

# A Contemporary Turkish Composer: Mete Sakpınar

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Mete Sakpınar, who was born in Ankara, May 5, 1954, is a contemporary Turkish composer. His compositions were played in various countries like Turkey, France (1980-1983), Canada, Australia, Sweden, Norway, Hungary, Albania, Belgium, Holland, and German, and he also joined lots of seminars, radio, and television programs. His inspirational sources are traditional Turkish music, modern French music, American cultural traditions, as well as jazz, acoustic, and electronic music. His music, in summary, is about taking a little from tonality, twelve-note system, coincidences, improvisations, etc., and joining them with his own experiences like emotions, knowledge, and intelligence. Sakpınar always defends that the composer of the day has to benefit from lots of various sources. He is doing this as well as trying new forms in every new piece. It does not matter if these are tonal, atonal, serial, or modal but it must be personal. All the borders and capacities of the instruments have to be forced.

*Keywords:* contemporary Turkish composer, Mete Sakpınar, modern composing

## Introduction

Mete Sakpınar and his brother Ender, who became a conductor, were trained for music and painting while they were five years old. His parents Hasbiye and Sadi Sakpınar were both opera artists in Ankara, so he took his first piano lessons with his mother. Then, he studied solfege and harmony with Firuzan Saydam and Metin Ögüt. His mother, born in 1923, began studying at Ankara State Conservatory in 1942 and graduated in 1945 from the Opera Department. Then, she entered the Ankara State Opera. His father, born in 1918, entered the Ankara State Conservatory in 1937 and graduated in 1945. Then, he entered the Ankara State Opera and worked as a soloist tenor in lots of operas. He was also as a student of Leopold Levy, graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts and he is still working on painting.



Figure 1. Mete Sakpınar.

Sakpınar enrolled at the Ankara State Conservatory in 1975 and studied harmony, counterpoint, and fugue with Ercivan Saydam and piano with Gülay Uğurata. He entered Mimar Sinan University State Conservatory in

1978, and graduated from the composition class of İlhan Usmanbaş in 1979. He went to Paris in 1980 and became a student of Ecole Normale de Musique, where he studied composition under Tony Aubin and Jacques Casterede, and conducting under Dominique Roitz and Gerard Devos. While living in Paris, Sakpınar also gained a three-year experience in conducting with a big chamber orchestra about 45 members. In 1981, the jury of Paris gave him a reward about composition and fugue in Ecole Normale de Musique. He received his license degree from the composition department of this institution in 1983 and went to the US, founding the New York Concertante Orchestra there in 1984. He was the conductor and artistic director of this ensemble until 1986. Sakpınar (see Figure 1) entered the Composition Department of Juilliard School of Music in 1985, where he received master's degree from the composition class of Milton Babbitt. He also studied electronic music with Donald Howe. At the same time, he worked on his doctorate thesis in Istanbul University. Between the years 1985-1987, his compositions had been started being performed in Juilliard Symphony. In addition, he directed an art gallery in New York East Village from 1988 to 1991. Some of his electronic music studies were played in New York Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, National Public Radio (1988), Chicago Film Festival (1989), and Ankara Contemporary Music Festival (1990-1991). Since 1991, he has been teaching composition and fugue lessons in the Composition Department of Istanbul University State Conservatory.

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "AÇILIM" (Spatial). The score is written for a large ensemble, including strings, woodwinds, brass, and electronic elements. It features complex rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings. The title "AÇILIM" is written in bold, and "Spatial" is written below it. The score is divided into two systems, with the second system starting on page 2. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like "ff" and "f".

Figure 2. Spatial.

He combines electronic sound materials with acoustics in some of his main compositions. There are about 30 electronic and chamber music, five symphonies such as *Tri-minor* (1987), which was played by Juilliard

Symphony Orchestra in New York in 1987. *Transfusion*, *Focus*, *Proton*, *Atasal*, four electro-acoustic pieces, two piano concertos (1985/1998), *Avalanche* (1992), sextet for wind instruments, concerto for strings and percussions (*Swingle Turtle*), Hyper-Flute for flute and tape band, and concerto for two pianos (1997). He also wrote some music for theatre like Nazım Hikmet's play "*Ferhat ile Şirin*" in 1991, Gogol's play in 1993, and Kenter's play "*Hep Aşk Vardı*" in 2000, and some documentaries like "*Hello Modern Turkey*" that is related with all Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's revolutions for Turkish Radio Television channel in 1996. Some of his symphonic pieces were played in Istanbul State Symphony Orchestra concerts like *Transfusion*, *Focus*, *Proton*, and *Spatial* (see Figure 2) (its third movement was dedicated to Schostakovich), etc.

### Compositions

His compositions have been effective on the progress of the modern, contemporary, and electronic music. Before coming back to Turkey, his music was in more apolitical style (he was rather interested the relationship between natural and artificial sounds), but after seeing the negative changes in his country, he was more influenced of the way of writing universal and political like the compositions *Proton* and *Atasal* (1994). He, in general, does not want to belong to any trend because he believes that all of them will be passed away someday. All he tries to achieve is using them for a specific purpose without being obsessed. In his reports from 1995, he explains that his admiration sources are coming from Bach because of his flexible music. It is more obvious to see the fastidious flexibility especially in his solo or chamber music works more than the orchestral ones. His orchestral pieces, considering all of them last from 11-16 minutes, provide the organic unity. He is assertive that there is no any other avant-garde example in this kind of individual source. Sakpınar thought Bach would always be on top and when he was listening to his music, he feels like the world has changed and goes another dimension.

After the short biography and general point of view of Mete Sakpınar's music, it will be examined contemporary aspects of some of his principal works with chronological order besides the short musical analysis.

#### Lieds in Italian

This piece (see Figure 3), written in 1982, develops the discipline of the indeterminacy philosophy that comes upper surface and moves ahead. The most important newest technique is singing while breathing and trying to go to the high-pitched sound with symmetrical accents between the parts. Indeterminacy is formed because of the inexistency of written pitches while sighing and the linear and vertical components of music are reaching the virtual dimension of dividing doubling against triplets.

#### Three Pieces for Piano

This piece was written in 1986. The most characteristic of the piece is to hear three layers at the same time rhythmically. The cells are processed at the same time from three different layers. Each layer has different dynamics and intervallic worth as mezzo-forte on the top, forte in the middle and piano at the bottom or with open, close, and silence one after another.

#### Dilara

It was written in 1988 and performed in Carnegie Hall by Sevgi Topyan, in which there are lots of different combinations in this piece (see Figure 4) for solo piano. These formations consecutively constitute colors that are different from each other with variant dimensions. Basically, the piece is trying to describe a

baby's birth (it was written for his nephew Dilara's birthday by the way) and because of that, all complex and calm components are completing each other.

MINIATURISATION

The musical score is titled "MINIATURISATION". It is written for a chamber ensemble. The first system includes staves for Violin I (Vle), Violin II (Vla), Viola (Vla), and Cello (Cello). The music is in 6/8 time and features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes. Dynamics range from piano (p) to fortissimo (f). The second system continues the complex rhythmic and melodic development. The third system shows further orchestration with more instruments, including a double bass (Basso) and a piano (Piano). The score is characterized by its dense, intricate notation and dynamic contrasts.

Figure 3. Miniaturisation.



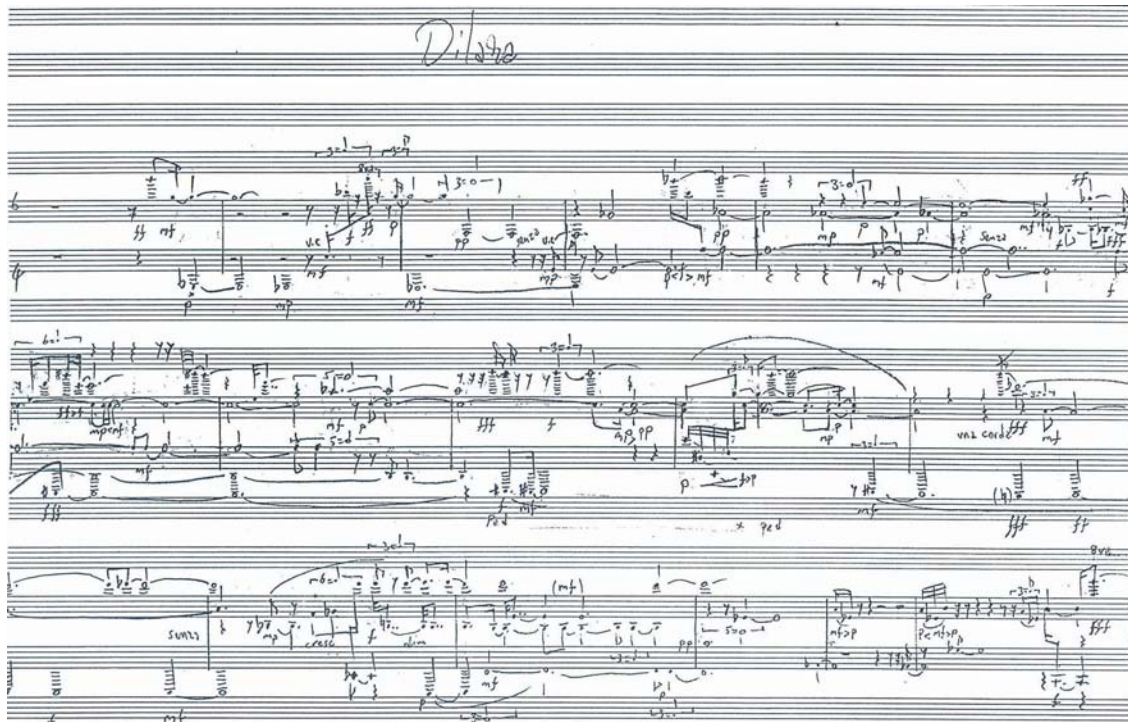


Figure 4. Dilara.

### Transfusion

In this piece (see Figure 5), composed in 1991, Sakpinar determines the broadened orchestra staff with the fullness of nature, the transitions of the cut parts to the dependence, the arrival of the untidiness to the ordered system with an attractive orchestration. It processes skillfully the relationship of individuality, nature and society.

Figure 5. Transfusion.

### Focus

This piece (see Figure 6), written in 1992, lasting about 10 minutes, reflects French impressionism, jazz, with accented rhythms and minimalist effects in it. Its music, in general, can be described as tensioned group combinations with powerful double fortes, jazzy improvisations, emotional/melodic solos, descending fugato/crescendos, etc... Sakpinar says,

Everybody has they own reality, all of us live as different focuses in our lives. Our thoughts are the sources of our dreams. I tried to give the unchanged effects of our lives in a different cultural synthesis as complete. We cannot achieve more that just being 'relative' with our definite judgments in this variable universal system. Because of this reason, I created a form that has the harmony, which constitutes the absolute focal points in an unlimited oneiric relativity, and the argument concepts in it. Hoping to add the new ones to our dreams... (personal communication, n.d.)

Focus

Figure 6. Focus.

### Avalanche

This piece was written in New York in 1992 for chamber music ensemble (flute, violin, viola, violoncello, piano, and percussion). The work, written for strings, piano, and percussion, was also played in Michigan, USA. It was also played at Vienna Modern Music Festival in November, 1998 together with Swingle Turtle. Its dynamic and energetic structure is coming from a disaster that occurs in a village of Erzurum a few years ago therefore, there were many people who had been injured. Sakpinar felt that the emotion of “Avalanche” was a cleaning process of nature in a way.

### Proton

It is a symphonic mixture of electronic and acoustic music. The piece (see Figure 7), which was composed in 1993, is for a college work for orchestra and electronic tape. The main theme was born from a Bosnian folk song also used in Emir Kusturica’s movie *Time of the Gypsies* (1988). The percussion heard in the middle of the theme, reflects the military pressure and then music calm down with the other orchestral instruments. According to the explanation of the composer himself, it is a “Sur-National” work that is against for the “Neo-Nationalist” trend. In this 13 minutes piece, there are lots of differentiations like tonal, atonal, serial, minimal and electronic elements. Proton was written for the people who had been murdered in Bosnia-Herzegovina because of the pressured ideologies of the wars. With the crystallization of the folk song, it is symbolized the ethnical separations hearing the percussions acoustically. The link that provides coming back is heard from the whole orchestra elements. The entering of the development, which consists of the repetitions, tells the unstopping attendance and the effects of the tape creating the voice of the war “instruments”.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the piece "Proton" by Mete Sakpinar. The score is written on multiple staves, including strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion. It features complex notation with many accidentals, dynamic markings, and some electronic tape notation. The title "PROTON" and the composer's name "Mete Sakpinar" are at the top. The score is divided into two main sections, with the right section showing more developed musical ideas and some electronic tape notation.

Figure 7. Proton.



### Swingle Turtle

The inspirational source of the piece (see Figure 8), was written in 1994, Istanbul, for his students—a turtle. The short, quick, and intensive part of this work is to exhibit the characteristics of each instrument (violin, trumpet, violoncello, piano, and percussion). Present Music performed it in Cemal Reşit Rey Contemporary Music Festival. The compositional technique happens from the contrapuntal relationships of sounds. Sakpınar used minimum elements of the whole voice scale in some parts. He tried to make the symphonic density disappear and used voices, models, “Makamsal” shapes and melodic concepts that were unifying the piece. The performing concept of this piece requires the individual capacities of performers besides the necessities to have following vertically the score, knowing, understanding, and being in a harmony with each other so the musicians must be free in a disciplined relationship both in their performances and the others’.



Figure 8. Swingle Turtle.

### Atasal

This symphonic poem (see Figure 9), which is for orchestra with electronic tape collage and lasting about 11 minutes, was written in 1994 for memory of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and also to show the respect and devotion to his love by nation. Its premiere was in the date of December 16, 1994 by Istanbul State Symphony Orchestra in Istanbul Technical University. Sakpınar explains the work’s message as “it is necessary to recall Atatürk’s principles and apply them today in urgency” (personal communication, n.d.). The movement begins with bass line motions and it is transformed to an ironic theme later on. First, the theme is heard very simple and then it is encircled to the whole tissue in a rising tension. The second part of the piece contains the 10th year speech with Atatürk’s own voice. This collage’s aim is to announce the instability and the quietness of the community in a “Neo-grotesque” way. While Atatürk is talking, there are no any other instrumental accompanying and no change on his voice. His talking is linked to the group of acoustic instruments with rich accompaniment of electronic effects in the end. There is a dynamic, sometimes neo-classic, atonal, and mysterious effect in the entire work. He uses a language that has lots of colors in it. Using the rustling with sound or the radio waves coming from the past which is questioning consciously is collaged over Atatürk’s original voice and them, the rustling comes back to the contrabasses. The repetition of the ironic theme, which is heard from different group of instruments also tells being inability of humankind and the affects of the danger. From the critical point of view, the enthusiasm is a bit exaggerated.





Figure 9. Atasal.

### Valssimo

Composed in 1994, the piece was planned as an encore piece for piano solo. The atonal composition, starting with wide intervals, is transformed to a sarcastic waltz in a limited area. The waltz ends in “A” form that comes again at the end.

### Hyper-flute

This piece (see Figure 10), which was composed in 1994, is dedicated for flutist Günay Yetiz, with the accompaniment of electronic tape. Thus, both electronic and acoustic sounds are exhibited together. The solo flute is competing with the background sound of the synthesizer. They are sometimes in contrast and sometimes in harmony. It is not only the music of tape is a duet with flute's row, but also the flute includes the tape's characteristic sound. The metallic sound of the flute is combining with the mechanical voice of tape. Actually, it invites the listener dreaming a forest. While, it is perceived that the intensity of the forest in the electronic sound with all the bird, water, and board voices, the concrete sound of the flute catches the short living time. The atonal dataset is coming together with some tonal link. These tonal links are symbolizing the primitive living style as few, pure, repeated, and undeveloped but existing. Before and after the irritating sounds of electronic tape, it is used a technique that reflects the soft tunes in flute and repeating passages that reflects again the talent and condition of the performer or bordered and difficult mathematical, canonic real time usage with tape.



Figure 10. Hyper-flute.

### Contre Value

Composed in 1998, the piece (see Figure 11) is for an electronic tape and violin (for Cihat Aşkın). It is based on both the nature acoustic characteristic of violin and reflection of the electronic sounds basically.



Figure 11. Contre value.

### Mayıs Türküsü

This folk song (see Figure 12), written in 1999 for TRT, is a piece that reflects the local philosophy and sub-dynamics of unity, which was motivated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. This capella work was written for the Turkish Was of Independence and it causes the rising of chromatic motions. Datum that presents various traditions by different rhythm and series chronically creates a new discipline towards the necessities of harmony. All the voice effects are a kind of train that travels all over Turkey. This unity, which was synthesis of various Makams' realizations, presents the abstract in the beginning as a superior worth at the end.

Figure 12. Mayıs Türküsü.

### Conclusion

The main achievement of this paper is examining Mete Sakpınar's music out of analyzing some of his compositions. It is presented the several main works that reflects some of his music with analytical point of



view. His 14 works and 11 music examples given here reflect some personal materials he used in general. Forcing the capacities is the key of composing contemporary.

As a conclusion, the main point of the contemporary aspects is using the materials putting them together with minds. The combination of several aesthetics together reflects the composer's accumulation. His philosophy is more inclusive, less obsessed on the new.

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### Appendix: List of Mete Sakpınar's Principal Works

#### Orchestra

Tri-minor suite, 1987.

Transfusion, 1991.

Focus, 1992.

Atasal, 1994.

Spatial, 2000.

#### Concerto

Piano Concerto No.1, 1985.

Atatürk for two pianos, strings and percussion, 1997.

Piano Concerto No.2, 1998.

#### Chamber Music

Sonata for violin and piano, 1981.

Dance Music in three movements with piano, clarinet, double bass and percussion, 1982.

String Quintet, 1982.

Miniaturisation, 1983.

String Quartet No.2, 1983.

Fantasy for eight flutes, 1983.

Prelude for piano and clarinet, 1984.

Sextet for woodwinds, 1989.

Avalanche, 1992.

Swingle Turtle, 1994.

#### Voice and Piano

Alcohol for baritone (poem: Appolinaire), 1981.

Lieds in Italian for soprano and tenor (poems: Carlo Arcuri), 1982.

#### Chorus

Mayıs Türküsü (TRT Youth Choir), 2000.

Yılıkı (TRT Youth Choir), 2002.

Solo Instruments

Antiseria for clarinet, 1983.

Three Pieces for piano, 1986.

Dilara, 1988.

Delidolu for flute, 1993.

Valssimo, 1994.

Hyper-Flute, 1994.

Aurora for guitar, 1996.

Contre Value, 1998.

Scene Music

“Ferhat ile Şirin” music for Nazım Hikmet’s play (first time in USA theatres), 1992.

“Bir Delinin Hatıra Defteri” music for Gogol’s play, 1993.

“Hep Aşk Vardı” music for Yıldız Kenter’s play, 2000.

Dance Music and Electronic Tape

On the way home, 1989.

Prism, 1991.

Köm’ür, 1993.

There is nobody, 1993.

Kara/an (dedicated to Uğur Mumcu), 1995.

Film Music

“Gün Işığı” short film, 1996.

Documentary Music

Hello modern Turkey, 1996.

Living is no laughing matter, 1998.