

MY INSTRUMENT

Melisa Yıldırım and her kamancha

Turkish spike-fiddle player Melisa Yıldırım talks to **Simon Broughton** about her distinctive Anatolian instrument and the music she makes with it

“**T**his instrument is very soulful for me and I just feel what I want to play. It’s in touch with my body. I feel the vibrations, which come through this hole here.” Melisa Yıldırım turns her instrument around to show me. It’s got a beautifully rounded gourd back and there is a sound hole at the top so the music rises up and engulfs her.

She’s passionate about the bowed fiddles of Anatolia and the surrounding region. There are several types of *kemençe* (spike fiddle) in Turkey. The Istanbul, or ‘*klasik*’ *kemençe*, the narrow Black Sea folk *kemençe*, and the *kabak kemane*, made from a gourd (*kabak*). Spike fiddles are also played in Iran, Azerbaijan and Armenia. “Different instruments,” she explains, “but from the same family tree.”

Born in Istanbul into an Alevi Kurdish family, Yıldırım studied music at the Istanbul Technical University and was inspired to take up *kabak kemane* by her teacher Ferhan Yeprem, one of few women playing the instrument. “I liked her and realised there are all these unexplored sounds I want to go after. It gives me my self-awareness and I can express myself.” Yıldırım toured the UK as part of a Making Tracks tour in 2019 and she’s recently released her debut album *Talûş* (a Hebrew word meaning ‘Timeless’) with fretless guitarist Gilad Weiss.

Yıldırım calls the instrument she plays a *kamancha* (the Azeri word for it). It’s made by Arslan Hazreti, an Iranian Azeri with a workshop in Istanbul. “It’s *kamancha* heaven,” she says. “The *kamancha* doesn’t have any standard form, like the violin or the piano. It is still developing and he is very innovative. He calls this the ‘Anatolian *kamancha*’ and it’s a kind of hybrid.”

Her instrument has five strings, with an extra bass string in addition to the usual four. “Low sounds have a mystical quality, which I always prefer. I’m interested in Sufi and spiritual music.” You can hear the warm, low, ‘mystical’ tones on the opening track of *Talûş*.

The *kamancha* has a beautiful gourd body, covered with goat skin over the front where the bridge sits. There are modern metal fine-tuners on the tailpiece. The fingerboard and pegs are ebony, while the neck is walnut. “The strings are metal,” Yıldırım continues. “In the old days they used gut, but these are specially made in Tabriz, Iran, and very good for the *kamancha* sound.” The bow looks like wood, but is actually made of bamboo. “The horse-hair of the bow is grey, which is unusual, from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan or Mongolia.



Normally it’s white.” The bow hair is tightened with a screw mechanism, as on a violin bow.

Yıldırım’s playing is sonorous, particularly in the low register, but with that scratchy, edgy sound that makes these spike fiddles so distinctive. There are also eerie slides and spectral high notes creating a kind of aura in the music. “I get my inspiration from traditional music, but I like to develop it. Some people object to that, but years ago it was also new. Traditional music is like an ocean and the human soul is like an ocean, and you have these two oceans side by side. I like to improvise so I can be myself. Before playing I plan and have ideas about what I am going to do. I may have played the Huseyni *makam* 1,000 times, but I don’t want it always the same, because I am changing and growing. So it’s original, but with a traditional side.” ♦

+ **ALBUM** *Talûş* will be reviewed in the next issue