

# The pleasures of ambiguity: pedagogy and musical apprenticeship in an Istanbul art studio

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‘Dealing with ambiguity’ has become a pressing concern in many spheres of contemporary life, often presented as a ‘survival skill’ in an uncertain world. Working with ambiguity also plays a crucial role in the musical pedagogy of the Ottoman-Turkish ney (Sufi reed flute), the playing of which I discuss in this article. Rather than a constraint or deficiency to be resolved, in the context of ney apprenticeship, ambiguity emerges as a desired pedagogical force not only valued but also deliberately amplified. My aim is to show how ambiguity is embraced here as a productive condition that maximizes possibilities for artistic exploration, freedom of discernment, and aesthetic pleasures.

In his book *The craftsman* (2009), Richard Sennett draws a vital connection between ambiguity, creativity, and the process of developing a skill. To make his point, he takes the example of the work of Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck, who designed hundreds of public playgrounds in Amsterdam following the Second World War. Van Eyck discovered how ‘planned ambiguity’ in the urban environment fostered creativity, provoking, as Sennett puts it, ‘imaginative processes that enable [people] to become better at doing things’ (2009: 10). In shaping his designs, van Eyck wanted children to engage with the spatial ambiguities carefully fabricated in his play-scapes. No rigid boundaries demarcated these site-specific parks from the rest of the city, nor did the play objects in them (cylinders, tunnels, stepping-stones, etc.) dictate to children how they might be used. Instead, the architect let the place ‘invite the child to actively explore the numerous affordances (action possibilities) it provided’ (Withagen & Caljouw 2017). Sennett concludes that van Eyck ‘found simple, clear ways to make the users of his parks, young and old, more skilled in *anticipating and managing ambiguity at the edge*’ (2009: 234, emphasis mine).

*Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 28, 632-650

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Sennett's take on the potential of *spatial ambiguity* to enable what we might call 'autotopy' – the making of place for oneself (alongside and with others) – resonates with the *generative* role that ambiguity plays in the musical practice of ney playing that I explore in this article. An end-blown reed flute, and the beloved instrument of Ottoman-Turkish art music,<sup>1</sup> today the ney occupies a vital place in Turkey's public soundscape, as demonstrated in the recent explosion of ney learning classes in major cities. In this article, I examine the specific affordances that ambiguity provides in the pedagogical context of ney learning, whose master musicians not only value but also deliberately amplify its existence. This amplifying of ambiguity is especially conspicuous in the 'education of attention' (Gibson 1979; Ingold 2001; 2018) that novice players are exposed to in learning to get their intonation right. They are taught to appreciate the inexactness of the two key tools of the art, the reed and the notational score.

As we shall see, the pedagogical process I examine here draws attention both to the *intractability* of the reed – a material that, by its nature, make standardization difficult – and to the musical score's problem with *exactitude*, dual conditions that players must wrestle with in giving each note its rightful place in a melodic line. Fluency in the art requires an educated hermeneutics of suspicion towards both of these devices, including an ability to overcome their useful insufficiencies in the real time of playing. In this article, I reveal how the absence of reliable material guidance from the reed and the written score produces an uncertainty concerning pitch accuracy. I argue that rather than being an insurmountable problem, this ambiguity is integral to the creative pedagogical processes that produce the aesthetic life of the genre of art music genre in the present.

In analysing what exactly this musical apprenticeship in ambiguity involves, this article engages with issues that have been of long-standing concern to anthropologists studying the practical, bodily, and material dimensions of knowledge-making practices in social life, especially in the fields of craft making (Makovicky 2010; Marchand 2008; Portisch 2010), skill cultivation, and creativity (see, among many others, Ingold 2001; 2011; Ingold & Hallam 2007; Nakamura 2007; Wilf 2014a; 2014b; Yen 2005). One central point stressed in this scholarship has been the irreducibility of knowing-in-practice to representational knowledge that abstracts, objectifies, and systematizes such knowledge. As Michael Jackson's phenomenological insight summarizes it, '[P]ractical knowledge lies in what is accomplished through it, not in what conceptual order may be said to underlie or precede it' (1996: 34). Along similar lines, Tim Ingold's (2000, 2011) dwelling perspective has been decisive in the critique of the representationalist paradigm in anthropology and beyond, shifting analytic weight from cognitive schemata or cultural models to the practical. This perspective calls attention to the creative 'process of *working with* materials and not just *doing to* them' (Ingold 2011: 10, original emphasis), a process that amounts to a 'corresponding with things in the process of their formation' (Ingold 2018: 71).

In their collaborative work, Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam (2007) situate improvisation at the centre of this creative process of bringing form into being. Improvisation, they contend, is not only made possible, but is also demanded by 'the gap between non-specific guidelines and the specific conditions of a world that is never the same from one moment to the next' (2007: 2). This gap is literally visible, for instance, in those practices where the making of a visual form by way of copying a model is *not* equivalent to the reproduction of a pre-existing arrangement (see Mall [2007] on pattern drawing; Nakamura [2007], Şenay [2017], and Yen [2005]

on calligraphic writing). Experimental interventions are necessary, if not inevitable, because one must, as Eitan Wilf puts it, constantly adapt one's real-time movements to the 'contingency of the unique situation' (2014b: 402). The vicissitudes of engaging with dynamic materials are central to the creative practice.

Nevertheless, what if the conditions that compel improvisation are not just consequential – 'conditions of a world that is never the same from one moment to the next' (Ingold & Hallam 2007: 2) – but also intentional? Unlike other forms of contingency that have received attention in the anthropological literature, here ambiguity is not primarily an accidental outcome triggered by a 'chance event' (Pandian 2015), nor does it entail 'unpredictability' (Mall 2007), or 'uncertainty' in a changing world (Wilf 2019: 18). What is striking here is how master musicians of the ney do not only respond to ambiguity, but also desire it and wilfully accentuate it by making it a defining pedagogical element of their teaching practice. Ney education contrives at and takes pleasure in ambiguity as a valorized pedagogical affordance. My aim here is to show the generativity of this affordance for practitioners of the reed, including ney craftsmen, master musicians, and apprentices, each of whom must attend to and act upon ambiguity in distinct ways.

More than one recent analysis has pointed out the elasticity and ambiguity of the word 'ambiguity'. In *A history of ambiguity*, Anthony Ossa-Richardson speaks of 'doubt and plurality, or plenty', as the 'twin poles of ambiguity' (2019: 2), while Islamic studies scholar Shahab Ahmed (2016: 36) points at the existence of 'multiple meanings' (and their potentiality) as its essential qualifier. In my analysis, I play with these dual qualities of ambiguity as something that pushes against closure and fixity, enabling, instead, open function and a multitude of interpretations. My argument supplements a second body of research that explores the productive possibilities of ambiguity in a range of fields, from humanistic scholarship (Levine 1985), corporate communication and management (Eisenberg 1984; Wilf 2019), art and aesthetics (Berndt & Koepnick 2018), design (Kaethler 2019), to poetry and language (Empson 1949 [1930]; McMahan & Evans 2018; Ossa-Richardson 2019).<sup>2</sup> The complex alliance between creativity and ambiguity has been a ubiquitous theme in this multidisciplinary literature (see Byers 2007). In studies of art, and in music more specifically, the tendency has been to analyse the aesthetic implications of ambiguity as an integral feature of an artwork, epitomized in composer/conductor Leonard Bernstein's famous words, 'the more ambiguous, the more expressive' (1976: 39-41). For Bernstein, the refusal to resolve a phrase of music into one or other expected key adds pleasurable tension and drama to a work.

Less attention has been paid, on the other hand, to the capacity for autonomy – the making of 'law' for oneself (alongside and with others) – that intentional ambiguity affords to skilled practitioners. In anthropology, where ambiguity has been an inconstant theme (Engelke 2002; Meintjes 2017; Petrović 2018; Wilf 2019), Michael Jackson (1982) describes how Kuranko storytellers, by deliberately cultivating ambiguity, license listeners to explore and interpret moral dilemmas and solutions for themselves. Jackson's approach bridges purposeful ambiguity with individual discernment and autonomy, positing it as a condition that enables listeners to become meaning-makers. He contends that in making sense of an ambiguous figure or situation, one is also making sense of the world *for oneself*.<sup>3</sup> Building upon this line of argument, I seek to convey how the intentional use of ambiguity in this musical environment connects not only with issues of creative agency, but also with autonomy. As a pedagogical force, ambiguity does its generative work precisely here. It enables

self-constitution – both a collective and an individual self – by allowing a freedom from ‘law’.

My compressed examination of these issues is based on fieldwork carried out in Turkey irregularly between 2013 and 2018. Fieldwork involved visiting and participating in a wide range of ney teaching sites (private workshops, music schools, religious associations, university student clubs, and council-sponsored adult education centres) and ateliers scattered around Istanbul’s urban sprawl. While participation in these settings allowed me a city-wide familiarity with the larger field of the ney, it was my becoming a *talebe* (pupil) of Neyzen Salih Bilgin (known by the honorific Salih Hoca, or master) at his ney and art studio Hezarfen that enabled my own submission to the transformative (perceptual, multisensory, and ethical) force of this musical practice.

There are three movements to the discussion that follows. First, I examine the process by which practitioners of the ney enter into creative tension with the reed. The second part shifts the attention onto how musicians reckon with the notational score, a topic that raises vital questions about aurality/orality and the meaning of reading the ‘text’. In the final part, I discuss the possibilities of artistic exploration, freedom of discernment, and musical pleasures facilitated by this intentional exploitation of ambiguity.

### The recalcitrant reed

On a warm spring day, together with two ney players from Istanbul, I travel to Samandağ, a small town in Hatay province of southern Turkey, not far from the Syrian border. The town’s fertile reedbeds nestling along the Asi River have a special reputation among ney makers. Taking advantage of Samandağ’s damp, salty soil and its mild temperatures, the reeds most suitable for ney making (the variety of reed called *arundo donax*) grow abundantly here (Fig. 1). One of my neyzen (ney player) friends, also an expert ney maker, wants to buy some reeds, and contact is made with a local reed harvester prior to our arrival.

Saho is one of the first harvesters who began collecting reeds some thirty years ago. At the time, only two local families were involved in this small enterprise. ‘The situation



Figure 1. Reedbed in Samandağ. (Photo by the author.)

has changed now', Saho says. 'Many unskilled reed cutters go into the reedbeds before the right season [ideally, between November and February] to collect more reeds and sell them to ateliers in Istanbul and other cities.' Standing in the courtyard looking at the bundles of light yellow reeds stacked against a wall, I ask him what he looks for when cutting. 'You must have an eye for the ideal diameter of the reed's body', he explains, 'and how well balanced it contracts at each node; you must know how much moisture is left in the cane before cutting it, and discern which reed is suitable for which tuning of ney. I can tell a good reed even with my eyes closed', he says, and pulls out a few samples from the stack to demonstrate.

Yet, pessimistic about the quality of future reeds in the town – 'unless the local authorities do something to prevent immature harvesting', he adds – Saho is planning to cross over to the other side of the Syrian border to try his chances there. Although reed cane grows literally in 'the wild', finding reeds ideal for ney making is no easy task. The ney reed demands a perfect combination of a number of material elements to ensure a promising sound. The reed's cylindrical body must consist of nine node segments, with each segment having a proportional length to other segments. The size of node segments determines not only the intonation of the ney, but also the type of tuning the instrument is set in. For example, the reeds with longer segments are more suitable for neys in a lower register, which are also longer in overall size and are more difficult to play compared to shorter neys. The balance with which the reed tapers from top to bottom also effects the intonation and tone quality, and so do the conditions under which the reed loses its inner moisture before its metamorphosis into a ney.

In practice, however, the uniformity of these physical elements is never guaranteed. The reed, a gift from 'nature' (in Turkish its description is '*hüdayi nabit*' – self/God planted – drawing attention to its self-germination), is a material characterized by heterogeneity and idiosyncrasy. Canes grow in different thicknesses, and the lengths of their node segments slightly vary. The reed membranes are different from each other too, and so is the texture of their internal flesh. The result is an instrument that defies standardization not only in the process of its making, but also when it comes to its playing. As one master craftsman put it to me: 'The reed is like a human being. No two reeds can ever be the same. Are we identical?'

Another ney maker, also well versed in the craft of making *rebab* (a three-stringed fiddle), explained by way of comparison: 'Take the *rebab*, for instance. The instrument allows you to intervene more into its form. You have strings, tuning pegs, and so on. You can use certain standard techniques when making a *rebab*, but the ney is not like that. Because its material isn't homogeneous'. He described the reed as a 'humble' (*mütevazî*) and 'sensitive' (*hassas*) material, yet also a deceptively 'simple' one, concluding that 'in the end, the reed becomes a ney only if it has the will to be so'.

What is it like for skilled practitioners to work with a material that lacks precision, or, as one craftsman described it, that 'comes with a lot of personality'? At the atelier, the material particularity of the reed lends itself to creative problem-solving most dramatically when it comes to opening tone holes on the reed's body (Fig. 2). The six finger holes, from which the fundamental tones are obtained, are carved out in a straight line on the front body, and a seventh hole, the thumb hole, rotated slightly, is placed on the back. This task is performed not by replicating holes marked on a template on the reed's body but by reproducing each tone hole anew by way of working out, and responding to, the foibles of each reed. Millimetric adjustments that allow a compensating for the flaws and quirks of the material are essential to the tuning process,



Figure 2. Opening tone holes on the reed. (© Hezarfen Ney School, reproduced with permission.)

a skill that requires aural acuity. For example, in neys crafted by my teacher, also a fine ney maker, he would shift the tone holes for *acem* (F) and *neva* (D) a few millimetres up to resist their natural inclination to fall flat in their original place.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, he would move the thumb hole up as much as two millimetres to avoid flat intonation, an inherent feature of many reeds. Unlike with mass-produced neys sold in music stores, the thumb hole would be opened only after the ney had been played by its owner for some time to allow the embouchure to settle.

The relational (*izahi*) and temporal dimensions of these improvised adjustments are thus entangled with the player's ever-evolving kinaesthetic relationship with the reed. The tuning of the ney is a creative event that extends well beyond the initial contact with the instrument. In similar fashion to electric guitarists who are known to be always modifying their guitars, amplifiers, and pedals to manipulate their acoustic force, ney makers, who are, in most cases, also neyzens, continue to make alterations to their neys (e.g. resizing the bore or modifying the height of the mouthpiece) in progress with their

changing dialogue with the reed. Ironically, the very obduracy of the reed, in this sense, offers much discretion to the maker, maximizing opportunities for directly intervening in the instrument's design form.

What is essential here is that these skilled adjustments are never applied mechanically, even if, through years of tactile and sensory engagement with their material, master craftsmen develop intimate knowledge of what are called tuning tendencies. Treating each reed/player as a self-contained (*müstakil*<sup>5</sup>) human/nonhuman agent, the practitioners 'join with and follow', to use Ingold's words, 'the forces and flows of material that bring the form of the work into being' (2011: 13). Creative agency is neither a property of the reed, nor is it something that resides with the craftsman. It is the product of a series of negotiations between them (Malafouris 2013). Fuyubi Nakamura (2007) makes a similar observation in her study of Japanese calligraphic writing, where improvised creativity entails becoming responsive to the properties of materials – brush, paper, ink, ink stone – with which the calligrapher works. Although these materials cannot be fully tamed, she says, given each exerts its own force over the writing process, agency is not something that shifts from the calligrapher to the self-generative capacity of these tools. 'The interaction between personal agency (the calligrapher and his techniques) and the agency of things (nature of materials) results in new types of works', she argues (2007: 95).

Equally significant, human intentionality part-constitutes the agency of things. The phenomenological approach is helpful here as it alerts us to 'consciousness's *constitution* of the meaning of the "world" ... through intentional acts and thoughts, by which "objectivity" – the act of positing the sense, value, and significance of those things for one's self – is constituted out of subjectivity' (Houston 2021: 40, original emphasis). Alison Leitch's work on marble mining in the Italian city of Carrara illuminates this point. Leitch describes how the agency and material affordances of marble are perceived and recruited in different ways according to the intentions of the quarry workers or sculptors who work with it. 'Just as the quarry foreman dreams at night of carving out the mountain', she writes, 'the sculptor dreams of rocks that weep, and, of releasing sexual energy into the stone' (2010: 73). In similar vein, while the multiple utility of the reed possesses generative force over the terms of its making, the same reed appears differently to the poetic imagination of the great Sufi mystic Rumi. The opening couplets of his *magnus opus Mesnevi* immortalize the reed as the 'perfect human' (*insan-ı kâmil*) into whom the Divine blows his or her breath. For Rumi, just as the reed is now parted from its reedbed, so the human soul is separated from its original source: each yearns for reunification. In short, the plentiful materiality of the reed matters, as do the intentions of users that constitute its purpose and meaning.

### From workshop to classroom

Although an expert ney maker, with fine adjustments, can tune several notes to perfection, this does not guarantee that the ney's remaining notes will also be fully in tune. As a matter of fact, this is hardly ever the case. Even the 'best'-tuned neys often mislead the player in getting the pitches right. As ney musicians say, 'Because there is no perfect ney, the neyzen has to become perfect'.

Similar to the atelier, the lesson room is a 'playground' where the idiosyncrasies shaping the ney's sonic capacities must be attended to at all times. Masters often warn their students that the ney is a 'flawed' instrument, and when it comes to obtaining the right note, one should not count on its physical structure. Unlike, say, the piano, the ney

has no ‘machine-like accuracy’ (Machover 2007: 16). Nor does its non-standard form allow precision in executing pitches (*perde*), unlike the *bağlama*, the long-necked lute, which literally takes its name from the frets tied on its body. Martin Stokes notes that

an important element of the rhetoric which surrounds the playing of the *bağlama* is its logical and systematic organization as a musical instrument . . . Teaching upon the instrument stresses logic (*mantık*) at every turn. The fingering . . . is not left to chance or individual whim but systematized according to precise rules (1992: 71).

By contrast, with the ney, primacy is placed on the player’s aural perceptions to get the pitch relations right for there is no direct march between a tone hole and correct pitch. If a good *bağlama* player ‘is often said to play with the precision of a machine’ (Stokes 1992: 98), what credits a neyzen is how well she or he sustains intonational effectiveness given the lack of full guidance from the instrument. As the acclaimed composer-vocalist Alâeddin Yavaşca (1926–2021), who over the long course of his musical career was accompanied by many ney players, remarked to me during an interview: ‘The pitches of a neyzen must be precise [*kâti*] and reliable [*güvenilir*]. The ney is not for everyone to play’.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the physical differences between the *bağlama* and ney partly contributed to their remarkably different trajectory in the early decades of the Republic when the Kemalist nation-builders pursued a revolution in music. Fuelled by positivist-modernist tenets, this top-down transformation of the artistic sphere by the state envisioned the creation of a ‘modern’ field of music-making wherein a ‘systematic’ and ‘rational’ approach to musical performance and pedagogy reigned. As Stokes (1992) points out, the high esteem attributed to the ‘logical’ and ‘rational’ organization of the *bağlama* earned it, in the eyes of the reformers, the status of a ‘national’ sonic icon. By contrast, their selective Eurocentrism connected Ottoman-Turkish art music and the perceived affect of its chief instruments with a very different set of meanings. The Republican intellectual Ahmet Ağaoğlu asserted that ‘the tunes of the ney, its complaining, all those “*ah*” [sounds] of the oud, are the moaning of the East oppressed for centuries’ (cited in Ayas 2014: 177). The official rhetoric of the reformers constituted Ottoman music as ‘backward’ and ‘irrational’, while condemning its apprenticeship-based teaching from master to pupil as ‘unscientific’ (Ayas 2014: 172–3).

By contrast, back in my lesson room, in being somatically attended to, the sonic imprecisions of the ney are brought to the attention of students, disclosed as a pedagogical element that facilitates vital opportunities for discretionary action. To repeat what my teacher told us on a range of occasions:

Music is about judging the right distance between any two notes. The instrument in your hand doesn’t give you that distance. You must know how to bring two notes into a good relationship, not the ney.

The right pitch must be in your ear, otherwise you end up playing the note on the ney. There is no bad ney, only an incompetent neyzen.

Ney is an accident-prone [*netameli*] instrument. Only playing it with ear will get you to the right pitch.

A competent player finds the right note even in a badly tuned ney. This is why neyzenes know music well; the ney educates them.

As Salih Hoca’s spoken words illuminate, the ‘glitch’ integral to the reed’s form means that ney playing demands a relatively larger input from the musician’s body than is the case with, say, the Ottoman *tanbur*, whose fretted long neck physically ‘contains’ all





Figure 3. Neyzen Salih Bilgin. (© Hezarfen Ney School, reproduced with permission.)

microtones peculiar to the Ottoman art music system. Ney musicians not only take pride in this peculiar feature of ney artistry, but also accentuate its pleasurable role in leaving it up to the ear to explore and discern the right pitch. This freedom to explore is not without ‘servitude’, or a social context. The path to create flavoursome pitch relations, as with any other aesthetic element of ney playing, goes via the royal road of copying. Rooted in the long-term master-apprentice learning relationship, the pedagogical method of mastering the ney – known as *meşk* – is primarily one of demonstration and imitation (Behar 2012). Sitting side-by-side with the master and receiving the ‘right’ pitch directly from them, the novice comes to learn the mechanics of bringing his or her sound and sensori-motor actions into ‘alignment’ (Ingold 2011; Wenger 1998) with that of the master. In our own communal lessons with Salih Hoca (Fig. 3), where there was no attempt to demarcate learners according to their proficiency – both a fresh neophyte and someone apprenticing with him for years would share the same joint lesson – he would listen to those students willing to exhibit their playing in front of the class, comment on their playing, and re-demonstrate the correct modes of articulation on his own ney. This routine would be repeated until the student’s ‘copy’ satisfied his taste. Surrendering one’s will to the authority of the *hoca*, and sonic fidelity to the master’s musical expression and personal style, are both implicated as core artistic and ethical sensibilities of this social world.

Reproducing the master’s sonic traces is a whole-body experience. This requires a series of minute kinaesthetic actions that allow the player to compensate for the reed’s foibles: knowing how to angle lips on the embouchure hole; how much pressure to exert on it; how to position the head; how to adjust the fingering technique – all of which must be harmonized to work together. As Yuehping Yen notes for Chinese calligraphy, what is being ‘copied’ in the process is not so much the ‘spatial layout of strokes in the model work’. Rather, she says, ‘through copying the outward appearance of a past

master's writing the apprentice is in fact copying the master's bodily propensities of movement' (2005: 120). The creative act of imitating the sonic movement from one pitch to the other, and the breath stroke enabling it, is no different.

However, an added complexity here is the tension between the aural knowledge acquired through listening to and observing the master's real-time performance and the semiotic directions of the notation, a key pedagogical tool integral to the learning practice. As novices learn how to align their body techniques with that of the master, they must also learn how to problem-solve the blind spots of the notation, a condition that further contributes to ambiguity in locating the right pitch. I turn to this issue next.

### Creative engagement with notation

Musicians' reflective dialogue with notation has been a fertile topic in musicology and ethnomusicology, often situated within broader debates around musical transmission, literacy, and transcription (Iguchi 2008; Lawson 2010; Seeger 1958). As a large body of research across different artistic genres has indicated, any musical notation, being a symbolic and static abstraction/reduction, is 'incomplete' (Halliwell 1994), 'diversely interpreted' and 'improvised' by individual musicians' (Iguchi 2008: 260). For instance, Laudan Nooshin's (2003) work on Iranian classical music demonstrates how improvisation is integral to musicians' performance of the composed and notated repertoire. Creative engagement with notation in Western classical music is not that different. Daniel Barenboim's remark attests to this: '[T]he score is not the truth. The score is not the piece', he says. 'The piece is when you actually bring it into sound' (Barenboim & Said 2004: 33). Each time a piece is brought to life, it is given a new meaning, a creative response to what Barenboim calls the essential 'unrepeatability' of music as it unfolds in real time.

Over and above the artistic liberties that go into the act of interpreting any notated music, another complexity is added to lineage musicians' interactions with the 'text' in the case I discuss here. This involves their conscious constitution, and subsequently their intentional resolving, of what we might call the score's 'translation failure'. Although historically notation had found limited use in the culture of Ottoman art music, the emergent standardization of musical performance in the early twentieth century in the form of ensembles and the incorporation of the teaching of this music into academic institutions have made notation a standard practice in music education. Designed as a modified version of Western staff notation, the standard musical system in Turkey today has developed a range of symbolic strategies in order to visually capture the microtonal pitches peculiar to the *makam* (musical modes) structure of Ottoman-Turkish music.<sup>7</sup> One strategy is the invention of the notational concept of *koma* (roughly equivalent to one-ninth of a whole tone)<sup>8</sup> and its entextualization in an array of special symbols as measurement devices to quantify, objectify, and standardize the value of each microtonal interval. Yet even with these adaptations made to account for microtones, the grids of staff notation still lean towards a certain scale-oriented rigidity that misses the pitch subtleties of the *makam* system.<sup>9</sup>

How do master musicians respond to, or even exaggerate, this useful 'gap' between theoretical and practical knowledge? Here the score's muting of pitch subtleties poses less of a problem than it does, say, in the case of efforts that go into transcribing certain intractable musical elements of a recorded tune (Winkler 1997). The point to stress here is not that one must 'avoid the temptation of thinking of the notation as a substitute for the music itself' – the conclusion that Peter Winkler (1997: 197) arrives at after his own

painstaking efforts of transcribing a jazz piece – but how this gap is actually *desired* and consciously constituted by the ney masters. It was precisely this ‘gap’ that became a primary focus of attention in our lessons with Salih Hoca.

Let me cite something typical from my field notes:

*Tonight, I played an instrumental piece in the makam Uşşak. Hoca listened to my playing of the first section and, dissatisfied with my pitch (perde<sup>10</sup>) articulation, he commented in response:*

*So far you played the score, but not the makam. If you want to bring the makam to life, you must avoid playing the score. The score tells you to play each one of these segahs (B one-comma flat, B♭) with the same degree. But you must render each one of them slightly differently depending on the melodic progression, and the specific tonal relationships characteristic of the makam. Uşşak likes that segah flatter than other makams, when the melodic direction is in descending order. Making that adjustment is essential to the creating of the flavour of the makam, to bringing out its affective state (hâl). If you ask the mathematical value of that flatness, it has no value that can be known as such. Its value must be in your ear ... In this music we can play the pitches, but we cannot write them down. Pitches like segah exist in playing, but not in the score.*

Salih Hoca’s words point towards two different ways of knowing pitch relationships. Music theory calls this relationship the ‘interval’ (*aralık*) and directs the player’s attention to a series of consecutive notes laid out in space, each charged with an objective meaning independent of the melodic movements essential to the creation of a *makam*. By contrast, the practical knowledge of the master directs attention to the sonic-affective form of the *makam* as an organic whole, hearing not its note-for-noteness but how it behaves as a single form. Here each tonal relationship (the word Salih Hoca uses is ‘*münasebet*’, meaning relation or connection) gains its subjective meaning from this larger web of sonic relationality. A *makam* is brought to life from the dynamic and ever-shifting movements between the pitches (among other things), not by following in the footsteps of the ‘lifeless’ scale that becomes the visual focus in a score. Or we might say, if the scale is ‘form’, to bring forth a *makam* is akin to ‘form-giving’ (Ingold 2011: 210). Indeed, some *makams* share the same identical scale (e.g. the *makams* *Beyati* and *Uşşak*), yet the crafting of their sonic and emotional efficacy demands different kinds of tonal manipulations and pitch inflections, nuances about which the score is silent.

To turn again to our calligraphy analogy, just like no written character on the paper is a ‘law’ unto itself, no pitch stands alone in the melodic terrain. ‘Each is situated in a web of calls and responses, actions and reactions’ (Yen 2005: 97). Salih Hoca himself often made an analogy with the Islamic calligraphic inscriptions that adorned the walls of our lesson room, approaching them as vital visual tools to communicate his verbal instructions: ‘Bend that note like the curving line of that و [the Arabic letter *vav/waw*] in the inscription up there’; ‘Notice how one character lends itself onto the next’; ‘Think of creating the *makam* like creating form in *hat* [calligraphic writing]’. In each skilled act, the weaving of intra-character bonds requires a continuous modification of individual parts for the sake of accommodating the visual/aural integrity of the larger form. For the reader/performer, then, reading the ‘text’ is more an act of ‘problem-solving’ than deciphering. One must constantly assess how much to abide by the instructions of the score and manipulate them in the actual time of playing.

A key question becomes, therefore, how much amending is permissible? Although musicians agree that *makams* have distinguishing flavours that cannot be pinned down to fixed symbols, they do not shape them in the same manner. Different artistic lineages

(*silsile*) – growing webs of master-pupil relationships – have their own preferences for creating subtly different pitch articulations. Indeed, pitch aesthetics is one of the key markers of artistic styles in ney musicianship. For example, when playing in the *makam Suzinak*, Salih Hoca would want us to play the pitch *hisar* (E 4 *koma* flat, E♭) flatter than it appears in the notation. When playing in the *makam Hüz zam*, the same pitch had to be rendered sharper than it appears on the score. These would be presented as the binding ‘house rules’ of the musical-kinship group rather than as mere artistic choices of the master. In the following lesson example, Salih Hoca listens to a fellow student rehearse a compositional piece set in the *makam Hicaz*, a favourite mode in music traditions throughout the Middle East (and one of the five modes in which the call to prayer is recited in Turkey). Commenting upon his playing, he says:

Some of your pitches came out well but be careful with how you create the *Hicaz* flavour. The score indicates the *Hicaz* interval on *dügah* [A] as A, B♭, C#, D. But none of the neyzens trained in our *tavır* [style] would play that pitch *dik kürdi* [B♭, B 4 *komas* flat] that flat. That flatness goes against our ear. When we used to play *Hicaz* with my teacher [Neyzen Niyazi Sayın], he would sometimes say to us: ‘You have the freedom to play *dik kürdi* [B♭] as high as *buselik* [B]’. The *makam* gives you that freedom to amend the note everywhere the melodic flow allows it.

Now how is it possible to put such a volatile [*değişken*] pitch into writing? Its value has no equivalence in the notation. And it shouldn’t, in my opinion. This way, it is up to our discretion to discern the value of the pitch. This does not mean that we should avoid learning the theoretical rules of music. Nothing in the universe is without rules. Everything has its own sharia [law]. In music, too, every *makam* has its own rules, a combination of tetrachords and pentachords that comprise it. You will learn these, but when it comes to playing, your ear will be your reference.

These spoken words raise a number of interrelated points. In the first half of his speech act, refusing to limit himself to the pre-determined instructions of the score, Salih Hoca deconstructs notation as an inexact tool, and in doing so, he gives himself the authority to explore and discern musical meaning for himself. As his comment reveals, this ‘self’ is both an individual *and* a communal self, a self already in a web of lineage sociality. Unlike in the case of jazz pedagogy, for instance, where a high premium is placed on the creation of a unique personal sound (Wilf 2014a: 119–21), in ney pedagogy the regeneration of a collective sound is also a virtue. Wilf’s anthropological work on academic jazz programmes in America records the educators’ concern over the increased reliance on notated music in contemporary jazz training and the ramifications of this pedagogical shift on students’ capacity to cultivate a distinct style (2014a: 120). Although notation is not a neutral tool here either, for ney lineage masters its representational limitations are not necessarily a source of anxiety. On the contrary, it is precisely the limitations of the standardized instructions of notation that make it a perfect instructive tool in this case, as the limited nature of the score – or its constitution as such – makes multiple interpretations about pitch value plausible. Artist lineages, in this sense, do not exist in a diagram in a book on the history of Ottoman-Turkish music. As self-regulating institutions, they exist through their mobilizing of the perceptions of students, and in creating people who hear and sound out the world in a particular way.

The second half of Salih Hoca’s speech above reveals to us more than just a lack of anxiety concerning the ubiquity of notation. Not only does he make a generative connection between the notation’s insufficiency and the discretionary (*tasarruf*) capacities this potentially fosters in musicians, but he also puts forward an ontological understanding of music as a kind of knowledge that cannot be pinned

down or conform to a pre-determined framework (even when the musical act involves performing existing repertoire). Over and beyond the authoritative position that lineages occupy in shaping melodic and stylistic contours of music, there is still an ambiguity that comes with the difficulty of measuring and objectifying the value of a pitch. Pitches are fuzzy, with a live edge, and *makam* subtleties cannot be contained within the rigid boundaries of the five-line staff. In direct contrast to the *bağlama* musicians whom Stokes tells us about, here we are presented with a discourse about *makam* music that cannot be known and taught via a scientific and systematic approach.

These points connect more deeply with the question of what exactly is achieved through the act of reading. Above, the master makes no dichotomy between the rule-based knowledge mediated by the notational system – the sharia of music, as he likens it – and the aural knowledge learned contextually and mimetically. The former does not threaten, obscure, or override the latter mode of learning, but complements and reinforces it, fulfilling the role of a flawed visual aid. Thus, the skill of reading a score entails a phenomenological act of an ongoing interpretation by means of which the player makes sense of the ‘text’ in light of the aural perceptions acquired through listening and imitation. One must become fluid in ‘individualizing’ the score’s instructions by aligning them with the aural form of the master’s pitches. In her study on memory, orality, and literacy in medieval Europe, Mary Carruthers calls this ongoing alignment work ‘mak[ing] one’s reading one’s own’ (2008: 148). *Memoria*, in her account, ‘unites written with oral transmission’ (2008: 153), rather than the written making the oral obsolete.<sup>11</sup> In the same vein, the ney pedagogy unites the sensory medium of the eye with the ear, and reading with interpretation, operationalizing them both in teaching students how to make use of their discretionary capacities. The function that notation serves, in this sense, is neither ‘prescriptive’ nor ‘descriptive’, as Charles Seeger’s (1958) distinction suggests.<sup>12</sup> Shifting our attention from the notational work to the musicians’ *experience* of it, we get a better sense of the *interpretive* and *explorative* function that reading fulfils here.

### **Artistic exploration, freedom of discernment, musical pleasure**

To summarize what emerges from the analysis so far, both reeds and written scores must be sonically manipulated in their playing or reading, and education in (using) them fosters a freedom over and above the productive strictures that they set. The perspective developed in this article is not to argue that these tools themselves are ambiguous. Ambiguity is not the same as inexactitude, imprecision, or idiosyncrasy. As the ethnographic snapshots from the lesson room have illuminated, ambiguity in this instance derives from a significant degree of uncertainty concerning what the right pitch relationship is, or should be, for neither the reed nor the notation fully satisfies the specific – or exact – tonal and melodic demands of the *makam*.

This situation of uncertainty, however, is not an accidental contingency or an inevitable shadow that shifts the material conditions beyond one’s control. Throughout this article, I have sought to emphasize the intentionality on the part of the lineage masters in creating a wilful space for ambiguity in their teaching practice as an instructive force. This intentional attitude becomes more evident when we consider that not all ney teaching methods follow this path. For example, in the lessons I participated in at three different adult education centres sponsored by local Istanbul municipalities, a different kind of creative engagement with the notation guided the learning process.<sup>13</sup> There – in each place, the instructor had graduated from a conservatory and was well

trained in *makam* music – musical competence lay in learners' ability to reproduce the written in sound, not in becoming adept at manipulating it.

Why, then, this openness towards ambiguity (reinforced in specific pedagogical contexts)? What generative role does ambiguity play in the learning environment examined here? One key conclusion to draw out is the interpretive possibilities and sense of artistic autonomy that ambiguity enables. At its core, the purposeful exploitation of this absence of exactitude opens up a space for (guided) self-exploration by licensing the disciplined player to discern the musical 'truth' for him- or herself. This freedom of discernment is precisely what Ingold terms as the 'freedom of habit' (2018: 46), grounded in attention to the tendencies of material things and responsive to the way they are going. Rather than an unfortunate constraint, ambiguity is a welcome material condition that bolsters this freedom from *within*, a freedom that maximizes possibilities for interpretive action and, in doing so, allows autonomous lineage institutions to regenerate their 'ways'. As I have mentioned, the affordances of freedom are not the same for everyone at the same time. One gains permission to exercise interpretive liberties only once having been thoroughly disciplined in the lineage's ways. As one neyzen put it to me, 'The dervish who cares for the *tekke* [Sufi lodge] gets to drink the soup. Years later you drink that soup'. The key point here is how the pedagogy equips players with a capacity to work with non-standard versions of 'musical sharia', and frees them from a word of singular absolutes.

Musical apprenticeship at Hezarfen scaffolded students' explorative capacities in other ways as well. Most importantly, ambiguity was structured not only into the musical practice of playing, as we have seen, but also into the verbal architecture of its teaching. During our long listening lessons designed more or less in a *sohbet*<sup>14</sup> (conversation) style, Salih Hoca would improvise his words just like music: an instruction about the tonal intricacy of a *makam* would come in the form of a Sufi tale or, at other times, a comment about cooking would deliver a technical point. 'Think about how much onion you put into a stew', Salih Hoca instructed me. 'Getting the value of that pitch right is like getting the flavour of the dish right'. Making abundant use of metaphor and analogy, and criss-crossing between music and everyday life, the speech economy of the pedagogy took pleasure in keeping the meaning of its language-games open-ended, enticing a multitude of possibilities of meaning. Let me give just one example from a regular lesson to illuminate my point. Salih Hoca said,

The real ney is this ney, friends [pointing at his own body]: this ney [pointing at the ney in his hand] is a symbol. We should aim to get a good sound from this ney [human-ney] so that this ney [instrument-ney] also sounds good. Achieving a beautiful sound is a precious thing. This because there is a real neyzen who blows into this ney [human being], a neyzen who plays us. 'I breathed life into you, and now you breathe life into the things I said', says that neyzen to us.

What matters here is not the intrinsic truth of the analogy made, but how the language of analogy licenses the listener to *explore* and interpret the meaning of spoken words beyond and behind the surface of plain words. In the process of comprehending the statement, I reconstruct its meaning by bringing to bear a great deal of what I already know, not just about music but about the world. What I invoke is perceptual and experiential, mediated by my past horizons. According to Ahmed, it is precisely this endeavour of constitution that makes ambiguity an essential device for what he calls 'explorative [Islamic] discourses'. Explorative discourse, he explains, 'does not seek to prescribe a single meaning', but rather 'explores a range of possible meanings'

and 'is prepared to leave those meanings both unsettled and unsettling' (2016: 284). The overriding concern of such reasoning is not prescription, but to give licence to explore by oneself (2016: 282-3). Ahmed's point illuminates the productive work that ambiguity performs in the explorative registers of Islam, including not only music, but also the discursive-pedagogical practice of *sohbet* ('companionship-in-conversation', as Silverstein [2008: 121] translates it) that was playfully deployed by Salih Hoca, and formed the backbone of his lessons. In response, a good number of my fellow students hardly ever brought their ney to the studio, but yet never missed a single lesson. It was the pleasure of listening that they took from those *sohbet* lessons where commitment to learning was anchored.

In the same way, the making of musical meaning for oneself is where the pleasures of music-making lie. Just as an apt metaphor moves us by putting a word-spin on the world, 'playing' with the pitches allows the pleasure of improvisational creativity. The profound pleasure that ney musicians find in the perversity of their musical tools articulates with the explorative improvisations they exert upon them. Salih Hoca tells us this first-hand:

One could look at this [in this instance, the limitations of the notation] in two ways. One is to say it's a problem; another is to say it is richness. For me, it is the latter. Because it leaves it to your discretion to work out the right pitch ... Sometimes it is your mood that affects how you shape a pitch. That gives us pleasure.

This experience of pitching for oneself kickstarts the affective dimensions of autonomy: autonomy as an emotion rather than an outcome of practical arrangements. Pleasure (*keyif*) is an important mood in becoming a neyzen. This involved not only learning to take pleasure from the qualities of the reed and score, but also an experience of learning that could extend to taking pleasure in Istanbul itself, as apprenticeship enabled willing ney students to explore and appreciate the urban affordances of the city. To weave fine tonal relationships between the pitches, one also had to learn, among other things, where to purchase the best tools to make a ney, where to drink the best coffee or eat the best *kurufasulye* (white beans), and how to take pleasure from material craft objects such as calligraphy. The pleasure to be experienced from such practices is not separate from or a backdrop to learning. It is an affective quality of 'corresponding' with others (tools, the city, lineage, etc.).

In short, ambiguity can be a constructive condition for developing autonomy and ownership of skilled knowledge, while demonstrating the uncontainability of music. For ney players, the ambiguity co-created by their musical tools directly speaks to the core values energizing the social world of their craft, including the act of careful listening and exact imitation acquired through years of apprenticeship with a master, as well as the skill of developing one's own interpretation and style. As Jackson (1982) notes, for Kuranko people, play with ambiguity is the path to clarity; an exploration into the possibilities of ethical social life. Here ambiguity maximizes affordances for interpreting, imagining, and practising the arts of life. Rather than a curse to be countered, it is a promise to be taken up.

### Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Michael Jackson, Christopher Houston, Eve Vincent, Anna-Karina Hermkens, and Daniel Tranter for their invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this article. I am also very grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their extremely useful

suggestions. Special thanks to Neyzen Salih Bilgin and other neyzens for letting me share their world of ney music.

Open access publishing facilitated by Macquarie University, as part of the Wiley - Macquarie University agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> There is definitional conflict over the naming of this musical genre. In this article, I will use the label 'Ottoman-Turkish art music' to refer to it.

<sup>2</sup> By contrast, some market-oriented organizational discourses present ambiguity as a major problem for decision-making and strategic action (Jarzabkowski, Sillince & Shaw 2010), an 'ugly' condition (Alvesson & Sveningsson 2003) in which modern institutions operate, and something to be barely 'tolerated' (Davenport & Leitch 2005) if not eliminated. Such discourse circulates widely in contemporary media, framing 'ambiguity tolerance' as the most sought-after 'soft skill' in business life: 'How do we train ourselves to cope well with ambiguity?', 'Grooming leaders to handle ambiguity', 'Overcome ambiguity to improve performance', and so on. See, for example: <https://high5test.com/uncertainty-relieve-stress/>; <https://hbr.org/2010/07/grooming-leaders-to-handle-ambiguity>; <https://www.projectinsight.net/blogs/project-management-tips/overcome-ambiguity-to-improve-performance> (all accessed 17 February 2022).

<sup>3</sup> A parallel argument can be found in Victor Turner's essay on *liminal sacra* among the Ndembu. There, Turner (1967: 103-5) points to how the chaotic, ambiguous elements in initiation masks inspire neophytes to discern meaning in them and, in so doing, bring into self-conscious focus certain 'key elements of their culture'.

<sup>4</sup> The Turkish notation system is a perfect fifth higher than the notation system used in Arabic *maqam* music.

<sup>5</sup> This approach is literally manifest in the name given to the hole-opening method that has been traditionally in use in ney making: *müstakil açkı* (self-contained tuning) (see Tan 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Given its fixed pitch structure, the ney has been a preferred choice in ensembles for obtaining the reference pitch.

<sup>7</sup> Known as the Ezgi-Arel-Uzdilek system, this notation is a product of the musicological work of Suphi Ezgi and Hüseyin Sadettin Arel in their respective works *Ameli ve nazari Türk musikisi* (Practical and theoretical Turkish music), published in five volumes between 1933 and 1953, and *Türk musikisi nazariyatı dersleri* (Lessons in Turkish music theory), from 1968. According to established music theory, a scale consists of twenty-four unevenly placed tones, containing not only whole and half tones, but also microtones.

<sup>8</sup> According to music theory, a note is flattened or sharpened by the use of 1, 4, 5, or 8 *koma*. The accidentals indicating the flattening and sharpening of a note are: to lower:  $\flat$  (1 *koma*),  $\flat\flat$  (4 *koma*),  $\flat\flat\flat$  (5 *koma*),  $\flat\flat\flat\flat$  (8 *koma*); to raise:  $\sharp$  (1 *koma*),  $\sharp\sharp$  (4 *koma*),  $\sharp\sharp\sharp$  (5 *koma*),  $\sharp\sharp\sharp\sharp$  (8 *koma*).

<sup>9</sup> Ethnomusicologist Scott Marcus's work on how the same 'problem' unfolds in Egyptian *makam* music offers an excellent analysis on this topic. His discussion shows the creative responses of musicians to this problem, who, he writes, 'developed their own performers' vocabulary, a metatheory, so that they could express their own understandings about intonation' (1993: 40).

<sup>10</sup> Because some names used for *makams* and *perde* are identical, to avoid confusion, *makam* names are written with a capital letter.

<sup>11</sup> On the topic of orality/literacy dichotomy, see also Feld (1986) and Lawson (2010).

<sup>12</sup> For Seeger, prescriptive transcription entails 'a blueprint of how a specific piece of music shall be made to sound' while descriptive music writing is 'a report of how a specific performance of it actually did sound' (1958: 184).

<sup>13</sup> The full name of this organization is the Art and Vocational Training Courses of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (ISMEK). Established in 1996 under the Welfare Party, and having grown exponentially since then, today ISMEK offers skilled training in more than 600 fields of activity. Ney learning has been particularly popular in these educational sites, taken up by hundreds of thousands of Istanbul residents each year, both men and women.

<sup>14</sup> On the pedagogical significance of *sohbet* in ney education, see Şenay (2015; 2020: 115-38).

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## Les plaisirs de l'ambiguïté : pédagogie et apprentissage musical dans un studio artistique d'Istanbul

### Résumé

« Gérer l'ambiguïté » est devenu une préoccupation majeure dans de nombreuses sphères de la vie contemporaine, souvent présentée comme un « outil de survie » dans un monde incertain. Travailler avec l'ambiguïté joue également un rôle essentiel dans la pédagogie musicale du ney ottoman-turc (flûte de roseau soufflé), dont l'auteur expose ici la façon de jouer. Plutôt qu'une contrainte ou une carence à résoudre, dans le contexte de l'apprentissage du ney, l'ambiguïté apparaît comme une force pédagogique souhaitée, non seulement valorisée mais aussi délibérément amplifiée. L'objectif est de montrer comment l'ambiguïté est embrassée ici comme une condition productive optimisant les possibilités d'exploration artistique, la liberté de discernement et les plaisirs esthétiques.

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