

CARNEGIE HALL presents

CITI GLOBAL ENCOUNTERS

ROMANI MUSIC OF TURKEY

A Program of The Weill Music Institute at Carnegie Hall

ACTIVITY 3: THE TURKISH ROMANI EXPERIENCE



Citi Foundation



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ACTIVITY 3: THE TURKISH ROMANI EXPERIENCE

AIM: How do elements of freedom and structure in Selim Sesler’s music reflect the Roma’s cultural integrity within a majority culture, and more specifically the Romani tradition of economic survival?

SUMMARY: Students explore Romani history and musical practice by creating a business model like that of the Roma.

MATERIALS: Making It in Gotham Worksheet, The Turkish Romani Experience Handout

TIME REQUIRED: 40 minutes

NYC AND STATE STANDARDS: NYS Social Studies: 2.1 and 2.3

DO NOW

Have students argue for or against this statement:

- “It is important for Americans to have a layered identity: You should define yourself by your nationality first, your religious affiliation second, and your ethnicity third.”

Use the following statement as a transition to the next activity.

Tell students:

- “Roma are a minority in Turkey. Romani people generally see themselves first as Turks, second as Romani, and third as Muslims. In order for us to get closer to Selim Sesler’s music, we need to explore these aspects of the Romani experience.”

IMAGINING THE EXPERIENCE

Have students, in small groups, fill out the Making It in Gotham Worksheet (pp. 21–22). In this worksheet, students imagine they are in the fictional city of Gotham and create a fictional business in an area where multiple ethnic communities cohabitate.

Once students have completed their worksheets, lead them in a discussion about their responses.

Ask students:

“How did you decide what kind of business to set up?”

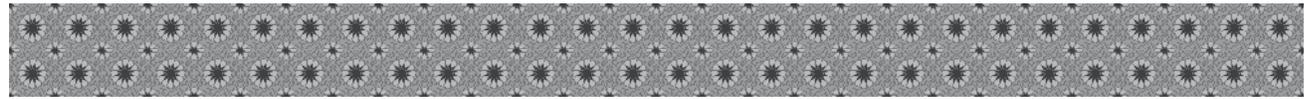
“What surprised you about your responses to the questions?”

THE TURKISH ROMANI EXPERIENCE

Give students (who are still in small groups) The Turkish Romani Experience Handout (p. 23). This handout will give students a more detailed background on general Romani history, Romani musical traditions, and the life of Selim Sesler.

Tell students:

- “Read one of the sections from The Turkish Romani Experience Handout. Be prepared to share what parts of your section relate to your Making It in Gotham Worksheet.”



Have students share with the class.

Ask students:

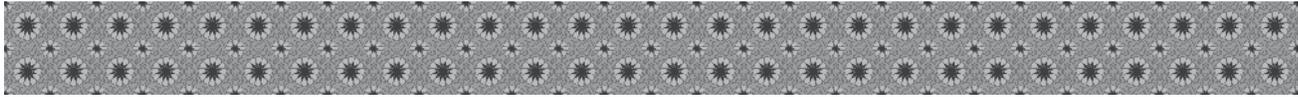
“How would you describe the similarities between your imagined immigrant experience and the experience of the Turkish Roma?”

“How would you describe the differences?”

“How do you think the Turkish Roma’s experiences influence Romani music?”



**The Sesler and Gumus family at the annual picnic (daglik) in Kesan, 1999
Right to left: Tom Padden; Selahattin Kocan; Sezer Gumus; Turan Gumus;
Selim Sesler; Ayse; Nuran Sesler**



MAKING IT IN GOTHAM WORKSHEET

Imagine that you are a new immigrant to the imaginary city of Gotham, and you need a job. Gotham is city of many indigenous and immigrant cultures.

You and your family have to survive, so you start an independent business producing something everyone needs. Choose one business that you will start:

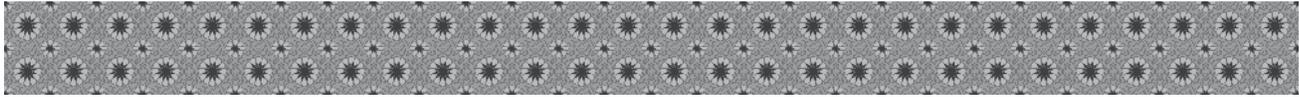
- a grocery store
- a clothing store
- a repair service
- a trading post (Set up a family network to bring any needed goods into a neighborhood: small plastic toys, pots and pans, or bedding. This business is completely dependent on staying in tune with local needs.)
- a wedding band (or other musical group)

Your business location is in The Nexus, an area where all the ethnic neighborhoods of Gotham converge. Answer the following questions about your business.

1. What will your business provide for customers?

2. How will you make sure that as many customers as possible do business with you?

3. What might cause your business to fail? How can you avoid this?

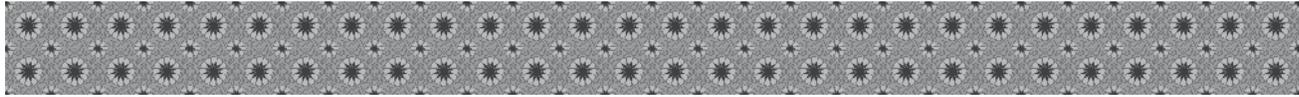


4. Name an aspect of your culture that people generally admire or even emulate (for example: manners, music, dance, poetry, cuisine, architecture, and belief systems). How can you draw on these admired aspects of your culture to strengthen your business?

5. Once your business is secure and thriving, how will you feel about your satisfied customers? How will they feel about you?

6. How will you honor your own ethnic traditions while confronting people of different ethnicities? Will you continue to speak in your language and practice your cultural traditions (such as weddings and holidays), or will you try to emulate your neighbors' culture? Will your children learn your business when they grow, or will they go to college and pursue other interests?

7. If people make fun of or insult you because of your ethnicity, will you maintain your polite manners and continue your ethnic traditions, or hide them?



THE TURKISH ROMANI EXPERIENCE HANDOUT

ROMANI HISTORY

Romani history is full of continuous struggle and persecution. Since they began moving to Europe in the 11th century, the Roma have been persecuted and treated with disrespect: European governments have often questioned their citizenship, restricted their travel, and suspended their due process (the principle that every person is entitled to the laws of a particular area). Romani people have rarely been included in any decisions regarding policies that shape their own futures.

European governments have attempted to forcibly settle and resettle the Roma, often with little success and negative results. In some cases, these governments create encampments where they forcibly place Romani immigrants. The Roma continue to live on the margins of society, and are prevented from gaining official recognition as a minority entitled to basic rights. Because the Romani people lack a single, united voice, governments have easily ignored their rights. Romani communities are scattered throughout Europe and have been isolated by continued persecution. In recent years, the World Romani Congresses (a series of forums for discussion of issues relating to Romani people that began in the 1970s) and the First Gypsy Congress of the European Union have begun helping the Roma speak with one voice.

Carnegie Hall has referenced The Patrin Web Journal (geocities.com/~Patrin) for this description.

ROMANI MUSICAL FAMILY TRADITIONS

Romani musicians are often born into—and thus trained by—families of professional musicians. While young Romani children attend neighborhood schools, male children also have ongoing musical education at home. Some fathers make miniature instruments available as toys for young toddlers. When they are older, male relatives help with coaching, and mothers often provide guidance by singing melodies and correcting their sons' interpretations.

MUSIC MAKING

In contemporary Turkey, Romani professional musicians perform several kinds of music in various settings, such as nightclubs, restaurants, and taverns, where they play light Turkish classical music (*fasil*) and popular music requests; radio and television station broadcasts; community celebrations, such as weddings, name-day ceremonies, circumcisions, and soldier-send off (as military service is mandatory in Turkey); and studio recording sessions in big cities.

THE MUSICAL LIFE OF SELIM SESLER

Selim Sesler's life story exemplifies the typical musical life of a Romani musician, because he began as a regional musician from a small town and then trained to perform in many different kinds of settings throughout Istanbul, eventually touring abroad. Selim was born in 1957 in the Turkish Thracian town of Kesan. The men in his family are professional musicians: his father played *zurna* (double-reed folk instrument) and then learned clarinet when he served in the army. Most of Selim's ancestors and other relatives were also *zurna* players. Selim and his older brother learned clarinet by sneaking it out while their father was out of the house. When Selim was 12, his father took him to play at his first wedding. From that point on, Selim began to play in the surrounding villages for Romani and non-Romani communities. In 1982, Selim moved his own young family to Istanbul to earn a better living. There, he played for an amateur classical music ensemble, a local theater, and nightclubs. Selim also recorded his first Romani dance music LP.

The above descriptions have been provided by Sonia Seeman.

—Sonia Seeman is Assistant Professor of Ethnomusicology at the University of Texas at Austin. Her articles have appeared in the Middle East Studies Association Bulletin, Ethnomusicology Forum, and Music and Anthropology. Seeman also co-produced the ethnographic recording *Roads to Kesan* with Selim Sesler.

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