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Music of the Zaza

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Summary

The music of the Zaza (Kırmanj–Dimilî)-speaking population in Anatolia remains largely unexplored, and a comprehensive overview of their musical traditions is therefore not yet possible. Different dialects of the language are spoken across a wide area stretching from Sivas to Urfa, and both musical practices and academic research vary considerably. Best known is the music of the Zaza in Dersim, where laments and religious songs are the most prominent forms. From regions further east, at least some musicians and repertoires are known, while the music of Sunni Zaza communities still awaits systematic investigation. The often-debated question of whether a distinct musical language of “the Zaza” or “the Kurds” exists cannot be answered on an academic basis, given the near-total absence of historical documentation. The earliest recordings of Zaza songs date only from the mid-twentieth century. Since the later twentieth century, Zaza music has changed considerably under the influence of migration, urbanisation, and the development of the music industry.

The music of the Zaza (Kırmanj-Dimilî)-speaking population in Anatolia still remains largely unexplored, and a comprehensive overview of their musical traditions is therefore not yet possible. Different dialects of this language are spoken across a wide area, including parts of the provinces of Sivas, Erzincan, Tunceli, Elazığ, Bingöl, Erzurum, Muş, Diyarbakır, Siirt, Urfa, and Adıyaman (Çağlayan, 2016; Kaya, 2011; Lezgîn, 2016; Özcan & Çağlayan, 2019). Within this extensive region, musical practices vary considerably.

The best-documented repertoire today is that of central Dersim, a predominantly Zaza-speaking region (Aslan, 2010; Erdoğan, 2023; Greve & Kızıldağ, 2025 (forthcomming); Greve & Şahin, 2019; Önal, 2021; Önder & Şenol, 2018; Özcan, 2003). In addition to its language, however, the region is distinguished by two further features: most notably, its traumatic history, particularly the massacres of 1937-38. By far the most significant literary and musical tradition in Dersim are laments, performed either solo or with accompaniment on instruments such as the *tembur* lute or the European violin. The majority of surviving songs recount events from these years of violence. Among the most renowned poet-singers are Sej Qaji (c. 1871-1936), Weliyê

Wuşenê Yimami (1889-1958), Alaverdi (1921-1983), Hüseyin Doğanay (1940-2005), and Sait Baksi (b. 1943) (Cengiz, 2010). Songs on love and other topics appear to have been more widespread before 1937, in addition to dance songs often performed without instrumental accompaniment. Other tragic events-such as avalanches or conflicts between tribes-were also the subject of songs. In addition, it was possible in Dersim to commission well-known poet-singers to compose lamentations in memory of deceased relatives or acquaintances.

A second distinctive feature of Dersim is Alevism and its local traditions until the second half of the twenteeth century. Some *dedes* (pirs) conducted ceremonies in Dersim entirely in Zaza and also sang a wide range of religious songs in this language (Cengiz, 2014). Nevertheless, religious songs in Turkish and even Kurmanji have likewise been preserved and continue to be performed today.

In neighbouring areas where related dialects of Zaza are spoken-such as Qerebel/Karabel (eastern Sivas), Karer (central Bingöl), and Varto-Hınıs (between Erzurum and Muş)-musical traditions appear broadly similar to those of Dersim, insofar as the available evidence allows to asses. Laments and religious practices are shared across these regions; however, the deeply melancholic atmosphere characteristic of Dersim’s musical aesthetics-obviously shaped by its traumatic history-is missing elsewhere. In these neighbouring areas, Zaza-language songs may focus on village concerns, minor incidents, or interpersonal conflicts. Dance songs, often recounting love stories, are widespread throughout the region and are performed in both Zaza and Kurmanji (Şahin, 2016). East and south of Bingöl lies the region of the Kurmanji-speaking *dengbêjs*, who almost always sing in Kurmanji. Some Zaza-speaking *dengbêjs* in Bingöl or Varto also perform songs in Kurmanji. Zaza-speaking poet-singers such as Hıdır Baş (1955-2023) and Devrêş Baba (1938-1999) from Varto appear to have been more strongly influenced by Alevi song traditions or by Turkish *âşık* singers.

Far less is known about the music of the central and southern Zaza communities, most of whom follow Sunni Islam. In these areas, Islamic chants and recitations-such as *qeside*, *ilahi*, *mevlîd*, and *beyîd*-are widely practised. It remains uncertain whether these genres display local stylistic features or instead conform to a broader pan-Islamic Anatolian style. The only publication that addresses this question, a study of Zaza-language *mevlîds* (Tıraşçı, 2012), suggests the latter. Only two singers from Bingöl have achieved limited recognition beyond their local contexts: Rêncber Ezîz (1955-1988, Karasu, 2012) and Sait Altun (d. 2018). Their musical styles differ markedly from those associated with Dersim. Rêncber Ezîz, influenced by the leftist musical movements of his era, even incorporated *uzun havas* into his repertoire. By

contrast, Sait Altun was primarily known for performing at weddings and public celebrations, where he was usually accompanied by an electric *saz*.

At present, nothing is known about Zaza-language songs or singers from the southern provinces, such as Diyarbakır and Urfa, or from the smaller Zaza-speaking enclaves in Kayseri, Kars, and Ardahan. Among the better-known Zaza musicians is Mehmet Akbaş from Dicle-Pîran, who is now based in Cologne, Germany.

Overall, it is difficult to identify shared characteristics across Zaza musical traditions. Many of the song forms-*lawik*, *deyir*, *kelûm*, *lûrikî* (lullabies), kilam, and *siware* (laments)- resemble equivalent genres performed in other Anatolian languages.

Zaza Music and Kurmanji Music

A serious and systematic comparison between the musical traditions of Zaza- and Kurmanji-speaking communities has yet to be undertaken. One obvious difficulty is that even Kurmanji-speaking traditions do not constitute a musical unity. Music appears to change and adapt more rapidly than language, and can therefore be traced only through sound recordings-dating back, at most, to the mid-twentieth century-or through notated sources, which in the case of Zaza-language songs exist only from the late twentieth century onwards. This stands in contrast to comparative linguistic research, which can reconstruct the histories and interrelations of languages on the basis of contemporary usage alone.

Across the wider Kurdish population of the Middle East, musical traditions display few consistent traits that could be regarded as universally valid for Kurds in general. Although Kurdish folk dances and epic traditions such as those of the *dengbêjs* share certain structural or stylistic features across some regions, a broad variety of regionally and religiously distinct forms of song and recitation exists. For example, the music of Hakkâri differs markedly from that of Dersim or western Iran. Comparable musical practices may be referred to by different terms in different regions (Allison 2001), while the same terms may carry divergent meanings according to local usage. Even within central Dersim, no unified Kurmanji musical style-clearly distinct from that of the Zaza-speaking communities-can be identified. The melodic style of Mahmut Baran (1923-1975) and his son Ali Baran (b. 1956), who lived in the village of Bargini (Karabakır, Hozat district) and performed *kılams* accompanied by the *bağlama*, differs significantly from the styles of the *dengbêjs* in Kiğı or from the songs of Muhundu.

Although numerous scholars have written on “Kurdish music”, only one publication to date has focused specifically on Zaza musical traditions: Beltekin’s article *Music among the Zazas* (Beltekin 2019). The study concentrates primarily on lyrical content

rather than on musical structures. Beltekin's main case study is the singer Rêncber Ezîz from Bingöl, though the article also discusses a range of Sunni religious music genres-including *qeside*, *ilahi*, *mevlîd*, and *beyîd*-together with various song forms such as *lawik*, *deyir*, *kelâm*, love and labour songs, *lûrikî* (lullabies), *şîware* (laments), and instrumental pieces. None of these musical forms, however, is unique to the Zaza language; rather, they are shared across diverse linguistic and cultural settings.

Comparisons with the musical traditions of other related languages, such as Gurani in north-western Iran, remain largely speculative owing to the absence of both academic studies and historical sources (Hooshmanddrad 2004). At most, only surface-level similarities can be observed-for example, the widespread use of long-necked lutes, which are common across many linguistic communities.

The frequently debated question of whether a distinct musical language of "the Zaza" or "the Kurds" exists cannot be answered on an academic basis, owing to the near-total absence of historical documentation. The earliest audio recordings of Zaza songs date only from the mid-twentieth century. Such sources are insufficient for formulating any credible theory about the "origins" of music in the region or about the survival of older musical structures extending back several centuries.

Recent Developments

Since the mid-twentieth century, migration to the cities has left many villages-particularly those inhabited by ethnic or religious minorities-largely deserted, with only a few elderly residents remaining permanently. By contrast, towns such as Tunceli, Bingöl, and Varto have developed into new urban centres. The practice of singing directly for acquaintances and relatives in the village has given way to the dissemination of music through mass media and to professional arrangements produced in recording studios. Zaza-language music has also become politicised, while some performers have sought success in the wider Turkish market.

From 1961 onwards, many Zaza speakers migrated to Europe, often driven by the Turkish state's repression of their mother tongue and of Alevism. From the 1990s, numerous Dersim and Varto associations, together with Alevi organisations, were founded in Europe, and Zaza speakers have played an active role in them. Since then, large concerts and festivals featuring Zaza-speaking performers have been held regularly across Europe, attracting audiences of both Turkish and non-Turkish background. Most of the best-known Zaza singers live in Europe, or have done so for part of their careers. These include Yılmaz Çelik (Basel/Dersim), Kemal Kahraman (Berlin/Dersim), Sakina Teyna (Vienna), Mikail Aslan (Mainz), Ahmet Aslan (Cologne/Rotterdam/Istanbul), Zelemele (Düsseldorf), Mehmet Çapan (Kornwestheim),

Rêncber Ezîz (1955-1988; latterly Bremen), Seîd Altun (1949-2018, Germany), Nilüfer Akbal (Cologne), Lütfü Gültekin (Brussels), Ozan Serdar (Bonn), Mehmet Akbaş (Cologne), Maviş Güneşer (Berlin), Ferhat Tunç (Rüsselsheim), Ali Asker (Strasbourg), and Taner Akyol (Berlin) (Greve and Şahin 2019).

The music of the Zaza has undergone significant change in Europe. On the one hand, many migrants sought to preserve old musical traditions by recording and documenting them before they disappeared. Collectors based in Europe-such as Daimi Cengiz, Musa Canpolat, Hawar Tornecengi, Zilfi Selcan, Metin and Kemal Kahraman, Hüseyin Erdem, and Tevfik Şahin-built extensive archives of historical music recordings over many years. Musicians frequently consulted these collectors and reconstructed traditions on the basis of their recordings. Strongly shaped by the European diaspora, a “Dersim revival” has flourished since the 1990s, often overshadowing the music of other Zaza regions.

At the same time, music in Europe has continued to evolve. The brothers Metin and Kemal Kahraman, for example, arranged songs using European instruments such as the guitar, violin, and flute, while Zelemele performed Zaza songs in rock and hip hop styles. During his studies at the Peter Cornelius Conservatory in Mainz (2001-2005), Mikail Aslan collaborated on an orchestral arrangement of the song *Munzur*, while Ahmet Aslan learned flamenco guitar at the Codarts Conservatory in Rotterdam. Taner Akyol went further still, composing contemporary new music on the massacres of 1938; his piece *Tertele* for chamber orchestra premiered at the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg (Greve and Şahin 2019).

Conclusion

This text demonstrates that the musical traditions of Zaza (Kırmanj-Dimilî)-speaking communities are geographically and historically highly fragmented, locally embedded, and insufficiently documented. The principal obstacles to a comprehensive assessment of Zaza music are the wide spatial distribution of dialects, pronounced regional and religious differentiations, and, most critically, the severe scarcity of historical written and audio sources. Consequently, it is analytically untenable to speak of “Zaza music” as a single, homogeneous tradition.

The central argument of the text is that Dersim occupies an exceptional position within this landscape. In Dersim, musical practice has acquired a lament-centered, profoundly melancholic aesthetic shaped by Alevi belief and the traumatic history of the 1937-38 massacres. Music here functions not merely as an aesthetic form but as a vehicle of collective memory and mourning. The central role of the Zaza language in cem rituals and religious hymns further establishes Dersim as a linguistic and religious

focal point of musical production. While neighboring Zaza-speaking regions share certain musical features with Dersim, they do not exhibit a comparable aesthetic intensity structured by traumatic historical experience.

The text also explains why a systematic comparison between Zaza and Kurmanci musical traditions has not yet been achieved. Music emerges as a practice that transforms more rapidly than language and is deeply responsive to regional and religious contexts. Accordingly, overarching categories such as “Kurdish music” or “Zaza music” possess limited analytical value given the current state of historical and ethnomusicological evidence.

Finally, a key contribution of the text lies in its analysis of the transformative impact of the European diaspora on Zaza music. Migration has facilitated both the documentation and preservation of older repertoires and the emergence of new aesthetic forms, hybrid musical expressions, and a powerful “Dersim revival” since the 1990s. This revival has repositioned Zaza music within a transnational framework, turning it into a dynamic cultural field shaped by the interplay of memory, politics, and artistic innovation.

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