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GRUP YORUM: ARTISTS OF THE PEOPLE FOR 40 YEARS (1985–2025) PRODUCING AND PROPOSING A SOCIAL ALTERNATIVE THROUGH MUSIC

Abstract: Through the case study of the Turkish music collective Grup Yorum, we will explore how music is still perceived as a subversive and potentially dangerous tool by the establishment today. Since its inception (1985), Grup Yorum has suffered continuous repression due to its political and social commitment. The cultural independence and linguistic pluralism sought by the band demonstrate their commitment to global causes in the affirmation of diversity. Musicological-historical reflections from the perspective of cultural studies will complement the ethnographic study.

Keywords: Grup Yorum, Turkish folk music, resistance, Halay dance, repression, alternative

Introduction

Through the emblematic case of the Turkish music collective Grup Yorum,¹ this article aims to investigate how music continues to be perceived as a sub-

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¹ As an introduction to the music of Grup Yorum, I recommend listening to *Güleycan* at <https://youtu.be/jtn3KE4xeBo?si=RVg7A0Iw-CD182Fd>. For all subsequent content presented via links, I refer to 15/07/2025 as the date of last access.

versive and potentially dangerous tool by the establishment. The analysis will focus on the group's cultural, social, and political practices, highlighting how their actions have been able to affect the collective imagination and influence the masses, in a constant confrontation with the power dynamics and social structures of contemporary Turkey.

The analysis is based on in-depth ethnographic field research conducted in 2021, which allowed for a close observation of the band's performance practices, both during their international tours and in everyday life. Rooted in the Turkish folk music tradition, the collective stands out for its ability to interweave elements of protest and political engagement with a powerful, symbolic, and highly evocative musical narrative. Their repertoire thus becomes a privileged channel for exploring the dynamics of cultural and social resistance, through the creation of a musical language capable of challenging power and giving voice to the oppressed. The analysis I propose fits into the perspective of cultural studies, which, as defined by Peter Burke in 1978, represent "a system of shared meanings, attitudes and values, together with the symbolic forms in which they are expressed and translated".²

Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary research field that investigates the dynamics of contemporary culture, including popular culture, in its intertwining with historical and social contexts.³ This approach allows complex categories such as ideology, social class structure, ethnic identity and national formations to be included in the processes of analysis by observing their articulation through cultural practices, such as music. Within this framework, cultural and identity phenomena will not be considered as "fixed, stable or bounded entities, but rather as dynamic sets of practices and processes that are constantly evolving, influenced and renegotiated over time".⁴

Through this lens, I have endeavored to understand how cultural norms and customs are created and manipulated by human actions, placing the shaping elements of identity categories and thus languages,⁵ symbols,⁶ and

² Cf. the introduction by Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Abingdon, Taylor & Francis Ltd., 2009³.

³ Simon During (Eds), *The Cultural Studies Reader*, New York, Routledge, 2007³.

⁴ Cf. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/cultural-studies>

⁵ The languages of Grup Yorum are understood as the communicative tools through which the collective expresses its worldview; from committed and popular music to lyric writing, to performative gestures in concerts, to media presence.

⁶ Symbols thus become central elements – in this case the Halay folk dance, the red flags, but also the very bodies of the members of the collective who expose themselves

practices⁷ at the center of the argument.⁸

In parallel, interest in microhistory⁹ offers a bottom-up approach, highlighting individual historical personalities, customs, and past attitudes. The contribution will also be supplemented with a talk given by Grup Yorum in a seminar I held (in their presence) on 15 May 2024 at La Sapienza University of Rome, titled “Rumori Sovversivi, da Jacques Attali alla vicenda del Grup Yorum”.¹⁰ The seminar was for doctoral students in history, anthropology and religion, the Master’s course in musicology and ethno-anthropological disciplines.¹¹

Grup Yorum: We have never left our stage empty

The collective, founded in 1985 by four Marmara University students, has established itself as one of the most powerful voices of politically-engaged music in Turkey. Over the years, Grup Yorum has been able to embody the

to repression, even to hunger strikes. Every gesture, every image, every note takes on a shared political and cultural meaning, rooted in the collective memory and imagination of the Turkish radical left.

⁷ The practices of Grup Yorum take the form of concrete acts of counterculture and militancy: the self-organization of concerts, direct participation in social struggles, the construction of community and solidarity networks in working-class neighborhoods, the involvement of the families of political prisoners, and even the foundation of autonomous educational and musical realities. These practices not only resist censorship but also pose as transformative acts, capable of constructing new spaces of freedom and participation.

⁸ Paolo Carusi, Manfredi Merluzzi (Eds), *Note Tricolori. La storia dell’Italia contemporanea nella popular music*, Pisa, Pacini Editore, 2021, 17.

⁹ The history of Grup Yorum underlines how their artistic and political experience represents a form of history from below that gives voice to cultures, identities, and memories excluded from the official narrative of Turkish modernization. Grup Yorum fits perfectly into that strand of social history that has shifted the focus away from elites and “big” institutions and towards popular, regional, and subaltern cultures, proposing a counter-narrative that reclaims marginalized experiences. In this sense, the collective becomes an agent of memory and cultural resistance. For a general discussion of micro-history, c.f. Carlotta Sorba, Federico Mazzini, *La svolta culturale*, Bari, Editori Laterza, 2021, 97–117.

¹⁰ The reference text mentioned in the seminar is Jacques Attali, *Rumori. Saggio sull’economia politica della musica*, Milano, Mazzotta, 1978.

¹¹ The seminar poster and references can be found at:

https://lettere.web.uniroma1.it/sites/default/files/download/Seminrio%2015%20maggio_DEF.pdf.

aspirations, frustrations, and struggles of the Turkish people, acting as a bridge between art and activism.¹² Their songs, deeply rooted in the Anatolian musical tradition but enriched by global influences, convey a strong intercultural drive to encourage dialogue between peoples and generations, addressing issues such as social justice, state oppression, censorship, marginalization, and political repression. From *Defol Amerika*,¹³ which deals with the struggle against American imperialism,¹⁴ to *Bu mahalle bizim*, a song urging all people to take back their territory, but which also contains references to some of Istanbul's neighborhoods that have distinguished themselves in social mobilization,¹⁵ to *Bir görüş kabininde*, a dialogue between mother and daughter. The mother implores her daughter to give up the hunger strike that is leading her towards death, while the daughter answers each plea with the lucidity of one who has chosen struggle as the ultimate form of dignity.¹⁶

¹² Songül Karahasanoglu, Gabriel Skoog, "Synthesizing Identity: Gestures of Filiation and Affiliation in Turkish Popular Music", *Asian Music*, 40 (2), 2009, 61.

¹³ For an in-depth understanding of the US-Turkish relationship read: F. Stephen Larabee, *Troubled Partnership: U.S.-Turkish Relations in an Era of Global Geopolitical Change*, Santa Monica, Rand Corporation, 2010. Also: Steven A. Cook et al., *U.S.-Turkey Relations: A New Partnership*, United States of America, Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2012, 38.

¹⁴ The struggle against American imperialism has been one of the founding ideological pillars of the Turkish radical left since the 1960s and 1970s. Emblematic is the figure of Deniz Gezmiş, a young revolutionary inspired by the international liberation movements and a symbol of resistance to Western neo-colonialism. For the Turkish revolutionary left, US imperialism represented (and still represents) a system of economic, military, and cultural domination that crushes the self-determination of peoples and fuels inequalities. Within this framework, opposition to US interests in Turkey, from military presence to political interference, became a structural part of militant identity, fueling practices, languages, and symbols that still permeate the antagonist culture today.

¹⁵ Reference is made to Gazi, an Alevi and working-class neighborhood, known for its history of social and insurrectional struggles, as well as to Armutlu, the epicenter of historical mobilizations related to the hunger strikes led by relatives and supporters of political prisoners. No less significant is the implicit reference to Okmeydanı, another crucial hub of popular urban organization, the scene of important social and political disputes. This same neighborhood is home to the İdil Cultural Centre, a symbolic and strategic location for the artistic and militant activities of the Grup Yorum collective, to which specific attention will be devoted later in this article.

¹⁶ The instances within the vast discography of Grup Yorum are numerous; by way of example, here are a few particularly significant ones. The song *Haklıyız kazanacağız* was

Their repertoire is characterized by a lucid and passionate critique of the contemporary world, its authoritarian drifts and cultural transformations, sensitively addressing the values of solidarity, resistance, perseverance, and compassion. What makes them unique in the panorama of political music, more than in the canonical path of many committed artists, is the concrete activism that has always distinguished them – not just words, but actions.¹⁷ Grup Yorum has actively taken part in demonstrations, hunger strikes, and protest events against the authoritarianism of the Turkish government, openly positioning itself against the repressive policies of the AKP (Justice and Development Party), especially under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. They sided with opposition movements such as those for the rights of workers, Kurdish minorities, students, imprisoned opponents, and the families of victims of power abuses. Their militancy has often led them to censorship, arrests, and performance bans, turning them into living symbols of artistic and civil resistance. As members of the Turkish alternative and revolutionary music scene, they have been able to build a transgenerational community that recognizes in their music not only a vehicle of expression, but a concrete instrument of political and cultural mobilization. They set up a choir¹⁸ of six hundred people, including young students and elderly people,

written in memory of Mehmet, a young man who was killed on the May Day celebration in 1989. Many verses of this song refer to this event, for example: “The bullet wound on your forehead is now an unquenchable fire.” *Sevdanıza and olsun* is a hymn dedicated to the 122 martyrs of the revolution who were killed during the massacre in Turkish prisons when the Turkish army broke into twenty political prisons that were on hunger strike.

¹⁷ To get a concrete idea of the numerous activities promoted by the collective and the events in which they take part, some sample links are suggested. Scrolling through their social pages, one can observe their intense presence in the field: marches, public interventions, representations and moments of political and civil participation. Here are some of the most important ones from the last few months (scrolling through the feed you can go back through the years and get a more complete idea): participation in an event in Leverkusen: <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1AX52SV61h/?mibextid=wwXIfr>. Attendance at the Traditional People’s Table’s Picnic organized by the Pir Sultan Cultural Centre in London: <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1CDS6W8Byj/?mibextid=wwXIfr>. Participation in the event “Resist NATO Coalition against NATO” held in Den Haag, The Netherlands: <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1CHwJS2vws/?mibextid=wwXIfr>. Participation in the solidarity exhibition and meeting of different left-wing organizations with Palestine in Paris, France: <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1B2Hm7Ugd5/?mibextid=wwXIfr>.

¹⁸ I recommend watching the video showing a village near Izmir where the elderly choir of Grup Yorum, led by Ali Araci (flutist and kavalist, who is now in prison), is at work.

in eleven provinces of Anatolia.¹⁹ They founded the Children of Hope Orchestra²⁰ in 2013, an initiative offering free music education to around ninety children. The orchestra was established in Okmeydanı, a populous area of Istanbul, where local children had access to a variety of musical instruments, both Western and Anatolian. Each child was educated on the value of inclusiveness and shared growth at the center. In addition, an appeal was made to Grup Yorum listeners, both in Turkey and abroad, inviting them to contribute by buying new instruments or donating unused ones they had at home so that each child would have a musical instrument. The creation of the music school was also a collective effort, made by the neighborhood community, resulting in a project that not only educates but also creates a strong bond between the people, the area, and music.²¹

In 2015, the most intense political repression began against them: the İdil Cultural Center in Istanbul was raided six times in two years by the police,²² the music schools they had built were stormed, their instruments requisitioned or destroyed,²³ and the teachers who were inside during the raids were brutally beaten, their hands and ears were broken, depriving them of the ability to play and listen.

The lessons were conducted in the village coffee house, which is usually a place where men play cards, watch football matches, and drink tea. Women do not usually enter. As can be seen in the video, people who had no prior connection with music in their lives began to learn the notes and then hold concerts in their village: <https://youtu.be/kp4XG0KiYW4?si=lzS1HKkTfibqtE1F>. See the choir's first concert here: <https://youtu.be/0hNY3sxoizY?si=Jc6exFx8cCaVIn3E>.

¹⁹ The choirs for Grup Yorum have always acted as a bridge between artist and audience, as their motto is "the voices of the choir cannot be silenced".

²⁰ The following link has a video of the Children of Hope Orchestra: <https://youtu.be/PEUpUSjrzk?si=vwPrEv7FmHTrjYFq>.

²¹ For an in-depth discussion and reflection on the issues of political domination over labor and environmental destruction caused by urban development projects, see: Kemal İnal & Ulaş Başar Gezgin, "Reclaiming the City, Reclaiming the Rights. The Commons and the Omnipresence of Resistance" in: Martin Butler, Paul Mecheril, Lea Brenningmeyer (Eds), *Resistance: Subjects, Representations, Contexts*, German, transcript Verlag, 2017, 109–115.

²² For an in-depth look at the police raids on the İdil Cultural Center see: written by the editorial staff, "Operation Against İdil Cultural Center", *Bianet*, 26 February 2019, <https://bianet.org/haber/operation-against-idil-cultural-center-205846>.

²³ The following video shows the condition of the damaged instruments following the police raids at İdil Cultural Center: <https://youtu.be/SAeqbLUcsZE?si=yusv63ZQT6bdq7T7>.

This act of extreme violence represents the will to suppress a revolutionary act, such as music, which, according to the state, can threaten the established order. Although the most systematic persecution began in 2015, through an article in *Il Manifesto* from 1996, it is noted that:

Between 1995 and 1996, the members of the Kurdish band Grup Yorum were arrested at least five times each. The last one was on 21 June this year [1996]: Kemal Sahir Gurel and Ufuk Luker were arrested by the police while they were in a recording studio. Two hours later, Irsat Aydin and Ozcan Senver were also arrested and taken to the police station. For thirteen days, the four musicians were tortured and beaten in one of the notorious police interrogation centers in Istanbul. The charges brought against the musicians of Grup Yorum are always the same and in the ten years of the group's existence, they have been the subject of more than fifteen criminal proceedings.²⁴

Since 1988, the collective has been repeatedly subjected to arrests and repression, not least because of a repertoire that included songs that were censored, including those from the Kurdish musical tradition,²⁵ which were considered politically sensitive.²⁶ The members endured both physical and psychological

²⁴ Orsola Casagrande, "Grup Yorum Intervista", *Il Manifesto*, 30 November 1996, https://ilmanifesto.it/archivio/1996018936?pk_vid=27dee16834d38f431743167210178695. The translation of the English text is mine. The original in Italian is: "Tra il 1995 e il 1996 i componenti della band curda Grup Yorum sono stati arrestati almeno cinque volte ciascuno. L'ultima risale al 21 giugno di quest'anno [1996]: Kemal Sahir Gurel e Ufuk Luker sono stati arrestati dalla polizia mentre si trovavano in uno studio di registrazione. Due ore dopo anche Irsat Aydin e Ozcan Senver venivano fermati e condotti alla stazione di polizia. Per tredici giorni i quattro musicisti sono stati torturati e picchiati in uno dei famigerati centri interrogatori della polizia a Istanbul. Le accuse rivolte ai musicisti di Grup Yorum sono sempre le stesse e nei dieci anni di vita del gruppo sono state alla base di più di quindici procedimenti penali."

²⁵ The Kurdish question should be framed starting with the state of emergency formalized in 1983, followed by the creation of the village guards in 1985, which were paramilitary militias charged with confronting the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK). Starting in July 1987, southeast Turkey was officially declared an emergency zone, an exceptional status that remained in force until 2002, fueling a long season of violence, suspension of civil rights, and unresolved tensions. For a more in-depth study, read: Francesco Fusco, "Strategic Depth in Turkish Foreign Policy. A putting into historical perspective (2002–2019)", *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali*, 89 (1), 2022, 93–120.

²⁶ During a chat with Grup Yorum before their concert at the TivoliVredenburg in Utrecht in The Netherlands in 2024, it emerged that in the 1980s their music cassettes were shot by the military precisely because they sang in Kurdish. Among the Kurdish songs that have been part of their repertoire there is a particularly well-known one called

torture until their first concerts were banned in 1989. Nine of the then-eleven members were arrested and remained in prison for months.

The coup d'état of 12 September 1980 represents one of the most tragic and decisive turning points in Turkey's contemporary history. Preceded by a decade marked by severe economic turmoil, political instability, and a latent violent civil war between extreme right and left-wing factions, the military intervention led by General Kenan Evren marked the beginning of a harsh military dictatorship that lasted for about three years.²⁷ Although the official declarations were intended to restore order by even-handedly targeting all destabilizing forces, the repression fell disproportionately on the left: activists, trade unionists, students, and progressive intellectuals were the main victims of a real ideological and cultural offensive. A climate of systematic terror was thus established, consisting of mass arrests, torture, forced exile, and censorship.

The committed music produced in Turkey around 1980 embraced the problems of immigration and refugees, representing a truly important moment for the maintenance of a variety of national, ethnic, and religious identities in social networks.²⁸

The shattering of the political landscape, combined with the slow economic deterioration of the late 1970s, had fueled an escalation of violence between ultranationalist groups and revolutionary movements, making the country increasingly ungovernable. The 1980 coup d'état was therefore presented as a necessary act of restoration, and in 1982, under military aegis, a new constitution was promulgated. In the same year, General Evren was elected President of the Republic, a position he held until 1989, marking a profound caesura: not only were the democratic mechanisms temporarily suspended, but an attempt was made to re-found the political and cultural identity of the country on strongly authoritarian and nationalist foundations.²⁹

Em Ne Binketi (We are not defeated), which celebrates not only the resilience of an ethnic group but also embodies a broader vision: the invincibility of those who fight for their culture, language, history, and rights.

²⁷ Cf. <https://www.eastjournal.net/archives/71617#:~:text=Anticipato%20da%20un%20decennio%20molto%20difficile%20per,momenti%20pi%C3%B9%20drammaici%20della%20storia%20turca%20contemporanea>

²⁸ For an overview of other left-wing music groups and collectives that emerged in Turkey in the 1980s, read Leyla Neyzi, "Embodied Elders: Space and Subjectivity in the Music of Metin-Kemal Kahraman", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 38 (1), 2002, 100.

²⁹ Ibid.

Starting in the mid-1990s, the rise of political Islam marked a new, crucial turning point in Turkey's political and cultural landscape. The first Islamist-led government, the result of a coalition and presided over by Necmettin Erbakan, leader of the Refah Partisi (Welfare Party), took office in 1996, arousing strong concerns in secular and military circles. The following year, in 1997, the experience was abruptly interrupted by a bloodless coup d'état, the so-called "postmodern coup d'état", orchestrated by the armed forces in the name of defending republican secularism, the founding principle of Kemalist Turkey. Alarmed by the growing legitimacy of political Islam, the military gradually distanced itself from the previous Turkish-Islamic synthesis, which had for decades represented a compromise between national identity and religious tradition, to reassert itself as the guarantor of the secular order. However, this resistance proved to be insufficient when, a few years later, the reformist wing of the Refah abandoned its Islamist positions to reconnect with the conservative traditions of the Democratic Party (DP) and the Turkish-Islamic synthesis.

This new political course found expression in the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party – AKP), which won the 2002 elections under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, former mayor of Istanbul. AKP won around 34% of the vote, securing a solid parliamentary majority with 363 seats out of 550. The victory, as unexpected as it was significant, was driven by a deep sense of popular disillusionment with traditional political forces.³⁰ Founded only a year earlier, the AKP presented itself as a new and dynamic political force, but its ideological roots were in the legacy of the moderate Islamic movement led by Necmettin Erbakan, former prime minister and key figure in Turkish politics in the second half of the 20th century. Under the charismatic leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the AKP confirmed its dominance in the following elections in 2007 and 2011, establishing itself as a hegemonic force in national politics. In 2010, the extent of Grup Yorum's popular following could be measured. At a time when Turkey was going through a more relaxed and open phase, favored by an AKP still in its infancy and inclined to more permissive policies than the previous state apparatus, the musical collective managed to perform in one of the most emblematic spaces of the cultural capital: the Beşiktaş stadium.³¹ The event,

³⁰ Cf. Fusco, op. cit.

³¹ On 12 June 2010, on its 25th anniversary, Grup Yorum held a big concert at the İnönü stadium, Beşiktaş JK's historic stadium, in the presence of around 55,000 spectators.

which featured important guest artists, sold out and became the concert with the largest number of spectators in the history of the country.³²

Over the years, especially following the attempted coup in 2016, the AKP has further consolidated its control over democratic institutions, accentuating the centralist and authoritarian features of its power. At the same time, foreign policy has also undergone a profound transformation, progressively distancing itself from traditional Euro-Atlantic alliances and showing a renewed prominence in the Middle East chessboard, often in opposition to the positions of major Western diplomacies.

Grup Yorum's attempts to play in public spaces were often brutally crushed: spontaneous performances in squares and streets were interrupted by the police with the use of force, including batons, tear gas, and arbitrary arrests. In several cases, musicians were physically assaulted while they were playing, and the audience who came out in solidarity also suffered intimidation, arrests, and violence.

For a long time, one could be imprisoned in Turkey simply by listening to Grup Yorum's songs, which represented a kind of invitation to join the underground struggle. Many school children and students were prosecuted when their inquisitive teachers found the cassettes in their possession, which were considered a danger to the community. Parents were worried about hearing the forbidden melodies coming from the bedrooms of their hitherto seemingly innocent children.³³

Almost 500 lawsuits were filed against the Turkish music collective, and 170 concerts were banned. The Turkish authorities have often justified these actions on grounds of public safety, accusing Grup Yorum of links to organizations considered to be terrorists, such as the DHKP-C,³⁴ although no concrete evidence has emerged to support such accusations. Although the collective had long been under observation by the Turkish authorities, it was

Starting in 2011, the band inaugurated a series of annual free concerts titled *Tam Bağımsız Türkiye* (Turkey Completely Independent), which were extraordinarily well attended; the first two dates drew 150,000 and 250,000 people respectively.

³² Rediscovered in: Tayfun Guttstadt, "Against the Death Cult", *Quantara.de*, 20 April 2020, https://qantara.de/en/article/death-grup-yorum-singer-helin-bolek-against-death-cult?utm_source.com

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ The DHKP-C is a militant Marxist group, considered a terrorist organization not only by Turkey, but also by the United States and the European Union. It is on the UK's list of proscribed terrorist organizations.

with the failed coup d'état in July 2016 that the repression against them accelerated dramatically. So much so that as of 2016, the band's concerts were officially banned throughout Turkey, and the members were exiled on terrorism charges.

Before 2016, even with its limitations, the Turkish judicial system still allowed for some possibility of redress. The restrictions imposed on the group, although already in place, could be legally challenged.³⁵ However, following the failed coup, thousands of magistrates and prosecutors were removed from office, around 4,000, and more than half were imprisoned on arbitrary charges.³⁶ In their place, officials deemed loyal to the political power in office were appointed, severely undermining the autonomy of the judiciary. In this context, opposing the decisions of the authorities has become extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Many of the members of the Grup Yorum moved between France, England, and Germany.³⁷ The ban on returning to the country where they were born is yet another manifestation of the systematic repression of their art and politics, which the Turkish government has tried to stifle by any means available.

All this led to a truly extreme case: Helin Bölek, activist and Grup Yorum singer, died on 3 April 2020 after 288 days of a hunger strike which was carried out in protest of the repression the group's members had long been subjected to by the government. Twenty-one days later, Mustafa Koçak, also on hunger strike to demand his release and that of his other detained comrades, died. Koçak had been sentenced to life imprisonment on charges of attempting to overthrow the constitutional order. The band's bass player Hibrain Göçek³⁸ died in May of the same year in an Istanbul hospital, two days after breaking a 323-day hunger strike,³⁹ leaving this written note:

³⁵ As Abdullah Bozkurt, director of the Stockholm Center for Freedom, points out, the intensification of controls and censorship reflects a systematic government shutdown of all forms of dissent, particularly in the world of art and media.

³⁶ Cf. Bryony Wright, "Grup Yorum: the jailed band Turkey can't silence", *The Guardian*, 4 April 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/apr/04/grup-yorum-the-jailed-band-turkey-cant-silence?utm_source=%20.com

³⁷ Currently, the official band is permanently based in Germany and consists of about ten members.

³⁸ At the following link you can read the poignant letter left by Ibrahim Gökçek before his death: <https://comune-info.net/la-lettera-di-ibrahim-gokcek/>.

³⁹ To better follow the story, read the following articles in some of the most important Italian newspapers: Monica Ricci Sargentini, "Turchia, Ibrahim Gökçek è morto, lottava

The reason we have been included in this terrorist list is as follows: in our songs we talk about miners forced to work underground, workers murdered by industrial accidents, revolutionaries killed under torture, villagers whose natural environment is destroyed, intellectuals burned, houses destroyed in working-class neighborhoods, the oppression of the Kurdish people and those who resist.⁴⁰

In an article about the death of Hibrain written by Roberto Vecchioni, one of the most important Italian singer-songwriters, in *Corriere della sera*, it is explained how taking away an audience, a square, and a stage from an artist is like cutting the wings off a butterfly.⁴¹ The news of the tragic deaths of some Grup Yorum members had a worldwide impact.⁴² Every organ of the

per l'esistenza della band", *Corriere della sera*, 7 May 2020, https://www.corriere.it/esteri/20_maggio_07/turchia-morto-ibrahim-gokcek-lottava-l-esistenza-sua-band-cba3b098-9057-11ea-b981-878bbbd902eb.shtml; read also Monica Ricci Sargentini, "Turchia, Grup Yorum tornerà a suonare e Gökçek interrompe il digiuno", *Corriere della sera*, 6 May 2020, <https://lepersoneeladignita.corriere.it/2020/05/06/turchia-grup-yorum-tornera-a-suonare-e-gokcek-riprende-a-mangiare/>.

⁴⁰ Cf. <https://comune-info.net/la-lettera-di-ibrahim-gokcek/> The translation in the text is mine.

⁴¹ Roberto Vecchioni, "Vecchioni ricorda Gökçek e il Grup Yorum: perché ho un macigno nel cuore", *La Repubblica*, 9 May 2020, https://www.repubblica.it/commenti/2020/05/09/news/roberto_vecchioni_grup_yorum_ibrahim_gokcek_lottava_per_la_musica-300816313/

⁴² Some international resonances can be seen below. The historic Club Tenco festival (the most important award for Italian songwriting) in collaboration with Amnesty International Italia instituted the Yorum Prize in 2020, which is awarded annually to an artist who puts his or her life on the line by fighting for human rights with their music: <https://www.amnesty.it/al-rapper-iraniano-in-carcere-toomaj-salehi-il-premio-yorum-2024-di-amnesty-international-italia-e-club-tenco/>. Samidoun Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network (organization that commemorated Helin Bölek and İbrahim Gökçek): https://samidoun.net/2020/04/samidoun-salutes-the-martyr-helin-bolek-of-grup-yorum/?utm_source=.com. On 3 May 2020, the Samidoun organization participated, together with organizations from all over the world, in the International Conference and Concert of Solidarity and Resistance (online) organized by the Anti-Imperialist Front in support of the imprisoned hunger strikers from Grup Yorum and the People's Law Bureau. Some 17,000 people followed the livestreaming of the solidarity event with speakers and participants from around the world. PEN America, which leads the Artists at Risk Connection (ARC), a programme dedicated to assisting artists in danger and strengthening the organizations that support them, also dealt with Grup Yorum: https://pen.org/press-release/turkish-musician-dies-following-hunger-strike/?utm_source.com. Large street mobilizations took place in the major European capitals.

press, from *The Guardian*⁴³ to *La Repubblica*⁴⁴ via the *Democrat Gazette*, recognized the importance of an event that not only marked a personal tragedy, but also a symbolic moment of cultural and political resistance.

A historical and ethnographic perspective

During my ethnographic field research,⁴⁵ it took me almost a year before I found the courage to ask Sena Erkoç and Umut Gültekin, now the solo voices of Grup Yorum, a direct question: whether, in light of all that they are experiencing, they felt fear, and what their relationship with fear was. They said that they were fully aware that every conquest of rights, freedom, and justice inevitably involves struggle and sacrifice. They recognized that fear, in situations of repression and constraint, is natural because “we are human beings”. However, they also emphasized that it is precisely in those moments that we must remember how high the stakes are: collective freedom. Every victory, they said, passes through a form of sacrifice. To die or to fight for a cause greater than oneself is not just a risk, but a conscious choice. “We have always put our face to it, with the means we had”, they concluded, with a steadfastness that is not recklessness but responsibility. It is perhaps useful at this point to read this phenomenon according to different strains of Antonio Gramsci’s thought, especially concerning his theory of the organic intellectual, the concept of praxis, and the ethics of responsibility.⁴⁶ The definition

⁴³ Written by the editorial staff, “Member of Banned Turkish Folk Group Dies After Hunger Strike”, *The Guardian*, 3 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/03/banned-turkish-folk-group-member-dies-following-hunger-strike>.

⁴⁴ Written by the editorial staff, “Turchia, morta Helin Bolek: attivista e cantante in sciopero della fame da 228 giorni”, *La Repubblica*, 3 April 2020, https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2020/04/03/news/turchia_muore_attivista_cantante_sciopero_fame_helin_bolek-253031622/

⁴⁵ We met for the first time in October 2021 at the Teatro Argentina in Rome, and then in November of the same year at the International Art Front in Athens, Greece. Later, in the post-pandemic period, I followed them again to Germany, Holland and France, during the organization, promotion and realization phases of the 2024/2025 international tour.

⁴⁶ Antonio Gramsci’s theories to which I refer, such as those on the organic intellectual, praxis, and the ethics of responsibility, are mainly found in his *Quaderni del carcere*, the most important and complex work that encompasses his political, philosophical, and cultural reflections, written during his fascist imprisonment (1929–1935). See: Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, Valentino Gerratana (Eds), Turin, Einaudi, 2014.

of an organic intellectual includes those who do not place themselves above social reality, but who are an active part of it, linked to a class or context.⁴⁷

The idea of “putting one’s face to it” and “doing with the means one has” recalls precisely this spirit: acting in the real world, without idealism, but with a concrete, responsible, and situated involvement. For Gramsci, moreover, praxis is the union of thought and action.⁴⁸ It is not enough to theorize: one must act, build, transform. The phrase in question expresses precisely this tension: one exposes oneself and acts despite limits, because it is in doing, even with poor means, that change is produced. Hence, the idea of doing the best you can with what you have, without waiting for ideal conditions; this is a perfect reflection of this attitude: not resigning yourself, but continuing to fight, even from below, even in adverse conditions.

The concept of music as an instrument of power, as a revelation of power, and as an antagonist of power has become the subject of study by many musicologists and ethnomusicologists. The Italian musicologist Guido Barbieri,⁴⁹ who has written extensively on the subject of *music and power*,⁵⁰ cites Michel Foucault, and more specifically the book *Microphysics of Power*⁵¹ concerning the distinction he makes between two conceptual domains belonging to the category of power: the idea of hierarchical power, understood as an emanation of an order that spreads from one entity to a multitude; and the vision of power as a system of relations between humans, which induces not necessarily relations of oppression but rather relations that produce knowledge, ideas, and concepts.

⁴⁷ Here Gramsci distinguishes between traditional and organic intellectuals, analyzing the role intellectuals play in social and political processes. The organics, in short, are those who emerge from a class and express its needs and values.

⁴⁸ Gramsci reworks Marxism, focusing on the relationship between theory and practice. Praxis is seen as concrete action guided by a theoretical vision, and not as mere application of abstract ideologies.

⁴⁹ Guido Barbieri, born in Parma in 1956, is a renowned Italian music critic, radio presenter and lecturer. He has collaborated with major broadcasters such as RAI and newspapers such as *La Repubblica*. An author of books and essays on music and composers, he teaches at conservatories and has held artistic direction positions in various music associations.

⁵⁰ At minute 03:84 of the video, the relationship between music and power from the Middle Ages to the contemporary age is illustrated:
<https://youtu.be/7gVVh2kn7Ic?si=tbiHNOl3SHfu-AEg>.

⁵¹ Michel Foucault, *Microfisica del potere*, Alessandro Fontana, Pasquale Pasquino (Eds), Torino, Einaudi, 1977⁵.

In the relationship between artist and audience this dynamic becomes particularly evident. The artist does not, in fact, exercise authoritarian power over the audience but establishes a circular relationship with it in which meaning, emotions and awareness are produced. The power of the artist lies not so much in unilateral influence as in the ability to activate imaginaries, to raise questions, to open possibilities. At the same time, it is the audience, in its reception, in its interpretation, in its mirroring or disagreement, that gives meaning to the work and the artistic action.

This principle finds full expression in the organizational structure of Grup Yorum, which is deeply rooted in a communitarian and participatory logic. The direct experience of the preparation of their concerts, which I was able to follow at every stage, from planning to promotion and realization, reveals an operational model based on listening and involvement from below. Long before the official date of the event, the collective initiates a dense network of meetings with local communities: they organize small musical events in neighborhoods, in people's homes, in shared spaces, establishing a direct relationship with the people who live there. It is not just a matter of promoting a concert, but of constructing its meaning together.⁵² Group members visit families, ring doorbells, introduce themselves, talk, and listen.⁵³ They collect stories, expectations, sorrows, and desires. In this way, the concert is never an isolated act, but the culmination of a collective, participatory process in which everyone feels an active part. This is how Grup Yorum's music takes root in communities: not descending from above but sprouting in the living fabric of relationships.

The relationship between music, social movements, and social networks in various communities has received wide attention in recent ethnomusicological and anthropological studies that argue that music has a unique and indispensable role in articulating the demands of community members. Many of these studies have addressed the contribution music makes to cul-

⁵² In this case the group played some songs to promote a concert in Paris, during a wedding of Turkish people. A symbolic and strategic gesture that, through music, made it possible to spread the invitation to the entire community in a context of strong social cohesion: https://www.instagram.com/p/DHjU_LmoC9z/?igsh=Z2RybmJtYnNjOWRu.

⁵³ Through the posts shared on Instagram and Facebook, it is possible to reconstruct the path of preparation (and propaganda) leading up to the concerts. Grup Yorum employees distribute flyers and personally go door-to-door in Turkish-majority neighborhoods, directly inviting the public to attend the events: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DIMe8CJojD1/?igsh=cDQzbXlhNXYxejB4>.

tural reconciliation processes in both majority and minority communities.⁵⁴ Among the most important are the reconciliation efforts that music has enabled in conflicts in South Africa, the Americas, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Grup Yorum concerts are in effect a means of propaganda, a container of messages and meanings.

Halay Dance: Fire and people

Before each concert, it is customary for some of the musicians and collaborators of Grup Yorum to gather in the spaces surrounding the event venues, be they theatres, arenas, or adjacent squares, and give life to moments of collective dance. Women and men, children and the elderly spontaneously join in this communal ritual that anticipates the actual concert, transforming the wait into a gesture of celebration, belonging, and shared resistance.

In dance, the engagement between individual bodies and the collective kinesthetic whole is expressed in Halay, a traditional dance rooted throughout Turkey and celebrated at numerous events such as weddings, ceremonies, and religious festivals. Although dancing is performed throughout the country⁵⁵ it has a variety of regional interpretations, reflected in the different nomenclatures, figurations, and rhythms that characterize each local version. It is performed in formations ranging from a semicircle to a circle, sometimes with close spacing, symbolizing the concept of collective cohesion and strength. The participants grasp each other's hands, little fingers, or shoulders, a gesture that hints at the idea that the group's strength lies in its unity. The dance is performed with elegance and rhythmic precision, in which the bodies move in complex sequences, articulated in a succession of steps that vary in intensity and speed.⁵⁶ Halay is often danced to a state of ecstasy,⁵⁷ a

⁵⁴ Ozan Aksoy, "The Soundtrack of Social Movements among Kurdish Alevi Immigrants from Turkey in Germany", *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 6 (2), 2019, 62.

⁵⁵ For a more in-depth study, read Tülay Sahan, *Migration und Suchtverhalten. Ein Halay-Tanz-Forschungsprojekt*, Hamburg, Diplomica Verlag GmbH, 2017, 8–13.

⁵⁶ To see the dance, watch the video from minute 12:55 to minute 15:00: https://youtu.be/jtn3KE4xeBo?si=asrOIwpQbwI_Sd93, and the video of the song *Halay Potpori* <https://youtu.be/QdFSL9xjtVE?si=ymCC54wxh8xQ2CC1>.

⁵⁷ Moments of ecstasy are witnessed by the Zilgit, a female vocal call, deeply rooted in Anatolian tradition, symbolizing joy, happiness, and a burst of enthusiasm. Its function is closely linked to moments of great exaltation and fervor, particularly during the performance of the Halay. The Zilgit is a high-pitched, piercing sound produced by the vibration of the tongue against the back of the upper teeth, while a high-pitched, almost shrill note comes out of the head and is like a "Tilili".

kind of abandonment that culminates in physical exhaustion, highlighting the intensity of the shared experience.

The band leaders explained that the term Halay derives from the fusion of two words meaning “people” and “fire” in Mongolian tradition, and its essence is deeply rooted in the collective, as it is a dance that originates from the people themselves. Another meaning attributed to Halay is that of an infinite and perpetual continuation of the world, a cycle that is not interrupted but continuously renewed through collective participation, which explains why Halay is almost always a circular dance.

Over the centuries, the Halay also took on the role of an instrument of resistance, testifying to the community’s strength in defending its identity and freedom. A significant example of this symbolic function of resistance can be found in a type of Halay called Zalongo, typical of Greece and later exported, which became a symbol of the struggle against oppression. The dance of Zalongo (Χορός του Ζαλόγγου) is an emblematic episode of Greek resistance against Ottoman rule, which took place in December 1803 in the region of Epirus, northwest Greece.⁵⁸ According to tradition, about sixty Souliote women, together with their children, found themselves trapped by the troops of Ali Pasha, the Ottoman governor of Ioannina, during their escape from Souli. To avoid capture and subsequent enslavement, the women made an extreme decision: they threw themselves off a cliff of Mount Zalongo, after forming a circle, singing and dancing, in an act of self-determination and sacrifice. This gesture of courage and desperation quickly became a symbol of heroism and resistance, inspiring works of art, literature, and commemorations throughout Greece and beyond. The story was reported by eyewitnesses, including Suleiman Aga, an officer of Ali Pasha, and spread to Europe through the memories of travelers and diplomats of the time.⁵⁹

The above is just one of the many instances in which the Halay dance, which later spread throughout Anatolia, is used. Today, all people who choose to fight, though deprived of weapons, dance the Halay. Because although they may be deprived of everything what remains to them is the body – the last instrument of resistance.⁶⁰ As long as they can move they will continue

⁵⁸ Cf. https://greekreporter.com/2024/12/18/dance-zalongo-self-sacrifice-greek-women/?utm_source.com

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ In November 2024, Grup Yorum’s Instagram profile, which had around 170,000 followers, was permanently removed from the platform following the viral spread of a video

to fight, perpetuating a resistance that is at once physical, cultural and symbolic.⁶¹

The official policy is continuously trying to erase all aspects of the shared history of the city. Istanbul, which is one of the oldest cities in the world and has been a crossroads of many different communities for centuries, is now being erased in the name of a new national history where cultural and social ties are constantly under attack.⁶² Grup Yorum seeks to create an alternative culture to the one currently imposed in Turkey by expressing love for the homeland and the people through art, highlighting the price that exploited and oppressed people are paying.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of Grup Yorum represents, in many senses, one of the most powerful and authentic expressions of contemporary protest music, not only in Turkey but globally.⁶³ They are not a collective that sporadically emerges to tell a story of revolt but rather a constant, a point of re-empowerment that has taken root in communities defending their rights.

posted at a concert held in Utrecht in May of that year. In the video, concert-goers danced the Halay. Meta justified the closure of the profile with a general violation of community guidelines, without providing further details, prompting critical reactions from supporters and observers of freedom of expression.

⁶¹ Another moment of connection and active experiential exchange in the artist-audience relationship are the slogans that strengthen and unite people around common political causes. Usually, during their concerts, every two or three songs someone from the audience yells a slogan and all the people shout it out several times. For each Grup Yorum song, there are about 15 slogans; the most famous one is “Grup Yorum is the people and cannot be silent”. To listen to the slogans, watch the video from minute 01:03: https://youtu.be/_nFb6rbsqTQ?si=pDmuMlspHcJigEQU.

⁶² In May 2025 the AKP government issued a measure banning access in Turkey to 455 songs by Grup Yorum on platforms such as YouTube, Spotify and others. This censorship is not only an attack on the group’s members but an assault on the collective memory of the people and their connection to art. The day after the announcement, Grup Yorum decided to disseminate all of their 21 albums on social channels via a cloud folder. See: <https://ilmanifesto.it/grup-yorum-erdogan-ci-vuole-fuori-da-spotify-ma-noi-lottiamo-dall85>.

⁶³ For example, in Carlo Pestelli, *Bella Ciao. La canzone della libertà* (Turin, ADD Editore, 2016, 116), it can be noted how the song *Bella Ciao* “was relaunched with stadium success by Grup Yorum, by far the most representative group in the alternative scene”, testifying to the importance attached to Grup Yorum’s mission.

What I hope has emerged in this article is an idea of the crucial role Grup Yorum plays as an engine of social cohesion. The musical act merges with political and cultural action, not as a mere form of expression but as an act of resistance that continuously defines and redefines the community itself. The audience at their concerts are never mere spectators but actors who, through participation and listening, become part of a broader, deeper project.

Similarly, in the context of resistance, music is not perceived as a mere embellishment of daily life but as a necessity that creates community, ideas, and knowledge. The music of Grup Yorum is not only a vehicle of cultural expression but a form of collective resistance, a way for community members to maintain their connection to the land and their people in times of hardship.

The observation that all crises of imperialist powers are inevitably reflected in local and global economic crises opens the way to a broader and deeper analysis of the contemporary capitalist system and its cultural implications. In every era the geopolitical changes of the dominant powers not only generate upheavals in financial markets, trade flows, or labor, but they inevitably bring with them a symbolic and cultural impoverishment, a critical disarmament of consciences, a rarefaction of the collective capacity to read one's own time.⁶⁴ It is in this scenario that the renewed role of the artist becomes necessary, understood no longer as an isolated or self-referential creator but as an active subject in the field of cultural transformation. If culture is, as Marx affirmed, the expression of the ruling class, then in times of crisis what enters this dimension is also the hegemonic narrative of the world, and with it the space that the artist can occupy to intervene.⁶⁵

Art, in this sense, is neither neutral nor marginal but profoundly political; it becomes a critical tool, a language through which to denounce the homologation imposed from above and recover the possibility of divergent thinking. Indeed, it is precisely in these contexts that the artist's duty is to generate meaning where noise reigns, to make visible what is silenced, to give back a voice to those pushed to the margins by the dominant cultural system.

In times of recession of critical thinking, the artist has the task of becoming a vehicle of conscience, of transforming his or her work into an instru-

⁶⁴ Anthony Giddens, *Capitalism and Social Theory*. Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Alberto Martinelli (Eds), transl. It. Carla Cantini and Marcella Pogatschnig, Milan, Il Saggiatore, 2021.

⁶⁵ Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *L'ideologia tedesca*, Rome, Editori Riuniti, 2018.

ment of emancipation. It is not just a matter of denouncing, but of imagining new possibilities, new narratives, and new expressive tools capable of restoring complexity to a world that tends instead to simplify, to reduce, to sell.

In closing, I would like to leave open a few questions for later reflection. What does “imagining new possibilities” mean today? Is there an unresolvable tension between the urgency to simplify to communicate and the responsibility to complicate to think? What role does the audience play in the co-construction of an art that emancipates? And finally, is transformative art still conceivable without active participation?

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Summary

The Turkish band Grup Yorum, founded in 1985, which has given voice to the desires and struggles of the Turkish people, faces constant repression due to its political and social commitment, offering a musical narrative that promotes cultural independence and linguistic pluralism. Grup Yorum founded the Children of Hope Orchestra, which promotes music education among young people; they created choirs in eleven Anatolia provinces, where more than six hundred people participated, and they founded the Idil Cultural Center in Istanbul.

This article is based on in-depth ethnographic research initiated in 2021, which documented the band's performance practices both during international tours and in everyday contexts, highlighting how their music becomes a channel of cultural, political, and social resistance.

The encounter between artist and audience turns into a dynamic and continuous dialogue, where every gesture and every sound contribute to building a collective identity that is living, resilient, and above all intrinsically linked to the struggle for justice and freedom. Collective identity also passes through the Halay, a traditional dance that symbolizes the cohesion and strength of the collective, absent of hierarchies, where the dancers unite in a circle, representing a mutually-supportive community.

The group's concerts and performances were banned, members suffered arrests and violence, and some of them died in prison. Despite this, the collective continues to fight for freedom of expression. It culturally claims the right to exist as a symbol of opposition, so much so that their most celebrated slogan is "Grup Yorum is the people and cannot be silenced".

Grup Yorum's music and art would seem to be essential for both the preservation of cultural identity and for the construction of a global network of resistance, capable of confronting injustice and oppression.