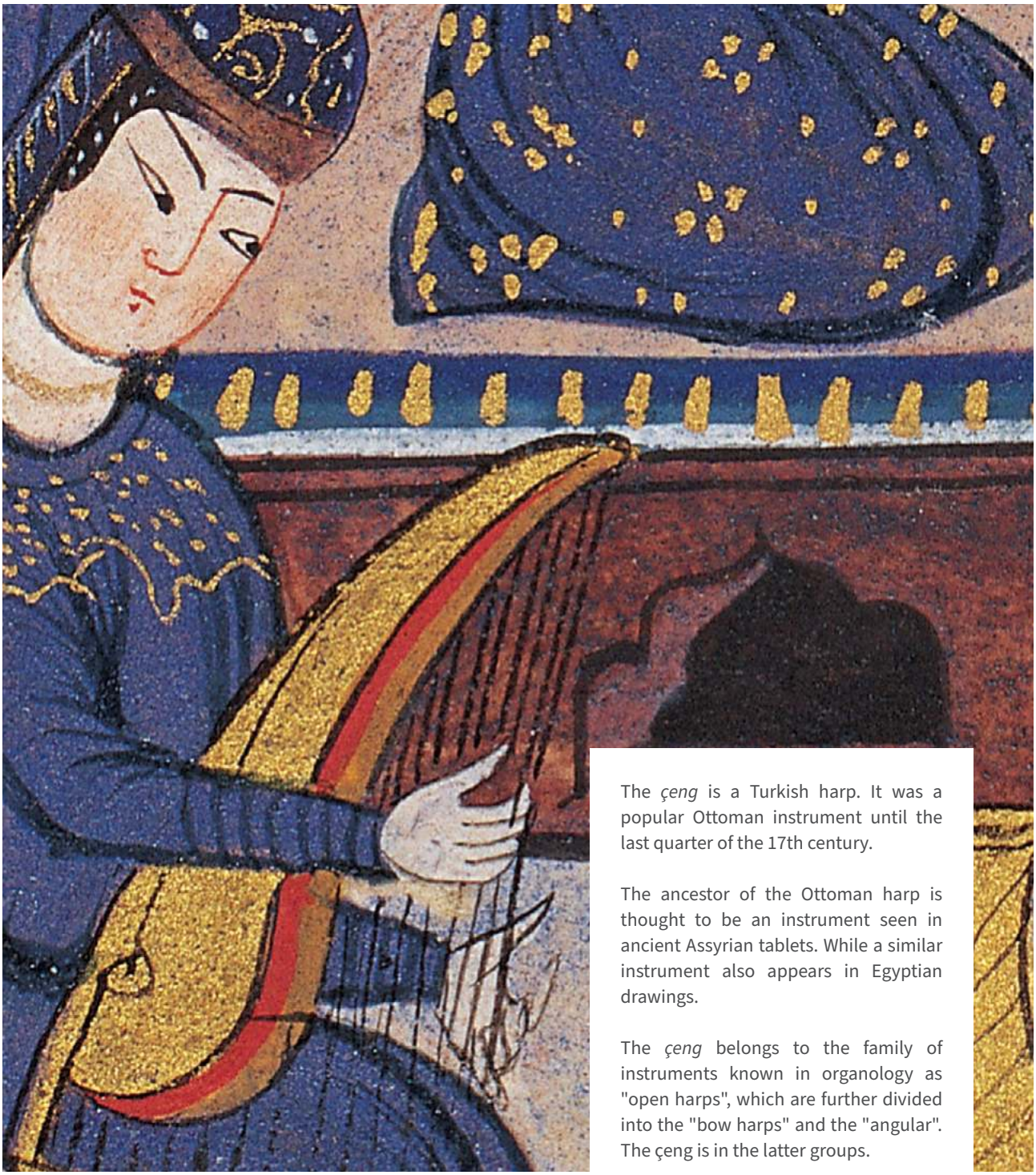
WHAT IS A ÇENG ?



The *çeng* is a Turkish harp. It was a popular Ottoman instrument until the last quarter of the 17th century.

The ancestor of the Ottoman harp is thought to be an instrument seen in ancient Assyrian tablets. While a similar instrument also appears in Egyptian drawings.

The *çeng* belongs to the family of instruments known in organology as "open harps", which are further divided into the "bow harps" and the "angular". The çeng is in the latter groups.

Design of instrument

The *çeng* is what we call an angular harp. So there is a rod and a body between which strings are streched. The body is in the uppermost part. The rod creates almost a parallel with the ground when held. The soundboard is covered with leather and çengs have about 24-25 strings.

Traditionally the *çeng* was played by both men and women. There are Miniatures depicting the çeng show it accompanying talks by poets and learned men than on the stage.

Though it is difficult to speak of a standard size of çeng, it becomes clear that there were two sizes of the instrument. The first, the "*kucak çengi*" (lap çeng) was small and played indoors, seated. The second was the "*açık hava çengi*", which was quite large and played standing up. The *kucak çengi* was played with the pegboard on the player's left knee; the *açık hava çengi* rested on a long foot that went between the player's legs, and tied around the waist by a belt attached to the lower part of its body (that is, the resonator).

We invited **Şirin Pancaroğlu** a turkish harpist who had spent several years studying the history and reviving the *çeng* to share her experience. (Read on in "repertoire section" to find out more about how the *çeng* has inspired her composition of music.

THA: Tell us a bit more about your "The Turkish Harp Project".

Playing the *çeng* was an experimental process in which I invested nearly five years. From the remaking of the instrument to premiering a new concerto for the çeng and the harp, to placing it next to other traditional instruments and giving it a try in electronic music, I had a wonderful journey in bringing it to focus. I liked discovering it and do enjoy playing some tunes on it, but it has a lot of limitations of course. The project's purpose is not spreading the playing of the *çeng* just reminding us that this tradition had also its own harp once. So that revival of the *çeng* which was made possible in the beginning of my journey has produced enough documentation in terms of concerts, recordings and enabled the *çeng* to take its place in the map of historical harps around the world. "The Turkish Harp Music Collection" was a very interesting project for me to work on starting in 2014. First in terms of methodology. I had to be able to write down transcriptions starting with basically single pages of traditional music written on monostaff. This is how traditional Turkish music is written down, a little bit like a short hand. There are no clues on the music as to which chords to might use to accompany a melody, no embellishments included…and without those,e specially on the harp the music does not sound good. And all this, one has to learn by playing with others. The performance practice part of it is handed down through generations by oral tradition. Then I had to figure out how to show microtonal tuning when called for. Eventually I published 23 books of music, some of which is old music, some more recent, and some of my compositions.

Turkish music is traditionally non-idiomatic. So there is one music and all instruments can play it in their own way. *Çeng* with its limited range of strings can only play simple tunes. I have had levers added to my çeng, so it is much like a lever harp but with far less tension. I usually tune my çeng in C major but depending on the music, I may tune with one flat. It can only play very simple melodies with a 1 or 2-note accompaniment.

Here are some examples of traditional Turkish music played on my *çeng*

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