

The Importance and Use of Percussion Instruments in Turkish Music

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Abstract

Percussion instruments have been used in the performance of traditional and religious rituals in the earliest periods of Turkish music. Initially, these instruments accompanied human voices in forms such as speech, shouting, pleading, and crying, emphasizing the intended emotions. Later on, with the influence of intercultural interaction, it became known that percussion instruments were used together with various other instruments. Throughout the historical process in Turkish music, percussion instruments used as rhythmic instruments, although they may appear to be used for maintaining and sustaining the tempo, actually had different missions for each instrument. In this sense, not every percussion instrument has been used in all forms of Turkish music. These instruments have been considered as being one of the most important instruments in Turkish music, both throughout history and in contemporary times, depending on the functioning of the music genre. Particularly, the *kudüm* instrument, which has been highly influential in the formation of Turkish music modes, has even taken on the role of a choir conductor in some musical ensembles. This study examines the importance of percussion instruments in Turkish music and their intended use, based on qualitative research techniques. The study focuses especially on the four rhythm instruments that are widely used in Turkish music. The findings of the study reveal that while the *nevbe* instrument, one of these instruments, has lost both its musical and social functionality, *kudüm*, drum, and *kös* instruments continue to be used both in social life activities and in concerts and rituals in various musical ensembles.

Keywords: Percussions instrument, Classical Turkish Music, Rhythmic instruments, rituals and ceremonies, Turkish Music

1. Introduction

Every culture has its social dynamics in the context of its social, philosophical, and other values. This dynamic begins with oral culture as a necessity for communication. That is why we support and carry out rituals in social life to teach others what we have learned and memorize it. For example, in situations like marriage, death, etc., another action accompanies our happiness, joy, and suffering and is part of our traditions. Even centuries later, social activities are still accompanied by music, dance, prayer, etc.

Since the Paleolithic period, humanity has produced sounds by beating their bodies for actions such as hunting and dancing without musical purposes. These actions became particularly widespread in East Africa when different materials such as stones, sticks, bows, and ropes were used. In the Neolithic, people discovered the vibrations produced by highly resonant wooden objects. They associated these vibrations with the sounds of the souls of the dead. They later covered their manufactured materials with animal skin and beat them by hand. During the Bronze Age, people used drums up to 2 to 3 meters high to emphasize and announce their traditions (TEK Percussion, 2023). Due to the developments described above, drums and similar instruments have become widespread in various countries around the world.

In Turkish society before Islam, as in all societies, there were rituals for praying, curing illnesses, and warding off negative energies, i.e., evil spirits, which were believed to influence people. Budak (2006) states that in Turkish society, individuals who effectively practiced medicine, music, and magic within the community performed certain rituals using a rhythm instrument and a cowhide drum accompanied these dances. (Budak, 2006, pp. 16-18).

Picture 1: The image shows drums, *kös*, and other instruments being played on horses and camels.



Source: Güneygül, 2021, p. 196

In the historical Turkish state tradition, drums, *kös* (a percussion instrument of *mehter* music played with two beaters), and flags were known as symbols of sovereignty and independence. Drums and *kös* were among the leading instruments of the military band. Therefore, Turks participated in many wars with drums and *kös* (Ögel, 1991, pp. 41-52-110). This strategy was primarily aimed at frightening the opposing side with powerful sounds, but in fact, it was a sign of the magnificence of the army. Both in ancient Turks and during the Ottoman period, percussion instruments used in military music were also used in the religious music tradition. Percussion instruments became a part of traditional rituals such as ceremonies and *semâ* (a special ceremony performed by whirling dervishes with musical accompaniment) in traditional rituals.

In addition to the information above, percussion instruments used in the Janissary music were actively used during holiday ceremonies, castle conquests, when the army was going to war, during the war, in *nevbet* ceremonies (five times a day), at border outposts to ensure security, and during enthusiastic victory celebrations (Boztaş, 2009, pp. 82-96).

The development of Janissary music organizations dates back to the reign of Sultan Murad-1 who was an Ottoman sultan in the 14th century. In a Janissary band (*mehter*), there

were wind instruments called "*boru*" and "*kurrenay*" and percussion instruments called "*davul*", "*kös*", "*nakkare*", "*zil*", "*çevgan*", and "*def*". They performed various military music, folk melodies, and hymns. The Janissary band could appeal to all segments of society in terms of their repertoire, and they also accompanied the sultan in wars (Popescu-Judet, 2007, pp. 60-68).

Tanrikorur (2005) points out that rhythm instruments have been used as a requirement of state protocol and played together with wind instruments, and that both wind and percussion instruments were necessary for Janissary band music. As a matter of fact, the majestic shows of wind and rhythm instruments were also used in military music and brought the music in question to the top. In accordance with state protocols, military music concerts during ambassador visits attracted the attention of Western societies. As a result of this, countries such as Austria, Poland, and England established bands called "Janissary music". Another result of intercultural interaction emerged at the end of the 18th century when the Ottoman military power began to weaken. In the Ottoman society, composers began to compose symphonies and concertos with Western influences. The weakening of the military power both led to a change in Turkish Music culture and deeply affected Western music culture (Tankorur, 2005, pp. 22-27).

This research was conducted on a sample of *nevbe*, *kös*, *drum*, and *kudüm* instruments, which are among the percussion instruments that have been influential in Turkish culture and social life. The research was conducted with a descriptive approach and aims to obtain results regarding the purposes and contexts in which these instruments are used. In this regard, it especially focuses on the functionality of the instruments used in traditional Turkish music to the Islamic period from pre-Islamic Turkish societies.

The problem of the research is in what dynamics have these instruments taken place throughout history and what is the place of these dynamics in Turkish music and culture? It aims to find an answer to the question. In addition to this information, this study is important in that the functionality of these instruments sheds light on the musical culture of pre-Islamic and post-Islamic Turkish societies.

2. Nevbe

In pre-Islamic Turkish societies, *nevbe* was played at specific times of the day. The playing style of this instrument showed days, weeks, years, and consequently, the duration of the sultan's reign on the throne. Playing *nevbe* or performing a *nevbet* ceremony served as a kind of calendar task to calculate the sultan's reign and the period in power. *Nevbet* ceremonies were also used in military music. The start of playing the *nevbe* instrument at certain times of the day was accompanied by rituals such as the army taking a specific position and then reciting prayers (Ögel, 1991, pp. 15-19).

Picture-2: Nevbe



Source: Agayeva, 2007, p. 37

In Turkish societies after the embracing of Islam, "nevbe" is known as mystical ceremonies held with the accompaniment of certain rhythm instruments and human voices in tekkes (Islamic mystic lodges). As well as *Nevbe* was the name of the rhythm instrument ensemble, it is a rhythm instrument with unique features used during the recitation of certain Sufi zikrs. Thus, *nevbe* (*nevbet*) is known as an ensemble and a ceremony as well as a rhythm instrument. This instrument, made of brass with an approximate diameter of 15-20 cm and covered with animal skin, was played by compressing it between the left arm and the body and striking it with a strap held in the right hand.

This instrument was used in mystical ceremonies (such as Ramadan, Eid al-Adha, wedding ceremonies, etc.) by some Islamic orders. In fact, this instrument's ensemble would begin days before the ritual was performed and announce the approaching traditional ceremonies. In larger dervish lodges, the "*nevbe ceremony*" was conducted with greater precision. The *nevbe* ensemble had an extensive repertoire in which instruments and human voices were sung together in a choir. Types of religious music composed to praise God and the Prophet were also performed by the sheiks of tekkes and *dargâhs* using rhythmic instruments such as "*halile*", "*kudüm*", and "*mazhar*". Although *Nevbe* ceremonies were generally held during religious rituals, they were also conducted during important duties assumed by officials in the state protocol (Agayeva, 2007, pp. 37-38).

3. Köş

Kös drums come in two types: those belonging to the sultan and those associated with the Janissary military band. The sultan's *kös* is unique and symbolizes the power of the sovereignty and the military. Mehter *kös*, on the other hand, are part of the Janissary bands and can be found in larger numbers. These instruments are made of copper containers with camel skin stretched over the top. They are played using two thick sticks and come in various sizes. Some are so large that they can be carried on horses, camels, or elephants and produce a majestic sound. There is a specific method for playing *kös*. Especially during the Ottoman

era, the way *kös* drums were played could vary on special occasions such as receiving an ambassador, celebrations, or holidays (Özalp, 2000, pp. 47-48).

Picture-3: Kös in a Janissary Band-Mehterân



Source: Halkbank, 2023

In the Ottoman Empire, the *kös* symbolized the sultan. Just like the drum instrument, it was given to sultans as a symbol of their rule. The primary purpose of the *kös* was to regulate the movements of the army. The *kös* played on the battlefield were smaller in size compared to those belonging to the sultan. This was because they needed to be easily played while riding on camels and horses. Unlike the drum, this instrument was not played at festivities and celebrations; instead, it was considered a sacred musical instrument according to Turkish mythical beliefs (Ögel, 1991, pp. 158-167).

Picture-4: Percussion and wind instruments used in Janissary Band (Mehteran) music (kös, davul, zurna, nefir, and zil)



Source: Boztaş, 2009, p.120, TSMK, B. 200-45a

4. Davul (Drum)

The drum is an instrument whose diameter can vary, consisting of a wooden frame with animal skin or imitation skins stretched over it. Metal and ropes located in the wooden part of the drum help keep the cylinder fixed. One surface of the instrument is played with sticks, one thick and one thin. The part struck with the thick stick produces a deeper tone, while the surface struck with the thin stick produces a higher-pitched tone. Therefore, strong and deep beats are played with the thick-tipped stick, while the thin stick is used for lighter and higher-pitched beats. Structurally, it resembles the *kös* but is smaller in size.

The drum was quite common in pre-Islamic Turkish societies as part of military music which is a widely listened-to genre. In the Ottoman period, *mehter* music, with its grand and imposing sound, including the drum and other instruments, was used as a symbol of the power of the state authority. This music, often performed during marches among the people, represented the might of the Ottoman Empire. Drums were actively used in ceremonies within social life and were even presented as gifts to government officials. The purpose was to symbolically present the power and authority of the rulers. Thus, the drums and other instruments within *mehter* music held significance in terms of acknowledging the laws, authority, and rights granted to the sultan (Popescu-Judet, 2007, pp. 57-63).

Picture-5. Davul



Source: <https://www.nenedirvikipedi.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/davul-nedir.jpg>

In present-day Türkiye, drums of various sizes are played by suspending them from the shoulder using a material called "*asma kayış*." Drums played in this manner are among the prominent percussion instruments in Turkish Folk Music. They are commonly used, especially in the *halay* form of music performed in the Eastern Anatolia region and the *zeybek* form of music in the Aegean region.

Drumming is still part of Turkish social traditions. During the holy month of Ramadan, *davul* is played every night to wake people up for *Sahur*, the morning meal before fasting. Sometimes this ritual is accompanied by poems and folk songs. Another longstanding tradition that involves *davul* playing is known as *gelin alma* (bride picking). While the groom and his relatives pick up the bride from her family home, *davul* and *zurna* (a wind instrument) are played to proclaim the joy of marriage. Also, *davul* and *zurna* are played during the ceremony to send young men off to military service. The powerful sound of both instruments is thought to represent the pride and courage of military service candidates. On many social occasions, *davul* is played such as sports events and receptions of government officials.

5. Kudüm

The *Kudüm* is one of the important instruments used in both Turkish classical and religious music. Its body is made of copper and consists of two round drums, one large and the other relatively smaller, resembling a round tray. The mouth diameter is approximately 30 cm, and its height reaches 16 cm. The *Kudüm* is traditionally covered with camel skin, believed to produce the best sound. Soft and round-shaped material is placed under the *Kudüm* to reduce contact with the ground. The large drum produces a deep and powerful sound, while the small drum produces a weaker and higher-pitched sound. This instrument is played using wooden sticks with round ends called "*zahme*" (Özalp, 2000, p. 157).

Picture-6. Kudüm



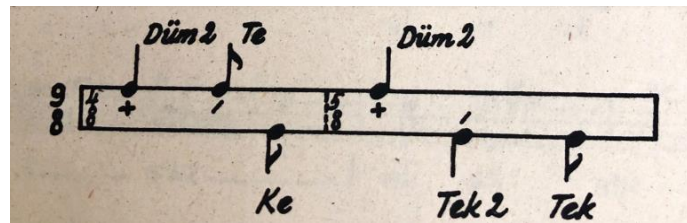
Source: Türkelman, 2023

In classical music ensembles, the leading role was initially played by the *serhanende* both vocally and instrumentally, the chief soloist, who directed the choir with percussive instruments such as the *def* and *bendir*. This practice also applied to religious music. The *Kudüm* player, known as the *kudümzenbaşı*, took on a leadership role in the rituals of the *Sufi* orders, both vocally and through playing the *Kudüm*. This practice continued until the 1920s, after which choirmasters began to lead the ensembles (Behar, 2015, p. 49).

Another significant function of the *Kudüm* instrument is related to its role in Turkish music's time signatures (*usûl*) and rhythms. In Classical Turkish Music, the smallest time

signature is 2/4, while the largest is 120/4. Therefore, in a small-metered song, the 2/4-time signature can be used repeatedly within each measure, while the 120/4 time signature, called *Zencir*, can only be used once in a composition. By playing the *Kudüm* with different degrees of strength (strong, medium, weak), it contributes to the rhythm's structure, which consists of weak, medium, and strong beats. In larger time signatures, the *Kudüm* doesn't simply strike the main beats (e.g., 1 and 2) as written but employs a technique called *velvele*, which enhances the dynamics of the composition without slowing down the tempo. For example, in the 9/8 *aksak usûl*, the main pattern is played as follows.

Picture-7: The Main Pattern of Usûl 9/8



Source: Özkan, 1994, p. 596

Picture-8: The Velvele (a type of rhythmic embellishment) Pattern of 9/8



Source: Özkan 1994; 597

The 9/8-time signature, which has both the main pattern and beats with *velvele* (a type of rhythmic embellishment) beats, is used differently depending on whether it will be followed by the vocalists singing the song or played by the *kudüm*. When vocalists are following the song, the main pattern is used, while if the *kudüm* is playing, beats with *velvele* are employed. The *kudüm*'s use of weak and strong beats in accompanying the song essentially creates harmony in the rhythm. This allows for completing a measure with shorter beats rather than waiting for an extended duration during long beats, thus seamlessly integrating with the song and maintaining the tempo at a consistent pace.

In contemporary times, the *kudüm* is the primary percussion instrument in classical choirs and ensembles, with percussion instruments like the *bendir* or *def* accompanying it. The responsibility of setting the tempo, starting, and concluding the song lies jointly with the choir conductor and the *kudüm*. Moreover, in a music ensemble, if there is no choir conductor, the player of the *kudüm* instrument takes on the role of directing the choir.

6. Conclusion

Music, in terms of existence, primarily began with rhythm. The course of natural events on Earth, the act of breathing, the beating of our hearts, our walking, our speaking, and other biological and physiological developments are all part of a systematically evolving process. As a result of these rhythmic cycles occurring in the human body and nature, humans have inevitably expressed themselves through percussion instruments. These behaviors, which have become rituals in accordance with individual and societal beliefs and traditions, have now become important traditions in societies.

In this research, four percussion instruments used in Turkish society both before and after Islam have been examined. Accordingly, it has been determined that the *nevbe*, *davul*, and *kös* instruments were actively used in both religious music and state affairs. The *kudüm* instrument, on the other hand, was primarily used in Classical Turkish Music and Turkish Religious Music.

The *nevbe* instrument has lost its functionality in modern times, and therefore, ceremonies held under the name of "*Nevbet* ceremonies" are no longer conducted. Throughout history, the powerful sound of the *davul* and *kös* instruments has been played in the Janissary bands. Additionally, the *davul* is also played in Turkish Folk Music choirs.

The *kudüm* is one of the most important percussion instruments in Classical Turkish Music and Turkish Religious Music. In fact, compositions in Classical Turkish Music forms such as "*kâr*" and "*beste*," which are composed in large rhythmic structures, are performed with *kudüm* and other instruments. A similar situation exists in Turkish Religious Music. Forms like the *Mevlevi ayin* (the ritual by whirling dervishes) are composed in large rhythmic structures, and as a result, these works are performed with the *kudüm*.

According to the study, it is understood that the *nevbe*, *kös*, and *davul* instruments were used in both religious rituals and other traditions of communication to demonstrate the authority of the ruler and the strength of the army, increase the functionality of communication, and similar purposes, both before and after the acceptance of Islam by the Turks. In this sense, these three instruments are among the sacred instruments of the Turks. The *kudüm* instrument, on the other hand, emerged in association with religious music. Therefore, the person playing the *kudüm* instrument, by taking responsibility for directing the choir, adjusting the tempo, and issuing commands to start and finish the work, effectively acts as the choir conductor.

Another important feature of the *kudüm* instrument in Classical Turkish Music and Turkish Religious Music is its connection to rhythmic patterns (*usûl*). In large rhythmic patterns and forms, compositions are composed in the main pattern of the *usûl* related. During the performance and singing of these works, the *kudüm* instrument completes the long-duration beats within itself with shorter-duration beats. Thus, by enriching the composition with rhythmic beats and breaking away from stagnation, the memorability of the work is ensured. In modern times, the *kudüm*, like other percussion instruments, is considered sacred and is used in the performance of both religious and classical compositions.

References (TNR 14pt., bold)

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