

## **The patterns of participation in the *rebetiko* music scene of Istanbul**

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### **Abstract:**

The main objective of this article is to examine the contemporary representations of rebetiko music culture and interpret the patterns of participation of its audience in Turkey. The findings of this study are based on ethnographic research that was carried out on regular rebetiko performances put on by a rebetiko band in Turkey's largest metropolis; Istanbul. The methodology centers on participant observation and in-depth interviews with listeners. By means of analyses of rebetiko-driven socio-musical behavior, this paper proposes an evaluation on different motivations of rebetiko listeners. The main findings suggest that the level and nature of interest in rebetiko is capable of evoking an off-the-beaten-path lifestyle, and attributing a subcultural, semi-underground aspect to its scene.

**Keywords:** Rebetiko music, music scene, audience analysis, Istanbul

### **Introduction**

Cities in developing countries have become more heterogeneous, stratified and fragmented, especially in the last few decades. Likewise, Istanbul, which is Turkey's biggest expanding metropolis, has been projecting interpenetrations of global trends and various localities onto its cultural sphere and its music scene. On the one hand, international migration movements and rural exoduses continue to shape the form and content of the many different music cultures. On the other hand, Turkey's efforts to become more integrated into worldwide economic and political developments and global trends have brought changing dynamics to the music scene in terms of both performers and listeners. Among these varying cultural and subcultural scenes, rebetiko audiences are part of a relatively small yet a distinct cross-cultural social group that calls out for analysis, along with other so-called traditional or out-of-mainstream cultural spheres in Istanbul.

Since rebetiko is a music genre that would best be introduced from a multifaceted point of view because of its historical background, which is closely linked to the forced population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1923, comprehending the emotional motives behind interest in the genre in Istanbul requires a multi-dimensional approach because of the complex nature of the long-term impact of the interaction between music and migration movements. The roots of rebetiko music date back to the 1850s when it first emerged as a music culture that was based on the Smyrna style. Piraeus style on the other hand, is generally described as having arisen after the compulsory population exchange between Turkey and Greece in 1923. Concerning these styles that are subject to an entirely different musicological study, Taranç (2007: 54-57) explains that rebetiko has deep multicultural roots and was especially influenced by Greek and Turkish music cultures. This substantial background continues to shape the characteristics of its contemporary scene. After the forced migration, rebetiko came to be widely performed and became a distinctive music genre on both sides of the Aegean Sea, reaching the peak of its popularity in the 1950s thanks to the efforts of recording companies, which were quite adept at making use of its authenticity; after the 1950s, however, the genre started to lose its popular appeal (Petropoulos 2000; Holst 1975). In view of this background, the main objective of this article is to examine the contemporary representations of rebetiko music culture and interpret the politics of participation of its audience in Turkey's largest metropolis; Istanbul.

Given the fact that music is a social phenomenon, it is often quite difficult to trace the patterns of the lived experiences in a given music culture because of the inevitable interaction among performers and listeners who belong to different social groups and who have varying cultural backgrounds. In light of that, this article aims to explore the contemporary emotional representations of this genre with a particular focus on the participation patterns of its listeners. The theoretical background of this study revolves around socio-musicological themes as a way to analyze the performativity and musical experience of rebetiko, and it also includes more recent concepts within the field of social anthropology and sociology.

This study employs the interdisciplinary scope of anthropological studies which center on music and helps show how music can be evaluated as culture itself as well as an element within the larger sense of the concept of culture. The findings used in this article, which are based on the fieldwork carried out for the author's PhD dissertation, includes analyses of regular performances and concerts put on by a contemporary rebetiko band in Istanbul. The methodology is based on participant observation and in-depth interviews with rebetiko listeners.

The first part of this paper outlines the theoretical background and the methodology that was used. The findings shed light on the features of the music-cultural space of rebetiko in Istanbul and listeners are examined as a particular social group. The study then explores the motives behind people's interest in rebetiko with a particular focus on the musical experiences of listeners. A thorough analysis of audience members leads to a discussion

about the changing subcultural aspect of the genre and its projections on preferences in the music scene of Istanbul.

### **Theoretical Background**

The theoretical framework of this paper is mainly based on a literature review of the music-cultural issues and concepts used in the anthropology of music. An evaluation of the literature on current problematic anthropological concepts such as ethnicity, identity, and ‘the other’ is included as a way to better interpret the socio-musical behavior of rebetiko audiences. Before engaging in the fieldwork on the Istanbul rebetiko scene, I carried out a more extensive literature review including the population exchange between Turkey and Greece and all previous studies on rebetiko music culture.

The narratives developed in the limited number of previous recent fieldwork studies about rebetiko (i.e. Sarbanes 2006; Koglin 2008; Zaimakis 2011) opened the way to a better understanding of the present-day meanings and representations of rebetiko in Istanbul’s urban music scene. Among related studies, Koglin’s research (2008) which bases on his fieldwork in Istanbul in 2004, draws upon diachronic and intercultural comparison of the symbolic and emotional meanings that rebetiko has for the members of intellectual minorities in both neighboring countries. He also glances at recent trends in Greek-Turkish relations as far as they affect the reception of rebetiko in Turkey. In his comparative analysis, Koglin (2008: 12) defines rebetiko as the musical tradition of a minority, either ethnic or social, within their own society. In addition, he stresses out the cultural diversity in Istanbul especially since the city’s opening up to the world economy in the 1980s and sees rebetiko a part of a lively mosaic of multifarious musical networks and internationalized record labels. This paper, however, will rather focus on a micro scale on the comprehensive analysis of rebetiko listeners within the local rebetiko scene of Istanbul.

Rebetiko as a music scene may be seen most recently in the work of Zaimakis (2011) who investigates the social world in Lakkos, Crete, suggesting that the forerunners of rebetiko can be explored as a hybrid music scene associated with cross-cultural interaction between different social and ethnic groups and musical traditions. According to him, the societal and aesthetic codes of this scene, with its low life themes and coarse melodies were seen by local elites as compromising the moral values of respectable society and subverting efforts to cultivate a national identity. Similarly, Sarbanes (2006) analyzes the early rebetiko practices with a particular focus on its subcultural dimension including drug taking in the urban ghettos. This paper also takes into consideration the potential subculture that this genre may reveal, yet it seeks to analyze the current status of rebetiko in Istanbul with all of its possible aspects.

Needless to say, issues concerning music and migration are quite complex. The experience of forced relocation is inevitably expressed in different forms, quite often in artistic modes. Music is one of those forms that brings to life the individual, national and historical contexts of its creators. Gauntlett (2009: 271) lays emphasis on the contribution of displaced people and points out that rebetiko songs are arguably the artistic genre of

migration *par excellence*. As a result, certain current anthropological themes such as minorities, ethnicity, and identity, with a more specific focus on forced migration-related otherness (Clark 2008; Hirschon 2006; Özsoy 2003), are also all taken into account as a way to better understand and interpret the audiences' musical experiences related to rebetiko.

As regards anthropological approaches to examining music, this fieldwork study was initially influenced by Merriam's model (1964: 32), which designates three analytic levels for ethnomusicological study: conceptualizations of music, behavior in relation to music, and the sound of the music itself. Yet, this paper revolves mainly around the second level. A study of behavior in relation to music requires audience analyses, which are a significant part of contemporary studies within the field of the anthropology of music. In other words, a musical performance becomes a unique cultural phenomenon expressed in symbolic forms by means of which social actors communicate, interact and generate social meanings. Therefore, the article benefits from the performance theory approach of Turner (1986; 1988) for a thorough analysis of the music-related social interaction patterns within rebetiko performances. Similarly, Turino's (2008) analysis of performance types was used to examine the participatory aspect of rebetiko performances and the level of inclusion of its audience. Then, in attempting to build up a profile of rebetiko listeners in Istanbul, I carried out a thorough analysis of their cultural preferences considering the habitus (Bourdieu 1984) of audience members. This detailed analysis led me to generate groupings of rebetiko listeners. In addition to a series of analytical concepts associated with musical practices, Adorno's 'typology of listeners' (i.e. emotional listener, culture consumer, expert listener, etc.) on the basis of listening motivations (Adorno 1994) also inspired my analysis of the rebetiko-driven musical behavior in Istanbul. In that way, without suggesting any rigid and closed categorizations, this study offers insights into the links between musical taste and cultural stratification through an evaluation of listeners with different levels of interest in rebetiko. Finally, the article utilizes analytical tools that are common to both the anthropology of music and the sociology of music, such as music subcultures (Hebdige 1979; Jenks 2005) and music scene (Slobin 1993; Bennett and Peterson 2004).

As this paper does not focus on a structural musical analysis of rebetiko, it does not take into account theories about different musical styles or the fieldwork findings about certain aspects of rebetiko performances such as the repertoire of commonly played songs, the instruments used on stage or the techniques of musicians. However, performance related listening attitudes are taken up in a relational way in light of the socio-musical behavior of rebetiko audiences as a response to performances.

## **Methodology**

This paper uses the responses of rebetiko listeners who were asked about their means of access to rebetiko music culture, their level of interest, familiarity, connectedness and main motivations for choosing rebetiko, as well as their intellectual and emotional attitudes towards the genre. Studying an urban music culture requires examining all the social actors

involved in the representation of music by taking into account their reciprocal relationships, in which the audience plays a significant role.

Music-cultural studies necessitate the application of ethnomusicological research methods and the research techniques of social anthropology. Therefore, qualitative research methods were mainly employed in this fieldwork study. The fieldwork was carried out between March 2010 and May 2011, but the initial forays into the field took place between January and March of 2010. Throughout the fieldwork, the Ethical Guidelines of the American and UK Anthropological Association were followed and the informed consent of the informants and participants was obtained. For that reason, the names of the rebetiko listeners interviewed for this study are kept anonymous and random pseudonyms were created which have no connection to their real names or identities.

While in-depth interviews with rebetiko musicians, scholars and professionals were carried out for this study, this paper uses the data obtained from in-depth interviews with thirty-nine rebetiko listeners. Participant observation at rebetiko concerts and semi-structured in-depth interviews were the main research methods used for this study. Unstructured interviews were also carried out especially during the performance breaks where rebetiko is played. The informants were asked questions concerning their thoughts and feelings about the music and about their means of accessing the music in order to reveal their level of familiarity and interest. Following transcription of the voice recordings, the most common key concepts that the informants talked about were highlighted and regrouped into more specific categories. Hence, a text-analysis method was designed based on a model that was proposed by Bernard (2006: 497) in which the main topics that were covered during the interviews were designated as a first-order category and the specific concepts that crystallized from them were set up as a second-order category. Lastly, numeric codes were generated and arranged accordingly. As a result, with four major 'first-order categories' each having their own 'second-order categories', the following themes were gathered from the interviews: (1) Familiarity with the history of rebetiko, (2) Sense of belonging and nature of connectedness to rebetiko music scene, (3) Conceptual approach to rebetiko, (4) Values and practices associated with rebetiko.

This ordering helped with the organization of the informants' answers in accordance with the themes that were covered. In turn that helped me catalogue the various musical behaviors associated with rebetiko performances, which later led me to designate the patterns of participation in the rebetiko scene in Istanbul.

## **Findings**

### ***Rebetiko as Performance: The Cultural Space of Rebetiko in the Istanbul Music Scene***

Locating a music culture in a broader context requires the description of a music-cultural space, which in this case consists of the structural features of the rebetiko music scene on

the one hand, and on the other hand the characteristics of the profile of Istanbul rebetiko audience members. Music genres are sometimes thought of as having a culture-specific dimension in which the artistic production is identified with geocultural terms, such as a Liverpool, New Orleans or Chicago sound. In our particular case, it is quite difficult and a bit inaccurate to narrow down the contemporary Istanbul sound to a particular genre, mainly because of the multicultural structure of the city's music scene, which includes the coexistence of performance spaces of various music genres and styles, ranging from rock and jazz to ethnic music and traditional Turkish folk songs. As Stokes (1999) suggested, music of and about Istanbul results from the complex intertwining local and global styles.

Regarding this multicultural artistic milieu, my analysis of rebetiko performances and audience behavior in Istanbul revealed certain characteristics that correspond to the main concepts used in the literature on music scene studies. First of all, my fieldwork on rebetiko audiences and performances was mainly carried out in *Beyoğlu* and *Kadıköy*, two major districts on the European and Asian sides of the city of Istanbul, respectively. Both of them are commonly deemed to be the cultural centers of the metropolis. The first performance venue analyzed for this study was a cozy café in *Beyoğlu* with around ten or twelve tables, and the second one was a two-story restaurant and pub in *Kadıköy*. Hereafter they will be referred to by the pseudonyms Café-K and Pub-A. The reason that I chose these venues is that during my fieldwork, these two small venues were the only places where regular rebetiko performances took place. The fact that rebetiko performances were held at these small cafes in certain parts of the city shapes the whole performative experience and figures into the visibility of the music genre.

As regards the visibility of a music scene, which is directly connected to how well people know about the venues, Slobin (1993: 17-19) suggests that there are three types of visibility, which are a reflection of the type of music: 'local' music, which is known by certain small-scale audiences and 'only by them'; 'regional' music, which can be traced across a somewhat larger zone of contiguous territory; and 'transregional' music, which crosses regional boundaries and even may become known on a global scale. This study revealed that the rebetiko scene in Istanbul, despite being known by a relatively small group of people and thus has the characteristics of a local music scene, attracts the attention of not only local audiences but also listeners from various backgrounds as well as tourists and migrants, thereby displaying certain features of a transregional music scene. Aside from its heterogeneous audience, the fact that rebetiko bands perform on a regular basis at such venues in Istanbul yet also go on tours abroad and take part in various cultural projects also reinforces this transregional aspect. Nevertheless, Slobin (1993: 18) also remarks that it might be tempting to label Europe a region unto itself, and regions may also reveal linkages among diasporic communities, such as groups far from a perceived homeland but still sharing common musical traditions. In this sense, the rebetiko scene seems to correspond to the latter typology. In other words, it is possible to claim that the rebetiko music scene of Istanbul emerged as a local music; as regards its relatively limited performance landscape, it was intended to be performed for small audiences in small places. At the same time, it can

also be classified as regional music, reflecting the traditional local sound of the Aegean region and the Greek-Ottoman melodies of the post-population exchange period.

A music-cultural space is not only determined by the relationship between the genre and the urban scape, but also by the musical performances and experiences that emerge therein. At this point, it is possible to apply Turner's (1988: 81) classification of social performances (including social dramas) and cultural performances (including aesthetic or stage dramas) to the evaluation of rebetiko performances. Rebetiko concerts in Istanbul seem to fit with cultural performances, as they are performed on small stages where the musicians and audience members interact with each other throughout the performance. The musicians, who are sometimes dressed in traditional Anatolian attire, literally and figuratively offer an aesthetic drama on stage. Audiences, on the other hand, create their own mobile stage by singing along with the musicians, dancing, or just clapping their hands and murmuring along with the lyrics as they sit at a table having dinner or a drink. In this way, rebetiko concerts are actually two-sided cultural performances in which the musicians and audience members are reciprocally interacting components. At this point, a distinction should be made between performance types. According to Turino (2008: 26-30), the first type, presentational performance, refers to situations in which one group of people, the artists, prepare and provide music for another group, the audience, who does not participate in making the music or dancing. Participatory performance is the second type; there are no clear-cut artist-audience distinctions and the primary goal is to involve the maximum number of people in a performative role. At a participatory performance, one's attention is drawn to the activity at hand and everyone's contribution to the performance matters; seen in this way, rebetiko concerts serve as participatory performances that are enriched by the participation of the audience, and engaging with the music and dancing play an important role.

A redefinition of the music-cultural space of rebetiko can be carried further by positioning it within the larger music scene of the city. While every music scene is unique and has its own cultural dynamics, Bennett and Peterson (2004: 7) define three general types. There is the 'local scene', which is mostly clustered around a specific geographic focus, a 'translocal' scene, which involves widely scattered local scenes drawn into regular communication around a distinctive form of music and lifestyle, and a 'virtual scene', a newly emergent formation in which people separated by vast physical distances create a sense of a scene via fanzines and, increasingly, on the internet. The contemporary situation of rebetiko music in Istanbul seems to mostly fit in with the first type, the local scene, as it revolves around certain districts such as *Kadıköy* and *Beyoğlu* and is directed toward a small number of audience members whose profile varies according to the venue. Still, it also corresponds partly to a translocal scene, as various musicians -mobile artists who are scattered around the world- get together to perform, even though they are few in number and do not represent a music scene within a broader geography. However, it does not seem to constitute a virtual scene because of the lack of strong rebetiko networking around the

world. Language differences and the so-called 'oriental melodies', which may be unfamiliar to western ears, may explain this seemingly weak connection.

### ***Rebetiko as Experience: Socio-Musical Behavior and Participation Patterns of Listeners***

Analyses of the patterns of exhibiting socio-musical behavior are an important part of the audience analysis of a particular music genre. That has always been one of the main themes of both anthropology and sociology of music, whether we're talking about a mosh pit at a heavy-metal concert or the sequential dancing ritual of a religious ceremony. As a way to deal with the local aspects and micro-social elements of rebetiko, in-depth interviews and participant observation at rebetiko concerts were used to reveal the social and cultural backgrounds of the listeners. While contemplating the habitus of the listeners, Shepherd's (2003: 69) question concerning the extent to which musical structures and practices reflect, model or resonate with the identities, experiences or structural positions of social classes and gendered and ethnic groups was of great help. My approach, initially influenced by Adorno's (1994) typology of listeners, is to examine thoroughly the forms and different patterns of involvement with rebetiko, rather than categorizing listeners into closed and rigid entities. Besides, such an attempt would be unsuitable for our contemporary era of ephemerality, fluidity and permeable boundaries. A fortiori, detailed analysis of the various individual uses of rebetiko allowed me to portray the listeners in terms of their major motives in participating the rebetiko music scene.

Basing on their involvement with and uses of rebetiko, the listeners were analyzed in accordance with Turner's framework (1986) whereby a concert can be designated a unique experience as part of a cultural drama and performance. Moreover, this cultural experience can be considered to be part of the strategies of presentation of the self in everyday life (Goffman 1959), pointing to certain rules for listening and rituals which govern the behavior of people acting in a given social capacity. In this sense, being a rebetiko listener can be interpreted as a way of experiencing a status in which one may express different thoughts and beliefs and employ many behaviors and strategies during a single performance. Thus, in my attempt to sketch the participation patterns of the audience with varying motivations in the rebetiko scene in Istanbul, I came up with the following major groupings of listeners: (1) Rebetiko Consumers, (2) Devoted Rebetiko Fans, (3) Friendly Rebetiko Listeners, and (4) Show-off Rebetiko Listeners.

#### **1. *Rebetiko Consumers:***

A small yet remarkable portion of the audience in Istanbul constitutes the first social group, 'rebetiko consumers', whom I met at Pub-A and at Café-K. Their principal characteristic is that they attend Rebetiko concerts a few times a year but without 'really' listening to the music. They seem to lack any background information about the history or the general characteristics of this music culture. They knew little or nothing about the outcomes of the

compulsory migration between Greece and Turkey or the historical event itself. An emotional or an intellectual connectedness could not be directly observed in their socio-musical behavior or their responses when asked to define their interest in rebetiko. At times, the responses revealed that they tend to consider rebetiko to be an example of 'dance-along' Greek songs. The relatively lower price of entrance to rebetiko pubs and the good dinners served for reasonable prices might also be important factors that contribute to their consumption of the music. Under these circumstances, listening to rebetiko slowly becomes no different than listening to pop music. One of the informants, *Ates* (late 30s, female, sales coordinator) said that 'the overall entertaining atmosphere' of Pub-A was her main source of motivation to liking rebetiko. Similarly, *Ruzgar* (late 30s, male, vice-manager) lays weight on the uplifting mood of the café rather than the music itself. It should be underlined that rebetiko consumers can be further divided into a sub-grouping that can be referred to as 'indifferent rebetiko listeners'. They could be observed taking part in other music scenes of Istanbul, such as rock, for instance. The main difference between this type and a rebetiko consumer is that the indifferent listeners seem to attend the concerts and performances to hang out, have a drink or two, eat, or meet new people. In this sense, rebetiko becomes background noise, a part of the décor of the soirée, and the focus on rebetiko falls to a secondary level.

## **2. Devoted Rebetiko Fans:**

'Devoted rebetiko fans' constitute a small group which tries to attend all of the rebetiko concerts and related performances in Istanbul as well as elsewhere. They value and praise this form of music as a special genre and as having a unique culture of its own. Among my informants, the ones that I met at Café-K in *Beyoğlu* were prime examples of this social group. The way that they sing along or murmur with their eyes closed, wave their hands and tap their feet while seated as they listened indicated that they truly felt the music. These listeners seem to fully give themselves over to the atmosphere throughout the performance. With the help of the in-depth interviews, I found out that their attachment to rebetiko was mostly brought about by familial connections; they often noted that one of their grandparents or great-grand parents directly or indirectly experienced the consequences of the compulsory population exchange between Turkey and Greece. A second segment of these devoted rebetiko fans was introduced to the music randomly, but from the first moment 'it got them'. The feeling of nostalgia in both a romantic and a realistic sense could also be observed in the way they participate in the performances. The manager of the band that used to perform every other week at Café-K in *Beyoğlu* defines herself as a devoted rebetiko-listener and states that as a dedicated rebetiko fan her only concern is about how much the music can reach out to touch even more people. One evening at a performance at Café-K, the band manager introduced me to *Han* who is also now a dedicated fan. *Han* (mid-30s, male, chemical engineer) told me that he had met the band by coincidence back in 2009 when he was out with his fiancée on a Tuesday night in *Beyoğlu*. They were just looking for a new place to hang out and they walked into a bar

where a rebetiko band was playing at the time. He said that he still remembers the exact setting of that performance because that's where he 'fell in love with' the sound of rebetiko. He says the place was full of foreign students, elderly people who were quite spry, and young people eagerly waiting for the next rebetiko song to be played.

### **3. Friendly Rebetiko Listeners:**

One of the main characteristics of the third audience group, 'friendly rebetiko listeners' who respect and have an interest in or a sentimental relationship with rebetiko culture, is that they are familiar with the similarities between Turkish and Greek culture, mainly in terms of music, dance and gastronomy. One of the informants, *Lila* (early 20s, student, female) is a friendly rebetiko listener who exemplifies this attitude by stating that: 'We are neighbors, we have so much in common; like yoghurt, coffee, *baklava* and other *meze* dishes. So, rebetiko sounds also like our music'. Sometimes, instead of 'rebetiko' some friendly listeners use 'Aegean music' to define Turkish and Greek musical forms and they are drawn to the unified and enriched aspects of rebetiko. Secondly, they find the music artistically satisfying and enjoy spending evenings at rebetiko pubs, where they can have dinner and dance to the songs, most of which exist both in Turkish and Greek. They also say that they attend rebetiko performances simply because they love the music, again emphasizing how they care about the resemblances and common features between Turkish and Greek culture. Therefore, 'sympathy for a neighbor' is an essential motivation for these listeners.

### **4. Show-off Rebetiko Listeners:**

Lastly, 'show-off rebetiko listeners' have variegated characteristics, and some belong to a social group that falls somewhere between yuppies and bobos who just go out on weekends to fancy places, spend money at clubs and have fun, yet they seem to want more. Because the night out should also have the potential to turn into a cultural activity which is 'authentic', 'original', 'off-of-the-beaten-path', 'not-so-mainstream' and 'not-so-subcultural', they feel that they have found an 'original comfort zone' in rebetiko. It should be underlined that this is a listening attitude that needs to be further analyzed, as they constitute quantitatively the smallest portion of the current rebetiko audience in Istanbul.

Nonetheless, some of the characteristics of show-off rebetiko listeners can be situated within the emerging bobo culture of Istanbul, a small social group in search of reconciliation between bourgeoisie and bohemia, two problematic concepts that need to be carefully redefined. Considering the fact that *Beyoğlu* has undergone extensive urban gentrification in the past decade, this subtle overlapping of rebetiko and bobo culture seems quite reasonable. *Okyanus* (late-30s, male, manager of an advertisement company) for instance, is a young professional listener at Café-K who overemphasizes that he had his bellyful of the popularization of 'so-called' 'alternative' genres and had been in search of new 'hidden gems'. The search for 'difference' and 'originality' was his main motivation for choosing rebetiko over other genres. Despite his rather limited knowledge on historical or musical

components of rebetiko, he says: 'This is a great gig but only few people like us cherish its real value'. He seems to be proud of finding a 'new' alternative in music. Another listener revealed a similar attitude and complained about the expansion of the small jazz scene in Istanbul, while attributing a favorable authenticity to more 'underground' genres like rebetiko. They reported liking rebetiko because the original songs were mostly in Greek and had been a part of the Istanbul music scene a century ago. These listeners also very significantly tend to classify rebetiko within the scope of world music or ethnic music, which is in itself problematic as a label and a category of the music industry. These characteristics also contribute a great deal to the process of the identity construction of a 'stamboulite bobo' who is in search of 'difference', 'originality' and 'innovation'.

It is clear that there is significant cultural stratification among rebetiko audience members in Istanbul. 'Rebetiko consumers' tend to perceive the music as a cultural commodity and are likely to attribute a sense of fun or entertainment to rebetiko performances. They generally hold a distant or indifferent attitude and lack information about the historical or musical characteristics of the genre. In contrast to 'rebetiko consumers', 'devoted rebetiko fans' have a conscious connection to rebetiko culture mostly through familial links and they display a strong sense of intellectual connectedness to this music. During concerts they take part in the performance and are eager to experience the revival of rebetiko songs after so many decades. On the other hand, even though they share some of those attitudes, 'friendly rebetiko listeners' seem to have less information about the culture compared to devoted rebetiko fans. Yet with a hint of a sentimental approach, 'loving' and 'liking' the music is an important motivation for them. As listeners who are in constant search of social recognition by members of their group of reference, 'show-off rebetiko listeners' differ significantly from devoted rebetiko fans in terms of their sense of belonging to the music culture yet they share several common characteristics with friendly rebetiko listeners. Still, they attach less importance to sentimental motivations compared to friendly rebetiko listeners and consider such concerts to be part of their cultural activities.

## **Discussion**

### ***Does Rebetiko Represent a Particular Lifestyle in Today's Turkey?***

The musical experiences of rebetiko listeners differ from one performance to another because of the environmental features of venues in terms of the spatial and temporal features of the cafés and pubs. The listeners' responses, which are mainly shaped by their sense of belonging to rebetiko as well as their values and practices associated with the music, have been characterized here as a kind of duality. 'Permanence' was on one end of the spectrum, and it was expressed largely through the popular usage of the term 'lifestyle' to define the substantial extra-musical content of the rebetiko music culture. On the other hand, certain responses implicitly emphasized a sort of 'temporality' in which rebetiko

stands as an alternative to mainstream music genres that is not entirely liberated from the worldwide music industry. Consequently, it is likely to lead to a 'pseudo-lifestyle'.

One of the informants, *Zambak* (late 50s, female, musician), who claims to be a very devoted rebetiko fan, says, 'Today's rebetiko is a black box. You can never be sure what you will find inside of it. This music culture used to reflect a lifestyle, but today I have doubts about that'. She points out that there are many educated musicians who study Classical Turkish music, Greek music and ethnic music and hence are able to perform rebetiko in Turkey, but they are few in number. She also draws attention to the ticket prices and harshly criticizes the music industry for 'packaging and selling the past' through rebetiko. She also states that the Istanbul rebetiko scene of the previous century is no longer alive.

On the other hand, *Akasya* (late 30s, female, teacher), a friendly rebetiko listener, thinks that listening to rebetiko is a 'political act' because for her it symbolizes a leftist tendency, a humanitarian view and a multicultural perspective. Another informant, *Cinar* (late 30s, male, graphic designer), thinks that rebetiko is not only an alternative music genre but also an alternative way of perceiving the cosmopolitan structure of Turkey. According to him, one should be able to love to listen the music of so-called 'others' in order to be able to understand and love them. Perceiving rebetiko music as a 'way of life' is not only an old attitude that belongs to the early period of the compulsory population exchange -such a view is still remarkably prominent among rebetiko audiences in Istanbul. Similarly, another interviewee, *Cindy* (31, female, PR manager), who is a member of the Greek community in Istanbul thinks that rebetiko is not only a music culture, but a way of life. Just like the other 'sad' music genres of the world, it is a way of perceiving the world.

A similar yet more emphatic attitude was observed in the remarks of a very devoted rebetiko listener who is also a rebetiko musician, *Beme* (mid-30s, male, bouzouki player) about audience profiles. He says:

You can decide to become a punk. Even if you come from a middle-class family, one day you can go out and say 'I will become a punk or a metal-head'. But for rebetiko, you have to feel connected to its historical, traditional and rich cultural content to become one with it; just like how prisoners or sailors may not have lived their lives that way if they had another chance. Therefore, for Rebetiko, there is a reverse process. There are no options. This is a way of life. You don't choose rebetiko, rebetiko chooses you!

This statement was probably the most influential and strongest response that defined the link between a listener and rebetiko music.

### ***Is Rebetiko Still A Subculture? Redefining the Rebetiko Music Scene***

Not all the informants emphasized the idea that rebetiko still signifies a lifestyle in our day and age. In addition to the fact that not so many people in the general populace know about the performances that are put on, the multifaceted musical experience of rebetiko in

Istanbul requires a questioning of its subcultural aspects. According to certain informants, the state of being subordinated, marginalized or excluded in society at large may still characterize the rebetiko culture but in an alternate 'up-to-date' way.

For instance, *Dream* (early 30s, female, research assistant), a devoted rebetiko fan at Pub-A, thinks that rebetiko will go on telling the story of people who suffered because of international policies, just like those who went through the population exchange of the previous century. Nevertheless, she emphasizes that today we should not reduce rebetiko to a sad song of migration or the music of a minority or particular community, saying that it is for anyone and everyone who appreciates it. She also states that the painful days seem to be over and that today rebetiko has become a music culture that can be used to express sorrow, agony and understanding in a general way. However, other listeners like *Menekse* (mid-30s, female, MA student) think that rebetiko tells a story about the past. In her opinion, if someone wants to experience the past, they should go to a rebetiko concert but if they want to live in today's modern world, they would be better off going to a tavern. In this way, the statements of these informants help us detect a redefinition of a rebetiko subculture which is still thought to have a limited connection to a wider audience and which has still been reshaped in accordance with the actual musical practices in the Istanbul music scene.

At another rebetiko performance, two listeners in the audience, *Guc* (early 40s, male, customer representative) and *Kaptan* (late 30s, male, vice sales-manager) stated that they were at that concert mainly because the pub was near their office. *Guc* also said that it would be much more expensive if they chose to go to a Greek tavern. *Kaptan* agreed and added that they would love to break some plates at a tavern and dance until morning but Pub-A offers a cheaper yet more intimate and still entertaining setting. This was an indicator that some listeners considered rebetiko venues to be a substitute for Greek taverns. In this sense, such listeners can be categorized as rebetiko consumers. A similar approach was observed with another group of listeners at the same pub at another time. *Nehir*, *Ates*, *Yagmur* and *Ruzgar* were four close friends in their mid and late thirties who work for the same company. They were in search of a decent place where they could dance and have a good time but not without spending too much money. *Nehir* claims that 'you do not have to dress up' for Pub-A, and that it is easy to relax and do whatever you want there. They all agreed that rebetiko is a great kind of music. They did not know much about the history or any of the characteristics of rebetiko but they seemed to love it. At that point, they all seemed like rebetiko consumers. *Yagmur* said that it has a sound that is fun and sad at the same time. The others agreed with her when she said that it has an 'underground' atmosphere. That particular attribution was reminiscent of a converted subcultural condition that has the potential to contain.

In light of the fieldwork data, another way of readjusting the notion of subculture is to see it as a small unit within a larger music culture. Certainly, the contemporary rebetiko scene in Istanbul still seems to carry the primordial characteristic of subculture in the sense that it is a micromusical scene. In addition, it seems to partially correlate with what Slobin

(1993) calls an interculture, because listeners from different cultural backgrounds enjoy it even though they are not part of the musical heritage of rebetiko. Moreover, this attempt to question the subcultural aspect of rebetiko drives us to different connotations of subculture. One of these connotations might be a consideration of rebetiko as a form of 'urban blues', as defined by Keil (1966) in reference to blues lyrics that narrate diverse social problems associated with a particular issue in a given space, covering a range of issues such as love and lack of love, as well as prisons and catastrophes. Not only do these topics correspond to the main themes of rebetiko songs concerning the social impacts of the compulsory population exchange, but they also connect the urban space with people who have 'got the blues' and seek a remedy in a genre that creates a link between the past and present.

## Conclusion

This fieldwork study on rebetiko music culture in Istanbul at the end of the first decade of the 2000s has shown that familiarity and otherness are two substantial key concepts that coexist for the interpretation of the extra-musical rebetiko world in Turkey. The meanings attached by the audience to its performativity are surrounded by the larger cultural milieu of the Istanbul music scene. The interviews with the listeners have put forth that rebetiko has an unstable positionality that oscillates from being perceived as part of a historically embedded 'alternative' lifestyle to being part of a micromusical local scene where the music itself preserves its subcultural and semi-underground aspects to a certain extent. Indeed, unlike with many other popularized subcultural genres, the culture industry has still very little influence over the rebetiko music sphere in Turkey.

While presenting the main characteristics of the contemporary rebetiko scene in Istanbul through the simultaneous representation of a particular socio-musical behavior and the social milieu of the rebetiko audience, this paper offers a projection of a part of the Istanbul music scene. The fieldwork, which was carried out in the *Kadıköy* and *Beyoğlu* districts of Istanbul, revealed that the Turkish rebetiko scene, despite being known by a relatively small number of people, meaning that it bears the characteristics of a local music scene, stirs the interest of listeners from various cultural backgrounds. As the city of Istanbul shapes the whole performative experience and determines the visibility of this genre, it can also be classified as regional music reflecting the sound of the Aegean region and reviving the Greek-Ottoman melodies of the post-population exchange period. In other words, even though it bears the primordial characteristics of a subculture as a micromusical scene, contemporary rebetiko also seems to partially correlate with an intercultural scene, as listeners participate in the rebetiko experience even though they are not familiar with its cultural heritage.

At rebetiko performances in Istanbul it is possible to observe how people who are part of a particular music scene combine their personal feelings, which are stirred by the melodies through a common sense of taste and cultural choice. Throughout the settings where this relatively small music culture exists, different levels of familiarity and

sentimental and intellectual connectedness were observed during the fieldwork, which helped me model the characteristics of audience members. I came up with different groupings of Istanbul rebetiko listeners with different motivations in participating in the rebetiko scene. In the end, many listeners choose to go to rebetiko performances instead of other concerts, either because they have a strong sense of nostalgia or out of intellectual interest, as if they are recreating the music's historical context and saluting the previous century. In contrast, other listeners found themselves at such performances by coincidence, and when that happens, rebetiko dissolves into the background soundscape of the city of Istanbul.

Because of the many meanings that rebetiko represents, it still exists as a music genre which creates continuous links between the past and the present, between what anyone may call 'us' and 'them', between eastern and western musical styles, and an urban subcultural sound which attracts various listeners for numerous reasons. This exploration of the rebetiko experience by analyzing its spatial, social and cultural components has sought to make a contribution to analyses of rebetiko music 'as culture' and 'as an element of culture' in Turkey and thereby open up further discussions on the topic.

### **Biographical Note:**

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