

## Sanctities Sustained: An Outsider's Experience inside Armenian Culture

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### Abstract

This essay will depict one American musician's journey in the discovery of Komitas' music and how this led to a deeper discovery of Armenian culture and history writ large, resulting in a visit to Armenia itself. It is intended to honor the greatness of the Armenian spirit and identity, as well as to encourage the following of one's inspiration and intuition in life.

**Key words:** *Komitas, preservation, identity, travel, Lusine Zakaryan, Jordi Savall, sincerity, genocide, Garcia Lorca, duende, Artur Shahnazarian, music.*

*Just when I'm thinking, / As I'm passing the boy smiling in his school uniform, /  
Thinking I was a boy once too, / And then another boy, this one /  
twelve years old maybe, / With anger and confusion on his face,  
Thinking I was twelve once too, / And as I wonder, /  
Just as I begin to get pierced / By the gorgeous September morning /  
And all the holiness of the mountains and people around, /  
Wondering 'why is it that when so far away from one's birthplace, /  
Everything essential becomes closest?' /  
Just as it's hitting me with awe and grief and gratitude, /  
I round the corner and there's Mt Ararat, / In all majesty, silence,  
Autumnal, no haze, / Unreal, ultimate reality,  
The beauty, the symbol, / Anonymously, generously,  
Generating, donating, / Identity.  
Worship while you weep  
The clarity of Fall.  
Dylan Whitman Waller*

### Introduction

I was living in a one-room cabin in northern Minnesota, halfway between my grandmother and my parents, alongside a lake that was frozen full of eagles in

wintertime, and full of car-noise when it thawed, attempting to make a living while attempting to make peace between the generations.

One night as I'm resting and my little radio is on, a sound comes to me from the public station down the road broadcasting things from further away: it's the first time I hear Komitas, in that little broken shack, and I don't know who he is and I don't know what Armenia is, but the music makes immediate, complete sense: first, a woodwind, and who of what wood is playing that flute? The sound of pure longing, and the fortitude within it. Then, voices – the chorale, the angelic, the transcendence over the bestial and mundane, surpassing even Russian vespers in intriguing resolutions. It went to my soul, where it lived or already existed and was placed inside to germinate.

I did some research on the duduk as soon as I could, but for whatever reason overlooked a study of the composer. Years later I'm in Portugal, attending a concert of the Spanish maestro Jordi Savall, whose organization Hesperion XXI (Savall 2012) has long been dedicated to preserving and performing traditional music from around the world. Jordi's wife, Montserrat Figueras, had died within the previous year. She was an extremely gifted soprano, and her favorite music was Armenian music, so his ensemble had made a recording of his interpretations of Komitas' conveyant sounds, dedicated to her memory. I was finally fully struck by the man and his work.

It was mentioned that Montserrat's favorite singer of Armenian music was a woman named Lusine Zakaryan. The name stayed with me, but it wasn't until a year or two later, I'm living outside Boston, up in the Green Mountains, taking time away from the world, wanting always to go away, as the only means to get in further, and on a Christmas Eve I finally hear her, electronically, for the first time: Lusine Zakharyan singing Komitas, 'Krunk', 'Garun A', and all the rest.

I break down. If her voice opens a wound, it is only in order to pour healing into it. It shoots through me with such light, direct into the sternum, and I understand that my whole life will be rearranged. I end up in Denmark and I'm still listening to the material, absorbing her voice, and it's during that

time that a Russian colleague shares with me what she has known of Komitas' life, and I begin to become aware of some of the history of Armenia, while wondering what sort of people could produce and harbor such unique, divinely-inspired music.

### **From Dream to Determination**

I learn while looking at trees through the mist of the Danish seashore and listening to the calls of migrating geese above as background to the Armenian music coming from inside, that Armenia experienced the Genocide – the conscious determination of the Turks to exterminate it – the first such horror seen in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In earlier centuries, American occupiers had already been well under way in attempting to systematically exterminate its native inhabitants, but this, inside the boundaries of European civilization, was a first.

And I learned that Komitas could not handle it, had no way to assimilate or understand on a spiritual level what was happening. It broke him. Twisted him mad. I was compelled by his heroic, unique labor, in travelling to every region of Armenia and collecting, preserving the folk music; how he placed it alongside and within classical forms he had learned in Berlin and Vienna, and wondered if his action and his music remained a cornerstone of Armenian culture and identity. I wondered if someday, somehow, I could find out for myself.

Some few weeks later, in the rain-haze, looking into those seashore-trees holding this deep question, trying to discern direction, a voice inside their gentle repose seemed to say, 'Yes, now, Armenia.' The dream became determination, and I walked through the trees of that Baltic seashore and was able to enter Armenia.

What I discovered upon arrival and every day henceforth were so many open doors of illumination, a combination of creativity and depth of kindness in the people, a heroic humility I'd heard reflected in the music. I mean, a singer and her brother, neither of whom you've met before, come and pick you up at the airport at five in the morning in the middle of a snowstorm and take you to

your rented house? Who are these people; why are they so kind? Don't they know that nearly everyone in America and Europe distrusts one another, or do I yet not understand their brand of distrust? In any case, in being allowed to set up my portable home, I feel an immediate, deep sense of belonging.

I begin to learn. I begin to meet and assist musicians, composers, filmmakers, book publishers – those who have devoted their lives to Komitas' music, and all those who have Komitas' music inside them, which is everyone. Whether street sweeper or doctor, whether taxi driver or professor – all Armenians hold Komitas' music inside them, a sign of the highest culture. I am not an academic; if anything I am a student of faces, voices, sound and form. I was amazed to find children here safe and free, which no other large city of the world that I've seen can claim. Their freedom informs us all, a sign of the highest civilization.

I see the poverty and the problems too, but I see how people deal with the poverty, in most cases so heartily and humorously endured and survived within than the kinds of poverty that afflict the United States and Europe.

I had the great fortune of meeting, for example, Artur Shahnazarian, the composer of 'Sasuntsi Davit' and so many other works (Shahnazarian. 2014), one who understands *khaz*, the ancient Armenian system of musical notation, a code which had taken Komitas fourteen years to crack, and after a great evening of sharing music and poetry, he asked me, 'What do you hear in Komitas' music?'

How does one describe in words what one hears inside works of beauty, dedication and endurance? After a moment of reflection, I answered 'Sincerity'.

What is the quality of sincerity? Why is it difficult to define? Why is it essential?

It's not dissimilar to the great Spanish poet Garcia Lorca's definition of *duende*, meaning, 'singing from the soles of your boots through the top of your head' (Lorca 1933), and that one can retain all the technical training in the world, but without this quality, the work will be flat, without soul. Though

Komitas employed a unique technical brilliance in his compositions, the human heart is the root of his music.

Armenian singers retain this essence organically and supranaturally. Lorca would have loved this place. Anyone with half a heart left open would.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Simultaneously, I begin to learn more about the atrocities committed in the past and the threat and active danger Armenia remains exposed to by its neighbors east and west. In addition to its culture and music, I devote whatever may be useful from my life to the preservation of Armenian historical sovereignty. I learn about Komitas' rescue; I unexpectedly learn about my extended family – the Bliss family's role in assisting refugees in the region, raising over three million dollars in relief in 1920 (Ketibian and Ohanian 2018). I understand we used to do good things with our money.

Komitas gave his life to music, lived inside it; this cannot be overstated. What broke in him is what breaks in all of us, in accordance with our sincerity and sensitivity, but as he was breaking and before he was broken, the sound of his supplication can only be called divine, fully human. Tenderness and playfulness. The honesty. The faith. The love.

Sincerity and sensitivity – the rarest of traits.

Many young people in Europe have forgotten their root-music; but most here still listen to Komitas. 'His is not a music,' one young woman said, 'It is a way of understanding life.'

I have few illusions that any place is paradisiacal, but across the 30 countries I've experienced, I do have an ability to employ and observe some societal comparisons, and whatever is lacking in certain important areas of Armenian infrastructure is made up for in what's preserved – may it always be defended. I believe there is a heritage, cultural and spiritual, held for safekeeping in Armenia which belongs to all the world.

One can read it inside the tragedy, and hear it inside his music, where a spirit seems to say, 'It's safe here, inside this music – this is a preservation and

continuation of home, of identity. The world brings suffering, but there is a greater mercy at work.'

Last year, one of the good young soldiers drove me to Etchmiadzin, where Komitas lived and worked, and to Surb Gayane, where Lusine Zakaryan is buried. I placed four white roses on her grave, breaking down in light as I had when her voice first pierced me, a peak moment of my life, a great honor to come full circle from that small cabin in Midwestern America to here, from the birth of her voice in my awareness to her final resting place. I could not be more fortunate. Thank you for allowing me to say these words; it's an honor to be here. May God bless us all.

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### Հարատևող սրբություններ. հայկական մշակույթի՝ օտարերկրացու ընկալումը

Հոդվածը պատմում է Կոմիտասի ինքնատիպ աշխարհում ամերիկացի երաժշտի ճամփորդության մասին, այն մասին, թե ինչպես է վերջինս

բացահայտել մեծ երգահանի երաժշտության գեղագիտական արժեքը, ինչն էլ իր հերթին նրան մոտեցրել է հայ մշակույթի ու պատմության ուսումնասիրության մեջ խորամուխ լինելու գործին: Հեղինակի հետաքրքրություններն ու գնահատականները ամբողջացել են նրա՝ Հայաստան կատարած այցով: Սա փորձ է ընդգծելու հայ ոգու և հայկական ինքնության մեծությունը, ինչպես նաև քաջալերելու մարդկանց ականջալուր լինել սեփական կանխազգացումներին ու ոգեշնչմանը:

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