

Famed Turkish pianist, composer Timur Selçuk dies at 74

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On November 6, Turkish pianist, composer, musician and conductor Timur Selçuk passed away due to a heart attack. He was 74.

The son of Münir Nurettin Selçuk, an important composer and singer of classical Turkish music, and Şehime Erton, a soloist and theater artist, Timur Selçuk graduated from Galatasaray High School in Istanbul and Istanbul Municipality Conservatory. He then continued his musical education at the École Normale de Musique in Paris.

He was a prominent example of the layer of Turkish intellectuals who turned to the working class amid the political radicalization and social struggles of the 1970s.

In Turkey, as all over the world, the late 1960s and 1970s were marked by a radicalization of the youth and massive social struggles. In the absence of a Trotskyist revolutionary leadership, the radicalized youth orbited around various Stalinist and nationalist tendencies, including Maoist and Castroite movements. These forces, together with the reformist union leaderships and petty-bourgeois guerrilla movements, politically disarmed the working class, paving the way for the success of a NATO-backed coup in September 1980 by General Kenan Evren.

Timur Selçuk returned to Turkey in 1975 after his studies in France. Though the political atmosphere was increasingly dominated by populist and pro-peasant movements, his songs and compositions in this period were largely directed toward the urban working class, calling it to struggle. With his piano work, he expressed a desire to raise the cultural level of the working class. Selçuk composed plays for the Ankara Art Theater, where he worked for 10 years starting in 1975.

In addition to his many pop albums (including the one with which he began his career, *Ayrılanlar İçin*, in

1967), he composed many film soundtracks and songs for theater. He wrote songs (including the title song) for Bilgesu Erenus' play *Nereye Payidar* (1975-76), which depicted class conflict in a factory. The central character, Payidar (which means "lasting"), was drawn into struggle and resistance with her co-workers. "Nereye Payidar" has remained one of the most popular songs among Turkish workers engaged in struggles. Another song for the same play, "Direniş Türküsü" ("Resistance Ballad"), saluted workers who went on strike.

Among his other compositions for the theater included songs for productions of *Sakıncalı Piyade* (Uğur Mumcu), *804 Şişci* (Ömer Polat), *Ferhat ile Zehra* (Nazım Hikmet), *Şeyh Bedrettin Destanı* (Nazım Hikmet), *Tak Tik* (*Roundheads and Pointed Heads*, Bertolt Brecht), *Little Man What Now?* (Hans Fallada), *Rumuz Goncagül* (Oktay Arayıcı) and *Life of Galileo* (Bertolt Brecht). *Sarıpınar 1914*, *Üç İstanbul*, *Cahide* and *A Season in Hakkari* were some films for which he composed soundtracks.

The 1970s, a period of growing social struggles, were Selçuk's most productive period. He set verses by leftist poets such as Atilla İlhan, Enver Gökçe and Nazım Hikmet to music and sang anthems for the working class.

These years were marked by mass struggles and demonstrations by the Turkish working class. Nearly 500,000 workers attended the May Day celebrations in Istanbul in 1977, known as "Bloody May Day." At the time, Istanbul had a population of only around 2.5 million.

At the rally in Taksim Square, more than 30 people were killed and hundreds were injured by automatic rifle fire; the perpetrators were never charged.

The year 1977, as working-class struggles became

increasingly radicalized, was directly reflected in Timur Selçuk's works. In his album released in that year, he composed and read some poems by Nazim Hikmet addressed to the working class: "Hürriyet Marşı, Türkiye için Sana Selam" ["Greetings to the Turkish Working Class"] and "Güneşin Sofrasında Söylenen Türkü."

He also sang the "May Day Anthem." "16 Haziran" ("The June 16 Ballad"), on the same album, was about massive resistance by the working class in and around Istanbul on June 15-16, 1970. After the government prepared a law essentially targeting the DİSK union, tens of thousands of workers launched a wave of wildcat strikes and took to the streets. In the resulting clashes, two workers and one police officer lost their lives.

Although the demonstrations ended with the betrayal by DİSK bureaucrats and the declaration of martial law, the proposed law was cancelled. With these unprecedented events, the working class had again shown it was the principal revolutionary force in Turkish society.

Many artists among Selçuk's contemporaries were also affected by the social struggles and political radicalization, often turning to traditional and folkloric music. Selçuk, always concerned with enriching and raising the cultural level of his listeners, took a different approach, especially by using contemporary Western music and the piano in his works. He also founded the Istanbul Chamber Orchestra and the Contemporary Music Center, where he taught.

In an interview with the BBC Türkçe in 1992, he said: "My works have always been a little ahead of the public ... I think I am a fast-running person. I always set the bar high in every subject ... I think what I have done will become clear after a while."

The working class, which had been politically disarmed by the Stalinists throughout the 1970s, faced a severe defeat in the 1980 CIA-backed coup. The resulting demoralization and disorientation of the labor movement was also reflected in the personal journeys of artists and intellectuals who had turned to the social struggles during the 1970s.

After the coup, Selçuk was placed on trial, facing 15 years in prison, and was banned from leaving Turkey. Selçuk ceased appearing for a number of years, and in 1989 appeared in a concert organized for then-President

Kenan Evren. He also participated in the Eurovision Song Contest in 1989 with a Turkish-Western synthesis pop song ("Bana, Bana"). He composed Turkey's first pop opera (*A Space Tale*) in 1990.

Selçuk received the title of State Artist in 1998 and then performed mainly his own pop songs and works by his father, Münir Nurettin Selçuk, in concert.

He would later attract extensive press coverage for his turn to Sufism and his attempts to combine the latter with socialist sentiments. In an interview in 1999, he said that he found peace from praying and reading the Quran, adding: "I have the same democratic socialist thinking." In 2017, he said: "There is a revolutionary side to all of my music. It is a rebellion. My sadness and humor are both revolutionary."

His later evolution notwithstanding, Timur Selçuk's wonderful works continue to inspire workers, youth and intellectuals fighting for a society based on social equality and for the elevation of the cultural atmosphere. Selçuk and his best works deserve a broad, international audience.



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