

Kutluk, F. (2019), *Turning youthful adventure into a lifelong project; interview with Martin Stokes*, *Rast Musicology Journal*, 7(2), s.2084-2090. Doi:<https://doi.org/10.12975/pp2084-2090>

Turning youthful adventure into a lifelong project; interview with Martin Stokes

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Kutluk: I want to begin with the term ‘musical citizen’. You begin your last article¹ with these sentences:

“Many if not most societies believe that good music produces good citizens. In the Western tradition, we have been familiar with the idea since the time of Plato. The idea is an enduring one, certainly very much alive today.”

You suggest this idea is still strong and alive today and this is a surprise for me. Could you please describe the situation at present in the UK?

Stokes: The classical idea has been revived in many shapes and forms in the modern West, but most influentially and importantly I think in Paris at the time of the Exposition Universelle of 1889. The organizers of this had a clear conception of citizenship - one that needed to be rescued from the turmoil of the revolutionary period and its aftermath - and a clear conception of the arts - indeed, the global arts, in fostering such ideals. In my own country, the idea has a long and connected history. The immediate post-war years, the 1950s, saw a reenergized discourse of culture in the service of citizenship, accompanying the building of key bits of post-war national cultural infrastructure in the UK - the South Bank Centre in London, the BBC and so forth. The idea was under

¹ - Martin Stokes, “The Musical Citizen”, *Etnomüzikoloji Dergisi*, (ed. Firat Kutluk), v. 2, p. 15-30, 2018.

attack in the Thatcher years; ‘culture’ reduced to the entertainment industries and the market, and the state only considered responsible for the education and infrastructure required to produce engineers and entrepreneurs. But I would still describe it as a strong one. One only has to look at the current discussions about music and arts education in schools, about how underfunded they are, about how they are increasingly becoming the preserve of the wealthy, to see how strong the idea still is.

Kutluk: You also underline that:

“...Many societies, over history, and across the world, have also believed that good music needs to be in the hands of the right people, because the dangers of bad music are obvious to them.”

Are some still afraid that good music needs to be in the hands of the right people?

Stokes: The fears in the UK at the moment are twofold; on the one hand that the ‘elites’ have embraced a neoliberal conception of the world and with it an idea that culture is primarily a matter of entertainment and distraction, and the conviction that the state no longer has a responsibility to support cultural life. This has meant the dismantling the architecture of arts education in state schools, the system of subsidies that maintains the arts and music nationally, and the state media

institutions, primarily the BBC. So, on the one hand, amongst progressive liberals, there is a distinct anxiety that ‘culture’, understood as being protected and preserved by the state, is most certainly in the hands of the wrong people. On the other hand there is the growing view that the current cultural institutions have a tendency to corruption or to misuse their authority. We see this, for instance, in the much-publicized scandals that periodically blow up around orchestras, music schools and the like - corruption, sexual abuse of students, and so forth. And we see it in the common view that state-subsidized institutions of culture are run by Marxists and liberals who use them to promote their - anti-national and cosmopolitan - political agendas. This is a view one associates with the political right in the UK - a view that is now at boiling point thanks to Brexit. So, yes, I think many, at least in democratic western societies, are concerned that cultural leadership has a tendency to fall into the wrong hands - an ‘enemy’ whose conception of culture is believed to be narrowly utilitarian or instrumental - financial, political, ideological, what have you. It’s a way we have, I suppose, of maintaining in our mind’s eye the supposed purity of art, and the (equally pure) virtues of championing it. A precarious position, needless to say. But it does say something about the strength of the underlying sentiment that good music makes for good citizens, good democracy.

Kutluk: Dmitry Kabalevsky also suggests that music preference is an important criterion of being a good citizen. He was the Secretary of the USSR Union of Composer and made the opening speech of 1970 conference in Moscow. The title of his speech is Ideological Principles of Music Education in the Soviet Union. He asks: “What role should music play in the general education school?” And he answers:

“After serious discussion, our major teachers, educators, musicians, psychologists, came to

unanimous opinion that Soviet pedagogical principles must develop the views of progressive Russian 19th and 20th century educators on a new basis enriched by Marxist-Leninist materialist philosophy... We know our young people, we believe in them, in their moral strength, their aesthetic, moral and ideological potential, and we know that they never fall prey to this ‘aggression’ of musical entertainment. But neither can we underestimate the danger of this aggression.”

Do you think that we should ask this question: What role should music play in the general education school?

Stokes: If the only role that can be imagined for music in general education is one of teaching students how to be obedient and not to question authority, or simply teaching them to venerate the past, rather than believe in the future, then I would rather it was not taught in schools at all. Unfortunately I encountered much of this in my own music education, and I think it persists. As far as Kabalevsky’s comments are concerned, his concern about where a legitimate high art ends and where ‘musical entertainment’ begins is one we would have to rethink today. The line between ‘proper culture’ and ‘entertainment’ has become quite significantly blurred. I’d want children to understand that important things are going on, socially and politically speaking, in those areas of culture we often label rather dismissively as ‘entertainment’, and I’d want them to take ‘entertainment’ seriously, and learn to approach it critically, rather than assume, along with many of their teachers, that their job is to ignore it, or perceive in it only threat and ‘aggression’. It’s a big question. Obviously I think we learn the key things in life through music; understanding, sympathy, co-ordination, powers of persuasion, organisational skills, and so forth, as well as learning to understand eros, desire, the human need for pleasure and happiness. How better to learn how to be a grown-up, socially capable human being? John Blacking was right on this. Perhaps it’s a statement of

the obvious, but, yes, I would want to see music being taught as a central discipline in any public education system, not an optional extra, as is the case, in practice, in much of the UK's schooling system at the moment. If it can't be taught well, though, and in an enlightened fashion, maybe we should wonder whether we really want it to be taught at all, in schools at least. Perhaps we should let school students learn music in other ways and then come to university, unencumbered by problematic attitudes, to learn to think about it critically and creatively.

Kutluk: You know this is also a very common idea that has been held by ruling elites throughout the Republican era. Whilst some music is certainly 'bad' and 'worthless', everyone who listens to this music is cultured, enlightened and intellectual. Today, this is not valid as before but I may say all of the decisions made about music in this country are political. You are a well known writer by Turkish readers and academicians. Besides your books *The Arabesk Debate: Music*

and Musicians in Modern Turkey and *The Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music*, you had been in Turkey for many times since 80's. So you are witness of musical evolution of Turkey. Could you please describe the headlines of this change?

Stokes: From my perspective, if one is just to focus on the late Ottoman and Republican era in Turkey, I'd want to underline the process of westernization; the, in some ways separate, in some ways conjoined, process of developing a national culture; the hegemony of the market, which we can date to the 1950s; the period of military coups that caused so much chaos and cultural confusion in the 1970s; the emergence of a liberal order in the mid 1980s under Turgut Ozal, and with it the disintegration of the idea of a state whose responsibility it is to arbitrate national culture; and then the present period, and its forging of religious values in the public sphere. Each of these periods could I suppose be said to have produced a music politics; each has produced music that has



Figure 1

in some sense exceeded, or overflowed these particular periods. Arabesk, for instance.

Kutluk: I have no idea about the thoughts and anxieties of the English ruling elites. What do they like and in what ways are they similar to their Turkish counterparts?

Stokes: At the moment, a period of real political crisis caused by Brexit, a key question is 'who are the elites'? Because there are several social groups that might be described in that way. Those who want us out of Europe claim they are 'the people', and anybody that opposes them - business, the intellectuals, the bankers, the media, and parliament - are 'elites', or represent 'elite' viewpoints and interests. There is much of this around the world, as we all know. It is nonsense, a way of manipulating people in elections and referendums, and a way of hiding the interests of those extremely powerful people and corporations who want to fragment the regulatory power of the state. I think an important difference between the UK and Turkey is that the UK has only rarely, and in only in relatively distant historical times, made efforts to define and regulate national culture. Some might say that, with the swing to the right in our country, such efforts are underway again. But the problem is that we have no sustained history of defining and regulating national culture by the state, not least because we are a multi-nationstate, anyway. We have quite separate Scottish, Irish, and Welsh national cultures alongside an 'English' culture, which I and others tend to think of as a meeting place for other national cultures rather than something culturally distinct itself. It's very hard to say what 'English culture' is, and I for one (as somebody who usually identifies as 'English') am quite happy to leave things that way! So the contrast with Turkey, where the state has had an enshrined role to play in producing and regulating 'national culture' is obvious

enough. Perhaps a simplistic answer to the question is that our 'elites', at least as conventionally defined, have only rarely assumed a role in defining and safeguarding 'English', or 'British', or 'United Kingdom' values - all of which, as I've suggested, mean quite different things - and whenever they attempt to do so, they tend to be quickly - and heavily - criticised by the public at large.

Kutluk: Do they feel that censorship in music should exist?

Stokes: Efforts to censor music, or indeed anything else, do not sit comfortably with our essentially liberal political culture. Forms of censorship undoubtedly exists, though. We have no first ammendment, as they do in the USA, guaranteeing freedom of speech. In the UK there is a lot you can't say, or sing, legally speaking, particularly if it incites people to violence, or racial or religious hatred, or defames or libels individuals. And various state entitites will make their own decisions about what can and cannot be broadcast or staged. So there are many ways in which the broadcasting or performance of music can be curtailed in our country - by media, by local government and other agencies. During my lifetime I've seen attempts to control punk rock, for instance (associated with noisy political protest during the Thatcher years), rave (associated, by its critics, with drugs), 'UK drill' (associated, by its critics, again, with gangs in London), grime (associated with Black subcultures), and particular songs (the BBC refusing to air 'Ding Dong The Witch is Dead', an old song that topped the charts when Margaret Thatcher died, for instance). So, yes, we are not short of people who believe they have a responsibility to control music for the sake of social order, public decency and so forth.

Kutluk: When did you decide to get interested in Turkey and Turkish music?

Stokes: I came to Turkey first in 1981. I was a backpacking tourist, just out of high school. It was a strange time to come here, as anybody remembering the period will know. It was my first experience of travel, really, too. I came back to take a language course the next year at the Yabancı Diller Okulu at Istanbul University (I still have my diploma somewhere...), and then for another couple of years worked as a tourist guide in my vacations. By 1984 I had started research, and then there began a few years in which I was mainly living in Istanbul. As to what made me interested in Turkey and Turkish music, I would say primarily, at that stage, the experience of travel outside of Europe, the excitement of discovery, the awakening of interest in other worlds. But no less important was the vitality of the musical worlds I encountered, the pleasures of learning your beautiful language, the warmth and hospitality of everybody I met. It turned youthful adventure into a lifelong project, a lifelong learning.

Kutluk: And kanun?

Stokes: I learned some bağlama first, actually. I had some great teachers and mentors in Turkish folk music worlds, İbrahim Can amongst them; I also went to Yavuz Top's music centre (dernek), then in Aksaray. I picked up the kanun as my route into the classical music tradition, learning from Tuncay Gülensoy. I have been very lucky in my mentors here. I will have disappointed all of them in attaining only very modest levels of capability on these instruments, but the truth is that I have learned primarily in order to be able to listen, and understand, better. As time has gone on, and particularly in the process of making a musical life for myself in London over the last decade or so, I discovered that there were not many kanun players around and that I could make myself quite useful amongst the various communities of makam-based music in this city - Turkish,

but also Greek, Egyptian, and so forth. So that has kept me going. I'm not a good player but I'm good enough to accompany talented singers, and that makes me happy.

Kutluk: Let's talk about *Republic of Love*. Your theoretical concerns are love and intimacy, the global city and neoliberal transformation. Shall we begin with cultural intimacy?

Stokes: Cultural intimacy describes a way of theorizing the social imaginary on the small scale, with reference to love and the couple. Such social imaginaries encode a kind of democratic aspiration - love should make both partners equal, or more equal. But also it is the vehicle for certain kinds of authoritarianism. The nation comes to be understood, in these authoritarian systems, to be modelled on the (imagined, nuclear) family, the national economy modelled on an (imagined) domestic budget. It is a scalar imaginary, which is to say one that takes the norms of social interaction from one level and applies them to others over greater (or lesser) scale. There's a certain politics at play in scaling up and scaling down. But it is an ambivalent technique, as Michael Herzfeld and others have pointed out. In part because much in contemporary cultural worlds ('global cities' for instance) disrupt these intimate social imaginaries with their sheer size and diversity. And in part because there is a kind of social critique incipient in the act of imagining social and political relations in terms of love, a quite radical and destabilising one. Song is where ideologies of love take shape, and are transmitted with a particular force, and thus where key cultural struggles take place. This was the idea at the heart of *The Republic of Love*.

Kutluk: In this book, the word 'elitist' caught my attention. I think I have never seen before such a kind of classification. Secular elitises, Kemalist elites, cultural elites,

dominant republican elites, technological elites and mercantile elites...

Stokes: I agree, it's a vague term, and we've already spoken about the difficulties of defining 'elites' in the UK. It's a matter of perspective, to a certain extent; elites are always 'others' in our present, pseudo-democratic populist times.

Kutluk: I began the preface of my book *In Which Direction is Music Heading? Cultural and Cognitive Studies in Turkey* with these words:

"How should a 30 year-old handle a mid-life crisis? Mine was not difficult to overcome, but it left me with new habits of making and listening to music. My changing musical preferences were actually reflecting my changing identity. I was shocked when I played Richard Marx's "Now and Forever". I told my friends about this experience and realized that they don't have such problems. It was becoming hard to listen to Mozart or the masters of the Romantic era, and I was drifting far away from Queen, but I couldn't explain myself. This was the first time I found myself so close to the problem of cultural elitism. When I met people, including academicians, who classify musical genres by their values, I thought of doing a study using some kind of lie detector that can identify music genres which are liked. Of course, I still haven't succeeded because there is no software that can measure musical tastes!"

Did you feel such a problem in your life, I mean that's not a problem of course, but some see it like that.

Stokes: My midlife crisis started in my mid-teens and shows no signs of passing forty years on! The pain of falling in and out of love with music - like all falling in and out of love - is intense, isn't it? One wants to imagine that one's repertoire of musical pleasures grows and grows as one's wisdom, experience and intelligence grows, but things turn out differently. I guess you just get out of the habit of listening to certain things, and the skills - skills of listening and taking pleasure - fall away through non-use. I used to love jazz, for instance; indeed, I used to play jazz

bass, and knew the classic bebop albums by heart. I stopped playing (because of some trivial problem in my little finger) and then stopped listening, and now feel a vague sense of shame whenever, in conversation, I try to muster the energy and enthusiasm to join in a conversation about John Coltrane or Sonny Rollins or Keith Jarrett or Chick Corea. They used to mean so much to me, and now they don't, and it's not their fault. For me that is saddening rather than shocking, but I agree, one wonders just how one can change so much. What we really want is an algorithm that processes musical dislikes rather than likes. It is what we hate that defines us far more than what we love, surely? I'm sure Spotify or somebody else is working on some kind of negative recommender system. I mean "if you hated this, you'll most certainly hate x, y, or z". We seem to find it easier to talk about the music that fails to endorse our sense of values, for example, Arabesk!, and the problems that we associate with such music, rather than what our musical values actually are - which so often just go without saying, or are assumed to do so.

Kutluk: Over the last years, I have a longing for the past. It's natural I know but mine is different maybe. When I read the book of Furedi, *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone*, I feel an element of psycho-pleasure in the recognition that we have some of the same problems. When I talked with Philip Tagg, he asked me something about their profile, a question mainly concerned with Syrian migrants. I gave him some information and asked him, how about the UK? His answer shocked me: we are worse than you! And he meant it! Do you ever feel the absence of intellectuals?

Stokes: I compare the UK to France on this matter. France has an extraordinary culture of public intellectuals, and we don't. We envy them for this - the passionate and intense nature of the public debates and arguments - the rock-star status of the

intellectuals themselves- all of which is significantly absent from UK intellectual culture. We compensate, you might say, by being deeply francophile. To be a true intellectual, for us, is to look, and sound, French - no matter how much we might acknowledge the importance of Germany, Italy, the USA and Canada's heavyweight scholars and writers. You can see where I'm going with this, probably. We need desperately need independent and critical voices, we desperately need intellectual icons to focus and mobilise, capable of leading public conversation, of making politics and culture vivid, meaningful and alive. And I have no problem with thinkers being glamorous and wealthy and objects of public interest - why on earth not? But what I think we need, far more than public intellectuals on television and in the newspapers, is, in my view: functioning and durable and democratic educational systems, principled politicians to defend them, competent administrators to run them, educated citizens prepared to pay their taxes and fund them, devoted teachers to staff them. I'd want both public intellectuals and educators, of course, but if I had to chose, for me the latter, every time. And it's the latter that I fear for.

Kutluk: Obviously the road is much longer!
Martin thank you very much for accepting my invitation and for sparing your time.



Stokes: I thank you Firat.