

## “Leaving *alla turca* Behind: The Middle East in Opera and Other Musical Genres, 1800-44”

Ralph P. Locke [RLocke@ESM.Rochester.edu]  
Eastman School of Music / University of Rochester (Rochester NY USA)

### Introduction: Cultural and Musical Contexts

**Ex. 1.** Mozart, Sonata in A Major, K. 331/300i (ca. 1783), mvt. 3: “Alla turca.”

**Historical background:** The gradual weakening of the Ottoman Empire and the growth of European colonialism and imperialism (e.g., French control of Algeria, beginning in the 1830s).

#### Four relevant trends or other considerations (musical, theatrical, interpretive):

1. Increased access to published transcriptions of Middle Eastern music.
2. Greater interest in “local color” in musical works generally:
  - a. Evocative sets and costumes (in stage works).
  - b. “National” tunes (e.g., Scottish, Spanish, or Chinese).
  - c. Use of musical materials that were *not* specifically associated with the exotic location but were nonetheless highly unusual (see my “*All the Music in Full Context*” Paradigm).
  - d. Use of musical materials that were utterly normal but that matched the *emotional affect* of the setting, characters or events (as, again, in the “*All the Music in Full Context*” Paradigm).
3. In “Middle Eastern” stage works: an increasing focus on a central *female* character, whose portrayal is now highly exoticized. (Many *non-exotic* operas of this era similarly have a central female character, e.g., Bellini’s *Norma*.)
4. The ever-present question for historians/critics now: How to interpret an opera or other musical work—as a quasi-realistic (often highly stereotypical) depiction of the land and people being evoked (on the surface): as a semi-disguised comment on specific social conditions “here” (in Europe), and/or as an allegory of qualities deemed to be “universally human” (e.g., lust for power). Ethnic stereotypes are an important consideration in the “*All the Music in Full Context*” Paradigm.

### New Portrayals of Middle Easterners, and New Musical Devices Supporting Them

**Ex. 2.** Meyerbeer (1824), *Il crociato in Egitto*, Act 1 chorus, “Urridi vezzose.” Orientalism as a version of the age-old “pastoral” literary topos (here including drone basses, deriving from the bagpipes of European shepherds).

Urride vezzose,  
Leggiere, scherzose,  
Intorno aleggiate  
Al figlio d’amor:  
Tranquillo serbate  
Quel dolce sopor.

Pretty slavegirls,  
Light-hearted and playful,  
Flutter around  
The child of love:  
Keep peaceful  
His sweet slumber.

**Ex. 3.** Weber, *Oberon* (1826), Act 1 ballet of the Caliph's dancing women. Orientalism as an occasion for musical experiment (unusual chord progression, alternating I and iii6/4).

**Ex. 4.** Beethoven, Chorus [of Dervishes], from *The Ruins of Athens* (1811)—featuring primitive phrase in the strings (in unison, no harmony), alternating between two pitches in an obsessively repeated rhythm.

Du hast in deines Ärmels Falten  
Den Mond getragen, ihn gespalten.  
Kaaba!  
Mahomet! [Etc.]

Thou hast carried the moon  
in the folds of Thy sleeve,  
Thou hast split it [in two].  
Ka'aba! [The large square pilgrimage  
monument in Mecca.]  
Mohammed! [Etc.]

### Portrayals beyond the Stage (Lieder)

**Ex. 5.** Schubert, *Geheimes* (“Something Secret,” 1821, published 1822). Orientalist images (stereotypes) carried out through a distinctiveness of mood. Here: sexual anticipation, indicated by a repeated, almost panting, two-note figure in the piano.

Über meines Liebchens Äugeln  
Stehn verwundert alle Leute;  
Ich, der Wissende, dagegen,  
Weiss recht gut, was das bedeute....

Everybody is astonished  
At the eyes [literally: ogling] that my  
sweetheart makes.  
I, who know what's going on, however,  
Know very well what that may mean.  
[Namely: she seems to be hinting at her  
anticipation of the next sweet hour of bliss  
with her lover, i.e., me.]....

### A Travelogue from a Composer Who Had Lived in the Middle East: *Le désert* (1844).

**Ex. 6.** David, *Le désert* (1844), “Danse des almées.” Based (as is **Ex. 7**) on music that David had transcribed during his two years in Turkey and Egypt.

**Ex. 7.** David, *Le desert*, “Chant du muezzin.” (The final phrase was sung in microtones at the first performances.)

...La Allahil Allah,  
Ou Mohamed rassoul Allah.  
Allah hou akbar  
Ja aless sala.

...There is no god but God, and Mohammed is  
his Prophet. God is great; come to prayer.

**Ex. 8.** Verdi, *Otello*, ballet music (1894): “Invocazione di Allah” (music borrowed from **Ex. 7**, “by” David).