

Well Tuned Brass 2020

Cenk Ergün in conversation with Elena Kakaliagou

Recorded on 10 September 2020 at KM28 in Berlin Neukölln

Zinc & Copper play Cenk Ergün's composition "Small Small" (2010)

(applause)

Elena:

This is Cenk Ergün, the composer of the piece.

Cenk:

Hi everyone!

(applause)

I think we're going to talk a little bit...

Elena:

Maybe you want to tell us where the name of the piece came from?

Cenk:

Welcome everybody, thanks for being here, it's nice to see some friends and some others that I don't know. It's nice to have a real concert, after a long time. This piece is an old piece, it's about ten years old. I lived Sierra Leone, West Africa, for a while and I wrote it there. While living there, one phrase that I would hear often was "small small". It turns out it means – gently and slowly and little by little. So, if someone's parking a car and the other person's helping them, they'll say "small small, small small"! You know, like – "come gently, not too fast" – that kind of thing, so that's where the title comes from. It's one of my early forays into writing music outside of the equal tempered system, outside of the regular piano tuning system that we're all familiar with. What I used for this piece was an old European tuning system, a tempered tuning, designed for keyboards and the priority in the design of this tuning system was to get these nice thirds, actually major thirds, that are pretty wide but they sound really good. That was a priority, so they played around with the pitches, they tempered the fifths a little bit, took a little bit from here and gave a little bit there. There's these nice thirds and weird fifths. What I was interested in was not the thirds or the goal of modulation from one key area to another. I became interested in the melodic qualities of this tuning system. Because what you get when you're tempering this way is some really weird, odd intervals, different sizes of semitones and whole tones which I was interested in. I can demonstrate this a little bit for you. This is a C major scale in this tuning:

(plays C major scale with computer piano sound)

Let's hear these thirds:

(plays a series of thirds)

What I did find was some other notes that interested me in there:

(plays a new semitone like interval)

For example, this interval which is quite narrower than the semitone we're used to on the piano, or this one:

(plays another)

Or this one:

(plays another)

The fifths in there are a sound we're all kind of used to:

(plays a fifth)

But they're not perfect, they're not pure fifths, they're a little tempered.

I'm playing with that idea of these imperfect fifths by adding adjacent notes to the fifths. Then I'm playing with:

(plays computer piano, fifths plus extra notes)

These kinds of sonorities. If you remember the beginning of the piece, it starts with this trichord here:

(plays trichord)

and then it goes here:

(plays next trichord)

and goes here:

(plays next trichord)

and so on... I was working with these different tri-chords selected from this tuning system, with these pitches obviously taken out of their context. This tuning system was designed with harmonic ideas in mind, but I selected the pitches for their melodic qualities, but then ended up sustaining them anyway to get these kinds of chords.

That's how the piece came about.

Elena:

You said that your piece is based on three trichords, right?

Cenk:

Yeah, there's four. I played three of them and at the end you an exchange between two trichords and the final notes that you played. You got this:

(plays computer piano)

They're members of different trichords, three note groups, but we end up with this bluesy minor third. There's more than one way that we can connect this piece to modal thinking and the theme of tonight. One in the sense – what is modal music? As I understand it, modal music is a large group of notes that are made up of smaller groups of notes that come together and interact with each other. Modes around the world are usually built on different groups of notes, tetrachords, pentachords coming together to form scales. They'll have certain qualities like a dominant note, a tonic note, a leading tone and things like that. I didn't have tonic, dominant and leading tone in this piece. [But] I was very loyal to my pitches and I was very interested in the way that different trichords followed each other, interacted with each other. That's one connection I make to modal thinking. The other is that the intervals that I demonstrated, they all create a hazy kind of situation or, as Hilary was calling it the other day – "foggy". This foggy type of sound where we don't know where the fifth is, we don't know exactly how wide it is, this certain kind of interval, it can go in this direction – a little bit sharper, it can go in this direction – a little bit flatter. This kind of thinking, this kind of hazy sound world – I connect further to older modal music, specifically of Greek and Anatolian, this region around the Mediterranean Sea, where for thousands of years there's been an exchange of musical ideas and theories, as well as practical musical ideas. These hazy sonorities, these are coming from that region. I was talking to Elena, my Greek friend here, and I'm originally from Turkey. We're finding many similarities between the way, especially in practice, the way people approach the concept of pitch – it's very movable, the same pitch can have the same name, but depending on its context, which piece it is or which mode it's a part of or where its coming from, where it's going to, the same pitch can have an extremely different intonation or frequency. I think the gap there is wider than in most common, standard Western music. I think the shading, it's not just shading, but the pitch actually becomes another pitch even though it's called the same thing. I think it creates this hazy sound world which I'm really into and I'm exploring that in my work also.

Elena:

When we organised this week, these four days of concerts here – we realised that by choosing the pieces – we figured out that there are similarities between them, even if it's different kind of intonation, every system that is used by the composers – there is a global thing – a lot of pentatonic scales, a lot of maqams or modi. Its somehow before things got very stiff or organised, they used to be very flexible but there was something in common. Even geographically, you can see this connection and for sure the Mediterranean Sea which is this area that we both come from, was always a place where cultures would meet and exchange. Indeed, between the Greek folk music and the Turkish folk music, there are a lot of things in common in terms of intonation and how we approach intonation and how flexible it is, but still it is quite defined. It adjusts to the instruments, to the conditions, how it has to be played, was it like until forty years ago – it was always outdoors with no amplification – and that immediately demanded something much higher to be played so that people can still hear what it is if hundreds of people dance in front of you. There was a flexibility according to conditions and situations, it is something that these two cultures do share and they are not the only ones of course.

Cenk:

On a theoretical level there's a series of exchanges going on back to the time of Pythagoras. He's travelling to Egypt, a few hundred years later Ptolemy – another Greek theorist and mathematician – he's travelling to Egypt. They're looking at each other's stuff at the Alexandria library. A thousand years later Al Farabi comes from further East and also goes to Alexandria, and looks at these people's theories about how this music is working. Some of what they were doing is trying to document actually what was happening in practice. I'm talking about 500 BC and the next 1000 years after that of these theoreticians actually trying to document the musical practice there. Some of the tetrachords that we have, with the major scale that we have, I think comes out of this kind of interaction and this will to document. What's interesting to me that there's a difference between theory and practice. We can talk about ratios and we could say this pitch is here, this pitch is there, but it's the same thing in the performance of Greek traditional music also – the musicians are not thinking about ratios or exact frequencies.

Elena:

No not really.

Cenk:

And from night to night, from song to song, what we call one pitch can have a completely different guise.

Elena:

Yeah. I was talking today with a folk musician from Greece on the phone and he said that until fifties, even the Bazuki (that was later used in the Rembetika music), they were all fretless, so it was much more flexible how to tune, as the Oud is, as Kanun is. A lot of instruments, they are just not as defined as a guitar. The intonation is by this already much more flexible. You had to adapt to more European instruments – that's when the frets started.

Cenk:

Some of it is I think is that... at least for Turkish music... I'm not trained in Turkish music, but I'm familiar with it so I can speak for it a little bit, but also music of the Middle East – one thing to remember is that it's an aural tradition, it's not written down, so it's not set in stone. Would you say the same of traditional Greek music?

Elena:

Totally.

Cenk:

You cannot learn it by...

Elena:

No, you need to listen and just repeat it. They very recently started to document it but even for this kind of tuning, the closest way to write it down in a score is by using Byzantine notation. It's not close at all to any European, our system doesn't really work there, it gets very empty and naked.

Cenk:

Is that giving you enough information? The Byzantine...

Elena:

Much more for sure, because it has the element of all these glissandi or these non-separated notes and all this microtonalities are easier to write down in this way. Of course, this doesn't mean that the people who play traditional music know how to read it, not at all. Its more for documentation reasons.

Cenk:

For documentation?

Elena:

Yeah.

Cenk:

It's a lot like jazz, when you write jazz down, and you try to read from the notation, there's very little information about how it's supposed to go.

Elena:

Yeah, yeah that's very true.

Cenk:

Would you say it's also a way to document, rather than...

Elena:

Yeah. Even with the theme which we had last night about blues a little bit. The idea that there are some intervals that are so familiar to me, just because of the traditional music of Greece and not from the blues straight... there is a connection between a certain interval taste, or I don't know what it is, it is maybe just a human body, I don't know... that just brought it up... brought it in this way.

Cenk:

That last interval I was playing – you were hearing a connection with a Greek song...

Elena:

Yeah, I was hearing a connection to a Greek song that actually I've heard in many different ways. I brought you this example that is the only polyphonic version. In Greece normally, as in Turkey, as in the Middle East – there's mainly more focus on a melody than polyphony, than in harmony. This is mainly one of the major differences to European music. At some point this started to separate in this way. I don't have clue if some of you know why... how, why does it start to develop so much in polyphonic ways here and not there. They kept focusing on melodies and maybe even this flexibility of intonation is a reason, that you cannot really build harmonies that are stiff, you have to be as flexible...

Cenk:

I feel like that's one of the reasons.

Elena:

Could be, yes. This example I brought is from an area called Epiros, it is just on the border to Albania and it's the only area where there's Greek polyphonic music. It's a very weird polyphony. I love it. But you need to get used to it a little bit. Maybe we can listen to it?

Cenk:

The one with the old lady, right?

Elena:

Yes!

(plays musical example)

Elena:

It somehow fits to your last track.

Cenk:

I hear it. What's interesting here is that they're very strict with their main pitches, if I could say that, unlike what I was saying earlier. But the embellishments are very free, like what they're doing around those single notes.

Elena:

They use a lot of this bordone thing, it's the "isographics" (???) in Greek. You this one low note that will just continue through and that's the orientation I assume. Because the other example that I gave you, "Amanes" (?), that you have as well in Turkey, right? And in further Arabic countries. It's all this singing around, in mellisma, full of solo singing. It's much more flexible, although still in this "Usak" (???) in this case, mode. I think that indeed the idea of polyphony is just not that possible in such a free, flexible tuning as the ones we were thinking of.

Cenk:

Yeah, these guys look like they are sticking to a stricter scheme. One of the interesting things that we discovered while we were talking is based around the word Aman, which is actually an Arabic word, not a Turkish word, not a Greek word, but it's used in the songs of this entire region. It's a lamenting, sorrowful kind of expression. It means "danger" or "watch out" in Arabic but when you hear it in a song, it's sort of like, you know in rock you have the "oh oh, oh baby", it's this kind of thing! You know Aman, when you hear that...

Elena:

Yes, it fits to any kind of theme.

Cenk:

Yeah.

Elena:

It can be from a love song to a destiny song to a death song to whatever... you are running away from something, always use Aman.

Cenk:

Greek and Turkish languages are not the same at all but I knew that this word existed in Greek song, but if there's a whole genre built around it, I did not know that. Amanes.

Elena:

Yes – Amanes. It's all this solo vocal, not only vocal – it can be violin, clarinet or so – that is this solo thing playing around in this, in various types of maqam.

Cenk:

And they're not very happy songs usually?

Elena:

Well, in Greece you're happy when something is melancholic. It's something we... Greeks love minor scales, it's this kind of... but I think Turkey too no?

Cenk:

Yeah. The major scale in the Turkish modes is almost never used.

Elena:

Somehow fits...

Cenk:

We're depressed people...

Elena:

Could be...

So maybe we could just listen to this Amaneo. Would you like to add something?

Cenk:

Does anyone have any questions? Anything they'd like to say or ask?

Hilary:

Did either of you grow up making traditional folk music? Greek music or Turkish music?

Cenk:

I did not and I'm not trained in it so I can talk about it only like this, superficially! It's in my ear but I've never been trained in it.

Elena:

My father is a folk musician so I grew up in a family of this kind of stuff. It's very present in my life.

Hilary:

And he plays an instrument?

Elena:

He plays lauto, that is something between an oud and a lute, it's used a lot on islands, it's like the bass instrument and he sings.

Question from audience member:

So, when there's the other notes, which are not part of the well-tempered scale, is it always quarter or three quarters or does it go even smaller, the intervals?

Cenk:

It can go smaller. I think it could be anything, it's based on...

Audience member:

So, it's not notated specifically? Quarter, or?

Cenk:

There are many different systems of thinking about it. For example, the theory of Arabic music is given with quarter tones. The theory of Turkish music is working with commas that are slightly larger than a quarter tone. Then you can also think about ratios, of pitches, an octave being 2:1, a fifth being 3:2 ratio, and when you get into that then you can be working with very fine, very small intervals that are smaller than a quarter tone.

Audience member:

So, between the C and C# that you played...

Cenk:

That was exactly a quarter tone, it happened to be, you got that!
Shall I play "Ussak"? It's a common mode in both Greek and Turkish music. Our countries want to fight but...

(laughter)

(plays musical example)

Cenk:

Yeah, it's going to be hard to follow that...

Question from the audience:

It's interesting that you talked about documentation through Byzantine notation. Because in a way isn't it more accurate talk about ornamentation first? Rather than the specific microtonal distances between steps in a mode. Because it seems like it's all about the specific way they're executing these ornaments.

Cenk:

That's a great question. What's interesting to me I think is, yes, we need to talk about the embellishments, but also what is being embellished is also moving in this music, that's what I think is unique about it, it's not just the embellishment that's creating a fog around this one note. The same note that we talk about, there are names for each note in Turkish modal music for example.

Audience member:

Itself is floating, that's floating as well?

Cenk:

Yeah, and within a wide range, much wider than written down, European, common practice, music I would say. So, there's two levels of haze!

Comment from the audience (Werner Durand):

One point, one question, or statement rather, is that we always use this term "quarter tone" – I have problems with that. Because it relates to the tempered system which came much later than the practice of this music, so it's like upside down of the tradition.

Cenk:

Sure, yeah. The theory's following the practice!

Werner Durand:

Well, I mean the eleventh harmonic and the quarter tone is basically the same thing, so you could also see it from that point of view rather thinking of the tempered system and cutting in half. Like what John Cage said is very nice, I don't know if you know that phrase he once said – "cutting a semitone into half is like cutting a rotten apple into half"!

Cenk:

Right, it's a good quote. Yeah, I agree, I think it's a nicer way to refer to it, the eleventh harmonic but also when you're talking about ratios, at least with Turkish music, they also don't completely display or demonstrate what's happening. The ratios also fall short of describing the music.

Werner Durand:

Yeah... I'm not sure if that really justifies the terminology of the modern keyboard, because if you use that as a reference point for the Turkish music that would not work either.

Cenk:

Right, no. Neither work.

Robin Hayward:

What do they use in Turkey, to call these different...

Cenk:

Well, they call the notes by their names and every musician that's practising – when you shout out that name, they know what you're talking about.

Robin Hayward:

So, the intervals? So, they have a name for the intervals as well?

Cenk:

For the intervals there's a theory that's based on the Holdrian comma, which I don't want to get deep into, but they're... you know, using that comma, you can have four comma, five comma, eight comma

or nine comma intervals. This is a very precise measurement.

Robin Hayward:

So, a comma is always the same?

Cenk:

A comma is always the same, in theory.

Robin Hayward:

And how do they define it?

Cenk:

Well it's like 33 something cents, is a Holdrian comma.

Robin Hayward:

Holdrian comma?

Cenk:

Holdrian. It helps to explain the theory of it, but you can't go by that and say, okay I'm going to tune my instrument to these pitches and I'm going to be playing perfectly, that doesn't work. It comes after the fact of the practice and trying to explain and document it. There's no perfect system.

Elena:

And the terminology to what you say, it's what we hear in Western countries, put in a name. Because most people, even in the basic school music lessons, know what a semitone is. So, you can say it's a quarter tone because of the way that we think, in mathematical terms, quarter, semi... I think for many people it's easier to say it's a quarter, than to say the eleventh harmonic. I think this is mainly an issue that the European, Western culture needs to deal with, it's not about how to define, how to name, or... it's a terminology which we need to use.

Werner Durand:

No, it's more about pointing out the historical development and where does it come from. It certainly does not come from the tempered system...

Elena:

For sure not... of course not...

Werner Durand:

...and cutting the semitone into half, that's what I mean. Terminology is not the point.

Elena:

Absolutely not, it's just a compromise I think... that we have to do, so we understand a bit what it is about. But, of course no, it's the other way around.

(applause)