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Martin Stokes, *The Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music*

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- 1 The *Republic of Love* is a work of great subtlety on a subject that lies at the heart of Turkish cultural and political history: popular music in Turkey. Martin Stokes offers a complex account of popular culture and public life in post-1950s' Turkey. The book takes the reader through a musical journey, analyzing the lives and music of three popular musicians who set their seal on the 1950s, 1970s, and 1990s respectively: Zeki Müren, Orhan Gencebay, and Sezen Aksu.
- 2 Readers familiar with Stokes's earlier work on Turkey would know that he has always been interested in drawing out the complex links between music, politics, and emotions. This analytic concern takes its boldest form in the *Republic of Love*. Here Stokes convincingly argues that the elevation of Müren, Gencebay and Aksu into national icons involves more than an appreciation of the aesthetic elements crafted in their work (although their musical brilliance is important). His book unpacks the political conditions articulated with their mass popularity and underlines the critical role played by each artist in the public discourses of post-1950s Turkey. More importantly, the book shows how in the voices of these artists, and in their songs, lyrics, persona, and demeanour a broad Turkish audience finds a certain familiarity, something to affectively relate to. Each singer contributed in their own ways to the development of a complex of sentiment and love, in other words, to a *republic of love*. What characterizes these popular figures then, according to Stokes, is that they are 'voices of cultural intimacy' (15). His discussion of cultural intimacy approaches these singers and their iconic songs as a 'text' through which complex narratives and imaginings of self and of nation can be understood (33). He

claims that the widespread admiration and affection for these musicians are intimately linked with such identifications as much as they are associated with questions about modernity and public life in Turkey. Although cultural intimacy is the organizing theme of the book, Stokes makes references to other social developments and theoretical themes as well, including neoliberal transformation, the public sphere in late liberalism, and the global city.

- 3 The book begins with an account of the life and music of the queer nightclub star Zeki Müren. Crowned as the ‘Sun of Art’ in the 1960s, Müren’s initial public appearances on State radio date to the early 1950s. From the outset, popular appreciation of Müren’s vocal qualities involved depiction of his voice as ‘effective’ (*etkili*), ‘polite’ (*nezaketli*), ‘enchanted’ (*füsunkar*), a voice as soft and smooth as ‘velvet.’ He was also admired for his emotionally moving vocal renditions consummated by his flawless diction and his excellent command of *makam* (mode). As Stokes documents, these virtues of Müren’s voice became available to the ears of the masses not only through radio, but even more so as an outcome of new opportunities such as films and commercial recordings whose range, unlike radio, extended even to the east of Turkey. Stokes writes that Müren ‘often rationalized his commercial sound recordings and films as ways of making himself available to “the common people” (*halk*), who didn’t have the chance to see or hear him in Istanbul’ (40). In that city, a key setting in Müren’s music making and career was the *gazino* (nightclub), in which he delivered numerous live performances. Stokes notes how these performances transformed the dynamics of interaction between performers and audiences by making use of a T-shaped stage – new to art music at the time – and a mobile microphone, both of which ‘staged a moment of encounter and physical proximity between fan and star’ (25). This newly emerging commercially oriented music industry coupled with new consumerist desires were central to Müren’s rising popularity. Equally important was the artist’s sexual ambiguity and apparent queerness, a theme that became a contested issue in the 1990s. Stokes concludes that these aspects of Müren’s persona opened up the possibility that other kinds of identities might be talked about in the public sphere, thus making a positive contribution to the cultural life of the nation (70).
- 4 Chapter 3 shifts the readers’ attention to Orhan Gencebay, in the eyes of many the principal architect of the popular genre *arabesk*. (Interestingly Gencebay himself refuses to describe his style as *arabesk*, as Stokes’s interview with the artist illustrates.) As well as discussing Gencebay’s music, the chapter analyzes the negative associations that surrounded *arabesk* music, perceived by the Kemalist intelligentsia as the music of ‘poorly integrated rural migrants in the squatter towns’ (74), denoting ‘foreignness, misery, and poverty’ (74). Stokes also describes the Turkish State’s unsuccessful attempts to deal with its worrying popularity, first by banning it and then through gentrifying its representations. Stokes’s documentation of how Gencebay is both known and heard by his fans – as intelligent, cosmopolitan, self-sufficient, an exemplary figure of civic virtue, possessing ‘proletarian decency but no pretensions’ while his voice is ‘sincere, and intimate’ – makes for fascinating reading.
- 5 Chapter 4 explores the cultural life of Turkey in the 1990s through the music of pop diva Sezen Aksu. Examining Aksu’s early career, Stokes points to the political undercurrents contributing to her musical formation. The 1980 coup is a key point in his analysis: “It [the coup] dispersed or silenced her potential rivals. It oriented the music market toward musicians who looked and sounded local. It put a high premium on melancholy and

introspection. It created a middle class, frustrated by the heavy hand of the State TRT [Turkish Radio Television] and the street-level hegemony of *arabesk*, that was hungry for signs of cultural distinction' (121). Particular attention is given in this chapter to Aksu's 1995 album *Işık doğudan yükselir / Ex oriente lux* (Light from the East), described as a radical break with the artist's early career (127). According to Stokes, this is because the overt feminism of the album created a musical narration of the lives of Anatolian women, even as the CD represented the nation as a mosaic (131). This latter metaphor was at odds with the official and chauvinistic national history thesis of the Republic, portrayed in school textbooks for generations. Stokes discusses the significance of Aksu's cosmopolitan ventures exemplified in her musical collaborations with Goran Bregovic and the Greek vocalist Haris Alexiou, describing these as extensions of her 'internal cosmopolitanism' (139).

- 6 The last chapter of the book brings together a number of themes, focusing on a poem, 'Aziz Istanbul' (Beloved Istanbul, first set to music by Münir Nurettin Selçuk in the 1950s). Different versions of the song emerged in the 1990s. Stokes engages in a musical analysis of three different versions of the song in which multiple ways of 'seeing' or imagining the city emerge. Istanbul has long been a site of symbolic contestation between Kemalists and Islamists, and more recently, caught up in a battle between rival forms of nostalgia. While the city was 'de-Ottomanized' in the early Republican period, in the 1990s with the rise of more Muslim-oriented political parties the Istanbul Council has disseminated a new discourse valuing its very Islamic and Ottoman legacy. The remembering of a particular past for Istanbul in music not only displays a nostalgia for an idealized city, but it is also an expression of the meanings that their performers attach to intimacy and urban civility. Stokes's analysis illuminates the multiple political meanings and messages invested in different ways of remembering Istanbul, and how this remembering is connected to the artists' subjectivities crafted by national states.
- 7 This book's main strength is in bringing together the theoretical accounts of emotions and intimacy with the field of popular music in Turkey. It expands the geographical applicability of the concept of 'cultural intimacy' by presenting fieldwork material from Turkey, although one wishes that the discussion of the theoretical implications of 'cultural intimacy' was developed further. For Herzfeld, cultural intimacy in Greece is a 'recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the bases of power that may at one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation' (1997: 3). Herzfeld examines cultural intimacy from symbolic and linguistic perspectives (based on his ethnographic work in Greece) whereas Stokes does so from a musical perspective. Although Stokes acknowledges the usefulness of Herzfeld's definition of cultural intimacy for his own analysis, the notions of 'embarrassment' and 'rueful self-recognition' central to Herzfeld's framing of the concept do not always easily translate to the popular discourses surrounding the three musicians selected here. This is especially the case for Sezen Aksu, as the chapter devoted to the pop diva finds it hard to identify any empathetic embarrassment that underlies Turkish audiences' admiration of her.
- 8 Stokes seems to get closest to Herzfeld's conception of cultural intimacy when he refers to an article in the Islamist daily *Zaman* by Elif Şafak published in 2006. In this article Şafak writes about the very absence of love in everyday behavior in Turkey despite its

abundant prevalence in songs and stories, thus depicting it as something that has disappeared along the way. The crisis of love, according to şafak, 'is one of civility' (26), exacerbated by incidents involving the use of the violence and coercion in the name of love (i.e. honor crimes). In analysing the meanings arising from şafak's article, Stokes draws attention, among other things, to her *treatment* of this issue as a national crisis: 'The failure of Turks to live up to their own high ideals about love is truly a source of embarrassment for şafak and others' (33). There is a 'shared sociality' assured in this discourse. A Herzfeldian notion of cultural intimacy is also explicit in şafak's critical tone in the form of an expressed 'familiarity with the bases of power' (Herzfeld 1997:3). According to Stokes, 'To observe at the most general level that love is in crisis in Turkey is to note a deterioration of the republic's fundamental social contract, to hint at the political violence and authoritarianism that the culture of love has licensed... So talk about love engages power directly, not evasively' (33).

- 9 In a similar vein, the public sentiments evoked by these musicians too engage power directly as they point to ways of being modern very different from those demanded by Turkish officials. The links between music, politics, and ideal citizenship make this a valuable book for a general audience. Stokes once again shows us how 'music is not just a thing which happens "in society"; society also happens "in music"' (Stokes 1994:2). Readers will appreciate the book's rich ethnographic details and musical analysis. In short, this book is an important guide to understanding the contested field of music and public life in Turkey, imagined and lived affectionately if contestedly by Turkish citizens.

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