

De wedergeboorte van de çeng in Schotland

Şirin Pancaroğlu houdt zich bezig met de reconstructie van de oude Turkse hoekharp

In haar onderzoek naar de harp in Azië viel het Anouk Platenkamp op dat er veel landen zijn die een geschiedenis met de harp hebben. Zo leerde zij de Turkse harpiste Şirin Pancaroğlu kennen, die in Turkije de laatste tien jaar het gebruik van de haakjesharp promoot. Ze ontmoetten elkaar op skype om het te hebben over de harp in Turkije. De geschiedenis van de harp in Turkije gaat terug tot aan het Ottomaanse rijk.

Is het gebruikelijk om harp te spelen in Turkije?

Nee, dat is niet gebruikelijk. De klassieke pedaalharp is ongeveer 80 jaar geleden in Turkije geïntroduceerd met de komst van conservatoria. De harp wordt dan ook gezien als een westers instrument en vooral gebruikt voor klassieke muziek. Toen ik zelf harp wilde leren spelen, begon ik meteen op de pedaalharp. Thuis hadden we een piano, die mijn moeder bespeelde, en een gitaar voor mijn vader. Ik begon op 5 jarige leeftijd met de piano. Als kind luisterde ik ontzettend graag naar muziek, vooral vertellingen met klassieke muziek erbij spraken tot mijn verbeelding. Toen ik toelatingsexamen tot het conservatorium van Istanbul deed werd ik in de klas van professor Sevin Berk geplaatst, de meest vooraanstaande harpist van Turkije. Ik koos er dus niet zelf voor om harp te gaan spelen, maar de harp werd voor me kozen. Maar het was wel liefde op het eerste gezicht! Ik heb twee jaar harp gestudeerd in Turkije, daarna verhuisde mijn familie naar Indonesië en kreeg ik de kans om in Geneve harp te studeren.

Maar voordat de pedaalharp in Turkije kwam kenden we al een soort hoekharp die tot ongeveer de 15e eeuw gespeeld werd, genaamd çeng. Van deze harp zijn nog afbeeldingen te vinden in de kunst uit die tijd, maar er zijn geen instrumenten bewaard gebleven.

Het is heel waarschijnlijk dat de çeng verdween omdat de muziek veranderde. Tegenwoordig kennen we in Turkije een gecompliceerd tonaal systeem dat erg anders is dan het systeem van de westerse muziek. In westerse muziek wordt een octaaf verdeeld in 12 delen (c, c#, d, d# etc.), in Turkije verdelen we een octaaf in 53 delen. De tonen die daaruit ontstaan noem ik vaak micro-tonen.

Turkse muziek wordt geschreven in een makam, dat is een soort toonladder. Er zijn meer dan 100 verschillende makams. Daarbij wordt gebruik gemaakt van ritmische patronen, usul genaamd, die kunnen tussen de 1 en 120 slagen hebben. Het systeem ontwikkelde zich in de loop van de tijd.

Om alle verschillende makams te kunnen spelen is het nodig dat je een instrument hebt dat hiertoe in staat

is. De çeng kon dit niet. Het instrument is maar klein en zou telkens bijgestemd moeten worden om alle makams te kunnen spelen, vooral ook omdat er op het instrument origineel geen haakjes zaten.

Tot ongeveer de 15e eeuw was de Turkse muziek minder ingewikkeld en bestonden er niet zo veel makams. Toen de muziek zich begon te ontwikkelen kon de çeng deze ontwikkelingen niet bijhouden en raakte in onbruik.

De laatste tien jaar houd jij je bezig met de reconstructie van de Turkse çeng. Hoe is dit zo gekomen?

Mijn interesse groeide zo'n tien jaar geleden. Ik zag afbeeldingen van de çeng en wilde meer weten over



Şirin Pancaroğlu

Interview with Sirin Pancaroglu

While doing research about the harp in Asia, I was astounded by the many countries that have a history with the harp. One unexpected surprise was when I found Turkish harpist Sirin Pancaroglu, who has been an advocate for the (lever) harp in Turkey in the past two decades or so. We met on skype to talk about the harp in Turkey, her history with the harp and the story of the Turkish harp, “the çeng”, which goes back to the Ottoman empire.

Could you tell us something about how you got started playing the harp?

When I started playing, I started on a pedal harp. Back in Istanbul in the late 70's there were only pedal harps to go around with. I was born in a home where there was a piano which had been passed on from my mother's childhood as well as a guitar, which was played by my father. I found myself playing the piano at age five. I was fascinated by music as a child. I loved listening to records of fairy tales being told with very suggestive symphonic music in the background. Later I took the entrance examinations to the conservatory in Istanbul and I was placed in the class of Prof Sevin Berk who was Turkey's foremost harpist back then. I did not exactly choose the harp myself but was rather chosen. It was love at first sight however! I studied the harp in Turkey for two years. And then in 1980, my family moved to Indonesia and I was sent to Switzerland, to the Geneva Conservatory to pursue my musical studies.

Is the harp a common instrument in Turkey?

It is not very common. The classical harp was introduced about 80 years ago or so when the conservatories were founded. It is mainly a western instrument used for classical music. Before the classical harp there was a type of angular harp that was played in this geography until about the 15th century, called the çeng. An obsolete instrument from the 15th century onwards, the çeng is a tiny lap-harp which has its roots in Mesopotamia, going back 2000 years B.C. I have always been inspired by its beauty and the wonderful book by 15th century Turkish poet, Ahmed-i Daî, whose “Çengname” (The Book of the Çeng) has always fueled my imagination. This type of harp was frequently depicted in artwork, namely medieval book illustrations. That is how we know it was played, but there are no surviving original instruments. It is very likely that the harp disappeared because of how the music changed with time.

Turkish music is based on a quite different system from western music. While western music divides a whole tone in two (c,c#,d), Turkish music has microtones within a whole tone with much smaller intervals than a half step. Beyond this, Turkish music uses “makams” for organizing pitches and scales and “usul” to organize the rhythmic structure of music. There are 100 makams in use in today's music and a wealth of rhythmic patterns ranging from 1 to 120 beats per unit. This system developed over time. In order to play a makam, you need an instrument that is able to produce all intervals (microtones). The çeng was not made to do this as it is a very ancient and primitive instrument. The instrument is small and one would constantly need to change tuning in order to play all the makams, especially since there were not even levers to use at the time the çeng was played. Until about the 15th century Turkish music was less complicated and did not have so many makams yet, but once the music started to develop in terms of intervals, the çeng was no longer able to keep up which is likely why it fell out of use.

Over the last decade or so you have been working on reconstructing the Turkish harp. How did you get started on that?

My interest started to grow about 10 years ago. I kept seeing the çeng depicted in miniature paintings ever since I was a child. Those are basically medieval book illustrations. I wanted to know more about its origins and how it sounded. Obviously it was a local historical harp I thought! In the late 1990's I saw someone play a çeng in a historical music ensemble, which was made by a Turkish instrument maker, but this person did not want to share his knowledge with me. This is why I started experimenting with the instrument myself. I started out by studying the pictures I could find. These all show a small instrument which was played seated, with the body of the harp upright and the neck of the harp on the bottom parallel to the floor. The soundboard of the çeng is not made of wood, but a piece of leather, which accounts for the very peculiar sound it has. We call this harp angular, as it is basically an angle where strings are stretched: an open shape.

In 2008 I got funding to have a çeng made and a massive work written for it. I found a junior instrument maker who was willing to make a çeng based on the pictures and some medieval theory treatises. The first instrument was something to start with, but very hard to keep in good shape. The tuning pins were made of wood, which sometimes broke. I remember being very nervous for the performance because I was unsure of how the tuning would hold up. The open angular shape as opposed to modern closed shape harps makes the tuning much more unstable. The first çeng that was built did not last very long, so over the years I had several different instruments made by three different instrument makers.

The çeng I had, perhaps the 7th we had done in Turkey through three different instrument makers was suffering structural deformation, to the point that I was barely able to play it at the IEHF concert. Looking to have it repaired, I met Graham Muir of Ardival Harps and saw the amazing medieval lap harps he exhibited at the festival. It was Dave from Starfish, the maker of my lever harp who, seeing me in despair, said: "Graham can do it" Go for it!". Graham took careful measurements and wrote down his notes about the structural problems the çeng was suffering from. I sent some historical images to Graham. Although inspiring those images are not always reliable because illustrations can take away from the real image. Anyway, they are lovely to look at and be inspired by.

Graham started at a good place I felt. He had a good examination of my structurally failing çeng which actually had a decent sound and one which I had recorded my "Çengnağme" album with. While Graham was reflecting on his design, I started looking for funding. Then it was a matter of me sending the leather which covers the soundbox over to Scotland, something that comes to Turkey from Pakistan. Graham and I talked about a few details, such as the number of strings. Having now played the çeng since 2008, I realized that the Ottoman repertoire I was playing from did not need me to use the lowest two strings. An A and B. We could thus have a C for the lowest string (the middle C of a piano) and have a slightly smaller harp, making it lighter. Graham made a prototype and all through we stayed in communication through whatsapp. Whatsapp was never so much fun as receiving images from this instrument being born with a new structure. Bill Taylor who is the harpist who tuned and played and checked everything with the çeng before it was shipped over to Turkey sent me some wonderful videos and it was fascinating for me to hear somebody else other than me playing a çeng.

Finally the çeng arrived in Turkey late March 2017. And the result is a sturdy, beautiful sounding, beautiful looking, and reliable harp. I already performed on it at several concerts and I am truly overjoyed with this collaboration between Turkey and Scotland.

Has getting involved in playing Turkish music and the çeng given you any other (un)expected rewards?

Well, for one thing, I never to played music by ear. When I was 40 and started playing Turkish music, I had to learn to improvise and also play by ear!

Also, a couple of years after my adventure with the çengi I started playing the lever harp. It was a whole new experience for me, having always played the pedal harp. It was almost like learning to play a new instrument, with the levers and the lower tension. It was a lovely challenge and has given me very much satisfaction. It also led to the introduction of lever harps in Turkey, so the instrument is now more available to more people then it ever was before. It has helped me expand the harp in Turkey.

You were explaining on how different Turkish music is, because of the makams. How have you adapted it to the lever harp?

I found that there are about 16 makams that can be played on the harp with only minor adjustments. Because we have so many microtones, some can be adjusted in pitch just a little to make them fit the harp. They are technically not exactly right, but the difference is so small that the small change does not affect the makam so much that it is unrecognizable.

I have made arrangements of traditional music and wrote new music. You will find that when you go to traditional sources, most often only the melody is written down.

I collaborate with Bora Uymaz, a composer of traditional Turkish music who has written over 50 works for the pedal harp, lever harp and the çeng. At the moment I am working on a method for playing Turkish music on the harp with old and new music, exercices and lots of nice surprises. The first volume of the method will be for lever harp. I hope to publish it by the spring of 2018. So even though there are many makams, with the 16 that can be played on lever harp there is plenty of Turkish music for lever harpist to enjoy all around the world!