

## **Assumptions, choices and realities.**

The beginning of teaching music to the 'ethnic minorities' in Amsterdam in the early 1980's

### **Preface.**

What seems simple at first can turn out in something complicated later on.

The start of music lessons for Turkish and Moroccan children in Amsterdam in the early eighties seemed to be under nearly ideal circumstances. When it came to realize the plans, the projects stumbled upon a number of unexpected difficulties.

What happened with the Turkish and the Moroccan Music Project and how the difficulties were overcome, might serve as an example, give ideas and inspiration for other projects under similar or even more difficult circumstances.

### **Abstract.**

At the end of the seventies of the past century, the town government of the city of Amsterdam was confronted with the fact that, similar to the Surinam 'ethnic minority', the Turkish and Moroccan minorities would be permanently living in Amsterdam.

There were no cultural facilities and services for Turkish and Moroccan people at that moment.

At one of the five music schools in Amsterdam, the 'Muzieklyceum', a pilot project started. Wouter Turkenburg designed the curriculum and was the project coordinator. The Muzieklyceum was regarded to be an elite school, located south of the center of Amsterdam, around the corner of the Van Gogh Museum and the Concertgebouw. At one of the other music schools, the 'Willem Gehrels Muziek School', which historically offered music lessons for children of the working class, there were no initiatives at that time to organize music lessons for Turkish and Moroccan children.

The goal of the 'ethnic music projects' at the Muzieklyceum was to offer music instruction to 'ethnic minorities' of Turkish and Moroccan children in their own language, on their own instruments, and in their own teaching methods.

The assumptions and choices made by both the financiers and organizers of the project on one side and the participants on the other side led to realities that no-one had expected or could have foreseen. Nevertheless the projects were successful and continued until today.

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### **Assumptions , realities and choices: at the political level:**

At the start of the 'ethnic music projects' in the early 1980's there were a number of **assumptions** at the political level.

- The national self image: The Netherlands could limitlessly house and protect any political or economical refugee from anywhere in the world, was generally assumed. The open character of the Dutch society made it easy for any foreigner to adapt to the life in The Netherlands.
- The Amsterdam self image: Amsterdam as a 'free heaven' for everybody: protestants, Jews, political refugees, left wing thinkers, etc. The prosperity of the city over the ages was brought in direct relation with the arrivals of new citizens.
- The city of Amsterdam saw itself also as the cultural center of the world. Examples were the Concertgebouworkest conducted by Bernard Haiting, the Rijks- Stedelijk- van Gogh museum, new Dutch Opera and Nationale Ballet, high density of bigger and smaller theater houses, such as at the Stadsschouwburg, Paradiso, Melkweg, Bimhuis, Brakke Grond;
- The denial of existence of classes in the society due to high level of social welfare (Sociale Dienst). The class system was seen as folklore of the decreasing CPN, the Communist Party of The Netherlands.

The assumptions were often not in line with the political **realities** in The Netherlands in the early 1980's:

- On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December 1975 seven young men, children of parents from the Molukken, part of the former Indonesian colonies, high jacked a train near Wijster, occupied it for twelve days and killed the driver and two passengers. The young men stated that they felt neglected by the Dutch society at large and wanted to force The Netherlands to establish a free Molukken Republic. This event made it clear on a national level that The Netherlands did have a problem with minorities.
- A large reorganization of the government of the city of Amsterdam starting in 1981 was aimed at decentralizing the administrative power. Instead of one central town hall, the city was step by step sliced up in a number of boroughs up to a total of fifteen today. By decentralizing the power a focus was given to the specific demography of each neighborhood. The demographical studies made painfully clear that there were large differences between the social classes in Amsterdam. A rich cultural high class elite, existed next to a small middle class, as well as a big poor low class plagued by unemployment.
- The demographic shifts and changes were leading to an atmosphere of instability and even intolerance. This eventually led to the birth of the extreme right wing parties.
- The beginning of an economical recession led to the decrease of the industry in Amsterdam, especially in the harbor. This led to an increase in unemployment. Other small industries in and around the city were disappearing as well.
- The aggressive social-political pressure groups such as the Squatters, the Anti-Bomb Movement, the Anti-Nuclear Energy Movement, the Feminist Movement, the Gay Movement, etc. made clear that the city of Amsterdam was not one big happy family but a conglomeration of minority groups each with their own and sometimes conflicting interests.

Although the assumptions did not always were in line with the realities, **choices** were made that were decisive for the socio-political surroundings of the Ethnic Music Projects.

- Since the second world war The Netherlands was, and still is, in a permanent crisis of living space. In order to diminish the 'housing crisis', the city of Amsterdam together with the national government decided to build two new cities at the borders of Amsterdam. The first one, the Bijlmermeer, was part of Amsterdam. The second city, Almere, was a bit further away and build on the bottom of what used to be the sea, the Flevo Polder. At the same time a large Amsterdam city renewal program was started. Although not intended this led to ghettos-like boroughs. In the Bijlmermeer the Surinam people settled by the thousands after Suriname became an independent republic too fast. At the same time slowly but definitely thousands of 'ordinary' Amsterdam people left their small 19<sup>th</sup> century houses in order to live in the polder-city Almere. In the outskirts of worn out late 19<sup>th</sup> century neighborhoods and fifties/sixties 'garden city' apartment the Turkish and Moroccan people settled with their families.

- The Dutch government decided to install a 'family reunion plan'. Many of the male 'guest workers' from Turkey and Morocco who arrived in sixties and seventies in The Netherlands, lived without their families. Some still had work but even without work and well protected by Dutch unemployment laws or even illegally present, they were better off in The Netherland than in their 'home' country. The majority of these men, although cut off from their wives and children, decided to stay in The Netherlands. The family reunion plan led to unforeseen and uncontrolled growth of the Turkish and Moroccan population and the rapid 'creolisation' of the population of the big cities such as Rotterdam, The Hague and Amsterdam.

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### **Assumptions, Realities and Choices at the Social-Cultural Level**

Also at the social-cultural level in the late seventies in The Netherlands there were **assumptions** that most of the people and politicians shared.

- Naïve as it seems today, in the early eighties many people thought that the new ethnic minorities, called in Dutch the 'allochtonen', in time would integrate completely, if not assimilate, or at least find their niche in the Dutch society just as the Jews, Protestants, Chinese, etc, had done before. They would become, what is called in Dutch, 'autochtonen',: original' Dutch people!
- Another assumption was that most of the ethnic minorities in time would go back to their homeland. Once the Surinam Republic was working and prosperous, the black people who were suffering from the cold Dutch weather, would go back to their former paradise, many whites Dutch were thinking. The men from Turkey and Morocco were 'guest workers' only in The Netherlands on a temporary working contract. They would go back and establish their own businesses in their Mediterranean home country. After being reunited with their family as a result of the family reunion plan, the urge to return, was assumed, would only grow.

The assumptions were not met the **realities** on the social-cultural level.

- The integration and assimilation did not take place in seventies and eighties as expected. The ethnic minorities had their own problems to deal with. Young Turkish men raised in The Netherlands, married brides from their parents home country. Turkish girls in The Netherlands were not in favor. Turkish girls in

their teens were not allowed play outdoors. As a result they stayed home, learned hard, were successful in schools and got better paid jobs than their brothers. Girls maybe had a low status in their family but they brought in most of the money and knowledge, which created a lot of tensions. Many Turkish men started small businesses such as grocery shops, bakeries, clothing parlors or took technical jobs. Turkish women were in steadier and often well paid administrative jobs, and in health care.

- The family reunion plan for the Turkish and Moroccan people, the independence of Surinam, and marriage traditions of the ethnic minorities, and the liberal policy of political and economical refugees for all around the world brought in a constant flow of new 'migrants'. Under these circumstances integration cannot take place. The absence of integration led to the coming about of ghettos in the big cities which led to 'full is full' one-liner of the growing right wing parties in Holland.

- What had expected nobody but a few: the ethnic minorities became the majority within two decades. They did not fully integrate and there were and still are but a few cross over marriages. E.g. Turkish people became Turkish Dutch: half foreign in both countries.

Among the **choices** at the socio-cultural level were the following.

- The start of cultural programs for ethnic minorities in the 'neighborhood houses' or 'community houses' all over Amsterdam run by 'social workers' trained at social academies, schools for higher education. However, their programs based upon their knowledge and experience with the white working class did not work successfully for the ethnic minorities.

- The Dutch language programs for ethnic minorities were installed but even up to today they could not meet with the demands. As a result there were and still are enormous waiting lists.

- The support of sports clubs especially for ethnic minorities. As it turned out many Surinam youngsters were interested in football, Turkish young people in kick boxing, etc. Sometimes the policy of the sports organization was to spread the migrant sportsmen over a number of teams, sometimes all migrant teams were formed. Both choices created their own specific problems.

- The financial support for the Turkish Music Project at one of the five Amsterdam Music Schools was an exceptional decision. In general music schools were seen as something for the elite classes, as institutions that were not of any interest to the migrants. The contrary seemed to be true.

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## The Turkish Music Project

The first signals came in the early eighties. Request came in at the Muzieklyceum of the elementary school teachers in the outside neighborhoods of Amsterdam: "What to do with the Mohammeds and Murats in the music lesson?" I decided to have a look in the classes. When I reported about my visits in the teachers meetings at the Amsterdam Music Schools that in some of the classes there were up to ten 'ethnic minority' children, I was met with disbelief: "You must have miscounted the number of Turkish children!".

I turned to the ethnomusicologists of the Amsterdam University. They had no real interest in the Turkish and Moroccan community in Amsterdam. One professor once tried to conduct a women's choir. At the first rehearsal nobody showed up. What this professor failed to understand that in the musical tradition where the Turkish people came from a man cannot conduct a women's choir.

After much discussion about separation or integration of the ethnic music lessons it was decided to integrate them. The goals were then the teaching of saz and darbuka for Turkish children in the Turkish language in order to integrate the lessons into the regular program of the Amsterdam Music School. As it turned out, but I was not aware of this at that time, the goals are completely in line with the musical rights as formulated by the UNESCO and the IMC.

These goals were not unopposed. More than a few teachers of the MuziekLyceum, a music school that considered itself as the most progressive in town, were against the integration of Turkish and Moroccan music teaching in the classical music teaching.

After quite some research, that led from multi cultural music centers to Turkish restaurant with live music and back, a number of motivated Turkish teachers were found. Long discussions took place with them on the content of the Turkish music lessons. In the end it was decided that the teaching would be turned to a new style, a kind of new stream and new forms of music reflecting the position of the Turkish community in their new home country, The Netherlands. This style would have to balance the rural music making form the past and the urban music making in the present. Parallels were seen with the birth and developments of other rural-urban styles such as Flamenco in Spain, Fado in Portugal and Rebattica in Greece.

The startup budget of 20.000 guilders, about 10.000 euro, from the provisions for "project subsidies" from the Department Sports and Culture was the basis for the Turkish Music Project. This relatively small amount of money was provided for the try-out project with the perspective of regular subsidy in case the project would be successful. After one year 'free of charge' for the lessons, it was altered in a 'reduced payment' for lessons. This 'positive discrimination' created more resistance than the 'free of charge' period.

After four years Wouter Turkenburg left the Muzieklyceum to become head of jazz studies at the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague. Huib Schippers took over the end responsibility of the lessons to 'ethnic minorities' and integration all the projects in the "World Music School".

A big problem was the lack of instruments. Provisions were made to import the Turkish music instruments from Izmir.

Another problem was the recruiting of teachers. In the end one person was found, an performing artist on voice and baglama, Ceylan Utlu. He and his musical colleagues became the first teachers.

For the recruitment of the students the elementary schools in the outer neighborhoods of Amsterdam were contacted. Most of the parents of the students came from rural areas in Turkey and they had no musical training.

As it turned out, music was a strong and effective way to shape the personal and cultural identity of the Turkish migrants. It had an essential different function in Turkish culture than in the Dutch culture. Music in the Turkish culture is always there, is of everybody and only needs a medium, the performer, to be sounding. This holistic, performers friendly attitude towards musicians resulted in an essential different teacher-student relation than in western music teaching.

While the classical music teachers were still struggling with the question if group lessons were a good or a bad thing in music education, the Turkish music pedagogues were all in favor of group lessons. The minimum size of a group was four students but more often than not there were more people in the room. With this one of the goals was realized: to teach Turkish music not only on Turkish instruments but also according to Turkish music methods.

The classical music teachers were somewhat overwhelmed by the fact that the waiting list for classical music instruments were smaller than the versus waiting lists for ethnic instruments.

The Muziekyceum is location in the heart of the elite center of Amsterdam. Many assumed that Turkish music lessons in this part of the town would create an impossible threshold for the Turkish migrants living in the outskirts of Amsterdam. The opposite turned out to be the case. For many Turkish participants, the fact that their music was instructed at the same place as the classical music of the western world showed that their music was taken seriously.

The Turkish Music Project immediately attracted a large amount of media attention. Within a few months the students were performing in a well listened to live radio broadcast program called "Fur Elise" in the Concertgebouw.

There were counter pressures from Turkish community as well. One of the most talented students on the saz, Murat, brought back his instrument because the Iman had decided that all his free time on the Saturday had to be spend on lessons in the of Koran School.

#### Conclusions:

- What seemed at first to be simple to organize, music lessons for migrant children, turned out to be a trigger for many complex situations and circumstances.
- The assumptions on the political level turned out to be outdated and the assumptions on the social-cultural level turned out to be wrong.
- The realities on both the political and social-cultural level put the Turkish Music Project in a exceptional daylight.
- The choice to offer the lessons in migrant music / new music / ? / as ordinary, normal and regular as lessons in classical, pop and jazz music turned out to be the right choice.

- Saz and darbuka lessons are now integrated in the regular offer of lessons of the Amsterdam Music School. Also in Rotterdam and The Hague this is the case. Next to the with public money supported official music schools there are private music schools for Turkish Music lessons everywhere in Holland.
- Turkish music lesson help the acceptance of Turkish people in Holland, give them self esteem, and offer more choice for Dutch people to enjoy music.
- Cultural neglect and indifference leads is cultural oppression. It generates conservatism, radicalism and in the end terrorism.
- The local music schools, the national music school networks, the EMU (European Music School Union) and the EMC have all separate and common responsibilities. Turkish and Moroccan music teaching should be given a firm place next to the teaching of Western music: classical, jazz and pop. No 'Leit Kultur' but cultural coexistence based upon 'equality'.

**Wouter Turkenburg, October 2008**

