

SLEEPING BEAUTY

Tim Stanley

THE AWAKENING OF A TANBUR

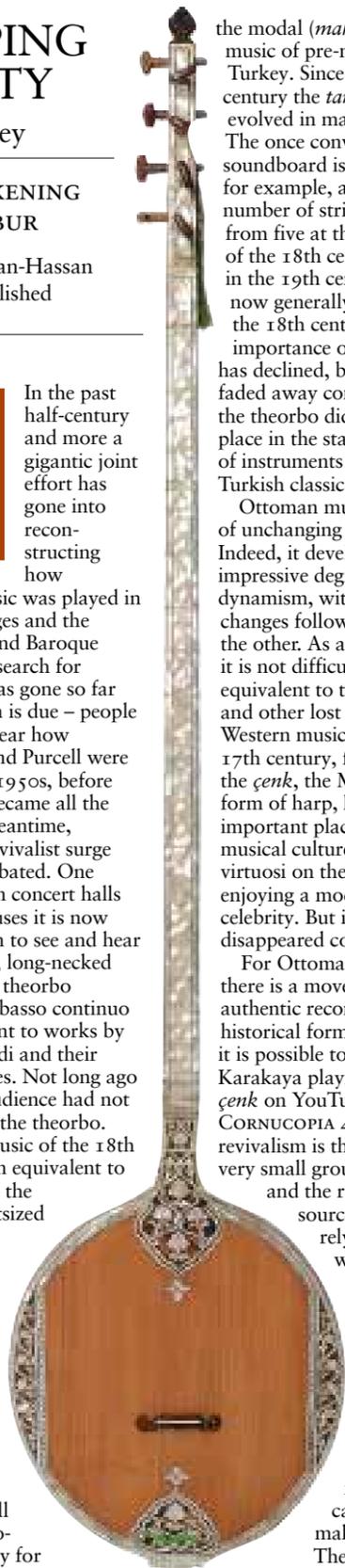
Karim Othman-Hassan
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In the past half-century and more a gigantic joint effort has gone into reconstructing how

European music was played in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and Baroque periods. This search for authenticity has gone so far that a reaction is due – people will want to hear how Monteverdi and Purcell were played in the 1950s, before authenticity became all the rage. In the meantime, though, the revivalist surge continues unabated. One result is that in concert halls and opera houses it is now fairly common to see and hear the enormous, long-necked lute called the theorbo providing the basso continuo accompaniment to works by Handel, Vivaldi and their contemporaries. Not long ago most of the audience had not even heard of the theorbo.

Ottoman music of the 18th century had an equivalent to the theorbo in the *tanbur*, an outsized form of long-necked lute. During its heyday it was the most important stringed instrument, its long neck allowing the player to execute the full range of micro-tones necessary for



the modal (*makam*-based) music of pre-modern Turkey. Since the 18th century the *tanbur* has evolved in many respects. The once convex soundboard is now concave, for example, and the number of strings increased from five at the beginning of the 18th century to eight in the 19th century and is now generally seven. Since the 18th century the importance of the *tanbur* has declined, but it has not faded away completely, as the theorbo did: it still has a place in the standard group of instruments used to play Turkish classical music.

Ottoman music is not one of unchanging tradition. Indeed, it developed with an impressive degree of dynamism, with major changes following one after the other. As a consequence, it is not difficult to find an equivalent to the theorbo and other lost instruments of Western music. Until the 17th century, for example, the *çenk*, the Middle Eastern form of harp, held an important place in Ottoman musical culture, with virtuosi on the instrument enjoying a modest form of celebrity. But it then disappeared completely.

For Ottoman music, too, there is a movement for the authentic reconstruction of historical forms. As a result, it is possible to watch Fikret Karakaya playing a recreated *çenk* on YouTube (see CORNUCOPIA 43). But this revivalism is the work of a very small group of people, and the range of sources they can rely on for their work is relatively narrow. In this context, Karim Othman-Hassan's study of a single musical instrument cannot help but make its mark. The *tanbur* seems



MADemoiselle GLAVANI, DAUGHTER OF THE FORMER FRENCH CONSUL IN CRIMEA, IN TURKISH COSTUME, PLAYING THE TANBUR. WITH HER IS MONSIEUR LEVETT, A FRIEND OF THE ARTIST, JEAN-ÉTIENNE LIOTARD, c1740

to have emerged just as the *çenk* disappeared, but where did it come from? Other long-necked lutes from the former Ottoman lands, such as the *bağlama*, have a pear-shaped soundbox, whereas the *tanbur*'s body is hemispherical. It had this shape for most of the 18th century, as we can see from several contemporary depictions, both Ottoman and European. Was there a transition from a pear-shaped to a hemispherical soundbox sometime in the 17th century, which would have been a relatively sudden event, or was the *tanbur* introduced from outside the empire?

One candidate might be the South Asian *tanpura*, especially as the earliest scientific illustration of a *tanbur*, in Dimitrie Cantemir's famous work on Ottoman music (c1700), shows the instrument with the same gourdlike shape as modern South Asian *tanpuras*. The problem is that

the *tanpura* is now played in such a radically different way to the *tanbur* that the link would take a great deal of research to substantiate.

Until recently the oldest example of a *tanbur* was thought to be a visually splendid example in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London,

which Fikret Karakaya has dated to 1850. Karim Othman-Hassan's publication is devoted to the equally glamorous *tanbur* in the collection of Sheikh Hamad Al Thani of Qatar, which he dates to the middle of the 18th century. He gives a similar date to the V&A example.



The book is beautifully and thoroughly illustrated, with a good deal of the modestly sized text given over to recording how the instrument was conserved. But it also provides a great deal of contextual material for understanding how the *tanbur* developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and how it was used. Indeed, the conservation of the instrument that Othman-Hassan directed was so thorough that Sheikh Hamad's *tanbur* can now be used to play 18th-century compositions, as evidenced by a set of video and audio recordings that is also being circulated.

The book brings together the visual evidence for the history of the *tanbur*. This includes images by artists who happen to include a *tanbur* in their compositions, among them very informative works by Abdülcelil Levni (d. 1732) and Jean-Etienne Liotard (active in Istanbul 1738–42). Another group are illustrations to works of musicology, and they include the unusual gourd-shaped instrument depicted in Cantemir's treatise and those in two works of 1750. One is by the French music specialist Charles Fonton, whose mother was a Levantine from Pera, and the other, by Kemânî Hızır Ağa. This last is important for anchoring the V&A's instrument to the mid-18th century, as the unusual layout of the decoration on the belly is echoed precisely in the painting. On the other hand, Liotard's depiction of Monsieur Levett and Mademoiselle Glavani in Turkish dress provides evidence that the more conventional layout seen on Sheikh Hamad's *tanbur* was also current in this period.

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'The Awakening of a Tanbur: Report of Restoration and Research into the 18th-century Tanbur Belonging to His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Abdullah Al Thani' is available online at ??????