

# All About Jazz

## Istanbul's İKSV: An Intensity Beyond Cool



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It would be easy to get breathless, even giddy, about the range and schedule of cultural events organized by İKSV, the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (in Turkish: *İstanbul Kültür Sanat Vakfı*). One individual could not possibly keep up with its jazz and classical music festivals and everything else that's offered by İKSV. It brings under one organization something like the variety and aspirations of Lincoln Center in New York, the National Endowment for the Arts, commercial promoter Live Nation, and the trend-tracking of National Public Radio.

Once pronounced a capital of cool, [Istanbul](#) deserves the title. It is impassioned and creative; there's great shopping, great food, fantastic sights of mosques and bazaars, and as much of the exotic or deluxe as one might seek. İKSV's central building at Sadi Konuralp Caddesi No: 5 sits just below the main pedestrian-only boulevard İstiklal Caddesi (Independence Avenue), in a neighborhood of hotels, small clubs and restaurants, opposite the hilly streets winding through the old Galata district and its shops and music stores. İKSV has its own performance venue. Firuze, a rooftop restaurant and bar, presents a view as dazzling as any: across the Haliç, one finds the Golden Horn, mosques on hillsides, ferries across the Bosphorus, the waterway which is the geographic demarcation between Europe and Asia.

However, everything İKSV undertakes occurs amid reports of authoritarian national politics, reports of thousands of persons from professions, academia, journalism, purged or imprisoned; with others suffering worse fates. Writer Suzy Hansen has tracked events in Turkey for more than a decade for the *New York Times Magazine* and other publications. She observed in December that young people in Istanbul seem more concerned about politics, about the long and convoluted history of the region, and seem to have a greater belief in democracy and human rights, mostly because they still have to fight for those things.

The goal of İKSV is to turn Istanbul into a major center within the international culture and arts community. It does that by bringing Western musical and other talent in, and showcasing Turkish styles for exposure to the West. It places itself as "progressive," using the arts to open communications; there's an earnestness to İKSV. İKSV is a non-profit with significant corporate underwriting, and 7% government funding. With that source of support, İKSV's calendars remain remarkably broad. Recurring themes are identity amid change.

## Directions For Identity

For example, this autumn İKSV used its performance venue to create Salon, where Mashrou' Leila from Beirut played September 28. Its lead singer and lyricist Hamed Sinno is openly gay, advocates LGBT issues in the Middle East, and has spoken frankly about his own struggles with mental illness, topics which are often taboo in the MENA (Middle Eastern–North Africa) region. Their song "Three Minutes" repeats the refrain "Tell me who to be, please," seeking firm ground, yet mocking the illusion of finding that in the span of a three-minute song.

Another Mashrou' Leila song challenges the imposition of "Roman," or Western, constructs: "Before you lay me to rest, tell me what cost I came at." In its video, a veiled female dancer but with face exposed, amid other women veiled and not, busts out modern dance moves, fracturing preconceptions. The group has toured the United States the past two years, and been profiled in the *New Yorker* magazine on the intersection of culture and politics in the club scene.

Turks are not Arabs, by nationality or ethnicity, although both are largely followers of Islam, and that distinction has been historically volatile. Nevertheless, ElMorabba3, a Jordanian Arab rock band, plays Salon October 5 and 6. Their name means "the square," as in public forum; their most popular song "El Mokhtalifeen" ("Different / Boxes") questions differences that separate.

Loosely translated, it asks: "What if I came closer to you and challenged the isolation that is in you? I have the same thing. What if I come closer to you and try to make my presence felt to you? Maybe it won't be allowed, maybe it's not how you were taught. What if I intend to reach you, even if you appear far?"

Much of emergent Turkish-based music finds its heart in indigenous antecedents, transformed, often through electric instruments. Turkey's borders touch Greece, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Georgia, Armenia, and lie directly below Ukraine, and Russia, across the Black Sea. All of those regions and others contribute their own approaches to improvisational music, and endless talents.

Altın Gün ("Golden Day"), at Salon November 23, is a Dutch rock band singing in Turkish. The group came together in discovering a shared interest through Facebook: bassist Jasper Verlhust and other members came across Turkish folk idioms (türkü) and became so enamored that they learned the language, studied what had gone before, joined with Turkish musicians, and brought the music forward. Lead singer Erdinc Yildiz Ecevit plays an electrified baglama or saz, a three-string round-backed Turkish instrument similar to the Greek bouzouki, the middle-eastern oud, Russian balalaika, Western lute.

Neşet Ertaş, a Turkish folk musician who was a virtuoso on the baglama, now deceased, had become famous, then forgotten, then rediscovered. Selda Bağcan, Barış Manço, Cem Karaca, Erkin Koray are names unfamiliar in the West, but there was a period of psychedelic folk or Anatolian rock that these figures led in Turkey forty years ago, which is now being revisited. Altın Gün brings these influences all to the present time.

[Mario Batkovic](#), a Swiss accordionist of Bosnian descent, plays Salon November 17. He can make his instrument sound like a baroque organ; with a string quartet, he creates a soundtrack for an interplanetary space program.

[Sons of Kemet](#) is a British band led by saxophonist [Shabaka Hutchings](#) on top of a tuba and double drum quartet over dance rhythms culled from calypso, New Orleans brass, and West Africa. They play Salon November 21, after touring the United States, where they have already sold out their appearance at [SFJAZZ Center](#), the San Francisco Jazz Center, on October 10.

## Cross-Currents

Cross-currents are everywhere. İKSV's Salon scheduled Okkervill River for September 19, a Texas indie rock band that draws its name from a Russian short story by the great-granddaughter of Tolstoi. La Luz, an all-female surf rock band from [Los Angeles](#) by way of [Seattle](#), plays October 10. The YouTube videos of La Luz and Altın Gün on the İKSV Salon site both come through Seattle's KEXP public television. Mashrou' Leila has done an NPR Tiny Desk session.

For other tastes, Salon offers "dark synthpop" from Jakuzi on October 19, "post-punk dark wave" from Soft Moon on November 1. During the summer, an outdoor İKSV concert presented Wolf Alice, an English band with a sound reminiscent of the Eurythmics, and the Australian headliner King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard psychedelic band played in homage to [Pink Floyd](#), [Led Zeppelin](#), Sex Pistols, and [The Doors](#). While austerity discourages tobacco and alcohol, numerous kiosks heavily promoted beer, hot dogs, and Western brands of cigarettes and whiskey in what was styled as rock carnival. An overflow of that prompts such as the independent rave-like Red Bull Music Festival in late September.

Both jazz and classical festivals spread their offerings across varied venues across the city including historical sites, plazas, bazaars, museum spaces, churches. Montreal's L'Equipe Spectra

similarly packs dizzying volumes of musical entertainments into a festival season, but İKSV continues throughout the year in other media. There are separate arts and design biennials, and a pavilion at the Venice Biennial.

The 25th [Istanbul Jazz Festival](#) in late June and early July featured more than 450 musicians in 22 days with more than 50 concerts in 27 different venues. [Read our coverage.](#)

The jazz festival was preceded by the 46th Istanbul Music Festival for classical music, with more than 500 local and international artists from 21 countries in 25 concerts at 17 different venues from late May to mid-June. Fourteen young female classical musicians were featured to benefit from the "Women Stars of Tomorrow" support fund established with the collaboration of Industrial Development Bank of Turkey. The Vitrin Showcase}} for contemporary music from Turkey specifically seeks exposure for emergent Turkish musicians who have not yet broken out internationally.

İKSV's Istanbul Film Festival in April has the aim to encourage the development of cinema in Turkey and promote commercial distribution of "films of quality" in the Turkish market. A "Filmekimi" in October presents films selected from screenings at Cannes and other major festivals in varied Istanbul locations and in other Turkish cities. Films in 2017 included "Call Me By Your Name," a film of male sexual awakening, and "Un beau soleil intérieur / Bright Sunshine In," Juliette Binoche in a woman's explicit search for love. This year's themes, among others, address crime and people confronting their pasts.

Censorship of international films is prohibited by law. Domestic films do need a certificate of registration after review and approval by the government's Ministry of Culture. Turkish filmmakers who had submitted a documentary on Kurdish guerillas to an İKSV film festival in 2015 were charged with disseminating terrorist propaganda; their trial continues in October. The prohibition resulted in boycotts by other directors and cancellation of much of the film competitions.

The festival continues now with an awards category for human rights in cinema, "in accordance with the principles of individual freedom, political liberty and the rule of law." This year the award for best national documentary was given to "Parçalar" ("Fragments") by Rojda Akbayır "for achieving a universal and balanced narrative" in a geography that "witnesses recurring social tragedies." Her documentary tracked the flight of her father as a political refugee from Turkey in a previous era.

İKSV also offers a theater festival, in mid-November to early December: 52 performances by 24 theater and dance ensembles—12 from abroad and 12 from Turkey—in 21 different venues. In an existential drama, "Talk About the Passion," a man attempts to establish justice in an "increasingly degenerating society where the law fails to function." Nederlands Dans Theater at the end of November puts the music of [Jeff Buckley](#) with choreography of young lovers throwing

themselves into the unknown regardless of consequences, driven purely by longing. Another dance production features the music of [Philip Glass](#) as three separate rooms each contain its own love story, with a door to another room open and beckoning.

"Hamlet" is reconfigured as a study in consciousness and search for justice, by a Canadian director and a Moscow theater company. Also at the end of November, "Visitor," a collective theater production bears witness to "the tragic era" of massive waves of refugee migration.

The curator of last year's Istanbul Biennial, Ingar Dragset, said art remains a legitimate and powerful resistance to a melancholy that could leave one inconsolable. He held out the hope for art to broaden dialogue and understanding.

That kind of idealism is a continuing affirmation of İKSV: that the world could be a better place through cultural communication and understanding. A stated objective is "to create continuous interaction between national and universal values and traditional and contemporary values via culture and the arts." Harun Izer, director of the Istanbul Jazz Festival, admits it may sound old-fashioned, overly simplistic and even naïve, "but we really believe it."|

It was the purpose of İKSV when founded in 1973 by Dr. Nejat F. Eczacıbaşı and other businessmen. Eczacıbaşı began as a producer of vitamins and baby food; his stated cardinal principle was to contribute to a healthier society. He sought the development of Turkish manufacturing and commerce, a goal of the founders of modern Turkey, and became a leading industrialist in pharmaceuticals, personal care products, consumer products, building products, and financial services. He believed that businessmen had a social responsibility of contributing to the advancement of society.

# "Progressive" Through "Pluralism"

For İKSV now being "progressive" means moving toward "cultural pluralism," an acceptance that Turkey and other countries are irreversibly becoming more diverse, with existing minorities and the arrival of migrants and refugees. "National and universal values" and "traditional and contemporary values" may each themselves contain deep differences. In recent years, İKSV proposed an article for the constitution supporting the rights of individuals and groups to engage in chosen cultural practices and use of minority languages, and cultural policies in accordance with the needs of provinces and regions.

İKSV acknowledges the challenge for nation-states: maintaining the idea of national identity in the face of ethnic, religious, and cultural groups, and absorbing newcomers (immigrants, refugees, undocumented persons) who may not share the worldview of their new country. It believes culture and the arts can play a significant role in fostering inclusion and participation of the culturally diverse groups. Living together, it reminds, is the underlying purpose of society.

With decades of experience, İKSV has been considering this process for a while, with lessons learned. Its 2016 guidebook for cultural presentations said that planning requires a vision more than simply organizing arts events. There must be consideration of economic development goals, social justice, and public services. "Urban conditions and an increasingly prevalent environment of conflict and migrations suggest that culture will have a much broader impact on our future than we might have thought in the past."

Different interests may have different goals. İKSV suggested that if an arts event itself caused certain problems, bringing competing interests together early in focus groups could allow for an understanding of areas of sensitivity for both parties, to establish objectives that will make cooperation possible.

Turkey is not easily reduced to simplification; it is a complex and dynamic mix. Around town and country, dress ranges from full burka, eyes only revealed, to the most contemporary of Western fashions -and Western conduct. Approximately half of the nation's creative industry workforce is employed in Istanbul, but Istanbul is only a small portion of the nation, which extends a thousand miles eastward. There are huge numbers of college-educated young people (the average age is twenty-nine) with contemporary interests. Others find their freedom of expression in different paths. Ninety-nine per cent of Turks are said to be Moslem; the ruling party is Islamist.

The jazz festival over the years has brought a range from purist to popular: [Herbie Hancock](#), [Wynton Marsalis](#), and [Ornette Coleman](#) to [Diana Krall](#), [Björk](#), and Grace Jones. This year the classical schedule offered symphonic and early folk music on different dates, and another presentation combined traditional instruments with Bach on the same program. İKSV cautions against programming tendencies which separate heritage from interpretations carrying that heritage into the future, rather than blending the two to further social development. That insight now results in the mix presented.

In [Cemiyet](#), a club near İKSV, singer Eda Baba one night this summer seemed grounded in an acoustic folk style reminiscent of [Judy Collins](#) or [Paul Simon](#), but distinctly Turkish: adding elements of Roma guitar and violin, not simply cloning [Django Reinhardt](#) or chanson; some klezmer, tango with a lilt, electronica and club beat; ballads of love, excitement, longing, striving. A visitor sat through two sets, understanding not a syllable except for the word "Merhaba," ("Hello" in Turkish, an opener to a love song) but enjoying all of it. Other groups offer their own take in a similar vein. Another comment: "I don't know what they are singing about, but I feel like dancing."

The West knows so little about this country, beyond the headlines. Yet major cymbal brands Zildjian and Sabian, considered among the finest and heard in bands and orchestras everywhere, trace their lineage back to 1623 in Turkey. This place is living history. Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Cyrus the Great of Persia, and Alexander the Great all crossed these lands.

Istanbul is a stretch beyond the more typical European destination. Roundtrip flights from New York to Rome, for example, with aggressive shopping and flexibility of schedule, run in the range of \$500; tickets to Istanbul, another 850 miles further east, are in the range of \$900, creeping up on double the price. Los Angeles to Istanbul on Russian Aeroflot is priced around \$1000; other carriers from KLM, Lufthansa, to Turkish Airlines cost a few hundred dollars more. Roundtrip connecting flights originating through major European destinations such as London or Rome can be found for about \$250; nonstop flight time from Rome is about two-and-a-half hours, from London about four hours.

Visa requirements for Americans have been changeable, amid shifting global politics and competing sanctions. It's recommended to get a visa from a Turkish consulate before leaving: one may not always be able to obtain an entry visa upon arrival, particularly in direct flights from the United States. A stopover in another country may ease entry, a curiosity in diplomatic strategies as applied.

Beyond mere price, it takes some earnestness to get to Istanbul, to match the earnestness awaiting. One will not be able to sample or understand everything, but as in Istanbul's bazaars,



that has always been true. The unfamiliar adds value. Some things are dynamic as they are eternal.

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