My paper is a first step in my 12-month research project within the Mercator – IPC Fellowship Programme at Sabancı University in Istanbul. Previously, I started this research at the University of Exeter (within the Centre of Performing Histories) and made some preliminary progress recently within the department of cultural anthropology and ethnology at Ankara University with the support of a Tübitak Fellowship. Under the heading ‘migrating sound’, I would like to look today at how culturally hybrid compositions, historical soundscapes and voices that are often unheard present social issues of migration in our operas and music theatres today. There is one particular type of theatre, that caught my attention two years ago, which takes this as its main concern: ‘post-migrant’ theatre.

In Berlin, post-migrant theatre is giving rise to stories of success and opportunity for German-Turkish practitioners (as well as Turkish and Kurdish artists and members of society with Turkish and Kurdish background – which immediately problematizes the ethnic issue) whilst the art form is slowly moving into the centre of Germany’s – and Europe’s – cultural landscape, including the festival and artistic collaboration networks. Gradually, a network of similarly minded post-migrant theatre ensembles and venues is developing all over Europe (with RAST and Xynix Opera/Holland Opera in the Netherlands, Arcola Theatre in London, as well as many singular projects and programs within established houses in Vienna, Belgium, etc.). These developments urge us to include ‘post-migrant cultural praxis’ seriously into our debates of multiculturalism in Europe.

Shermin Langhoff, artistic director of the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse Theatre, a leading voice in this artistic practice, has contributed significantly the past few years (since 2008) in coining the term ‘post-migrant’ for the German-Turkish context:

Postmigrants are the new Germans. It would be difficult to call us New German Theatre. That would have been a step too far, and I would not know if every college of high culture would take this with the necessary doses of humor. It is a play with notions. We place ourselves in a discourse which already exists: ‘post-migrant’ appeared for the first time in Anglo-Saxon literature, when ten years ago Feridun Zaimoglu was invited to a symposium. To me post-migrant, in the understanding of the producers and recipients at Ballhaus, is the right description, to the extent that one can describe something accurately (Dell 2009; my translation, PV).
Langhoff explains further that by naming this type of theatre as post-migrants themselves they deliberately claim the power of defining (‘wir nehmen uns die Definitionsmandaht’), which entitles them to a level of ‘empowerment’.

The underlying mechanism (and politics) of this ‘Definitionsmandaht’/claiming of definitions can be brought to parallel the rise of music theatre as a Continental European art form, now in its third wave since the 1980s – concomitant to the paradigmatic shift to post-modernity in art, culture and discourse, and the slow demise of migrant theatre, for equally social and political reasons. So the choice of using music theatre and operatic principles in post-migrant theatre is to say the least strategic: whilst the budding music theatre (or New Opera) and its infrastructure provides an institutional framework, music/musicalization creates a space for the presentation of different cultures and communities to resist certain power structures and mechanisms of objectification due to its alleged open signification processes. Music theatre is aesthetically and socially very interesting to empower voices that are generally not heard or removed from history. But despite its relative newness and openness, one should realize that it also serves certain purposes within the current cultural and socio-political climate (such as in Germany, cultural education/’kulturelle Bildungsarbeit’ and in Netherlands, cultural integration through community art).

Therefore, I wish to question the idea of community as potential beneficiary whilst participating and being represented within the content of the performances.

In the context of this conference, I choose to focus on the conceptual network around the term ‘community’ in relation to the still ill defined territory of ‘aurality’ within theatre and performance studies. I content that post-migrant music theatre and opera performances contribute to a more self-reflexive stance towards the construct of community through its inherence in aurality, and what I will call later, ‘inter-aurality’. Since these performances generally serve as a sounding board to what is often ‘unheard’ (of) in terms of untold stories and voices of migrant communities in between and across different listening cultures, they can give us vital information about how communities are lived, reproduced, represented and understood on auditory – and thereby often invisible – terms.

Music theatre, as a European theatre form resisting and recycling opera traditions, can play a vital role in reflecting upon our attitudes in acoustic communication and aurality. It can make us aware of how we ‘sound out’ our presence in our (interconnected) communities in idealistic, normative, conservative and inherently inclusive ways, as a strategy to resist certain tendencies of homogeneity and identity formation as a ‘finitude’. Particularly as ‘a theatre of confluence’ (Schafer), music theatre can challenge notions of community, identity, culture, discourse, representation, in between cultures and communities, and in the interstices of aesthetic experience and social life.

My conviction is that to uncover the workings of aurality in the formation of identities and communities, we a need sociological explanation, which enables a
sensitivity for the social context, which contemporary theatre/performance analyses often lack. I therefore propose what I call a *socio-aesthetic* approach. I will elucidate the aesthetic and social arguments respectively by means of two performances. Both performances will help me to explore different notions of community in a wider, philosophical framework, moving from a post-colonial critique towards an understanding of community in political sociology.

In the following, I will elucidate what I call the aesthetic and social arguments respectively by means of two performances. The question of inter-aurality, where listening attitudes are communicated between two listening cultures, will first be addressed as part of the aesthetic argument through *Lege Wieg / Boş Beşik* (by Hollands Diep in collaboration with VocaalLAB). A rethinking of ‘community’ as a self-reflexive concept will be developed as part of the social argument in relation to *Tango Türk* (by Neuköllner Oper). I thereby chose to separate the social and aesthetic implications for purposes of clarity, with which I by no means want to suggest that these performances isolate those arguments as singular showcases, nor that these realms exist separate from each other. On the contrary, for this developing socio-aesthetic approach we would need to consider how the social bears meaning to the aesthetic, and vice versa.

Important to note is that both performances were produced around the same time (in 2010) by women artists with always the composer having an Eastern background (Korean/Turkish), and the director being Dutch reproducing Western models of organisation and direction (‘Leitung’). This brings in a very important and complex question of who is presenting what for what purpose and to whom.

**The Aesthetic Argument: Acoustic Communication and Inter-Aurality**

The first performance *Lege Wieg / Boş Beşik* invites me to reflect on the production of community on acoustic terms and the position of the listener in-between listening cultures, which I will call ‘inter-aurality’. The leading question here is: how to represent this listener – in-between cultures – through hybrid musical and auditory practices? How can we keep the balance between the expectations of ‘authenticity’ with regard to the Eastern composer and the inevitable compromise of Western music cultures (as many of the composers are schooled in a Western classical paradigm) without falling into the traps of Orientalism, folklore, … In my opinion our Western ears have become quite ‘perverse’ in approaching other cultures under the concept and now policy target of ‘interculturality’, no matter how open we would like to see ourselves.

*Lege Wieg / Boş Beşik* exactly refers to this perversity as its plot/libretto is based on a story from the area of the Taurus Mountains in Southern Anatolia, which dates back to the 16th century, but is mostly known through its film adaptations, of which the 1969 version by Orhan Elmas is the most well known. This imaginary
fairy-tale context immediately sets the stage for an experience of ‘otherness’ through safe displacement and distance. The choice to stage a popular Turkish (folk) story as opera can be seen in a larger European tradition of the so-called ‘Türkenoperas’ representing ‘the Turk’ (more precisely, the Ottoman) and other related Eastern identities on the stage, mostly with exotic/Orientalist (and racist) undertones. The genre has also attempted to expose and, thereby, to reconfirm European values in the face of postcolonial narratives of history. In this view, it is a crucial question to ask if the representation of a Turkish ‘community’ on the stage today serves a similar post-colonial project.

The relation between community and aurality was earlier established in sound studies through the notion of ‘acoustic community’, coined by R. Murray Schafer for purposes of soundscape analysis and sound ecology in the 1960s. Barry Truax developed the notion further in relation to his central concept of ‘acoustic communication’ in the 1980s (influenced by information theory). These concepts offer a framework for considering how sound signals function in a specific cultural context for a specific acoustic community to gather information and, hence, make sense of the (sounding) world. Truax’s communicational model aims to show “how sound, in all its forms and functions, defines the relationship of the individual, the community, and ultimately a culture, to the environment and those within it” (Truax 1984: 3). His model stresses the influence of the cultural network to which the individual listener relates and metaphorically ‘tunes’ into by being a member of a certain community. What Truax illustrates using this model is that sound and the auditory environment are both part of the socio-cultural matrix, which mutually influences the listener in her or his listening modes as ways to communicate with that environment and with others inhabiting it. It is this discursive matrix, which determines the shape of our norms, values, habits and ideas surrounding hearing and listening, that I would like to call ‘aurality’.

Now, in its hybrid use of music and sound post-migrant theatre could be said to perform aurality as marked or hyphenated by its listening subjects. In the face (or ear) of other musical cultures, inter-aurality poses the question how we deal with our un-marked, often unnoticed listening attitudes, habits, norms and values as part of our cultures. Inter-aurality then suggests positions in listening for the spectator towards the work of art. One of such dominant positions in a traditional, modernist sense is convergence through musical adaptation. In Boş Beşik, this is the underlying model instigated by mainly atonality (close to Ligeti and Xenakis), which seems also based on a specific understanding of ‘community’ as other. Seung-Ah Oh’s musical adaptation process lays bare the difficulty of communicating one culture into another, particularly if one realizes that this is a native Korean composer – who studied composition in the Netherlands and the US. She was assisted in the choice of original Turkish songs by Turkish singer Nurhan Uyar who was also trained in Berlin. Opera, although a very European ‘indigenous’ tradition, serves here as a migrant art form in
itself, not only socially by including highly schooled ‘Eastern’ artists – no doubt, for artistic entrepreneurial reasons but also for implied reasons of authenticity. East meets East, under the auspices of a predominantly feminine West. Atonality seems then to be used as a more ‘neutral’ vehicle to translate Turkish rhythms, modalities and microtone fluctuations through a Western compositional paradigm, but this could also be criticised as reproducing and confirming Western hegemonic aesthetic practices.

The crucial point of this model of inter-aurality becomes clear in Seung-Ah Oh’s adaptation of the *Nenni Bebek* song, which lies engraved in most Turks’ cultural memory. In this song, it seems that the complex search for convergence between Eastern and Western musical cultures finds its fulfilment of an imagined fusion, which seems driven by an ideal of ‘living together’ (as so many a social policy would like us to believe). But in every process of adaptation and migration (literally) something always gets lost on the way. For some of the Dutch-Turkish women the polyvocality and other musical compromises lead to feelings of initial estrangement when singing together (Dutch and Dutch-Turkish side by side), whereas for Nurhan Uyar the adaptations meant an energetic refreshing of traditions.

Despite the good intentions of the theatre practitioners, as a result of the attempts towards a cultural melt-down in listening the Turkish community appears as radically ‘other’, in a (neo-)orientalist fantasy. First of all, the choir presents itself as one voice, commenting on the action similar to the chorus of the Ancient Greek tragedies, thereby highlighting its desired ‘commonality’ despite its internal cultural and ethnic differences. Second, the costumes (designed by Ineke Vink) seem to unfortunately confirm in its banal abstraction the perception of exotic alterity, thereby not only compromising the representation of community on stage as a (Dutch/oriental) fantasy, but also as ‘pre-modern’ (based on a sense of essentialism in European social evolutionism). The shift here from atonality to harmony and back seems to underscore this nostalgic move towards a pre-modern moment through the oriental subject. In short, the aesthetic desires for fusion overshadow the interconnection of cultures and communities being together in difference. Instead, the longing for fusion and convergence through adaptation and communal practices of singing/listening seem to confirm a Western supremacy and an elite culture around the chosen aesthetic instead of really empowering marginalized voices and thereby, hyphenated identities.

**The Social Argument: Community as Critical Concept**

The second performance I wish to briefly discuss, *Tango Türk*, will offer us an alternative model of inter-aurality in post-migrant theatre: one that allows for heterogeneity, translation and juxtaposition challenging the notion of community. *Tango Türk* (by the Neuköllner Oper) was produced by Turkish composer Sinem Altan and Dutch director Lotte De Beer. The performance could be said to follow a
postdramatic aesthetic, playing with plot through flash backs in an episodic structure. But in terms of action (including the acting styles) and the musical composition, it is still in a dramatic tradition. The term ‘opera’ is applied here rather loosely for institutional purposes (the Neuköllner Oper being mainly subsidized from the local government) than aesthetic ones. More significantly, its presence in Neukölnn has immediate social relevance, as its building is physically located at the centre of a highly concentrated multicultural as well as increasingly gentrified part of the city. This part of Berlin is still a predominantly working class area where post-migrants or ‘Neudeutschen’ (new Germans) live besides so-called ‘Biodutschen’ (a new term referencing ‘first-people’ which has been problematic since its inception as ‘bio’ also means ‘organic’ in German).

*Tango Türk*’s hybrid composition suggests a model for inter-aurality, which allows for much more self-reflexivity surrounding the representation of community on stage. The combination of Tango songs from the 1930s and Sinem Altan’s contemporary compositions give justice to the social existence, listening tastes and experiential realities of German-Turks in a second and third generation. The hybridity of theatre styles as well as in the musical experience offers here an in-between position, a ‘parodic’ mode of self-conscious representation.

Contrary to *Boş Beşik*’s tendencies towards fusion, *Tango Türk* seeks for a musical model that is based on juxtaposition of styles to highlight the contingency rather than the convergence between (listening) cultures. In my view, the model exemplified here comes close to what ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood calls ‘bi-musicality’:

This is the ability to function competently and with understanding within the musical practice of another culture. Hood notes that every culture’s music can be appreciated only on its own terms and he offers the example that basic western musicianship, such as having perfect pitch, actually represents a ‘conditioned prejudice to overcome’ interfering with the musician’s ability to hear ‘microtonal inflections’ (Hood 1960: 56). The needed skill set can be gained through learned sensitivity and actual musical performance experience” (Gluck 2008: 143).

Sinem Altan’s arrangements of Turkish tango music offer a point of access to this bi-musicality, which resonates with such new hybrid identities as Turkish post-migrants in Germany. This bi-musicality, according to Robert Gluck (2008), “requires developing an awareness of the assumptions and conditioned responses that colour our musical experience and thus our ability to engage with the music of an unfamiliar culture” (Gluck 2008: 144). Rather than trying to absorb the ‘other’ culture through fusing musical styles, this model of inter-musical experience engages with the values, norms and attitudes of the others culture’s aurality by exposing the listener to them besides their ‘own’ listening culture.
The community represented in *Tango Türk* represent much more a temporary gathering of individuals and different voices in the margins of a pluralistic society, then a holistic entity that is based on race, ethnicity, kinship or any social policy definition of the ‘migrant’. As such, *Tango Türk* demonstrates that the traditional meaning of ‘community’ has become an obstacle, if not obsolete. British sociologist Brian Alleyne formulates it well when he states: “… it [i.e. ‘community’] may be allowed too easily to become an explanation rather than something to be explained” (Alleyne 2002: 608). *Tango Türk*’s representation of community further resonates with Bataille’s ‘community without community’, which became the cornerstone of the community debate initiated by Nancy’s ‘inoperative community’ concept in *La Communaute desoeuvrée* (1986). The underlying idea is that community should be regarded negatively as the “antithesis to a notion of community that always already knows who and what it is speaking of” (Kosnick 2011: 28). Community is rather ‘inoperative’ to the extent that it cannot be regarded as “a project of fusion, or in some general way a productive or operative project – nor is it a project at all” (Nancy, 1991: 15). Instead, it is ‘unworkable’ or ‘unworking’; it is not an ‘oeuvre’ because it is un-objectifiable. It is not an immanent essence, an identifiable totality, nor has it explanatory value of ‘common being’ (Parmett 2012: 175).

The juxtaposition of songs as well as the plurality of cultures within Turkish tango music creates a space for bi-musicality, which debunks any homogenizing myths of ‘interweaving’ between communities, as in a tapestry. Rather, they urge us to rethink the notion of community as a plurality of encounters, a network of agents with ever-changing projects and pathways, which ultimately makes us rethink our own position within it. Through its promptings of inter-aural experiences, *Tango Türk* demonstrates then that community is not an object that is accomplished or produced, but it is an experience of ‘being together’ (contingency) between singularities. It is a process, rather than a finitude. It is a sharing of a lack of identity – always insufficient in its incompleteness and at the same time, excessive – rather than a confirmation of commonality, unity or a result of external categorization.

**Conclusion: A Radical Politics of Community**

Both *Boş Beşik* and *Tango Türk* showed how ‘community’ is a vehicle of a particular culture that experiences another culture as ‘other’, as alterity. Their models of inter-aurality suggested that acoustic communication should be regarded as vital a tool to think through this complex notion. Marginalised voices can precisely expose the liminal logic of community and the way we define it in our daily lives. Post-migrant theatre can then become a site of contestation and a critical tool, offering perspectives on our multicultural society, which urge us to position ourselves. We should, therefore, situate these performances in a larger practice of (democratic) resistance to
homogenizing forces in our theatres, particularly when they mean to blind us to crucial dynamics in our society today.

‘Community’ is, of course, only one concept that post-migrant theatre urges to rethink as a question rather than a given. Community is a performative concept, something that ‘does’ rather than ‘is’, and it should be thought inherently to aurality in how it separates and binds us in alterity through our listening practices. As such, by engaging critically with communities on stage, post-migrant theatre and its audiences respond to the urgent call of thinking radically different about forming socialities in our globalized multicultural realities – a radical politics of community as a necessity of our times.

Pieter Verstraete
Istanbul/Berlin, 1 Oct. 2012

Bibliography