

THE LIVING WITNESS AS A WANDERER THROUGHOUT
THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SOVIET UNION AND IN
THE POST-SOVIET ERA

Komitas String Quartet – 100

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Abstract

Established in 1924 at the initiative of four students of Armenian descent at Moscow Conservatory, Komitas String Quartet is one of the oldest chamber ensembles. All the founding members of the ensemble were born and raised outside of Armenia, meaning they originate from Armenian families in the Diaspora. In spite of this, they identify with the Armenian cultural heritage.

The strong sense of identity was crucial for the significance of music in the contexts of the Diaspora to establish the string quartet with the exceptional students of Armenian descent, who identified with the musical heritage of Komitas.

Key words: *Komitas String Quartet, Diaspora, Tradition, National Identity*

**ԿԵՆԴԱՆԻ ՎԿԱՆ ՈՐՊԵՍ ԹԱՓԱՌՈՂ ԿԵՐՊԱՐ
ԽՈՐՀՐԴԱՅԻՆ ՄԻՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԱՆԿՄԱՆ ԵՎ ԾԱՂԿՄԱՆ
ՇՐՋԱՆՈՒՄ ԵՎ ՀԵՏԽՈՐՀՐԴԱՅԻՆ ԺԱՄԱՆԱԿԱՇՐՋԱՆՈՒՄ**

Գայանե Միրզոյան

Վիեննայի երաժշտության և կատարողական
արվեստների համալսարան

Ամփոփում

Մոսկվայի կոնսերվատորիայի հայազգի չորս ուսանողների նախաձեռնությամբ 1924 թվականին ստեղծված Կոմիտասի անվան լարային քառյակը ամենահին կամերային անսամբլներից է: Համույթի բոլոր հիմնադիրները ծնվել և մեծացել են Հայաստանից դուրս, այսինքն՝ սերում են սփյուռքի հայ ընտանիքներից: Չնայած դրան, նրանք իրենց նույնացնում են հայկական մշակութային ժառանգության հետ:

Ինքնության ուժեղ զգացումը չափազանց կարևոր էր սփյուռքի մշակութային համատեքստում հատկապես պրոֆեսիոնալ երաժշտության ասպարեզում, ինչը թույլ տվեց ստեղծել լարային քառյակ՝ հայկական ծագումով նշանավոր ուսանողների ուժերով, որոնք իրենց նույնացնում էին Կոմիտասի երաժշտական ժառանգության հետ:

Բանալի բառեր. *Կոմիտասի անվան լարային քառյակ, սփյուռք, ավանդույթ, ազգային ինքնություն*

ЖИВОЙ СВИДЕТЕЛЬ КАК СТРАНСТВУЮЩИЙ ОБРАЗ ПОДЕНИЯ И РАСЦВЕТА СОВЕТСКОГО СОЮЗА И ПОСТСОВЕТСКОГО ПЕРИОДА

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Аннотация

Струнный квартет имени Комитаса, созданный в 1924 году по инициативе четырех студентов армянского происхождения Московской консерватории, является одним из старейших камерных ансамблей. Все основатели ансамбля родились и выросли за пределами Армении, то есть они происходят из армянских семей в диаспоре. Несмотря на это, они отождествляют себя с армянским культурным наследием.

Сильное чувство идентичности имело решающее значение для значимости музыки в контексте культуры диаспоры, что позволило создать струнный квартет с выдающимися студентами армянского происхождения, которые отождествляли себя с музыкальным наследием Комитаса.

Ключевые слова: *Струнный квартет имени Комитаса, диаспора, традиция, национальная идентичность.*

String quartets predominantly bear the names of particular composers, in the general works of whom the genre of the quartet has a special meaning, such as the Haydn Quartet, Beethoven Quartet or Shostakovich Quartet. However, this does not apply to Komitas String Quartet because there is not a single work in Komitas oeuvre that was

composed by him for a string quartet. Sergey Aslamazyan (co-founder, cellist of Quartet from 1924 to 1968) established a connection for himself and composed the 14 Miniatures for string quartet by using the Melodies of Komitas, as a “business card” of the ensemble. With this, the meaning of the music of Komitas can be disseminated further, and there would be a possibility to know more about his music outside of Armenia through a string ensemble. Thus, these 14 Armenian Miniatures - devoted to the music transcriptions of Komitas - serve as one of the first examples of the string quartet genre in the history of Armenian chamber music.

“Armenian folk miniatures by Komitas-Aslamazyan, small treasures from Armenian folk music arranged for string quartet; Songs and dances in an unexpected abundance of magical melodies and rhythms, a small ‘bouquet’ of exquisite ‘blossoms’ that the listeners couldn’t get enough of.”¹

The Komitas-Aslamazyan Miniatures are considered a footing for the ensemble and a special feature of its individuality. It is safe to, that Aslamazyan is the founder of the Armenian quartet ‘literature’. The Miniatures are not simply arrangements of Armenian folk melodies, but new works based on folk themes in which he showed his skill and knowledge. He referred to the potential of string instruments for expressing, the principles of composition and the instrumental-technical means of the 20th century. Aslamazyan had already gained significant experience before taking on the responsibility of referring to Komitas’ compositions.

Besides its standard repertoire, this Quartet has presented numerous new works of Soviet composers. In addition, the Quartet’s activities have

¹ Kleiter H. Art. „Überraschungen aus Armenien“, Nassauische Neue Presse, 24.11.1986.

inspired Armenian composers and promoted the development and propagation of Armenian quartet music.

The history of the 100-year-old Quartet is divided into two major phases: Avet Gabrielyan -Era and Eduard Tadevosyan-Era.

There was a regular change of musicians within the Quartet, a number of second violinists, violists and cellists came to replace each other. It is also unique in that it has had only two first violinists in its century-long history, including Avet Gabrielyan (1924 – 1976) and Edward Tadevosyan (1976 – present). However, the careers of Gabrielyan and Tadevosyan can also be divided into two periods.

For Avet Gabrielyan, who played a major role in the establishment of the ensemble, the first phase can be considered as the period starting from the formation of the Quartet and ending in the year of Joseph Stalin's death (1953), a period when touring was a taboo for Soviet musicians. The second phase can be considered as the period starting from 1953 and ending in 1976 when gradual de-Stalinization took place; it marked the start of a period in which the members of the Quartet got the opportunity to consider forging a career abroad. A. Gabrielyan worked as a primarius of the Komitas String Quartet for a total of 52 years. The path of Eduard Tadevosyan covers two more different historical phases: from 1976 to 1991 (collapse of the Soviet Union), from 1991 to present. E. Tadevosyan has been a member of the Quartet for almost 55 years (6 of which as the 2nd violinist of the ensemble from 1970 to 1976). With Tadevosyan, the Komitas Quartet moved its main residence from Moscow to Yerevan and started working there as a "quartet in residence", which played a decisive role in further development and the international reputation of Armenian chamber music. Eduard Tadevosyan, former student of the legendary Leonid Kogan (1924-1982), serves as the most important bridge between the two great historical phases of the

activities that the Quartet has carried out over the past century. This bridge plays a crucial role in preserving various experiences and traditions and passing them on to the next generations, including the choice of repertoire, performance style, etc.

The important topic of working towards gender equality in the modern world was also in the focus of Komitas String Quartet. For example, just 155 years after its foundation, the world-famous Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra (founded in 1842) included women musicians in its ranks starting from 1997.¹

Thus, in the 86th year of its existence, the Komitas String Quartet received a "new look" when a woman appeared in the ensemble for the first time, and that woman was violinist Suzi Yeritsyan (2nd violin since 2008), then Hasmik Vardanyan (cellist from 2010 to 2017) and cellist Angela Sargsyan (since 2017).

The Quartet experienced very difficult times. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the termination of the *Armconcert* institution, which played the most important role in Soviet Armenia in terms of organizing the 'import' and 'export' of musicians. The radical political and social changes (starting from 1988 - the isolation and blockade, the Nagorno-Karabakh war, the big earthquake, and finally the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991) also determined the future of the ensemble. The Quartet was on the verge of extinction, but E. Tadevosyan and other musicians of the ensemble have tried very hard to overcome this obstacle.

Throughout its history, the Quartet has promoted the creation and development of Armenian chamber music, especially the works of the string quartet genre. It has been the source of motivation for many

¹ Jackes F. *All white on the night: Why does the world-famous Vienna Philharmonic feature so few women and ethnic minorities? In: The Independent. 4. März 2010.*

Armenian composers (Vardan Adjemyan, Artemi Ayvazyan, Arno Babajanyan, Alexander Harutyunyan, Eduard Hayrapetyan, Edgar Hovhannisyan, Adam Khudoyan, Edvard Mirzoyan, Ghazaros Saryan, Haro Stepanyan, Levon Chaushyan, Arzas Voskanyan, Suren Zakaryan etc.). The history of the ensemble is unique not only in the history of Armenian chamber music, but also worldwide.

Thus, let's recap the most important points related to the meaning of the Komitas String Quartet:

a. The Quartet is the first, the oldest and most long-standing string quartet in the history of Armenian performing arts.

b. Komitas String Quartet was the one that established and developed chamber music, especially the quartet genre, in the history of Armenian music. New works were composed, and members of the Quartet were the first to perform them.

c. The Quartet has been one of the ensembles that best interprets the world's rich quartet heritage in Armenia and in all parts of the former USSR.

d. Komitas Quartet was the first ensemble in the USSR, which, after Stalin's death, received permission to perform outside the borders of the USSR for the first time.

e. It played a major role in the Soviet Union in the sense that its existence helped lead to the formation of other string quartets, and one of those string quartets is the famous Borodin String Quartet, which was established 21 years after the foundation of Komitas String Quartet in the chamber music class of Mikhail Teryan at Moscow Conservatory (at the time, Mikhail Teryan was a violist of Komitas Quartet). In 1966, Shostakovich Quartet was founded in the chamber music class of Rafael Davidyan at Moscow Conservatory as well (Rafael Davidyan served as the second violinist of the Quartet (1947-1970).

f. Rafael Davidyan published string quartet biographical, teaching and methodical works, and in this way, he helped bring together the Interpreter and the Scientist within one person, which is also a unique phenomenon.

g. The Quartet produced many historically valuable recordings.

In terms of geography, Komitas String Quartet has given concerts in more than 50 countries around the world.

Current members of the Quartet

Eduard Tadevosyan, 2nd Violin (1970-1976), 1st violin (since 1976)

Syuzi Yeritsyan, 2nd violin (since 2008)

Aleksandr Kosemyan, viola (since 1990)

Angela Sargsyan, cello (since 2017)

References

1. Kleiter H. Art. „Überraschungen aus Armenien“, Nassauische Neue Presse, 24.11.1986.
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