

On *Vessel* and the History of Cymbal Making in Istanbul



Herman H. Kreider, *Zilciyan's shop Istanbul. Hand-hammering*, between 1940 and 1967, retrieved from the Library of Congress

Ege Kanar

From the seventeenth-century craftsmanship of Avedis I to the Istanbul Agop Factory, visual artist Ege Kanar tells the story of the cymbal-making tradition in Istanbul. Kanar's audio installation, *Vessel*, was presented in 2021 at Sabancı Museum, suspending cymbals to create an auditory experience but also inviting tactile engagement. Through Kanar's lens, the piece explores the nuanced connections between local sounds and situated expressions, as he finds himself auralizing about the imprint and reverberation of this hand-hammered instrument and its »indexicality,« which is otherwise usually attributed to photographs.

Cymbals are circular, metallic instruments that first appeared around the early Bronze Age. The word »cymbal« comes from the Greek *kymbos*, meaning »cistern,« or »beaker« in Latin, the equivalent term is »cymbalum.« Throughout history, cymbals were deployed during distinct rituals and ceremonies like funerals and orgies. On the battlefield, they served in sonic warfare. Witches used cymbals to counter lunar eclipses, and as noted by Pliny, Roman beekeepers utilized the instrument to lead their swarms. Although the early history of cymbal-making is vague, the oldest known cymbal-like objects date back to the third millennium BC. Made in the Middle East by the Sumerians, these proto-instruments were manufactured using bronze, an alloy obtained by mixing molten copper and tin in specific proportions. According to speculation, the alloy was first employed in manufacturing plates, cups, and shields and eventually lent itself to making instruments due to its outstanding vibrational and mechanical qualities. In organology, cymbals are classified under »idiophones,« instruments capable of producing sound by the vibration of their bodies. Each hand-made cymbal has a fingerprint comprising a given curvature, a specific diameter, a unique weight, and a particular finish. They are acoustic objects that emerge from a mysterious alloy and endure a cumbersome process finalized by thousands of hammer blows.

The instrument's local history can be traced back to the Armenian metal worker Avedis I, who migrated from Trabzon to Constantinople in the early seventeenth century to make a living by casting bells for the city's churches. In 1618, Avedis was commissioned by the Ottoman Sultan, Osman II, to produce a set of cymbals for the Mehteran Ensemble, the Ottoman military band, to reinforce the Janissary army's striking power and impact. Avedis created his first set of cymbals using a bronze alloy (B20) he obtained by mixing copper and tin in specific proportions. Impressed by the quality of the cymbals that he delivered, Osman II would name Avedis »Zildjian« (Armenian for »son of the cymbal maker«) and employ him in his court to keep producing more cymbals. After working for a few years at Topkapı Palace, Avedis obtained a special permit required for non-Muslim subjects of the empire to set up a private workshop in the coastal region of the Samatya neighborhood; as such, the foundations of the brand Zildjian that is one of the oldest businesses still alive today were laid in 1623.

When Murat Germen invited me to produce a new work for an exhibition titled *Past. Present. Istanbul* held at Sabancı Museum in 2021, I wished to engage more deeply with the local history of manual cymbal making. The emergence of cymbals in Istanbul at the beginning of the seventeenth century marked an alignment of events, personalities, resources, technics, and entities of knowledge that materialized in the form of an aural object with an aura of its own. As a research-oriented visual artist and an amateur drum kit player, the fact that the actual alloy used in small factories across Istanbul today could be traced back to the recipe developed by Avedis 400 years ago fascinated me. During my first visit to the Istanbul Agop factory, I observed how cymbals rose out of this primordial mixture, and I encountered some destined to return to it. Inspired by the cyclical nature of this heat-induced process and by its malleable material that oscillates between liquid and solid states for centuries, I decided to create an audio installation that uses some faulty cymbals picked from the factory on the promise of being taken back and melted once the work was dismantled.

The production of a handmade cymbal begins with an ingot obtained by pouring molten bronze into an iron cup and leaving it to cool for about a week. The ingot has to match the approximate weight of the anticipated cymbal to be heated and pressed into a flat disc called a blank. Edges of these blanks are then trimmed, their cups are punched in, and a hole is drilled in each of their centers. At the last stage, the



Vessel, exhibition views *Past. Present. Istanbul*, Sabancı Museum, 2021.
Courtesy Murat Germen



A pile of ingots at Istanbul Agop Factory, 2023. Courtesy Ege Kanar
Hand-hammering cymbals at Istanbul Agop Factory, 2023. Courtesy Ege Kanar

instruments are lathed on both sides to remove the oxide layering that dampens their sound, and hand-hammered to find their definite form and timbre. Each instrument made this way possesses a unique harmonic character determined by the complex processes that have shaped it.

The recipe developed by Avedis in the seventeenth century has been transmitted orally within the family and kept a secret for generations. By the nineteenth century, Zildjian cymbals were displayed at trade fairs in various European capitals and taken to the main ports of the New World, such as New York and Chicago. In 1905, Aram Zildjian's name got involved in an assassination attempt against Abdulhamid II, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century – following which he had to flee to Bucharest for a while.

In 1927, Aram wrote a letter to his nephew Avedis III and requested him to return to Istanbul and take over the company. Avedis III had already left the city in 1909 and settled in Boston to avoid being drafted by the Ottoman army at the onset of the clashes awaiting the Armenian society. Although Avedis III showed no interest in his uncle's offer in the beginning, his wife Sally later persuaded him to study the manufacturing process and continue running the business in Boston. In 1929, Avedis finally settled in a taxi garage in Quincy, Massachusetts, and established the first Zildjian factory in the United States.

After the brand moved out of the country, the workshop management in Istanbul passed to Aram Zildjian's maternal cousins, the Dulgarians, who had worked in production since Aram's time. The Dulgarian family took the surname »Zilçan« with the enactment of the surname law in Turkey. Mikhail Zilçan started to rival Zildjians in the global market with cymbals he kept producing in Istanbul. The rise of jazz in North America at the beginning of the twentieth century compelled Avedis III to increase his factory's production capacity and develop new types of cymbals suitable for the era's needs. While cymbal production resumed in an entirely manual fashion in the Old K Factory in Istanbul, the new Zildjian factory would switch to partial automation and triple its daily production capacity by introducing mechanized hammers.

Zildjian finally acquired the Old K Factory at the end of the sixties and terminated its activities by 1977. After the closure of the factory and the death of Mikhail Zilçan, two cymbal smiths, Agop Tomurcuk and Mehmet Tamdeğer, who had worked for him since their childhood, established Zilciler Kollektif in 1980, and rebranded the firm as Istanbul Cymbals in 1982. In 1996, the sudden passing of Agop Tomurcuk caused the brand to split into two. This event became the genesis of Istanbul Agop and Istanbul Mehmet, two separate companies with no commercial ties that continue to produce cymbals under the same logo today.

With the assistance of Dilara Hadroviç, I started to work on the installation *Vessel* by building a 1:10 scale model of the exhibition hall to figure out the arrangement of instruments to be suspended from the ceiling using audio cables of varying lengths. These cables would not only support the weight of the cymbals but also transfer audio to small exciters (contact speakers) planted on each cymbal body. This mechanism would be used to feed the cymbals with sound recordings I would later make using the same set of instruments. The technique was reminiscent of plate reverbs introduced in 1957 by EMT to process electric guitar recordings.¹ A plate reverb consists of a suspended metal sheet enclosed in a wooden frame and two sets of transducers mounted on each side of the sheet to excite and record it in real time. My idea was to trigger the cymbals similarly via physical contact. This way, each cymbal would act like a bronze membrane through which the exciter mounted on its body speaks. Since objects can only vibrate when they encounter frequencies built into their substance, I expected

each cymbal to cut off a particular portion of the incoming signal spectrum due to its sonic complexity and thus create a biased, individual rendering of the same audio material. I believed the frequencies, which would grab and release certain cymbals momentarily, could also transform this constellation into a transient choir that would resonate not only with the physical space of the installation but also with the whole tradition of manual cymbal-making in Istanbul.

I still remember the moment I switched on the amplifier in the control room of the museum and rushed anxiously to the exhibition hall to experience what *Vessel* sounded like for the first time. I created five short tracks from the recordings I made in the studio playing the cymbals with different pairs of sticks, mallets, brushes, and a bow. I added intermissions between each of the tracks to let the floating instruments come to rest from time to time. One thing I had the urge to modify toward the end of the installation phase was the position of the last cymbal to be hung. With a sudden insight, I decided to place this item at a much lower height than planned to enable the visitors to observe the cymbal from above, touch its vibrating body, and engage with the work tactilely while listening to how it sounds. If we were to unpack the card boxes in which pieces of the work are still stored at Mas Matbaa, Istanbul, I suspect we would be able to tell, looking at the faint fingerprints left on the surfaces of the instruments, which cymbal was that last one.

On a recent visit to the Istanbul Agop Factory two years after *Vessel* came to life, I had a chance to converse with Arman Tomurcuk, who oversees the company today. As we passed by some photographs mounted close to his office, he showed me a particular image of his father, Agop Tomurcuk, sitting at his anvil next to Kirkor Küçükyan, the master cymbalsmith of the Old K Factory at the time. Mr. Tomurcuk asked me to take a closer look at the image and noted the wristwatch hanging on the wall of the room in which Agop and Kirkor were working. Observing this curious detail further, I found myself auralizing the sound of the hanging wristwatch ticking and imagining how certain involuntary rhythms created by the pounding hammers of these two cymbalsmiths were to supersede the regular flow of seconds in that small room where time seemed to be suspended for good by the photograph.

¹ Elektromesstechnik (EMT) is a manufacturer of phonograph turntables and professional audio equipment. Wilhelm Franz founded the company in Berlin in 1938.

Ege Kanar's photographic practice addresses images from an ontological standpoint and scrutinizes the intermediary role of photographs within various scientific, and cultural contexts. His recent projects incorporate sound, video, and installations and treat notions of rhythm, scale, and materiality. He lives in Istanbul.

Resources

Bart Van der Zee: *Drum History*, podcast, ep.: 28, 37, 58, 65, 93

Canan Aykent: »Zildjianlar ve Türk Zilleri,« in: *folklor/edebiyat*, 26, no: 1 (2020), pp. 127–139.

Hugo Pinksterboer: *The Cymbal Book*. Milwaukee 1992.

Pars Tuğlacı: *Mehterhane'den Bando'ya*. Istanbul 1986.

James Blades: *Percussion Instruments and their History*. London 1971.

To listen to the accompanying audiovisual material, please access the online version of *Solitude Journal 5 – A Sound Was Heard!*



You will find the following material:

Ege Kanar, Audio composition for *Vessel*, 2021

Ege Kanar, Video recording for *Vessel*, 2021