

“I go. I return. I am confused:”

Reflections on Armenian Music Ideas in Multi-sited Research

Ortensia Giovannini¹

Experiencing Armenianness

The Armenian diaspora is considered one of the world’s classic diasporas due to its resemblance to the ‘archetypal’ (Armstrong 1982) or ‘ideal’ (Safran 1991) diaspora of the Jews. It refers nowadays to the communities of Armenians outside the former Soviet Union Republic of Armenia and the self-proclaimed *de facto* independent Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Even if since ancient times, Armenians have established settlements throughout the world, it was the Armenian Genocide of 1915 that caused the formation of the modern Armenian diaspora, a ‘victim’ diaspora grafted, in many cases, on the already known paths of the precedent trading and mercantile diaspora.²

¹ Ortensia Giovannini, independent scholar (Italy), giovanniniortensia@gmail.com.

² The modern Armenian diaspora was mainly formed because of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 when the Armenians living in their ancestral homeland (eastern Turkey, known as Western Armenia among Armenians) were systematically exterminated by the party of *Young Turks*. The *Young Turks* rose to power in reaction to the absolutist rule of Sultan Abdul-Hamid II (1876–1909). The Ottoman government, controlled by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), aimed to solidify Muslim Turkish dominance in the regions of central and eastern Anatolia by eliminating the sizeable Armenian presence there. The definition of ‘victim diaspora’ was categorised by Robin Cohen as a “dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions” (Cohen 1997, 26). Victim diasporas are usually a class of people who, by a traumatic event (conquest, persecution, enslavement, genocide or exile), have been banished from their place of origin and sent to another land. As for ‘trade diaspora,’ Philip D. Curtin defines his use of the term as follows: “Commercial specialists would remove themselves physically from the home community and go to live as aliens in another town, important in the life of the host community. There, the stranger merchants could settle down and learn the language, the customs and the commercial ways of their hosts. They could then serve as cross-cultural brokers helping and encouraging trade between the host society and people of their origin who moved along the trade routes. The result would be an interrelated net of commercial communities, forming a business network, or trade diaspora” (Curtis 1984, 2). This definition indiscriminately incorporates a broad spectrum of traders, from the stateless Armenians and Jews to the powerful European trading companies and their representatives. Robin Cohen has presented a comprehensive typology of diasporas and treats these two typologies as though they were mutually exclusive. As the Armenian case demonstrates, however, ‘trade’ and ‘victim’ diasporas have been intimately linked in history, suggesting that the first type can evolve out of the second.

During my research about diaspora and music, I travelled back and forth to Armenian groups in Italy and France; I also went to the Republic of Armenia to visit the so-called motherland. I moved from the ‘nearby’ (the Armenian community in Milan, my city of residence) to the ‘far away’ (France and Armenia). My multi-sited research, forced by the transnational networks of the Armenian diaspora, often disoriented my fieldwork and left me with the sensation of incoherence: I noticed a multi-vocality of ‘Armenianesses,’ often in contrast between them.

Diasporas communities can be observed as ‘social formations’ (Safran 1991), emphasising historical facts and material conditions and enquiring about the social networks that maintain the community themselves. In the Armenian diaspora, the members are dispersed geographically across state boundaries. Yet they manage connections between multiple sites and combine different habits from the homeland and the ‘hosting’ home (Turino 2008, 117–118). This combination produces ‘double or multiple’ consciousnesses (Du Bois 1993), and because of this, the Armenian diaspora is anything but monolithic. It has evolved along various historical lines, timelines, and developments according to the countries of arrival.

As underlined by Tina K. Ramnarine, a “diaspora is not an actual object or a simple migration” (Ramnarine 2007, 2), but a constructed identity unit, an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983) based on signs, belief, behaviours, and discourses of similarity and unity. The intricate cultural collective heritage depends on the selection, recovery, and reworking of founding elements and even on ‘tradition’s creation’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Nowadays, in multicultural societies, this diasporic imagination serves to represent and legitimise an otherness at variance with a reality that is lived every day.

This article speaks about my involvement and experience as an ethnographer among Armenian communities and individual musicians and performers, who in one way or another, acknowledge strong musical and social bonds with a so-called Armenianess.³ It investigates how Armenians could still have (or promulgate) an identity conscience or diversity, despite their history and the dearth of an independent homeland until less than 30 years ago and the assimilatory tendencies of the countries of arrival.

Music, for all diasporas, has a special place in the construction and presentation of identity. It describes at once the conditions of being displaced from the homeland, and it inscribes the history and geography that connect their displaced culture to that nation, or at the very least to a place claimed as

³ In Safran’s definition: “Armenian ethnicity and the solidarity of the Armenian community are based on a common religion and language, a collective memory of national independence in a circumscribed territory, and a remembrance of betrayal, persecution, and genocide” (Safran 1991, 84).

home. Music’s mixed embeddedness is indeed what gives it the ability to, in the words of Jane Sugarman (2004) create “new forms of subjectivity.” The music of diasporic communities reveals the shifts in “processes of becoming,” but also illuminates the complexities of the processes themselves.

Much of published scholarship on Armenian music rarely takes into consideration the imaginary of diasporic communities: this has led to the presupposed existence of a single cultural ‘Armenia’ that is somehow continuous, united across physical boundaries. This homogeneity is controversial because music as performance is a result of an action, necessarily actual, alive (Macchiarella 2009).

In fact, a lot of today’s Armenian musical practices, performed by musicians of various backgrounds in diverse contexts, despite claiming to hark back to a fixed tradition, elaborate it creating a mix with other European and non-European music. This formulation leads to sonorous objects that are always developing. The more I dug into the topic of Armenian music, the more I understood just how controversial it was. I had to be careful to define what Armenian music is and what it is not.

To explain this non-unique Armenian musical culture, characterised by various identity constructions, I have studied music making in scenarios where there is collective community participation. Through the dialogic approach, I also tried to understand and interpret the musical knowledge of individuals in the communities and their self-identification as Armenians through music. On many occasions, as a disciple, I listened to the musicians’ words during lessons. More than interviews, these were conversations and life situations negotiated through verbal and musical interactions. These speech acts were exchanges between individual musical protagonists and me, as their student, a term that here covers personal discipleship, informal studentship, and research inquiry.

My participatory strategies also created a life situation negotiated through verbal interactions, to plan, identify and devise research themes to carry out together with the members of the community. Without it being applied research in a strict sense, during fieldwork, I experienced different dynamics of partnership with the social subjects involved in ethnomusicological research. This kinetics meant a collaborative field and an epistemological approach whereby the ‘researched’ actively participated in the process, often as a co-researcher and a co-constructor of knowledge, fostering in this way a new knowledge-producing praxis. These strategies and collaborations allowed me to move around more freely and to gain a role in the Armenian communities that I frequented: this led to new kinds of information about various forms of Armenianness and the music and sounds associated with them.

Armenian communities exist not just with a homeland (be it mythical or real) but in consonance and dissonance with each other, with the countries to which they immigrate and with the motherland as they conceive it. Music, as Mark Slobin writes, “is an extraordinary multi-layered channel of communication” (Slobin 1994, 244), allowing it to articulate the various belongings and involved

imaginaries of diasporic communities. Investigating the music of Armenians can reveal how exilic and diasporic groups balance, prioritise, and manoeuvre between the simultaneous dimensions of their reality. Let me offer one overview, as seen through a musical lens, of the way these strands have come to operate in (and on) Armenian diasporic self-identification.

Milan, a ‘choosy’ community

I will begin by discussing the ideas about Armenianess in the music of the Armenian community in Milan. There are currently 3,000 Armenians in Italy mainly residing in Milan, Rome, Padua, and Venice. Around three hundred Armenians live in Milan, where there is a church and an Armenian cultural centre, the ‘Armenian House,’ *Hay Dun*.

My research started in September 2012, when I began to attend and document cultural and musical activities, gradually becoming well accepted as a trusted person. It is important to point out that this diasporic community is very particular because it uses the high Western culture to represent and demonstrate its high economic and cultural status. Usually, folk music is not encountered.

In spending time with the Armenians in Milan, I gathered that folk traditions “were lost” along the various paths lived by people. The remains are often myths (Komitas above all, the so-called ‘father of Armenian music,’ victim and symbol of the genocide),⁴ used, reused and adapted to present and express a communitarian style of life that is very bourgeois.

There is a controversial idea of traditional music related to opera singers accompanied by piano, singing classical tunes and Komitas’ songs or liturgical music classically, often in a stern and grave manner. I discussed this observation with some members of the community during our meetings: they underlined that the unique Armenian musical practice in Milan was (and still is) mass and classical music.

⁴ Komitas is a key figure in Armenian culture and music because he is the focus of many intrinsic characteristics of the promulgated Armenianess. This Armenian priest, composer and collector of folk music is considered by the Armenians as the ‘father of Armenian music’ and the founder of the Armenian national school of music. In fact, in each interview, discussion, conversation conducted for my study about the musical Armenianess in the diaspora, whether the focus was on pop, folk, or classical music, so long as it was Armenian, the conversation led, in one way or another, to Komitas. On two occasions, he participated in the programmes of the *International Musical Society* (he was even a founding member, as Sirvart Poladian writes in “Komitas Vardapet and his contribution to ethnomusicology” (Poladian 1972), giving illustrated lectures on Armenian music in Paris in 1906, and again in 1914. Thanks to this, he was highly regarded on the Western European intellectual circuit. Komitas’ work earned him admiration, but his arrest and torture during the genocide made him an icon. The 1915 Armenian massacres affected his mental health, and he suffered a nervous breakdown. Much of his work was destroyed, or at least lost, in the massacres. Since the genocide, Komitas’ reputation and importance have only grown. His story in many ways symbolises that of the Western Armenian, who today exists only in the Diaspora. Christopher J. Walker has observed, “to be a Western Armenian is, with few exceptions, either to be dead or in exile” (Walker 1990, 12). For Armenians, Komitas’ legacy has come to take the place of a ‘national’ cultural hero, one of the rare Armenian figures uniting eastern and western Armenians alike.

As Turino (2008) theorises, we expect the authentic representation of a given social group or cultural position in art to have been directly affected by membership and experiences within that group or position. I suggest that in Milan, the musical choices of the historic community’s urban nucleus represent the city’s high society habits and the behaviour of the Armenian institution. These organisations promulgate a rhetoric of a single and vigorous Armenian identity within the Armenian transnation. The standard musical “pathway” (Finnegan 1989) chosen is Western culture because it represents and demonstrates a conservatory mind-set and a higher type of socio-cultural status. This choice does not reject the path of assimilation into the dominant majority but, without fully becoming a part of or being entirely assimilated into the host society, shows a collective identity other than the one of the ‘new’, ‘poor’ migrant communities and minorities who live in the city.

During the various commemorations and anniversaries, communities, individuals, and performers who choose to participate in this constructed Armenian transnation, celebrate Armenian identity by ‘presentational performances’ (Turino 2008) of Armenian and Western classical music.⁵ These events show how Armenian institutions develop a social memory, a fund of memories, on which shared identity feeds itself. These memories are always located within space and time, and the history of the Genocide made up a point in space and time that serves as memory traces, coping with the imagination to support and to ensure continuity to a shared representation of the collective self, or identity group.

The structure of the performances is almost always the same, and it is felt by the members of the community as an Armenian habit:

- introduction by the President of the Armenian Community and conferences about Armenian history;
- the concert;
- a little party with Armenian confectionery.

Focusing on a few sentences of one the speeches that I heard at one of these events it is possible to underline how the music is used to inform, evoke, and organise collective memories and experiences of a ‘built’ place (Stokes 1994): that of the Armenian’s tragic history but also that of the daily struggle to conceive themselves as Armenians. Phrases such as “Tonight we celebrate the strength of the Armenians. We celebrate the faith, pride and unity of our people” or “This evening we are together,

⁵ In 2013, at the beginning of my research, I expected to participate in traditional musical performances but, as I have already explained, the music performed responded to classical repertoires. Even if there were some Armenian tunes, many of them and their lyrics belonged to the nineteenth century’s bourgeoisie tradition, derived from a moment of a powerful process of self-awareness when music was used by Armenian revolutionary leaders to construct a collective identity against the imperial rule.

united as our forefathers used to be, to remember our steadfastness in fighting for our faith”, show how the music will be subsequently used to emphasise the social boundaries and an imagined place to recall an ideal Armenia shared by those who live in diaspora.

After settling in the European cities, Armenian communities changed their life adapting to the host societies. For European diasporic Armenian organisations and institutions, the suggestion is that becoming intimately acquainted with the codes of conduct of the dominant party has been the goal. Such groups have provided, in fact, spaces and places to help create and reproduce cultural identity through the performance of cultural activities such as music and theatre.

The leading members were (and still are) usually wealthy upper-class immigrants who, after settling, started to build churches, cultural centers and to promote various cultural and musical activities, mostly used to gain political recognition of the 1915 Genocide. Even if in posters and flyers there is a lure of Armenian tradition, the one promulgated by Armenian institutions results from ‘identity negotiations,’ not only based on the past, but on a selective (re)appropriation, reconstruction, and interpretation of what is believed to be culturally significant and easily understandable also for non-Armenians.

Paris: “You have to evolve to survive”

Many of my Armenian interlocutors from Italy relate to France and Paris Armenian communities as an enclave which, given their larger dimensions or different histories and paths, have maintained close ties with some ideal Armenian culture, less bourgeois and less influenced by the so-called ‘West.’ Conditioned by these ideas, going to Paris, I expected to listen to traditional music, and Komitas’ collections played in a sort of traditional way. What I discovered was that in most cases this was just an idealisation.

As Anahide Ter Minassian pointed out in 1995, the Armenian identity in Paris is not preserved only by legacy transmission. It is a reconstruction where the various needs of life combine with fragments of tradition and the memory still works on the fracture of the Genocide. Nowadays, in Paris, within the French melting pot, the Armenian community is a diverse one, crossed by social and cultural divides. The two poles of assimilation and ‘re-Armenisation’ are visible also in the musical practices. Let me illustrate a few examples.

I begin by discussing the ideas of a promulgator of the tradition, Aram Kerovpyan, one of the protagonists of the Armenian musical practices in Paris. I compare his discourses to those of the youngest and most forward-thinking generation of Armenian musicians in Paris. I also consider his approach in connection to one of the other tradition conservators in Yerevan, the capital city of the so-

called motherland. I show how I had to adjust my understanding of an ‘ideal’ culture after discovering various musical identities and choices.

The *bolsabay* (Armenian from Istanbul) musician Aram Kerovpyan, one of my closest acquaintances in Paris, is the director of the Armenian Liturgical Chant Ensemble, *Akn*, and of the *Centre for Armenian Liturgical Chant Studies of Paris*. As written on his site:

The ensemble Akn works to revive and develop the traditional interpretation of Armenian liturgical chant. Akn interprets this monophonic and modal repertoire in its original form, accompanied by a drone. The interpretation of the ensemble Akn has been developed along the same lines as the traditional practice of ordained cantors in the Church of Armenia, a practice which has diminished with the disappearance of the Offices and the propagation of Western musical techniques in the Armenian communities.⁶

For many Armenians from Istanbul, the lived experience of locality is a defining aspect of what is imagined as ‘home.’ The music from ‘there’ can construct and recall the place where you were born, where your culture is, where your friends are, where you have a lived experience (Bilal 1995). As Aram Kerovpyan explained during a conference in 2015 at the University Jean-Monnet in Saint-Etienne (France),⁷ all the children (himself included) in Istanbul went to the church to sing in a choir or in the ordained singing groups (*tbirs*).⁸ Without being conscious of the precise practice, learning was by imitating.

Aram said that the remains of that period are sorts of ‘living’ images or pictures, with smells and sounds. He rediscovered this practice in Paris, at the age of 25:

One day, by chance, I went to the Armenian church early in the morning: there was a group of old men who were singing. I still cannot remember how they were singing. What I noticed immediately was the old man who was conducting, with little hand movements. A chironomy that looked like the orthodox one. I said: “Ah! That is one of the people from there [Istanbul *Ed.*]” I met him, he was 80 years old,

⁶ La Chorale Akn, <https://akn-chant.org/en/>, last access 20 July 2017.

⁷ *Musical practices of Armenians in present-day Istanbul, sensory memory and sonic presence* (Pratiques musicales des Arméniens d’Istanbul aujourd’hui, mémoire sensible et présence sonore), Colloquium 12–13 March 2015, Calenda, Published on 10 March 2015, <http://calenda.org/321371>.

⁸ According to Kerovpyan: “In Armenian churches, there are musically skilled clergymen and cantor groups (*tbrats tas*) that say the offices. They are part of the church hierarchy. Although it is not known when the rank of *thir* (lit. ‘scribe’ or ‘lector’) was established, the religious texts give evidence of their use in the sense of ‘cantor’ since the 5th century. As the term *thir* means at the same time ‘cantor’ and ‘educated person,’ it is hard to establish whether the high number of names accompanied by this title in historical documents have been cantors” (Kerovpyan 2010, 4).

and he had only old people around him. He immediately caught me, we stayed together, and I studied with him. The musical picture of my youth became a formation with a singing master when I was 25. [Part of Kerovpyan’s speech at the conference *Musical practices of Armenians in present-day Istanbul, sensory memory and sonic presence* (Pratiques musicales des Arméniens d’Istanbul aujourd’hui, mémoire sensible et présence sonore), Colloquium 12–13 March 2015, Calenda, published on 10 March 2015, <http://calenda.org/321371>. Transl. by the author.]

As a tradition keeper, a promoter of a (presumed) pure and immutable tradition, his musical productions are based on a professed authority principle attributed to the memories of who “was there,” of elders, of people that learnt in an uncontaminated way. Kerovpyan’s musical ideas about traditional secular music also cling to a ‘true’ Armenian sound and an idea of loss, of a tradition that is dying and disappearing, due also to the persistence of the denial of the genocide.

Kerovpyan’s legacy is not limited to his family (his wife and all his sons sing or play with him) and Armenian circles. Since 1990 Aram has been teaching traditional and liturgical singing, through oral transmission, at his home and in workshops and seminars in Europe. He also works with the Teatr ZAR in Poland on a project dedicated to the history and culture of Armenian people. Since 2011, *Armine, Sister* has travelled from the *Na Grobli Studio* of the *Grotowski Institute* in Wrocław to Warsaw, London, Oslo, Rome, Paris, Florence, Sibiu and San Francisco. The play tells the story of the genocide, treating this as a universal and symbolic tale of human tragedy. During the show the audience becomes an active witness: the purpose is to pass the memory of this tragedy on.⁹ As regards Aram’s life and teaching, there is also *Singing in Exile*: a 2015 Turi Finocchiaro and Nathalie Rossetti documentary film about this transmission of Armenian culture to the group of actors and performers.¹⁰

The repertoire taught by Aram and his wife Virginia is modal. The teaching process starts with maintaining a drone, the melody’s “centre, reference, support” (in Aram’s words). Then, instead of telling a story, it is necessary to “explore places and spaces.” Explanations are often much more evocative, based on rhetorical figures such as “We are passing a river, this rock is extremely stable,” to say that the note of the melody to be sung must be full, robust (and in musical terms, it forms a consonant interval with the drone). They use a sort of chironomy that serves to guide the voice.

In Kerovpyan’s circle I discovered some folk songs, but when I arrived in Armenia in 2015, and studied with Hasmik Harutyunyan,¹¹ a folk singer and a tradition conservator who is still recovering

⁹ Teatr Zar, Armine Sister, <https://vimeo.com/89893467>, last access 30 August 2014.

¹⁰ Singing in Exile, <https://it.ulule.com/singing-in-exile/>, last access 30 August 2017.

¹¹ Hasmik Harutyunyan, Music of Armenia, www.musicofarmenia.com/hasmikharutyunyan, last access 30 August 2017.

dances and songs in Armenian villages, I discovered that there were other ‘traditional’ versions of the songs. *Zinch u zinch* (‘What or what’ [‘I will give to the swimmer’]), as I heard it and learned that it is a good example to understand how, even Komitas’ songs, considered as traditional, untouchable, could be performed in different ways, all flaunted as authentic.¹²

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Allegretto ♩ = 54

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Figure 1: The score of *Zinch u zinch* that I used during my lessons with Hasmik, published in the Soviet Union and based on Atayants’ works.

This dance-song, in the opinion of the musicologist Karine Khudabashian (2011), is a legacy of Goodness Anahit’s pagan rituals. The refrain *Zoma, zoma er, koma, koma er* recalls the beverages *soma* and

¹² *Zinch u zinch* was recorded in 1997 by Aram Kerovpyan’s *Kotchnak* ensemble, in *Chant Populaires Armeniens* (Collection Al Sur – France) album and by Hasmik Harutyunyan’s *Karot* ensemble in 2001 in *Traditional Songs of Armenia Vol.1* (Face Music – Switzerland) in two completely different ways. I carried out my analysis, summarised here, on these two versions. One can also listen to these two songs on YouTube: *Zinch u zinch*. Hasmik and Aleksan Harutyunyan, <https://youtu.be/wz-omC0ivn0>, last access 24 April 2014; *Kotchnak, Zintch ou Zintch dam*, https://youtu.be/Mm1Tbj81_gI, last access 5 October 2015.

kebaoma served to the priests during the ceremonies. Khudabashian considers this and similar other songs as being the oldest examples of dance-songs, where the lyrics describe the priestesses getting undressed starting from their dress to their underclothes. The melody, as transcribed in Komitas' collections (Fig. 1), is based on the repetition of a sequence of phrases, with the possibility of internal variation in re-proposition.¹³

Kerovpyan's Ensemble version, sung by Virginia Kerovpyan with a head voice of the early music technique, is accompanied only by percussions used to recall an exotic, ideal western Turkey or pan-middle oriental, cosmopolitan tradition. It follows Komitas' arranged transcription. In the timeless 'a cappella' version sung by Hasmik and Aleksan (his brother and a member of the same ensembles), the lyrics' structure and meaning remain the same but it is based on a different melody that is not published but which is much better known both in the diaspora and in Armenia. Both the singers use a chest and mixed voice, much more suitable for folk music, as the variation for embellishments in every phrase.

If Aram's approach, on the one hand, is philological because of the research about the relations between Ottoman and Armenian music as well as the academic study of the Armenian modes and the Armenian notation,¹⁴ on the other hand, his method is based on an 'original and creative' reconstruction of the repertoires, based on a new formalisation of the musical practices. Such experimentation with authenticity respects the need to preserve the characteristics of Armenian folk music and provides the chance to experiment staying outside the *pop-ifying* styles, as well as the standard homogenising arrangement approach dominant in the music industry.

As stated by Middleton, “folk is always seen as ‘real’ music, not imposed on or sold to people but produced by them, expressing their participation in an unalienated culture” Middleton (1990, 29). This is the feeling about Aram's musical products. A review of Kotchnak's album on Amazon reads:

Armenian traditional music at its best. Much research has been done by this wonderful musical ensemble in order to revive a musical tradition threatened with the customary westernized and soviet overtones that have dominated other recordings of 'traditional' music. Their enormous contribution has been to restore authenticity, which places this music in its rightful place in the Middle Eastern canon. Aram

¹³ For instance, Robert Atayan, *100th anniversary: Komitas*, New York: T & T, 1969. Atayan spent almost thirty years researching Komitas' work and was the main editor of the *Collected Works of Komitas* in fourteen volumes (Yerevan, 1960–2006).

¹⁴ For a bibliography of Aram Kerovpyan's studies see <https://akn-chant.org/it/kerovpyan>, last access 22 June 2017.

Kerovpyan and Virginia Patti are scholars as well as musicians. Their scholarship remains invisible and only the music speaks for the long hours of reconstruction from documents and musical archives.¹⁵

In Paris, in the French melting pot, the situation is much more stratified: conservative attitudes are but one face of the coin. As underlined by Cohen, “the tension between an ethnic, a national and a transnational identity is often a creative, enriching one” (Cohen 1997, 24). In fact, the younger Armenian generations do not feel as if they are losing something. They re-use freely what for Kerovpyan is ‘traditional,’ and there is a sort of ‘indigenisation’ (Appadurai 1996) of external elements showing their double (or triple and so on) consciousness.

For instance, Aram Kerovpyan’s son and daughters sing in the *Aken* choral but also in the collective *Medz Bazar*, a group composed of Armenian, Turk, and French musicians. For them reviving ‘traditional classics’ and playing original compositions is a positive outlook to stand “in contrast with the ambient pessimism of part of the community who thinks that Armenian identity and culture are dying out.”¹⁶

For instance, in the song *Ariur Ar Ariur* (‘100% Armenian bloo’), they take up the theme of Armenian identity.¹⁷ This is what they have to say about the lyrics:

The song was created from things that we have heard around. The portrait we make is not something we want to criticise. It is something we want to laugh at. All we say in the song are often things Armenians tend to cry over: Ah, Armenian is not spoken anymore; ah, all these marriages with non-Armenians; people do this and that.¹⁸

A rough translation of the first part of the song reads as follows:

The French Armenians are speaking in the streets of Medz Bazar.

2014.

Listen now! 100% Armenian blood!

I know my alphabet up to ‘L.’

I am Armenian, and I am proud, I have dolma [traditional food].

¹⁵ www.amazon.com/Chants-populaires-arméniens-Armenia-Kotchnak/dp/B001VEN9DY, last access 13 November 2016.

¹⁶ Vahan Kerovpyan, part of the interview *Metz Bazar Collective: a dynamic vision of Armenian identity*, Repair Armeno-Turkish Platform, Wednesday, 13 January 2016.

¹⁷ *Ariur Ar Ariur*, https://youtu.be/FRFQ_amDp_U, last access 9 January 2021.

¹⁸ Vahan Kerovpyan, part of the interview *Metz Bazar Collective: a dynamic vision of Armenian identity*, Repair Armeno-Turkish Platform, Wednesday, 13 January 2016.

(But still, I do know some French people...)

I am a believer; I go to “Jean-Goujion” [Armenian church of Paris].

Ok, I confess. Only twice a year.

However, I do cultural stuff.

On Saturday nights, I dance *kochari*! [traditional Armenian dance]

The song is an interesting mix of hip-hop, as Vahan, rapping, imitates the usual opening with the citation of the streets of Metz Bazar, and pan-Oriental sounds, as the group sing and play original arrangements of traditional music from Anatolia, the Caucasus, and the Balkans. Generally, in their albums, Medz Bazar always re-make, re-invent, and re-invest with a meaning of their own and others’ musical practices. They do not perform a diasporic consciousness like Kerovpyan’s one. To them the music is not a metaphor of their exile but an expression of their networks, of their reflective, active, and confident creative practices of memory.

“Hayastan is my homeland. Or not?”

Much research on music in diasporic communities has demonstrated how music functions as a social ‘glue’ in connecting diasporic communities widely dispersed around the globe. If, for the Armenians, at an institutional level this glue is Western classical music, on much more informal occasions, mediated popular music genres and world music serve to connect Armenian diasporic communities to each other and their homeland.

Young Armenian people in Paris gather in various associations and are still using Armenian music and dances during their meetings. Jerome Lafazan, now a dear friend of mine, and his family, like many of my acquaintances, do not come from a group of wealthy and ‘frenchified’ diasporic Armenians, but from Anatolian Turkey. He lives in *banlieues*, he also speaks Turkish, and he seems very bound to the so-called Armenian tradition of *kochari* and *duduk*. As he and his wife told me:

The *duduk* is the symbol of our painful past. If we hear a *duduk*, it is necessarily Armenian music. However, besides the folklore and the fantastic dances [*kochari Ed.*], there are also current songs sung in Armenian, including *pop* and *rabit*.¹⁹

During Jerome’s wedding feast, after two ceremonies, one at the Alfortville Municipality and one in the Armenian church in the same suburb, the bride and groom chose to have both a DJ and ‘Armenian music’ provided by a group. The ensemble made up of a keyboardist, an oud player, both of whom

¹⁹ Private conversation during my fieldwork research in Paris.

were also singers, and a percussionist, played during the pauses between courses, using also pre-recorded backing tracks as part of their live performance. The newlyweds, as well as the Armenian guests, danced *kochari* or some ‘modern’ (and simplified) versions of round dances often with the bride in the middle. I was at the marriage as a friend so, instead of speaking with the musicians, Jerome’s father proudly took me to chat with some family members as “the Italian friend who knows about Armenian culture and speaks the language.” From these conversations, where they also tried to find me a husband, I gathered that the group had been paid for by some uncle because “marriage is not a ‘true’ marriage without *kef* music.”

In the studies carried out in the United States (Alajaji 2009) and in Armenia (Adriaans 2011), one can make a distinction between the two cosmopolitan genres called respectively *kef* and *rabiḻ*. However, what I noticed in the European diaspora was the lack of proper difference. These genres are a combination of the music of Turkish, Greek, Armenian, and other former Ottoman minority groups. It can generally be divided into up-tempo 6/8 dance songs (often a direct influence of Armenian folk dances) and slow, melancholic ballads, with a typical accompaniment of electronic keyboard, oud, dhol (or percussion), accordion and clarinet or zurna. There are also appropriations of many foreign styles, ranging from belly dance rhythms to tango. These repertoires make a *kef*,²⁰ a pleasurable embodied experience that enhances a sense of belonging to the same transnation, which for the younger generations allows them to unite in an imagined single social group, understanding the history of their grandparents.

Kef, *rabiḻ*, *kochari*, and the *duduk* are the most popular soundtracks for Armenian celebrations, both in the Republic and in the informal meetings in the diaspora. Nowadays these genres are also used in Milan during the parties organised by young Armenians from the Republic and older members who continue to keep the community alive. Like *bhangra* and *rai* for respectively South Asians and Algerians in Europe, *chalga* in Bulgaria and *arabesk* in Turkey, Armenian urban and popular repertoires have come to designate more than just musical genres or even lifestyles, being simultaneously enjoyed and denounced as something too demotic.

The ‘traditional’ double-reed woodwind instrument, called *duduk* or *tsiranapogh*, is by definition the only, genuine Armenian instrument that has survived over time. It is by now a substantial identity marker, a symbol of Armenian (trans)national identity. Thanks to the figure of Djivan Gasparyan, this instrument is also well known to non-Armenians, and its notoriety demonstrates how the politics of the new Republic has been insinuated into the diasporic imaginary.

²⁰ ‘Kef’ is a Turkish word meaning merriment.

Since Armenia’s independence in 1991, a trend of connectedness has started between Armenia and the Diaspora. Due to the identity politics of the new Republic, as I have learnt, a lot of diasporic Armenians have embodied the musical traditions ‘constructed’ by the new nation-state. For older generations, on the other hand, the identification with the Republic as ‘homeland’ is purely symbolic, because of its Soviet past. There are a series of prejudices regarding *Hayastan* (Armenia in Armenian), which are both positive and adverse at the same time. Some think that everything there is authentic, wonderful and they feel a brotherhood, others consider people there as too different and maybe corrupt, or even crooked.

This complicated picture emerging from my conversations became even more explicit when I arrived in the Republic of Armenia for the 100th anniversary of the Genocide, and again in the summer of 2015. Many diasporic Armenians are familiar with the capital, and essentially with downtown Yerevan, because they usually go there for holidays. Because of this tourist presence, in those Yerevan restaurants that claim to be ‘traditional’ and with ‘village cuisine,’ people can listen to ‘traditional’ ensembles who play folk, urban and patriotic songs. A lot of these groups will surely have a *duduk* player, useful to enhance the traditional imaginary of diasporic Armenians and tourists in general. Only the ‘finest’ and bourgeois restaurants have a piano, where good tenors or sopranos sing Komitas’ songs for tourists who can pay a lot and who do not want to renounce their class.

In the diaspora, the relationships with a common place, in this case, Armenia as a homeland, are both real and imagined: the belief in an eventual return to the real home and, in the meantime, a commitment to support it, turns out to be problematic. The younger Armenian generation feels diasporic because they rely on the new Republic and use the culture that comes from there as ‘true.’ Older generations are diasporic even though their concept of the homeland was created after dispersion: they rely on the surviving family traditions and on their imagination of what it was like before 1915.

“Armenian music only exists because of that catastrophe”

After my travels, following musical networks, Armenian familial ties, and friendship bonds, I returned to Italy with the evidence that the ideas of Armenianess and ‘Armenian music’ depend greatly on whom you are speaking to, and in which situation. For the Armenians, notions such as nation, culture, and music are not only polysemic but sibylline. This is due to the ‘ethnoscapes’ (Appadurai 1996) created by the condition of being constantly on the move (by travelling or by communication), and the perceived plurality of home(s).

To deal with this multiplicity, Armenians deploy a process of relocation or, to use Giddens’ well-known term, ‘re-embedding’ (Giddens 1990). This process now includes musical discourses and

activities that can belong to both individual choices and political propaganda. It is a sort of ‘plugging in’ of social and personal relationships to local and transnational contexts and their recombination across time and space to establish a sense of continuity and order in events including those not directly within the perceptual environment.

‘Armenian music’ appears to be a broad definition, but it implicates the boundary constructions needed to mark ‘us’ and ‘them,’ boundaries that need to be constructed since actual, physical boundaries are unattainable. Musical stories express the complex individual and communitarian way of maintaining the memory of, and the relationships between diasporas and homelands, between diasporic communities and the host countries, and between and within the diasporic communities themselves.

To ask: “What is Armenian music?” as I did many times in my fieldwork, means entering a volatile territory: each answer contains within it a story and a choice of Armenianness, a narrative that embeds Armenian identity, granting legitimacy and certainty to a contested past, giving meaning to the present and clarity to an uncertain future. The multiple definitions, and consequently the boundaries, of what Armenian music is, and what it is not, speak to the complicated nature of the present situation. The basic terms of reference must be revised and given different meanings. In the vocabulary of old, ‘Armenian music’ was commonly depicted as a place filled with memories of the glory of the past and bathed in visions of nobility and renaissance. In the new discourses, this concept sometimes persists, but it means only classical repertoires, and at times it fades out expressing the new generation’s search for identity.

What is pivotal in all definitions is the history and the memory of the Genocide. Since 1915, the boundaries of what counts as Armenian music (and, by extension, Armenianness) have been continually redrawn, adjusting to the realities of the genocide and its aftermath, and the ongoing state of conflict over the very existence of that event. The tragic Armenian history is a metaphor that can explain the multitude of meanings musically engendered within diasporic communities and among individuals, musicians, and performers who participate in the communities themselves. The genocide and its rejection are a founding myth, a root metaphor for Armenian history’s remembering and imagination. It serves as the trope for all kinds of musical productions, from the melancholy of older generations, passing through the places of exile, to the arena for the creative melding of cultures and the formation of new ‘hybridic,’ mixed identities that permit a continuous line of descent.

Every Armenian musician needs to play at least the most famous Armenian songs and, even in the strongest arrangements, the idea is that some Armenian qualities remain identifiable. Most musicians aim to produce something new, without losing ties with the ‘tradition.’ Nowadays, the use of Armenian sounds in many musical productions, from classical music to pop and contemporary expressions, is an instrument to capture the attention of Armenian and non-Armenian audiences.

As but one last example, in Milan, in Paris and Yerevan, in the different ways that I described previously, a commemoration of the 1915 episode is organised every year. In Milan, discourses, lectures, poems intermingle with classical music; in Paris, the associations hold parades and a great vigil in Place de la République, with a variety of different performances that signify the diversity of the community; in Yerevan, the ceremonies take place on the nights of 23rd and 24th of April. Over a million people go up to the Genocide Memorial, placing flowers and bouquets around the flame of remembrance.

To commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, in 2015, the Republic called strongly on the Armenian transnation. On April 23rd in Republic Square in Yerevan, the well-known American rock band, System of a Down (all the members have Armenian origins) gave their first show in the country. System of a Down have always been committed to a sobering cause: raising recognition for the Armenian Genocide. *Holy Mountains*, a song that speaks of the genocide and recalls the sounds of Armenian liturgical and traditional music, was performed at the concert's opening. After the first vocalisation, the guitarist player made a liberating shout saying “Hayastan!” (‘Armenia!’). The people in the square sung along with the group and it was evident, as the guitarist said later during the concert that “This is not just a rock and roll show. To our murderers, this is revenge.”

Armenians are ‘diasporic,’ their music is not, but it expresses endless activities and sacrifices to maintain an Armenianness: every performance is a statement of survival, a grievance, a will to confirm and remember the Armenian history. The same rhetoric was at the basis of the slogan designed for the centenary, along with the newly invented tradition of the forget-me-not flower. The slogan lay at the heart of the campaign for recognition of the genocide and read “We remember and demand.”

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