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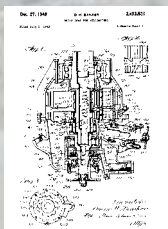
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A MONK APART

Komitas Vardapet forever transformed Armenian music while preserving its legacy

By Robert Atayan

The founder of the modern Armenian compositional school, Komitas (Soghomon Soghomonian) was a man of prodigious diversity. He was a composer and an instrumentalist, a documenter, poet, musicologist, singer, conductor, and teacher.

Born in Kutahya, Turkey, in 1869, Komitas was orphaned at an early age. In 1881 he was sent to the Gevorgian Lyceum in Ejmiatsin, where his beautiful voice and musical aptitude gained him special attention. Under the tutelage of Sahak Ama-

tuni, he studied Armenian liturgical music and notated ancient spiritual melodies.

A decisive factor in Komitas' growth as a musician was his daily connection with the folk songs of Armenia's Ararat Plateau, a large number of which he documented at the outset of his career. He began composing in the early 1890s, writing songs and choral music to the poetry of Avetik Isahakian (a younger schoolmate) and others, as well as arrangements for traditional and folk songs.

After graduating from the Lyceum in 1893, Komitas was appointed teacher at the school and conductor of the Ejmiatsin Cathedral choir. The following year he was ordained a cenobite, being renamed after the seventh century poet, musician and catholicos Komitas. In 1895 he was ordained a monk and thereafter was known as Komitas Vardabet.

That year Komitas took a short course in harmony under Makar Yekmalian, in Tbilisi, then traveled to Berlin, where he enrolled in the private conservatory of Richard Schmidt and studied at the Friedrich-Wilhelm University. In these prestigious institutions, during 1895 and 1896, Komitas studied compositional theory, music history, psychology, and philosophy. He also took intensive voice lessons and was trained as a pianist, organist, and conductor.

Komitas had an instrumental role in the creation in 1899 of the International Musical Society (IMS). At the Berlin chapter of the IMS, he delivered lectures on Armenian music and presented his own arrangements of Armenian folk songs, in live performances with a German quartet.

Returning to Ejmiatsin in 1900, Komitas continued researching and teaching, wrote the "Anush" opera (based on Hovhannes Tumanian's eponymous poem), and concertized with the Ejmiatsin Cathedral choir in Ejmiatsin, Yerevan, Tbilisi, and Baku. In 1906 he presented, with the choir of the French Lamouriot Ensemble, his arrangements of Armenian liturgical hymns and folk songs in Paris. The following year he delivered a lecture on the material at Paris' R. Rolland School of Higher Sciences. In addition, Komitas gave concerts and lectures throughout Switzerland and at the Mkhitarian Monastery in Venice. In 1910, seeking a more open milieu for his work, he left Ejmiatsin for Istanbul, where he founded the 300-member Gusan Ensemble (renamed Armenian Gusan Ensemble after 1912).

The press of the day noted the seminal significance of Komitas' art, not only for Armenians but several Middle Eastern and other cultures. In 1913 Komitas himself published a pivotal and brilliant essay in "Azatamart" on the uniqueness of Armenian music, and in 1914 delivered lectures on Armenian folk and spiritual music at the IMS Congress in Paris. The famous Austrian musicologist E. Wellesch, having heard Komitas' music at the Congress, later called him a rare master of harmony and polyphony.

While living in Istanbul, Komitas contributed to Turkish cultural life as well. He maintained friendships with Turkish poets, wrote music to the poems of Mehmet Emin, and served on several musical boards and committees. On the invitation of the prestigious Turkish Hearth cultural center in the Payazit quarter, Komitas delivered keynote lectures during celebrated musical soirées on April 2 and 3, 1915, when he also sang solo and presented his compositions with his choir.

The Genocide of the Armenians, which began to be carried out only weeks later by the Turkish government, cut Komitas' work short. Deeply traumatized by the mass killing and deportation of his compatriots, Komitas experienced a protracted mental breakdown, of which he never recovered. He was hospitalized in Paris beginning in 1919. He died there in 1935. The turn of events also claimed Komitas' considerable body of papers and scholarly possessions, which included manuscripts, research findings on the Armenian khaz (neumatic) notation system, as well as his library.

As a composer, Komitas was at the vanguard of 20th century music. In many of his works, he employed wholly unique, cutting-edge devices and his own inventions — particularly in terms of harmony, polyphony, and pianistic composition. He made music through a careful synthesis of Armenian folk convention and Western compositional techniques, producing spiritual works, particularly the male cappella "Divine Liturgy," that are of enormous importance.

Komitas' creative methodology opened wide horizons for the development of modern Armenian composition, bringing it to par with the evolution of world music. Komitas' influence is also considerably felt in the development of modern Eastern musical schools.





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Landmark Recording of Komitas' Divine Liturgy Features a Quartet of Duduks

A unique recording of Komitas Vardapet's Divine Liturgy has been released by the Los Angeles-based Armenian Arts organization. The recording is unprecedented in the history of Armenian music as it features an entirely instrumental rendition of the Liturgy, performed by the duduk quartet Winds of Passion.

Stepan Partamian, who conceived and produced the project, commented on the rationale behind the recording. "The vast repertoire of Armenian sacred music, and Komitas Vardapet's Divine Liturgy in particular, represents some of the highest compositional achievements of the Armenian people," he said; "yet Armenian church music has never integrated instrumentation using indigenous instruments. I believe this recording reflects a fresh model for performing Armenian spiritual music, through the use of a genuinely and recognizably Armenian instrument, namely the duduk."

Acknowledged as the most emotional of Armenian instruments, the duduk stands apart for having a timbre that comes closest to the human voice. This fact, according to the Winds of Passion Quartet, was a major reason the group took on the challenge of recording the Liturgy. A statement from the quartet reads: "Given its complex melodic structure, emotional range, immediacy, and compositional wholeness, Komitas Vardapet's Divine Liturgy is the finest example of Armenian spiritual music."

The Winds of Passion Quartet, comprising some of the most accomplished duduk players in the world today, has garnered both popular and critical acclaim through its concerts and a string of recordings.

According to Partamian, the recording of Winds of Passion's "Divine Liturgy" represents a milestone for the Armenian Arts Fund, as it was made possible through grassroots support from the local Armenian community. Partamian added that proceeds from the sale of the compact disc will be used solely for initiating cutting-edge artistic projects by the Armenian Arts organization.

The "Divine Liturgy" compact disc is accompanied by a 36-page, fully illustrated booklet featuring extensive liner notes in Armenian and English, as well as information on the Armenian Arts organization. Available from www.TheArmenian.com.

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“The Armenian in America”

A photographic journey through
the Armenian-American landscape of the 21st Century

The Armenian-American community is more than 125 years old, with a rich, evolving history that often begins with the quest for a better life and culminates in great achievements in art, science, commerce, sports, and other fields. But perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Armenian life in America is the community's tenacity in the face of overwhelming challenges, a resolve that finds expression in not only hard work, but also creativity, individuality, and a unique sense of humor.

Armenian culture in America has further diversified since the 1970s, when thousands of compatriots immigrated from Armenia, the Middle East, and elsewhere, to build new lives in the Land of the Free. New communities sprung up and older ones expanded in a multitude of cosmopolitan areas, but Armenians also settled and worked in towns, cities, and regions that remain off the beaten path.

Whether establishing new roots in Los Angeles, New York, and Dallas, or along the charming peripheries of city life, Armenians in America continue to put their individual stamp on the American dream. With cues from Armenian art, literature, cuisine, and crafts, they are engaged in a constant effort to contribute to the magic of America's human diversity.

*The First Armenian Church in The USA, Church of Our Saviour
in Worcester, Massachusetts. 1890.
No Longer an Armenian Church.*





The Tree is dedicated in the Memeory of the Armenian Genocide on The State Capitol Ground in Denver, Colorado.



Armenian Genocide Memorial in Phoenix, Arizona.



This Tree is dedicated in the Memeory of the Armenian Genocide in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The Armenian Arts Fund believes that the astonishingly rich mosaic of Armenian life in America deserves to be fully documented, for the enjoyment and appreciation of Armenians and non-Armenians alike. To this end, the Armenian Arts Fund had embarked on a photographic project that had encompassed the entirety of the United States, in search of noteworthy Armenian individuals and institutions that contribute to the greatness of the American landscape. The project had a duration of 50 days in 2009 and resulted in a sizeable book of photographs, which will be published on July 4th, 2012.

"The Armenian in America" the book will be available at www.thearmenian.com



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Oscar H. Banker *Asadour Sarafian*

*Father of Automatic Transmission,
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Gun Type Inoculator.*

Oscar H. Banker, born Asadoor Sarafian, was one of America's most prolific inventors and a pioneer of consumer advocacy.

Banker's life story reads like a mythical odyssey, filled with gargantuan struggles, impossible dreams, a dogged determination to tackle challenges, and countless moments of epiphany, those Eureka moments which punctuate the path of all great inventors.

Banker was born in a hillside cave in Turkey. It was the late 1890s, when the Ottoman Turks had begun exterminating the Armenian population of Turkey, through waves of massacres that would culminate in the Genocide of 1915. Although Banker's family survived the carnage, he was a sickly infant and was not expected to live, since his mother was unable to lactate as a result of the extraordinary traumas she had experienced. What ultimately saved the child from certain death was the resourcefulness of his father. An "improviser," as Oscar Banks remembers him, his father made a feeding bottle using a goat's udder and fed the child abundant amounts of grape juice, nursing him back to health. Such creativity in the face of a difficult situation would serve Oscar Banker as an abiding inspiration throughout his life.

Still a teenager, Asadoor struck out on his own and headed to America, in search of a better life. Within a short span of time after he entered the United States through Ellis Island, the adventurous immigrant improved his English, changed his name to Oscar Banker, took up drafting, and found employment at a machine shop. He refused to go into a less-ambitious trade such as shoemaking,

as an acquaintance had strongly suggested. Instead, Banker pursued his dream of becoming an engineer.

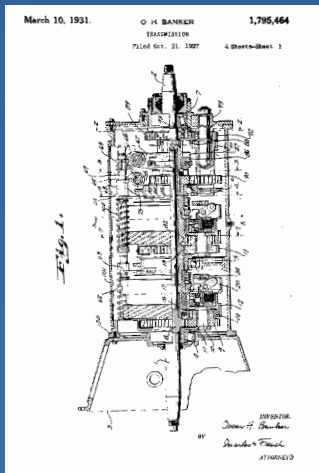
Already at the time he was working at the machine shop, Banker invented a saw-filing machine, to the astonishment of his appreciative employers. That early milestone would pave the way for an almost unbroken string of inventions. Banker invented the first practical automatic car transmission, which General Motors adopted for the 1940 Oldsmobile Hydramatic, "with twists of their own." But since GM's version of the transmission had serious design flaws, making it dangerous for drivers, Banker fought the car-manufacturing industry to force it to adapt a better, safer, design. After eight years of battling fellow automotive engineers and car companies alike,

Banker won, with the result that manufacturers converted what Banker termed as "bobby-trap" automatic transmissions to ones with a "standardized" shift pattern. Thus, in later decades, Banker came to be known as "the man who made [consumer advocate] Ralph Nader."

Banker's second major invention were the primary controls of the first Sikorsky helicopter. The invention led to the mass manufacture of helicopters during World War II. Thanks to Banker's designs, U.S.-made helicopters saved the lives of an estimated 20,000 servicemen fighting in the Pacific. Banker practically donated his invention to the United States. Although a contract stipulated that he would receive a nominal annual royalty for his invention, he was never actually paid royalties since the company with which he was associated with was sold and his contract was subsequently voided.

Still, Banker was not a man easily broken by setbacks. Rather, he went on to gift to the world a long series of groundbreaking inventions, including the first versatile needleless inoculation gun and the first four-color flatbed printing press. Banker has more than 300 patents to his name.

In his autobiography, titled *Dreams and Wars of an American Inventor: An Immigrant's Romance* (co-written by Robert Hull; Rob Hull Books and Features, 1982), Banker writes: "America is yet the greatest county existing for opportunity... for achievement... if a person can endure the hardships, ridicule, rebuffs, whatever... and keep on going! That is what counts. And absolutely nothing else."



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