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Resonances of mnemonic community: Turkey's Kurdish Question in European opera

Pieter Verstraete

For the last decade, Turkey is said to be at a historical crossroads. Underneath the rapidly changing sociopolitical climate, there is a more fundamental epistemological and cultural shift taking place, affecting Turkey's 'communalist' consciousness, which is deeply rooted in Turkey's history of the public sector and state institutionalism, but it also manifests culturally on the music and theatre stage.¹

Historically, communalism developed out of a movement of solidarity between social groups, usually in a context of dynamic opposition between communities and a colonial state, which under the development of independent nation states gave further rise to the emergence of the usually ethnically based question: which group can claim national identity? In the case of Turkey, besides the communalism that defines the 'Turk' based on Kemalist principles (i.e. founding father Mustafa 'Kemal' Atatürk's fundamentals of the Turkish Republic: republicanism, populism, nationalism, secularism, reformism or revolutionism, and statism), communalism is historically even more associated with the Kurds who, as dispersed people scattered across different state borders, at certain times have claimed cultural and political legitimacy.²

Communalism has then more revolutionary connotations for the Kurds who identify today with the Kurdish liberation movement, as a political way of organizing and/or practicing a way of living together based on federated communes. This defies the historical 'Turkish contract' so central to the Kemalist nation-building project, despite decades-long concomitant efforts by many Turkish Kurds to assimilate. It is within this tension that cultural practices of memory and commemoration for individuals who do not feel represented by the state culture or who are deliberately silenced are highly instrumental, particularly in times when these practices are little endured and even prohibited.

Theatre has played an essential role in commemorative practice for centuries in this respect. Ever since Aristotle's mimesis concept in his *Poetics* avowed theatre's essential role in learning through repetition, it became a tool for communities to relive past events and express their common identity, thereby (re)producing it time and time again as a communal practice and ritual. Among the performing arts, music has perhaps even more potential to evade censorship and appeal to communities in terms

of a common imagined identity and a shared, embodied and commonly understood experience. In the present chapter, I therefore propose to look at one particular form of theatre, namely music theatre, for its potential to express issues of identity, memory and commemoration in one of the historically most censored mnemonic communities in Turkey, the Kurds. Given the current context of state coercion in Turkey and the international consternation it has caused, particularly in areas of Turkish and Kurdish diaspora, it is unsurprising that the most thought-provoking productions that support the Kurdish identity and memory culture are produced outside of Turkey.

According to Eviatar Zerubavel (1996), language and narration play significant roles in the constitution and preservation of identities and communities under threat that define their existence on a mnemonic basis, or what he calls, 'mnemonic communities'. By means of a case study of the first Kurdish opera *Tosca* (2019)³ which addresses the concerns of such a community divided over many countries, I aim to challenge Zerubavel's suggestions of mnemonic socialization and community by reading them against Nancy's (1991) philosophical considerations on the unmaking of community, or as he calls it, an 'inoperative community'. The latter is significant in a larger argument that questions the risk of such critical commemorative music theatre practices of falling into the trap of creating new myths for the sake of political propaganda or for an industry around memory and commemoration.

Besides language, I will claim that the staging of collective memories and mnemonic acts of 'musicking' (Small 1998) play a significant role too, not only from within but also in solidarity with Turkey's subaltern communities, particularly the Kurds. Musicking will be discussed as an extension of Zerubavel's theory and criticism by means of the case study. As verb and action, musicking refers to the full musical experience as social process, in line with Small's original definition that stressed the taking 'part, in any capacity, in a musical performance' (1999: 12), be it by performing, rehearsing, listening, dancing and so on. Musicking is not so much about music as sound or as execution of a score, but as social relationship (Kun 2000: 11). Small deliberately coined this all-inclusive term to talk about precisely the grey area between what 'performers are doing and what the rest of those present are doing' (ibid.), thereby circumventing the traditional dichotomy between the act of music production and what Kant once called 'disinterested contemplation'. This will prove to be most fruitful to discuss commemoration in music theatre where all present are welcomed to *do it together*. It is my contention that musicking plays a vital role in transgressing national borders to allow expression of underrepresented identities, while taking part in celebrating and commemorating them.

Context: Turkey, an odd case

Turkey is an odd case as music theatre and opera are not indigenous art forms in the strictest sense, apart from Atatürk's attempts to introduce this European art form into the newly established modern republic by means of commissioned operas. These include *Özsoy* (a neologism meaning, *Pure Ancestry*, 1934) and *Taşbebek* (*The Doll*, 1934) by Ahmed Adnan Saygun as well as the unfinished *Bayönder* (*The Leader*,

1934) by Necil Kazım Akses and *Ülkü Yolu* (*Path of Idealism*, 1935) by Ulvi Cemal Erkin, all to which Atatürk is claimed to have personally provided dramaturgical notes. Significantly, as Ryan Gingeras (2019) remarks, the state's energies at the time were directed towards supporting the creation of a new, national style of music, which according to the then leading Turkish sociologist and political activist Ziya Gökalp meant a 'marriage of folk and Western music' (1968: 99; qtd. in Gingeras 2019: 274) through which Atatürk's pan-Turkic dream of nationalism and modernization would find its antagonistic cultural expression against the old Ottoman historical, cultural and geographical alliances. Though started almost a century ago, the resonances of this modernist cultural project, also called a 'Turkishness' contract (Ünlü 2016), continue to have wide-reaching implications today, including for Kurds historically minorized under this doctrine.

Turkey is also an odd case as new music theatre works are produced within the Turkish diaspora in Europe, while a critical project like the first Kurdish *Tosca* is today virtually unimaginable in Turkey's current political climate. Its rehearsals had to be moved unexpectedly from Diyarbakir to the basement of a burned down theatre in Istanbul because of a sudden mayor switch ('Kanun' in Turkish). Because of Turkey's military operations in Northern Syria, its Turkish premiere was first postponed and eventually cancelled. A previous project by the same director, Celil Toksöz, namely the first Kurdish adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which already included sung parts in the Kurdish dengbêj tradition (more on that later), met with a different fate then. As a result of a brief reform period in 2013 called the Kurdish Opening or Kurdish Initiative, peace talks between the Turkish government and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) were reopened, which brought instant fame to the theatre tour with subsequent broadcastings of the play on television and occasional visits by respected politicians across the political spectrum. With this contrast in mind, Toksöz's main question today cannot be relevant any more: 'Do we need to forget our culture or to keep on struggling to keep it alive?' (Beeckmans 2012; my trans., qtd. in Verstraete 2018: 65).

Furthermore, Atatürk's historical nation-building project created a very powerful mnemonic community of Kemalists in Turkey who form the backbone of Turkey's secularist 'communalist' consciousness in the state's administrative and educational culture (Turkish *laiklik*), which for a long time in history impeded the means of cultural existence of a Kurdish identity. Since state theatre artists are historically associated with the Kemalist project, the political climate today has amplified the need for more cautious dramaturgical approaches that are not potentially seen as harmful by the state, particularly after the post-coup emergency law was lifted, on 25 July 2018, when all state theatres including opera and ballet were placed under the direct control of the newly installed presidency. For the Kurds, however, dramaturgical hints amidst state-organized censorship practices were already a fact of the stage from 1987 onwards when the then emergency situation was declared permanently in the Kurdish regions to restrain armed conflict. Special security forces would make occasional checks in spaces that would attract large crowds. Occasional curfews would limit audience attendance, according to a *Siyah Bant* report in 2012. The state had even forbidden the use of Kurmanji in official events, in public spaces including theatres, and in songs

since the 1960s and as early as 1925.⁴ It was not until January 1991, when President Turgut Özal and Prime Minister Yıldırım Akbulut lifted the ban on Kurmanji; it would take even longer to be implemented and it was in the 2000s, when Kurdish drama and song in Kurmanji started to flourish again (Verstraete 2018: 52).

Turkey is then an ideal case for the discussion of the role of music and theatre in collective memory building and commemoration of sensitive past events as well as its socializing effects on communities and identities. Of particular interest are performances that try to win the approval of the authorities to avoid political reaction or polarization, notwithstanding opera productions that were imbued historically with a great social and critical function to advance Turkish nationalism. A more recent example of the latter is the 2021 opera *Sinan* by composer Hasan Uçarsa, based on an unrealized film concept by Halit Refiğ in 1978 (libretto by Bertan Rona), staged at the inauguration of the newly rebuilt iconic opera and ballet house, the Atatürk Cultural Centre (AKM) in Istanbul, on the 98th anniversary of the Republic of Turkey. The fact that the opera took a celebrated Ottoman architect as its protagonist is well in tune with President Erdoğan's pan-Ottoman architectonics to re-establish the greatness of the former empire under his vision of a 'New Turkey'. Producing a critical music theatre production for Turkish and Kurdish communities in both Turkey and Europe, whilst evading such state narratives and censorship, suddenly makes a whole lot of sense.

Music theatre as tool for mnemonic socialization

Now that a larger cultural and historical context has been established, this analysis will elaborate on the theoretical foundation for analysing music theatre's role in commemorative practices, starting with Zerubavel's (1996) notion of 'mnemonic community'. In his sociological work on communities, he has demonstrated how commemorative acts, rites and sites can affect what he calls a 'mnemonic socialization'. By this, he considers the workings of collective memory in relation to our material culture, influencing social behaviours, habits of mind, assumptions, values, belief systems, practices, traditions and perceptions of the world – in other words, our pervasive cultural discourse. He distinguishes personalized manifestations of a mnemonic community's collective memory from personal recollections.

The collective memory of a mnemonic community is quite different from the sum total of the personal recollections of its various individual members, as it includes only those that are commonly shared by all of them ... The notion of a collective memory implies a past that is not only commonly shared but also jointly remembered (that is, 'co-memorated'). (Zerubavel 1996: 293–4)

We shall see later how music theatre, through celebrating language and cultural artefacts that are plagued by long stretches of censorship, can also trouble a collective memory that is inherently incoherent and only comes into existence by re-imagining and co-memory. Moreover, for Kurdish communities, reimagining the dengbêj

tradition through an in essence 'European' art form like opera and staging it outside Turkey creates wider opportunities for *co-memorating*. According to Zerubavel, such newly established commemorative practices always engage in mnemonic battles over the social legacy of the past, thereby underscoring their social role in a larger politics of remembrance that affects not only individuals but also entire communities. These battles often bring along discord regarding what the 'correct' way is to interpret the past, which narratives ought to be remembered and *how* they should be remembered, which often corresponds to major social changes that are discussed in the public realm.

Zerubavel discusses mnemonic socialization through narrative structures and *narrativization*. He speaks of a narratological pluralism that underlies the discord in society regarding essentially *what* events should be remembered and *how* these events should be commemorated. For the Kurds, however, the foundational narratives of their communal identity and memory have long been hampered by expression in their language, despite the substantial efforts of Kurdish poets to produce literary works in Kurmanji since the 1970s, many of whom were writing and translating outside Turkey (with the Kurdish Institute of Paris as a significant supportive centre). Since (self-) restriction of speech and writing, and thus of narrative, in the public arena also affects theatre artists and audiences in the theatre, more affective ways are sought to facilitate mnemonic socialization around sensitive topics. Music is then one of such tools to circumvent it as it has the power to reach audiences more directly, affecting them both bodily and cognitively.

In narratological discussions, instrumental music is often described by its problematic *tellability* in contrast to its great propensity for *narrativity*. The former is defined by a medium's ability to recount an event or configuration of events that are (relevantly) reportable, or 'tellable', in a given communicative situation, which music essentially lacks. Labov and Waletzky (1967) contributed to the notion while discussing performative narratives that may be considered 'empty or pointless' when they only recapitulate experience, though they may still enable a 'stimulus in the social context in which the narrative occurs' (13). In narrative psychology of the 1970s, the notion of 'narrativization' was developed to explain how for all music's semiotic ambiguity, it can strongly appeal to a cognitive mode of experiencing the self through music in a narrative interpretation. Zerubavel draws from these same insights when he acknowledges narrativization as a mnemonic tool: 'In order to satisfy their desire for cognitive closure, people tend to mentally transform the flow of more or less unstructured events into relatively coherent narratives' (Zerubavel 2003: 13). Music has that potential to incite the listener finding closure and relief through narrativization in order to maintain a holistic self.

Music theatre's framing mechanisms as well as lyrics in songs (and supertitles) or concomitant gestures of the performers help the spectator to construct a narrative traction by appealing to their familiarity and cognitive ability to make narrative connections. These are defined by contextual clues and socially shaped identifications. We, therefore, should give attention to the full musical context, which is what Christopher Small (1998) denotes with the term 'musicking' as a form of socialization. If, following Zerubavel, we regard narrativization as one significant

aspect of this social relationship which the total musical performance situation can bring about, then we have to acknowledge music theatre's significance in mnemonic socialization, particularly in works that address communal issues. Yet Zerubavel has also acknowledged the role narrativization plays in myth-making, for instance in founding myths and ethno-nationalist narratives that foster a sense of common descent and commonality in sharing a common present (Zerubavel 2003: 63). Yaël Zerubavel, Zerubavel's spouse, has added that such myths also fulfil the social function of 'demarcating the group's distinct identity vis-à-vis others' (Zerubavel 1997: 7). This is an important point to look out for when discussing community building through music theatre as a form of mnemonic socialization.

One important aspect has not been fully addressed in this context: the role of identity and the address of self. The social aspect of memory as constitutive in the process of identity formation and selfhood has been well researched since the 1920s by Maurice Halbwachs (1980). He introduced the term 'affective communities' already in 1925 to discuss the role of emotion in the production of social groups. He believes that music, both in production and reception (the production of musical meaning), has correlations with our capacities of memory: it is dependent on a history of replications, previous performances of the music, which is then mediated by the listeners' (and musician's) relations to one another. He uses a comparison to the image of footprints in Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe*, as Mowitt (1987) recounts:

musical signs ... are indices of the action exerted on a performer's brain by the 'colony' of other brains. The significance of these signs arises within the horizon established by this structuring of memory – a memory that is at once fundamental to music and profoundly social ... The social history leaves its traces, its footprints, in the brains of musician and listener alike. (Mowitt 1987: 181)

Since both musician and listener are participating in social history's footprints, one could assume that *musicking*, in all its aspects of performance and reception, is also always shaped by these traces. However, Halbwachs believed that social frameworks pre-exist and shape people's memories by filtering narratives according to their social significance for the group (1939: 7–8). Since the prolific expansion of cultural memory studies in recent years, we have seen studies that show how remembrance is also a cultural force that can help to redefine social frameworks, and, as will become apparent in the following case study, to connect hitherto unconnected communities with differing understandings (Rigney 2018). The latter is particularly of importance if we want to understand the empathetic links to Kurdish communities outside of Turkey, not only within their own diasporic groups but also within the intercultural communities of Europe. In this regard, cultural memory that is reproduced and communicated through formative (and often normative) cultural texts plays an important role and should be acknowledged as a site of new experiential perspectives that could work against the rigidity of foundational myths.

Music has a double role to play in this identification process. Simon Frith (1996), for instance, has been central in the debates surrounding music's ability to address identity, by reminding us

first that identity is mobile, a process not a thing, a becoming not a being; second, that our experience of music – of music making and music listening – is best understood as an experience of this *self-in-process*. Music, like identity, is both performance and story, describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social, ... ; identity, like music, is a matter of both ethics and aesthetics. (Frith 1996: 109; qtd. in Verstraete 2013: 191)

As Frith remarks, music – or better, musicking – sustains the social connection between the individual and the collective memory, precisely because of its propensity, just like identity, to stay mobile, unfixed, perpetually *becoming* but never arriving.

When we extend this argument to our discussion of music theatre's purposefulness for mnemonic socialization, the identity question requires a deeper look into the complexity of the audience as temporary community. This is even more complex in bi- or intercultural situations. The Deleuzian/Spinozian idea of the self as pure becoming has inspired philosophers to rethink community, not as a well-defined, coherent social group, but as George Bataille called it, a 'community without community' (Derrida 1997: 48; Nancy 1991: 71). Bataille's notion became the cornerstone of the community debate initiated by Jean Luc Nancy's *La Communauté desoeuvrée* (1986; transl. 1991). The underlying idea is that community should be regarded negatively as the 'antithesis to a notion of community that always already knows who and what it is speaking of' (Kosnick 2011: 28). Community is then 'inoperative' to the extent that it cannot be regarded as 'a project of fusion, or in some general way a productive or operative project – nor is it a *project* at all' (Nancy 1991: 15). Instead, it is 'unworkable' or 'unworking';⁵ it is not an 'oeuvre' because it is un-objectifiable. This notion of community is in a state, which Bataille called the absence of myth, or, in Nancy's words, the 'interruption of myth' (1991: 47). Although Nancy meant particularly the Nazi myth and its relentless desire to regenerate the 'old European humanity' (46), it can mean to refer to any foundational myth. It is the latter discussion that will help us to argue for music's ambiguity in appealing to a community's collective memories while that community is by and in itself, 'inoperative'. Hence, we should ask ourselves the question: to what extent does the music contribute or resist the interruption of myth?

Case study: A Kurdish *Tosca*

I propose to discuss the developed argument on music theatre's potential role in mnemonic socialization further through the case study of the Kurdish adaptation of Puccini's *Tosca* (2019), translated into Kurmanji by exiled Kurdish author, Kawa Nemir. This adaptation was set to a new musical score by the emigrated Armenian-Turkish composer, Ardaşes Açoşya, in a staging by the Turkish-Dutch director, Celil Toksöz. This noteworthy production was produced by the Amsterdam-based Theater RAST in collaboration with artists from the Diyarbakir City Theatre, now called *Amed Şehir Tiyatrosu* in Turkey. This music theatre production comes at a significant political moment in time, when newspapers and petitions speak of another 'genocide' taking place involving Kurds in north-eastern Syria (Dag 2020; Stanton 2019). Amidst this

geopolitical crisis and its atrocities, the opera commemorates the Kurdish language, culture and its long history of state oppression and betrayal in different historical contexts, much in line with the main dramaturgical themes of Puccini's *Tosca*.

On a narrative level, it is perhaps a surprise that this Kurdish musical drama is not based on a Kurdish story but on the libretto of Puccini's 1900 opera, which was in its turn based on a French melodrama by Victorien Sardou. Kawa Nemir got most of the original poetry translated by the librettists, Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, with some poetic additions in Kurmanji where appropriate. The choice of Puccini's most political lyrical drama is, however, no coincidence. Inspired by Emile Zola's naturalism in French literature, Italian *Verismo* at the beginning of the 1900s gave Puccini opportunity to put stories of common people with more mundane desires and passions on the stage. In the Kurdish *Tosca* adaptation, however, the figures of political refugee Cesare Angelotti (played by Hediye Kalkan), the insurgent painter Mario Cavaradossi (Dodan Özer) and his rather politically ignorant lover, Floria Tosca (Gülseven Medar) seek a very different 'veristic' truth as they do not necessarily portray Puccini's original admiration for Napoleon Bonaparte and the Italian dissidents who supported the Napoleonic revolutionary wars in Italy. Rather than set in Rome, where Napoleon's battle of Marengo against the Austrians takes place, the fictional world is now 'situated in Diyarbakir, a city on a steep, high basalt rock on the banks of the Tigris', according to the programme brochure.

Moreover, the brochure reveals 'Puccini's 200-year-old story is a metaphor for the suppression that the Kurds experience until today'. In interviews, Toksöz highlighted the theme of 'betrayal' which is very meaningful in the context of the Kurds, particularly in the context today with the Turkish incursion in northern Syria. This sparked international outrage and numerous newspaper articles referencing a long history of betrayal. Historically, that betrayal goes back to the 1920s when Kurds were promised a state under the Treaty of Sèvres, which marks the ending of the First World War and dismantles the Ottoman Empire, a promise never fulfilled by the involved pledging parties, Britain, France and the United States. When the new republic of Turkey was established in 1923, national borders were drawn in such a way that would leave out the fulfilment of an independent (greater) Kurdistan. Kurdish tribes and revolting tribal leaders were quashed by the military.

Each year in November, a related historical event is commemorated among Kurdish communities from Turkey, the Dersim massacre, in which c. 20,000 to 30,000 Zaza-speaking Kurds were gassed and killed in the years 1937–8 because they did not comply with Ankara's efforts of centralizing power in the early republican period. The commemoration recalls the hanging of one of the Kurdish rebel leaders, Seyed Riza, on 15 November 1937. The Dersim massacre is seen today by internationally acclaimed academics, like Martin van Bruinessen (1994), as a genocide. It was followed by decades of repressive policies of ethnocide that would curb Kurdish rights to identity in Turkey. Although the creative team of *Tosca* never referenced such harsh historical events directly, neither in media interviews, nor the programme or the staging, they do refer in the brochure and on their website to the context of censorship and linguicide when revealing the production's central metaphor: 'the Kurdish language refers to the language of oppressed, of the refugee, of secrecy. ... This language also searches like

a refugee for a home in this opera.' Ironically, the opera's premiere in Turkey, where it would come home, could not take place and it is uncertain if it would ever be produced there.⁶

When one tries to decipher the adaptation's narrative as an allegory for Kurdish political history or for the contemporary situation, the reading always falls short. Neither the storyline nor the characters ever completely fit. It rather circumstantially wants to resonate with bigger metaphors of power (abuse), subjugation, exile and liberation, which anybody can relate to. Since the opera is produced for a very diverse audience in the Netherlands and potentially Turkey, the work is kept open, without clear symbols or cues, so that anybody can read their own story, in other words, 'narrativize' the musical events on stage.

There are, however, some clear dramaturgical changes that have political relevance. One is that a woman, Hediye Kalkan, plays the originally male political refugee Cesare Angelotti, who is a member of the pro-Napoleon dissidents who just escaped prison. Toksöz explained this dramaturgical choice: 'Kurdish women are so combative. ... They have always been under pressure by both the government and the family, and they always have to be strong. It is now often the Kurdish women who protect their land, organize demonstrations and take up arms' (interview with Beeckmans, 16 October 2019). Given the contemporary context, the reference seems then to allude to the all-female Kurdish Women's Protection Units in Northern Syria, which are reported to have become a pawn in a bigger, male-dominated, geopolitical game (Temelkuran 2019). This creates perhaps more tension around the politically unaware Tosca, who later gives up Cesare's hiding place at her lover's safehouse.

A second, less noticeable, dramaturgical change is that the overall focalization has shifted from Tosca to Mario Cavaradossi (Dodan Özer), apart from the scene where Tosca is alone with the corrupt chief of police, Baron Scarpia (Ali Tekbaş). However, one could argue that Cavaradossi is still presently perceiving the scene while being interrogated under torture offstage. This shift in focalization may be the result of some cut scenes, which makes Cavaradossi present in most of the songs. When he sings the legendary 'E lucevan le stelle' aria in a new composition by Açoşyan, it is clear that the audience are meant to feel more connected to the tragedy of the Kurds, who have gone through systematic torture historically. Most known in that regard is the Diyarbakir Prison, established in 1980 as a martial law military prison to interrogate political dissidents after the 1980 Turkish coup d'état, notoriously exposed to horrifying acts of torture. So, when Dodan Özer elongates his musical gasp, 'Oh', it crosses time and space with much historical resonance, until he pronounces: 'I have never loved life like this before.'

It is clear from these two noticeable changes in the adaptation that, in commemorating Kurdish liberation efforts, the overall dramaturgy works around a duality in the recognition and narrativization by diverse audience members. On the one hand, certain narrative elements as well as visual motives are kept deliberately open to interpretation, which invites audiences to feel along with the main dramatic arch close to the original opera, while on the other hand, certain images claim political traction and symbolism. For instance, the painting that Cavaradossi was preparing in the church is in this production a more generic photograph of *Sculpture Woman in a*

*Russian Dress*⁷ by the Soviet sculptor Sergei Konenkov, clearly chosen for its pensive, commemorative bending of a woman's head slightly backwards rather than any direct historical or political connotations. Yet the image of an eagle tied to a tree, which dominates the scene halfway the performance, is clearly suggesting more political significance. The eagle is not only a mythological animal that works as a catalyst for a lot of Kurdish folk stories, but it is also a primary national symbol on the coat of arms for the Kurdistan region in Iraq where the eagle holds a sun on its wings. The fact that it is tied to a tree is a rather obvious political symbol for the capture of Cavaradossi and Angelotti and for the Kurds who want to have sovereignty over their land, a democratic federation and an internationally recognized society, rather than a dispersed, homeless and diasporic community.

Debate: *Tosca*'s problematic mnemonic socialization

This chapter's main question of mnemonic community through music theatre invites us to look at the full musical experience in *Tosca*. The composer admits in a privately conducted interview⁸ that he composed the music with the purpose of commemoration in mind. His identity as a previously Istanbul-based Armenian composer is not insignificant: he grew up as a Christian in a cosmopolitan environment with Turkish, Kurdish, Assyrian, Jewish, Greek and Armenian people around him. He claims to have taken his roots from pre- and post-Christian Armenian culture with a 5,000-year-old history, so as a classically trained composer, the music of the Kurds was never foreign to him.

In his composition, he uses famous Kurdish songs and tunes, some of which were compiled by the Armenian composer-singer, musicologist and priest, Soghomon Soghomonian, better known as 'Gomidas' or Komitas Vartabed (1869–1935), whose 150th anniversary was celebrated in 2019. During the Ottoman Empire, Gomidas travelled through Anatolia to notate over four thousand Kurdish, Armenian and Turkish songs in search of a 'pure' Armenian music. By way of commemoration, composer Açoşyan rearranges a tune that Gomidas preserved throughout this opera adaptation in what he calls a 'music of Mesopotamia'. It is perhaps historical irony that music, which was once collected to find the true 'Armenian sound', is now used in a Kurdish opera to identify with Kurdishness. It says a lot about how the timeworn music of Mesopotamia is culturally hybrid. Moreover, Açoşyan left room in the rehearsal process for improvisation for the dengbêj singers – they could choose a region in Mesopotamia and improvise according to the singing techniques associated with each individual region. Through guided improvisation, the composer places a great amount of trust in the singers and instrumentalists to express themselves by adopting new singing techniques while using their own instincts and memories of Kurdish musical cultures.

The reference to 'Mesopotamia' is ideologically significant, as Çağlayan (2012: 6) confirms in her study about the ideological discursive strategies of the Kurdish liberation movement: it may 'emphasize the historical continuity from the pre-historic peoples of Mesopotamia ... and thereby allow the construction of a

continuous identity of Kurdishness' (Smets and Akkaya 2016: 86). So, by bringing to memory an often-unrecognized Middle Eastern culture, the opera resonates with a micro-nationalist fantasy of the Kurds that gives them existential rights against what is generally imagined as 'Anatolian' within Turkey's national and literary history. In a way, the mnemonic community that identifies itself here by means of a collective memory around some of the songs and tunes can have nationalist undertones. This became very clear when some of the songs were recorded by audience members on their smartphones and shared through Twitter. Social media then reinforced a sense of an imagined community (Anderson 1991) across national borders, which breathes new life into the myths that underpin it.

Nonetheless, the collective memory of the Kurds, particularly those of the diaspora in the Netherlands, is waning. The long censorship history in Turkey (as well as in Syria and Iraq) has had significant influence. Therefore, commemorative citation of their ancient forms of music is always in a sense (re)producing new myths on which the community rediscovers its identity in a continuous process of *becoming* (cf. Frith 1996). One particular Leitmotif that the Kurdish(-Dutch) community can recognize is the repetitive use of two Kurdish wedding dance songs (*düğün halayı*), 'Lorke' and 'Welleh govend ranabe', around which Agoşyan composed his melodies as reflections of these songs. The first time it is heard it signals the thoughts of the villainous chief of police, Scarpia, when he is blackmailing Tosca to share the bed with him in return for her lover's mercy from the death penalty. The wedding 'halay' could then prompt an extra narrative layer for Kurdish listeners, signalling that Scarpia thinks of the situation as his wedding. We hear 'Lorke' for the first time when Tosca accepts Scarpia's deal. Consequently, we continue to hear 'Lorke' after Scarpia is killed by Tosca, which may mean that all his powers are transferred to Tosca in some kind of Shamanic way of thinking. To symbolize this, we hear 'Lorke' again in its amodal transformation: this now symbolizes the wedding that has gone astray. After Tosca kills Scarpia, during the execution scene of Cavaradossi, Tosca imagines for herself a wedding scene just like Scarpia did. Before the execution, we hear 'Welleh govend ranabe' because Tosca will have the same destiny as Scarpia: she thinks she will elope with Cavaradossi because he will be freed safely. However, when she finds out Cavaradossi is killed, we hear the amodal transformation of 'Welleh govend ranabe'. This is her song for a wedding that has gone astray because the groom is now dead.

Even when Dutch audiences, through musicking, would not recognize such cultural meanings of a Kurdish wedding dance song, usually performed as a circle dance by the community in wedding parties, the repetition of the 'Lorke' and 'Welleh govend ranabe' tunes as leitmotifs make the audience part of a collective memory with the Kurdish singers, musicians and audience members. Moreover, the cultural transferences and appropriations of Agoşyan's composition (which, according to him, is also based on one melody in his own oeuvre, namely a Kurdish harvest song) creates enough cultural and mnemonic distance to detach any tendencies in the making of a community through musical recognition and collective memory in a nationalist programme. Such cultural referencing 'necessarily stretch[es] the meaning of national belonging by disengaging it from its presumed territorial and linguistic imperative, and decentering it in relation to any putative "core" values or markers of greater or

lesser “authenticity” (Flores 2009: 45). The ‘authenticity’ question, according to Lo and Gilbert (2002) quoting Griffiths (1994), can ‘easily become a fetishized commodity that grounds the legitimacy of other cultures “not in their practice but in our desire”’ (46).

Thus, the authenticity in the musicians’ engagement with traditional halay songs and the dengbêj tradition in this opera adaptation marks a chasm in the address of commemorative communities through music: on the one hand, the Kurdish audience members may find themselves trapped in a desire for recognition of their culture in a fantasy that sharing some of their collective musical memories produce a temporary community in listening. On the other hand, the white Dutch audience members may marvel at what they read as an ‘authentic’ vision of Kurdish traditional music performed by non-Western ‘others’ producing their (folklore) *culture* on the stage. But then, they may miss the mythologizing aspects that this production engages in its reproduction of a phantasy of a ‘music of Mesopotamia’ – much similar to the ‘memory industry’ (Klein 2000) that the newly established House of Dengbêj in Diyarbakir initiated.

The layering of these potential connotations in the different engagements with the music in its production and reception disrupts Jacques Attali’s impression that ‘all music, any organization of sounds, is then a tool for the creation or consolation of a community, of a totality’ (1985: 6). The sense of totality in the musical experience is then more of a temporary illusion, and the community that is produced as much on stage as in the auditorium is rather an ‘inoperative’ one (Nancy [1986] 1991). The potentially (micro)nationalist connotations of a remythologization of Kurdish cultural ‘authentic’ traditions through the performance are open enough to sustain a larger appeal and cultural reading by the different communities represented in the context of this theatrical experience and social ritual that traditionally comes along with opera-going. Similarly, its visual symbols may pinpoint nationalist connotations but are open enough to appeal to a hybrid community in a process of *becoming* but never quite realizing as a totality through the musical experience. The *in-operative* community that this opera produces is then rather an apparent paradox under question: a chasm between communities that are always in themselves imagined and whose boundaries are more porous than its constituting individuals may believe.

Concluding remarks

The music theatre production discussed in this chapter sets out to address and commemorate a transnationally dispersed mnemonic community of Turkey in the multicultural contexts of Western Europe, in this case, the Netherlands, but this equally concerns Germany, Sweden, France or Belgium. They showed the importance of opera’s commemorative function in translocal and transcultural situations where an ‘inoperative’ community through commemorative practice in its own national context is prohibited.

In its appeal to memories of individuals and communities, sometimes fabricated, sometimes deliberately ideological, *Tosca* gave rise to questions on the very notion of what the community defined by memory is. Notwithstanding nationalist connotations and aspirations that music may provoke in its appeal to Kurdish collective memories

and political imaginings, the mnemonic community is opened and decentralized to such an extent that it drives the attention away from a national belonging. It sets out to include outsiders to that community in a more inquisitive and indefinite way, while commemorating the perpetual deaths and historical betrayals of the Kurds – including cultural and linguistic knockbacks – through protagonists who are borrowed from the European dramatic canon. This multifaceted cultural appropriation consisted of Turkish-Kurdish cultural agents reclaiming Puccini's opera to claim recognition for their culture, the Turkish-Armenian composer reclaiming the hybrid musical-cultural archive of the Kurds and the Dutch diverse audiences reclaiming something of an 'authentic' cultural experience through the familiar narrative format of the opera (by itself, also a cultural hybrid of a French melodrama in an Italian veristic opera form). This hybridity – call it a living 'barbarism' – challenged the total musical experience as an experience of community that, in itself, is a constructed totality. Even more so, it presented itself as a problematic paradox, a myth of a temporary community through musicking that may desire commonality but never arrives there.

Through commemoration, whether it is of language, of music or of political narrative, music theatre reminds us that the coming of communities, be it through mimesis or collective experience, would always somehow necessarily fail short. Its repetitions and aimed restored socializations make the contours of communities more than ever reflective and mistrusted. Yet it is exactly this troubling of community from which mnemonic practice in the theatre draws its communal strengths.

Notes

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2. Even more so, due to decades of political repression and denial of the Kurdish identity in Turkish society many Kurds have historically felt as 'an active "colonial project"' that is continuing up to the present (Houston 2009: 20). This has fueled the 'Kurdish Question' or 'Kurdish Issue' which has been essentially about either separation of the Kurds from Turkey to create an independent Kurdistan or about more autonomy and rights for the Kurds inside Turkey.
3. The production was advertised as the *first* Kurdish opera, but there have been earlier occasions where Kurdish musicians and singers performed in different Kurdish dialects on the international classical music stage. One notable example is Dilşad Said (in Kurdish, Dîlşad Seîd), a Kurdish musician (classically trained in Baghdad and now residing in Austria) who conducted his own symphony, titled *Peshmerga* in 2015 with the Czech National Symphony Orchestra and the Kühn Choir of Prague. The composition was commemorating the massacre of Yazidi Kurds and the capture of Sinjar by ISIS. It was sung by six celebrated Kurdish vocalists in different Kurdish dialects (texts by Edib Chalki). Another famous Kurdish soprano on the international concert stage is Pervin Chakar (born in Turkey's Mardin; studied in Diyarbakir and Ankara), who lives nowadays in Germany's Baden-Baden and sings classical renditions of Kurdish folk songs, mostly with the Junge Philharmonie in Cologne.

4. Kumanji was banned under the Orient Reformation Report, *Şark Islahat Raporu*, sometimes referred to as the Plan, which was enacted in 1925. Particularly, Law No. 2932,8 banned conversing and singing in Kurmanji.
5. 'Inoperative' is the term that Nancy's translators, Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland and Simona Sawhney came up with in 1991.
6. The premiere was first planned in Diyarbakir and then provisionally set to happen in Izmir and Istanbul after its first run in Dutch theatres but all performances in Turkey were finally cancelled.
7. Sergei Kronenkov is sometimes nicknamed the 'Russian Rodin' and his sculpture perhaps depicts his wife Margarita Konenkova, who allegedly had a brief affair with Albert Einstein when Sergei came down to Princeton University to do his sculpture. Margarita was rumoured in the United States to perhaps be a Soviet spy. Whether Toksöz was aware of this historical reference is unclear, but certainly, the audience is not given a context to read this image in such a way.
8. The author of this chapter conducted the structured interview on the basis of five questions and the responses were delivered on 20 November 2019 in written electronic form.

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