

PENTAGRAM (A.K.A. MEZARKABUL): FOUNDERS OF TURKISH HEAVY METAL

I heard Pentagram for the first time in my teenage years as a successful Turkish trash metal band. But, years later, when I first listened to their album *Anatolia*, I totally met something different. They were like “Turkish Metallica” and at the same time they were including traditional Turkish motifs in it. I impressed by this music very much at that time, so I decided to go one of their shows. It was in Cemil Topuzlu Openair Theater. When I see huge amount of fans, I realized that it was a bigger thing than I imagined. They were the first and best heavy metal band in Turkey who could gather such a big audience for the first time. And later, I would be going to understand that they would get the same interest out of the country, too.

The band is important for their unique music style. They successfully combine heavy metal music with Turkish music elements such as Aşık literature, mystic music, and janissary music. They used some specific modal and rhythmical patterns of Turkish music such as scales like -harmonic minor with a tonic on fourth or fifth degree- which are basically Hicaz and Nikriz maqams and 3+2+2+3 rhythmic pattern which is basically Aksak Semai usul in Turkish music. They used also Turkish instruments like ney, darbuka, zurna, bağlama and a playing technique which resembles bağlama playing technique “şelpe” in some of their guitar solos.

They have mainly two major musical periods. First is “trash metal sound” which is similar to American or European trash metal bands which can be heard in their first two albums. It is still possible to find some Turkish music elements like Hicaz maqam or janissary tunes but general atmosphere in western trash metal sound. Second is can be defined as “Turkish heavy

metal sound” which appears with Anatolia album. Turkish melodies, rhythms, instruments, and lyrics can be heard all over their last albums.

In this study, I will use musical analysis in order to understand the relation between the band’s music and their influences. I will transcribe excerpts of their songs and related influences and compare them. For example Anatolia album and Metallica’s 1991 album has similar characteristics in song structure, guitar and bass sounds, riffs, some rhythmical patterns and so on. Also we can speak about similarities to other bands like Sepultura, Dream Theater etc. There is also strong influence of “Aşık” and “tasavvuf” (mystic) music. The way they use ney and bağlama worth to compare to the original performances. Also in guitar solos, it is interesting to stress the bağlama playing technique “şelpe” and guitar playing technique “tapping” which have common characteristics. Lyrics are also highly influenced by mystic philosophy. The band interprets and adds new meanings on the ideas of mystic philosophy.

Analysing the band’s music according to their periods helps to understand their works better.. The first two albums Pentagram and Trail Blazer, can be evaluated as trash metal style. The last three albums; Anatolia, Unspoken and Bir can be seen as a mixture of heavy, trash, progressive metal and aşık music and music and mystic music. By saying heavy, trash and progressive, I assume that their common use and connotations by the fans.

Other criteria is big and small gestures. In big gestures, the music is purer, the music can be closer to Turkish or western side; in small gestures Turkish and western styles are blending as fragments. Another aspect is playing the instruments in the style of another Turkish instrument. For example, playing the guitar in the style of “bağlama”, or playing the drums

sometimes in the style of “ramadan drum”, sometimes “kudüm”. Song forms are usually in common pop song forms, but the instrumental ones have variations.

A Few Definitions for Turkish Music Terms:

Usul: Usul literally means style. Usul is the name given to the specific rhythmic patterns in Turkish music. Some usuls may be also the name of a form. (ex. yürük semai) There are various usuls from 2 to 120 beats which are formed of composite rhythmic patterns.


Velvele: Velvele is the embellished –usually with syncopations- versions of usuls, played by a kind of bounded two drums with two sticks “kudüm”. Kudüm is one of the primary instruments of Mevlevi Ritual.

Seyir: Seyir is the name of the motion manner of the improvisation and the melodic structure which represents the characteristics of a makam scale. There are three kinds of seyirs: ascending, descending, and ascending-descending. Seyir is also the name of oral improvisation in the makam scale. When this improvisation is played by an instrument, it is called “taksim”.

Aranağme: Aranağme is the tune played by the instruments in order to fill the rests of the vocal parts. It can be short between the verse lines, or longer between the two verses.

Dem: Dem is long drone note –tonic, dominant or other note, according to the solo- played by the instruments in order to support of the vocal or the other instrument’s free solo.

The First Period: From Trash Metal To Janissary Music; From Harmonic Minor To Hicaz Scale:

When we look at the first album, we see a very classical trash metal sound. All riffs, rhythmic patterns of the songs are in popular style of 1980's metal bands like Slayer and Metallica. Fast tremolos, rhythmical dynamism –usually in very fast 2/4-, natural minor or phrygian mode with augmented 4, sudden modulations to 2nd, 4th, and 5th degrees, chromatism, very fast guitar solos –sometimes at the very beginning of the song-, scream or brutal vocal styles, playing unison of guitar and bass are the common features of the trash metal. So in the first album we see all these features in the songs. Also there is a rhythmic pattern..... in Pentagram song, we'll hear the slower version of the same pattern in the middle section of 1000 in the Eastland song in Anatolia album.

In second album Trail Blazer, we hear from the first song a fast guitar solo in harmonic minor scale which resembles Y.Malmsteen's style. Again, for the first time we hear hicaz scale in the album. In No One Wins The Fight, we hear a part of a janissary tune Neslin Deden. The section is prepared with a trashy rhythmic pattern.....

The Second Period: Blending Heavy/Trash/Progressive Metal With Aşık Literature and Music, Mystic Philosophy and Music:

With Anatolia album, we hear 10/8 aksak semai rhythmic pattern, nikriz scale for the first time with new vocalist Murat İlkan's Bruce Dickinson-like voice with its big vibrato. Also the powerful guitar sound resembles the general sound of Metallica's Black album. The short duo of bağlama and soprano, gives the clue about Pentagram's new style. Also the symbolic instrument of mystic music "ney" brings to the band a new colour. Hicaz and kurdi scales are

alternating, sometimes with their pentatonic forms There are also small gestures like using rhythmic patterns of trash metal, with Turkish maqam scales like hüseyini. And also dynamic and asymmetrical rhythm patterns calls the term “progressive”. There is also one Aşık Veysel cover in the album.

Unspoken album consolidates the new attitude of the band. Again we hear hicaz, nikriz, hüseyini, kürdi scales with flattened 2nd and augmented 4th. Drop d tuning reinforces the solid guitar sound. Songs are in d for darker mood, in e for lighter mood. We also hear rhythmical patterns like 6/4 (yürük semai usul), guitars and drums strengthen by playing a rhythmic pattern which is very similar to “usul”’s “velvele”. In verses, filling the vocal rests with the guitars keeps alive the “aranağme” tradition. There are also 10/8 (aksak semai), 9/8 (aksak), 7/8, and 12/8 beats. Besides ney, we hear other instruments like keyboard, mey, and zurna. In Bir album, we hear guitars in the “bağlama” playing style. And there is zirgüleli hicaz scale in guitar solos. We also hear the guitarist Hakan Utangaç’s half-brutal vocal. There are short trashy parts to awake a retro feeling to their previous albums. Songs are usually in middle tempo. There are one Aşık Veysel and one Aşık Derdli cover in the album.

Song Example:”Lions In The Cage”:

The song begins with 4-measure melody in hicaz scale, in 6/4. Drums, bass, guitars, ney, they are all playing in unison, -emphasizing the 2nd and 4th degrees like in hicaz maqam “seyir” characteristics.-It repeats two times. In the verse, bass and guitars playing a rhythmic riff which resembles syncopated yürük semai velvele. The augmented 4th is heard. This rhythmic structure makes room for the vocal melody. Vocal melody is in A-B style. In second repeat, there is back vocal singing in third. Guitars keep the dynamism with rhythmic variations. At the end of the verse, beat changes to 4/4. In bridge, guitars are playing long chords. Vocal’s

“ooo” parts with its third, makes call and response with the lyrics. The chorus derives from the bridge. The word “Lions!” is sung by recitative back vocals. (This part is sung by the audience in live performances). We hear the introduction melody, the second verse, the bridge, and the chorus again. After 8-measure melodic guitar, introduction melody is heard again. The middle section is comprised of the speech of the vocal with effects, long notes of the keyboard, and the ascending short melody of the guitar played for four times. The second guitar solo is again in zirguleli hicaz scale and 16-measure long. Then the bridge and the chorus are heard two times. At the end, there is a short ney solo in counterpoint style while the band is waiting on the note e-flat as “dem”(pedal). The song finishes with an attack-like riff which is played by the whole band.

LIONS IN THE CAGE:

MELODY 4*6/4 D D G C	VERSE 1 4+2*6/4 - 2*4/4 D	BRIDGE 4*4/4 D C	CHORUS 4*4/4 D C
MELODY' 4*6/4 D D G C	VERSE 2 4+2*6/4 - 2*4/4 D	BRIDGE' 4*4/4 D C	CHORUS' 4*4/4 D C
GUITAR SOLO 8*4/4 D	MELODY'' = 4*6/4 D D G C.....	MIDDLE SECTION 16*6/4 D C D G D	GUITAR SOLO 2 16*4/4 D
BRIDGE'' 4*4/4 D C	CHORUS'' 4*4/4 D C	BRIDGE''' 4*4/4 D C	CHORUS''' 4*4/4 D C
MELODY''''= 4*6/4 D D G C.....	FREE NEY SOLO C	ATTACK D	FINISH

Song Example: “Bir”:

The song begins with four-measure rhythmic riff in kürdi scale with augmented four played two times. The guitars play in muted long style which resembles bağlama picking from below. (↓↑↑↑) Then the guitar plays the melody in hüseyini scale with its octave two times. With the short drum attack and the harmonics of the guitar, the song moves on the verse. Vocals come in octaves. Bridge is short, in major tone, with long chords. In chorus, we hear first rhythmic –with harmonics-, then long notes on guitars. The same drum attack comes at the end of the chorus. The introduction melody, the second verse, the bridge, and the chorus come again. This time the bridge repeats two times, expressing “there is more to say/coda” feeling with the 6th degree. After the chorus, there is 8-measure guitar solo in zirgüleli hicaz scale. Then the second guitar solo with higher notes with the same length. We hear the bridge, the chorus and the introduction melody for the last time. The song ends with a short attack.

Big and Small Gestures:

When we look at Pentagram songs, we see two kinds of gestures; big and small gestures. The big gestures are purer whether they are close to Turkish or western side. For example Anatolia song with its nikriz scale and 10/8 aksak semai rhythmic pattern, it’s easy to perceive by the audience. The only the westerner aspect of the music is almost the sound.

The small gestures are mingling of stylistic Turkish and western music fragments. For example, The bridge of Stand to Fall is made of very classical trash metal rhythmical riff. But it is also made in huseyni scale, with 6-7-1 cadance along with very characteristic huseyni 4-7-5 leap. This gesture is not very easy to catch by the audience’s ear. Still, if we speak of the

word “synthesis” for Pentagram’s music, these small gestures constitute the case rather than the big ones.

Overall Charactersitics of Pentagram’s Music:

The most used maqam scales by the band are hicaz –and zirgüleli hicaz-, nikriz, hüseyni, and kürdi scales. The zirgüleli hicaz is used mostly in last two albums and mostly in guitar solos; in order to open a new section by coloring with +7 without changing the tone or chord progression.

The songs are either in d or e. D is preferred for darker mood, e is chosen for lighter, more positive feeling.

The guitars are in drop d tuning. The guitar and the bass partitions are very plain, easy to play, and easy to ring. The guitar and the bass are playing the riffs or the melodies in unison or in octaves. These strategies, reinforces the guarantee of the solid and heavy sound of the band.

The most used rhythmic patterns are 10/8 (aksak semai), 9/8 (aksak), 7/8, 12/8, and 4/4. The songs are usually in middle tempo (around 100). This tempo is very convenient to headbang and accompanying rhythmically along with the band in live shows.

The songs are in popular song form. The song starts with the melody, then the verse, bridge, the chorus, again the repetition of these, a middle section or/and solo, and several repetitions of the chorus for the last time.

A MAP FOR OVERALL CHARACTERISTICS OF PENTAGRAM'S MUSIC

MAQAM SCALES	FORM	TONES	USULS/RHYTHMIC PATTERNS	TEMPO	STRATEGIES FOR THE SOUND
HİCAZ/ZİRGÜLELİ HİCAZ	SONG FORM	D	10/8 AKSAK SEMAİ	100~	DROP D TUNING
NİKRİZ		E	9/8 AKSAK		PLAIN PARTITIONS
HÜSEYNİ			7/8		PLAYING IN UNISON AND OCTAVE
KÜRDİ			12/8		
			4/4		