

Playing the Street: Syrian Musicians in Istanbul



By Jonathan H. Shannon

Introduction: Playing the Street

It is nearing midnight on a summer evening in 2016 as I walk up the steep cobblestone hill from the Tophane tram stop toward the Galatasaray High School. The evening is pleasant and there are still numerous people out and about on a summer's evening in central Istanbul. Stopping to catch my breath as I crest the top, I find myself on the edge of a sea of humanity coursing through what I and many of my Syrian acquaintances have come to call "the street" (*al-sh?ria*)– Istiklal Caddesi, the pedestrian avenue that traverses downtown Beyo?lu on the European side of the city. Many shops and restaurants remain open and the crowds – Istanbulites, tourists, street cleaners, police officers, men and women, the young and the elderly – walk to a surging choreography of sociality and consumerism as far as the eye can see.

However, I am here primarily with my ears open, and sure enough, as with most evenings, off to the right I make out over the din the strains of a familiar tune. Approaching, I find “my” group performing another set to an enthusiastic crowd. They are just finishing up ‘Amru Diab’s pop hit “*ʔab?b? y? n?r al-‘ayn*” as I sidle up to the edge, whip out my phone for a few photos, and, catching the eye of the violinist, exchange smiles. I remain for a few songs then continue on my way toward Taksim Square, passing other groups of street performers on one side or another of the street: Black Sea musicians, a lone man on his *saz*, a young European woman banging gently on a Hang drum,^[1] a clarinetist sending his plangent tones into the night air... Another evening on the street, another evening in Istanbul.

This essay explores the lives of Syrian migrant musicians in Istanbul, with a focus on how a subset who performed primarily on the street used it as a stage for navigating their lives in the city.^[2] Facing uncertain futures in Syria and precarity in Turkey^[3], many Syrian musicians early in their migratory lives in Istanbul turned to street performance or busking – a practice largely unknown in Syria^[4] – as an important means for connecting with and reconstituting a sense of home; others, however, found Istanbul to be alienating and the role of music in their daily lives to be more limited. The street, I argue, played an important role in mediating their experiences in Istanbul; it therefore needs to be understood as a performative social, cultural and political “ecosystem” (see Simpson 2008) in which Syrian musicians negotiated their often-fraught pathways to integration in and accommodation to Turkish society.

For marginal groups such as migrant Syrian buskers, their transformations in and through the street assumed many forms. In what follows, I explore how the street served variously as a stage for obtaining a degree of economic empowerment, re-establishing preexisting social relations and forming new bonds of affiliation, demonstrating (and often acquiring) musical skills, and negotiating struggles over repertoire and style. For some musicians the street also represented a musical dead-end and, often, a launching pad for further migration beyond Turkey. The street itself served as a liminal social-musical space (Bywater 2007) guiding their accommodation to new socio-economic, political, moral and affective terrains in conditions of displacement; it simultaneously enabled and restricted, liberated and confined those who performed on it, passed through it, and, in a sense, performed it. At the same time, the migrant Syrian musicians who performed on the street also transformed the spaces in which they performed even as they were transformed by them, creating new if transient forms of community while audibly and visibly marking their presence in Turkish society.

Following the work of O??u?t (2021), I argue that the street served as a space for politics, and that by performing the street, these Syrian musicians also created a sonic form of what Jacques Rancière (2010) terms dissensual politics. For Rancière, dissensus (as opposed to consensus) aims to disrupt the social order to create the conditions for political equality; it is a radical rethinking of European political theories that have typically focused on consensus-driven politics in a public sphere characterized by equality. Rancière argues that the public sphere and the conceptual and perceptual apparatuses that underpin it are always under contestation. These apparatuses are based in what he calls the “distribution of the sensible” (*partage du sensible*): that is, the common sense norms and forms of belonging, of assembly and voicing, and of bodily comportment that characterize a polity. Drawing on these insights, I argue that Syrian street performers can be understood as engaging in a dissensual struggle to assert a public voice in contexts where they have been silenced, coopted, or closely managed – by the Turkish state, local government, and international humanitarian organizations, as well as by journalists, documentarians, and scholars.^[5] Below I explore how this quest for a voice – literally through singing and playing but also metaphorically through their very presence in Turkish public spaces such as Istiklal Caddesi – might reconfigure

Istanbul's "distribution of the sensible" and promote a greater sense of belonging in Turkey more generally. Given the contradictions of integration of Syrian migrants in Turkey – their uneven acceptance, overt and covert forms of discrimination, economic precarity, desire to emigrate, as well as growing threats of deportation – Syrian street performances can be analyzed as practices that contribute to a broader revoicing of the Turkish body politic. In these ways, the performing migrant body on the street-cum-stage served as a site for the negotiation of the contradictions of the politics of recognition in (Taylor 1994) contemporary Turkey and the emergence of a new sonic commons.

Background: Homeland Insecurity

In March 2011, following the Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya, the Syrian people began their own revolution against a longstanding authoritarian regime. The uprisings in Syria began as peaceful demonstrations against the heavy-handed and even barbaric practices of the Syrian regime. Faced with increasingly violent repression of dissent the protests became increasingly violent themselves, with armed militias forming and eventually coalescing into the various opposition groups, including foreign actors. The consequences of these developments for the social life and physical infrastructure of the nation have been catastrophic. Over 500,000 Syrians (some estimate as many as a million) have been killed, over 11 million displaced internally and into camps and cities in neighboring countries (approximately half of the pre-war population of 23 million): by 2017 almost 4 million in Turkey; over 1.5 million in Lebanon; 700,000 in Jordan; 250,000 in Iraq; and about 150,000 in Egypt. Massive out migration to Europe has brought over 600,000 Syrians to Germany, 150,000 to Sweden, and over 75,000 to Greece. Many other European nations host significant groups of migrants, many awaiting processing or deportation.[\[6\]](#)

Prior to the war, musical performance was a powerful medium in Syria for the expression of deeply felt sentiments about home and served as an important context for the creation and experience of forms of cultural intimacy and confidence (Shannon 2006). As a result of the revolution and its ongoing aftermath, the core of Syrian musical and social life has shifted both within Syria, and from Syria to other countries, including Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey, but also France, Germany, the UK, Holland, Sweden, and even across the Americas and to Australia. Contemporary Syrian migrations mirror 19th and early 20th century movements of Syrians, adding to an existing global diaspora (see, for example, Gualtieri 2009, 2019; Zenner 2000). These global movements raise the question: As musicians shifted terrain, what role did musical practice play in negotiating new forms of sociality and belonging? What role did street performance play in effecting these transformations, and, in turn, how did their musical performances refashion the street?

Music Cultures in Exile

Numerous scholars have demonstrated the important role of music in negotiating transnational identities in conditions of displacement and forced migration.[\[7\]](#) For example, Reyes (1999) analyzed the importance of traditional songs in mediating the experiences of Vietnamese refugees in the Philippines and the US, while Baily (1999) examined the tensions of musical preservation and innovation among Afghan migrants in Iran and the US. In these works, and others, the flux and flow of musical performance

both mimics and promotes the flux and flow of subjectivities in transnational contexts. The study of music in situations of migration, both voluntary and forced, also reveals how music plays more than a passive role in determining how migrants adapt to new social and political contexts. In addition to reflecting broader social contexts, music also has been an active agent in reproducing social transformations. For example, in his study of transnational Kurdish musical networks, Aksoy (2014) investigated how Kurdish Alevi immigrants and refugees in Germany responded to new ethnic, political, and social realities through musical performance; new musical genres not only reflected these transformations but in turn promoted the creation of new political subjectivities in the “second homeland.” As I discuss below, Syrian musicians in Istanbul engaged in similar processes of negotiating social integration, musical repertoire, and belonging through music (see also Hajj 2016, Habash 2020, O’?u?t 2021). This comes as no surprise, since migrants not only adapt to new situations but recreate and transform the contexts into which they are inserted by larger structural forces (Malkki 1995, Peteet 2005, Sanford 2006, Stokes 2021).

The Street as Performative Space

The physical location of performance – whether a street, living room, restaurant/bar, or concert hall – refashions the social and political subjectivities of performers and audiences alike. For Syrian migrant musicians in Turkey, the street initially served as a critical site for refashioning their subjectivities as musicians, and also as Syrians. Scholars have devoted considerable attention to the performance and performativity of identities in public places in the Middle East, including the creation of counter-publics (Hirschkind 2006, Stokes 2020 [1992], 2010), yet little attention has been paid to Arab street musicians per se and to how their performances might create new publics. This is due to the relative absence of such performance in the urban Arab world, unlike the more common street performance traditions of Iran and Turkey, for example (O’?u?t 2021, Breyley 2016). In Syria, public performance is typically limited to traditional street theater and puppetry (on the wane for generations), wedding celebrations, religious festivals (*m?lid-s*), public festivals (including government sponsored music festivals), and celebrations at store openings; during the Arab uprisings, political demonstrations and forms of performance in support of revolutionary social movements became common as well (see, among others, Amin 2006, Mehta 2013, Slyomovics 1991, Puig 2006, Pahwa 2020).^[8] However, none of the Syrian musicians I interviewed in Istanbul had public musical or other performance experience that could be used as a “repertoire of contention” (Tilly 1986; see also Della Porta 2013) in Syria or in Istanbul, unlike artists in other contexts of the Arab uprisings (see LeVine 2015, Parker 2018). In this regard, Syria is distinct from other Arab contexts, from (pre-revolutionary and revolutionary) use of public spaces in Cairo (Bayat 2017) to the public theatrical traditions in Morocco (Amine and Carlson 2008, Kapchan 1996, 2014, 2018) and across North Africa (Amine and Carlson 2011, Goodman, 2018).

While busking in Syria and the Arab world is rare, street performance has a long history globally, often tied to the creation of political subjectivities. Nonetheless, as Watt (2016, 70) points out, street music has been an underexplored area of music research; there is no mention of it in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, and *The Oxford Companion to Music* has only a short entry.^[9] Recent scholarship on buskers has begun to redress this aporia by focusing on the street as an ecosystem for the production of emergent subjectivities in the interactions among performers, audiences, and the built environment (Simpson 2008). For example, Simpson, citing Tanenbaum’s study of New York City subway musicians,

argues that street performance presents an “urban ritual that challenges the way we think about public space by promoting spontaneous, democratic, intimate encounters” (Tanenbaum 1995, cited in Simpson 2011, 416). Street performers in a variety of mediums use the street to create opportunities not only to make money but also to earn social status and dignity “in a postindustrial economy that denies such prosperity and dignity” (Marina 2016).

It should be noted that one of the early names for the Syrian revolution was *thawrat al-kar?ma*, the Revolution of Dignity; among other things, Syrian street performers were, like buskers elsewhere, in search of dignity. Moreover, the street, whether in Bath (Bywater 2007), New Orleans (Marina 2016), Montreal (Wees 2017), Berlin (Seldin 2020), or Istanbul (Habash 2021, O??u?t 2021), can be understood as a liminal space in which performers transform themselves and their spatial and temporal environment in the course of performance.^[10] As Wees notes (2017), busking should be understood as “an assemblage-act, involving multiple participants – human and material – that emerges through the practices and creative tactics of an individual performer, in an ongoing process of cobbling together, of *bricolage*” (15). In her study of public dance performance in Melbourne, Bird (2016) notes that street performance is “a form of political action and resistance in public spaces” (128) that potentially “cause disruption to city spaces by upending usual, regular, or reasonable uses of the street as defined by the law” (129). In this manner, street performance can be political simply by using space in unorthodox ways and not only through overtly political acts such as protest song. Activists also use dancing as a covert political technique by engaging in what Bird calls “tactical frivolity” (139).

Drawing on this work and a “broad spectrum” model of performance (Schechner 2004), I understand the street to be a performance and performative stage where Syrians in their musical and everyday interactions fashioned social and political subjectivities and negotiated their sense of belonging in Istanbul. The street (both in general, and Istanbul’s Taksim Square and Istiklal Caddesi in particular) constituted a performative ecosystem where Syrian musicians negotiated new senses of belonging and asserted their right to sonic citizenship. As a liminal space, the street assisted their accommodation to new socio-economic, political, moral and affective terrains. On one hand, through their street performances, Syrian musicians transformed the spaces in which they performed, promoting a new sense of public space marking a Syrian and Arabophone presence that is increasingly controversial in Turkey today. On the other, the musicians themselves were transformed, creating new if transient forms of community while audibly and visibly marking their presence in Turkish society.^[11]

The Syrian Street Musicians and their Repertoire

The Syrian street musicians I studied ranged in age from about 20 to 65 years of age, with most being in their mid to late 20s. The majority of the performers I interviewed arrived from Aleppo beginning in the summer of 2014, when the Syrian regime and its Russian backers began a long blockade of Aleppo and, over a period of many months, dropped barrel bombs indiscriminately on their city. Others arrived since 2016 from Damascus (often via Beirut), Homs, Idlib, and elsewhere in Syria, when conditions were such that they felt they could find better opportunities or what several described as more open horizons (*?f?q*) than in their homeland. Only a few had formal musical training in Syria, and those who did had studied informally since the state conservatories were not the traditional path to acquiring professional musical credentials in the traditional urban art music.^[12] A few of the younger performers hailed from prominent

Aleppine musical families, and even if they had no formal training their genealogies gave them certain social capital that they often attempted to convert into material capital. Informal systems of patronage and pedagogy from Syria remained important bases for musical affiliation and opportunity in Istanbul, especially for musicians from Aleppo. The regional distinctions were critical, for not a few performers noted what had become obvious: namely, that with rare exception the musicians from Aleppo would perform only with others from Aleppo, whereas other Syrian groups consisted of a mix of artists from Damascus, Homs, and elsewhere. The only exceptions to this musical “Halabocentrism” were to accommodate close friends and to form ad hoc ensembles for particular event such as weddings or boat cruises. In the end, the old allegiances of city and family remained relevant in Istanbul.^[13]

All of the street performers were men, reinstating in Istanbul a gendered division of labor found in the homeland. Syrian women vocalists have always been a part of the Syrian musical culture, but only since the early 2000s have women instrumentalists found opportunities for public performance, and usually in high status venues such as the opera house in Damascus, or abroad (the young ‘*d* players Waed Bouhassoun and Rihab ‘Azar and the *q?n?n* player Maya Youssef are three prominent examples of Syrian women musicians performing traditional Arab music, mainly in Europe).^[14] Women vocalists were common in Syria, yet the few Syrian women vocalists I met in Istanbul who were trained in Syrian Arab music were unwilling to perform either on the street or in most venues because they deemed doing so to be culturally unacceptable; women performers specializing in modern and experimental musical styles (e.g. rock, alternative rock, EDM) have performed in Istanbul but not in the context of the musical practices I studied, and not on the streets; moreover, most of these artists have relocated to European cities (see Büsch and Küper-Büsch, 2016). Some women vocalists performed in all-women’s choirs, and at least one participated in a studio recording, and another has begun to perform in public but in more “respectable” settings (cultural centers, television studios, and the like). To reiterate, I never encountered a female Syrian artist performing on the street as a busker.

The typical street ensemble included anywhere from 3-6 artists performing on ‘*d* (Arabian short-necked and fretless lute), guitar, percussion, vocals, and sometimes *q?n?n* (a plucked lap zither) and *kamanja* (violin). This arrangement reproduced the traditional Arab *takht* ensemble but with the addition of guitar, which is not used in the traditional urban repertoire known as the *wasla*. Their repertoire was a mixture of light songs from Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, with an emphasis on simple and short material in the same mode or *maq?m* in order to create small song sets of approximately 6-10 minutes in length. This allowed them to generate interest in their music, gather a larger audience around them, and in the end possibly gain more income. They almost always started off their sets with the Fairouz song “*Nasam ‘alayn? al-h?wa*” (the breeze blew upon us) whose refrain is “*khidn? ‘al? bil?d?*” (take me home/back to my country), in an upbeat tempo and in the *maq?m kurd* on A.^[15] By 2016 it had become the de facto theme song of Istiklal Caddesi, and many groups continue to perform it, even Turkish and other non-Syrian musicians. On a trip to Istanbul in winter 2018, a lone Syrian violinist was playing the tune outside a bookshop on the street, and in January 2020 an older man performed it on the *cümbü?*. The song was popular during the Lebanese Civil war for expatriate Lebanese and resonated with a nostalgic longing for their shattered homeland. The fact that the lyrics speak of a return home was not lost on the Syrian performers, who mentioned the resonance of the song lyrics with their own conditions of displacement, and some Syrian audience members I spoke with claimed not only that the song brought back childhood memories of listening to the song but reminded them directly of going home (“*khidn? ‘al? bil?d?*”). As the opening to their street sets, the song also opened a space for nostalgic and affective listening, a sonic marker of home, about a desire to return home.

The Syrian ensembles then usually transitioned to the mid-90s pan-Arab hit “*Hab?b? Y? N?r al-‘Ayn*” by the Egyptian star ‘Amru Diab. The song has a flamenco flavor, featuring the augmented second or “Oriental” interval in its main refrain, using *jins* (tetrachord) *?ij?z*. The original version of the song featured both guitar and accordion, whereas the Syrian street musicians used the *q?n?n*, ‘*ud*, violin, and guitar. The song almost always attracted large audiences, including Arab visitors to Istanbul – many from Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and the Arabian Gulf – who would sing along with the refrain “*?ab?b?, ?ab?b?, ?ab?b? Y? N?r al-‘Ayn*” (My Beloved, O Light of my Eye). The musicians would conclude their street sets with a series of light songs from the Aleppine *qud?d ?alabiyya* repertoire that are well-known around the Arab world, primarily through recordings and performances by the late Sabah Fakhri (see Shannon 2003a). They usually perform these songs in modes that do not feature significant microtonality, such as *?ij?z* and *nah?wand*, because they allow easy incorporation of the guitar as well as collaboration with artists unfamiliar with microtonal musics or Arab musical aesthetics (such as visiting musicians).^[16] When they did perform songs in a *maq?m* featuring microtonal interval, such as *r?st*, the guitar would “comp” on a chord based on the tonic (C, in the case of *r?st*).^[17] Moreover, in each set of songs, they tended to remain in the same *maq?m*, recapitulating traditional performance practice back in Syria. To complement these songs, many performers would take requests from audience members. Often Arab visitors requested recent popular songs – mainly hits by such Arab artists as Sherine, Ragheb Alama, Haifa Wehbe, Tamer Hosny, Wael Kfoury, Angham, Kadim al-Saher, and Nawal Al-Zoghbi, among others. While the larger street ensembles sometimes struggled to comply with audience requests, usually because they had not prepared the new tunes or had well-defined set lists in place, solo performers eagerly accepted the challenge and could be found performing the latest pop hits, often on guitar and vocals rather than, say, ‘*ud* or violin.

The Street as Staging Ground

The Syrian musicians I studied performed primarily on Istiklal Caddesi, the 1.4 km long pedestrian street in the central Istanbul neighborhood of Beyo?lu, and occasionally in more formal settings. As O??u?t notes (2021, 2-4), Beyo?lu and especially Taksim Square, adjacent Gezi Park, and Istiklal Caddesi have historically been sites for multicultural belonging and mass politics, and, since the 1990s, tourism and consumerism (see also Papadopoulos 2017). Hence the Syrian musicians inserted themselves into an already politically and culturally saturated environment. During the time of my research between 2015-2020, many buildings had been undergoing extensive renovation, and this offered musicians a variety of performance spots along its length. “The street” (*al-sh?ria* ‘,) as the Syrians would call it, was also the site of suicide bombings in the weeks prior to my arrival in Istanbul. Istiklal Caddesi is musically alive at all hours with buskers performing a wide variety of musical styles: one hears music from the Black Sea at one end, solo *electrosaz* (long-necked fretted lute) at the other, and along the way a mixture of Syrian and Turkish bands, Iranian *santur* (hammered dulcimer), solo violinists and guitarists playing everything from tango to flamenco, the occasional soulful clarinet, European and American visitors playing various instruments, and sometimes children playing drums or plastic melodica keyboards. For the past several summers an Ecuadorian trio dressed in feather headdresses performed Andean music on guitar and *rondador* (Andean panpipes), contributing to the global busking scene (cf. Bendrups 2011).

When I asked, no one mentioned to me the existence of a formal policy about who plays where and when, or of any local formal regulations or enforcement (as is common for buskers in many cities; see Bywater 2007, McNamara and Quilter 2016). The Syrians abided by a set of informal arrangements so that each

group would have “its” spot – a Syrian sextet outside a colorful mural blocking off the Yapı Kredi Bank museum and bookstore construction site (re-opened since late 2018, it is no longer a staging area); a Black Sea ensemble at a construction site across from the Beşiktaş metro station; a solo *ba?lama* performer on the steps just past the Türk-Alman bookshop café most evenings; a Kurdish performer on *cümbü?ü* near the Chamber of Commerce;[\[18\]](#) and other soloists and groups here and there up and down the street. Musicians usually performed in front of construction sites or closed shops (to avoid blocking entrances), and usually about every 100 meters or so down the length of the street, alternating sides of the street when possible to avoid sonic conflicts with other groups; during my visits to the street, very few conflicts arose though there were sometimes rough exchanges when one group occupied the space of another or played so loudly that they interfered with other performers.

Despite the relative proximity of the various groups, I witnessed almost no interaction among them during my visits, and in fact there was a certain amount of tension over access to space and potential audiences. Once a Syrian violinist was joined by a Turkish violinist, but they could not communicate verbally (despite my efforts to translate between them) and played whatever they could manage in common; they were eventually joined by a flamboyant Bülent Ersoy[\[19\]](#) impersonator (who carried a portable PA system) for an impromptu performance. Otherwise each group would stick to itself, though occasionally Syrians would stop to listen to other groups and socialize with other Syrian performers. Aside from a handful of Arab visitors to Istanbul joining in to sing along with the Syrian groups, I did not encounter any other Arab musicians or ensembles performing on İstiklal Caddesi during my stays in Istanbul.[\[20\]](#)

Given the precarious nature of the performances on a street that was often the staging ground for political protests, and heavily policed, the musicians were always prepared to move on, bags open and ready to go. In one instance the above-mentioned Syrian sextet was playing near Galata Tower (just below İstiklal Caddesi) during the World Humanitarian Summit of 2016 when a plain-clothes police officer told them to move on because the district deputy was dining nearby and deemed their music to be “too loud.” Regarding noise, local police often enforced a no-drum policy, so instead of playing *riqq* (tambourine with jingles) or *?abla/darbukka* (goblet-shaped drum), they tended to use sticks or egg shakers. Like buskers anywhere, the Syrian street musicians had to negotiate an often changing and fraught landscape with uneven enforcement of regulations that were to them never clearly articulated by authorities and which added to their sense of precarity and un-belonging. In this way their actual voices and their physical presence were either highlighted or silenced/obfuscated depending on the vagaries of the street.

The Street as/and Staging

As with buskers worldwide, financial considerations were the primary motivation for most of the Syrian street performers. In fact, while one of the older musicians was an established artist with training and extensive experience in Syria, most were not practicing musicians at home but had begun to perform in Istanbul as a means of making a living. For some the choice was between working long hours for low wages in a textile or shoe factory (*fabrika*), more or less a sweatshop, laboring 12 hours a day, 6 days a week in return for 350-400TL (\$110-\$120)/a week), or performing on the street and earning anywhere from 40-100TL (\$12-\$30) daily, sometimes much more (depending on the season and the crowds) – at least equivalent to what beginning textile workers could earn.[\[21\]](#)

When I asked “‘Abd al-Hamid,” a young vocalist, why he performed on the street, he mentioned the joy of being outside rather than in a noisy basement factory, the freedom of being able to come and go as he

pleased, and the pleasure of interacting with friends, smoking a cigarette at will, and being himself (“*itsarraḥ mitil ma bidḍi*,” I do as I please). Some musicians supplemented their street wages through performances at cafés and restaurants in central Istanbul or in neighborhoods about half an hour from downtown usually with Syrian establishments (including well-known restaurants and sweets shops based formerly in Damascus or Aleppo). “Murad” gave oud lessons at a private school and used the street as a way of passing the time, seeing friends, and making some extra money to help support his family. When his economic prospects improved, he quit the street, claiming that playing for long hours outdoors was damaging to his health and his instrument. He recently gained Turkish citizenship and now offers private lessons from his home studio, and performs with a variety of ensembles, often on Turkish television.

In addition to these jobs, some Syrian musicians worked occasionally on Bosphorus tour boats, at weddings and at concerts at more formal establishments, including cultural centers, schools, churches, and charity offices. The street was often a site of recruitment for such gigs, and some of the Syrian groups successfully transitioned to more formal performance venues as a result of their street performances. For example, the main group I began studying on the street (the sextet) began to perform on Saturday evenings at the (now defunct) Pages Bookstore Café in the Edirnekapı neighborhood of Istanbul. As the only Arabic-language bookstore in town, Pages was a *de facto* cultural center and meeting place for displaced Syrians eager to read in Arabic and to hang out in its garden café. Its Saturday evening concerts would draw audiences of up to 60 people packed into its small space. While the performances were not initially remunerated, they offered opportunities to rehearse, make connections, and, as one artist told me, “have a little fun” (*tasliya*).^[22]

In addition to bringing additional income, these sorts of gigs allowed the artists to rehearse their repertoire and establish connections for private concerts, weddings, and other work at cafes, restaurants, and art galleries; some even went on tours to other Turkish cities, including Gaziantep, Ankara, Mersin, and Izmir, where significant Syrian communities have formed since the revolution; a common thread on their Instagram feeds was their “road trip” journeys to and adventures in such sites outside of Istanbul. The street was thus for them a bridge to economic stability, even empowerment, as well as musical training, marketing, socialization, networking, and even the acquisition of Turkish language skills (necessity being the mother of invention). It also allowed them to expand their presence across Turkey, bringing their music to other diasporic communities in these cities and, to an extent, allowing Turks new opportunities to hear their music as well.

While many of these musicians worked hard on their craft, with regular rehearsing and even tutoring sessions, by 2020 most had transitioned from street performance to non-musical work in hotels, restaurants, construction, travel agencies, or other more stable employment. For them, music had become more of a hobby; a few would even do “reunion” concerts on the street or in Taksim Square when they had the time, and others earned supplementary income on weekends through performance at restaurants, including the Arada Café and Arada Endülüs restaurant in Tophane/Karaköy (just down the hill from Taksim and “the street”).

Yet, while some street musicians earned decent incomes through busking on İstiklal Caddesi and used the street as a means to showcase their talents, the work was tiring, damaging to the instruments and often to their bodies, and, for many of the trained musicians, demeaning. Prior to arriving in Istanbul, none had performed on a street before, since busking was, as noted, considered to be inappropriate in Syria; in fact, in their eyes it was akin to begging. “I should be playing at a concert hall!” said Murad, only half joking.

“Here on the street no one knows if you are good or not. They just walk by, maybe stop and listen for a minute, maybe toss in some money, then walk away.” He was especially irked by the idea that people would give them money out of charity. Echoing the sentiments of many Syrians in Istanbul, musicians and non-musicians alike, he said “I don’t want any charity; I want to work! Give me a stage, a hall, some respectable venue (*‘a??n? sh? mak?n mu?taram*) and I’ll play beautiful music for them, even for free (*bal?sh*)!” When opportunities for extra-musical employment were less available, some musicians spoke of their desire to migrate to Europe, or expressed their regret at not having made the journey earlier (pre-2016) when it was “easier” (*ashal*).^[23] Performing on the street had never been very easy (even if it was sometimes joyful). As the years dragged on, the street increasingly became a site of desperation.

The street as a political space: Negotiating a sonic commons in Istanbul

Syrians used the street to negotiate belonging in conditions of displacement and, often, “permanent temporariness” (Volk 2016, Osseiran 2020) – that is, being stuck in a legal limbo given Turkish and EU immigration policies and their unwillingness either to return to Syria or to undertake the risk voyage to Europe; hence their temporary protected status became a more or less permanent situation with the only resolution being the arduous process of acquiring citizenship, or return to Syria. At the same time, they have left their mark on the street and on Istanbul itself. In some ways their performances recapitulated and reinforced pre-existing notions of street performance on Istiklal Caddesi, which in many ways is like busking and street performance elsewhere; in other words, these musicians fit into a pre-existing framework of the “street musician” and accommodated themselves to it. At the same time, they altered the street through their presence and performances. In the context of the contradictions of contemporary Turkey, including tensions in the time of my research associated with populist politics, extremism, debates on migration, and a massive economic downturn and currency crisis, the presence of Syrian performers constituted in and of itself a politics. Ö?üt (2021, 8) argues that Syrian street performance should be understood as what Asef Bayat (2012) calls a “social non-movement” – social because it brings together various actors, but not a movement because they do not gather around shared grievances or, to use Tilly’s language (1986), draw on conventional repertoires of contention. For Ö?üt, the everyday actions of Syrian musicians in Istanbul, while not overtly political, constituted a means for participating in political life through their musical performances on the street, which attracted audiences and thereby attention to their presence in the city. Drawing on Stokes (2018), Ö?üt claims that their performance promoted a form of “musical citizenship” – a sense of belonging and voicing as political subjects that subverted the usual means of integration and inclusion that form the basis of (juridical) citizenship.

To extend this important insight, I propose that the musical or sonic citizenship (O’Toole 2014, Stokes 2018, Western 2020)^[24] of Syrian migrant street musicians in Istanbul can be understood as a form of dissensual practice (Rancière 2010). For Rancière, politics consists in a struggle for equality among socially and politically unequal actors, which we can contrast with the idealized notion of a public sphere constituted by *already* equal (bourgeois) political subjects in the work of Habermas (1989). For Rancière, equality must be realized socially and politically through public contest over what is legible, visible, audible, and present in society. It implies a necessary struggle that disrupts the status quo by manifesting the contingency of the aesthetic and conceptual order, what Rancière calls *le partage du sensible*, the distribution (and sharing) of the sensible. By sensible Rancière refers both to notions of common sense (the conceptual order) and to the sensate and sensory order (the perceptual, the aesthetic). Unlike

Habermasian consensual politics, which reaffirms the perceptual and conceptual underpinnings of society, dissensual politics disrupts this organization and opens possibilities for new configurations, new partitions, new sensory orders. In this way, Rancière's notion of dissensus reveals the important linkage of politics and aesthetics to the underlying organization of society. It allows for even "non-political" art to be understood as essentially political, since both aesthetics and politics arise, according to Rancière, from an underlying conceptual order (the distribution of the sensible).

Moreover, Rancière describes this struggle as a "staging" given its public and performative nature; indeed, in his extensive review of the theatrical elements in Rancière's thinking, Peter Hallward (2009) describes Rancière's approach to equality as "theatocratic" because it is based in spectacle, performance, disruption, improvisation, contingency, and liminality (Hallward 2009 147-150). These are all dimensions of political activity on Istiklal Caddesi, Gezi, and other stages for overt forms of political action (as noted in Ö?üt 2021). These qualities also characterize the less overt and implicit forms of agency characteristic of "social non-movements" and which Syrian street musicians deployed in their performances to carve spaces for their voices (literally and metaphorically) in Istanbul. Their dissensual political performances occurred on a street that has historically been a stage of struggle and conflict where various actors have struggled for access to a public language, and in the broad sense of the term, to a voice.

As multiply marginal subjects – as migrants, as non-Turks, and possibly even in their own communities as musicians – Syrian street musicians in Istanbul typically have had little voice: that is, limited access to rights under the Turkish "deportation regime" (De Genova and Peutz, 2010) and an at best ambiguous status in Turkish society (see, among others, Uyan-Semerci and Erdo?an 2016). Their street performances asserted a politics and aesthetics of belonging that attempted to secure a voice, both literally in terms of the songs they sang, but metaphorically as means of claiming recognition in a highly fraught political environment. Their performances on the street as stage can also be understood as a staging of belonging and an assertion of voice, enacting a form of musical citizenship or musical belonging that granted them a voice in the multifaceted – and polyvocal – sonic commons that is the street. It facilitated their uneven incorporation into Turkish society, but if the increasing number of Syrian musicians appearing on Turkish language television broadcasts as well as in a variety of live performance settings is any indication, the street did indeed promote a begrudging politics of recognition.

Conclusions: Performing the Street, Pedestrian Performances

Rancière argues that "the essence of equality is not so much to unify as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with controversial figures of division. Equality is the power of inconsistent, disintegrative and ever-replayed division" (1995, 32–33). In this spirit, I conclude with a musical metaphor to suggest that the dissensual performances of Syrian street musicians promoted new affective divisions or *taq?s?m*. The term *taqs?m* (pl. *taq?s?m*) is usually understood as a genre of instrumental improvisation in Arab music, but in the context of Istiklal Caddesi and Taksim Square, it can also suggest a form of a sonic (re)distribution, what we might call a "*partage du sensible sonore*." Not by coincidence, Taksim Square derives from the term *taksim* (from the Arabic *taqs?m*), meaning a division point for the distribution of municipal waters in Istanbul. During the time of my research, the presence of Syrian migrants musicians in the square and on the street enacted a (re)distribution of sounds in contested Turkish public spaces. However, these musical sounds not only promoted redistributions of the sensible, but also a sharing (*partager*) of a "sense ratio" or sensorium that enabled the assertion of a public voice

that offered these migrants a means to claim a presence – one often seen as temporary, threatening, inconvenient, a burden, and, for some, an opportunity – in the Turkish body politic. And by doing so they asserted their presence as equals, in Rancière’s sense of the term. As Syrians struggled to find and create spaces for collaboration with Turkish and other European artists and to navigate the political commitments of new and old homelands, their voices and bodies were made audible/legible, squelched/erased through their street performances. They thereby participated in the staging of a new sonic commons and the formation of new conceptual norms by performing in spaces where their voices could be – indeed, demanded to be – heard.

[1] The Hang or Hank drum is a hand-played idiophone that resembles two steelpan bowls fused together; it is often called a handpan. See <https://panart.ch/>, Accessed 14 September 2022. The Aero drum is a similar if smaller (and less expensive) version not to be confused with the electronic drum controller

(“aerodrums”).

[2] I spent approximately 6 months in Istanbul over the years of 2015-2020, mainly during winter and summer breaks. My methods included individual and group interviews with Syrians (musicians and non-musicians); oral histories of their migration to Turkey and beyond; audio and visual recordings of street

musicians; and lots of hanging out on Istiklal Caddesi listening to their performances, observing performer-audience interactions, and talking with audience

members. In addition, I monitored social media feeds and Internet resources (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Vimeo) since a large number of Syrians

utilize these platforms to share news, maintain contact with family and friends in Syria and in the global Syrian diaspora, and for entertainment; some promote

arrange performance opportunities, promote networks of artists and potential patrons, and (on rare occasion) performing with them on 'd.

[3] In June 2022 The United Nations accepted The Turkish Republic's request that the official name be changed to "Türkiye," which is in line with the original name of the modern Turkish Republic founded in October 29, 1923, as "Türkiye Cumhuriyeti." I will continue to use "Turkey" for the sake of clarity.

[4] Musical performance on the street is characteristic of celebrations such as some forms of wedding celebration, the opening of new businesses, and other occasions, but never with the public solicitation of money. Busking as a category of musical performance did not exist in Syria during the era of my field

research there (1994-2008).

[5] My research and activism are implicated in these processes, and had as an antecedent a nearly 25-year engagement with Syrian music. I was known to many of the performers, who referred to me as *'amo* ("uncle," an honorific) given my close relationships with their fathers and uncles or teachers back in

Syria. My previous connections to Syria and prominent Syrian performers and teachers as well as my deep understanding of the urban art music traditions of

Syria and of Syrian culture in general facilitated by introductions to and conversations with a wide variety of Syrians, musicians and others. All interviews

with Syrians were conducted entirely in Arabic. Translations are my own.

[6] Data on refugees registered by UNHCR are from the UNHCR report "Syria Regional Refugee Response," <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>. Accessed 21 April 2022.

[7] Kartomi (1981) discusses the terminology and concepts of musical culture contact relevant for analyses of migration and music.

[8] Musical performance in rural areas of the Arab world is often more public and can include solicitation of money in return for performance. In urban Morocco one finds itinerant Gnawa musicians soliciting money through street performance. As already noted, this practice is common in Istanbul.

[9] see Wilton (2015).

[10] See Hirsch (2010) for an overview of global street performance.

[11] It is important to note that attention to street music should not overshadow or preclude a focus on the lives of the musicians themselves. As Joshua Pilzer notes, "...scholars of music and traumatic experience have treated survivors as receptacles of the past that allow for its reconstruction" rather than

focusing on "[t]he musical means by which survivors stay alive and come to terms with their experiences" (2019, 484). Moreover, he calls for a more people-

centered approach that witnesses how survivors of traumatic experience (and most of the Syrians with whom I worked would fall into this category) find

meaning in their current lives through musical practices as well as through silences. My work with Syrians in Istanbul therefore focused on how they utilized

musical practices in their efforts to manage displacement, marginalization, victimization, and struggles for survival. I hesitate to term their practices

refugee or asylum status [i]). At the same time, I wish to focus attention on their experiences to highlight their resilience and creativity in the face of enormous challenges.

[12] Traditionally Syrian artists would learn through apprenticeship to master performers, a system that was codified in the 20th C. in the Artists' Syndicate (*Niq?bat al-Fan?n?n*) certification exams. Until the early 2000s, the main music academies did not emphasize Arab music, though beginning in 2003 several

conservatories opened in major cities offering degrees in Arab music performance. See Shannon 2006.

[13] See Shannon 2006 for more on musical practice and subnational subjectivities in Syria. "Halab" is Arabic for Aleppo.

[14] Many more Syrian women artists perform European classical music and also global popular musics in Europe and North America.

[15] The song was composed by the Rahbani brothers in 1967. *Maq?m kurd* (also *k?rd* or *kurd?*) is similar to a Phrygian scale on D, though as a melodic context the *maq?m* is much broader than a scale. *Nassam 'alayna al-hawa* is transposed to A.

[16] *Maq?m ?ij?z* is similar to a D Phrygian dominant or altered Phrygian scale, whereas *maq?m nah?wand* is similar to a C harmonic minor scale. Both modes incorporate microtonal intervals in some of their lower and upper tetrachords (*ajn?s*). These are features inherent to the *maq?m*, and not, as Shumays

suggests, "maqam baggage" that accompany the main structures of the modes (in MaqamWorld.com, accessed September 29, 2022). Nonetheless, on the

street, both are reduced to their simplest forms, which means excluding microtonality.

[17] *Maq?m r?st* is the foundational mode in the Arab *maq?m* system. It's scale representation is similar to a C major scale but with smaller 3rd and 7th intervals, or what is often called a "half flatted" E and B though there is great debate about the precise measurement of these intervals. It bears repeating that I

refer to similar scales in Western Art Music for the sake of convenience with the understanding that a *maq?m* is very different from a scale even if they are

often represented as such. See Marcus (2002) for more on the theory of *maq?m*.

[18] The *cümbü?* is a Turkish string instrument similar to a banjo developed in the 1930s that was popular in among ethnic minorities in Turkey and has seen a revival in recent years. see Ederer 2007.

[19] Ersoy is an iconic Turkish singer who performs in the classical Turkish, *Alaturka*, and *Arabesk* styles.

[20] It is important to note here that not all Syrian street performers self-identified as Arabs; many were Kurds, adding another level of complexity to the politics of their street performance.

[21] These numbers are from 2018. Recent inflation and dramatic devaluation of the Turkish lira has altered the situation dramatically.

[22] Pages closed its doors in 2017 and relocated to Amsterdam in June of that year (Samer al-Kadri, personal communication). See also Smadi nd.

[23] With the EU-Turkish accords of 2016, migration from Turkey to Europe was significantly curtailed.

[24] cited in Ö?üt 2021, 6.

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