Contested Spaces of Acoustic Community in Post-Migrant Theatre
Dr. P.M.G. Verstraete, Sabancı University (Mercator – IPC Fellow)

**Rationale**

In my previous research, I conceptualised ‘auditory distress’ as a basis for analyzing the individual listener’s position towards the auditory scene in a (music) theatre performance. This ‘distress’ in listening mainly manifests itself due to a conceptual radicalism in the use of sound on the stage in the exploration of semiotic excess (such as plethora, multimedia, split perception), which is often intensified by a lack of signifiers or a sensory/visual ‘deprivation’. By studying how auditory distress is channelled through various listening perspectives in composition and performance, we can start to understand the necessity of the listener’s responses through his modes of listening, specifically in relation to his individual listening capacities and the cultural norms and values predicated by contemporary aurality. However, this theoretical model does not yet encounter communal listening experiences, which include the translation and entangling of cultures.

Therefore, I propose to extend the theory of aurality with a more historically and socially sensitive scope on the notion of community, which lays bare the cultural transactions and disjunctures that shape aurality today. The main aim of my current research is to pair sociological concepts with culturalist perspectives on identity issues – which I term a ‘socio-aesthetic approach’ – to identify issues that would be later tested against policy analysis and in-depth interviews. At the centre of my inquiry with the following paper, I critically reread Schafer’s pivotal notion of the ‘acoustic community’ in soundscape theory through other, philosophical notions of community, such as Nancy’s ‘inoperative community’, Agamben’s ‘the coming community’ and Blanchot’s ‘unavowable community’, among others. I aim to conceptualise how mixed audiences are much-contested sites of tension between listening cultures shaping the individual against the hegemony of norms, tastes and prejudices that surround formative definitions of community.

Whereas R. Murray Schafer’s timeworn notions of the ‘acoustic community’ and ‘acoustic horizon’ have still explanatory value in conceptualising the relation of individual listeners to the external world, particularly their sounding habitats and communal audio practices in multicultural situations, these notions are in need of revision to consider the social-aesthetic aspects of developments in audio design, sound/music dramaturgy, composition for the stage and its interpretation. ‘Community’ will therefore be explored philosophically as an open, critical and complex concept. Post-migrant theatre projects will be considered that address the representation of heterogeneous, interconnected communities through hybrid sound and music practices by challenging aurality as a space of contestation rather than homogenisation. The role of music theatre – in form and content – as a critical vehicle will also be questioned in relation to this.

With this paper, I wish to outline some of the key theoretical concepts of my new research strand on Turkish and Kurdish post-migrant theatre, including forms of music theatre and opera, in Europe, which I started earlier at the University of Exeter (Centre for Performance Histories) and for which I received financial support through a Tübitak Fellowship at Ankara University and recently, a Mercator – IPC Fellowship at Sabancı University in Istanbul. The concept of ‘community’ will later become one of the analytical concepts that will be tested against social/cultural policies and interviews with theatre practitioners, participants and audience members.
Defining Post-Migrant Community and Aurality in Music Theatre Today

In Berlin, ‘post-migrant’ theatre is causing general stories of success and opportunities for German-Turkish practitioners (as well as Turkish and Kurdish participants) whilst the art form is slowly moving into the centre of Germany’s cultural landscape and Europe’s festival and artistic collaboration networks. Recent attention has been raised by journals such as Dramaturgie (Feb. 2009; Jan. & Feb. 2011) and Theaterheute (Jan. 2011). These publications have highlighted the need 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, coins the term: 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 2012; my translation, PV)²

In the same interview, Langhoff explains that by naming this type of theatre themselves they deliberately claim the power of defining (‘wir nehmen uns die Definitionsmacht’), which entitles them to a level of ‘empowerment’. This mechanism of definition seems quite common with the rise of music theatre since its third wave in the 20th century from the 1980s.

Elsewhere Langhoff clarifies that the ‘post-’ in post-migrant theatre refers to a change in perspective. Not only is this a theatre that emancipated itself from migrant-theatre, with or without the support of government-supported professionalization and therefore cautious institutionalisation, it is also a theatre that engages ‘post-migrants’, meaning the children and grandchildren in a second and third generation of people with migrant backgrounds. Langhoff is right to point out that the naming, describing

---

¹ Recent work is produced in Germany at Neuköllner Oper, Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, Heimathafen Neukölln, Uelum Theater but also Manheim National Theatre and recently, Rimini Protokoll. In the Netherlands post-migrant theatre can be found at Holland Opera (previously called Xynix Opera), RAST Theatre, and occasionally, Hollands Diep. In the UK, the centre for this type of work is the Arcola Fringe Theatre in London (particularly its associated ‘Ala-Turca’ programme). The latter has direct ties with Yeni Kusak Theatre and Talimhane Tiyatrosu in Istanbul. There used to be also 476 Players Theatre Co., but its activities seem to have ceased due to a lack of funding.


³ “Der Begriff Postmigranten ist ein ‘Schritt weiter in einem Denken, in einem Raum’, wo ‘Geschichten derer, die Migration selbst nicht erlebt haben, aber in deren Leben sie (...) eine Rolle spielt’ ausgedrückt wird und ein Perspektivenwechsel beinhaltet.” (Sharifi 2011: 45)
and defining – as well as its associated empowerment – need careful examination when trying to understand the meaning of this developing art form today. But Langhoff’s suggestion of a ‘Perspektivenwechsel’ could mean to suggest that this type of theatre is a vehicle rather than an end in itself. It becomes a lens for the post-migrant audience member to recognise her or himself through the blind angles of their shared history, which affects them in their subjectivity, whereas it has also the potentiality to effect a wider change in perspective addressing larger audiences.

In terms of the policies that support this artwork, post-migrant theatre in Germany is often regarded as ‘kulturelle Bildungsarbeit’, as part of wider concerns of education through the arts. In the Netherlands, on the contrary, this body of work finds resonance with another hyped theatre genre at the moment, called ‘community theatre’, for funding purposes. Despite the relevance of this developing art form for educational and social purposes, such as the coming to terms with Diaspora, integration, local governance and interculturality as a direct consequence of Europe’s migration history, I would like to raise more caution for the implications such political and utilitarian frameworks around the art form may have on definitions of ‘post-migrant’, ‘community’ and ‘culture’, particularly where the sounding of marginalized voices may resist common or institutionalized understandings of these categories.

In this paper, I choose to focus on the conceptual network around the term ‘community’ in relation to the still ill defined territory of ‘aurality’ as a vital part of our culture and ways of communicating. With this, I wish to respond to a renewed interest in community in the theatre. I content that post-migrant music theatre and opera performances contribute to a more self-reflexive stance towards the construct of community. 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, they can give us vital information about how communities are reproduced, represented and defined whilst being undone or, at times, confirmed.

The relation between community and aurality was earlier established through the notion of ‘acoustic community’, coined by R. Murray Schafer for purposes of soundscape analysis and 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’.

Communication is most central to a notion of community. As Raymond Williams (1983) has once suggested: “any real theory of communication is a theory of community” (Williams 1983: 313). “[C]ommunication takes place at the threshold of the emergence of community” (Shindo 2012: 152). And acoustic communication is most central in the way we (‘I’) expose ourselves (myself) to others (a ‘you’) by
sounding out our (my) existence through language. We thereby always occupy space to make ourselves heard at the cost of others” (Connor 2005: 56). But as Truax has suggested, we should always think our acoustic or auditory communication in the expression of self in relation to a socio-cultural context that is larger than only the envelope of acoustic signals.

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 (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, etc. in between cultures and communities, and in the interstices of aesthetic experience and social life.

Hence, post-migrant music theatre and opera invite me to develop a socio-aesthetic approach that rethinks Schafer’s acoustic community concept. For this purpose, I will explore the concept of community in a wider, philosophical framework, borrowing ideas from political sociology. With this I respond to a repeated call to bridge the disciplinary gap between the social sciences, which have strongly focused on structural factors and institutions shaping people’s lives, and the humanities, which have previously focused on issues of cultural identity and attitudes (Kosnick 2010: 2). In Theatre Studies, a turn to social awareness came as a response already in the 1980s that criticized a too restricting and essentializing semiotic approach. However, the question of ‘community’ was still only regarded as a political and sociological category and became underrepresented by immanent-aesthetic and subject-oriented analyses of theatre.

In the following, I will elucidate what I call the aesthetic and social arguments in the representation and mediation of community. The question of inter-aurality, where listening attitudes are shared between two listening cultures, will be addressed as part of the aesthetic argument. A rethinking of ‘community’ as a self-reflexive concept will be developed as part of the social argument. I will explore both arguments in relation to two performances (both produced in 2010), which I would like to present as contrasting examples of inter-aurality: the first one, Lege Wieg / Boş Beşik (by Hollands Diep in collaboration with VocaalLAB), in relation to the ever-problematic modernist notions of identity, adaptation and fusion; the other, Tango Türk (by Neuköllner Oper), as engaging in post-modern principles of hybridity, translation and juxtaposition.

As a category for socio-aesthetic analysis, I consider community at four different levels (which I only touch upon briefly in this paper):

- as participating members of a living community chosen to serve as ‘representatives’ on stage;
- as a group on stage representing a community which presupposes a certain perception or perspective on an existing or past community;
- as a group of spectators (‘audience’ as a temporary community of listeners) who share ‘common’ features such as an expected ideological position towards the interpretant, their social milieu vis-à-vis the intended audience or social class;

as group of interpreting and producing artists who share opportunity in this art form (cultural entrepreneurship driven by precarity) and/or who are supported – again as ‘representatives’ of their community – by certain social/cultural policies and educational systems.

The Aesthetic Argument: Community and Inter-Aurality

*Lege Wieg / Boş Beşik* (‘The Empty Cradle’), by Korean composer Seung-Ah Oh and Dutch director Cilia Hogerzeil in the Netherlands, is a new opera production in the ‘post-Wagnerian’ vein by a Dutch small-scale music theatre company in Dordrecht, Hollands Diep, in collaboration with VocaalLAB in Zaandam (according to their website, an ‘international atelier for innovative music theatre’). The production came about after a series of workshops with Turkish/Kurdish and Dutch women from the community in Dordrecht, some of who formed the chorus in the performance. The opera was staged at Het Energiehuis in Dordrecht, which is a former power plant on an old industrial site in the city. This engaging working method and site-specific location play a vital role in the overall motivation to reach out to a community that is not very familiar with the opera form or its social milieu. It could thereby be regarded as part of a larger development in the Netherlands of ‘community theatre’.

*Lege Wieg / Boş Beşik* 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. The story recounts the tragic destiny of a village woman, Fadime (portrayed simultaneously by soprano Jennifer Claire van der Harst and ‘alter ego’ Caroline Cartens), who falls in love and marries a city citizen, Nomad (Ankara-born tenor Gunnar Brandt-Sigurdsson), outside her class and much against the will of the latter’s in-laws. When she cannot produce a child for years, the family’s rejection increases. By a mysterious force, however, she does produce a son, which is later unfortunately snatched away from her by a vulture.

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. It is also not unimportant to realize that opera is here presented by an ensemble (Hollands Diep) that has embraced New Music Theatre as its main aesthetic and is structurally subsidized by the governmental foundation NFPK+ (which works for the Dutch Ministry of OCW). The mayor of Dordrecht also contributed with some introductory words in the programme brochure, applauding the role of this opera in the pluralistic society of the Netherlands today. Opera seems here to be employed as a medium, a vehicle for overt and covert expressions of multicultural identity (and citizenship), which resonate to, institutionalized processes of local governance (cf. Ingraham 2011: 213).

Hollands Diep’s exploration with opera here materializes opportunities for the Korean composer Seung-Ah Oh (who studied in the US and the Netherlands) as well as Turkish tenor Gunnar Brandt-Sigurdsson (schooled between 1996 and 2001 in the Hochschule für Künste in Bremen with Maria Kowollik) and Turkish singer Nurhan Uyar (who has her own choir in Berlin and also advised on the choice of songs).
Opera, although a very European ‘indigenous’ tradition, serves here as a migrant art form in itself, not only socially by including highly schooled performers from Turkey and Korea – no doubt, for artistic entrepreneurial reasons or reasons of authenticity – but also by aesthetically adapting an idea of the ‘operatic’ (with its associated features of histrionic, extravagant, overly aesthetic, gestural, ceremonial, performative as well as nationalistic, colonial…) in an otherwise culturally empty vessel. It also includes atonality for that same reason, in order to allow for more play with different musical practices and listening attitudes in an intercultural context.

The hybridity of its aesthetic form makes opera indeed ‘unsettling’ (David Levin 2007) so that it can function as a tool to reflect on identities and communities, in terms of what Linda Hutcheon (1985) has identified as a ‘parodic mode of self-conscious representation’. However, the underlying rationale of the performance, which drives the working method, choice of location and overall aesthetic, discloses a certain understanding of community based on presuppositions of ethnicity, gender and location. It is not my intention to criticize this artwork for its artistic shortcomings but to regard it as an example of a model for inter-musical compositional practice and staging, which thereby implicates a certain notion of community through its representations in sound and music.

The communities that are represented on stage through music here are respectively the families of Fadime and Nomad of which they are the representatives, in particular of rural and urban class. Musically, Nomad’s family is depicted with staccato-like rhythms and Gregorian-free-style chants whereas Fadime’s sisters present themselves through mourning laments at two instances, one when Fadime bids them farewell and second when her child is taken away from her by the fictional ‘Derman’ figure (a combination of ‘Derwish’ and ‘Sjaman’, which accidentally also means medicine or power). Particularly the latter moment offers some inter-musical problems through the adaptation of the well known Turkish Neni Bebek song. As Robert Gluck (2008) suggested, ‘inter-musicality’ poses questions and suggests models of exchange between two or more musical cultures through compositional practices as communication strategies. My concern, however, is mainly related to listening, so I would like to think his suggestions further as related issues of interaurality, particularly where the complex notion of community is represented through shifting listening habits.5

In Boş Beşik, the overall model of inter-aurality is musical adaptation and convergence, based on a specific understanding of interconnected communities, which the musical experience generally assists to represent. Seung-Ah Oh’s musical adaptation process lays bare the difficulty of communicating one culture into another, particularly if one realizes that this native Korean composer tried to translate Turkish rhythms, modalities and microtone fluctuations through a Western compositional paradigm (borrowing as much from Wagner as from Xenakis and Ligeti). East meets East under the auspices of the West, particularly feminine/ist West. In the Neni Bebek 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’. But in every translation something always gets lost. For some of the Dutch-Turkish women the polyvocality and other musical compromises

5 In my view, inter-aurality could be seen as a step further than John Cage’s ‘panaurality’ concept as a means for his own refusal of a normative Western subjectivity that decenters the subject as individual. This idealistic resistance would suppose an inevitable point outside of aurality altogether, which seems hard to achieve. Inter-aurality, however, resists the idea of a holistic, all-inclusive attitude to sound, emphasizing the necessary in-between position when opening up to ‘all sound’.


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.

However, I want to argue that, 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 as it were. First of all, the choir presents itself as one voice, commenting on the action similar the chorus in the Ancient Greek tragedies, thereby highlighting its desired ‘commonality’ despite its internal cultural and ethnic differences. The aesthetic desire for fusion overshadows the interconnection of being together in difference. Second, new orientalist mechanisms are lurking when one realizes that an old Turkish story – unknown to many of the younger generation Dutch-Turks – is being retold by a Dutch librettist and set to music by a Korean composer whereas it is presented as something of the ‘other’ culture under the pretext of a necessity by the Dutch to grasp something ‘genuine’ in that culture. One wonders what is exactly being represented here for what reason? In searching for abstraction, the costumes (designed by Ineke Vink) seem to unfortunately confirm the perception of exotic ‘otherness’, thereby not only compromising the representation of community on stage as a (Dutch/oriental) fantasy, but also as ‘pre-modern’. The shift from atonality – which can be seen as both a rejection and confirmation of Western/European values and power structures – to harmony seems to underscore this nostalgic move towards a pre-modern moment.

The identification of ‘mass’ and the seeming production of a fantasized ‘lost’ space as a meeting place for different musical/listening cultures seem to compromise any serious engagement with the Dutch-Turkish women in the choir. This brings me to my third point: although this model of adaptation aims at an extension of the boundaries of the ‘own’ aurality/musicality on both sides, as integral to its aesthetic agenda, the longing for fusion and identification through communal practices of singing and listening seems to confirm a Western supremacy and an elite culture around the chosen aesthetic instead of empowering marginalized voices and thereby, hyphenated identities. “Levinas makes a similar point, arguing that most projects of communication fail on account of their misguided aspiration for ‘fusion’: ‘If communication bears the mark of failure of inauthenticity … it is because it is sought as a fusion’” (Gahndi 2006: 200).

This particular model – thought-provoking in itself, particularly where feelings of identity through fusion reinforces a sense of community as pre-existing entity – begs the question whether community can and should be presented as the antithesis of a homogeneity or organic unity. Is not musical representation always in a way implying homogenizing inclinations as sound creates sonorous envelopes which, on an imaginary level, provides moments of satisfaction to the ‘auditory I’ (Connor 1997: 214)? And is not community always a representation and hence, imagined, as a phantasy of the privileged?

The second performance I wish to briefly discuss, Tango Türk, will offer us an alternative model of inter-aurality and its implications to an understanding of community: one that allows for heterogeneity, translation and juxtaposition challenging the migrant voice as ‘singularity’, ‘representative other’ or ‘finitude’.

There is lurking essentialism here as marked by an idea of ‘European social evolutionism’ (Stocking 1982) which associates non-European migrants with premodernity (Kosnick 2011: 23). Bryan Alleyne explains the underlying idea as such: “‘We’ (in the West) have individuals in society, while they (the Rest) have community (of course, ‘we’ once had community as the dominant form of social organization, but ‘we’ dropped it on the way to modernity)” (Alleyne 2002: 611).
The Social Argument: Community as Critical Concept

*Tango Türk* (by the Neuköllner Oper) was produced by Turkish composer Sinem Altan and Dutch director Lotte De Beer; again, both women artists with the composer being Eastern. 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 acting) and musical composition it is still in a dramatic tradition. The term ‘opera’ is applied here rather loosely for institutional reasons than aesthetic ones. More significantly, its presence in Neukölln has immediate social meaning, as the Neuköllner Oper is physically situated 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 ‘Biodeutschen’ (a new term referencing ‘first-people’ which has been problematic since its inception as ‘bio’ also means ‘organic’ in German).

By installing a state-subsidized ‘opera’ in this area whilst using the term in its most open sense very similar to ‘music-theatre’, the Neuköllner Oper attempts to both speak to a cultural elite and include its direct social environment, which is generally seen as ‘deprived’ from this exclusive art form. The Neuköllner Oper thereby caters to (implied) educational purposes within the socio-cultural policy environment that supports its activities, as well as to respond to the ideal to give opera again wider cultural currency. In this context, *Tango Türk* appears much more concerned with the direct social implications of its participants and audience members than *Boş Beşik*. Contrary to *Boş Beşik*’s aesthetic concerns, *Tango Türk*’s underlying model of inter-aurality showcases a social argument for the representation of community.

*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 songs – original Turkish tango music and popular songs from the 1920s and 30s — and Sinem Altan’s contemporary classical compositions gives justice to the social existence, listening tastes and experiential realities of German-Turks in a second and third generation (with a fourth one coming up) living in Berlin, like the area around the opera building in the Karl Marx Strasse in Neukölln. The hybridity of theatre styles (with some hints to classical Turkish theatre such as the presence of the music ensemble on stage) as well as in the musical experience offers here an in-between position, a ‘parodic’ mode of self-conscious representation.

*Tango Türk*’s main plot is based on the politically and socially volatile history of migration since the political coup d’état of the 1980s, which made many leftist people flee Turkey as political asylum seekers to Germany. History is represented in the first place through a family story starting with the death of the mother, Nur (Sesede Terziyan), who, as a spectre of the past, is the driving force behind the narrative. We relive her history through the eyes of her son, Cihan (Kerem Can, who also plays Cihan’s biological father on the stage). Relatively successful as an entrepreneur in Germany, he has no interest in the past. But when his mother dies, he is suddenly thrown back into a family history, which is so connected to the political events of the 1980s. Snippets of this past are told by four senior men outside the plot, immigrants who were political refugees themselves and appear as silent guests at the coffeehouse of Cihan’s stepfather in Germany. They recount their experiences of the political events in the streets of Turkey and the reasons for their departure. History is
not only the catalyst of the play but also the defining factor that links the people represented on stage as a temporary, local community (an extended family) in relation to global developments. They are not only representatives of a community that is dislocated in time and lives scattered among different nation states due to their common history, they also offer a perspective to the present multicultural situation in Europe.

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. The model exemplified here is 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)

Composer Sinem Altan stands in between musical cultures, born in Ankara and trained in piano and composition in Germany (Hochschule für Musik Hanns Eisler in Berlin), which enables her to lay bare how musical traditions of Turkey are as hybrid as Western traditions. Altan’s rendition of Turkish tango music offers a point of access to this bi-musicality, which resonates with newly becoming identities of post-migrants with a Turkish background in Germany. This bi-musicality, according to Gluck, “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 trying to fuse musical styles, this model of inter-musical experience engages with the values, norms and attitudes of the others culture’s aura by exposing them besides the ‘own’ listening culture.

In my opinion, this inter-aural strategy – as idealistic as it may appear – seems to be well suited to represent a community notion that is self-critical. The community represented in Tango Türk is much more about the 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’ (in a Dutch context: the ‘allochtone’). The bi-musical approach also urges to rethink Schafer’s acoustic community as far as it suggests a homogeneous group of inhabitants of a certain environment on acoustic terms, since Tango Türk presents us with voices that are integral to Neukölln’s social environment but they are generally unheard or hidden. I therefore wish to extend Schafer’s notion with the debate on community as instigated by philosophers such as Jean-Luc Nancy for purposes of developing the social argument of post-migrant theatre today.

By representing communities on stage through inter-aural strategies, most post-migrant theatre, such as Tango Türk, show that the term ‘community’ has

7 As a grassroots development in Turkey in the 1930s, tango became part of what historians have identified as Atatürk’s “ballroom diplomacy”, derived from his numerous diplomatic receptions with balls at the Ankara Palace Hotel. Tango music was mostly sung in these elitist social settings by operetta singers, supporting the new Turkish identity. Nowadays, Turkish tango is again popular amongst young Turks as part of an emancipation movement (new expressions of masculinity through dance) and new socialities formed through leisure.
become an obstacle. British sociologist Brian Alleyne formulates it very 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). Through a self-reflexive stance in musico-dramatic expression, however, post-migrant theatre can make explicit and render visible its workings as ‘representation’. I believe that music – precisely because of its ambiguous relation to representation – can really do this.

*Tango Türk’s* representation of community 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 desoeuvré* (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) or as a “troubling [of] the Hegelian dream of self-identical community” (Gahndi 2006: 53). Community is then ‘inoperative’ to the extent that it cannot be regarded as “a project of fusion, or in some general way a productive or operative project – nor is it a project at all” (Nancy, 1991: 15). Instead, it is ‘unworkable’ or ‘unworking’; 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 characters in *Tango Türk* exemplify this rationale as members of an extended family gathering around the mother’s death: they have ‘in common’ a history that is largely unknown until the death of the mother uncovers the past, but their commonality is only temporarily defined.

The protagonist’s identity, Cihan, as successful ‘new German’ with a Turkish migrant background and family, demonstrates how community is more a joint mode of being in the present that impinges on a sense of ‘singularity’ rather than a fusion or higher totality of traits. Cihan presents himself as very different from his family, resisting his place within the family history. But by presenting him as a singular being in relation to this family history, which coalesces with the history of Turkish migration into Europe, we can adopt our ideas and perceptions of a ‘Turkish community’ and of our presumptions regarding community, at large. Cihan’s process of learning about his family history demonstrates then how community always necessarily *happens* rather than it is produced. Singularity emerges in relation to others. But it is not the “the subject comes to know the self through the other. Rather, the subject comes to know that it is not a subject through the other—both are singularities that can only exist in relation to each other” (Parmett 2012: 177). This shared mode of being between singular and plural is what constitutes community. 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 incompletion and at the same time, excessive – rather than a confirmation of common traits or a result of external categorization.

As such, community is always represented and at the same time, absolutely unrepresentable. Through its ambiguous status in signification and representation, music can support this experience of excess and insufficiency in exceeding fixed notions of identity and community. *Tango Türk* presents us with a model of inter-aurality that makes ‘community’ into a site of contestation and resistance, which supports its protagonist’s struggles in identity as exemplary of the post-migrant’s

---

8 *Inoperative* is the term that Nancy’s translators, Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland and Simona Sawhney came up with in 1991.
social existence and of our own. 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.

Conclusion

I hope to have demonstrated how auditory/musical practices in post-migrant theatre need to be looked at for their aesthetic and social concerns in the representation of communities. There is a danger to regard the discussed performances as representatives of two opposing models, where either aesthetic or social reasons dominate. However, it is my conviction that the social and aesthetic in these performances should be always thought in relation to one another.

Both Boş Beşik and Tango Türk showed how ‘community’ is a vehicle of a particular (hegemonic) culture that experiences another (minority) 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 critical tool, offering perspectives on our multicultural society, which urge us to position ourselves.

I believe post-migrant theatre, particularly in its engagement with forms of music theatre and opera, can contribute to a radical vision and politics, which posits the awareness that people do not belong to just one culture or community or are ‘in between’ cultures and communities. Rather, they belong to “a densely constituted space where any attachment to a community is only a tactical settling of the always-open question of identity (Hall 1996)” (Alleyne 2002: 621). We should, therefore, situate these performances in a larger practice of (democratic) resistance to hegemonic 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. It is in this way that post-migrant theatre can contribute to a radical politics of community as a necessity of our times.

Reference List


Shindo, Reiko. “Rethinking Community: Translation Space as a Departure for Political Community”. In: *International Political Sociology* 6 (2012): 149-64.


**Contact and info about the author:**

verstraete@sabanciuniv.edu
p.m.g.verstraete@exeter.ac.uk

http://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/en/people/pieter-verstraete/
http://eprofile.exeter.ac.uk/pieterverstraete/
http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/drama/staff/verstraete/