

## Rauf Yekta Bey - Mevlevi Neyzen and Modern Musicologist

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### Abstract

Rauf Yekta Bey (1871-1935) was the towering figure of Turkish musicology in the earlier twentieth century. Although he was the product of a Mevlevi musical education, in fact his mature musicological methodology developed as a synthesis of this Mevlevi tradition with current European musicological thought. For the latter, his major source was the Jesuit musicologist Jean Baptiste Thibaut (1872-1938), who spent much time over many year in Istanbul. It was only thanks to his deep friendship and collaboration with Thibaut that Rauf Yekta was able to become the seminal figure in modern Turkish musicology .

**Keywords:** Yekta Bey, Thibaut, Musicology, Mevlevi, Turkish Republic.

In *From Rumi to the Whirling Dervishes* (2022:239) I wrote: “In his own, more scholarly way, Rauf Yekta Bey (1871-1935) was one of those Mevlevi *neyzens* who acted as an ideal representative of Ottoman culture...”

As a *neyzen* and as a composer, Rauf Yekta had first learned ney and traditional Mevlevi and secular Ottoman music from many teachers, including Neyzen Aziz Dede (d. 1905). He learned Ottoman musical theory from Hüseyin Fahrettin Dede (1854-1911) of Beşiktaş, among others. He was instrumental in setting up the Darülelhan Conservatory, and later the research and publication group that succeeded the now closed Turkish section of the Conservatory, where he continued working until his death in 1935. This much and a great many other details of his education, musical compositions, professional ranks, and wider familial connections are presented at some length in Turkish sources such as the *Türk Musikisi Ansiklopedisi* (TMA) or the *Islam Ansiklopedisi* (IA). But one crucial detail of Rauf Yekta’s career is omitted from these sources. It is mainly thanks to Bülent Aksoy’s 1992 re-publication of Sermüezzın Rif’at Bey’s Ferahnak Ayini that we now know how deeply indebted Rauf Yekta Bey had been to the French Jesuit musicologist/Byzan-

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tinologist P.J (Jean Baptiste) Thibaut (1872-1938). Somewhat later in Rauf Yekta's career he came to know George Henry Farmer (1882-1965) and they both attended the Cairo Musicological Congress of 1932. Thus Rauf Yekta's incorporation of both Eastern and current Western approaches to musicology was fundamental to his intellectual formation.

While publishing extensively on Byzantine music, Jean Baptiste Thibaut often worked in Istanbul. His publications on Byzantine music are extant, but documentation about his life seems to be rather scanty. Hopefully some of his correspondence with Rauf Yekta may perhaps survive. Thibaut was staying in Istanbul and also in Edirne by 1900. He also travelled for research to Jerusalem, Odessa and Petersburg. Thibaut and Yekta evidently developed a close friendship over years. Thibaut's publication of Sermüezzin Rifat Bey's Ferahnak Ayini in Paris in 1902 was the first full publication of a Mevlevi *ayin* composition. Thibaut became a chaplain with the French army, and returned to Istanbul in 1920, during the Allied Occupation. His continued friendship with Rauf Yekta transcended politics.

Thus there is no way to account for Rauf Yekta's scholarly orientation as a musicologist without acknowledging his collaboration with the Jesuit Thibaut. We must view Rauf Yekta as a product both of the sophisticated and centuries-old tradition of Mevlevi musicological thought—reaching its apex with Abdülbaki Nasir Dede (1765-1820) a century prior--plus his access to first-rate musicological methods expressed in a major European language. Unfortunately, the political and cultural conditions in Turkey during the mid-twentieth century did not allow such research to continue on an equally sophisticated level by his associates and immediate successors, such as Subhi Ezgi and Sadettin Arel.

Rauf Yekta's publications cover an immense scholarly territory, including major works on musical theory, genres and biographies of major composers. The bulk of his articles and books were published in Turkish. But, thanks to his contact with Thibaut he was able to publish also in French for the *Encyclopedie Levignac* (1922), designed for a European readership. Despite the traditional Ottoman and Mevlevi ambivalence toward musical notation (carried to an extreme by Aziz Dede), considering the problems of oral transmission, particularly after the closure of the Mevlevihanes in 1925, Rauf Yekta embraced musical notation with great vigor.

Given the unfavorable conditions for both Mevlevi and Ottoman secular music—especially after the First World War and during the Early Turkish Republic--it was only natural that Rauf Yekta focussed on the following issues:

- 1) documenting the surviving repertoires through notation,
- 2) attempting to adapt the use of Western notation so that it would better reflect the actual intonation of Ottoman music, while attempting to rationalize the whole system on a mathematical basis.
- 3) Creating semi-popular narratives and biographies so as to increase awareness of Ottoman music, primarily among the educated Turkish public, and also among Western Europeans.

Within the publications of the *Mevlevi Ayinleri*, a couple of major theoretical points emerge. I would define them briefly as 1) a recognition of the significance of variants between earlier notated and current oral versions of a single item, and 2) the possibility of uncovering aspects of historical change, particularly as reflected in the *usul* rhythmic basis of composition.

In the *Darülelhan* publication of Sultan Selim III's *Suzidilara Ayini* (vol. X), Rauf Yekta issued both his transcription of Abdülbaki Nasır Dede's notation, plus his own transcription of the current Mevlevi performance practice. While he did not conduct an analytical study, he did present the basic documents through which such an analysis could be conducted. In a sense he prefigured the kind of analytical research on Ottoman musical sources that would be conducted by some Turkish and Western scholars only in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Another important detail emerged in his *Darülelhan* publication of the ancient *Pençgah Ayini* (vol. I). As I had noted back in 2001, in a footnote to the transcription of the Third Selam of this *ayin*, Rauf Yekta observed that the form of the *usul devri-kebir* was not identical to the one currently in use (in 28 beats). It resembled more the *devr-i kebir* found in the early eighteenth century Notated Collection of Prince Cantemir, in 14 beats. Since this was a musical edition and not a musicological study per se, Rauf Yekta did not pursue this observation further. Unfortunately he did not live long afterwards, so we do not know how he might have developed this major observation. As it turned out, no scholar or musician in Turkey pursued this point in writing. It only re-emerged more than 50 years later, with Owen Wright's article on "Historical Change in the Turkish Classical Repertoire", from 1988, and then in my own publications in 1996 (2024) and thereafter.

### *Conclusion:*

We might conclude by noting that in the following generation in Turkey, most musicologists-- and most crucially Sadettin Arel--felt the need to present Turkish music as ancient, essentialist and unchanging, with a "history" of not only centuries but perhaps millenia. In some quarters in Turkey this discourse continues even today. Apparently only in this way could Turkish music withstand the challenge of the continual historical evolution of Western music, with its numerous notated documents. Rather than attempt to deal with the paucity of notated Turkish, historical documents Arel felt it more useful to construct a pseudo-history and thus to dispense with the need for documents. It was only when Gültekin Oransay returned from his studies in München that we see a somewhat more analytical approach in Turkey. But in general structural/historical methodologies in studying the total corpus of Ottoman notated and orally transmitted repertoires have been far more developed by scholars abroad or trained abroad (in the UK, the US and Germany) than in Turkey itself. Thus we must see Rauf Yekta as a synthesis of Mevlevi and European musicological thought, to both of whom historical change was viewed as natural, and indeed unavoidable. It was a great loss to Turkish musicology and to Turkish culture in general that Rauf Yekta Bey did not have the conditions within Turkey in which to fully develop his ideas.

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