KOMITAS – AN ICON IN ARMENIAN MUSIC*

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ABSTRACT

Although the 150th anniversary of the birth of the great Armenian composer, Komitas – celebrated with great respect in Armenian communities everywhere – took place last year, we believe that the importance of the work of this icon in Armenian music deserves and must be mentioned in any period. The author of this study has been concerned with the issue of Armenian music for a long time. During the in-depth studies in the field, the conviction of the need to talk about Armenian music – very little known in Europe – and about its famous representatives, of which the most important was and still is Komitas, was strengthened. At the same time, studying the life and work of this outstanding composer, the similarity of his life and career with that of Bartók Béla, sometimes even surprising, arose several times, despite the great geographical distance that separated them. In this article we will try to briefly present the biography and creation of the great Komitas, as well as some parallel elements in terms of life, research and works of the two composers, musicologists and ethnographers. Belonging to the same generation of musicians, they dedicated their lives to collecting, researching and processing authentic folk music, being concerned not only with the folklore of their own nation, but also with the music of neighbouring peoples. The activity and research of the two present remarkable similarities, and through their compositional activity they both succeeded in opening new perspectives, decisive for their descendants, the generations of composers of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Armenian, folk, music, Komitas, ethnomusicology

* Translation from Romanian by Dora Felicia Barta

Introduction

Joseph Kerman once wrote that Western music lives “in the valley of the Ninth [symphony].”¹ It can also be said that Armenian music lives in the valley of Komitas Vardapet.² As a collector of folk songs and researcher, arranger and composer of sacred music, Komitas’ influence and help in preserving traditional Armenian music reverberates in almost all areas of musical studies of Armenia. Komitas is recognized as the figure whom the notion of Armenian music is greatly indebted to and is undoubtedly the one who laid the foundations for understanding Armenian folk musical traditions.

His life represents the identity of all Armenians who were affected by the genocide: Komitas Vardapet was one of the most important musicologists in Armenia, but despite this, he was no exception to this purge. Owing to the mediation of the Honorable Henry Morgenthau, the American Ambassador to Turkey (1913-1916), Komitas was able to return from exile, but the experiences of those few weeks shocked him so deeply that it permanently affected his psychological stability. The terror he went through – the massacre of close friends, the martyrdom of the Armenian nation, the loss of his livelihood due to the war – proved too much for his sensitive nature. Father Emil Ciomac concludes in a study of his, dedicated to Armenian music, regarding the fate of the great composer: “Komitas’ role was to reform the old Armenian music, cleaning the thorns from it. (...) Unfortunately, fate killed him halfway.”³

Komitas’ life and work

In the research of Armenian music, a special role was played by the Archimandrite Komitas Vardapet (1869-1935), composer, musicologist, conductor, exceptional pedagogue, folklore collector, founder of the Armenian National School of Music, who laid the foundations of Armenian ethnomusicology. Moreover, he is even recognized as one of the pioneers of ethnomusicology in the history of universal music. The greatest value of his work is to find new forms of expression, promoting above all authentic folklore, and always focusing on the Armenian soul. His purpose was to instil into his contemporaries honour, patriotism, civic involvement, but at the same time he remained faithful to the essential values of the time. Komitas was also a talented pedagogue, who

¹ David Jonathan Jubilant-Pickett, *Sacred and Popular: Music and the National Armenian Identity*, University College Dublin, 2017.

² Vardapet = archmandrite, doctor of theology.

³ Emil Ciomac, *Muzica armeană* [Armenian Music], in Siruni Djololian, Hagop: Ani, anuarul culturii armene [Ani, the yearbook of Armenian culture], Bucharest, 1941, p. 468.

understood that music is a vital need of a society. He studied Armenian folklore and church music for a long time, conducting in-depth scientific research, and constantly collecting folk songs. His first collection was gathered in 1891, during his student years, and included lullabies, wedding songs, wandering songs, burial songs, dances and more. He also transcribed for the first time the folk songs of some neighbouring peoples: Turks, Greeks, Persians, Kurds.

But the greatest merit of Komitas lies in the fact that, through hard and competent work, he managed to separate and eliminate the foreign layers superimposed on Armenian folk music, he revealed the original national background of each song, which he harmonized and transcribed into European notation.

This is very important, given that most researchers simply deny the existence of authentic Armenian music, based on the multinational character of the Ottoman Empire. (Related to this issue, the great musician Jordi Savall speaks in his lecture entitled *Istanbul. Dimitrie Cantemir: The Book of Science of Music and the Sephardic and Armenian Traditions*: "We wanted to show not only that this imaginary musical dialogue [...] reflects an indisputable historical reality, not to mention the astonishing diversity and incredible cultural richness that characterized Istanbul in the time of Cantemir, as well as the presence at court of Greek, Armenian or Jewish musicians, confirmed by numerous sources. As the Count de Saint-Priest, the French ambassador to Istanbul, recounted, the Ottomans' prejudices about the arts in general led them to regard the music profession as the prerogative of those of non-Muslim origin. Indeed, "most of the musicians in the service of the Grand Sultan, including Cantemir, who represent the musical elite of the Turkish Empire, are of Greek, Jewish or Armenian descent."¹

His work as a folklore collector, arranger and composer was much appreciated during his time, also on an international plane. Komitas is loved and recognized by all Armenians in the world, with many choirs and musical ensembles bearing his name, such as the Conservatory of Yerevan. His influence on the Armenian composers who followed him is immense.

The renowned composer was born on September 26, 1869 in the Ottoman Empire, in the city of Kütahya. Komitas – born Sghomon Sghomonian – was orphaned as a child. His fate changed radically when, due to his exceptional voice, he was sent to study music at the "Gevorkian" Theological Seminary in the city of Echmiadzin – the See of the Armenian Catholicos², the religious and cultural centre of Armenia. There, once his special musical talents were noticed, the young orphan was given special attention in terms of music education. From this period, Komitas

¹ <https://www.icr.ro/uploads/files/istanbul-dimitrie-cantemir-carte-stiintei-muzicii.doc>, accessed: May 14, 2019.

² The supreme leader of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

began the study and transcription of folk songs from the plains of Ararat, collecting them from his seminary colleagues from different regions of the country. His first compositions date from the early 1890s; most of them were songs and choirs on lyrics by famous poets, and also adaptations of authentic rural folk songs and even urban folklore. He travelled eagerly through the Armenian-inhabited regions to collect folk songs.¹

In 1893, after graduating from the Seminary, he was appointed music teacher in place of the famous musician Kara-Murza and conductor of the famous choir of the Cathedral of Echmiadzin. In 1894 he was ordained a hieromonk, taking the name of Komitas, a musician-poet-scientist, who was Catholicos in the seventh century, and in 1895 he became archimandrite.

In the same year, eager for professional development, he went to Tbilisi to study harmony with the most important composer of the time, Makar Ekmalian,² and between 1896 and 1899 he studied music history, composition theory, piano, organ and conducting (besides singing, psychology and philosophy) at the Richard Schmidt Conservatory in Berlin, and at the University of Berlin – all this being possible due to the material support offered by the philanthropic entrepreneur Alexander Mantashev.

Komitas was one of the active members of the International Musical Society (Internationale Musikgesellschaft). He permanently collaborated in the editing of the Society's magazine and periodically participated in the meetings, meetings of the Berlin section, presenting studies on Armenian music.

Following his return to Echmiadzin, he continued his work as a teacher and ethnomusicologist. He further studied the art of composition, and performed with the choir of the Seminary in numerous concerts, not only in Echmiadzin, but also in Yerevan, Baku and Tbilisi and other cities with an effervescent cultural life.

Between 1906-1907 he was invited to France, where he carried out a vast musical activity: he was conductor of the choir of the Lamoureux Concert Society, with which he presented Armenian folk and religious songs arranged by him, including at the School of Advanced Social Sciences, where the president of the music department was Romain Rolland, the famous writer, deeply interested in the culture of the Armenian people. In the following years, Komitas held concerts and conferences in several cities in Switzerland, and in addition, in recognition of his work, he was invited to the Mekhitarist Congregation in Venice (San Lazzaro Island).

In 1910, Komitas moved to Constantinople, considering that the milieu and the dogmatic, conservative thinking in Echmiadzin limited his creative activity. At the same time, he hoped that in Constantinople he would have the opportunity

¹ *Komitas – Variațiuni pe aceeași temă* [Komitas – Variations on the same theme], edition compiled and translated by Sergiu Selian, Editura Ararat, Bucharest, 2018, p. 14.

² Armenian composer, 1856-1905.

to present Armenian folk music and his works to a wider audience. To this end, he founded the *Gusan* [The Bard] choir, later called (since 1912) *Hay Gusan* [The Armenian Bard], consisting of about 300 members. The members of the choir were talented people with musical knowledge, and – in order to reach a high professional level, and out of the desire to train good musicians – Komitas gave those in the choir private lessons on music theory. At the same time he organized other choirs and participated in numerous conferences and concerts in various locations of the Ottoman Empire, even in the cities of Egypt, Cairo and Alexandria. In the contemporary press, the importance of Komitas' work was recognized not only for what he did in order to popularize Armenian music, but also for collecting and popularizing the music of other peoples in the East.

For his work in preserving and popularizing authentic Armenian musical culture, he was admired by Armenian communities around the world, and writer-journalist Arshag Chobanian called him "the saviour of Armenian music."¹

The Armenian genocide, which commenced on April 24, 1915, suddenly interrupted Komitas' professional activity. He was deported and subjected to cruel torture, along with other Armenian intellectuals systematically gathered in Constantinople and the entire Ottoman Empire by the Young Turks. Following a special international political and cultural pressure, Komitas was released, but the time spent in prison profoundly affected his health: he survived, but the psychic trauma he went through led to nervous depression, aggravated by mutism.

Unfortunately, due to the suffering and the horrors inflicted on him, Komitas never recovered completely. From 1919 he continued his life in an almost unconscious state in psychiatric hospitals in Paris, until his death on October 22, 1935.

After a long time, in 1936 he was reburied in the Armenian capital, Yerevan, in Komitas Park and Pantheon, along with other celebrated representatives of the Armenian cultural treasure – the writer William Saroyan, the composer Aram Khachaturian, the painter Martiros Sarian and others.

Komitas' work and his role in preserving the Armenian identity

Komitas' most notable composition is *Surp Badarak – The Holy Liturgy* – a work still in use today, both in religious services in Armenian churches and in concert halls everywhere. It is part of a series of his few works that have fully survived the Genocide. The 1914 composition for men's choir was printed and published in Paris in 1933.

¹ Rita Kuyumjian, *Komitas. Portretul unui idol armean* [Komitas. The portrait of an Armenian idol], Editura Ararat, Bucharest, 2018, p. 12.

It should be mentioned that – for the most part – Komitas' creation was vocal (solo and choral), most of his works being based on folk music sources. There are over 150 vocal works and several piano compositions, in multiple variants and transcripts. Over the years he collected over 4,000 folk songs, thus compiling a systematized collection of Armenian folk songs.

As for his musicological and research activity, unfortunately, following the deportation of 1915, most of his valuable manuscripts related to the *khaz* notational system (neumas) of Armenian music from the eighth-eleventh centuries were destroyed by the Turkish authorities.

Currently, the Art Institute of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia aims to gradually recover and print a complete collection of Komitas' works, whose manuscripts were gradually recovered and taken to Yerevan after 1950.

Komitas is considered a martyr of the 1915 Genocide, and his personality is one of the main symbols of the Armenian Genocide in art. If by creating the Armenian alphabet in the fifth century, Mesrop Mashtots transformed the Armenian language into “a fortress for saving the nation,”¹ Archimandrite Komitas transformed the Armenian song into a saving power, becoming the founder of the Armenian music school at the end of the nineteenth century.

Komitas played an incomparable role in preserving, performing, composing and teaching traditional Armenian music. He was one of the first Armenians educated in the Western classical tradition and one of the first people to be a member of the International Musical Society in Berlin, where comparative musicology is considered to have begun.

In the introduction to his “Essays on Armenian Music,” Sirvat Poladian describes Komitas' purpose as threefold:

- 1) to write down and preserve the national musical heritage;
- 2) to make this music accessible, thus promoting the performance of folk song and dance as living art and as part of everyday life;
- 3) to use folk music for ethnomusicological and historical study; that is, to isolate, identify, and define the authentic Armenian musical style.²

Komitas' life may be regarded as an individual manifestation of the Armenian national identity. He was a person with a deep faith and a deep understanding of his own culture, who persevered for a long time in trouble and suffering as a result of the actions of others against him. As a symbolic figure in the context of Armenian music, his story and works simultaneously play a major role in the way Armenians define themselves today as a people.

¹ Tigran Grigorian, *Istoria și cultura poporului armean* [The History and Culture of the Armenian People], Editura Științifică, Bucharest, 1993, p. 360.

² Sirvat Poladian, *Komitas Vardapet and his contribution to ethnomusicology*, Etnomusicology, University of Illinois Press, Vol. 16, No. 1.

Komitas – Bartók parallel

“The quality and quantity of Komitas’ work can be compared to that of twentieth-century musicologists, such as Béla Bartók.”¹

Based on previous knowledge on the history of Hungarian music, and current knowledge acquired during the study of Armenian music, we found that in the biography of the two composers, Komitas and Béla Bartók, a number of coincidences or similar moments can be identified, as follows:

The greatest Armenian composer, conductor, pedagogue and ethnomusicologist, Komitas Vardapet was born in Anatolia (the Ottoman Empire), a region inhabited mostly by Armenians, in a small village, to a modest family. He lost his parents at the age of 11 and subsequently – due to his special talent, discovered by the village priest – he was sent to Armenia to Echmiadzin, to study at the Gevorkian Theological Seminary, the centre of Armenian culture.

In the 1896-’99 period Komitas studied in Berlin, taking courses in theory, harmony and music history at the private conservatory of Professor Richard Schmidt. At the same time he took courses in philosophy and psychology at the Imperial University of Berlin.

Komitas spent an important part of his life in Echmiadzin, and afterwards moved to Constantinople. His compositional and scientific activity was abruptly interrupted by the Armenian Genocide in 1915. He spent the rest of his life in a psychiatric hospital in Paris.

The most famous and renowned Hungarian composer, pianist and ethnomusicologist of all time, Bartók Béla (1881-1945) was born in the village of Sânnicolau Mare (Nagyszentmiklós) in Transylvania, today on Romanian territory. He studied music at the Academy of Music in Budapest. He lived most of his life in Hungary, later settling in the United States. He died in modest financial conditions in the USA, suffering from leukaemia.

From the biographical data presented, it appears that both composers were born abroad, but lived within the boundaries of their historical homeland. For different but still similar reasons – the search for creative freedom – they both moved to another country and both died far from their homelands – Bartók in New York, Komitas in Paris. Their remains were posthumously brought to their homeland.

However, the most obvious and eloquent parallel can be drawn in terms of their musical activity.

Both stood out primarily by their work collecting and studying authentic folk material. Dedicating themselves to this field, they travelled throughout their country, but also abroad, collecting, recording, noting, and scientifically analysing

¹ Rita Kuyumjian, Komitas. *Portretul unui idol armean*, Editura Ararat, Bucharest, 2018, p. 13

folk music. In addition to the music of their own nation, they both greatly appreciated and researched the music of neighbouring peoples. Ethnomusicology remains indebted to them for discovering and saving from oblivion some latent folkloric melodic layers, previously unknown.

As previously mentioned, Komitas began collecting folk music in the 1880s, when he was a student at the seminary in Echmiadzin. Around the 1890s, being appointed professor at Echmiadzin, he was already using his transcriptions of folk songs in his pedagogical activity. Then, gradually, his activity in this direction became more and more consistent: he visited different localities in Armenia and neighbouring countries, in order to collect authentic folk music material, which he studied and classified scientifically, from different perspectives. Komitas continued this work throughout his career. He was aware that, for a more correct understanding of the specifics of Armenian music, knowledge and analysis of the music of neighbouring countries is necessary. Through this research activity it became possible to clarify the mutual influences of the music of the neighbouring regions. To this end, Komitas collected and studied Kurdish, Greek, Arabic, Turkish, Iranian (Persian), and Syrian folklore. In his lectures delivered in international locations, Komitas always underlined the differences between the folk music of various peoples, presenting Armenian, Arabic, Turkish songs, etc., and indicating precisely the details and factors that differentiated them. It is certain that through a thorough analysis and comparative analysis between the characteristics of folk songs of different nations Komitas was the one who studied this field in depth throughout the Caucasus. The results of his work were presented in the form of lectures and articles.

Béla Bartók had also been collecting folk music since his student days, starting in 1904. Immediately after his first contact with this field, he dedicated his life almost entirely to folk music, and biographical sources indicate that in 1909 he was already collecting Romanian folk music. Bartók – together with Kodály Zoltán –, a renowned Hungarian composer and ethnomusicologist, regularly travelled to regions inhabited by Hungarians and other neighbouring nations, in order to collect authentic folk music. Thus, in addition to Hungarian and Romanian songs, Bartók (and Kodály) studied Slovak, Serbian, Croatian, Turkish etc. folklore, in order to analyse and define their mutual interactions. Bartók published the results of his research in the form of lectures and scientific articles.

The two mentioned several times that the remote, intact villages were the most convenient locations for folklore research, because in these places only very few external influences were observed, or in some cases there was no external influence whatsoever, the purity of authentic folk music being intact.

Tatevik Shakhkulyan in his study on this subject draws attention to the fact that both Komitas and Bartók mentioned among the most important difficulties the fact that the villagers refused to sing without a specific opportunity, outside of a

suitable place and time. Komitas wrote in an article entitled *Armenian Peasant Music*: "They sing with great difficulty or do not sing at all, they even scoff if they are asked by a stranger, for example, to sing a work song while they are not in the field, at work, but at home. No villager will sing a ploughing song while sitting at home, because the field is the place to create and sing ploughing songs."¹ Bartók wrote in his article entitled *Why and how do we collect folk music?*: "It was considered absolutely inappro-

priate, if not impossible, to sing carols, wedding or harvest songs at a time other than on the occasion [for which they were created]."²

It is also very interesting how they both systematized and analysed the material collected according to regions, geographical territories, defining on this basis some different, well-defined folk dialects. Just as Komitas presents the dialect characteristic of the Akn or Van regions etc., Bartók speaks of the dialect across the Danube, from Transylvania etc.

It is worth mentioning their insistence on preserving the authenticity of folk songs, including in the arrangements: some sources mention that Komitas expected and asked the performers of his works to always reproduce the timbre of folk instruments as well as possible. We also know Bartók's aspiration in this sense: it is enough to think about the instrumentation and instructions within the Romanian Folk Dances signed by him.

Komitas' research was discontinued in 1915 due to the Genocide and – as a result of the socio-historical circumstances mentioned – much of his legacy was permanently lost. Bartók managed to continue his folk studies until the 1940s, and – the working conditions being more favourable – a large part of his collections, musicological writings and compositions were preserved.

Both enjoyed international fame and recognition in their lifetimes, traveling to European countries and Asia (Komitas), where they held concerts and delivered lectures. Claude Debussy, Romain Rolland and many other intellectuals of international level expressed their admiration for the works of Komitas, he being listed as an authentic, reliable representative of Eastern music. Bartók was and still is considered the greatest ethnomusicologist in the world, his activity being unmatched and unsurpassed by anyone to date.

The preoccupations in the field of folk music had a certain character / formative effect on the compositional style of the two. Thus, Komitas and Bartók created a completely new, unique, original and innovative musical style and thinking, appreciated worldwide. And the innovation in this case is not limited to the melody of the compositions – as happened to several composers of the

¹ Tatevik Shakhkulyan, "Komitas and Bartók: From Ethnicity to Modernity", *International Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 2 (2016)

² Idem.

nineteenth century within the so-called National Schools – but extends to all components of music: rhythm, meter, harmony, counterpoint etc.

As a result of studying the ancient strata of Armenian music, Komitas came to the conclusion that Armenian modes (the eight-mode system – *octoechos*) cannot be compared, or identified with the tonal system (major-minor), which was the basis of European music and played a major role in music during the seventeenth-nineteenth centuries worldwide. He believed that the modes of Armenian music consisted of mutually joint tetrachords rather than disjoint ones. Starting from this idea, Komitas derived characteristic principles of arrangements with a new harmonization and texture, as well as modal procedures unknown at that time.

Bartók also researched in depth the sound system of Hungarian folk music, and showed that at the base of the old layer of folk songs are the pentatonic systems. By organizing the sound material of authentic folk songs on the vertical dimension, Bartók reached new harmonies, and the evolution of his musical language led from folk modes to the systematic and integrated use of abstract melodic and harmonic formations in his compositions.

Conclusions

The resembling achievements of the two composers, surprising and at the same time explainable, makes one wonder how it happened that two contemporary musicians, with similar interests and beliefs and living in the same period, presenting some points in common in terms of composition, being brave innovators, and without repeating their predecessors, also having a common environment, never met nor referred to each other, or at least there is no evidence of their relationship.

Komitas and Bartók were also interested in Turkish music. In 1936, Bartók travelled to Turkey to collect music. It is well known that Komitas Vardapet played a major role in collecting Turkish music and enjoyed immense appreciation in this country, even the Turkish government aimed to found a national conservatory, under the guidance of Komitas, many years before Bartók was invited for the same purpose. Several notable proofs of Komitas' position in Turkey are that the Prince of Turkey along with the US Ambassador Henry Morgenthau were the ones who demanded that Komitas Vardapet return from exile during the Armenian genocide. Even though Bartók had have heard about Komitas during his visit to Turkey, it remains a supposition.

“What Komitas gave to the Armenians was similar to what Bartók gave to the Hungarian people – the voice of the national soul.”