“Leaving alla turca Behind: The Middle East in Opera and Other Musical Genres, 1800-44”

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Introduction: Cultural and Musical Contexts

Ex. 1. Mozart, Sonata in A Major, K. 331/300i (ca. 1783), mvt. 3: “Alla turca.”

Historical background: The gradual weakening of the Ottoman Empire and the growth of European colonialism and imperialism (e.g., French control of Algeria, beginning in the 1830s).

Four relevant trends or other considerations (musical, theatrical, interpretive):

1. Increased access to published transcriptions of Middle Eastern music.
2. Greater interest in “local color” in musical works generally:
   a. Evocative sets and costumes (in stage works).
   b. “National” tunes (e.g., Scottish, Spanish, or Chinese).
   c. Use of musical materials that were not specifically associated with the exotic location but were nonetheless highly unusual (see my “All the Music in Full Context” Paradigm).
   d. Use of musical materials that were utterly normal but that matched the emotional affect of the setting, characters or events (as, again, in the “All the Music in Full Context” Paradigm).
3. In “Middle Eastern” stage works: an increasing focus on a central female character, whose portrayal is now highly exoticized. (Many non-exotic operas of this era similarly have a central female character, e.g., Bellini’s Norma.)
4. The ever-present question for historians/critics now: How to interpret an opera or other musical work—as a quasi-realistic (often highly stereotypical) depiction of the land and people being evoked (on the surface): as a semi-disguised comment on specific social conditions “here” (in Europe), and/or as an allegory of qualities deemed to be “universally human” (e.g., lust for power). Ethnic stereotypes are an important consideration in the “All the Music in Full Context” Paradigm.

New Portrayals of Middle Easterners, and New Musical Devices Supporting Them

Ex. 2. Meyerbeer (1824), Il crociato in Egitto, Act 1 chorus, “Urridi vezzose.” Orientalism as a version of the age-old “pastoral” literary topos (here including drone basses, deriving from the bagpipes of European shepherds).

Urride vezzose, Pretty slavegirls,  
Leggiere, scherzose,  Light-hearted and playful,  
Intorno aleggiate Flutter around  
Al figlio d’amor: The child of love:  
Tranquillo serbate Keep peaceful  
Quel dolce sopor. His sweet slumber.

Ex. 4. Beethoven, Chorus [of Dervishes], from *The Ruins of Athens* (1811)—featuring primitive phrase in the strings (in unison, no harmony), alternating between two pitches in an obsessively repeated rhythm.

\[
\text{Du hast in deines Ärmels Falten} \quad \text{Thou hast carried the moon} \\
\text{Den Mond getragen, ihn gespalten.} \quad \text{in the folds of Thy sleeve,} \\
\text{Kaaba!} \quad \text{Thou hast split it [in two].} \\
\text{Mahomet! [Etc.]} \quad \text{Ka’aba! [The large square pilgrimage monument in Mecca.]} \\
\text{} \quad \text{Mohammed! [Etc.]} \\
\]

**Portrayals beyond the Stage (Lieder)**


\[
\text{Über meines Liebchens Äugeln} \quad \text{Everybody is astonished} \\
\text{Stehn verwundert alle Leute;} \quad \text{At the eyes [literally: ogling] that my sweetheart makes.} \\
\text{Ich, der Wissende, dagegen,} \quad \text{I, who know what’s going on, however,} \\
\text{Weiss recht gut, was das bedeute…} \quad \text{Know very well what that may mean.} \\
\text{} \quad \text{[Namely: she seems to be hinting at her anticipation of the next sweet hour of bliss with her lover, i.e., me.]…} \\
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**A Travelogue from a Composer Who Had Lived in the Middle East: Le désert (1844).**

Ex. 6. David, *Le désert* (1844), “Danse des almées.” Based (as is Ex. 7) on music that David had transcribed during his two years in Turkey and Egypt.

Ex. 7. David, *Le desert*, “Chant du muezzin.” (The final phrase was sung in microtones at the first performances.)

\[
\text{…La Allahil Allah,} \quad \text{…There is no god but God, and Mohammed is} \\
\text{Ou Mohamed rassoul Allah.} \quad \text{his Prophet. God is great; come to prayer.} \\
\text{Allah hou akbar} \quad \text{Ja aless sala.} \\
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