



In Memoriam

by Linda Minasian, DMA

In *Hallelujah Junction* the postminimalist composer John Adams writes: “Poetry offers that possibility of multiplicity and ambiguity in a way no other art can.”¹ I questioned the statement, thinking that music, the most abstract form of art, certainly provides the greatest variety of interpretations.

The mere fact, whether or not music is open to any interpretation, has long been debated. In his oft quoted passage Stravinsky stated, “Music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to express anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, or psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature, etc... Expression has never been an inherent property of music. That is by no means the purpose of its existence. If ... music appears to express something, this is only an illusion and not a reality.”²

In *Romantic Music*, Leon Plantinga quotes Berlioz, who, in regards to his *Symphonie fantastique*, writes the following: “He [Berlioz] knows very well that music can take the place of neither word nor picture; he has never had the absurd intention of expressing abstractions or moral qualities, but rather passions and feelings.”³

As performers we are left with our individual approach in how to create a magical connection with the audience and to invite them into the numinous world of our music. Technical precision and mastery is certainly awe-inspiring, academic, and mandatory, but is not necessarily sufficient for the audience to have a transcendental experience. To eliminate the experience is to eliminate the most significant purpose of music.

As pedagogues, we are also left with our individual judgement whether and how to make a composition animated, vivid, and narrative for our students’ imaginations, regardless of their age, level, and gender. What is easier to relate to, the abstract sounds of music or the semantic power of words?

Recently, while researching online on an unrelated topic, in my California home, I came across the name of a composer I had met years ago, in my early teens. The headline announced: “Emanuel Melik-Aslanian died on July 14th, 2003.”

Instantly, I was taken back to a different time, a different world, a different life.

¹Adams, *Hallelujah Junction*, 279.

²Katz, *Contemplating Music*, 190.

³Platinga, *Romantic Music*, 209.

I remembered the day I visited Aslanian. Accompanied by my instructor, I was to perform his composition in order to obtain his approval for public performance of the piece. A soft-spoken, sympathetic, middle-aged man greeted us, listened to my performance, nodded, gave his approval, and we left. I left his house just as puzzled as I had entered. The piece, a combination of diatonic clarity and dissonant ambiguity, was then a complex obscure collection of notes, which I practiced religiously, resolving technical issues, to be left, in the end, with an uncomfortable feeling of the unknown. Now, decades later, searching amongst my piles of music, I found the hand written manuscript copy of the memorable work: “*Tanzvariationen über ein Armenisches Volkslied*” composed in 1952¹, the year Melik-Aslanian returned home from Germany, after concluding his studies first at the Hamburg Conservatory, then Berlin Hochschule für Musik. Secretly afraid of facing the long forgotten puzzle, I sat down to play the piece. To my great relief, within minutes, the entire history of a nation unraveled under my fingers: past - present - future.

Whether evolved from pure imagination or inherent musical phenomenon, these are the ‘events’ I hear portrayed through the notes, all inclusive in the simple title: “Dance Variations, on an Armenian Folk Song.”

Dancing denotes festivities.

Folk song denotes villagers. It is amongst peasants that the purity of folk songs is best preserved. The composition paints a wedding celebration in an Armenian village. At a time when simple events were given enormous magnitude, a wedding was certainly a worthy cause for a week long celebration. Interestingly enough, Jonathan McCollum in his *Armenian Music* writes: “We doubt there are many ethnomusicologists around today who would dare to refute the importance of weddings for the study of any folk music. Weddings often [construe] one of the most vital sources, if not the most vital source of music in rural areas.”² The composition begins with a simple 12-bar diatonic melody played in parallel octaves in a key called the Rast, which is the same as a G major scale. There are several keys in Armenian music similar to the Western diatonic scales. Otherwise, as with Jazz, scales of Armenian music contain semi-tones and quarter-tones that cannot be played and notated properly on the piano. Four variations follow, each representing a day of the festivities. As the days progress, more and more people join in. Two voices in the theme become three, then four, in each subsequent variation. While the theme is heard in its entirety, either in the treble or bass register, the rhythmic elaborations of the accompaniment signify the innocent joy of the activities. Especially the added syncopation with its energizing effect, which always creates jovial movement.

Armenian is the final reference to deduce from the title, not so much as a reflection of ethnicity, but as a vivid reminder of a historic atrocity, which is present in every literary, artistic, musical work, every political gathering, every breath, of every living Armenian. Just as the Holocaust is an unforgettable scar in the history of mankind, the massacre of a million and a half victims of

¹Since no printed copy is available, musical examples have not been included in the article. The reader may refer to the live performance of this work on YouTube ‘Armenian Genocide thru Music- Linda Minasian’.

²McCollum, *Armenian Music: A comprehensive bibliography and discography*, 2.

this tiny nation a few decades prior to the Holocaust, has left a deep wound in the soul of the survivors.

The last variation is followed by a folk song in the right hand, traditionally played on the 3000 year old reed instrument called *duduk*. In 2005, UNESCO proclaimed Armenian *duduk* music as a “Masterpiece of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity.” Its haunting, plaintive sound evokes the exotic, the ancient, the distant land in motion pictures like *Gladiator*, *Passion of the Christ*, *Blood Diamond*, to mention a few. The left hand plays a drone bass accompaniment in the dominant. A similar effect is typically created on the traditional *doumbek* or small drum. The happy song is not to last very long. It will, however, return once more at the end, only then disguised in a melancholic aura.

Creeping in and shattering the innocence of the melody with a pattern reminiscent to the unorganized footsteps of the vicious attackers, the most heart wrenching dissonant chord interrupts day five of the wedding. The serenity of the diatonic folk song transforms into a barbaric drive. A pounding G major chord with the raised fourth (c#) is repeated incessantly. Not only is the rapid metamorphosis masterful, but Aslanian’s symbolism is uncanny.

First, the duality he presents by the choice of the key - G major. Religious intolerance is the central cause of the massacre. Christians being brutalized in their homeland. At the same time, G major is the key of *Hayr Mer* prayer of the Armenian Mass. The same religion that serves Armenians as both their solace and their source of misery.

Second, the reference to the above mentioned authentic instruments places the geographic location of this historic abomination, namely Anatolia (Eastern Turkey.)

Third, the mixed meter rapidly changing between 9/16, 6/16, 2/8 emphasizes not only the mixed participation of soldiers, citizens, and prisoners - the latter were released solely to help fulfill the crimes-, but also the Turkish presence, since the constant shift of the metric stress is reminiscent of the Turkish additive meter known as *aksak* (crippled, in Turkish.)

The chaos is further limned by the combined effort of dynamics, articulation, and percussive touch. The frenzy is interrupted twice, marked *subito p*, first with an A diminished triad in bar 52, then an E diminished triad in bar 74. Three distinct voices can be heard: in the mid register, repeated 32nd notes representing the cry of children; mothers, in the high register, consoling their children; and men, in the low register, helplessly witnessing the crimes, unable to intervene. By fragmenting the theme, Aslanian symbolizes their lives cut short. The first six notes of the theme are heard in the high register. However, below a lingering diminished fifth pedal point, only the first three notes are used, representing the male victims, who were the first to be annihilated. The horrid picture is enough to bring tears to the listeners’ eyes.

Four measures 254-57, close to the end, seemed to be the most ambiguous part of the composition then; out of place, completely unrelated, almost cheerful, palaver. Now, the passage, alternating between augmented and perfect fourths, comes through as the mockery of the neighboring nations, who witnessed the atrocities, yet did not lift a finger to help. Leading

directly into a section marked *L'istesso tempo* (mm. 265-58 and 273-76). Three chromatic notes, descending into E minor with extended half note values, seem like a plea for help. Followed each time by a slow triplet passage in tonic-dominant moving in the opposite direction, showing cold dismissal (mm. 269-72 and 277-80).

Suddenly, all is over.

The soulful sound of the *duduk* echoes once again through the treble register of the piano. The happy folk song in day five of the celebrations seems like a distant past. The song has now turned into a mournful lament. The key has modulated from G major to E minor. Beethoven moves from D minor to D major in his final symphony to show his triumph over life. Melik-Aslanian, however, tells a different story. A story that should have been, if not forgotten but perhaps a forgiven part of history. But since the aggressors never accepted responsibility, nor were faced with criminal charges, their inflicted atrocities of 1915 have remained an open wound. Perhaps, had proper actions been taken, the Holocaust could have been prevented. Perhaps the Armenian experience would not have been looked at as practice grounds for the future mass murders. And perhaps, in his speech to his commanders initiated out of pure hubris, Hitler would not have uttered: “Who still talks nowadays of the extermination of the Armenians?” Even to this day, close to a century later, the wound is inflicting the living generation who fights incessantly for justice for the victims, closure for the survivors, an end to the unresolved trauma. Aslanian ends the piece on an E minor chord, with an unresolved *a#* lingering, penetrating the soul of its listener; Armenian ... non-Armenian, affected ... unaffected, G major ... E minor, Genocide ... Existence.

The work is perhaps not intended as agitprop, but as a historic statement of facts similar to *The Death of Klinghoffer* or *Doctor Atomic* of John Adams. Although I seem to have solved the initial mystery, I now have a new question, which will remain unanswered. Were these truly Melik-Aslanian’s intentions? Why wasn’t the story explained to me then? An idea, any idea, would have enabled me to interpret the work rather than merely execute it. I must agree with Harold C. Schonberg who writes how ‘concentration on textual truth’ can lead to ‘emotional inhibition,’ and that ‘many musicians...end up obeying the letter but not the spirit of the music.’¹

Although, In Stravinsky’s view this could constitute as “sentimental twaddle,”² I do know that listeners clearly see the picture that I paint through music, assuming the narrative is told in advance. The most rewarding aspect of live performance is the utmost captivation of the audience. I do not mean the forced silence imposed on the classical concert goer, to fulfill the burden of the etiquette, but the powerful energy, when the performer succeeds in gaining emotional control of the audience. Can the music be interpreted differently? Is it open to a multiplicity of explanations? Certainly. Adding or eliminating ideas outside of a composition does not add or subtract its value. But there is no harm in triggering the imagination of our students and listeners. I believe imagination is a learned skill. It may or may not be obtained easily, but it can certainly be developed.

¹Schonberg, *The Lives of the Great Pianists*, 400.

²Joseph, *Stravinsky Inside Out*, 28.

*Let the knowledge grow from more to more,
But more of reverence in us dwell,
That mind and soul, according well,
May make one music as before,
But vaster.*

Lord Tennyson - *In Memoriam*

In memory of my great aunt and great uncle who perished during the 1915 massacres.

‘Variations on an Armenian Folk Song’ was recognized as the best representation of the Nationalist Music of the East at the 1960 International Musical Conference held in the Middle East. Emanuel Melik-Aslanian remained unknown to the Western world.

Works Cited

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Online Resources

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<http://www.armenian-genocide.org/hitler.html>
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2011/apr/21/komitas-vardapet-folk-music-armenia>

Illustration: Komitas Vardapet by Sarkis Muradyan

Photograph: RIQ Novosti/Lebrecht Music & Art

Armenian ethnomusicologist, who like Aslanian, studied in Berlin. At the age of 25, he was ordained Vardapet - a celibate priest and assumed the name Komitas after a 7th century religious poet. Komitas was amongst the first 290 intellectuals to be arrested, tortured, and deported in the 1915 massacres. Survived physically, yet unable to cope mentally, he spent the remaining twenty years of his life in a mental asylum in Paris.