

Written Sources about Ottoman Music

While in the past there was little to read about Ottoman court music, there has been a recent explosion of writings in English. (I assume that there is probably plenty in Turkish.) My searches for information have led me to create a short, annotated bibliography of some of the things I have found.

First off, I should say that we don't really have much info about SCA time-period music in western notation. While they were not illiterate, the Ottoman court musicians used the *meşk* system, a teacher/student relationship, to transmit music orally. They felt that writing was unable to capture the nuances of performance. Therefore, the earliest written notations of music we have are from Western musicians who spent considerable time in the Ottoman court. (Incidentally, the *meşk* system is still being used.)

The first one was **Wojciech Bobowski**, or Albertus Bobovius (1610-1675 c.e.), a Pole who was captured, and later converted from Protestant to Muslim, changing his name to **Ali Ufki Bey**. He seems to be a most interesting character. He had already been trained in music before his capture, and seems to have continued his studies in Istanbul, playing santur (dulcimer). He ended up speaking at least 13 languages, wrote some other books, and worked as court musician, translator, and eventually dragoman. Around 1650 he notated over 500 pieces of various styles/genres of court music in western style notation, but from right to left, probably to "avoid disharmony between the Ottoman script and the Western notation." 2 versions of his music manuscripts survive, one in the British Museum and the other in Paris at the Bibiotheque Nationale. Wikipedia's entry on him is quite short but a good place to start: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wojciech_Bobowski A good short (13pp) article about him by Ipek Aynuska can be found here: https://www.academia.edu/29627966/Ali_Ufk%C3%AE_Bey_Wojciech_Bobowski_Wel%20Known_Musician_Forgotten_Political_Figure._A_Luminary_in_the_600_Years_of_Turkish_Polish_Diplomatic_Relations

The B.N.fr. has the ms online here:

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84150086/f1.planchecontact.r=turc%20292>

[After looking at the ms online, I am not convinced that all the pieces are from right to left - it looks like some are, but others are from left to right. Look carefully for things like a clef sign at the beginning, and an ending squiggle for clues. It also may depend on what language he was writing in on each page. Do start at what we would think was the back, however.]

The 2nd one to write down music, about 50 years later, was **Dimitri Cantimir** (1673-1723), a Moldavin prince who lived in Istanbul from 1666 to 1710. As his father was ruler of Moldau, an heir lived at the Ottoman court to insure proper behavior (his brother was hostage before him). He learned to play tanbur, a type of long-necked lute, and notated some 350 instrumental pieces. His notation system had letters for frets on tanbur (so pitch) with numbers underneath (duration), then said makam (musical mode) and usul (rhythm). One other fellow also wrote in about the same notation system, so it is not

clear who created it. About a hundred of the pieces are the same as Ufki's. Again, it wasn't used by Turkish musicians, and was forgotten until around 1912, when a Turk rediscovered it. Also like Bobowski, he is known for other things besides music, a history of the Ottoman Empire up to that point being the most well known.

Cantimir books:

Eugenia Popescu-Judet, *Prince Dimitrie Cantemir; Theorist and Composer of Turkish Music*. Publ by Pan Yayıncılık, İstanbul, Turkey, 1999.

A good summary of Cantemir's life and musical work. There are 50 pieces of music in the back, 22 from Cantemir's book and 23 from other sources (ie oral tradition notated at a later time).

Owen Wright, *Demetrius Cantemir: The Collection of Notations. Part 1: Text*. Publ by University of London, London, 1992.

This has all of Cantemir's music transcribed into Western notation, but is almost impossible to get. It also lacks an index and a table of contents.

Owen Wright, *Demetrius Cantemir: The Collection of Notations. Part 2: Commentary*. Publ by Routledge, 2002.

Ottoman Music Books that might incl. Cantemir:

Theory and Practice in the Music of the Islamic World: Essays in Honour of Owen Wright Edited by Rachel Harris and Martin Stokes. 2019.

First section of this book is all about Ottoman music. Here are the titles of the 1st 3 essays:

1 "New light on Cantemir" by Eckhard Neubauer

2 "Towards a new theory of historical change in the Ottoman instrumental repertoire" by Jacob Olley

3 "Not just any usul: semai in pre-nineteenth-century performance practice" by Mehmet Ugur Ekinci

Greve, Martin, ed. *Writing the History of "Ottoman Music."* Würzburg: Ergon Verlag in Kommission, 2015. 270 pp., bibliography. ISBN 978-3-95650-094-7.

I've read a couple of articles from this, but haven't seen the whole book.

Previous to musical notation systems (and post, since they didn't like to notate), song words were written. Some information about the music that supported those words can be gleaned out by astute researchers. A good article that expresses the difficulties with this is *Neither Dates nor Sources: A Methodological Problem in Writing the History of Ottoman Music* by Ersu Pekin, 2015.

https://www.academia.edu/79064676/Neither_Dates_nor_Sources_A_Methodological_Problem_in_Writing_the_History_of_Ottoman_Music

For a full book specifically about 4 not quite datable manuscripts, see *Words without Songs: a Musicological Study of an Early Ottoman Anthology and its Precursors* by Owen Wright, 1992. Like other Owen Wright books, it is densely written so I have barely looked at it.

If you just want some sheet music and nothing else, then get *A Selection of Early Ottoman Court Music in Concert Pitch: Music from Ali Ufki, D.Cantemir etc.* by Dr Jonathan Paul Gemmill, 2017. There's just over 100 instrumental pieces in western notation. For a **readable** intro to this music, **I highly recommend** his doctoral thesis: https://www.academia.edu/92031456/Interpreting_the_early_Ottoman_music_repertoire

There's more articles out there, and books too. However, you can't easily start reading about another culture's traditions without knowing something about it already. So where to start? Dr Gemmill's paper really is great, one of the most readable things I've found, and his transcriptions are in an appendix. You will also want to listen to the genre, and Gemmill has suggestions. [I don't have any, but you already know YouTube has lots, if you can get started.] One book that I like is *Turkish Music Makam Guide* by Murat Aydemir, 2010. It includes 2 CDs. A review can be found here:

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/15762253-turkish-music-makam-guide>

Another book that might help (I haven't read it yet) is *A Summary Catalogue of the Turkish Makams* by Eugenia Popescu-Judet, 2007.

For Turkish sheet music (they notate up a 5th from Western) see [NEY - Neyzen.com](http://NEY-Neyzen.com)

There's also a FB group [Osmanlı Şarkı Söyleme Okulu \(Ottoman Singing Class\)](https://www.facebook.com/OsmanliSarkiSoylemeOkulu) that focused on learning one song a year to sing at Pennsic. It's currently paused, but there's lots of material there to study.

Then there's the unobtainable *Music of the Ottoman Court* by Walter Feldman, 1996. Everyone keeps referencing this one. If I really cared I'd try to inter-library loan it. If this is your jam, you should do that. [NB It looks like this book is being reissued/updated – due out in late Dec 2023, publ by Brill.]

How To Inter-Library Loan, or The Secret to Getting Expensive Hard-to-Find Books for Free!

So if you know what book you want, take that information to your local library. ISBN numbers help, but you don't have to have them. Find the reference librarian; they're usually at a help desk. Tell them you want the book. They'll look it up online, find a library that does have it, then request for them to send it to your library. Sometimes there's a small (~\$3) fee. They'll send you an email or text when the book shows up. And that's it! Of course you do have to return it after a couple of weeks.

To keep it short, the 2 best things are the FB group and Gemmill's paper.

So that's all I've got on this subject so far. If you are really into Turkish/Ottoman music, you should of course listen to the genre and probably find a teacher. The traditionalists will eschew writing for learning by ear. I prefer written, which is probably why I haven't delved into this much yet. If you find this helpful, or find more good sources, let me know and I'll add to this.

Thanks, Amelie
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