also provides a rich case study for the encounter and dialogue of East and West. One of my greatest passions is promoting lesser-known 20th-century music and bringing it to a wider audience, and with this project and research paper I have worked to fill a gap in the scholarly literature as well as encourage cellists and listeners to discover Saygun's three masterpieces for my instrument: the sonata, partita, and concerto.

To accomplish this project, I engaged in as much archival research as possible. There are precious few sources available that treat or analyze Saygun's work and his life, and I have read them all. There is only one publication that specifically analyzes one of Saygun's three cello works, his sonata, but I found its analysis dissatisfactory and incomplete. Once published, my paper will be the first to address all three of Saygun's cello works in depth. I also pursued sources relating to Turkish history, politics, and culture, especially relative to the important reformer and founder of the Turkish republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, with whom Saygun had a personal relation and direct political connection. This informed my understanding in order to explore the connections between Saygun's music and politics. Thanks to the help of Dr. Layton at the HBLL, I obtained the score of the cello concerto for study and original analysis in addition to the scores of the sonata and partita which the library already owned. I also engaged in performance study with Dr. Kesler, my cello teacher, to learn and perform the partita for cello solo on a public recital given in November 2017 at the BYU Museum of Art Auditorium. Dr. Howard's advice and guidance have been very helpful as I have conducted research and crafted my own analysis of heretofore unstudied works.

I have found that Saygun's cello sonata, partita, and concerto represent the major phases of his career, his early, mature, and late styles, respectively. Each work also reveals political goals and evolving ideas about European and Turkish music. Saygun wrote his sonata for cello and piano not long after returning to Turkey from a government-sponsored three-year study in Paris at the prestigious Schola Cantorum. By this time, Atatürk's reforms were well under way, and Saygun had already written an opera at the president's request for the occasion of the Shah's first official state visit to Turkey, the first opera written and performed in the Turkish republic. The composer's relationship with the establishment became tenuous because the state had brought in German composer Paul Hindemith to set up the state conservatory in Ankara, and Saygun was excluded from these proceedings due to his training at a rival French school. He was ousted from his position as the conductor of the state orchestra and also suffered severe ear infections. The opening movement of the cello sonata reflects the tempestuous state of his life at this time, and also shows his interest in Turkish folk materials. Atatürk worked to expunge Arabic and Islamic influences, discarding the old Ottoman ways in favor of a secular, more Westernized state, and this extended to music as well. He urged composers to turn to Anatolian folk roots and combine those with modernist European polyphony. Saygun's sonata shows him trying to accomplish this and find a voice, and it is somewhat of a pastiche of styles. The second movement sounds straight out of France and

reflects his sophisticated training there, and the last movement clearly draws on the irregular meters and rhythms of his homeland's folk music. The work enjoyed some success abroad, especially in England, and functioned as an emblem of Turkey's development and modernization.

The partita for solo cello was commissioned by the German embassy to commemorate Friedrich Schiller, but the connection between the music and Schiller is tenuous at best and otherwise nonexistent. Saygun wrote this piece having already enjoyed the success of his greatest and most popular work, a massive oratorio Yunus Emre on texts of the 13th-century Turkish mystic poet of the same name. The work represented a real synthesis of European art music with uniquely Turkish subject matter and musical materials. The partita for cello shows Saygun's self-assured style and mastery of Turkish elements, as well as his continued interest in the reform ideals of the late Atatürk. The concerto for cello and orchestra comes from near the end of Saygun's life and a time when he was ill, depressed, alone, and felt under-appreciated even in his own country. He did not live to hear the piece performed, and did not write it on commission. This remarkable work shows Saygun at the height of his compositional powers, having eschewed simple quotation of folk elements and absorbed them into his own style in which he could write highly original music that still expressed an unmistakable Turkishness.

Publication of my essay is still under way, and I will submit it next semester to several journals, including the Journal of Music Online, based in Adelaide, Australia. I will also submit my work to present at academic conferences. Pending approval, I will present my research in the Reynolds Auditorium at the HALL on BYU campus on March 21st at 11:00AM. I will continue to work with Dr. Howard as I push for the paper to be published. I also intend to continue research on Saygun and work to promote his music in the West. This will enhance understanding of Turkish identity and society among Westerners.

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