

FOREIGN AUTHORS ABOUT THE ART OF KOMITAS AND ARMENIAN MUSIC

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**Komitas (Soghomon
Soghomonian) (1869-1935)**

Komitas Vardapet (Archimandrite), starting from his academic years in Berlin, with his concert-lectures in various countries abroad, contributed to a large extent to attract the attention of famous composers and musicologists to the unknown for them Armenian medieval and folk music. After each of his concerts, in the foreign press articles full of sincere praise were published in which Komitas was praised as composer, conductor, and performer.

From his professional and renowned teachers, he learned not only different musical disciplines, but also exchanged thoughts and opinions with various famous musicologists. His first teacher, Prof. Richard Schmidt, giving serious knowledge to his alumnus, also very favorably influenced him respecting his personality and Armenian mentality, and never forced on Komitas his musical style. He was proud to have such a student as Komitas¹. In 1899 Komitas acquired the title *Doctor of musicology* and returned to Echmiadzin, where he took over conducting a polyphonic male choir².

Thanks to the unique and unforgettable performances of Komitas, many foreign musicians and musicologists had the opportunity to get acquainted with the centuries-old Armenian music-art and express opinions on Armenian music. The first of them was Prof. Oskar Fleischer³, and Komitas was one of the first members of the International Music Association founded by him. At his invitation, in 1899 Komitas repeatedly appeared before the members of the International Music Association with lectures and concerts, which became a revelation for all present. So great was the impression left by the Armenian music in the performance of Komitas that Prof. Fleischer, on behalf of himself and on behalf of other authoritative listeners, expressed his special gratitude to

¹ Գասպարյան Գ. Ն., Կոմիտաս: Ժամանակակիցները Կոմիտասի մասին, Երևան, 1960, էջ 11-13:

² Komitas classical music composer. Biography <http://www.classicalconnect.com/composer/Komitas>

³ The author of “Neumen-Studien”, Teil I, Leipzig, 1895.

him and noted that he would gladly assist him in publishing his works in the future⁴. And on behalf of the Berlin branch of the International Music Association, Dr. Max Seifert, impressed by the lectures of Komitas, expressed the opinion that Armenian church music, from the beginning of Christianity to the present day, has remained unchanged, and its origin is due to the ancient temple music, which in turn originated from folk music. The church simply has enriched what the people preserved in its simplicity⁵.

Famous French musicologist Pierre Aubry in 1901, visiting Echmiadzin under the Catholicos Mkrtich Khrimyan, wrote a series of articles entitled “The System of Armenian Church Music: Memoirs from a scientific trip to Armenia”, which was published in the journal “Tribune de Saint-Gervais” (1901, 1902, 1903, Paris)⁶.

Describing the warm reception that their group in Echmiadzin was awarded, Aubrey notices that some priests spoke fluent French, or German, beside Russian, because they were educated in those countries, and adds the same about Archimandrite Komitas, who quite fluently spoke German and a little French, and thus was very useful at their visit to Etchmiadzin. He notes that already in Paris he heard much praise from Antoine Meillet about Komitas as a connoisseur of church music. Komitas for days covered all the difficult issues for Aubrey and his attendants. Aubrey describes with pleasure the musical life in the seminary, which was given new scope thanks to Komitas and was in high esteem. Komitas taught the theory and practice both of Armenian and European music. The students even learned to play the piano, harmonium and stringed instruments. The adult students did not study music, but sang in the beautiful choirs composed by Komitas. Pierre Aubry was also impressed by the perfect memory of the singing youths, who sang melodies of the ceremony lasting a few hours by heart⁷.

Pierre Aubry’s article ends with Komitas’s wise proverb: “As long Armenian music lasts, Armenia will live for so long”⁸.

In 1906 Komitas moved to Paris to deal closely with the French musical world. There he met Arshak Chopanyan, who supported him in every way, translating his lectures into French, and also publishing them in the magazine “Anahit”, edited by him. In Paris, thanks to the tremendous efforts of Komitas, an unforgettable concert took place, attended by such celebrities of French music as the famous music critic Louis Laloy⁹ and the famous writer and musicologist Romain Rolland¹⁰. The latter before that

⁴ Կոմիտաս Վարդապետ, Նամականի (աշխ. Գ. Գասպարեանի), Երևան, 2009, էջ 240, 487 (թարգմանություն՝ Արթուր Ավանեսովի), Բեռլին, 1899, հուլիսի 16:

⁵ Կոմիտասական, 2, Երևան, 1981, էջ 31-32; see also: “Zeitschrift der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft”, 1/1899/100, էջ 54:

⁶ See: Pierre Aubry, *Souvenir d’une mission d’études musicales en Arménie*, Paris, 1902; Idem, *Le système musical de l’Église arménienne*, Paris, 1901 (Կոմիտասական, 1, Երևան, 1969, էջ 253, ծան. 1).

⁷ Կոմիտասական, 1, էջ 254-258:

⁸ Ibid. p. 259.

⁹ The founder of “Mercure musical” in 1905.

¹⁰ One of the founders of “Revue d’histoire et critique musicales”.

had the opportunity to get acquainted with the soulful performances of Komitas, and after this concert he invited him to the Sorbonne University and asked him to give a lecture on Armenian music and to sing his amazing songs.

Perhaps the mentioned concert was meant by the famous Armenian linguist Hrachia Acharyan in his memoirs about Komitas where he wrote: "I've heard that in 1906 in Paris, after the concert, the famous French composer Claude Debussy knelt down to kiss Komitas's hands, saying: "Genius Father Komitas, I bow before your talent..."¹¹.

And after the concerts of Komitas Music in different cities of Switzerland, the newspaper "Gazette de Lausanne" wrote that Armenian music was not only one of the components of human music, but it was also so beautiful that it could cause the envy of magnificent Germany and proud France¹². It is a pity that the author's name is not mentioned, but the latter particularly emphasized that these songs should be listened to in the performance of such an artist as Komitas, so that the impression would be complete.

In the spring of 1910 Komitas moved to Constantinople. His numerous concerts were admired by representatives of different peoples of this multinational city. On the following year, at the Union Francais Hall, two important concerts took place that were rated by the European press as the most beautiful phenomena of that music season¹³. According to those who were present at this famous concert, a number of French and European musicians and musicologists could not believe that this was purely vocal music, they rose to the stage to search for unknown musical instruments¹⁴.

In 1911 Komitas left for Egypt. After reading several lectures in Alexandria and Cairo, he gave a concert with his choir of 190 people in a large hall of the Alhambra Theater for a huge audience. The authoritative press of the Arab world expressed many words of the highest estimate for the art of Komitas. The concert held in Alexandria was exactly repeated in Cairo, and the local newspapers devoted special articles to Komitas. On their columns, along with the detailed articles, a photograph of Komitas was also printed, which in those days was placed in the windows of the stores not only of Armenians, but also of Arabs¹⁵. And after all these concerts Komitas was presented with a gold chain, a gold purse and a gold pencil as a sign of perfect delight for his art...

In the fall of 1913 Komitas returned to Constantinople, where he again gave numerous concerts. At this time his chorus "Gusan" performed not only the Armenian, but also Western European programs, including Wagner and Mozart. The newspaper "Byzantion" warmly reacted to this concert, noting that Komitas is such a famous talent that if he acted in Europe, he would be highly paid materially, but he is so modest that it

¹¹ Հրաչյա Աճառյան, Հուշեր Կոմիտասի մասին: Ժամանակակիցները Կոմիտասի մասին, էջ 80:

¹² Մուրադյան Մ., Կոմիտասը և հայ երաժշտության ցուցադրումը Եվրոպայում // Կոմիտասական, 2, էջ 22:

¹³ Գասպարյան Գ. Ն., Կոմիտաս, էջ 22-24:

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 24.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 25.

is more important for him to praise Armenian music. A lot of foreigners were present at this concert, including ambassadors of all countries in Constantinople.

Thanks to the highest evaluations of German musicologists, Komitas found himself in close contact with the Association, and in 1914, with great success at the V International Congress of the Music Association, presented Armenian music to the most famous composers and musicologists. After his three lectures the famous German mediaevalist Peter Wagner expressed his admiration and special thanks to Komitas, noting: "I am looking forward to the publication of all the works of Komitas Archimandrite, which contain a huge treasure to cover the dark points of both Armenian and Greek music"¹⁶.

The well-known Austrian musicologist, composer and master of Byzantine neumes, lecturer of the University of Vienna Egon Wellesz, who also had the chance to listen to Komitas singing, wrote: "I am surprised at his outstanding abilities. Being a connoisseur of folk songs, he harmonizes them with a rare taste and precision. All those songs that I listened to from Komitas or studied them, above all, prove that Komitas is a rare master of harmonization and polyphony"¹⁷.

There is information that Wellesz expressed the opinion that "Armenian Khazes are older than Byzantine (Greek) neumes, and even that at their basis were the Armenian ones"¹⁸. It is possible that this opinion of such an authoritative scholar was formed precisely as a result of the fact that he had heard the singing of Komitas...

About the unique art of Komitas, with great admiration wrote the famous French musicologist, Professor of the University of Sorbonne, Frédéric Macler¹⁹, expressed the opinion that the work of Komitas Archimandrite is invaluable due to the absolute truthfulness that his trips and living among the people give him. And the president of the Union of French Music, the musicologist Amadeus Gastoue, analyzing the art of Komitas, wrote about the relationship of his music with the French, noting that his visit in 1906-1907 served as an occasion for a wonderful French-Armenian festival²⁰.

And finally, the famous Russian composer and pedagogue Mikhail Gnessin, visiting Constantinople in 1913, after listening to Komitas, highly estimated his works.

Komitas, as a true messenger of Armenian music, after receiving reviews on his lectures (1914), responded with the satisfaction of a man who had completely fulfilled his mission: "Most of all I was touched by the fact that these foreign musicologists, listening to my explanations, understood and were convinced that there is Armenian music in the world, quite original and self-sufficient, as well as Armenian language and

¹⁶ Բաբայան Մ., Հայ երաժշտությունը Փարիզի մեջ: «Ազատամարտ» օրաթերթ, Կ. Պոլիս, 11/24 հունիսի 1914, № 1535, էջ 1:

¹⁷ Ժամանակակիցները Կոմիտասի մասին, էջ 18:

¹⁸ See: Հայր Ղեւոնդ Տայեան, Շարական Հայաստանեայց Եկեղեցոյ, բազմահատոր շարակնոցի անտիպ Ա հատոր (կազմող՝ Արփի Վարդումյան), էջ 42:

¹⁹ The founder of "Revue des Études Arméniennes" in 1919, the author of the book "La Musique en Arménie" (Paris, 1917).

²⁰ Կոմիտասական, հ. 2, էջ 265:

Armenian life...”²¹. In fact, Komitas was pleased not so much for his luck, as for praising Armenian music.

Thus, Komitas during his trips abroad gave numerous concerts and lectures, thanks to which he largely acquainted the international audience with Armenian music, presented the foreign listeners with wonderful moments of his art and was awarded the highest praise worthy of his genius.

²¹ Հայր Ղեւոնդ Տայեան, Շարական Հայաստանեայց Եկեղեցւոյ, Ա հատոր, էջ 60, 86: