



An Analysis of the Problems Zeki Müren's and Bülent Ersoy's Queer Masculinity/Femininity Performances

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Abstract

In Turkish culture people like to watch/listen musicians who owned arabesque and Turkish classical music as their music genre and we can show Zeki Müren and Bülent Ersoy as greatest examples for that kind of music. About these two musicians, there is another important issue. Both of them confused Turkish people's minds about traditional gender roles in Turkey; Zeki Müren known for his sexual orientation for young boys and feminine style and Bülent Ersoy had a gender-change surgery in 1981 -in England- and become a first trans-gendered singer in Turkish Republic. Both, Ersoy and Müren faced with problems in creation of coherent relationship between their musical performances and private life. To add, their standpoint in front of LGBTI individuals differs into Turkish society. This article aims to explain and analyze the reasons behind several problems which related with queer performances of Ersoy and Müren by giving a brief description of their backgrounds and speeches.

Key Words: Queer Musicians, Zeki Müren, Bülent Ersoy, Turkish Music, LGBTI

Introduction

Turkish people always known for their strong emotional worlds, they would like to find themselves into the lyrics of songs, doesn't matter which genre they belonged. Western world identifies Turkish classical music and arabesque as traditional types of Turkish music, in addition to Turkish folk music, and they were partially right. Bülent Ersoy and Zeki Müren were seen

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as successful and popular representatives of Turkish classical music/arabesque music genres. Their music career intersected in Maksim Gazinosu (the most prestigious night club in İstanbul before late 1980s); once Ersoy was a second lead male singer, after Zeki Müren. Their relation in music also had an effect on their challenges in codes of masculinity in Turkey with their public character. The feminine image that Müren created was really extraordinary at his time - he was appeared in costumes or accessories that challenged established masculine dress codes; such as mini-shorts, ostrich feathers or sequins or wore hairstyles or bracelets and earrings that were normally seen on women. Ersoy had appropriated an image with which the audience was already familiar, through Zeki Müren, who maintained it until late 1960s, when he adopted a feminine style. It would not be wrong to say, while Müren was adopting a feminine image, Ersoy was taking on Müren's previous one (Altınay, 2008). To add, Selen Eser argues that their queer identity only can be existing on stage. The stage is a space that dilutes homophobia/transphobia, if not erasing it, until the end of a show. Queer bodies pertain to a subjectification onstage, as seen in the works of Müren and Ersoy as they sustain their absence off stage because of the subjectification that the queer entails. In Turkey, these performers fill a sense of lack by producing willful queer responses through their presence onstage and absence offstage. They do this through the very elements bound to notions of representation, such as language or discourse, and visibility or display. These two artists should therefore be understood as representing major challenges to heteronormativity when performing onstage, yet while offstage they subordinate themselves to queer repression (Eser, 2012).

In theoretical frame, their situation fits into Butler's identification of 'gender' in her work 'Gender Trouble'. We saw Butler used the term 'gender' as the process of producing sexed bodies; a way of understanding the structures of power that produce the category of women. Basically, she argues that gender is a kind of improvised performance and within this performance there are lots of ways of differentiating bodies but Western/dominant perspective chose characteristics to differentiate different bodies. In case of queer performances Butler identifies them as revealing the unspoken prohibitions on the basis of heterosexual gender identities, normative gender identities of all kinds, within a theoretical basement (Butler, 1990; Second edition 1999). As a queer performers, both Müren and Ersoy were constricted in their queer visibility by the strict gender roles of the Turkish society and its media tools. I will give a detailed background and details of their queer identity for each singer one by one.

Star performer Zeki Müren (1931-96) can perhaps memorialize as the most revered singer of Turkish classical music in Turkey, even the facts that his cross-dressed style during most of his musical performances and his ho-

mosexuality was an all but open secret. A star on the radio, screen, and television and at nightclubs, Müren queered Turkish masculinity—that is, he performed it convincingly, while also exposing its contradictions. His performances reproduce gender norms in such an ambiguous yet widely celebrated way that the very notion of masculinity comes to seem less oppressive in its demand for conformity. Over his career, he expanded his audience from the urban bourgeoisie who frequented upscale nightclubs, to the rural peasantry who increasingly attended his movies, and finally to include whole families, including children, in his audience through colorful televised music videos (Hawkins, 2016). Müren's artistic excellence in singing, together with his commitment to Turkish classical music, has been held in high regard, and in 1991, he was endowed with the honor of 'State Artist' for his lifetime of musical achievement. Also, he would be called as the "Sun of Art" (Sanat Güneşi), in Turkish society. Müren's iconic status as the Republican ideal of a well-spoken, educated and sophisticated modern Turkish man and gifted artist illustrates the complexity of national identity bound up with paradoxical conceptions of *transvestism* and masculinity. He not only introduced queer to Turkish audiences with his unique style in (cross) dressing but also pioneered the closeting of a public figure's same-sex desire. His gender and sexuality have been an issue of debate since his debut in an hour-long radio program at the beginning of his career in 1951, after which many listeners dwelled on his gender status: Was it a she or a he? (Kahraman, 2003). Müren had a long-term male partner (Fahrettin Arslan) which was locally known in Bodrum - popular touristic town on the Aegean Sea where Müren lived for most of his professional career (Stokes, 2003). After all, Müren never publicly identified himself as a homosexual; such a declaration would likely have negated his tactical moves aimed only one thing; to save his reputation. The Turkish mass media still behave suspiciously on his gender ambiguity and at times questioned him directly. In response, Müren asserted his masculinity under multiple pretexts. For example, responding to questions regarding his clothes, Müren declared, "If women wear trousers, does this mean they are all going to have sex-change operations, too? . . . I don't wear women's clothes. I wear the kind of clothes Caesar, and Baytekin, and Brutus wore" (Stokes, 2003). About Müren's way to save his reputation, Serkan Görkemli (2011) said: Müren's tactics to steer his public image clear of his homosexuality in this manner, through his claim to ancient, allegedly heterosexual masculinity, were also supported by other mass media representations. His films and the newspaper images of him with female stars were constantly available to his audience, fueling the assumption that he was heterosexual.

Bülent Ersoy (1952-present) began performing as a male singer in the restricted political atmosphere of the 1970s. Those years were marked by tensions between official state secularism and Islamism, leading to fears of a reli-

gious revolution, and violent confrontations between left and right wing political parties led to widespread destabilization. In 1971, the year that Ersoy made his first record, a military ultimatum set the stage for a coup as various revolutionary movements. When Ersoy was physiologically male, he would usually wear a white tuxedo or a dark suit and bow tie. Unlike Müren, at the time, he was never appeared in costumes or accessories that challenged established masculine dress codes. It was only after his hormone treatment began that he started to appear on stage in female attire. Arguably because Ersoy wanted to claim the female body, his costumes were particularly revealing. In 1980, after the military coup, when she was singing in a nightclub at the İzmir International Fair, Ersoy did not deny the audience and their desire to see her newly developing breasts. Proving her femininity in this way gave a big result to her - go in prison and served forty-five days inside (Altınay, 2008). In 1981, she went to sex change operation in England (London). This would change her life in ways that she probably never expected. Maybe the well-known speech of Simone de Beauvoir can perfectly describe the situation of Bülent Ersoy, and other transgendered women individuals – “one is not born, but rather, *becomes* a woman”. Even Ersoy had a quiet long journey to become a women, she denied her past. Rüstem Altınay (2008) identifies Ersoy as “a self-proclaimed expert on classical Ottoman music- one of the first Turkish men to undergo sex change and the very first one to ask for female passport, and a hater of transgendered prostitutes”. The issue of having a female passport for Ersoy, is highly political topic. In 1988, Ersoy was permitted by the neoliberal government of Turgut Özal to obtain a female ID and work in Turkey. It is clear that she had become a showpiece for the Özal government. Before her sex change operation, Ersoy was a very popular male singer and the public had been longing for her comeback as a female singer. Altınay (2008) identifies two different goals of Özal government by saying;

“... giving her a female ID and allowing her to perform in Turkey, the government achieved two goals. First, to increase their own legitimacy, they presented the case of Ersoy as expressing the epitome of personal freedom. Second, by granting Ersoy her work permit the Özal regime differentiated itself from the highly unpopular military regime that had preceded it“.

After the sex change operation, Ersoy was adopted the language of the heterosexist hegemony, develop survival tactics that actually reproduce this hegemony and its strategies rather than resisting against what she was suffered. This can be interpreted as a bargain with the hegemony. Also Rüstem Altınay believed that this bargain is what gives Ersoy’s story its particular significance. It is quite obvious that the political environment of Turkey forced Ersoy and Müren to act carefully. By saying ‘carefully’ I mean being careful in line with the frame of Turkish gender stereotypes. Turkish citizens

and politicians accepted their queer identity and mass media had a great role on this acceptance. In order to avoid an exclusion from the society, both Ersoy and Müren preferred not to support LGBTI members and other excluded groups, in presence of the mass media. In front of LGBTI community, Zeki Müren's partially gender neutral attitude looks better than Bülent Ersoy's insulting attitude towards same sex relationships and gender bender people, except herself (Altınay, 2008).

Discussions

To analyze more, I want to discuss about Bülent Ersoy's homophobic speeches (as a transgendered woman) and Zeki Müren's LGBTI supportive speech examples (even he never confessed that he was homosexual directly), which these two issues were quiet unusual in a context of queer musicians, from my perspective.

In a strict political atmosphere of Turkey in 1980s, Ersoy was the only person who had the power to have her voice heard, as a transgendered woman. What was striking in her attitude was that she was not making a claim in the name of queer people or the trans community—she was only trying to save herself. That makes her to be criticized by LGBTI members. One of Ersoy's speeches we found out a strange way to explain herself as a woman: “My mother thought I was a girl when she was pregnant with me. Maybe that is the reason why my male hormones did not develop.” In her speech, she was clearly rejecting her transgendered identity and the established gender codes. Ersoy's only desire is to be accepted as a woman, in front of the society. To add, she did not have any intention to fight against heterosexism. In one of her interviews with the newspaper *Günaydın* in 1981, Ersoy said: “The people whom I find most disgusting are homosexuals. I am so glad that I am not one” and claimed a female identity who owned a homophobic view. Ersoy might not have that kind of homophobic perspective in her personal life but in front of Turkish press she was acted according to save her professional life - as far as the court was concerned, her efforts were in vain: her performances were banned, and she was unable to work in Turkey, at past. Her right to work -a basic human right- had been violated and she had to work in Germany and France (in Altınay, 2008).

Bülent Ersoy was neither a young “flamboyant boy” nor “the *femme fatale*” in her early post-operation years. Although she was still loved dearly by her audience, her sex change operation was seen as a threat to the heterosexist patriarchal state hegemony during the military regime of 1980s. She was cornered and had to face the tools of the homophobic and transphobic regime, from medicine to law. When she was back on the stage, she did not use the power that she hold we can read in Altınay's criticism “she refused to

use her transgendered status as - as a way to challenge gender codes, heterosexism, patriarchy, nationalism, capitalism, or conservatism. Rather, she refused to acknowledge her transgendered status and gradually started to advance an identity as a conservative, Muslim, nationalist, upper-class woman". Many members of LGBTI community also had a same criticism about Bülent Ersoy but they were not aware of the reality of what Ersoy faced when she went beyond the borders which drawn by the Turkish society and the government (Altınay, 2008).

Discussions related with Ersoy still continuing in today's media. Once she claimed in a TV music competence programme that she would oppose her son to joining the army; facing immediate backlash by the public, at the beginning of 2000s. The discussion ended only after she gave a public apology. This is a strong reminding to her about the initial bargain: she would accept the norms in order to be accepted. Unfortunately, the more she reproduced the dominant discourses, including the homophobic and transphobic ones, the more social acceptance she enjoyed.

The homosexuality of Zeki Müren was always questioned since he cross-dressed during his stage performances. Kaan Arer (2015) analyzed speeches of Müren in his work and showed these two sentences as an example of homosexuality into Müren's speeches;

"I don't have a liberty to tell my love to my lover, like everyone else. I explored famous people of the world in area of art, more than %80 of them were gay, so that a person can have two souls together. I do not name it as a mistake, rather I named as a richness of soul. To have female and male souls at one time and live without disturbing anyone or not to be a wrong example through people around is a situation even not grounded by laws" (in Arer, 2015).

Discussion of Müren remarks on the apparent contradiction: he presents as queer or feminine in a culture with rigid norms of masculine dress—even for performers—yet is revered as a national treasure. Film historian Umut Tümsay Arslan draws on Nurdan Gürbilek's analysis of Turkey's "masculinizing struggle" to find in Müren's cinema appearances a figure who survived the abjectness of Turkish people masculinity. Zeki Müren's homosexuality was an open secret that produced what he had to offer the imagination:

He was never openly referred to as "gay." This censored text is constantly at work in Zeki Müren's image. While on the one hand enabling fears of effeminacy, loss of masculinity, or fixation in childhood to be played out in relation to domineering characters, this secrecy on the other hand, turns homosexuality into a libidinous investment that is not publically acceptable (Arslan, 2011).

Müren exhibited queer tendencies onstage but his closeted sexuality is part of the text and amounts to what Selen Eser called "work of sacrifice" where Müren's "gender ambivalence remained existential to his stage performance

and his work, for which he sacrificed his queer subjectivity offstage. Between the 'manly' and the 'unmanly', the ways by which he managed his queer subjectivity are emblematic, exemplary and perhaps indicative of an economy where his work of sacrifice was rendered valuable".

To add an important point, Göksenin Çakmak – very old close friend of Zeki Müren – gave an interview about his memories and private life of Zeki Müren in 2014. Çakmak identifies Zeki Müren as "passive gay" and underlined that the honesty is the reason of why did Turkish society loved Müren that much. He mentioned Müren's secret memories with many male partners in his interview (in Çınar, 2014).

After a performing career of over 40 years, Müren remains an icon and inspiration for younger artists and queers in Turkey (Eser, 2012). Müren recreated his life with his fascination for the stage. Even his death took place on stage. On 24 September 1996, he was called for an honorary ceremony by the state broadcaster (TRT), where he was presented with the microphone with which he first sang on the radio. Five minutes after this ceremony, while the live broadcast continued, he suffered from a heart attack and died on stage. His body was carried on the grave with prayers, mourned by crowds of fans from all sections of the Turkish society.

Conclusion

Even both of these two musicians can be categorized under the title of queer Turkish musicians, their treatments through Turkish society's recognition of LGBTI identity were differs, also, the thoughts of their homosexual and heterosexual audiences. For that, Fausto's statement from her book 'Sexing the body' fits very well. She stated that labelling someone as a man or a woman is a social decision (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Social decisions created the dualism between sex and gender and author mentioned about developmental system theorists who rejects dualisms at all. Also I think there is a dualism in comparison of Turkish society and LGBTI individuals' perspectives, but not a biological type. From the perspective of their heterosexual audience, Müren and Ersoy were loved as artists because of their musical success, mainly. However, as the discussion above illustrated, the maintenance of their status as household icons depended on what Rüstem Altınay (2008) calls a "bargain with the heterosexist hegemony"; that is- as Altınay said "they were popular and successful as long as they could project and reaffirm their audience's expectations regarding heterosexual normativity and gendered decency".

Furthermore, this bargain with the heterosexist hegemony worked for both musicians: Müren and Ersoy remained popular and enjoyed commercial success, while their heterosexual audience saw its values regarding gender and sexuality, religion, and nation, affirmed through their mass-mediated public

image and performances (Görkemli, 2011). From the perspective of the homosexual audience, Müren and Ersoy's bargain with the heterosexist hegemony is seen as having negative consequences for this particular segment of the Turkish audience, since it meant distancing, denial, and erasure of LGBTI existence, fueling heterosexism and homophobia in Turkish society. To return in main aim of this article, we can say that queer performances of Ersoy and Müren and their contributions stand in individual level rather than a massive support to overcoming Turkish society's gender stereotypes because of their personal struggles related with their music career, personal life and Turkish government.

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