

The Operatic Aesthetics of *Çelebi* by Cemal Reşit Rey

Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi, composed between 1942 and 1945 to a libretto by Ekrem Reşit Rey and revised over more than three decades, occupies an important place in twentieth-century Turkish opera. Despite its completion in its final orchestral form in 1973, the opera was not staged for many years before its rediscovery in the archives of the Ankara State Opera in 2005 and subsequent reconstruction. This study examines the operatic aesthetics of Çelebi through three interrelated dimensions: dramaturgy, formal and structural organization, and musical style and language. First, the opera is considered in relation to its Ottoman setting during the Tulip Era, examining how historical and cultural references shape its dramatic world and characterization. Second, its formal and structural organization is analyzed with attention to the articulation of acts and scenes, dramatic continuity, and its relationship to Western operatic conventions. Third, the study examines Rey's musical language, focusing on the integration of Ottoman–Turkish musical elements within a Western operatic idiom and their contribution to the work's expressive and dramatic identity. Through these perspectives, Çelebi is interpreted as a hybrid operatic work in which Western conventions and Ottoman–Turkish musical and cultural references are integrated into a coherent aesthetic.

Keywords: *Çelebi, Cemal Reşit Rey, operatic aesthetics, Turkish opera, Ottoman–Turkish musical elements*

Introduction

Among Cemal Reşit Rey's stage works, *Çelebi* occupies an important place within his compositional output. Initially composed between 1942 and 1945 to a bilingual libretto in Turkish and French by his brother Ekrem Reşit Rey,¹ the opera remained under revision for more than three decades, with its final orchestral version completed in 1973 and its piano–vocal score in 1975. Unlike Rey's earlier operas, which were conceived primarily in piano–vocal form, *Çelebi* was fully orchestrated and was the only one of his operas whose orchestration he completed himself. Set during the Tulip Era, the opera depicts aspects of Ottoman social and artistic life through the story of an artist. Following its disappearance in the late 1970s, the opera remained lost for nearly two decades until it was rediscovered in the archives of the Ankara State Opera in 2005 and subsequently underwent restoration and reconstruction for performance.²

Existing studies have addressed *Çelebi* from historical, archival, dramaturgical, and musical perspectives, with Aydın Karlıbel's research placing

¹Evin İlyasoğlu, *Müzikten İbaret Bir Dünyada Gezintiler* [Wanderings in a World Consisting of Music] (İstanbul: İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Yayınları, 2023), 154.

²Aydın Karlıbel and Cihat Aşkın, "Cemal Reşit Rey'in *Çelebi* Operasının Günişığına Çıkarılışı ve Restorasyonu: Bir Kritik İnceleme [The Rediscovery and Restoration of Cemal Reşit Rey's *Çelebi* Opera: A Critical Study]," İTÜ Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Müzik Programı, İstanbul, 71.

particular emphasis on the opera's restoration and reconstruction. Following its rediscovery in 2005, Karlıbel was directly involved in the restoration process, including the classification of the surviving materials and the completion of missing orchestral parts. These studies provide a basis for understanding the opera's composition, dramatic organization, musical language, and restoration history. Building on this research, the present study approaches *Çelebi* from the perspective of operatic aesthetics. In this study, operatic aesthetics refers to the interaction of dramaturgy, formal organization, and musical language through which the opera's expressive and dramatic character is constructed.

The central question of this study is how formal organization, dramaturgy, and musical language interact in shaping the operatic aesthetics of *Çelebi*. To address this question, the analysis considers three interrelated dimensions. First, it examines the opera's dramaturgy, focusing on its Ottoman setting during the Tulip Era, its representation of artistic and social life, and its narrative structure. Second, it considers the formal organization of the work, particularly its four-act structure and the relationship between episodic and continuous dramatic development. Third, it examines Rey's musical language, with particular attention to the integration of Ottoman–Turkish melodic, rhythmic, vocal, and instrumental materials into the opera's Western-oriented musical language.

The significance of this approach lies in examining how these materials function within the opera rather than simply identifying Western and Ottoman–Turkish elements. The study therefore considers their use within formal, dramaturgical, harmonic, orchestral, and vocal processes. The analysis suggests that traditional melodies, modal references, rhythmic structures, vocal practices, and Ottoman-associated instruments are not limited to isolated references to Turkish musical culture. The selected musical examples show how these materials are incorporated into the opera's harmonic, rhythmic, orchestral, vocal, and formal organization. In this respect, *Çelebi* cannot be easily reduced to a distinction between a “*national opera*” and a continuation of Western operatic tradition. Its hybrid character can be understood through the transformation and integration of Ottoman–Turkish musical materials within a Western-oriented operatic framework.

The article is structured around three main analytical dimensions: dramaturgy, form structure, and musical language. Before turning to these dimensions, the study first provides the musical and biographical context necessary for understanding Rey's approach to *Çelebi*, with particular attention to his musical education and the development of his compositional style. The first analytical section examines the dramaturgy of the opera, focusing on its Tulip Era setting, representation of artistic and social life, characters, and dramatic progression. The second considers its form structure, with particular attention to the four-act organization and the relationship between musical and dramatic units. The third analyzes selected aspects of Rey's musical language, including melodic, rhythmic, vocal, and orchestral writing, as well as the incorporation of Ottoman–Turkish musical materials and *mehter* elements. The Discussion section then brings these three dimensions together to examine how they contribute to the operatic aesthetics of *Çelebi*. The Conclusion summarizes

the study's main findings, contribution, limitations, and directions for further research.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Cemal Reşit Rey (1904–1985) and his opera *Çelebi* has developed along several complementary lines, although these aspects have not yet been examined together through a sustained analysis of the opera's aesthetics. Existing studies have primarily focused on Rey's compositional identity and musical language, the historical and archival trajectory of *Çelebi*, and selected aspects of the opera's musical and dramatic organization. Together, these studies provide a basis for understanding both the composer and the work. Nevertheless, these dimensions have not been consistently examined together in relation to the construction of the opera's aesthetic.

The most extensive study devoted directly to *Çelebi* is Aydın Karlıbel's doctoral dissertation, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi and the Opera's Restoration: A Critical Study* (2008). Karlıbel's work is particularly significant because it combines archival research, restoration history, biographical knowledge, and detailed musical examination. Karlıbel was also one of Rey's students and was directly involved in the rediscovery and reconstruction of the opera. His dissertation therefore draws on both archival materials and first-hand knowledge of the composer. The dissertation documents the complex history of *Çelebi* and examines the opera in considerable detail, including its characters, dramatic organization, prosody, formal structure, and musical language. It also addresses such features as chromaticism, modal references, rhythmic organization, orchestration, vocal writing, leitmotivic procedures, and the incorporation of elements associated with Ottoman-Turkish musical traditions. In this respect, Karlıbel's dissertation constitutes a fundamental point of departure for subsequent research on *Çelebi*, providing both the historical framework necessary to understand the opera's reconstruction and a comprehensive analytical account of its compositional language.³

The study by Aydın Karlıbel and Cihat Aşkın further documents the rediscovery and restoration of *Çelebi* and provides additional information on the restoration process⁴.

More recent scholarship has approached the opera through more focused analytical perspectives. The study by Şahin Ekşioğlu and Ece Merve Yüceer Nishida, for example, examines the baritone role of Hasan Çavuş in *Çelebi*, focusing on the relationship between vocal writing, character construction, and dramatic function. Their study provides a focused example of how a specific

³Aydın Karlıbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi and the Opera's Restoration: A Critical Study* (PhD diss., Istanbul Technical University, 2008).

⁴Karlıbel and Aşkın, "Çelebi Operasının Günışığına Çıkarılışı ve Restorasyonu".

character and vocal role can be examined through the interaction of musical and dramatic elements.⁵

Evin İlyasoğlu's *Müzikten İbaretle Bir Dünyada Gezintiler* (2023) provides biographical and musical information about Rey, drawing also on testimonies from musicians, students, colleagues, and others who knew him. The book is particularly relevant to this study for its discussion of Rey's emphasis on melody, his relationship with French musical culture, his orchestral conception, and his broader aesthetic principles.⁶

Şefik Kahramankaptan's *Cumhuriyet'in Müzik Öncüleri* (2024) provides further biographical information on Rey's musical education in France and his encounters with figures such as Gabriel Fauré and Marguerite Long. This material is relevant to the present study for its account of Rey's French musical formation and its significance for understanding his later compositional style.⁷

A further perspective is provided by Elif Sanem Güleç and İbrahim Şevket Güleç's study of the operas and operettas of Ekrem Reşid Rey and Cemal Reşid Rey. Unlike studies focused exclusively on *Çelebi*, this research considers Rey's stage works within a broader context of operatic and operetta production. The study is relevant to the present research because it places *Çelebi* within Rey's wider stage production and discusses theatrical form, vocal writing, dramatic characterization, and the relationship between musical expression and stage action.⁸

The historical reception of Rey also provides an important complement to later musicological scholarship. Two French-language articles published in the newspaper *Istanbul*, André Ameller's "*Djemal Réchid*" (1951)⁹ and Léon Enkserdjis's (1945)¹⁰ article concerning Rey's program devoted to modern French music, offer evidence of how the composer was perceived within a contemporary French-language cultural environment. These sources are particularly valuable because they provide perspectives that differ from later national music histories and retrospective scholarship. They allow Rey to be considered not only as a major figure in the formation of modern Turkish music but also as a musician whose artistic identity was observed and discussed within a broader French-language musical and cultural context. Such contemporary reception material is especially relevant when examining Rey's relationship with French musical culture and the international dimensions of his musical identity.

⁵Şahin Ekşioğlu and Ece Merve Yüceer Nishida, "A Study on the Baritone Role Hasan Çavuş in the Opera *Çelebi* and Performance Suggestions," *International Journal of Social Humanities Sciences Research* 12, no. 126 (2025): 2930–2942.

⁶İlyasoğlu, *Müzikten İbaretle Bir Dünyada Gezintiler*.

⁷Şefik Kahramankaptan, *Cumhuriyet'in Müzik Öncüleri: 10 Portre – İlkler / Yolu Kesişenler* [Music Pioneers of the Republic: 10 Portraits – Pioneers / Intersecting Paths] (Istanbul: Cumhuriyet Kitapları, 2024).

⁸Elif Sanem Güleç and İbrahim Şevket Güleç, "Ekrem Reşid Rey ve Cemal Reşid Rey Operaları [The Operas of Ekrem Reşid Rey and Cemal Reşid Rey]," *Bilgi*, no. 93 (2020): 53–84.

⁹André Ameller, "Djemal Réchid," *Istanbul*, 4 June 1951, Gallica, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

¹⁰Léon Enkserdjis, "Djemal Rechid consacre le quatrième concert de l'orchestre à cordes du Conservatoire à la musique moderne française," *Istanbul*, 9 February 1945, Gallica, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Existing scholarship has established a substantial basis for understanding *Çelebi*, including its composition and restoration history, dramatic and formal organization, and musical language. Aydın Karlıbel's dissertation, in particular, provides detailed documentation and analysis of the opera's dramatic structure and musical materials, while other studies have examined specific aspects of its vocal writing, Rey's compositional style, and his stage works. However, less attention has been given to examining how dramaturgy, formal organization, and musical language function together in shaping the opera's operatic aesthetic. The present study addresses this question by considering these three dimensions in relation to one another.

The analysis first examines the opera's dramaturgy, with particular attention to its Tulip Era setting and the representation of artistic and social life. It then considers the four-act structure and its progression from the predominantly lyrical character of the first act toward the comic, dramatic, and tragic developments of the subsequent acts. Finally, it examines Rey's musical language through selected examples of modal references, rhythmic structures, chromatic harmony, orchestral color, vocal writing, and traditional Turkish musical materials. The study considers how these elements function within the opera's dramatic and formal organization rather than treating them only as separate musical characteristics.

The study approaches the hybridity of *Çelebi* not simply as a juxtaposition of Western operatic techniques and Ottoman-Turkish musical elements, but as a process in which these materials acquire structural, expressive, and dramaturgical functions within the opera. From this perspective, *makam*-related sonorities, asymmetrical rhythmic structures, augmented-second intervals, *terennüm*, Ottoman percussion instruments, and other traditional references do not function merely as markers of national identity or cultural reference. They become part of the opera's internal musical and dramatic logic.

The contribution of the present study lies in interpreting the relationship between Ottoman-Turkish musical materials and Western operatic practices through the opera's dramaturgical, formal, and musical organization. By connecting dramaturgy, formal organization, and musical language, the study argues that the opera can be understood neither simply as a conventional Western opera produced in Turkey nor as a straightforward national opera constructed from Turkish musical quotations. Instead, the opera combines Western operatic structures with Ottoman-Turkish musical materials, which are transformed within its formal, harmonic, rhythmic, orchestral, and vocal organization. In this sense, the study therefore moves from the analysis of individual musical features toward examining how these features function together within the opera's formal, dramaturgical, and musical organization.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and analytical methodology to examine *Çelebi* as an integrated textual and musical work. Performance analysis,

evaluation of vocal interpretations, and assessment of contemporary staging practices fall outside the scope of this study. Instead, the analysis focuses on the work's textual, structural, and musical dimensions rather than on individual performance or staging conditions. Within this scope, the analytical framework is structured around three interconnected dimensions: dramaturgical reading, macro-structural analysis, and stylistic-musical investigation.

The source base of this study reflects the current archival condition of the opera. As the complete printed full score and orchestral parts are not yet publicly available, the musical and stylistic analysis relies primarily on manuscript transcriptions and musical excerpts documented in Aydın Karlıbel's doctoral dissertation. These materials provide the basis for examining the opera's harmonic language, melodic and modal organization, rhythmic structures, orchestration, and vocal writing. For the textual and contextual dimension, the official program booklet of the Ankara State Opera and Ballet production serves as a principal source, providing information on the opera, its characters, performers, orchestra, production team, and historical context.

As a supplementary contextual source, the researcher attended a performance of *Çelebi* by the Ankara State Opera and Ballet on January 19, 2026, and documented selected aspects of its scenography photographically. Although the production was presented in an abridged two-act version, the observation provided contextual insight into the opera's visual and dramatic framework, particularly its representation of the Tulip Era through stage design, scenery, and costumes. These observations and photographs are used solely as contextual material for discussing the production's representation of the opera's historical and spatial settings, rather than for evaluating performance practices.

The analysis proceeds in three phases. The first phase consists of a dramaturgical reading focusing on the narrative architecture, character development, and dramatic relationships within the libretto. The live performance observation is used only as supplementary contextual evidence for the dramaturgical discussion. The second phase involves a structural and formal analysis aimed at mapping the macro-structure of the opera, with attention to its four-act organization, episodic and continuous development, and the relationship between musical and dramatic units. The final phase focuses on the opera's musical language and stylistic features, examining how melodic, modal, harmonic, rhythmic, orchestral, and vocal elements contribute to the opera's aesthetic and dramatic organization. Secondary literature, particularly Evin İlyasoğlu's biographical and analytical study, *Müzikten İbaretle Bir Dünyada Gezintiler*, is used to contextualize Rey's musical idiom. The musical material documented by Karlıbel is considered alongside these contextual and stylistic sources in order to relate the opera's dramaturgy, formal organization, and musical language to one another. Musical examples are selected where they directly illustrate the relationship between Ottoman–Turkish musical materials and the opera's formal, harmonic, rhythmic, orchestral, or vocal organization.

Biographical and Artistic Background of Cemal Reşit Rey

Cemal Reşit Rey (1904–1985) was a Turkish composer, conductor, and pianist who played an active role in the development of Western-oriented musical institutions in the early decades of the Turkish Republic. He received his musical education at the Paris and Geneva Conservatories and later founded the Istanbul City Orchestra and co-founded the Istanbul Philharmonic Society.¹¹ Rey was a member of the group of composers known as the “*Turkish Five*,”¹² and his works include symphonies, operas, and operettas that combine Western compositional techniques with elements drawn from Turkish musical traditions.

Rey’s early life brought him into contact with both Ottoman and European cultural environments. Born in 1904 in Jerusalem during the final years of the Ottoman Empire, he spent part of his early life in Europe. In 1913, he settled in Paris with his family, where his musical talent attracted early attention. According to Kahramankaptan, Rey’s musical abilities attracted the attention of French President Raymond Poincaré, who helped arrange an encounter with Gabriel Fauré, then director of the Paris Conservatoire. Following this encounter, Fauré directed Rey to the pianist and pedagogue Marguerite Long. This initial contact with the Parisian musical environment marked the beginning of his formal musical training.¹³

With the outbreak of the First World War and the growing concern that Paris might be threatened, Rey and his family decided to leave the city and settle in Geneva. This relocation marked a new phase in his education, which he continued at the Geneva Conservatory.¹⁴

Cemal Reşit Rey received a comprehensive musical education at the Geneva Conservatory, where he studied piano with Milloud and took courses in harmony, counterpoint, organ, fugue, and composition with Montillet. He also attended advanced solfège, choral, and improvisation classes taught by Mademoiselle Lydie Malan. During his studies, Rey was awarded medals of distinction in several subjects, reflecting his high level of achievement at an early age.¹⁵

Toward the end of 1919, Rey returned to Istanbul due to his father’s official duties. However, as no suitable instructor could be found to continue his musical training, he soon returned to Paris in order to pursue his studies. İlyasoğlu further points out that in 1920, following Marguerite Long’s appointment as professor at the Paris Conservatory, Rey joined her class and continued his education there. During the 1920–1921 academic years, he also received private instruction in musical aesthetics from the conservatory’s director, Gabriel Fauré. In the same

¹¹ Ankara State Opera and Ballet, *Çelebi* [Opera Program Booklet] (Ankara: Ankara Devlet Opera ve Balesi Yayınları, 2025), 15.

¹² Rey was a member of the group of composers known as the “*Turkish Five*,” a group of early Republican composers—Cemal Reşit Rey, Ulvi Cemal Erkin, Ahmed Adnan Saygun, Hasan Ferit Alnar, and Necil Kazım Akses—who played a central role in the formation of modern Turkish art music through the synthesis of Western compositional techniques and elements of Turkish musical tradition.

¹³ Kahramankaptan, *Cumhuriyet’in Müzik Öncüleri*, 117.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁵ İlyasoğlu, *Müzikten İbaret Bir Dünyada Gezintiler*, 69.

1 period, Rey studied composition, instrumentation, and orchestration with Raoul
2 Laparra (1876–1943).¹⁶

3 In 1923, following the proclamation of the Turkish Republic, Rey was
4 invited to return to Istanbul to take part in the reorganization of *Darülelhan*, as
5 part of broader efforts to align musical institutions with Western models.
6 According to Evin İlyasoğlu, this invitation included a position teaching piano
7 and composition, effectively placing Rey within the emerging institutional
8 framework of the new Republic's cultural reforms. However, this appointment
9 was not without controversy. At the time, Rey was only nineteen years old and
10 had not yet acquired formal pedagogical experience. His former teachers in
11 Paris, including Marguerite Long and Raoul Laparra, reportedly expressed
12 strong reservations, questioning both the timing of his appointment and his
13 readiness to assume such responsibilities. Despite these objections, Rey accepted
14 the invitation and returned to Turkey, a decision that underscores his early
15 commitment to contributing to the modernization and institutionalization of
16 Western-oriented music education in the Republican era.¹⁷

17 According to Ahmet Say, upon his return to Turkey in 1923, Cemal Reşit
18 Rey dedicated his career at the *Darülelhan* and subsequent institutions to the
19 development and dissemination of polyphonic music in Istanbul until his death.
20 His institutional and artistic contributions include the founding of the String
21 Orchestra at the Istanbul Municipal Conservatory—which later evolved into the
22 Istanbul City Orchestra—his tenure as Chief of Western Music Broadcasts at
23 Ankara Radio (1938–1940), and his regular performance series such as *Piyano*
24 *Dünyasında Gezintiler* (Wanderings in the World of Piano) on Istanbul Radio.
25 Furthermore, between 1949 and 1960, Rey actively conducted orchestras in
26 major art centers across the globe.¹⁸

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 70-71.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁸Ahmet Say, *Müzik Tarihi* [History of Music], 7th ed. (Ankara: Müzik Ansiklopedisi Yayınları, 2010), 519.

1 **Figure 1.:** Cemal Reşit Rey (Photo: Ara Güler / Ara Güler Museum Archive).



2
3 Source: İlyasoğlu (2023, p.272)

4
5 According to Say, an important early stage in Rey's compositional
6 development was represented by *12 Anadolu Türküsü* (1926), in which Turkish
7 folk materials were incorporated into a polyphonic framework. During the
8 1930s, he sought to bring polyphonic music closer to the public through his
9 operettas, while also composing orchestral works like *Enstantaneler*
10 (*Instantaneous Impressions*, 1931), which reflects Impressionist influences.
11 From 1950 onwards, Rey transitioned toward Neoclassicism, producing more
12 introverted, mystical works influenced by Sufi philosophy, as exemplified by his
13 symphonic poems *Çağrılış* and *Fatih*, as well as his well-known *Kâtibim*
14 *Variations* for piano and orchestra (1961).¹⁹

15 As Cevat Memduh Altar²⁰ emphasizes, Rey played a pivotal role in
16 organizing concerts through the Istanbul Philharmonic Society, inviting
17 internationally renowned virtuosos to Istanbul and establishing meticulous
18 international cultural exchanges. From 1946 onwards, his international
19 conducting career gained significant momentum as prestigious European
20 ensembles—including the Vienna Philharmonic, the Orchestre National de
21 France, the Santa Cecilia Orchestra in Rome, the Scarlatti Orchestra in Naples,
22 as well as symphonic orchestras in Belgrade, Bucharest, Athens, Sofia, Warsaw,

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 519.

²⁰Cevat Memduh Altar (1902–1995) was a prominent Turkish musicologist, art historian, music critic, and administrative figure who played a key role in the institutionalization of polyphonic music and opera in Turkey.

Madrid, and Israel—invited him to direct programs of his own choosing. These activities also provided opportunities for Rey to present his own works and Turkish polyphonic music to audiences outside Turkey.²¹

Rey's position within Turkish musical life was also recognized by prominent musicians of his time. According to Evin İlyasoğlu, the French pianist Alfred Cortot compared Rey's position in Turkey to that of Isaac Albéniz in Spain and Alexander Borodin in Russia.²² Cortot made this comparison during his visit to Turkey in 1951, when he also commented on Rey's role in the transformation of musical life in the country.

Among Rey's nearly one hundred works, his operatic output forms an important part of his stage music. His early stage works include *Faire sans dire*, *Jean Marek*, *Sultan Cem*, *L'enchantement*, *Zeybek*, and *Köyde Bir Facia*. Among these works, *Çelebi* represents a later stage in Rey's operatic output, with its unusually long compositional and archival history.²³

In 1981, Rey was awarded the title of State Artist and taught composition at the Mimar Sinan University State Conservatory in Istanbul until his death on October 7, 1985, at the age of eighty-one.²⁴

Compositional Style and Musical Language of Cemal Reşit Rey

Cemal Reşit Rey's musical language combines Western compositional techniques with elements drawn from Turkish musical traditions. As Léon Enkserdjis noted in a 1945 music column in *Istanbul*, Rey's compositions reflect a unique synthesis that bridges East and West, while clearly embodying the influence of the French masters.²⁵

A central feature of Rey's style is its strong emphasis on melody. His musical writing frequently gives melodic ideas a prominent role within the broader harmonic and formal organization. This emphasis on melody can be related to the French *mélodiste* tradition and to Rey's pedagogical background. As noted by Karlibel, Rey developed his musical language under the formative influence of his teachers, Gabriel Fauré and Raoul Laparra, who placed particular emphasis on melody as the primary element of musical creation. This pedagogical lineage is also reflected in a contemporary French press account by André Ameller, who notes that Rey came to Paris to study composition with Raoul Laparra, a pupil of Massenet and Gabriel Fauré, and that he inherited the best of this distinguished musical tradition.²⁶ Karlibel also traces Rey's pianistic

²¹Cevat Memduh Altar, "Cemal Reşit Rey'in Ardından" [In the Wake of Cemal Reşit Rey] (October 15, 1985), Cevat Memduh Altar Digital Archive, Istanbul Technical University, accessed 31 July 2026. <https://cevadmemduhaltar.itu.edu.tr/cemal-resit-reyin-ardindan.html>.

²²İlyasoğlu, *Müzikten İbaret Bir Dünyada Gezintiler*, 128.

²³Altar, "Cemal Reşit Rey'in Ardından."

²⁴See Ankara State Opera and Ballet, *Çelebi* [Opera Program Booklet] (Ankara: Ankara Devlet Opera ve Balesi Yayınları, 2025), 15.

²⁵Léon Enkserdjis, "Djémal Reçhid consacre le quatrième concert de l'orchestre à cordes du Conservatoire à la musique moderne française," *Istanbul*, 9 February 1945, Gallica, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

²⁶André Ameller, "Djémal Réchid," *Istanbul*, 4 June 1951, Gallica, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

1 background to the Chopin tradition through figures such as George Mathias and
2 Édouard Mathé, as well as through Rey's professional encounters with Alfred
3 Cortot in Paris and Istanbul.²⁷

4 This historical foundation is complemented by İlyasoğlu's observation that
5 a constant principle defined Rey's approach throughout his career: the absolute
6 primacy of melody. According to her, Rey maintained that a composer could
7 pursue any kind of technical exploration or enrichment, provided that the
8 melodic line remained intact.²⁸

9 Further insight into this melody-centered approach can be found in the
10 testimony of his student, the pianist Vedat Kosal, who states: "He would first
11 find the melody and then write it down. He usually heard it through the sound of
12 the instrument. He would say, 'I heard a melody for the French horn or the
13 clarinet.' Then he would strive to produce that sound from the piano."²⁹

14 Rey's musical writing also places considerable emphasis on timbre and
15 orchestral color. His orchestral conception is evident even in his piano works,
16 particularly in their dense textures and coloristic writing.

17 This aspect of Rey's piano writing is also noted by the composer and
18 academic Ertuğrul Sevsay, who describes Rey's piano music as possessing an
19 orchestral richness that extends beyond the piano itself: "In Cemal Bey's piano
20 music, there are riches that go beyond the piano itself. You can hear a whole
21 orchestra. For this reason, it is not very difficult to render them symphonic.
22 Sometimes, looking at it, I even say to myself, 'If only this piano music were not
23 so dense, so complex.'"³⁰

24 Furthermore, Sevsay defines Rey's orchestral music as a synthesis of
25 Richard Strauss and French Impressionism:

26
27 "I can define his orchestral music as a mixture of Richard Strauss and the French
28 Impressionists. In Debussy, orchestral colors govern the melody. In Richard
29 Strauss, it is quite the opposite. Cemal Reşit Rey took orchestral colors, the free
30 form in structure, and chromatic colors from the French; and from post-romantics
31 like Richard Strauss, he took the concept of the symphonic poem and the use of
32 large-scale symphonies."³¹

33
34 These observations point to the coexistence of French Impressionist and
35 post-Romantic influences in Rey's orchestral language.

36 As Kahramankaptan highlights, France was one of the major influences on
37 Rey's musical formation. Rey spent his formative years studying at the Paris
38 Conservatoire, where he worked with prominent French musicians and
39 developed a strong connection with French musical culture. Kahramankaptan
40 also discusses Rey's affinity with French Impressionism, particularly the music
41 of Claude Debussy. An example of this Impressionist influence can be found in

²⁷Aydın Karlıbel, "The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi and the Opera's Restoration: A Critical Study" (PhD diss., Istanbul Technical University, 2008), 49–50.

²⁸İlyasoğlu, *Müzikten İbarettir Bir Dünyada Gezintiler*, 111.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 262. English translation by the author.

³⁰*Ibid.*, English translation by the author.

³¹*Ibid.*, 264. English translation by the author.

his orchestral work *Instantanés (Enstantaneler)*, which illustrates the presence of Impressionist elements in Rey's earlier orchestral writing.³² Music critic Faruk Yener similarly emphasizes the importance of French culture and Impressionism in Rey's musical formation, noting that his early years in France coincided with the period of Impressionism and that this influence remained significant in his later musical development.³³

At the same time, Yener observes that, despite a musical output that appears cosmopolitan at first glance, Rey approached Turkish folklore and monophonic traditional Turkish art music with profound technical knowledge and discernment, incorporating these musical foundations into his polyphonic language.³⁴

His harmonic language frequently incorporates chromaticism, extended chords, and fluid modulations, creating a rich and dynamic tonal environment, while his rhythmic organization reflects asymmetrical patterns and subtle metric shifts.³⁵ As Karlıbel relates this emphasis on chromaticism is deeply rooted in Rey's second creative period—characterized as his “mystique and modal” style—and is clearly manifested in works such as *Çelebi* and his piano concertos, notably the *Concerto Chromatique* (1931) and *Second Piano Concerto* (1945).³⁶

Expanding on this harmonic language, Karlıbel points out that the augmented second occupies a particularly significant position in Rey's melodic contours. He compares Rey's recurrent use of this interval with Debussy's unconventional treatment of parallel fifths, suggesting that Rey similarly transforms an interval associated with non-traditional harmonic practice into a characteristic feature of his musical language. Karlıbel further notes that Rey's technical language seamlessly combines French modal flexibility with German structural mechanisms, such as the use of leitmotifs, while also incorporating theatrical wit and humor refined through his mastery of the operetta genre.³⁷

According to İlyasoğlu, the development of this musical language can be broadly understood through four principal periods. In his early works (1912–1926), Rey operates largely within a Western musical framework, strongly influenced by French impressionism, while already exhibiting initial traces of Turkish musical elements. The subsequent period (1926–1931) marks a decisive shift towards a more explicit engagement with Turkish music, as folk melodies and rhythmic patterns become central components of his compositional practice, transformed within a polyphonic context. His third period (1931–1950) represents the height of his creative output, characterized by a refined synthesis of modal structures and impressionist aesthetics, as well as an increasing interest in programmatic expression and stage works. Finally, in his mature period (1950–1983), Rey achieves a highly personal and integrated musical language,

³²Kahramankaptan, *Cumhuriyet'in Müzik Öncüleri*, 136.

³³Faruk Yener, cited in Evin İlyasoğlu, *Müzikten İbaret Bir Dünyada Gezintiler* (İstanbul: İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Yayınları, 2023), 111.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 111.

³⁵Karlıbel and Aşkın, “Çelebi Operasının Günışığına Çıkarılışı ve Restorasyonu,” 70.

³⁶Karlıbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi*, 1.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 49,50.

in which diverse influences—including modal, impressionist, and post-romantic elements—are unified within a flexible and coherent stylistic framework.³⁸

Table 1. *Periodization of Cemal Reşit Rey's Compositional Development*

Period	Years	Core Aesthetic Influences
<i>Early</i>	1912–1926	Western framework, French impressionism
<i>Transition</i>	1926–1931	Explicit engagement with Turkish folk music
<i>Peak</i>	1931–1950	Refined modal-impressionist synthesis, stage works
<i>Mature</i>	1950–1983	Integrated personal language, post-romantic elements

Source: Adapted from İlyasoğlu (2023).

Çelebi spans Rey's third and mature periods: its initial version was composed between 1942 and 1945, while the final orchestral version was completed in 1973. Karlıbel argues that the harmonic language of *Çelebi* draws on Rey's theoretical and aesthetic syntheses, combining *makam*-evoking scalar structures with chords generated from these structures. He relates this approach to a broader compositional principle found in the works of the "*Turkish Five*," in which Turkish traditional idioms are incorporated into polyphonic musical textures. Karlıbel also points to Rey's Piano Sonata, whose sonorities are associated with the *kanun* (zither), as another example of this approach.³⁹

A related perspective is offered by the composer and theorist Ertuğrul Oğuz Fırat, who observes that in Rey's works leading up to the 1950s, national elements cease to function as mere surface "quotations" and instead become integral to the stylistic and harmonic texture. Fırat goes further, describing this development as a distinct "*Turkish branch of Impressionism*".⁴⁰

In *Çelebi*, *makam*-evoking materials recur throughout the opera and are incorporated into its melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and orchestral language. The opera therefore provides a particularly relevant case for examining the interaction between dramaturgy, formal organization, and musical language in Rey's operatic style.

³⁸İlyasoğlu, *Müzikten İbaret Bir Dünyada Gezintiler*, 142,143.

³⁹Karlıbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi*, 49,50.

⁴⁰Tülay Uyar, "Cemal Reşit Rey'in Müzikal Tarihindeki Yeri ve Önemi" [The Place and Importance of Cemal Reşit Rey in Musical History], *EKEV Akademi Dergisi* 20, no. 68 (2016): 358.

Results: Analytical Framework of *Çelebi*

Rather than approaching *Çelebi* primarily as a historical document or limiting the inquiry to descriptive musical analysis, this study examines how its dramaturgy, formal organization, and musical language interact in the construction of its operatic aesthetic. The analytical framework is structured around three interrelated dimensions.

First, the analysis examines the work's dramaturgy and subject matter. In this context, the opera is considered in relation to its Ottoman setting during the Tulip Era, its representation of the protagonist's artistic identity and inner world, and its narrative structure. Particular attention is given to how historical and cultural references shape characterization and dramatic progression, and to how these features interact with European operatic conventions.

Second, the investigation considers the formal and structural organization of the opera. Here, the focus lies on the articulation of scenes, the relationship between episodic and continuous dramatic development, and the possible relationship of the opera's formal organization to Western operatic models, particularly French operatic forms and post-Wagnerian dramaturgical principles. This dimension examines whether and how Western structural conventions are adapted to the narrative requirements of *Çelebi*.

Finally, the study addresses the opera's musical language and stylistic features. This phase focuses on the interaction between Ottoman and Turkish musical elements—including modal structures (*makam*) and rhythmic patterns (*usul*)—and the opera's broader Western compositional language, with particular attention to orchestral timbre and vocal writing. The analysis therefore considers the extent to which these elements function as integrated components of the opera's melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, and dramaturgical organization.

Taken together, these dimensions allow the study to examine how *Çelebi* combines Ottoman-Turkish musical references and Western compositional practices without reducing the work to a single stylistic category. The study therefore considers the extent to which *Çelebi* can be understood as a hybrid operatic work in which these different musical and cultural elements are brought into dialogue.

Dramaturgical Analysis

The dramaturgy of *Çelebi* is rooted in the Tulip Era of the Ottoman Empire—a period associated with cultural activity, artistic patronage, and changes in elite social life. Following a period of military conflict, the era was marked by relative political stabilization, increased courtly patronage of the arts, and intensified diplomatic contacts with Europe. A significant manifestation of this diplomatic shift was Yirmisekiz Mehmed Çelebi's embassy to Paris. Although the mission did not result in a formal alliance, it contributed Ottoman awareness of European developments in fields such as architecture and other areas of knowledge. The architectural plans brought back from Paris subsequently influenced developments in Istanbul, while European Baroque

forms became increasingly visible in Ottoman architecture, contributing to the emergence of the Ottoman Rococo. European influences also extended to gardens, clothing, and aspects of courtly lifestyle.⁴¹ This historical context is therefore relevant to the opera's representation of cultural and artistic life during the Tulip Era. Within the opera, the Tulip Era provides the historical setting for the characters, social relationships, and conflicts represented in the libretto.

In *Çelebi*, the Tulip Era is not only the historical setting of the narrative; it also provides the social and spatial contexts in which the characters interact. These contexts are reflected in the opera's representation of artistic identity, social hierarchy, and everyday social life. Crucially, this historical setting encompasses not only the luxurious lifestyle of the imperial court elite but also the broader Ottoman society (*reaya*), capturing a period marked by significant developments in residential architecture, streetscape organization, and public spaces such as fountains and gardens⁴². The opera operates simultaneously as an intimate portrayal of an artist's inner life—specifically framing the narrative around Ahmet Çelebi, a muezzin at the Selimiye Mosque, whose romantic devotion to Fatma unfolds alongside a tragic conflict involving her husband Hasan Çavuş, a baritone role—and as a sweeping panorama of Ottoman social structures⁴³. Central to its dramatic construction are universal moral and human themes—such as love, loyalty, devotion, and family dynamics—which ground the narrative in a compelling emotional framework.⁴⁴

Furthermore, the opera moves between contrasting dramatic atmospheres, social settings, and groups of characters, ranging from mosque muezzins to members of the courtly elite. These differences in social and spatial setting are also visible in the set and costume designs of the 2025 Ankara State Opera production—directed by Gürçil Çelikaş with set design by Özgür Usta—where domestic spaces, public settings, and period-specific costuming contribute to the visual representation of the historical setting (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).

A close examination of the production's scenography reveals a clear contrast between exterior and interior spaces. The exterior scene (Figure 2) presents an Ottoman neighborhood setting through wooden residential architecture, a stone fountain, and the silhouette of mosque minarets under predominantly blue and dark lighting. By contrast, the interior scene (Figure 3) presents an enclosed domestic setting framed by elaborate latticework (*kafes*), heavy drapes, and warm interior lighting.

⁴¹Ahmet Refik Altınay, *Geçmiş Asırlarda Osmanlı Hayatı: Lâle Devri 1718–1731* [Ottoman Life in Past Centuries: The Tulip Era 1718–1731], ed. Salih Kış, prep. Hidayet Duyar (Konya: Palet Yayınları, 2020), 16.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 17.

⁴³Ekşioğlu and Yüceer Nishida, “Çelebi Operasında Hasan Çavuş Bariton Rolü Üzerine Bir İnceleme,” 2935.

⁴⁴Karlıbel and Aşkın, “Çelebi Operasının Günişığına Çıkarılışı ve Restorasyonu,” 76.

Figure 2. Exterior scene from the Ankara State Opera and Ballet's 2025 production of *Çelebi*. Director: Gürçil Çelikaş; Set Design: Özgür Usta. Photograph by the author, taken during a performance on 19 January 2026



Figure 3. Interior scene from the 2025 Ankara State Opera and Ballet production of *Çelebi*. Director: Gürçil Çelikaş; Set Design: Özgür Usta. Photograph by the author, taken during a performance on 19 January 2026



The opera's dramatic organization is further reinforced by its four-act structure, in which each act embodies a distinct expressive character: the first act is predominantly lyrical, the second comic, the third dramatic, and the fourth

tragic⁴⁵. This structural differentiation contributes to a dynamic progression of emotional intensity throughout the work, thereby shaping the audience's perception of contrast, continuity, and dramatic escalation. In accordance with operatic conventions, the forward movement of the narrative is achieved through the gradual introduction of characters, particularly towards the ends of acts, enhancing dramatic accumulation and tension.⁴⁶

Rey's choice of the Tulip Era can also be considered in relation to his position within the cultural transition from the late Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic. Born in 1904, Rey belonged to a generation whose formative years spanned the final period of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Turkish Republic. İlyasoğlu emphasizes the presence of both French cultural influences and the Ottoman cultural heritage Rey inherited from his father, describing this combination as contributing to the formation of his multifaceted artistic identity⁴⁷. His engagement with Ottoman historical and musical material can therefore be situated within this broader cultural background. Rather than assuming direct familiarity with the eighteenth-century Tulip Era, the present analysis focuses on the ways in which Rey represents this period through the opera's historical, dramatic, and musical materials.

Form and structure

At the macro-formal level, the opera is organized into four acts, each defined by a distinct expressive character and dramatic function. According to Karlibel, the acts display a rich variety of atmospheres: Act I is predominantly lyrical, centered on the exposition of the romantic devotion between Fatma and Çelebi; Act II is comic in character, beginning with a festive opening chorus and featuring light-hearted interactions between Çelebi and three ladies; Act III combines lyrical (the Rebeka–Vizier duet), comic (the character of Tahsin), and dramatic elements (the attack scene); and Act IV reaches a tragic and mystical climax, characterized by nostalgic reflection, Çelebi's death, and the celestial chant of the Chorus of Angels.⁴⁸

This structural variety is also reflected in the organization of the individual acts, particularly in their opening choral sections and the progressive addition of characters and musical forces. In accordance with classical operatic traditions, Acts I and II open with choral sections that establish the setting and introduce the initial dramatic situation. Furthermore, structural culmination within each act is achieved through the progressive addition of characters and musical forces toward the end of each scene. Consequently, each act grows systematically in ensemble density: Act I expands from an initial aria into the central Fatma–Çelebi duet; Act II culminates in a vibrant quartet; and Act III escalates into a tumultuous, boisterous climax driven by the male chorus during the attack scene.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷İlyasoğlu, *Müzikten İbaretle Bir Dünyada Gezintiler*, 74.

⁴⁸Karlibel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi*, 43.

This progression creates increasing formal and dramatic density within the acts, linking their individual sections to larger climactic points.⁴⁹

Taken together, the four acts trace a broad dramatic progression from lyrical exposition and social interaction in Acts I and II toward conflict in Act III and tragic resolution in Act IV.

Musical Language

In terms of harmonic vocabulary, *Çelebi* displays a strongly chromatic harmonic language within an expanded tonal framework that incorporates polymodal elements. The score features dense chordal structures, extended seventh and ninth chords and their inversions, and chord clusters associated with early twentieth-century European modernist harmonic practices.⁵⁰

Figure 4. Excerpt from *Çelebi* (Act III), illustrating Rey's use of chromatic ascent and dense chromatic harmonic writing.



Source: Karlıbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi*, 69.

The excerpt illustrates how chromatic motion is incorporated directly into the harmonic texture, rather than functioning merely as a passing embellishment.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰Karlıbel and Aşkın, "Çelebi Operasının Günişığına Çıkarılışı ve Restorasyonu," 74.

1 **Figure 5.** *Distribution of chromatic writing across the first and second violins*
 2 *and viola in Çelebi.*



3
 4 Source: Karlıbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi*, score appendix, 27.

5
 6 The chromatic writing is not confined to a single melodic line. In the
 7 excerpt, chromatic motion is distributed across the first and second violins and
 8 viola, producing a layered string texture in which closely spaced pitch
 9 movements occur simultaneously. The resulting density suggests that
 10 chromaticism functions not merely as melodic ornamentation but as a structural
 11 component of the musical texture.

12 Traditional modal (*makam*) structures are incorporated not simply as direct
 13 folkloric quotations, but as stylized materials embedded within a Western
 14 polyphonic idiom⁵¹. As Karlıbel observes, open fifths (bare fifths lacking the
 15 third) and “power chords” are recurrent features of Rey’s musical language and
 16 serve to connect polyphonic and tonal textures with traditional monodic
 17 sonorities. In *Çelebi*, these sonorities are employed in the opening chorus of Act
 18 I and at the ends of several scenes, where they contribute to the work’s distinctive
 19 harmonic texture.⁵²

20 The tonal organization of Act I also contributes to the opera’s larger
 21 harmonic coherence. Karlıbel and Aşkın note that the act begins in A Aeolian

⁵¹Karlıbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi*, 26.

⁵²Karlıbel and Aşkın, “Çelebi Operasının Günişğine Çıkarılışı ve Restorasyonu,” 75.

and concludes in A major, creating a tonal framework that contributes to its sense of unity. The act opens with the “*Love Motif*,” which subsequently reappears in different forms throughout the opera and leads into the *Soldiers’ Chorus*.⁵³ Karlıbel further identifies in this opening motif the use of a *hicaz* tetrachord (E–D#–C–B), whose resolution on A leads him to classify the passage as *nikriz* rather than *hicaz*.⁵⁴ This modal inflection is significant within the tonal organization of the act, as the motif introduces a *makam*-derived modal coloration at the outset of a broader tonal trajectory from A Aeolian toward A major (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. The opening “*Love Motif*” of *Çelebi*.



Source: Karlıbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey’s Çelebi*, score appendix, 2.

Rey’s musical language can also be considered in relation to his training in Paris, particularly his studies with Gabriel Fauré, which provide an important context for examining its relationship to French compositional aesthetics. A significant comparative link emerges between *Çelebi* and Fauré’s opera *Pénélope*⁵⁵ (1913). In *Pénélope*, Fauré strategically employs modal structures (such as Mixolydian and Aeolian modes) as integral, non-tonal materials to convey temporal conflict, historical allusion, and expressive depth.⁵⁶

In *Çelebi*, traditional Ottoman *makam* materials are integrated into the harmonic and expressive organization of the opera rather than functioning solely as isolated quotations. A further point of comparison with Fauré concerns the treatment of dramatic expression. In *Pénélope*, Fauré favors a restrained

⁵³*Ibid.*, 72.

⁵⁴Karlıbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey’s Çelebi*, 52.

⁵⁵*Pénélope* is an opera in three acts by the French composer Gabriel Fauré. The libretto, by René Fauchois, is based on Homer’s *Odyssey*. It was first performed at the Salle Garnier, Monte Carlo, on 4 March 1913. The piece is dedicated to Camille Saint-Saëns. For further production details and synopsis, see Opera-Online, “*Pénélope*,” accessed August 10, 2026, <https://www.opera-online.com/fr/items/works/penelope-fauchois-faure-1913>.

⁵⁶James William Sobaskie, “Allusion Analysis in Fauré’s *Fantaisie pour piano et orchestre*” (paper presented at the 9th European Music Analysis Conference — EUROMAC 9, Université de Strasbourg, France, June 28–July 1, 2017), 1.

dramatic language characterized by lyrical intensity, psychological interiority, and expressive subtlety rather than the monumental theatricality associated with Wagnerian opera. This restrained dramatic approach also provides a useful point of comparison for Rey's characterization of *Çelebi*, whose historical and semantic associations emphasize refinement and cultivated manners.⁵⁷

Karlıbel also draws attention to the expressive role of *word-painting* and tonal color in the opera. He compares Rey's use of stark open textures at the beginning of Act IV, accompanying Fatma's aria and evoking the surrounding winter landscape, with Puccini's use of open fifths to suggest the harsh cold of winter in *La Bohème*.⁵⁸ In the Act IV aria "*Sön ey güneş!*" ("Extinguish, O sun!"), the movement from F-sharp major (six sharps) to A major (three sharps) is likewise interpreted by Karlıbel in relation to the protagonist's impending tragedy. He further associates this contrast between brighter and darker tonal regions with the influence of Rey's mentor, Gabriel Fauré, drawing a parallel with Fauré's *Avant que tu t'en ailles*. Karlıbel also identifies a broader tonal balance across the circle of fifths, with contrasting flat and sharp key regions observable in the Act II Trio and Fatma's Act IV aria.⁵⁹

Karlıbel and Aşkın identify five distinct types of metric modulation in *Çelebi*, which may be summarized as follows:

1. Retention of the beat unit with constant duration and note value,
2. Retention of the beat duration while altering its written notation value,
3. Shift in the beat unit caused by meter changes while preserving the internal pulse,
4. Mixed and additive meters, and
5. Asymmetrical (*aksak*) meters expressed through juxtaposed values (e.g., 3/4 transitioning to 3/8).⁶⁰

These procedures contribute to the rhythmic flexibility of the opera.

⁵⁷Karlıbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi*, 10.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

⁶⁰Karlıbel and Aşkın, "Çelebi Operasının Günişığına Çıkarılışı ve Restorasyonu," 75.

Figure 7. Excerpt from the score of *Çelebi* showing contrasting rhythmic values in simultaneous musical layers.



Source: Karlıbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi*, score appendix, 158.

As illustrated in the passage above, the simultaneous use of contrasting rhythmic values and the different treatment of metric units across the musical layers can be seen to reflect the metric procedures identified by Karlıbel and Aşkın.

Figure 8. Excerpt from the score of *Çelebi* showing different meters operating simultaneously across the musical layers



Source: Karlıbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi*, score appendix, 139.

As illustrated above, different meters operate simultaneously across the musical layers. In the first two measures, the wind parts and the vocal line are in

4/4, while the strings are in 12/8. In the third and fourth measures, the meter changes to 3/4 in the wind and vocal parts, while the strings move to 9/8. The coexistence of 4/4 with 12/8, followed by 3/4 with 9/8, shows how Rey allows different metric organizations to operate simultaneously within the ensemble texture.

Figure 9a. Çelebi, “Giriş Korosu – Yeniçerilerin Türküsü,” orchestral excerpts showing the simultaneous use of zurna, nakkare, kös, and çevgân alongside Western orchestral instruments

ÇELEBİ İnci Perde
Giriş Korosu-Yeniçerilerin Türküsü

CEMAL REŞİT REY
Orkestrasyon : AYDIN KARLIBEL

The musical score is for the piece "Giriş Korosu – Yeniçerilerin Türküsü" by Çelebi, with an orchestration by Cemal Reşit Rey. The score is divided into two sections: "Moderato" (♩ = 80) and "Allegro moderato" (♩ = 208). The instruments listed on the left include Pico., Fl. 1,2, Ob. 1,2, C. ang., Cl. Sib. 1,2, B. Cl. si b., Fag. 1,2, C. Fag., Corni in F 1,2, Corni in F 3,4, Ttp. 1,2,3, Trb. 1,2,3, Tuba, Perc. (Tam-Tam, Zil, G.C.), Timpani, Arp., Zurna, Nakkare, Köş, Çocuklar, Tenor, Bas, V. ni I, V. ni II, V. la, V. o., and C. b. The Zurna, Nakkare, and Köş parts are highlighted with a blue box. The score shows the simultaneous use of these traditional instruments alongside Western orchestral instruments.

Source: Karlibel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi*, 14; reproduced and annotated by the author.

- 1 **Figure 9b.** *Çelebi*, “Giriş Korosu – Yeniçerilerin Türküsü,” detail showing
 2 zurna, nakkare, kös, and çevgân alongside the vocal and string parts.

Source: Karlıbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi*, 14; reproduced and annotated by the author.

The musical language of *Çelebi* also encompasses a varied orchestral palette. The opera employs a large and diverse orchestra, including woodwinds, brass, percussion, harp, celesta, and strings, thereby providing a broad range of timbral possibilities. Particularly significant is the incorporation of Ottoman-associated instruments, including the *zurna*, *nakkare*, *kös*, and *çevgân*.⁶¹ A score

⁶¹Güleç and Güleç, “Ekrem Reşid Rey ve Cemal Reşid Rey Operaları,” 75.

excerpt from the opening chorus, *Yeniçerilerin Türküsü*, illustrates how these instruments are incorporated into the orchestral texture. In the passage shown in Figures 9a and 9b, the *zurna* presents a melodic figure alongside the woodwind writing, while the *nakkare*, *kös*, and *çevgân* contribute distinct rhythmic patterns. At the same time, the Western orchestral instruments and strings sustain their own melodic and harmonic material, with the chorus entering within the same texture. The passage therefore shows that Ottoman-associated instruments are not treated as isolated additions to the symphonic ensemble; they participate simultaneously in its melodic, rhythmic, and timbral organization.

Figure 10. Nakkare



Source: Bursa Mehter Association, “Mehter Sazları,” accessed 17 July 2026.
<https://www.bursamehter.com/index.php?sayfa=mehter&alt=2>

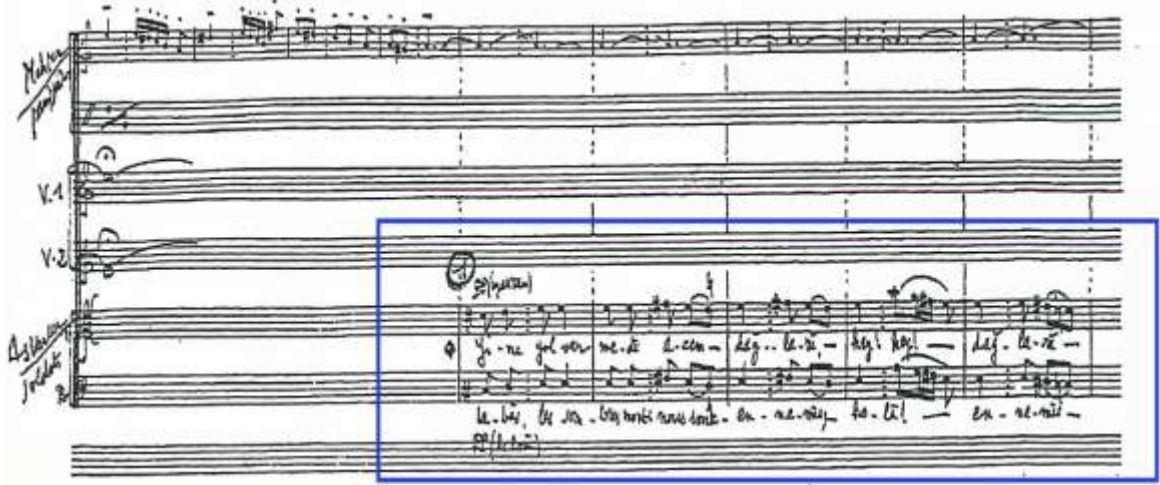
Figure 11. Çevgan



Source: Bursa Mehter Association, “Mehter Sazları,” accessed 17 July 2026.
<https://www.bursamehter.com/index.php?sayfa=mehter&alt=2>

The use of these instruments therefore extends beyond historical or cultural evocation, placing Ottoman-associated sonorities within the opera’s symphonic orchestral texture. At the level of timbre, this creates a recognizable point of contact between the symphonic orchestra and the Ottoman *mehter* tradition.

- 1 **Figure 12a.** “Yine Yol Vermedi Acem Dağları” in Rey’s manuscript of *Çelebi*,
 2 identified as an “old folk song.”



- 3
 4 Source: Karlıbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey’s Çelebi*, score appendix, 3.

- 5
 6 **Figure 12b.** “Yine Yol Vermedi Acem Dağları,” *Karcıgar Köçekçe*, in the *Türk*
 7 *Aksağı* rhythmic pattern.



- 8
 9 Source: ProjeTSM, “Yine yol vermedi Acem Dağları,” accessed 6 August 2026, <http://projetsm.com/eserler/11503-mechul-karcigar-kocekce-yine-yol-vermedi-acem-daglari>
 10
 11

A further example of Rey's treatment of traditional Turkish musical material can be observed in the incorporation of the folk melody "*Yine Yol Vermedi Acem Dağları*" into the opening of *Çelebi*. In the manuscript, the passage is explicitly identified as an "old folk song," while a published version of the melody is notated as *Karcıgar Köçekçe* in the *Türk Aksağı* rhythmic pattern. A comparison between the traditional version and Rey's treatment reveals that the melodic identity and textual incipit of the song are retained, including the characteristic opening gesture and the asymmetrical rhythmic organization associated with the traditional version. In the operatic setting, however, the melody is no longer presented as an autonomous monophonic line. It is incorporated into a larger vocal and orchestral texture, in which the soldiers' chorus is supported by instrumental layers that transform the traditional melodic material into an operatic ensemble passage. The traditional rhythmic and melodic characteristics therefore remain recognizable while being repositioned within a polyphonic and orchestrated musical context. Rather than reproducing the folk melody as an isolated quotation, Rey adapts it to the structural and dramatic requirements of the operatic scene, allowing traditional material to function simultaneously as a recognizable melodic reference and as part of the opera's broader orchestral texture. This treatment illustrates a characteristic aspect of Rey's musical language: traditional material is preserved at the level of identifiable melodic and rhythmic features while being transformed through orchestration, vocal ensemble writing, and polyphonic treatment.

Another aspect of Rey's engagement with traditional Turkish musical materials emerges in the *Şehnaz Büselik Semai*, associated with the character of *Çelebi* and appearing in the quartet of Act II, Scene V. According to Karlıbel and Aşkın, the piece consists of three stanzas, the first of which is an original a cappella song transmitted to Rey by Cevat Memduh Altar.⁶²

Figure 13. Excerpt from the *Şehnaz Büselik Ağır Semai* as integrated into the score of *Çelebi*



Source: Karlıbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi*, 77.

⁶²Karlıbel and Aşkın, "Çelebi Operasının Günişığına Çıkarılışı ve Restorasyonu," 74.

A comparative examination of Küçük Müezzınbaşı's original *Şehnaz Bûselik Aksak Semai* and its adaptation in Rey's *Çelebi* reveals a substantial transformation of both its formal and metric organization. As Karlıbel notes, the original song comprises 24 bars, whereas Rey's first couplet is reduced to 18 bars, with the original 10/8 meter replaced by 5/8.⁶³ In the operatic version, however, this metric transformation extends beyond the opening couplet: the passage moves through a range of meters, including 5/8, 12/8, 4/4, 3/4, and 9/8. These meters are not always presented successively: at certain points, different metric organizations occur simultaneously in different vocal or instrumental parts, as in the juxtaposition of 5/8, 12/8, and 4/4, while elsewhere 3/4 and 9/8 coexist. In addition to the change of meter, Rey intensifies the rhythmic profile of the melody through sixteenth-note articulation, while the passage itself is articulated through contrasting tempo indications such as *Moderato*, *Allegro*, and *Meno vivo*.

Rather than reproducing the *semai* as a continuous traditional form, Rey therefore reorganizes its rhythmic and temporal structure within the demands of the operatic ensemble. The three stanzas likewise do not follow one another in uninterrupted succession; intervening lines and exchanges by other characters interrupt the continuation of the *semai* material, while its subsequent sections are distributed within the broader ensemble texture. In this way, the traditional material is transformed from a self-contained vocal form into a fragmented and dynamically reconfigured component of the dramatic and polyphonic structure of *Çelebi*. As Karlıbel notes, the material becomes a quartet upon its second appearance: the tenor carries the melody in a high tessitura, while three female voices join *bocca chiusa* in a lower register.⁶⁴ This redistribution of the material produces a layered vocal texture in which the tenor line emerges above the accompanying female voices.

The second stanza incorporates *terennüm*, a vocal practice characteristic of traditional Turkish music. In *Çelebi*, this takes the form of rhythmic, non-lexical vocalization, in which syllables without independent semantic meaning become part of the musical texture.⁶⁵

This use of *terennüm* can be observed directly in the vocal writing of the *Şehnaz Bûselik Semai*. In the later part of the passage, following an intervening section of musical material, the vocal line moves away from semantically meaningful text and introduces non-lexical syllables such as “te-ne-nen-ni” and “te-re-nen.” Rather than functioning simply as vocal filler, these syllables are organized into a distinct melodic and rhythmic figure.

⁶³Karlıbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi*, 59.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

⁶⁵*Ibid.*

1 **Figure 14.** Excerpt from *Çelebi* showing the use of *terennüm* in the vocal line



2
3 Source: Karlíbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi*, score appendix, 146.
4

5 The use of *terennüm* also provides a point of comparison between Turkish
6 musical practice and French operatic writing. Karlíbel and Aşkın point to
7 parallels between this use of non-lexical vocal writing and choral passages in
8 major French stage works, including Berlioz's *Les Troyens* and *La Damnation*
9 *de Faust*.⁶⁶

10 According to Karlíbel and Aşkın, the augmented second appears with
11 sufficient frequency in Rey's melodic writing to be considered a characteristic
12 element of his musical language, evoking sonorities associated with Eastern and
13 *makam*-based musical systems. The interval occurs in *makam* families such as
14 *Şehnaz*, *Eviç*, and *Kürdilihicazkâr*, while *Hicazkâr* may contain two augmented-
15 second intervals.⁶⁷ More broadly, Karlíbel argues that the augmented second was
16 one of the defining characteristics of Rey's musical language, noting that Rey
17 explored its expressive potential in a manner comparable to Debussy's use of
18 parallel fifths. In this sense, the interval functions not merely as a marker of
19 modal identity but also as an expressive device capable of introducing what
20 Karlíbel describes as an "oriental and exotic color" into the musical texture.⁶⁸

21 Rather than reproducing entire *makam* structures in their traditional form,
22 Rey appears to select particular pitches and intervallic configurations from
23 modal contexts and transform them into melodic motives and integrate them into
24 his broader harmonic language. These transformations thus allow modal
25 materials to function within the opera's chromatic and polyphonic texture while
26 retaining recognizable intervallic characteristics.

27 The melodic dimension of Rey's musical language is also marked by his
28 recurrent use of augmented-second intervals. In the excerpt below, the vocal line
29 is predominantly shaped by stepwise motion, while altered pitches create wider

⁶⁶Karlíbel and Aşkın, "Çelebi Operasının Günişğine Çıkarılışı ve Restorasyonu," 74.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

⁶⁸Karlíbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi*, 75.

1 intervallic relationships, including augmented seconds, which introduce moments of
 2 increased melodic tension into the otherwise flowing melodic contour.

3
 4 **Figure 15.** Excerpt from *Çelebi* illustrating the use of augmented-second
 5 intervals in the vocal line



6
 7 Source: Karlıbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi*, score appendix, 33.

8
 9 This passage provides a concrete example of how this intervallic characteristic
 10 operates within *Çelebi*. The augmented seconds do not constitute a complete
 11 quotation of a specific *makam* structure; rather, they emerge within an otherwise
 12 predominantly stepwise melodic line, interrupting its scalar continuity and
 13 intensifying particular points of melodic tension. In this sense, the passage illustrates
 14 how Rey could draw on an intervallic feature associated with *makam*-based melodic
 15 practice without reproducing an entire modal structure.

16 The expressive dimension of the musical language is likewise closely
 17 connected to the opera's dramatic and symbolic content. Themes of love,
 18 separation, reunion, and death are not merely narrative events but acquire
 19 broader emotional and symbolic significance through their musical treatment.⁶⁹
 20 Although Karlıbel identifies the presence of leitmotivic writing as an element of
 21 the German operatic tradition within *Çelebi*⁷⁰, the recurring treatment of these
 22 broader themes may also be understood as extending beyond the function of
 23 character- or object-specific leitmotifs. Their recurrence can therefore be
 24 considered in relation to broader dramatic situations rather than being limited to
 25 the representation of individual characters or objects.

26 Taken together, the examples discussed above show that Ottoman-Turkish
 27 musical materials in *Çelebi* are incorporated at several levels of the musical
 28 language, including timbre, vocal writing, modality, intervallic organization, and
 29 leitmotivic treatment. These elements do not appear only as isolated quotations;
 30 they are integrated into the opera's broader harmonic, rhythmic, and formal
 31 organization.

⁶⁹Karlıbel and Aşkın, "Çelebi Operasının Günışığına Çıkarılışı ve Restorasyonu," 76.

⁷⁰Karlıbel, *The Emergence of Cemal Reşit Rey's Çelebi*, 38.

Discussion

The analysis of Çelebi suggests that its operatic aesthetic emerges not simply from the coexistence of Western and Ottoman–Turkish musical elements, but from the ways in which these materials are transformed and reorganized within the opera’s formal, dramaturgical, and musical structures. This observation builds on previous scholarship, which has largely examined the opera’s restoration history, musical language, and individual structural and dramatic features, by considering how these aspects interact in the construction of its operatic aesthetic.

One of the most significant findings concerns the treatment of Ottoman–Turkish musical materials. The selected examples suggest that traditional melodies, rhythmic patterns, vocal practices, and Ottoman-associated instruments are not consistently presented as self-contained quotations. Instead, they are altered and incorporated into the musical and dramatic structures of the opera. The transformation of the *Şehnaz Bûselik Semai* is particularly revealing: its original metric and formal organization are substantially altered, its material is distributed across different voices and meters, and *terennüm* becomes part of a polyphonic vocal texture. Similarly, the incorporation of *Yine Yol Vermedi Acem Dağları* and the use of *zurna*, *nakkare*, *kös*, and *çevgân* show how recognizable Ottoman–Turkish materials can be integrated into larger orchestral and ensemble structures. These examples suggest that the national dimension of Çelebi is constructed not simply through the presence of traditional materials, but through the ways in which they change their musical and dramatic functions within the opera.

The selected examples also suggest that Rey does not preserve their original musical organization unchanged. Chromaticism, modal coloration, augmented-second intervals, orchestral color, and Western-derived formal procedures are incorporated into passages containing Ottoman–Turkish musical materials. The augmented second, for example, does not reproduce a complete *makam* structure; rather, an intervallic feature associated with *makam*-based practice is incorporated into Rey’s melodic and chromatic language. The *Şehnaz Bûselik Semai* provides an even clearer example of this process: its regular 10/8 metric organization is replaced by changing meters including 5/8, 12/8, 4/4, 3/4, and 9/8, while its material is redistributed within the ensemble. The traditional material therefore remains recognizable, but its original rhythmic, formal, and vocal organization is altered to serve the musical structure of the opera.

The present analysis builds on Karlıbel’s detailed work on the musical materials of Çelebi by considering their function within the opera’s dramaturgical and formal structures. Karlıbel’s analysis provides detailed documentation of the transformation of materials such as the *Şehnaz Bûselik Semai*, including changes in meter, vocal distribution, and ensemble writing. Building on these observations, the present study considers how such transformations affect the function of traditional material within the dramatic and polyphonic organization of the opera. The contribution of this study therefore lies not primarily in identifying individual Ottoman–Turkish musical

elements, but in relating their transformation to the construction of *Çelebi*'s operatic aesthetic.

The relationship between musical language and dramaturgy further reinforces this interpretation. The four-act structure moves from predominantly lyrical material in Act I through comic and dramatic developments in Acts II and III toward the tragic and mystical conclusion of Act IV. This progression is accompanied by increasing musical and ensemble density, with individual arias and smaller combinations expanding toward larger ensemble and choral climaxes. The formal organization therefore does more than divide the narrative into four sections; it also shapes the distribution and intensity of the musical material across the drama. The use of traditional materials is similarly connected to dramatic function: melodies, vocal practices, and instrumental colors are incorporated into scenes according to the characters, situations, and ensemble structures in which they occur. In this respect, the opera's musical language and dramaturgy are closely connected rather than functioning as separate levels of construction.

The Ottoman setting is similarly more than a historical backdrop. By situating the drama within the social and artistic world of the Tulip Era and bringing together courtly, domestic, religious, and public spaces, *Çelebi* presents Ottoman cultural life through an urban and socially differentiated setting. This is also reflected in the musical treatment of Ottoman–Turkish materials, which are not limited to a single folkloric or ceremonial function but appear in different vocal, instrumental, and dramatic contexts. The opera therefore reinterprets Ottoman cultural heritage through the formal and musical language of twentieth-century opera rather than reproducing traditional musical forms in their original organization.

Taken together, these findings suggest that *Çelebi* is best understood as a work in which cultural materials are transformed through composition rather than merely combined. Its operatic hybridity is therefore a structural and aesthetic process in which Ottoman–Turkish melodic, rhythmic, vocal, and timbral resources acquire new functions through their interaction with Western-derived harmonic, formal, orchestral, and dramaturgical procedures. The significance of *Çelebi* thus lies in the compositional procedures through which these culturally differentiated materials are incorporated into the opera's melodic, rhythmic, vocal, orchestral, and dramatic structures.

Conclusion

This study has offered an analytical examination of Cemal Reşit Rey's *Çelebi* by considering the relationship between its dramaturgy, macro-formal organization, and musical language. By shifting the focus from the opera's archival history toward its operatic aesthetics, the study considers how Western operatic frameworks and Ottoman–Turkish musical materials are brought together and transformed within the work. The findings also place *Çelebi* within broader discussions of how national identity was represented through opera in Republican Turkey. Rather than relying primarily on the straightforward reproduction of traditional musical forms, the selected musical examples show

1 how Rey reworks traditional materials within a modern operatic setting. These
 2 findings suggest that Ottoman cultural heritage could remain an important part
 3 of the opera's national dimension without requiring traditional musical forms to
 4 be preserved as autonomous units.

5 Ultimately, the operatic aesthetic of *Çelebi* is shaped neither by the simple
 6 quotation of Ottoman–Turkish musical materials nor by the straightforward
 7 adoption of Western operatic procedures. The analysis suggests that melodic,
 8 rhythmic, vocal, and timbral resources associated with Ottoman–Turkish musical
 9 culture are incorporated into the opera's formal, harmonic, orchestral, and dramatic
 10 organization. In this respect, *Çelebi* can be understood as a case of Republican
 11 musical modernism in which Ottoman cultural heritage and modern operatic
 12 composition are brought into the same compositional framework. Its significance
 13 lies not in resolving the distinction between these musical traditions, but in showing
 14 how Rey could work across them while retaining identifiable elements of both.

15 This study also has several limitations. Access to the complete score was
 16 limited, as the work is not available through an openly accessible published or
 17 digital edition; consequently, the analysis is based on selected passages and score
 18 excerpts available through archival and secondary sources rather than on an
 19 exhaustive examination of the full score. Nor has it examined the opera from the
 20 perspective of performance practice, including vocal interpretation, staging, or
 21 the realization of its orchestral and ensemble writing in performance. These
 22 dimensions remain important areas for further research, particularly given the
 23 practical and interpretive challenges posed by *Çelebi* as a large-scale stage work.

24 Further research could place *Çelebi* in a broader comparative context by
 25 examining Rey's other stage works or by comparing its treatment of Ottoman–
 26 Turkish musical materials with that of other Turkish operas of the Republican
 27 period. Such comparisons could clarify whether the compositional procedures
 28 identified here—particularly the transformation of traditional melodies,
 29 rhythmic structures, vocal practices, and instrumental colors within operatic
 30 forms—are characteristic of Rey's operatic language or form part of a broader
 31 approach to musical national representation in twentieth-century Turkey.

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