

# From Vienna Opera to War-Torn Europe: The Remarkable Life of Vahdet Auntie

*A Turkish mezzo-soprano's journey from musical acclaim in Vienna to escaping Nazi-occupied Austria, remembered through a child's admiring perspective.*

**By İdil Biret**

I had known Vahdet Auntie since as long as I could remember. I remember her climbing the stairs of our apartment building with a black guitar case and singing songs. When I misbehaved, she'd tell me that she would put me in her guitar case and take me away. When Vahdet Auntie appeared with the black case, I would make a fuss. My mother used to scold me for it. I was only 3 years old at the time

Eventually, she got used to leaving the case at her place when she came to our apartment. Vahdet Auntie used to sing Schubert lieder with my mother accompanying her **[on the piano]**. This is how I got to know many of Schubert's songs at a very young age. Vahdet Auntie was a longtime friend of my mother from her German school **[German language school in Ankara, or in Germany?]** days. When she got together with Reşadet Auntie (who was also a friend from the German school), they would chat endlessly about their school days, the songs they sang there was marvelous, and they always engage in sweet gossip. They would playfully call each other "wizard" **[is 'wizard' related to Schubert? To Germany?]** and have a great time.

Vahdet Auntie lived in a small apartment in Ankara. She chose a small apartment because she lived alone, and it was easier to take care of. Her mother lived in the apartment next door, and her brother and his family lived on the floor above. Her father had built the apartment building. Vahdet Auntie was imaginative. The decoration of her house was far

from ordinary at the time: a half-tail black Bechstein piano, an ottoman adorned with elegant fabrics she bought at the market, cushions instead of a dining table, two rocking chairs made in Anatolia, and Ottoman engravings on the walls. A well-functioning fireplace surprised and delighted her visitors.

Vahdet Auntie's father had taken her with him to Vienna when he went there for work. She was learning to play the violin at the time. I'm not entirely sure, but she might have been a student of Karl Berger [**father of German-American jazz musician Karl Berger?**]. Mahmut Ragıp<sup>1</sup>, my mother's cousin, was also her teacher, as was for my mother. In Vienna, after talking to some teachers and receiving their positive responses to dedicate herself to music, her father placed her as a boarder with a lady [**what kind of 'lady'? Wealthy lady? Titled lady? Bourgeois owner of a large home?**]. Settled in Vienna, mischievous Vahdet Auntie played the role of a someone who had escaped from a harem for only 6 months before, and some naive acquaintances believed it. She pretended she didn't know German, acting like a sheltered, timid girl.

But one day, she started speaking fluent German and going out in the latest fashion. Everyone around her was amazed. Meanwhile, she was discovered at the academy because of her beautiful mezzo-soprano voice. She began a rigorous routine to train as an ideal prima donna. Singing lessons, harmony courses, diction, dramatic training, courses in art and music history, and even fencing lessons.

She quickly started appearing on stage in small roles, and later, she began playing mezzo roles in Wagner and Verdi's operas at the Wiener Volksoper (Princess Eboli and Ortrud in Lohengrin). During this time, a famous Viennese architect who had seen her in the opera managed to convince Vahdet Auntie, and in the mid-1930s, she married Herr Mittag.

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<sup>1</sup> Mahmut Ragıp Gazimihal (27 March 1900 - 13 December 1961), was a Turkish musicologist, researcher, historian and writer. He started his education with his father. After his secondary school education, he was able to complete higher education in different schools. He completed his music education in Germany and France and met important musicians. When he returned to Turkey, he gave lectures on music history at various schools and universities and published his articles in magazines such as Kültür Haftası. Gazimihal, who died in 1961, was also the uncle of pianist İdil Biret. [[wikipedia.tr](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahmut_Ragıp_Gazimihal)]

Herr Mittag was a well-known and wealthy architect. They lived in a beautiful mansion across from Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna, leading a splendid life.

When she mentioned about those days, saying, "I saw the best of everything, lived in luxury and elegance. I was becoming known and respected in the opera. I had become a member of high society. My husband was highly regarded, and he fulfilled all my wishes." During our conversation, Vahdet Auntie mentioned a visit to Vienna by Cemal Reşit Rey, (One of the greatest composers from Turkey, known as one of the Turkish Five). He had gone to Vienna in the 1930s for a concert featuring his compositions. Vahdet Auntie organized a beautiful reception in his honor at her home, attended by all the luminaries of Vienna's art scene. The hostess's relaxed and elegant demeanor in this circle deeply impressed Cemal Bey.

Additionally, Vahdet Auntie sang Cemal Bey's lieder. Rehearsals for this concert were held at Vahdet Auntie's house. Herr Mittag, becoming increasingly impatient with these frequent gatherings, once told his wife, "If this Turk continues to come and go for a longer time, something bad will happen." Around that time, the "Anschluss" happened. Hitler's armies occupied Vienna. Vahdet Auntie witnessed the atrocities with disgust, and her husband joined the Nazi Party to ensure he could continue his profession. She couldn't bear his decision. She told me about concerts she had to participate in, almost like negotiations, where she had to perform due to her mandatory involvement.

Vahdet Auntie's host [**where she lived before marriage?**] in Vienna was Jewish. She asked Vahdet Auntie, "Can you send my jewelry to Switzerland for me? They won't allow me to take them with me when I leave." Vahdet Auntie immediately agreed. She went to Zurich for a day and handed the jewelry over to a relative of her host. Her husband was on a business trip at the time. When he returned, he spoke harshly to Vahdet Auntie. He said,

"They told me where and why you went. If you ever do such a crazy thing again, they will get rid of both of us," scolding her.

Shortly after, her husband was called up for military service. Vahdet Auntie's life became increasingly difficult. She was being followed by intelligence agents. Eventually, she left for Istanbul on the last train (**Orient Express?**) from Vienna, never to return. After returning to Istanbul, Vahdet Auntie learned that her husband had been in a plane crash in Stalingrad. Miraculously, Herr Mittag survived, but he suffered from amnesia as a result of the accident. After recovering and regaining his memory, he pressured Vahdet Auntie to return, but she had built a new life in Ankara and had been trying to get a divorce since returning from Vienna.

Her husband, on the other hand, still believed she would come back to him and take care of him. Vahdet Auntie didn't go, and Herr Mittag didn't divorce her...

In 1956, we went to Vienna for a vacation, and as we passed by Schönbrunn Palace, we took a photo in front of Vahdet Auntie's house and sent it to her.