

A Form within a Form

A Conversation between Dor Guez and the Composer Hagop K.

Dor Guez: The fate, or should I say the physical presence, of a work of art that isn't fixed to a place doesn't necessarily attest to its origin, or sources of influence. This is especially true in the case of musical works like your own.

Hagop K.: Similarly to movables such as ceramics, carpets, silverware, manuscripts, etc., sometimes it's impossible to point with any certainty to the origin of a melody. Objects such as these are easily transferable and thus it's often hard to pinpoint the identity of their maker. This enabled nationalistic historians to bend their findings and dub unmistakably Armenian artifacts "Ottoman."

D.G.: The nation-state's artificial borders distort the historiography of art. For this reason, the phenomenon of inscription (in Armenian "hishatakaran") is not accidental when we are dealing with minority culture, which is often nomadic.

H.K.: More than any other people, we insist on artistic validation and authorship. There is a built-in blindness in the writing on Christian artisanship originating from Armenia. For example, academic literature tends to ignore the Armenian influence on the ceramics made throughout the Ottoman Empire. The prevalent reasons given to this oversight are that many of the objects manufactured by Armenian potters were commissioned by Muslim clients, or that Armenian carpets were woven and commissioned by Muslim subjects of the Empire. Having been subsumed by the metanarrative under the heading "Ottoman" or "Turkish" works, ornaments manufactured in Armenian workshops (decorated ceramic tiles, jars and eggs) were deemed unworthy of a chapter of their own. It's also known that in certain cases colophons clearly stating the place and date of production and the maker's and manufacturing workshop's names were taken off Armenian carpets.

D.G.: The way you describe it suggests that an artifact manufactured by Armenian craftsman within the framework of his life as a subject of the Empire is a sort of a form within a form.

H.K.: In 1863, the Armenians were pronounced a special, protected nation within the Ottoman Empire. We were known as "millet i-sadika" (loyal nation). Over the years, time and again the authorities promised to reform their policies towards minority groups...

D.G.: Promises that were never kept, despite pressure from Western powers. The ceramics manufacturing center was in Kütahya, your hometown.

H.K.: In 1800, about a hundred workshops which manufactured tens of thousands tiles for Turkish palaces, mosques and churches across the Empire – including the Holy Sepulcher and the Cathedral of St. James in the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem – were counted in Kütahya. One of the notable inventions of the Armenians of Kütahya was the ceramic eggs hung on chains from which oil lamps were suspended. These ornaments were amply used in churches and mosques alike. The eggs had a double function: decorative and practical. Rodents were attracted to the oil of the lamps, which was made of animal fat, and the eggs blocked their way to the lamps. The predominant decoration was that of winged seraphs.

D.G.: Original Kütahya eggs are held in the collections of the Louvre, the British Museum, the Israel Museum, Istanbul Archeological museum, the Islamic Art Museum in Jerusalem among others. In most museums of Islamic Art, Armenian ceramics are classified as "Ottoman." This category is compatible with those museums' metanarrative as suggested by their name. Western museums tend to classify oriental artifacts according to their motifs: animal and vegetal species, categories of gardens, etc. Historiography is always author-dependent.

H.K.: Armenian cultural identity is linked to our ethos as a people, as a nation... hence the importance of the author's identity.

D.G.: Many argue that the story of the Armenians is encapsulated in Armenian art history: the formal motifs, stylistic influences from China and Iran, the color range and the decorations, depictions of New Testament scenes and so on. An aesthetic essence which relies on similar formal elements and unifies them into various motifs perforce testifies to a style.

H.K.: Armenian art historiography is very often commensurate with "witnessing."

D.G.: Separatism might lead to tensions with majority groups. In 1908, Enver Pasha headed the Young Turk Revolution. In 1913, as war minister, he decided to join WWI on the side of Germany. In 1914, only three workshops remained in Kütahya, and by 1922 no Armenians were left in your hometown.

H.K.: Are we talking about the war?

D.G.: We always talk about the war. In our previous conversations we talked about the role you played in that war.

H.K.: Let's return to the subject of composing music.

D.G.: The two are interconnected; you've never finished composing your "Journey to Zvartnots Cathedral."

H.K.: And so it was never performed.

D.G.: Therefore, the "story" of this work is a testimony...

H.K.: I believe that the circumstances of the creation of a work of art interest you more than the work itself. It isn't only your interest in the original work, or your formal interest in its amortization, you're mainly interested in the context, in what determines the "rhythm."

D.G.: Well, why didn't you complete "The Journey to Zvartnots Cathedral"?

H.K.: Because of the context and the circumstances in which the work was composed.

D.G.: Namely the "rhythm" of your work.

H.K.: Severance.

D.G.: In the war, the Ottoman Empire fought alongside the German Empire. The war ended with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire which was commonly known as "the sick man of Europe." Most of the territories of Greater Armenia remained under Turkish control. At the end of the war, Armenia declared its independence, and soon afterwards it was conquered by the Red Army and it became part of the Soviet Union. On December 10, 1920, a New York Times headline read, "Armenia reduced to a tiny state by Turkish peace." You were left outside the new political borders of the Armenian Republic after the war.

H.K.: Today, there aren't any Armenians on 90% of the territory of historical Armenia.

D.G.: For many generations now, the name "Armenia," given to the entire district according to age-long European tradition, doesn't correspond to its political and ethnographic

conditions. You composed "The Journey to Zvartnots Cathedral" – cathedral located between Armenia's political capital, Yerevan, and its religious capital, Etchmiadzin (Vagharshapat) – for a duduk (deriving from the Turkish düdük, meaning a whistle).

H.K.: Music produced by a duduk represents the dialectics of the Armenian language better than that of any other instrument. The duduk looks like a flute and is made of apricot wood, which gives it its unique sound. It's cleaned with a piece of cloth containing broken walnuts. The nuts' oil cleans the instrument. In Armenian liturgical music one can discern very early chanting forms of the Christian Church. We had developed a system of punctuations and neumatic notations, which can be compared to the Hebrew cantillation. Armenian hymns belong to the most exquisite examples of liturgical music. Their melodies are based on the eight-mode system (oktoēchos), which was also employed for the composition of religious chants in the Western church and in the Arabic maqamats. The duduk is the only ancient instrument that has survived the vicissitudes of Armenian history as well as the historians' biases concerning the cultural identity of authorship.

D.G.: Such biases, which reflect the researcher's nationalistic standpoint, are almost impossible with regard to architecture. Many of the churches built in the north-eastern regions of the Turkish Republic (former Greater Armenia) are still standing and the ruins of others are still visible. Thus it's implausible to attribute them to Turkish architects.

H.K.: One can't doubt that they were designed by Armenians, even in the absence of an architect signature.

D.G.: When visiting Armenia, one immediately notices the formal relation between the building style and the place's geographical traits. It's a geographical and physical experience of a place and a culture, especially in the field of architecture that resonates with the mountainous topography. The same relation is also found in the field of musical composition. Renowned Armenian composers such as Grikor Mirzaian Suni linked Armenia's topography to the structure of their melodies. Suni confirmed this both to his biographer and in a radio conversation he held in 1910 with another Armenian composer, Komitas Vardapet.

H.K.: Both of us were born in Kütahya.

D.G.: You and Suni?

H.K.: No. I and Komitas. Many believe that his work collection and preservation enabled the existence of Armenian music in all its variety.

D.G.: For this reason, he personifies the narrative of the Armenian diaspora. Part of the canonization process of Komitas is linked to the tragic end of his life. In April 24, 1915, the Young Turks expelled more than a hundred Armenian intellectuals and political figures; Komitas was among the expellees. His life was shattered, and Komitas never recuperated from this trauma. Many consider Suni his successor, despite the significant differences between them. His commitment to melodic authenticity, and especially to the melody's metric irregularity, sets him apart from his followers. He demonstrated a deep commitment to the sound and the original style of the melody.

H.K.: Irrespective of musical category or sources of influence, all Armenian melodies share common characteristics.

D.G.: In contrast to Komitas, Suni has received recognition only recently, similarly to many other composers from the eastern side of the map, who were excluded from Armenian historiography.

H.K.: Once again you cling to circumstances.

Armenian melodies were influenced by varied Eastern and western traditions. Armenia has always served as a link between the surrounding large empires. Similarly to musical composition, Armenian architecture is also an outcome of a blend of styles and the Armenian original contribution. Buildings such as Zvartnots Cathedral or St Hripsime Church in Etchmiadzin combine a number of uniquely Armenian architectural elements: a circular central aisle all of whose parts relate equally to the center and a conical dome, unlike the Byzantine rounded one.

D.G.: Walking into St Hripsime Church, I was surprised by the differences between its exterior and interior. If one pays attention to the formal transformations, one notices the insertion of one form into another: its exterior is quadrangular, whereas its interior is quatrefoil-like with four apses alternating with four narrow corner niches leading to four square corner rooms.

H.K.: The relation between the exterior and the interior is determined by the Armenian architects' predilection to include one geometrical form within another, completely different, form.

D.G.: Like our conversation.

H.G.: One form within another.