Confessions of a Former International Student

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Augusta Read Thomas, a New Music composer, was commissioned by the legendary Berlin Philharmonic to write an orchestral piece. Upon her arrival for the premiere in Germany, she held a press conference. Naturally, many reporters wanted to know "how it was to be the first woman composer to be commissioned by the Berlin Philharmonic." After responding to several questions on this topic, she observed that a number of reporters at the press conference were unable to get past the fact that she was a woman first and a composer second. She later commented, "I almost told them that 'well, when I compose, sometimes my breasts get in the way.'"[1]

A similar duality exists in the different facets of my own identity in the United States: my Turkishness seems to compete with my identities as an artist or scholar. Upon being introduced to me, people often go through polite contortions to find out where I am originally from. Finally, when I ended up in Seattle, I began telling people that "we moved from Baltimore a few years ago," knowing that this was not the exact answer they were expecting. Because of my accent, this answer rarely satisfied their curiosity. Only after learning about my Turkish background would they finally relax, as if, all of a sudden, they knew much more about me. Finally, they were able to imagine the community to which I belonged.[2] I think this reveals how we think and process information about ethnicity and identity, and the question itself reminds and reinforces one's ethnic identity.

I suppose our imagination starts working when we do not know quite enough about something. Occasionally I have met people who did not expect that I would speak in English. I think one of the most remarkable experiences in the United States I had was at a radio station in Seattle to promote a concert. When the sound engineer was out, I saw scrawled on a piece of paper: "*ud* player from Turkey, he can speak."

So, what does it mean to be Turkish? Well, it is probably as complex as being American. Naturally, there are obvious differences being Turkish in Turkey vs. being Turkish in the US. When I am in Turkey, since I do not belong to a minority group, I do not think of my ethnic background; in the US I am constantly reminded of that, regardless of whatever "Turkish" may mean. There are ever-changing official positions taken by the Turkish government about who the Turks are supposed to be, and then there are my personal assumptions on the matter. In the US, I observe that people imagine what my identity is supposed to be against the backdrop of their personal experiences.

One of the assumptions coming with an ethnic identity is the ownership of history and culture. Regardless of whether someone from Turkey supports the specific policies and actions of the Turkish government or other Turkish agencies and individuals, he/she is appropriated to the position of Turkey's advocate and responsible for anything related to Turkey or Turkish. Or perhaps, more kindly, he/she is considered to be an expert on Turkey and its culture.

Hence, I am also assumed to know some things about Turkish traditional music. Indeed, my background allowed me to study traditional musics in Turkey. However, the secular views of the country shaped the norms in Turkish music education around Western music. As a result, many Turkish musicians do not know much about these traditions. Until very recently, when someone formally studied music in Turkey, it meant that they studied Beethoven, Mozart, Lutoslawski, Tomita, Cage and others, just to recall a few from my own conservatory education and that of my friends from other similar institutions. Quite a few composers from Turkey, for example, consider themselves part of a historical lineage that includes Bach, Frank, d'Indy, Faure, Haba, and others. Probably very few people would imagine that the pedigree of a composer from Turkey would include such Western luminaries. In a historical sense, at least for some, this could be considered as a relatively recent identity and perhaps, in Stuart Hall's terms, a "new ethnicity" with a newer set of cultural practices. From a Turkish individual's point of view, however, the identities of the past generations may or may not necessarily represent the true identity or "true self," but exist like other models available to be emulated—or not. Some of us from Turkey, on the other hand, suffer from multiple personality disorder, and function in diverse artistic domains.

So if you ask me, "how it is to be a *Turkish* scholar or artist," I might tell you "when I compose, type or play an instrument sometimes my mustache gets in the way."

Notes

1. Personal notes from a presentation by Augusta Read Thomas at the State University of New York in Buffalo, summer 2000.

2. Nowadays, even though I could spin my answer in terms of any one of the many American cities in which I have lived, I prefer to tell them right away about my country of origin without making them suffer too much.

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