

From Istanbul Radio to Opera Stage: A Journey of Self-Discovery

Turkish basso shares how his mother's musical influence and operatic roles help him express emotions and connect with audiences.

By Cumhur Görgün

As a child growing up in Turkey, I vividly recall the sound of my mother's voice filling my ears and permeating every aspect of my being. She loved to sing and sang everyday, whether it be practicing for an upcoming performance or just singing for pleasure around the house. At bedtime, I would fall asleep to her tender rendition of Brahms' *Wiegenlied*

My mother, Asuman Aslim, was a soloist with the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation. As a young child, I would accompany her to rehearsals or concerts in the TRT building. I grew up in that building. It is called "Istanbul Radio," but to me it seemed more like the Topkapi Palace of the old Ottoman Empire. Large marble steps at the entrance led to a big, heavy metallic door. To this little boy, it looked like something made for a giant. Inside, it was more like a museum than a broadcasting facility, with scores of vintage microphones, old LPs, antique gramophones and old photographs of famous singers and musicians.

For me, the building was a mystery meant to be explored, and I inspected every nook and cranny, except for the recording studios. The studios were sacrosanct, but they did let me sit behind the soundproof glass with the *tonmeister*, the technician responsible for the overall quality of the recording. When the green light turned to red, I'd hear the collective sound of the musicians, then my mother's distinctive voice coming from the speaker. Her voice rising above the orchestra gave me a feeling that I still find impossible to put into words.

I continued to explore as they performed, and as I ran about playing games and listening to the music, I gained a powerful insight that guides me to this day: Making music is a serious undertaking that must be approached with great care and sensitivity. Listening to the music being recorded in that building was an intense experience. I can still hear the strains of the Turkish classical music composed so long ago, being sung with the heart.

Little boys, though, are notorious for short attention spans. Soon, I'd get bored, wondering when my mother would be ready to go home. But boredom, at least while listening to music, turned out not to be a bad thing. As my mind wandered to thoughts of dinner, as clashing cymbals marked Ottoman rhythms, and as my mother's voice rose above it all like a lark, I had no idea how that boredom was creating my life's path.

As I approached my teenage years, like many of my peers, I started to play bass guitar and keyboard, but I never really developed a passion to play any particular instrument. I knew that there was something inside me that needed to be expressed—something that could never be expressed with playing an instrument. My mother witnessed my struggle and said: "Why not try to sing?" That question surprised me. Although I was raised with music, I was quite shy about singing. In fact, I hadn't sung anything in my entire life. I had never used my voice to utter a tune until that very moment.

Why had I never tried to sing? I assumed that my voice was ugly and that nobody would want to listen to it. It never occurred to me that my voice would be my instrument. "No," mother told me. "Forget about the voice. Singing is about nourishing your soul and having new perspectives on life." It was hard for my younger self to understand what she meant, but when I started to sing, her words immediately struck a chord. As an introverted teenager, I saw how singing could become a mode of expression and how it could help me discover the different aspects of my personality.

I have a bass voice, the lowest of the vocal *fachs*. Operatic roles typically sung by basses include fathers, devils and soldiers, as well as a various and sundry assortment of "bad guys." As you can imagine, we are not like tenors. Tenors always get the girl; basses do not. But that's a topic for another discussion.

Every time I sing an operatic aria, I feel as if I meet a new version of a human soul as I seek to experience and express that character's emotions. The character I perform is completely different from the person I am. What a way to gain a better understanding of the human condition and to widen my own worldview! Singing affords me the opportunity to inhabit the souls of complex characters wrestling with deep moral and emotional issues.

When I sing I feel my soul expand like a surging river. To sing the character's song, you need to find his emotional path and sometimes it's not a pretty one. Hatred, lust, greed, revenge, you name it! You have to cross the big emotional mountains into new emotional territories. The experience is unique and individual.

Singing is different for each person and for each song. Perhaps singing can be described as a metamorphosis that anyone—singer or listener—can experience, giving access to an unending reservoir of understanding and empathy. Like life itself, it is about change and finding the shape of the road that lies ahead.

When I sing, my voice carries my soul, allowing me to share it with others. There is a German saying: *Stimme und Charakter sind parallel*, or “Voice and character are parallel.” Singing reveals character.

So why do I sing? I sing because I want to be understood, to connect with people, to have an adventure, to explore, to understand the world and to change things for the better. All noble motives. But the real reason I sing? I leave behind all my burdens and troubles when I sing. I live in a different world. I feel fully alive in the present moment, without beginning and without end.