Nineteenth-Century Music Review, 17 (2020), pp 301–304

CD Review

Komitas, *Piano and Chamber Music*

Mikael Ayrapetyan *pf*, Vladimir Sergeev *vn*
Grand Piano 720, 2017 (1 CD: 70 minutes)

Few Armenian composers occupy a place in the Western classical music canon. Aram Khachaturian, who is perhaps the only such musician known to non-Armenians audiences, owes his popularity partly to the Soviet propaganda of 'friendship of the peoples'. With the goal of introducing listeners to lesser-known Armenian composers, pianist Mikael Ayrapetyan, a graduate of the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory, has released a handful of CDs featuring the music of Eduard Abramian (2014), Eduard Bagdasarian (2014) and Haro Spetanian (2017); his project continues with *Komitas: Piano and Chamber Music* (2017), recorded with violinist Vladimir Sergeev. This CD consists of the works of Komitas Vardapet (1869–1935) – composer, musicologist, ethnographer, choirmaster and pianist – who is deemed to be the fountainhead of the Armenian classical music tradition. The revival of Komitas's works is particularly consequential as it has the power to elucidate his musical and scholarly legacy within the historical events of the Armenian Genocide.

Komitas was born in the city of Kütahya, located in modern-day western Turkey. After becoming an orphan at the age of 12, he moved to Etchmiadzin, the spiritual centre of the Armenian Apostolic Church, where he attended the Gevorgian Theological Seminary. In 1895, when he was ordained as a *vardapet* (celibate priest), his original name Soghomon Soghomonyan was changed to Komitas Vardapet. Shortly after, with the sponsorship of oil magnate and philanthropist Alexander Mantashev, Komitas travelled to Berlin where for three years he studied composition and music theory at the private Richard Schmidt Conservatory and musicology at the Friedrich Wilhelm University. Upon returning to Etchmiadzin, Komitas struggled with Armenian church officials who disapproved of his music. As a result, he moved to Constantinople, where he established the 300-member professional choir named Gusan. He continued to travel and perform in major European cities where his music was praised by renowned masters such as Claude Debussy. More importantly, he popularized the Armenian musical tradition by presenting his scholarship to the members of the International Musical Society in Europe.

Komitas's legacy as an ethnomusicologist is of great importance. From 1890 to 1913, with the aim to resuscitate and preserve Armenian music, Komitas studied the old Armenian neumatic notation *khaz* and tirelessly collected liturgical sacred *sharakans* at monasteries and libraries across Armenia, the Ottoman Empire and

Georgia.[1] He considered it his duty to purify liturgical music that was permeated with Turkish and Persian musical idioms. National independence, according to Komitas, was to be accomplished not by means of war but through a cultural revival.[2] If 'this last flicker was to die', he wrote, 'we would then with our own eyes witness the entombment of our soul and the extinguishing of the fire of our life'.[3] Music, then, was not mere entertainment but one of the vital forces for preserving national heritage. In addition to his contribution to sacred music studies, Komitas's main aspiration was to uncover the authentic Armenian musical style that he believed lay in the music of peasants. Hence, he travelled to villages where he gathered and notated thousands of secular folk songs and dances. As a result of these folk influences, his music – which often explores themes of love, nature and daily chores – was judged as too secular by church authorities.

In April 1915, during the mass extermination of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, Komitas was among the hundreds of Armenian intellectuals who were arrested in Constantinople. Upon the intervention of the United States ambassador (who admired Komitas's music), the composer was released from the Ottoman prison camp. Yet he never recovered from the trauma of witnessing the massacre, and he spent the last 20 years of his life in a mental asylum in Paris. Historian Anthonie Holslag describes Komitas as the epitome of a destroyed identity – 'a non-identity' – whose response to atrocities was silence.[4] Yet despite the composer's silence after 1915, his compositional and musicological accomplishments during the pre-Genocide years continue to resonate – in part due to efforts of institutions such as the Grand Piano label, established in 2012, whose mission is to record rarely performed works by underrepresented composers.

The selections on *Komitas: Piano and Chamber Music* are all products of Komitas's encounters with a diverse body of folk music. Musicologist Sirvart Poladian points out that in contrast to the work of contemporary comparative musicologists such as Carl Stumpf and Erich M. von Hornbostel, Komitas placed special emphasis on music's multiple social functions:

> Whereas the German school tended to stress scientific measurement of musical tones, Komitas turned his attention to the anthropological, sociological, and historical aspects of comparative musicology. He discovered examples of individual and of communal creation of folk music; he noted a certain correlation between physical labour and musical response, and described the role of music in its total social complex.[5]

The selections on this CD are based on folk music that ranges from collective threshing and ploughing songs, to wedding dances, funeral laments, individual grieving songs, lullabies and melancholic or joyful reflections on nature. For his

---

[1] Anthonie Holslag, *The Transgressional Consequences of the Armenian Genocide: Near the Foot of Mount Ararat* (Cham: Springer International, 2018), 188.

[2] Eddie Arnavoudian, 'The Salvaging of an Authentic Armenian Musical Tradition', 21 April 2003, on *Armenian News Network / Groong*, http://groong.usc.edu/tcc/tcc-20030421.html (accessed 16 April 2019).

[3] Arnavoudian, 'The Salvaging of an Authentic Armenian Musical Tradition'.

[4] Holslag, *The Transgressional Consequences*, 190.

[5] Sirvart Poladian, "Komitas Vardapet and His Contribution to Ethnomusicology: Komitas the Pioneer", *Ethnomusicology* 16/1 (1972): 84.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409819000107 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Seven Folk Dances (most likely composed in 1906), Komitas indicates each dance's geographic origin in its title and provides descriptions of the instruments that the pianist should imitate.[6] Ayrapetyan's rendition masterfully captures the timbral subtleties evoked in each dance: for example, in 'Shushiki of Vagarshapat', he uses delicate pedalling to imitate the *tar* (a long-necked plucked string instrument) and performs the repeated notes in the upper register using a short dry staccato to imitate the shimmering of the *daf* (a percussion instrument with metal rings attached to the wooden frame). Some of the dances feature modal and metrical peculiarities: 'Shoror of Karin' uses a sombre mode (B–C–D♯–E–F♯–G♯–A) and – unlike more typical shorors in 6/4 metre – is written in 10/8 (divided into two 5/8 subgroups, which are further divided into 2 + 3 groupings). Overall, Ayrapetyan's performance is intricately executed, although his rubato at times obscures the irregular metrical play.

Ayrapetyan's performance of Seven Songs for Piano, written in 1911 in London, is a world premiere recording. This cycle consists of contrasting miniatures, their fleetingness reminiscent of Erik Satie's volatile *Gymnopédies.* Each song lasts about a minute and may be interpreted as representing the daily activities of a peasant girl, introduced in the first song, 'I'm a Girl'. The songs depict the girl as she longs for love (no. 2), pleads for her lover to return home (no. 3) and carries bread for ploughmen (no. 4); later songs feature poetic portrayals of moon at night (nos. 5–6) and streams flowing from mountains (no. 7). Similarly, Twelve Children's Pieces features brief contrasting movements. This charming set was written between 1910 and 1914, and its didactic scope is often likened to Béla Bartók's Ten Easy Pieces for Children (1908). However, unlike Bartók's cycle – in which only three of the pieces are based on Hungarian folk songs – all 12 of Komitas's pieces draw on Armenian folk music. He believed that the folk tradition should be the primary means of educating a new generation of musicians. In fact, he often resisted being credited for his compositions, as he claimed that he was only responsible for uncovering the music rather than inventing it. The last solo piano piece on this record is *Msho Shoror*, composed in 1906. It is also based on folk materials and is the most elaborate in scope among Komitas's piano works: instead of separating the sections of the work into separate pieces, as he did in the cycles, the composer interlinks the contrasting sections of *Msho Shoror* by means of fluid transition.

The Seven Pieces for Violin and Piano consist of instrumental arrangements based on Komitas's songs for voice and piano composed between 1899 and 1911. With the exception of 'The Apricot Tree' and 'The Crane', these pieces are world premiere recordings. With their use of functional harmonic progressions, these arrangements seem to be less distinctively Komitasian than the other works on the album. Moreover, 'The Apricot Tree' and 'The Song of the Partridge', arranged by Avet Gabrielian, follow the tradition of virtuosic character pieces in the spirit of Ravel's *Tzigane*. Ayrapetyan and Sergeev execute these brilliant renditions with due bravado. Overall, this record serves as a first-rate

[6] According to the CD liner notes, the Seven Folk Dances were written and performed in Paris in 1916. Yet 1916 is a highly unlikely date for this composition, as many scholars identify 1915 as the year after which Komitas 'never picked up a pen again' (Holslag, *Transgressional Consequences*, 189). The cycle most likely dates to 1906, when Komitas travelled to Pairs to give concerts and lectures.

introduction to the roots of Armenian ethnic music and its champion Komitas, whose role in its development is comparable to that of Glinka's role in Russian music and Bartók's in Hungarian.

Knar Abrahamyan
Yale University
knar.abrahamyan@yale.edu

doi: 10.1017/S1479409819000107

First published online 30 May 2019