

## Turkish Music for the Harp: Interview with Şirin Pancaroğlu

by Isabel Moreton

**Isabel Moreton Achsel:** Sirin, thank you for meeting with me here in Osnabrück, Germany, where you performed at the "Morgenland" festival, the most important festival for oriental music with the Iranian project "Wooven Sounds". Recently you have published sheet music for Lever and Pedal harp, based on Turkish traditional music. Tell us all about the process that led to this.

**Şirin Pancaroğlu:** Before settling down as a professional harpist in Turkey, I had studied for many years in Switzerland and then in the U.S. So, actually I did not know much about Turkish music. When I returned to Turkey, I started to be quite active as recording artist and this gave me exposure in the Turkish media. Journalists would often ask me "But you are playing an instrument that is not from Turkey. How do you think you can communicate with the audience?" They mainly talked about the harp being a foreign instrument, not a Turkish instrument. That question really cracked me up.

One cannot say that the harp is Western or Eastern or Southern, because it is an instrument that belongs to all civilizations. But if you tell the press that a historical harp by the name of "çeng" existed in Turkish culture, while not being able to show them an example, you can't really answer their question and then it's very frustrating because you can not convince them. Besides, I don't think that an instrument has to have its roots in a country to be appreciated there.

My interest in the çeng was as much triggered by such questions as by observations I had made in fine arts. If you look at early Ottoman miniatures which are book illustrations, there are always scenes depicting small groups of musicians. I would look closely at the paintings and I always saw what looked like a lap harp being played on the floor, sitting with knees bent. It appears often along with the ney (reed flute) and the kemençe, a tiny bowed instrument. There are quite a bit of references to the çeng in old mystic texts as well. When I realized that upon a time it had a strong presence in arts and that it had disappeared from collective memory I wanted to pursue my interest in it.

The çeng is an angular harp. Angular harps were most likely quite popular in Mesopotamia. With the soundboard in the upper part, angular harps consisted of a body and a rod between which string were stretched. It has an open shape, unlike modern harps which as we all know feature a triangular frame. Such harps spread from the Near East along the Silk Road, eventually reaching as far as Japan. There it is called "kugo", and it is basically the same instrument. The last written testimony we have for the çeng is from 1600, a travelogue who wrote that he came across only a handful of çeng players in Istanbul. It had reached a peak in the Middle Ages and then disappeared little by little. In rural China, the çeng remained however. Today you can find peasants who play such harps in China. In Japan, the kugo has disappeared, but there is a partial kugo preserved in a museum in Tokyo, I am told. No çeng has survived in its ancestral birthplace of Egypt, Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. In Iran there is a revival of the ancient çeng, but with a totally different design.

My interest kept growing as I was also curious from a musical point of view. I wondered what kind of sound it had. I approached a foundation in Istanbul that supported musical projects and had its own philharmonic orchestra. I proposed a project to revive the çeng. We would base our research on the information from book illustrations as well as theoretical treatises where there are very clear descriptions about size, materials, design and tuning.

The foundation agreed to support the making of a prototype, as well as my idea to commission a piece, a concerto for harp and çeng, so that we could play along with their orchestra. I suggested a composer who was interested in Ottoman music. The project would lead into a performance as well as a recording. Once we reached an agreement, I had to find someone who wanted to build a çeng!

I had heard a traditional musician at a concert in Istanbul in 1999 or 2000 who had made a çeng. I saw him play it with two fingers on the 25-string çeng and thought, "It would sound better if it is played including the thumb and the third finger." I contacted him and told him about my project. However, he proposed playing the çeng himself and wanted me to play the harp in that project. But the point was that I would play both harps. He said he had built the çeng for his own use only and that he was not interested in building for someone else. So this was a dead end. Then I went to an instrument maker who had built some early instruments. But he was too busy and he suggested I work with a master's student of his. We worked for six months on several prototypes, me trying them out, him revising the design, etc. The process was very tricky. Some of the çengs fell apart. He had made the tuning pins out of wood, and when you turn them, they would crack and split. During the concerts, I asked him to sit in the front row in case something would go wrong with the çeng. I always had extra tuning pins with me. At the premiere of the concerto I ended up using the çeng he built. That çeng fell apart after some time and I thought I should keep building more prototypes to improve them. I turned to two other instrument makers in Turkey who built çengs that didn't fall apart, and I liked the sound of one of them and played it for quite some time.

In 2015 I was scheduled to perform at the Edinburgh International Harp Festival. When I arrived there, I opened the box and the çeng was broken on the way. It just couldn't stand the difference in pressure. There were a lot of harp makers there, of course, and one maker of medieval harps, Graham Muir of Ardival Harps, looked at it and said, "I'd be interested in making a çeng. Let me take the measurements." He examined the pieces and understood where the problem might be, and was confident he could build a stronger one. And he did.

Recently I looked at this çeng - it had been out of my possession for a while - the rod that the strings are attached to has moved up and made a hole through the leather skin. Building

a strong çeng is an ongoing process. Graham has come up with very clear instructions as to how to fix it. By the way, the çeng features a soundboard which is not covered with wood, but with leather. This gives it a very special timbre. In summary, the best çeng I played is made by Ardival. He used wonderful wood, and had great solutions to design problems.

In my journey with the çeng, I had to figure out how to play this very primitive instrument. I had to learn how to play sitting on the floor for example. At first I couldn't sit on my knees for a prolonged time, but I kept trying and eventually I could sit for half an hour after which my legs would be totally numb. There was also the technical issue of the number of fingers to use. There is just not enough room to place the fourth finger. The strings being quite loose and the music very simple, two or three fingers are enough in each hand. It was interesting that during a workshop with Andrew Lawrence King, who talked about fingerings in the baroque period he suggested the use of 212121 with phrasing becoming clear through this fingering. I realized that it could be the same with the çeng. Because it is an angular harp, the articulation of the sound is quite different I feel. Once you pluck a string the sound develops differently. And as frail as it can get as an instrument, the legato feeling of a simple melodic line is easier to obtain on the çeng compared to the larger harps. On the other hand, when you play an ancient harp, you clearly notice the power of the pedal harp. It's very robust and the sound production is very stable. An ancient instrument offers you new aesthetics in terms of sound, simplicity and phrasing. Also the feeling is unique when you play sitting on the ground. You feel very connected to the earth, that's something very beautiful.

My work with the foundation, the premiere of the concerto in which I played both the çeng and the pedal harp as well as the recording that has resulted from this collaboration attracted substantial media coverage and quite a bit of recognition was given to this revival. I felt very energized to pursue more. I wanted to learn Turkish music and to be able to expand my experience. I wanted to set the çeng alongside other traditional Turkish instruments. But I knew very little about Turkish music and traditional practices. It felt like jumping into the ocean. I reached out to traditional musicians who were seen as masters and I asked them if we could play together. I learnt how to accompany a song and how play in a small ensemble with three or four instruments, to improvise a little, to embellish and to play patterns that enhance the melody. In a traditional Turkish music ensemble all instruments play the same melody and yet they play it all different. I had to come up with skills to play free improvisational sections which precede pieces. And you really have to go through that scary experience where everyone is a master and you are a total rookie in this style, while being an accomplished musician in a different tradition. It completely took away my ego I have to say. I made a lot of mistakes, repeated in the wrong places. There are unfixed moments in a Turkish music performance where musicians suddenly decide to play something four times where in rehearsal it was decided to play twice for example. Such experiences taught me how just to be in the moment. All that went on for another three or four years

and then decided to explore further and take Turkish music from the çeng to the lever and pedal harps as I wanted to overcome some of the limitations of the çeng. The lever harp had been on my mind for quite some time. At the 2005 World Harp Congress in Dublin, there were daily concerts with the concept of "Celtic Highlights" and I fell in love with the lever harp. I had never played a lever harp before, having started directly with



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the pedal harp as a teenager. The sound stuck in my mind, and I thought, well, this kind of sound and its precision would work well in Turkish traditional music as well. So I started playing some pieces on the lever harp which were impossible on the çeng. I started doing concerts of Turkish music in which I played a combination of çeng, lever harp and pedal harp or sometimes just the lever harp or the pedal harp.

Traditional Turkish music is quite rich in its vocabulary of pitches and intervals. There are two systems which distinguish this tradition: makam and usul. "Makam" can best be understood as a system melodic development, in which scales are made of a combination of whole, semi and micro tones. Several "makams" can use the same scale and yet have different melodic character and bear different names. Turkish music features currently 140 "makams" in use, but thirty to forty are more common and some of those some have microtonal intervals. At first I chose to play non-microtonal "makams", and later I learned how to tune certain pitches microtonally to play pieces with different flavours. Turkish music is also based on a system governing rhythmic structures which is called "usul" where there are very interesting patterns. Slowly but steadily I built a repertoire which sounded great on the harp. I started playing some concerts abroad as well and after a few festivals, harpists came up to me and said, "This is really nice, I'd like to play this music too. Where can I buy the sheet music?" Well, Turkish music being transmitted mostly aurally, the written sources



leave a lot to be desired. There are hundreds of pieces one can find on the internet, but they need to be arranged for the harp to be playable. Until harpists wanted to play this music, it never occurred to me to write down my arrangements. That made me think of preparing a sheet collection of Turkish music for harpists. I started working on this project in 2015 and through thin and thick, I obtained a grant of the Ministry of Culture in Turkey in 2021. The first six years I worked on a primer that turned out to be my formal education in Turkish music. Eventually I started composing based in this tradition because the systems of "makam" and "usul" make composing very inviting and it is a lot of fun. At the end of 2022 I finished twenty-three books, a collection which features Turkish music. The collection is published in the UK by 80 Days Publishing and available to harpists around the world either in print or as PDF downloads. It is entitled "The Turkish Harp Music Collection". There are pieces for lever harp and for pedal harp.

**IMA:** What I really liked about one particular book, "Sixteen Traditional Turkish Tunes for Lever Harp" was the wonderful introduction and that there is always an easy version and a more advanced version.

**SP:** Yes, in that book I included the original tune and one version with a very simple accompaniment and a second version with more embellishments and a fuller left hand that offers more details of the rhythmic flow. It's a little more "groovy."

**IMA:** How did you choose the pieces in the collection?

**SP:** I conceived the collection in a way to represent a cross section that is significant of Turkish music. The collection is organized of six sub-series based on genres, new music, education material etc. So when a harpist looks at the whole, he/she gets a clear idea of the riches and variety of this tradition. It is organized as a catalog system with numbers etc. The collection has lever harp pieces and pedal harp pieces. And yes, I wrote down only what I perform and what I value. The collection covers the genres of instrumental music which is made of little suites ("saz semaisi"), preludes ("peşrev") and fantasy like pieces ("longa, zeybek" etc). I chose works from the early Ottoman period up to present day. I included some of my compositions which are based on this tradition but explore beyond. So you have early works, classical works, and new ideas based on them. Then I made one book of tunes. I tried to choose tunes that are not copyrighted or tunes I could get permission to arrange. They are drawn from "türkü" which are traditional songs, or sufi hymns, or classical songs or catchy instrumental tunes people love in Turkey. Turkish music is really vast in repertoire, so I could do many more books of this kind! Before I write the second one, however I'd like to get feedback from teachers and players, and I also think this book might be interesting for professional harpists who play the melody and make their own versions of it in different styles such as jazz, celtic etc. I'm really curious about the fundamentals they will extract from the melody, how they approach the material, and what they make of the piece. The works in the collection offer enough variety to compose different concert programs entirely made from the collection. There are substantial pieces to place

in a concert program, others one could pair with for example a Western baroque piece as well as wonderful encore pieces.

**IMA:** So that was step one, step two: what's next?

**SP:** Well, it's published and accessible, and the good thing about the publication is that you can download it from anywhere. Alternatively you can also order a printed version, which will be printed in the country where the order is placed to avoid costs. This was very interesting for me because sometimes you pay more for the post office than for the score if it's overseas shipping. The digital age is very user friendly, cost saving and even environmentally conscious.

The next two steps are, first giving exposure to the collection through concerts, workshops and collaborations with teachers, harpists and harp associations. I have already lined up a number of events for 2023-24 to this end. I will be at the International Belgrade Harp Festival at the end of October 2023, and concerts and workshops based on tunes are being planned for Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria, U.S.A, UK and Japan...I look forward to giving workshops on tunes because they can be learned by ear or with the music. The rhythms are a lot of fun. We can learn the basics of Turkish music that way. I plan to gather all harps and all levels in these workshops to play together. Also presenting the collection to teachers and professional harpists means a lot to me. Some wonderful harpists have already started video recording the pieces which we share on YouTube and social media, such as Mai Fukui, Tamsin Dearnley, Elinor Evans, Michelle Sweegers, Lenka Petrovic to name a few...And the second step is adding new pieces to this collection. I would like to expand it and write down as many pieces as possible. I have a huge list of pieces I perform.

**IMA:** Just one last question: When you played with the (Iranian) project "Woven Sounds" at the Morgenland Festival here in Germany yesterday, did you ever think about bringing the çeng and playing on it?

**SP:** Yes, I actually wanted to do that, but as I mentioned my çeng needs repair and there was not enough time to get it done before. Actually it would have been very suitable, because the çeng came to Turkish culture from Iran and I enjoy immensely the cross-cultural bridges the world of the harp makes possible. The çeng being a shared heritage, I plan to feature it in the upcoming concerts of this project.



## 6th International Competition of the Slovenian Harp Association

The 6th International Competition of the Slovenian Harp Association took place in Velenje from 31 March to 2 April 2023. It was organized by the Slovenian Harp Association with the collaboration of Music School Fran Korun Koželjski and the support of Camac Harps. A record number of 131 harpists competed in seven age categories and were judged by an inter-



Oliver Wass and Lise Vandersmissen.

nationally renowned jury consisting of Irina Zingg, Lenka Petrović, Patrizia Tassini, Sirin Pancaroglu, Diana Grubišić Čiković, Maria Gamboz Gradišnik, and Dalibor Bernatović.

The competition started with a beautiful opening concert by Oliver Wass and Lise Vandersmissen, 5th edition winners.

The support of general sponsor Camac Harps and Eric Piron helped keep a high level of competition that Dalibor Bernatović has built in the past editions.

**Category A (lever harp)**

First Prize: Eksena Kostova

**Category A (pedal harp)**

First Prize: Julia Dermendjjeva

**Category B**

First Prize: Yvonne Böhme  
Lejla Hasanović

**Category C**

First Prize: Amelie Jade Knapp

**Category D**

First Prize: Adrian Ignjatović  
Mima Stevanović

**Category E**

First Prize: Alexandra Bidi

**Category F**

First Prize: Agnese Contadini



Agnese Contadini, winner of category F with president of competition and headmaster of Music School Velenje Boris Štih, presidents of the Slovenian Harp Association Katja Šumečnik and Naja Mohorič, and General Director of Camac Harps Eric Piron.

## 2023 Rave Harps International Prestige Award Competition

The 6th Rave Harps International Prestige Award Competition was held in Singapore 29 to 30 July 2023 with great success. A competition that alternates between solo and chamber competitions, this year was dedicated to Chamber categories (with Harp duets/trios/quartets and Harp with Other instrument groups). Participants hailed from not only Singapore but also from Indonesia, Taiwan, China, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Thailand, and New Zealand.



Winners of the Virtuoso Category with jury: Mieko Inoue; Chloe Liow and Renee Yadav; Willi Maerz, Carolyn Choo and Kaitlyn Tan.



Winners of the 2023 - Rave Harps International Prestige Award (Chamber) - Pedal Intermediate Group: L-R: TRIO: Jaervis Low, Charlotte Sheum, Chanel Chua; QUARTET: Desirae, Ezra, Elisabeth, Christie.

There were various aged categories from young children to youth, and a special non-professional adult category. Top winners of each category were invited to perform in the Gala Concert on 30 July.

The following groups received the Best Performance Awards:

Lever Apprentice: Itheia Bong and Natalie Lee

Lever Intermediate: Hailey Koh, Hannah Hsu and Kelsie Tan

Lever Advance: Iserei Bong and Ashley Seaw

Lever Open: Rachel Eleora and Vanessa Tunggal

Pedal Intermediate: Chanel Chua, Charlotte Sheum and Jaervis Low

Pedal Advance: Jerielle Kok, Megan Wan,

Hayley Ho and Kate Ching

Young Artist: Chow Yen Yu and Ng Yi Wei

The Rave Harps Prestige Award Virtuoso is the highest category in the Chamber Competition. Participants of this category has participated in past years' editions of the Chamber Competition to arrive at this virtuoso category requires a 25 minute thematic program.