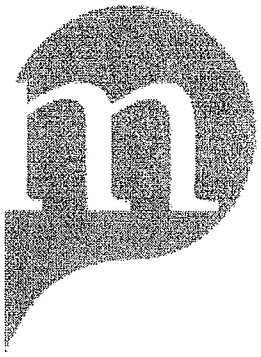
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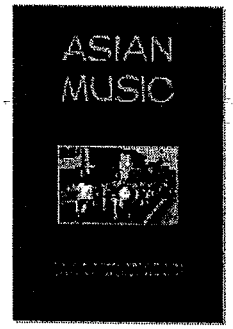
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Oratorio by Khaçadur Avedisyan (review)

Esra Berkman



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Recording Review

Oratorio. Khaçadur Avedisyan [Khachatur Avetisyan], lyrics by Ludvig Duryan. The Ensemble of National Instruments of the Armenian National Radio, conducted by Manvel Beglaryan; soloists Ararat Petrosyan (*shvi*), Angela Atabekyan (*kanun*). The Chamber Music Choir of the Armenian National Radio, conducted by Tigran Hekekyan; soloists Araks Mansuryan (soprano), Arzas Vokanyan (tenor). KALAN Music Publishing. Produced by Hasan Saltık, 2009. One CD with eight pages of Turkish and English notes (34 minutes). $15.00.

Released by KALAN Music in 2009, this CD set is the first presentation of Avetisyan's *Oratorio* for listeners in Turkey.[1] Two earlier releases were in 1999 by Editions NECH (Paris) and in 2004 by Narek Music Publishing (Yerevan). The seven-movement, symphonic work was composed in 1985 by Khachatur Avetisyan for the 70th Anniversary Commemoration of the *Medz Yeghern* (Great catastrophe). *Medz Yeghern* refers to the forced deportation of Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire by the Ottoman government in 1915. These events are considered part of the deportation policy by Turks, yet are memorialized by Armenians as genocide because many Armenians lost their lives.

Composers can sometimes be perceptive to events that compose a part of and have significance for the collective memory of their time. The *1812 Overture* composed by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky to commemorate the defense of motherland Russia against Napoleon's invading troops in 1812 and performed in Moscow in 1882 on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the event is one such example of this musical phenomenon. In the same vein, Krysztof Penderecki dedicated his *Polish Requiem*, composed from 1980 to 1984 and expanded in 1993 and again in 2005, to the heroes and victims of Polish history (Bolesławska-Lewandowska 2011, 181). These two examples reveal composers with perceptiveness similar to that shown by Avetisyan in composing his work *Oratorio*. In order to fully comprehend the Armenian phenomenon, it is critical to understand the significance of the events of 1915 in the collective memory of Armenians.

The events of 1915 were not commemorated officially in Armenia until 1965. The Republic of Turkey and Mustafa Kemal Ataturk were treated as

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allies in Lenin's policies because of their oppositional stance toward Western imperialism. During Stalin's rule, there were attempts to change the borders between Turkey and Armenia, but the onset of the Cold War once World War II ended and Turkey's siding with the United States rendered all attempts to change the border impossible. During the rule of Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev, Armenian communist leaders seized autonomy from the central Soviet leaders. On April 24, 1965, the 50th anniversary of the *Medz Yeghern* was commemorated officially at the Yerevan Opera House.

Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms lent more liberty to Armenians and other nationalities of the USSR to enjoy their national identities and culture. At the time Avetisyan composed his *Oratorio* in the mid-1980s, the Soviet policy toward different ethnicities reflected relative moderation (Suny 2005).

Avetisyan's *Oratorio* makes direct reference to nineteenth-century Armenian musical traditions. He employs musical ideas and instruments associated with the *ashughner*, Armenian traveling musicians. These minstrels used wind instruments such as the *zurna*, *duduk*, *shvi*, *blul*, and shepherd's pipe, as well as string instruments like the *tar*, *kemenche*, *kanun*, and *santur* (Muratyan 1970, 17). Armenians gradually became familiar with European musical traditions as well—a trend that gained momentum after they became part of the Russian Empire (ibid., 518). Following the establishment of the republic as part of the USSR in 1920, the Armenians founded their folk music ensembles in increasingly similar organizational form to that of European academic music orchestras (Prudyan 2001, 42, 91). They also removed microtonal or modal intervals from their music systems while gradually incorporating Western harmony and polyphonic practices into Armenian folk traditions (ibid., 47). Although microtonal intervals were eliminated, folk music melodies in stylized forms suggesting those modalities are still found in the works of many Armenian composers, as is the case in *Oratorio*.

As noticeable in the recording reviewed here, Avetisyan's use of folk music instruments, the *shvi* and the *kanun*, should be regarded as a conscious decision to connect his modern work to the tradition of hybridization of Armenian composers and performers. Modal and rhythmic structures borrowed from Armenian folk music suggest that Avetisyan's intent was to make a musico-political statement about the ways in which Armenian musics were demanded to serve this nationalistic approach.

Oratorio is written in a diatonic scale system, and the symbols used in its key signature give the impression that it is composed with a tonal center. However, we see that the composer employs modal scales from folk music in a stylized form without the actual use of microtonal intervals, particularly in passages that involve the *kanun*. Although the scores do not present a notation denoting microtonal intervals, *shvi* passages performed in the album do

venture beyond the equal-tempered system. Traditional modal structures of Armenian music are discernible in *shvi* parts, not as stylized forms but actual modalities; as a wind instrument the *shvi* is capable of playing microtonal intervals. However, these modalities cannot be performed by the *kanun*, because the single-lever configuration (keyboard) of the Armenian *kanun* allows only for the production of pitches in an equal-tempered system.

In the small ensembles consisting solely of folk music instruments, Armenian performers have the opportunity to improvise and prove their virtuosity. In *Oratorio*, the *kanun* and *shvi* are not given such a temporal or sonic freedom of improvisation, but there is a part where performers are allowed to express their creativity, as is customary in a cadenza.

All of the notes are predetermined and written by the composer for the solo parts of the *shvi* and *kanun*. The performer is guided by various tempo, dynamics, and musical markings. However, we can witness differences in the performances of various players in these cadenza-like solo opportunities. Examples are the *shvi* solos in "Ode" (4:23–52), "Ode to Exodus" (1:50–2:40), and "Expectation" (0:01–0:50 and 3:40–4:24); and the *kanun* solo in "Lullaby" (0:01–1:29).

In line with the characteristics of the oratorio form, *Oratorio* features soprano and tenor soloists who sing both a cappella and accompanied by the chorus and orchestra.

The opus ends with a vivid quotation: "Armenia with a Thousand Wings." The lyrics by Ludvig Duryan (1933–2010) suggest the feeling of leaving behind sorrow and despair and facing the future with hope.

In addition to discussing the influence of traditional Armenian folk music on Avetisyan's *Oratorio*, this review provides information on the social and political context of the composer's work. Despite extreme conflicts in national policies, Avetisyan's *Oratorio* is nevertheless appreciated by audiences in Turkey. The album is still available on the market for enthusiasts of classical and ethnic music.

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Note

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