

Music in Performance: Who Are the Whirling Dervishes?

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In Ottoman times a visit to one of the Mevlevî cloisters (mevlvîhâne) of Constantinople was a touristic must comparable to the pyramids of Egypt or the Acropolis in Athens. Travelers' descriptions, such as those of Pietro Della Valle (seventeenth century), Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (early eighteenth century), and Carsten Niebuhr (later eighteenth century), as well as European paintings of the ceremony in the cloisters, furnish some of the earliest documents. In modern times, very few musical institutions of the Middle East have acquired a place in the Western cultural imagination sufficiently important to necessitate a Western name. Among these is the ceremony of the "whirling dervishes" —virtually a household word even among people who may never have heard of the Mevlevîs. The lyrical poetry of Mevlânâ Our Master' Jalâluddîn Rûmî (d. 1273) is today a best-seller in the United States (mainly in Coleman Barks's translation), although his mystical-didactic Mesnevî is virtually unknown. The more expressive aspects of Mevlânâ Rûmî and the Mevlevî tradition have long appealed to the Western imagination, but the deeper structural elements remain obscure.

THE MEVLEVÎ ORDER: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Mevlevî tarikat (Sufi order) was organized in Konya by Mevlânâ's son Sultan Veled (d. 1312). It was initially associated with the Saljuk and then the Karaman states of Anatolia; its first permanent establishment (tekke) in the new Ottoman capital of Istanbul, the Galata mevlvîhâne, was founded in 1494. The second major tekke, at Yenikapı, was founded a century later, in 1597. Two others, at Kasımpaşa and Beşiktaş, followed in the early seventeenth century, and the Üsküdar tekke in the late eighteenth century. There were other major centers Manisa, Karahisar, Bahariyya, Gallipoli, Bursa, and Edirne. Further afield in the Ottoman Empire were the mevlvîhâne of Aleppo, Damascus, Hims, Latakia, Tripoli, Beirut, Jerusalem, and Cairo. Still others were built in the Balkan provinces, such as Greece, Bulgaria, and Bosnia.

Until the late seventeenth century, all leaders (sheikh) were appointed by the Çelebi, who were descended from Mevlânâ and lived at the central tekke (Asitâne) in Konya. Thereafter, families of hereditary sheikhs emerged in Istanbul; these families' views often differed from those of the usually more conservative Çelebi. By the seventeenth

[Page Image](#) century the Mevlevî order in the capital was deeply involved with the Ottoman ruling class and tended to represent the freest and most innovative intellectual currents within that group. As a natural development of the ideas of Mevlânâ—an outstanding poet, thinker, and patron of music—the order saw intellectual and artistic attainments as essential to spiritual advancement. The families of the hereditary sheikhs had members who were outstanding patrons and exemplars of the arts, especially music, poetry, and calligraphy. Because of the continuity created by the hereditary leadership, in recent centuries many of the mevlvîhâne also functioned as music conservatories and advanced schools where the Persian language and Persian literature were taught systematically.

By the late eighteenth century, the Ottoman state tended to rely on the Mevlevîs for support as it undertook reforms that were contrary to the interests of the orthodox clergy and the janissary corps. Mevlevîs in Istanbul were also strong supporters of the westernizing reforms of the Tanzimat after 1839. Nevertheless, the Mevlevîye was banned—along with all other tarikat—by order of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1925; its central Asitâne in Konya and the Galata tekke were turned into museums. After 1925 many leading Mevlevîs became active in secular life; for instance, the last sheikh of the Yenikapı tekke, Abdülbaki Dede (d. 1935), became a university teacher of Persian literature, and the dervish musician Rauf Yekta Bey (d. 1935) became the founder of modern

Turkish musicology. Still, the demanding training and the elaborate ritual of the Mevlevîye were an obstacle to its continuity after its official dissolution.

MUSICAL ACTIVITY IN THE MEVLEVÎ ORDER

The importance of the Mevlevî order within Ottoman Turkish music must be assessed from several points of view. An organized ritual, known as *âyîn* or *mukabbele*, based on musical compositions emerged in the fifteenth century under the direction of Pîr Adil Çelebi (1421-1460). During this period, Anatolian Turkish art music as a whole developed in original ways, apparently somewhat distinct from the centers of art music in Iran and the Arab countries. For most of the following century (under the sultans Selim I and Süleyman I), however, this originality almost ceased, except for the continuous musical creativity of the Mevlevî dervishes. When an independent Anatolian Turkish art music reemerged in the early seventeenth century, the Mevlevî dervishes interacted with it in several significant ways. By the middle of the century, Mevlevî neyzen flutists' constituted more than half of the master flutists identified by Evliyâ Çelebi; and by the end of the century they occupied an equally prominent position at the court. Furthermore, their instrument, the ney reed flute', became the second instrument of the courtly ensemble—a unique development within Islamic art musics. The ney *taksîm* was not only a part of the *âyîn*; it was (and still is) a mature, independent art form.

The orthodox clergy succeeded in banning the Mevlevî *âyîn* from 1666 to 1684; but even during these years, and immediately afterward, the leading composers of the Ottoman court included several Mevlevî musicians, such as Köçek Mustafa Dede (d. 1683), Buhûrîzâde Mustafa Itrî (d. 1712), and Nayî Osman Dede (d. 1730). In the next century (the eighteenth), their influence increased, and Niebhur (1792) described them as "the best musicians among the Turks." By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the ney had displaced other types of flute (notably the panpipe *miskal*) in the courtly ensemble. The culmination of the Mevlevî musical tradition is represented by Hammamîzâde Ismail Dede (1778-1846), the leading composer of the entire modern era of Ottoman music, who was as crucial in the development of secular music as he was to Mevlevî music.

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In the eighteenth century, Greek Orthodox church psalters become serious students of the Mevlevîs, and Petros the Peloponnesian (1730-1777) was known as their musical disciple. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when it was rare for a provincial musician to enter the court, the principal exceptions seem to have been Mevlevî flutists and kettledrummers.

The Mevlevîs had long assumed a major role in musical pedagogy, and their importance in this regard increased during the economic dislocations of the nineteenth century, when other social groups were unable to perform that function. Consequently, in modern Turkey Mevlevî musicians often stand at the beginning of the line of musical transmission, which frequently involves such central figures as Ismail Dede Efendî, his student Zekâî Dede, his son Zekâîzâde Ahmed Irsoy, Hüseyin Fahreddin Efendî, Azîz Dede, and Emin Dede. For many Turks, this modern link reinforces and even exaggerates the definition of Ottoman art music as "Sufi music," an opinion that has spread to Europe and the Americas because of the whirling dervishes' public tours.

The two earliest indigenous systems of notation developed by the Ottomans were those of Prince Demetrius Cantemir (d. 1723) and the Galata Mevlevî sheikh Osman Dede (d. 1730). Cantemir's notation was perfected by the dervish Mustafa Kevserî (d. 1770); and the sheikh of the Yenikapi tekke, Abdûlbaki Nâsir Dede (d. 1820), produced both a new system of notation and a major book of theory, *Tetkîk ü Tahkîk* (1795). Modern Turkish musicology is essentially the creation of Rauf Yekta Bey (1871-1935), a student of the Yenikapi neyzen Cemal Efendî and Azîz Dede. He founded the Istanbul Conservatory (*Dârüelhân*) in 1914 and was responsible for numerous major collections of and publications on Ottoman music.

THE MEVLEVI AYIN

Throughout the Ottoman period, westerners' fascination with the "whirling dervishes" seemed to have little affect on the position of the Mevlevî order within the empire; but in the Republican period the emic and etic

perceptions of the order and its ritual have interacted more significantly. Permission was granted to reinstate a form of the traditional annual commemoration of the night of the death of Rûmî (Şeb-i 'Arûs) on December 1953 (although not in the mausoleum in Konya); this quickly met with a positive response in Europe, and later in America. In fact, the commemoration was the one Turkish-Islamic cultural event that began to serve as an international tourist attraction, and soon it was being sponsored by the ministry of tourism of Konya. The initial decision to allow the Şeb-i 'Arûs ceremony seems to have resulted from purely internal pressures, but the many other yearly performances of the general Mevlevî ceremony in Istanbul and in European and North American cities cannot be separated from the demand in the West.

Historically the Mevlevî âyîn was conceived of both as a ritual that would benefit the participants and as a spiritual concert, like the medieval Sufi samâ', that would instill belief (feyz) in the audience. Unlike the medieval Sufi samâ', the Mevlevî samâ' was not restricted: women and non-Muslims were allowed to observe the rituals. Mevlevî tekke were constructed with both a musicians' gallery and a clearly demarcated space for nonparticipants.

Collections of lyrics dating from the seventeenth century and later contain texts of compositions for the âyîn ceremony, with the names of composers. These texts are generally in Persian and usually taken from the Divân-i Shams-i Tabrîzî or from the Mesnevî of Rûmî. Such documents attest to the existence of musical compositions corresponding in their formal structure to the âyîn of the later tradition. Several âyîn are ascribed to well-known musical figures of the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries,

[Page Image](#) including Buhurîzâde Itrî (d. 1712) and Osman Dede (d. 1730). The earliest composer known to us by name was Kõçek Mustafa Dede (d. 1683), whose work Beyâtî âyîn is the best-known âyîn today; he is also mentioned in contemporary sources as a composer of secular courtly music. Three âyîn earlier than the Beyâtî âyîn of Kõçek Mustafa survive today; they are known collectively as the "ancient compositions" in makam 'mode' pençgâh, makam hüseyinî, and makam dügâh. (The ancient dügâh is the modern uşşak.) Of these three only the first is complete, having all four sections (selâm). The dügâh âyîni has three sections, and the hüseyini only one.

Most of the surviving âyîn repertoire was composed from the late eighteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth century, when the order received substantial patronage from the Ottoman rulers Selim III (1789-1808) and Mahmud II (1808-1839). In addition to the âyîn of Ismail Dede Efendi, compositions continued to be created throughout the nineteenth century, including major âyîn by Mustafa Naki Dede, Haim Bey, Neyzen Salih Dede, Hacî Faik Bey, Zekâî Dede, Hüseyin Fahrettin Dede, and Sermüezzîn Rifat Bey. In the early twentieth century, âyîn were created by such musicians as Bolahenk Nûrî Bey (d. 1910), Zekâîzâde Ahmed Irsoy (d. 1943), Ahmed Avnî Konuk (d. 1938), and Kâzîm Uz (d. 1938); composers of recent years include Cînuçen Tanrikorur and Alâettin Yavaşca.

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century the âyîn has had the following structure:

- Na'at-i şerîf: a composed rubato form.
- Taksîm on the ney.
- Peşrev in usûl muza'af devr-i kebîr (56/4).
- Selâm-i Evvel in usûl devr-i revân (14/8) or düyek (8/4).
- Selâm-i Sâni in usûl evfer (9/4).
- Selâm-i Sâlis beginning in usûl devr-i kebîr (28/4) and continuing in usûl semâî (6/8).
- Selâm-i Râbi' in usûl evfer.
- Taksîm on the ney.

- Son peşrev in uşl düyek.
- Son yürük semâî (6/8).

The earliest notated Mevlevî âyîn dates from 1795—this is the Sûzidilârâ âyîn of Sultan Selim III in the "Tahrîriye" of Abdûlbakî Nâsir Dede. Since then, and following the fixing of the entire known repertoire in Hamparsum notation in the 1860s, changes in the transmission of the âyîn have been relatively minor. Raûf Yektâ's edition of 1923-1939 represents an oral tradition predating the Hamparsum manuscript, approaching the style of the 1795 document. Although it is possible to generalize about the form of the repertoire dating from the turn of the nineteenth century, we cannot be certain that various features were not introduced into older compositions at that time. The vocal core and the instrumental introduction and closing of the âyîn

[Page Image](#) seem to have been treated differently: the introduction and closing were usually modernized stylistically or replaced with newer items.

In compositional structure, âyîn differ substantially from the courtly fasil. For example, AABA structure (known as zemîn-miyân) exists only in an altered form in the early âyîn and was abandoned by the late eighteenth century; the long usûl, with correspondingly retarded tempos and melodic elaboration typical of the courtly beste and kâr, is found only in a modified form in the opening of the third selâm; there are no terennüm (nontextual) sections; and the entire âyîn, unlike the courtly fasil, is a context of large-scale modulation, so that each selâm is often composed in a different makam.

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