

## In Istanbul, a Display of National Music Culture

LIVE, NEWS, ERKAN OĞUR, EDİZ HAFIZOĞLU, SELEN GÜLÜN, CEVDET EREK, SELİM SELÇUK

By Michael J. West | Jul 11, 2018 9:00 AM



Vitrin is Turkish for “display window,” like those of the dense storefronts lining even Istanbul’s quietest streets. That’s exactly what the Vitrin Contemporary Turkish Music Showcase is: a window display of the country’s musical culture in 2018.

It’s the second year of the showcase, a component of the Istanbul Jazz Festival that ran from June 27-30. This time around, it featured a contingent of 30 performers from around Turkey—plus one from Azerbaijan, signaling the festival’s hopes of making Vitrin not just a national event, but a regional one.

For all of Istanbul’s picturesque scenes and concert venues, Vitrin opened in a small, windowless, balconied salon on the ground floor of the festival organizer, Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts. Also inauspicious was the double bill. Alike Places, a trip-hop duo featuring vocals over laptop electronics, hit the right buttons, channeled the appropriate voices (Tracey Thorn, Sade, Portishead) and ultimately managed competent mediocrity. The second act, a quartet led by jazz pianist Çağrı Sertel, confusingly billed itself as “fusion.” Perhaps it’s of jazz with Turkish music; there were certain folk-pop elements to their set. But it was also traditional acoustic post-bop, with the only electric element being the guitar that augmented the piano-bass-drums rhythm section. The music was pretty, sometimes soaring—and oddly devoid of a blues

feeling.

Vitrin's second evening was the "Night Out," a free-for-all similar to the marathon at [New York's Winter Jazzfest](#). Over six hours, 22 artists performed across nine venues, with attendees free to pick and choose where to go and what to see in Kadıköy, a super-hip district in Istanbul.

First came experimental percussionist Cevdet Ereğ—who stood alone on stage, beating a large shoulder-slung drum at the Moda Sahnesi performance space. He played a mallet in one hand and a stick in the other, keeping separate and often conflicting time with each. And if it wasn't quite clear what he was doing, it was fascinating to try to find out. Not, however, as fascinating as the Selim Selçuk Quartet at the nearby Baba Sahne theater. Drummer Selçuk featured alto saxophone, Fender Rhodes and bass in a remarkable, challenging set that simultaneously evoked Kneebody, electric Miles (Selçuk's new album, *Miles Kuçles*, is an homage to Miles's "Selim Sivad") and Ornette Coleman's Prime Time. The tangled rhythms and harmonies were rooted, though, in simple, instantly memorable melodies (like the four-note theme of Selçuk's "God Bless The Funk").

Less exciting was the Azerbaijani band, the Ahmedowsky Trio, which played at a four-story rowhouse club called KargArt. They billed themselves as ambient jazz, which really meant dancefloor funk with "Cantaloupe Island" thrown in; it got the crowd moving, but wasn't music for listening. The Focan & Biyikoğlu Organic Quintet, back at Baba Sahne, however, was great fun: greasy, funky organ jazz, full of piss and vinegar and groove. It was almost defiantly in the soul-jazz tradition, yet had a unique kick—Turkish spices in the hot sauce.

On night three, Vitrin held court at Zorlu Center, a massive performing arts complex. The three showcase-branded performances there were appropriately broad in stylistic range. They were broad in quality range, too. Singer-songwriter-pianist Selen Gülün's performance was lovingly crafted, luxuriant and torpid. She was followed, after dinner, by Turkish rapper Ağaçkakan. He brought along a live drummer and bassist/guitarist, plus electronic tracks; the performances had fire—but how much can one appreciate rap in a language one doesn't remotely understand? The answer might be generational. Two fellow attendees (in their twenties) proclaimed it the best live performance they'd seen all year; a third, in his sixties, called it "torture."

Ediz Hafizoğlu, an acknowledged master jazz drummer, later led a sextet called Nazdrave that was world fusion in the most exhilarating sense: funk and hip-hop beats, jazz harmonic and improvisational language, and best of all, Turkish folk music. A guest singer (who'd also been part of Gülün's revue) added a vocal deriving from *muezzin* calls that echo throughout the city.

The showcase's finest hour came on day four—back at the inauspicious Salon IKS. The wonderful Coşkun Karademir Quartet blended Anatolian folk music and sufi mysticism into surpassing loveliness on bağlama (lute), dukun (flute), cello and drums. From the moment the quartet began and for the next 50 minutes, it was absolutely spellbinding—so intricately bound together that it's impossible to say whether there was any improvisation.

Good as that was, a strong runner-up came in the evening with the postbop of guitarist Erkan Oğur, whose quartet played at an overlook of the Bosphorus Strait. An older, bearded man carrying a double-neck guitar, he immediately evoked Jimmy Page and other rock guitar gods. His actual playing, though, was delicate and, if occasionally charged by rockish distortion, unfailingly lyrical—even as his pianist, bassist and drummer turned up the heat. An hour in came a ferocious, almost-three-minute drum solo that stunned even the menacing fuzz-tone bass vamp into silence.

No festival is perfect, nor a component 31-band showcase. Vitrin, though, is on to something in displaying these artists to the world. **DB**