

EMPIRE STATE

Paul Vernon recounts the course of recorded music in the last days of the Ottoman Empire

At its height, around the mid fifteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was vast. With its power-base in Constantinople (now Istanbul) it stretched west into Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Greece, Macedonia and Albania, east into Persia (now Iran), Iraq and Kurdistan, south into Egypt and Palestine. It gobbled up Armenia, the Crimea and parts of what is now the Czech Republic. It lasted close to 500 years and was one of the great civilisations. Its cultural influence was, and still is, immense.

By 1900, when the first gramophone recordings were made in Constantinople, the empire was in decline and 26 years later would break up completely. However, the imprint that it left upon its former territories remained evident in the music. Constantinople saw recording sessions take place almost every year from the turn of the century to the outbreak of the 1914-18 war. Competing in this market were the English Gramophone Company (Gramco), and German Odeon and Favourite. Gramco were first, sending their engineer W. Sinkler Darby to record 187 titles in July 1900. By the beginning of the following year a handsome little catalogue was available to the public, and, as a result, the sales of hand-wound gramophones rocketed, just as they did in Egypt, Spain, Russia and elsewhere. In essence, this was what the companies wanted. Gramco and Odeon were in the business of selling machines as much as records, and worked on the very correct assumption that a lot more people would buy them if they had something culturally relevant to listen to.

In Turkey, a more liberal application of Islamic principals had allowed the fostering of music and promoted its integration into society on many levels, including religious. Music was especially important to the *mevlevi* (known popularly as Whirling Dervishes) who used it to induce trance-like states. In the courts of the many sultans, classical Turkish music, with its roots in Central Asian culture, was enthusiastically supported and widely recorded in the first 25 years. Alongside it in the first catalogues could be found examples of taksims, gazals, urban and regional musics, and the innovative and beautiful tanbur playing of Cemil Bey. He was perhaps the first important tanbur player to record, a musician who either broke with or extended tradition - his playing prompted both responses - by employing increased tempos, and developing a 'call-and-response' style of playing. His influence is still felt today and his recordings are held in awe by contemporary players.

Constantinople was also one of the great polyglot cities. Muslims rubbed shoulders with Christians and Jews; always a major crossroads of trade, people from all over the old empire constantly flocked through the capital, interacted with one another, and brought with them their music. Thus it comes as no real surprise to find that German Odeon held its first Albanian recording session, in 1920, in Constantinople rather than Tirana, that Gramco recorded its 1928 Armenian catalogue there, and that much non-Muslim music was also prevalent.

However, the 1914-18 war, in which Turkey sided with the Germans, badly damaged the old order. Unrest and upheaval followed, and in 1926 the empire finally broke up. Turkey turned itself into a republic, having lost direct control of its satellite territories. The British had taken Egypt and Palestine, while Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro had become welded into the new Yugoslavia. Albania had declared independence and enthroned a king, Persia and Iraq had become separate Islamic states and the war with Greece finally ended in 1922 with an exchange of populace that uprooted tens of thousands of Greeks living in Turkish Smyrna, caused major hardship, and

hammered the last nail into the Ottoman coffin.

The incoming republican government, led by Mustafa Kemal Attaturk, brought with it sweeping changes. Attaturk consciously westernised the country, breaking old traditions that stood in his way without compunction. Music, as a result, underwent some fundamental alteration. Attaturk attempted on the one hand to suppress what he saw as the outmoded Ottoman-style classical music, but tried on the other to foster genuine Turkish folk-music. Government-appointed musicologists started searching for their version of real Turkish music, but they fell foul of both Attaturk's political will and their own preconceptions, ending up emasculating the very thing they were supposed to rescue. It was an extraordinary example of bureaucratic interference. Thus the first quarter century of recording can now be seen as doubly valuable. Had recordings not been made, then much that was suppressed and reshaped by the new republic would have been irretrievably lost.



Turkish Mevleviis

None of this mattered much to the record companies, however. They did not see themselves as anthropologists or defenders of culture. They simply viewed political upheavals as fresh opportunities to establish new markets. In the very competitive record trade of the '20s, the major players, Columbia, Gramco (HMV), Odeon, Pathé and Polydor were constantly trying to find ways to undermine each other in every country in the world. They did this by monitoring one another's activities, attempting to influence local agents to stock only their brand and no other, wooing or sometimes even bribing agents to abandon a rival, and undercutting the competitors' prices.

To monitor rival activity meant that executives had to go on location regularly. Thus, in the spring of 1926 a Mr. Sheard, of the Gramophone Company's Overseas Interests Department left for a two month tour of Turkey, Iraq, Persia and Egypt.

Arriving in Baghdad he found business brisk but not to his liking. There were, he complained, too many agents doing too many different things. There was little he could do to resolve the situation, however, since competition was far too sharp. Not only from the Germans and the French but also the independent Lebanese-based Baidaphon company, then vigorously expanding into Egypt, Persia, Syria and Morocco as well as Iraq. They had recorded and marketed Iraqi music with some success, but Egyptian artists were also well-received in Iraq, and they were selling large quantities of records

by the immensely popular Mohammed Abdel Wahab. Baidaphon records were being manufactured in Germany by the same company that owned and sold Odeon records. This Sheard found distasteful, petulantly calling them "badly finished" but also admitting that they sold "in large numbers".

Moving on into Persia, Sheard again found that Baidaphon had been there ahead of him; they had recorded Persian artists in Teheran, and the records were selling briskly. Despite this, he concluded his report by noting:

"I would point out that the large majority of people here are so poor that the purchase of a gramophone is out of the question. After seeing the country and the people I am amazed that the Company ever had a branch in Teheran and venture to say that it was, and is, impossible for a branch to be made to pay there."

Reaching Constantinople, he found things more to his liking. A new agency had recently been appointed, and the owners, two local businessmen, Messrs. Schorr and Guessarian, were busy putting the finishing touches to an elegant new gramophone store. Sheard described it enthusiastically, singling out the listening salon with its "good rugs and fine decorative work by a Russian painter" and remarking that the lighting system was installed "regardless of expense". It all pointed to the economic vibrancy of the city which, despite the loss of empire, remained the major trade centre of the Middle East. Sheard concluded that a new batch of recordings was necessary immediately, a view enthusiastically endorsed by Schorr and Guessarian, who needed fresh goods to help offset the recent expenses. However, it took over a year before an engineer was sent out from Hayes to make these new recordings, and he arrived at almost the same time as his rival from Columbia. Thus, from August to October 1927, two competing British engineers were making recordings in the city. The records were on sale by early 1928; Schorr and Guessarian became, and remained for many years, very successful agents. In 1931 when Columbia, Odeon and Gramophone merged to become EMI, it was Schorr and Guessarian who were chosen to continue representing the company. Columbia's old agents, Blumenthal Frères, were unceremoniously dropped.

In the meantime, activity elsewhere was also being reported. Karl Freidrich Vogel, a German based in the Egyptian city of Alexandria, was the Gramophone Company's main representative for Egypt, Turkey, Greece, Syria, Palestine and Cyprus. He was also the man responsible for discovering and first recording Omme Kolsoum and Mohammed Abdel-Wahab. While recording was taking place in Constantinople, Vogel was undertaking a motoring tour of Palestine to assess the potential for business. With the advent of the electric recording process in early 1926 the whole record industry felt confident about the future. Records were louder and clearer now than they had ever been, and customers didn't need new equipment to play them on. It was the recording process, not the playback system, that was electric.



1927 Victor Croatian Catalogue

Vogel visited Haifa, Jerusalem, Jaffa and the fast expanding Tel-Aviv, which he described as "a splendid town, its special character is in its being essentially Hebrew in all its details." He concluded that the Arab population was already well-served with Egyptian and Syrian recordings, that Omme Kolsoum records were selling in huge quantities and that little else need be done. No specifically Palestinian recordings were felt to be necessary. For the emerging Jewish trade he offered no advice and, significantly, EMI made no Jewish recordings for the Middle East until after the state of Israel had been set up in 1948.

In March and April of the following year George Cooper, a Gramco executive posted in Bombay, visited Iraq and Persia specifically to look at what competitive companies were doing. He found that Baidaphon had now opened its own retail stores in Baghdad and Basra and that "a further blow to our prestige was delivered by the Columbia Company, who, just as I was leaving Iraq, marketed a considerable number of Egyptian records, all electrically recorded. These records are simply splendid and they must collar the market."



1927 Victor Serbian Catalogue

He gloomily noted that Odeon had also opened a retail outlet in Baghdad and had just completed a large recording session. He concluded by recommending the opening of a permanent office in Baghdad to monitor the situation and find new artists to record, since many established ones were already under contract to rival companies. Furthermore, he said, a retail shop, specifically stocking Gramco products, should be opened in direct competition to Odeon and Baidaphon. Interestingly, he also recommended that since the Kurdish population appeared to be completely ignored, a recording session specifically for Kurdish music would be a wise move. From the evidence we have, however, it seems that few of Mr. Cooper's recommendations were taken seriously which was a pity, not least for the preservation of Kurdish music.

A surviving summary of Persian and Turkish record sales figures, compiled in 1939, allows us to see that the years 1934 and 1935 were outstanding in terms of sales, but that a dramatic downturn took place the following year. One reason at least may have been the introduction of a so-called luxury tax by the Attaturk government which increased the price of all imported goods by close to 70 percent. EMI responded to this by building a factory in Istanbul to handle every step of the record manufacturing process from mastering to pressing the finished product. This would make the records domestic Turkish product and avert the tax. When the European war broke out, Turkey remained neutral and was therefore able to continue to produce records without the interruption suffered by many other countries.

Looking west, to the Balkans, history finds Gramco visiting Belgrade in 1904, Sarajevo in 1907 and Montenegro in 1908. French Pathé made a real effort to crack the market, issuing several hundred records from 1907 onwards, probably in direct competition to Odeon's equally large output, with the German Favourite and Beka companies also making sporadic visits. However, the pistol shots that rang out in Sarajevo in 1914, killing Arch-Duke Ferdinand and triggering the First World War, also claimed recording activity as an early victim. When it resumed, around 1920, Bosnia, Montenegro, Serbia and Croatia had disappeared under the new cloak of Yugoslavia. The enforced integration of these essentially separate and mutually distrustful cultures, held together for years by dictatorship, produced the fuel that has burned so fiercely in the recent conflicts.

The major competitors for the Balkans were, again, Gramco, Columbia, Odeon, Polydor and, oddly,

Edison Bell. By the end of the decade some several hundred records were to be found in Balkan catalogues, and much of it was genuine folk music. Some of it was also leased to North American, record companies, especially Victor and Columbia, to supplement catalogues aimed at the large number of Balkan immigrants.

In the spring of 1931, the ever-alert Rodney Gallop reviewed a dozen recently released Serbian records for the monthly *Gramophone* magazine;

"Not long ago an American walked into the Yugoslav Consulate at Geneva, and with a curt 'Do you know this?' proceeded to whistle a selection of Serbian folk-songs. When the Consul had recovered from his astonishment and asked the reason for this musical display, the American revealed that this was his way of asking for a visa to go to Belgrade for the purpose of making a talking-film of the tzigane singer Sofka. If you want to know why the Americans thought it worth while to have a talkie of Sofka, get HMV AM1073 and listen to her singing *All Pasina Pesma* the song of Ali Pasha, the Albanian who ruled over Epirus and Macedonia. Sofka is magnificent. She had not risen to fame in 1924-26 when I was at Belgrade, but I picture her rather like the lithe figure of Kaya, who in my time used to draw everyone to the tavern. She has the same deep voice and the same wild despair in her manner of singing. She vividly expresses the pent-up feelings of the Serbs through five centuries of foreign domination. As a friend of mine put it; 'She sounds as though she were about to commit suicide!'"

"All the records reviewed here are perfectly authentic both in substance and manner. Serbia is peculiar in that her folk-music is the heritage of the whole nation. There is, indeed no difference in mannerism between the singing of a peasant and that of Sofka the gypsy, Mijat Mijatovic the lawyer, or Teodora Arsenovic the opera soprano. And then besides the singing there is on the majority of these records that wonderful gypsy fiddling which is such a feature, of folk-music from Vienna to Constantinople. In the popular mind, owing, perhaps to the descriptions of novelists and travel-writers, it is particularly associated with Hungary, but in reality is no more Hungarian than it is Serbian or Turkish. The playing in some of these records rivals the best to be heard in Budapest."

Sofka was indeed magnificent. Her records, issued in 1928, were announced in a special HMV supplement that presented her pictured on the cover wrapped in a long, regal cape. They stayed in catalogue for over ten years. All the major companies viewed the Balkans as a separate area that also included Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia. They viewed Iraq and Persia as 'arabic' and saw no connection between them and Turkey. To the commercial mind, the Ottoman Empire no longer held any relevance. In a twenty-year period between the wars, HMV issued over 4,500 records in a general series aimed at the Balkans. It's difficult at this stage to be accurate about how many records were issued for or aimed at specific cultural groups, especially as there was so much stylistic overlap; but one area, although the records were issued in the general Balkan series, is easily identifiable.

Albanian culture has a range of flavours all its own. There is a marked difference between the north - a remote and tribal area - and the south, where the influence of Greek culture bleeds across the borders. Over 70 percent of the country is Muslim, but a generous portion of the south is Orthodox Christian, influenced by the Greek Church, while a small enclave of Catholicism remains entrenched in the north. Although occupied for centuries by the Ottoman Empire, Albanians held fiercely to the old ways of their Indo-European ancestry, and often retreated into the harsh hill country in order to escape subjugation. When they broke away from Constantinople's rule, in 1912, they were still very much their own people, and, as Doris and Erich Stockmann note, in *Grove's Music & Musicians*; "The enforced cultural isolation and the continuation of the peasant way of life have contributed to the preservation of traditional folk music".

Thus, when the record companies turned their attention to Albania, what they recorded was some of the most archaic music remaining in Europe. The first Albanian records were made by Favourite in 1904 and Gramco in 1906, but none appear to have survived and they remain an unknown quantity. Odeon recorded in 1920 and Polydor followed a few years later. As the country appeared to be emerging from the dark ages under the leadership of King Zog, both Columbia and Gramco reassessed the situation and sent recording engineers to Tirana and Scutari. Columbia's recording expert arrived at Scutari in November 1929, and collected 285 performances. Seven months later, Gramco sent their engineer A.D. Lawrence directly from a recording engagement at Kosice in Czechoslovakia, to Albania's capital, Tirana. Here, at the house of a local wealthy businessman named Kinja he recorded 90 titles by over twenty groups of musicians. Moving on to Scutari, in the north, setting up his equipment in what his notes describe as "a disused, ruined house", he recorded six titles by a girls choir from Shkoder. The record label euphemistically describes it as "Girls choir - unaccompanied", and the catalogue infers they were from a convent but it was, in fact, the 'Konvikti Stigmatinevet ne Shkoder', a young women's prison. Two years after they had been released, an article in *The Times* in October 1933 titled 'Folk-Song And The Gramophone' said of the HMV Albanian catalogue that it was "a body of music that a three-month-long folkloric expedition would have been well pleased with."

When Columbia, Odeon and Gramco merged in 1931, they appear to have deleted all the Albanian recordings very quickly. Certainly by the summer of 1933 they were all unavailable. The Kingdom of Albania, under Zog, lasted until the outbreak of the 1939-45 war, when it was occupied by Mussolini's forces. In 1946, the redoubtable Enver Hoxha came to power, installing the hardest of communist ideologies and again isolating the country from outside cultural influence, as the classic 1965 Topic field-recordings prove.

When the European war ceased in 1945 the old territories had undergone some change. Albania was seriously closed to all outsiders; communist Yugoslavia, busy setting up a state-run record company, Jugotone, was regarded as 'difficult' to trade with; Bulgaria, Roumania, Czechoslovakia and Armenia were becoming Russian satellites and Palestine was in uproar over the establishment of the Israeli state.



HMV 1928 Serbian Catalogue with Sofka

Only the situation in Turkey remained truly viable for West European record companies, and the old guard now had to share its market with Decca, who had launched their immediate postwar catalogues with a technically innovative system called 'frfr', or Full Range Frequency Recording. Commissioned during the war by the Royal Air Force, under the strictest secrecy, it was a system that radically extended the frequency range of recording and had initially been employed to record the various pitches of aircraft and ship engines for identification purposes. Turned round and used for music, it was a world beater that caught all the other companies with their technical pants around their ankles, and Decca launched an aggressive pan-European recording programme that included Turkey and, annoyingly, Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, Turkey remained a viable market for everybody and it was one of the first European countries to move to vinyl. Although it has been over 70 years since the old order of Ottoman held any power, a cursory comparison of the areas music will readily demonstrate the remarkable similarities in style, format and instrumentation. This is not to say that it's tediously samey. Far from it; within the framework lies a rich panoply of exciting music worthy of your attention.

Recommended Listening

FM 634: *Armenians, Jews, Turks & Gypsies In Old Recordings*

FM 635: *Constantinople In Old Recordings 20s-'30s*

FM 706: *Albania & The Central Balkans 1920-40*

FM 707: *Bulgaria-Turkey 1930-45*

Heritage: A compilation of Albanian regional music, from the 1930 HMV recordings will be released in the summer.

Ocora 560089: *Archives Of Turkish Music 1904-'40s*

[Ocora C 560081: *Archives de la musique Turque (1) 1904-'40s*]

[Ocora C 560082: *Archives de la musique Turque (2) 1904-'40s*]

Rounder CD 1051: *Masters Of Turkish Music Vol. 1 1920's-'40's*

Rounder CD 1111: *Masters Of Turkish Music Vol. 2 '20s-'40s*

Topic (all classic '60s field recordings):

Folk Music Of Albania (TSCD904)

Folk Music Of Bulgaria (TSCD905)

Folk Music Of Yugoslavia (TSCD906)

Folk Music Of Turkey (TSCD908)

Gypsy Music From Macedonia (TSCD914).

Traditional Crossroads:

CD 4266: *Istanbul 1925*

CD 4270: *Udi Hrant -Early Recordings Vol. 1 '50s*

CD 4271: *Udi Hrant-Early Recordings Vol. 2 '50s*

CD 4274: *Tanburi Cemil Bey - Early Recordings: 1910-14*

Yazoo: The *Secret Museum of Mankind* series features a handful of examples.

Start with either or both Rounder compilations; if you like what you hear, then get Traditional Crossroads magnificent *Istanbul 1925*. The Topic series, although field recordings from the '60s, are very pure and stunningly beautiful. The Albanian set has never been surpassed. The FMs are superbly remastered and presented and, though expensive, are worth getting if you're serious.

Further reading;

Both *The Rough Guide To World Music* and Peter Manuel's *Popular Musics Of The Non-Western World* will provide further information and place the music into contemporary contexts.

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