

# Exoticism in 18th Century Opera: Appreciation versus Appropriation

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## ABSTRACT

*Tales of Turkish harems, imprisoned women, and Western heroes were widely popular during the height of Western Europe's fascination with the Ottoman empire. The idea of these "seraglio stories" is a popular trope in the discussion of musical orientalism. "Exoticism in 18th Century Opera: Appreciation versus Appropriation" expands upon previous research to fully explore the concept of appropriation in regards to the Western interpretation of Turkish culture. Focusing on a study of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's (1756-1791) Die Entführung aus dem Serail (The Abduction from the Seraglio). This research analyzes the implications of the Western musical exploration of Turkish culture. Despite attempting to emulate Turkish traditions, Mozart's music is ultimately inauthentic and diminutive. Additionally, the portrayal of Turkish characters as one-dimensional barbarians exposes Western culture's true view of the Ottoman empire. My research finds that the Western portrayal of Turkish culture is more appropriative than appreciative due to the dichotomy between the Western world's appreciative attitude towards their artistic traditions and their negative depiction of the Turkish people themselves.*

Artistic fascination with Turkish culture was not a novel idea by opera composers in the 18th century. Plays featuring Turkish themes and characters date back to when Europeans first experienced Turkish culture during the Crusades and consequently brought aspects of Turkish culture back home. The image of the Ottoman changed after the European victory in the Ottoman's Siege of Vienna in 1683 (O'Connell 181). The Ottoman's failed expansion into Europe and later retreat symbolized a shift in European views towards their culture. The Ottoman Empire's expansion no longer threatened European culture and the shift in power allowed Europeans to idealize their culture rather than fear it.

This shift in power also led to new alliances between European countries and the Ottoman Empire which further led to new

trade relations. The Treaty of Passarowitz in 1718 introduced Austrians to the market of Turkish goods and opened the gates for new products to flow into Europe (Balkis 188). The influx of Ottoman goods influenced European trends and masquerade balls, Turkish coffeehouses, and Alla Turca music styles came into vogue (O'Connell 181). Additionally, Turkish military bands, called Janissary bands, were often sent to European courts as part of diplomatic exchanges leading to European imitation of their musical styles ("The Alla Turca Style in the Late Eighteenth Century" 48). However, these trends represented a shallow interpretation of Turkish culture. Europeans focused their view of Turkish people and their culture as that of an "other" versus their own cultures.

Turkish "otherness" was often portrayed through the popular genre of operatic

“seraglio stories.” These stories had remarkably similar plots despite being composed in different languages and European cultures. They often featured Western women being abducted by Turkish pirates and held hostage in seraglios, or harems. The Western woman’s lover, desperate to retrieve his love from the sensuous embraces of the seraglio’s master, launches a failed rescue attempt. Despite catching the fleeing Europeans, the seraglio’s master displays an act of great magnanimity and releases the Westerners and it’s Happily Ever After for the Western heroes and heroines. This plot is seen in the little-known French opera *La Corsaire* composed by Adolphe Adam, Gluck’s *La Rencontre imprévue*, Mozart’s *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, and many others of varying notoriety (Stilwell 51-52).

This research focuses on a case study of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s (1756-1791) *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (*The Abduction from the Seraglio*) and the causes and effects of exoticism presented in the work that are common in the “seraglio story” genre. It includes a discussion of the methods in which the work portrays the differences between Western and Eastern characters including two common Turkish tropes (the barbaric Turk and the noble savage), the implied comparison of Western women and their Eastern counterparts, as well as the differences in the portrayal of Western and Eastern men. This research will also discuss the causes and effects of the inauthentic Western portrayal of Turkish musical traditions. Overall, this research attempts to highlight the difference between genuine appreciation and the gross appropriation of an “other” culture by Western Europeans.

In Mozart’s opera, the character Osmin provides an example of the stark separation between European and Turkish culture that is prevalent in this genre. Osmin is the guard of Pasha Selim’s harem and estate and is portrayed as a barbaric individual with a harsh temper. However, he is written as a comic villain, trivializing his anger and ferocity (Kaiser 127-130). In his Act I aria, Osmin sings, “I

won’t rest until I see you killed” and later describes the many ways he wishes it to happen with, “First you’ll be beheaded, then you’ll be hanged, then impaled on red hot spikes, then burned, then manacled and drowned; Finally flayed alive” (Bretzner). This steadfast determination to torture is a joke for the audience but also reduces Osmin’s character to one defining trait, his barbaric personality. Due to his comic nature, Osmin is not perceived as a real threat by either the Western male heroes or the audience. As one of two main Turkish characters in the drama, Osmin serves as a generalization of Turkish men. Effectively, his words and actions diminish Western respect for the Turkish people by portraying them, through Osmin, as immoral and barbaric.

The musical aspect to Osmin’s character provides further support for this generalization. Osmin’s first aria in Act I, referenced before as showing his fixation on barbaric torture practices, is musically set to highlight his quick temper and harsh personality. The aria is written with short notes and phrases which creates an angry mood that complements the violent lyrics. Additionally, the *allegro assai* is an unexpected ending to the aria that subverts traditional expectations by presenting a new meter and remote key. Mozart explained in a letter to his father:

There comes the *allegro assai* which is in a totally different metre and in a different key; this is bound to be very effective. For just as a person in such a towering rage oversteps all the bounds of order, moderation and propriety and completely forgets himself, so that the music must also forget itself (Head 2).

The nontraditional musical choices can be equated to Osmin’s non-Western mannerisms. Osmin’s temper sends him into a state of barbaric rage that starkly contrasts the noble, Western heroes. His aria features repetitive phrases and underdeveloped harmonies which portray him as less sophisticated or cultured than his Western counterparts. While these choices, such as a remote key and contrasting meter, may not come across as overly unsettling to the modern listener,

the musical traits of his aria mimic his angry descent as far as the limits of 18th century music would allow. Mozart reminded his father, in the same letter referenced earlier, “music, even in the most terrible situations, must never offend the ear” (Head 2). Nevertheless, Osmin’s music contrasts with that of the Western men through clipped phrases, brash dynamics, and foreign modulations that culminate in a caricature of the “barbaric Turk” (Balkiç 191).

Pasha Selim offers a different trope of Turkish characters, the noble savage. He is the master of the seraglio, a setting that is simultaneously extravagant and immoral, and holds power over the three Westerners imprisoned there. He desperately seeks Constanze’s love and often retaliates with empty threats when she refuses. It is implied by Pedrillo that he converted to Islam from Christianity in a conversation with Belmonte about Pasha Selim’s morals. The original libretto suggests as such but neither the second librettist nor Mozart confirm nor deny this suggestion (Kaiser 93-94). Regardless, there is no doubt that Pasha Selim is first and foremost an antagonist in the drama. He holds the Western company hostage and repeatedly threatens them. However, he earns the “noble” aspect of the noble savage when he frees the Westerners after their failed escape attempt. This action may seem contradictory to the negative effects of exoticism but implications of his actions prove otherwise.

As mentioned before, Pasha Selim is a “renegade,” a European converted to Islam and living as an integrated part of Turkish culture (*Mozart’s Operas* 94). Pedrillo tells Belmonte that Pasha Selim’s former Christianity still grants him “sufficient delicacy not to force any of his women” (Kaiser 160). This places Pasha Selim’s gracious behavior towards members of his harem on his European background rather than his current Turkish setting. This attribution then undermines the positive portrayal of Turkish culture by insinuating that his admirable morals are exclusive to Western tradition and should not be taken as a reflection of Turkish culture.

Furthermore, his graciousness is muddled by his repeated threats to Constanze and the rest of the Western company. In his first introduction, he is shown with Constanze, inquiring as to why she is still upset and assuring her that her honest answer will not upset him. Her answer, in aria form, explains her affection for Belmonte and how she wishes to stay true to him (Rushton 68-69). Pasha Selim, in turn, responds angrily reminding her that she is under his control and he could exert force upon her if he so wished (Bretzner). This change in emotion and control emphasizes Pasha Selim’s role as the “noble savage.” While initially portrayed as kind and gentle to Constanze, a woman he technically has in his control, his temper flares and he reverts to the “savage Turk” commonly portrayed in the genre. This loss of control further diminishes the Western view of Turkish rulers by portraying them as unsophisticated or unstable. When taken as a whole, Pasha Selim’s actions towards the European characters creates a deceiving view of Turkish people. Initially he seems to be a fair ruler (as fair as a harem owner can be) but his underlying motivations and irrational behavior undermine this interpretation.

The interactions within Pasha Selim’s seraglio also exemplify European views of Turkish culture. While the drama lacks any non-European women speaking roles, actions and statements from European women create comparisons and generalizations towards Turkish women. Blonde’s character serves both as the spunky, lively sidekick to Constanze as well as a comparison to the generalized Turkish woman (Kaiser 39). Act II features a scene between Osmin and Blonde, who was given to the guard as a slave by Pasha Selim. Blonde fends off Osmin’s advances and informs him that European girls are “quite different” (Bretzner). While she offers no one specific to base the comparison on, the implication is that she is “quite different” than the girls Osmin is used to, meaning the Turkish women of the seraglio. She describes English women as “good” and “free” and scoffs at the idea of giving into

Osmin's sexual advances, indicating that she is above the expectations of Turkish women (Bretzner). Her actions towards Osmin in this scene subvert the expected master/servant relationship. Her words taunt him and she undermines his power by reminding him of her connection to Pasha Selim through Constanze (Bretzner). Additionally, her phrases mock his coarseness and barbarism through mimicry of his low bass notes (Head 91-93). Blonde's actions and their musical setting pushes Osmin below her in terms of social status, which was already below that of European men. This further demotes and belittles Turkish women to an even lower standing without even being portrayed in the drama. Blonde's role functions to assign a one-dimensional generalized character to the idea of the "Turkish woman," a role that is simply defined as being less than European women.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from the interactions between Osmin and Pedrillo. Pedrillo is Belmonte's servant being held captive by Pasha Selim who is despised by Pasha Selim's guard, Osmin (Kaiser 148). Pedrillo's character mirrors that of Osmin, both serving as comic relief and a sidekick to their respective countrymen. They are also related through their amorous connection to Blonde (with Pedrillo winning out over Osmin, further enforcing European dominance). Their similarities create an easy comparison as Osmin functions as Pedrillo's foil throughout the production. Their first interaction in Act I, Scene 3 sets up their individual characters as well as their relationship with Belmonte teasing Osmin and Osmin reacting with violent intentions. The spoken scene ends humorously with Osmin not being able to logically defend his hatred of Pedrillo, responding simply with "Because I can't stand you" (Bretzner). This sets the tone for the rest of the singspiel as Pedrillo consistently has the upper hand.

This introductory scene also highlights a recurring theme between the characters. Osmin is repeatedly outsmarted by Pedrillo which adds to his barbaric portrayal by

coloring him as unintelligent or completely controlled by base emotions. This is further enforced by Osmin and Pedrillo's Act II, Scene 8 interaction in which Pedrillo convinces Osmin to go against his religion and drink alcohol with him. Pedrillo convinces Osmin to join him by trivializing the rules of his religion, saying "he [Muhammad] has got better things to do than to worry about your bottle of wine" (Bretzner). Pedrillo is initially able to overtake the brute force of Osmin by lacing the wine with a sleeping draught, once again proving that European refinement and intelligence can overtake even the scariest of Turkish men.

It is important to note the causes and effects of Pedrillo's role as comic relief. As mentioned in the analysis of Osmin's character, the source of his humor is his barbaric behavior in regards to the Europeans, specifically Pedrillo. His threats are exaggerated and unsupported by his actions. In short, he is the butt of his own joke. Osmin is also the source of Pedrillo's humor. Pedrillo draws out Osmin's savage behavior by taunting him such as in their first scene together. Pedrillo repeatedly implores Osmin to explain his hatred until Osmin lashes out musically in his harsh aria. Essentially, Pedrillo is not independently comedic but instead his comic character traits rely on the reactions he entices from Osmin creating a dynamic not unlike an animal trainer and his circus lion.

The last aspect of orientalism in *The Abduction from the Seraglio* to consider is the musical interpretation of Turkish culture. Mozart is often regarded as a master of music, a title he earned from his virtuosic and seemingly endless musical contributions. However, his Alla Turca music included in the singspiel show that he failed to portray an accurate depiction of Turkish music.

Mozart captures Turkish music in the Alla Turca style, a style that is not necessarily representative of Turkish culture. It is based off the janissary band music that the Turkish military used during wartime (Balkis 189-190). This style of music was introduced to the Europeans during their

wars with the Ottoman Empire. Paul Rycout, a British diplomat and authority on the Ottoman Empire, wrote about the janissary bands at the Siege of Vienna in 1683, “On the 26th, the Turks designing to make a furious Assault, caused all their warlike Musick, such as Flutes, Cymbals, and brass Trumpets, which gave a shrill Sound, to play with their highest Notes, to encourage their Soldiers to make the Onset” (Meyer 485). While Europeans had first been introduced to Eastern instruments and music during the Crusades, interest and knowledge in this type of music did not become popular until after the failed expansion of the Ottoman Empire at Vienna (Meyer 485). Despite the influx of Turkish goods, Eastern music continued to be portrayed only through modified Janissary-style music.

Instead of offering a genuine Turkish music experience, Mozart, as well as other composers of the time, reduces Janissary bands to a few defining traits and applies them universally to every situation. The most common trait to be associated with Janissary music is the extensive use of percussion. At the beginning of exoticism’s popularity, the only percussion employed in Western music was the kettledrum so the percussion sounds heavily featured were exciting for these audiences. Cymbals, triangles, and tambourines were extensively used in this Alla Turca style music which were close approximations to the Turkish instruments traditionally used (Meyer 485-486). Keyboard percussion instruments were often altered to include additional parts that mimicked other Janissary style instruments (Locke 120). Another common musical trope of Turkish music was the use of repeated thirds. This was traditionally associated with Turkish music and often employed to give the piece a defining aspect of orientalism (Head 383). Further characteristics include simple meters, unison parts, and uncomplicated harmonies (O’Connell 183).

Some characteristics of Alla Turca music derive less from the musical examples set by Janissary bands and more from European interpretations of the Turkish culture as a

whole. Alla Turca music was often written in key signatures with few flats or sharps, keys that were considered at the time to be “simple keys” (Locke 120). Related to this idea of “simple” music, the phrase structure and form of Alla Turca music was often short and simple. Independent phrases added onto each other to build larger, simple form structures (Locke 121). Another style trait found in Alla Turca operas and singspiel, is patter singing and skewed structures. Patter singing, a rhythmic and syllabic form of expression, is commonly seen in comedic settings and perpetuates the idea of a simple-minded, rambling Turk. The structures of these arias are often also purposefully altered from their traditional forms to sound confused or unfinished (Locke 121). This contributes to the aforementioned negative portrayal of Turkish characters when compared to the polished, traditional style arias written for European characters.

One example of these Alla Turca musical style traits found in *The Abduction from the Seraglio* is during the Janissary Chorus in the final scene. The strings introduce the repeated third interval early which is later imitated by the vocalists in unison. The rhythm of the main motive is very short and repetitive, relating to the “simple” approach to writing Alla Turca music. Of course, percussion is heavily featured in the chorus. The most commonly expected percussion instruments (cymbals, percussion, and triangle) are all present, adding a specific color to the texture. The cymbals and bass drum emphasize the rhythmic pattern of the chorus members with hits on the emphasized beats of the vocal line. This close relationship between different parts also relates to the simple, unison style trait often associated with Alla Turca music. The triangle adds an omnipresent color as it is struck on every beat of the closing chorus. While these traits are not always found in every instance of Alla Turca music, the combination of them in this situation gives the piece a definitive Turkish sound to the European listener.

With such a specific collection of musical

traits attributed to the 18th century Alla Turca style, a return to the discussion of appropriation versus appreciation is called for. Mozart was exceedingly focused on crafting music that pleased the European listener while still incorporating Eastern elements to give it the flair that the public was looking for (Head 14). This modification of Eastern musical traditions to suit a European standard of beauty was the first element of appropriation of Turkish culture. Further, Turkish music was almost exclusively represented through Janissary-style music in European settings (O'Connell 183). This military-style music was applied universally to all Turkish settings in drama despite them often having no relation to the military. Pasha Selim was not a military figure in *The Abduction from the Seraglio* yet he is introduced and praised through the Janissary style of music. This shows the apathetic approach of Western artists towards the subtleties of other cultures.

Contrarily, consideration must be given to the composer's ability to conform Turkish music styles to Western musical notation. Is it fair to decry a piece of Western art music for cultural appropriation when the frame in which they composed was not able to accurately capture Turkish music styles? Perhaps the largest obstacle that Mozart and other composers who wrote in the Alla Turca style faced was the physical difference between the instruments that comprised traditional Janissary bands and the Western instruments that made up the European ensembles. Additionally, the original intent of Janissary military music was not to be performed in a concert setting. Johann Adam Hiller, an observer of Western-interpreted Janissary performance in 1739, reported that the performance lacked the irregularity and roughness of the true Turkish sound ("The *Alla Turca* Style in the Late Eighteenth Century" 48). The limitations that composers encountered were not always as unavoidable. Composers self-imposed a distinction between Western music and that of true Janissary music. This limitation

can be seen in a letter written by Mozart regarding Osmin's savage nature. He writes, "music, even in the most terrible situations, must never offend the ear" ("The *Alla Turca* Style in the Late Eighteenth Century" 48). This implication, that Turkish music in its traditional form is offensive to Western ears, illustrates the Western appropriative view of Turkish music rather than a truly appreciative view.

These changes made to the traditional Turkish music style in reverence to the Western ear resulted in a style of music unrelated to what it was originally inspired from. While the style of Alla Turca music written in the 18th century would be recognizable to Europeans as "Turkish," Aleksandr Ulibichev, a music enthusiast after Mozart's time, argued, "The Persians and the Turks would not recognize themselves in these Choruses of Janissaries" (Locke 114). Mozart himself wrote that he included Alla Turca style traits in *Die Entführung* because his Western audience would expect to hear them included in an opera set in Turkey (Locke 121). While the original source material was based in Turkish culture, Alla Turca music took on its appropriative position when composers based their alterations of the style on what would conform to Western beauty standards.

True appreciation of these cultures would portray Turkish characters with multi-dimensional personalities and motivations. Music styles would vary and be representative of the correct style of music traditionally played in that setting. The portrayal of other cultures would be educational instead of the slapstick sideshow approach used in the many "abduction" style seraglio stories.

Mozart, Gluck, Rameau, and other composers were all complicit in perpetuating negative stereotypes of Turkish culture through European art music in the Alla Turca style popular in the 18th century. This genre of art and exoticism reduced an entire culture to only a few defining traits for the sensory enjoyment of Europeans. While these composers are praised and immortalized for their work, it is important for music scholars to

listen critically and understand the problems they present within their context. Musicians are tasked with representing different cultures through their compositions and performances and it is crucial to understanding the line between appreciation and appropriation. True Turkish music styles, as well as music styles

of other non-Western cultures, have the same subtleties of Western art music expressed through their unique traditions and deserve to be represented in their true forms rather than be remembered through the appropriative compositions of Western composers.

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