

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

AVIAN MOTIFS IN ARMENIAN MUSIC: AN
EXPLORATION OF INTERGENERATIONAL
MEMORY, TRAUMA, AND IDENTITY IN
THE ARMENIAN DIASPORA

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This thesis explores the theme of birds in Armenian music as it relates to identity, trauma, and commemoration. Based on one year of participant observation and interviews with Armenian Americans, I discuss the relationship between music and genocide commemoration among members of the diaspora in Washington, D.C. and, to a lesser extent, in Los Angeles. I analyze my interlocutors' interpretations of Komitas Vardapet to learn why he is so meaningful for individuals in the diaspora. I then dedicate much of this thesis to analyzing individual interpretations of Komitas' song "Krunk" ("The Crane"). I trace the indexical associations the song has accumulated over time to its present-day associations with diasporic identity, the 1915 Armenian genocide, and the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. Lastly, this thesis explores genocide commemoration events among the Washington, D.C. area community and music's role in memorializing trauma and shaping collective identity. I investigate whether these two communities have shared interpretations of songs commonly heard in commemorations or if being in different environments with varying levels of exposure to Armenian language and cultural practices impacts the ways in which community members value these songs.

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ARMENIAN DIASPORA

by

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Dedication

To my parents.

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank the six women who shared their experiences and stories with me. I am grateful to members of the Soorp Khatch Armenian Apostolic Church who welcomed me into their community. I would like to sincerely thank my advisor Dr. Siv B. Lie for her support, encouragement, and guidance in completing this work. I am thankful for what I have learned from her both inside the classroom and in our one-on-one discussions. I want to sincerely thank Drs. Larry Witzleben and Alyssa Mathias for their thoughtful insight on my thesis. Thanks to all my classmates at the University of Maryland. I especially thank Ilsa Yin and Kajwan Ziaoddini for their unwavering support and friendship. I am thankful for my parents, who inspired and encouraged my love for Armenian music from a young age. Lastly, I would like to thank my sister, Alex. Thank you for being my best friend and biggest supporter.

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Introduction

Do you know why we are compared to birds? Birds are innocent. They give so much and expect nothing in return.... Armenians are an innocent people who have lived in the Armenian highlands for centuries and created their culture and music. Unfortunately, others wanted to conquer our lands, destroy our culture, and kill our people. Because of this, we have had to leave these lands.

This was the response I received during an interview with an Armenian mother of three. Individuals with whom I have spoken draw associations between Armenian songs that emblemize birds and the 1915 Armenian genocide, but her comments made me realize that my conception of birds as a metaphor representing the Armenian diaspora should include the exodus of the entire civilian population of Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War with Azerbaijan.

This thesis explores the theme of birds in Armenian music as it relates to identity, trauma, and commemoration. I discuss the relationship between music and genocide commemoration among members of the diaspora in Washington, D.C. and, to a lesser extent, in Los Angeles. I investigate whether these two communities have shared interpretations of songs commonly heard in commemorations or if being in different environments with varying levels of exposure to Armenian language and cultural practices impacts the ways in which community members value these songs. I also discuss Komitas Vardapet as the most significant musical figure for many Armenians and his role in shaping Armenian diasporic identity through his musical

contributions. This thesis will contribute to ethnomusicological conceptions of trauma, memory, commemoration, and diaspora studies.

I dedicate much of this thesis to analyzing individual interpretations of Komitas Vardapet's song "KrunK" ("The Crane"). I trace the indexical associations the song has accumulated over time to its present-day associations with diasporic identity, the 1915 Armenian genocide, and the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. "KrunK" is from a genre of Armenian music known as *antoonee*, meaning "someone who has no home." According to musicologist Tatevik Shakhkulyan, *antoonee* songs involve birds such as the crane and stork bringing emigrants news from Armenia. She explains that "migratory birds symbolize homeland in general...they visit home more frequently and more regularly than [an emigrant]" (Shakhkulyan 2016, 377). In his article titled "The Diasporic Crane: Discursive Migration across the Armenian-Turkish Divide," Michael Pifer discusses the cross-cultural relationship of literary and musical cultures and the crane as a symbol of the Armenian diaspora (Pifer 2009, 229). According to Pifer, the "ubiquity of cranes in Armenian culture and politics has only reinforced a nationalistic, or at least nationally inflected, reading of the song 'KrunK'" (2009, 233). Through discussions with each of my interlocutors, I learned that "KrunK" and the emblem of the crane carry associations with diasporic identity and nostalgia for the homeland, but they also hold additional meaning depending on the individual experiences of the listener. The time frames in which I chose to conduct my interviews demonstrate how social processes, specifically the development of the 2020 war and departure of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh,

impact the ways in which my interlocutors perceive “KrunK” and the emblem of the crane.

Through interviews with interlocutors in the Washington, D.C. area and LA, I explore how Armenian individuals use music to memorialize their intergenerational trauma and collective past in commemorative contexts for the 1915 Armenian genocide. During World War I, the Young Turk government of the Ottoman Empire deported Christian Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks from the Empire with the objective of advancing pan-Turkic aspirations. These ethnic groups were sent on death marches throughout the deserts of Syria (Suny 2015, 245) and were subject to murder, starvation, dehydration, slavery, rape, exposure to disease and the elements, and other acts of violence. Leaders of the Ottoman Empire denied that such acts were committed. Today, the Turkish government refuses to recognize the Ottoman Empire’s role in carrying out the annihilation of approximately 1.5 million Armenians throughout the eastern Anatolian region. Lands that were once populated by Armenians faced cultural erasure as churches and other sacred landmarks were converted into mosques and cultural landmarks were demolished. On April 24, 1915, Armenian intellectuals, writers, leaders, and politicians in Istanbul were arrested, deported, detained in holding centers in the Ottoman Empire, and murdered. According to historian and political scientist Ronald Grigor Suny, “with the soldiers disarmed and the politicians under guard, the muscle and mind of the Ottoman Armenians had been effectively eliminated. The mass arrests on April 24 marked a radically new phase in the Ottoman program to deal with their Armenian subjects” (Suny 2015, 244). Every year on April 24, Armenian communities around the world

mark another year of genocide denial by the Turkish government and demand wide-scale recognition of the event. Because my thesis explores how five Armenian women in the diaspora perceive their collective identities and the intergenerational trauma imposed upon them as result of the genocide, the brief history I have provided here is important to understanding musical commemoration that I discuss in Chapter 3 and the women's interpretations of songs typically used in commemorative contexts.¹

Music and Commemoration

This thesis draws on literature about music and commemoration that show how communities use music to memorialize traumatic events, mourn in solidarity, and preserve the memory of people who lost their lives due to persecution and genocide. I draw on these works to contextualize musical commemoration among Armenian Americans in the Washington, D.C. area. Avo Katerjian's book *Hayots Tseghaspanutyun Azdetsutiune Erg-Erazhshtutyun Vrah (The Impact of the Armenian Genocide on Music)* discusses approximately 200 songs that are related to the genocide. Through this work, Katerjian shows how individuals used songs to convey the poor treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire preceding the genocide and writes about how these same songs are heard in the diaspora today. My research draws on Katerjian's work to show how songs such as "Kilikia" (addressed in Chapter 3) have evolved in meaning for their listeners and in their usage in

¹ For more information about the Armenian genocide and its aftermath, see *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* by Taner Akçam and *Great Catastrophe: Armenians and Turks in the Shadow of Genocide* by Thomas de Waal.

commemorative events today. Additionally, the edited volume *Performing Commemoration: Musical Reenactment and the Politics of Trauma* by Annegret Fauser and Michael A. Figueroa provides insight into how ethnic and social groups around the world use music as sonic acts of remembrance. The edited volume helps me understand how Armenians in the Washington, D.C. area use music in commemorative events to “reenact past trauma, seek justice, lay claim to territory, mark the passage of sacred time, and perform many other social functions...” (Fauser and Figueroa 2020, 1). I specifically draw from Sylvia Angelique Alajaji’s contributed chapter titled “Music and the Mediation of Remembrance.” Literature about music and commemoration is especially relevant to Chapter 3 in which I discuss commemorative events among the Washington, D.C. area Armenian community that simultaneously play important roles in educational contexts and political protests.

Music and Diaspora

To better understand music and genocide commemoration in the Armenian context, I draw on the works of Sylvia Angelique Alajaji, Alyssa Mathias, and Donna Buchanan, each of whom focus on remembrance among different Armenian diaspora communities. In her chapter in *Performing Commemoration*, Alajaji writes about a broad survey of communities around the world as they commemorate the centennial of the genocide. She discusses the relationship between music and melancholia and the motivations for repertoire selection for events of remembrance in diasporic settings. Her discussion of various commemoration programs informs my approach to

understanding remembrance in Washington, D.C. and their choices in repertoire that is performed at these events. In Washington, D.C., I observe how repertoire is selected to shape a collective identity revolving around resilience and hope, rather than mourning. In her book titled *Music and the Armenian Diaspora: Searching for Home in Exile*, Alajaji discusses the Armenian communities in New York, Lebanon, and California and explores how members use music to negotiate their Armenian identities amid political and social tensions. She discusses Komitas' contributions and importance as a cultural emblem. Like Alajaji, I have found that Komitas instills national pride within many individuals in the diaspora. While my work builds off Alajaji's work in exploring Komitas' significance among many Armenians in the diaspora, my work differs from hers in that I place a central focus on analyzing the interpretations of Armenian American women who either live in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., or have repatriated to Armenia.

In "They Were Sent to Their Deaths from Here: Sounds of Plurality and Solidarity in Istanbul at the 100th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide" from *Ethnomusicology Review*, Mathias writes about musical commemoration in Istanbul.² She shares audio recordings from her fieldwork and explains that "what seems to unite these diverse sounds of remembrance and protest is a sense of immediacy. Amid us visitors were people speaking to their own government, on the very soil where it happened, figuring out how to live together" (Mathias 2015). She observes political protest of the Turkish government's continued denial of the genocide, protest of hate

² For more information about musical remembrance for Armenians in Turkey, see "Lullabies and the Memory of Pain: Armenian Women's Remembrance of the Past in Turkey" by ethnomusicologist Melissa Bilal.

crimes committed against Armenian individuals in Turkey, and musical commemoration of the genocide. Her work informs my approach to understanding how music is used as a tool to express political agency and solidarity among a group of people.

Lastly, Buchanan writes about commemoration among the Armenian diaspora in Bulgaria in “Armenia Aeterna: Commemorative Heritage in Sound, Sculpture, and Movement from Bulgaria’s Armenian diaspora” from the edited volume *Heritage of Death: Landscapes of Emotion, Memory, and Practice*. Her work on the diaspora community in Bulgaria helps me understand how members of the Washington, D.C. Armenian community “remember” the events of the genocide without having lived through the atrocity itself. She draws on Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory,” which I also draw on in this thesis to discuss how my interlocutors assume the experiences of genocide survivors as their own through the mediation of songs.

Methods

I conducted interviews with five Armenian American women between December 2022 and February 2024. I spoke with thirty-two-year-old Aida K. Bagdasaryan, twenty-three-year-old Grace Vertanessian, thirty-four-year-old Nanor Balabanian, twenty-six-year-old Nayiri Shahnazarian, and forty-five-year-old Maral, a pseudonym for a mother who prefers to remain anonymous. I also interviewed Tereza Yerimyan, Director of Government Affairs at the Armenian National

Committee of America and chair of the Hamazkayin chapter in D.C., who gives insight into 2024 commemorations among the community.

Prior to this research, I knew each woman to varying degrees and realized that each of their lived experiences as Armenians in the diaspora would lead to compelling observations on identity construction and music's role in memorializing trauma. Grace and Aida grew up in the lively Armenian community of Los Angeles. Aida was very involved in her Armenian community and speaks fluent Armenian. Grace does not speak Armenian and grew up in a city in Los Angeles County that has few Armenian families. Nayiri lives in Maryland and Maral lives in Virginia, where there are also relatively few Armenians. They explain that because of their geographic location and the small size of their community, "remaining Armenian" is crucial. After living in California for most of her life, Nanor relocated to Armenia in 2020. In my own experiences, I have noticed that women play prominent leadership roles in cultural, political, and educational organizations and community gatherings. Most of these women are very active in their respective communities, which enabled me to repeatedly interact with them and establish good rapport before asking for interviews. For example, Nanor is the director and founder of the Hidden Road Initiative and Nayiri was the Chairperson of the Armenian Youth Federation D.C. "Ani" Chapter in 2023; both women are very involved in efforts organized to aid the homeland. Maral is involved in her community for the benefit of her children's cultural upbringing. I often see her bringing them to the Soorp Khatch Armenian Apostolic Church in Bethesda, Maryland for religious observances, holiday events, Armenian Youth Federation (AYF) meetings, and dance rehearsals.

My gender positionality as a woman played a role in my choice to have only women as interlocutors, and also impacted my level of closeness with each woman and played a role in how willing they were to speak with me for this research. Because I was already friends with Aida, Grace, and Nanor prior to this research, they were very happy to help me. As a newcomer to Washington, D.C. in the fall of 2022, I was eager to be involved in the Armenian community. Throughout my two years here, I have joined youth organizations, attended community functions and protests, and performed at community events with my sister. I believe that Nayiri and Maral were willing to speak with me because I have made strong efforts to be an active member of and contribute to the Armenian community in D.C. While I had informal interviews in person with Washington, D.C. community members, the formal interviews with each woman were conducted over Zoom or by phone. I spoke with my interlocutors before and after Azerbaijan's military offensive against Armenia-controlled Artsakh in September 2023, which resulted in the mass departure of Armenians from the region. The ways in which my interlocutors perceive "KrunK" transform as the war unfolds.

This thesis draws on one year of participant observation at cultural events, protests, and genocide commemorations in the Washington, D.C. area. To meet community members, I attended Hamazkayin-organized events, AYPF D.C. "Ani" Chapter Senior meetings, and religious services, all of which took place at the Soorp Khatch Armenian Apostolic Church. I attended most commemoration events that took place in the area from April 19 to April 30. I made audio and video recordings

on my phone of musical performances and remarks made by community members at commemorative events.

Most of my informational sources for this research are secondary. However, I also draw on translations of lectures, essays, and articles written by Komitas Vardapet to learn more about Armenian folk music and his process of collecting, transcribing, and arranging music he heard in village settings. Lastly, I include translations of song lyrics throughout the thesis. All translations from Armenian to English are my own unless stated otherwise. Volumes 2 and 3 of *The Heritage of Armenian Literature* by Agop J. Hacikyan, Gabriel Basmajian, Edward S. Franchuk, and Nourhan Ouzounian provide translations of various song lyrics I include. Zulal, an Armenian a cappella trio, also provides helpful translations of lyrics on their website.

Outline of Chapters

In Chapter 1, I analyze my interlocutors' interpretations of Komitas Vardapet to learn why he is so meaningful for individuals in the diaspora. I discuss his life and contributions in safeguarding Armenian musical traditions prior to the genocide and demonstrate why many individuals consider him to be Armenia's leading cultural figure. His music is heard in various contexts including genocide commemorations, political protests, and religious observances. In conversations with members of the Washington, D.C. community, mothers have shared the importance of playing Komitas' music for their children as an educational tool. My other interlocutors explain that his music allows them to *feel* Armenian. I discover that Komitas' music

and image represent endurance and survival amid massacre, displacement, and cultural loss in diasporic settings.

In Chapter 2, I explore the emblem of birds in Armenian music with a central focus on Komitas' "Krunk." Songs such as "Krunk," "Bari Arakil" ("Kind Stork"), and "Tsitsernak" ("The Swallow") are thought to communicate the experience of expatriates who feel nostalgia for their homeland. In analyzing my interlocutors' interpretations of and tracing the indexical associations of "Krunk," I show how this song has accumulated numerous meanings that reflect the Armenian experience during different periods in time and how it is commonly associated with the 1915 genocide and diasporic identity. My interlocutors' interpretations of "Krunk" reveal that Armenian self-identification varies based on knowledge differentials of the Armenian language and cultural practices, shedding light on how identity can be constructed in diasporic settings. As demonstrated by interviews with my interlocutors, the polysemic values of "Krunk" and the emblem of the crane become a reflection of contemporary social and political issues, namely the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and the mass departure of Armenians from the region.

In Chapter 3, I explore genocide commemoration among the Washington, D.C. area Armenian community. Through virtual ethnographic methods, I investigate genocide commemoration in past years and analyze a video of the Hamasdegh Armenian School Chorus' commemorative performance posted to YouTube in 2018. Children who appear to be between six and twelve years of age stand on raised platforms in front of a projection that reads "Hzor Banak, Hzor Hayastan" or "Strong Army, Strong Armenia." Rather than singing only somber songs, the choir also

performs a selection of revolutionary and patriotic songs. I explore reasons for which “Krunk,” although typically associated with the genocide, is not performed, and how the performance of songs such as “Kilikia” (which refers to a historic region of Armenia) allows community members to contend with intergenerational trauma while simultaneously envisioning a promising future for their people and homeland. I discuss the extent to which the genocide becomes fixed in Armenian diasporic identity and the role that music may play in this. As demonstrated by the songs that community members choose to perform at commemorations, repertoire selection plays a crucial role in how contemporary Armenians can acknowledge their collective past and future.

Chapter 1: Komitas Vardapet: An Embodiment of Survival and Resistance

The character of our melodies is indeed laden with sorrow, but it is not without hope; there is vigor and energy, force and vitality in it. Our songs have not been able to develop properly because of political conditions, for the country has been a battlefield since earliest times plundered by nations near and far.

-Komitas Vardapet, “An Overview of Armenian Folk Music”

In April 2023, I attended an Armenian Youth Federation (AYF) Senior meeting at the Soorp Khatch Armenian Apostolic Church in Bethesda, Maryland. As I sat with the AYFers waiting for the meeting to begin, I spoke with a woman I often see at community events. I asked her what Komitas Vardapet means to her and she eagerly explained why she considers him Armenia’s preeminent cultural figure: “Komitas gave us the culture of the common people. His music gives me something spiritual. His music identifies you as a nation. For this reason, I appreciate Komitas so much.” As an Armenian American from Los Angeles, I was raised with the misconception that East Coast Armenian communities were not as engaged in cultural activities as West Coast communities are. Having attended cultural and social events in the Washington, D.C. area for almost two years, I realize that oftentimes there is an even larger focus on cultural immersion in this area than among the people I have observed in Los Angeles, and that many of their aspirations for this revolve around the music of Komitas Vardapet. In this chapter, I introduce five Armenian American women as case studies who provide multifaceted understandings of why Komitas’ music contributes to nationalistic identification among Armenians, regardless of

geographic location or knowledge of Armenian language and culture. My observations correlate with perspectives of ethnomusicologist Sylvia Angelique

Alajaji, who asserts that:

Komitas's work (and the subsequent veneration of him by Armenians throughout the world) is entirely consistent with nationalist projects throughout Europe and parts of the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which folklore was used and appropriated towards nationalistic ends. His collection of folk songs and his stylization of them in his own compositions allowed for the development of a musical narrative that imagined into being an autonomous, singular collective self. Moreover, Komitas's work sonically constructed a unified Armenia that had been divided for approximately three centuries. (Alajaji 2015, 28)

According to Alajaji, Komitas' music constructs an imaginary unified Armenia. Moreover, his music has functioned to connect Armenian populations separated by geographical distances. As demonstrated by the parallels I draw between their interpretations of Komitas, each of my interlocutors mirror Alajaji's sentiments because they are connected to each other by the pride they feel for Komitas and similarly feel Armenian identification and patriotism through his music. In addition to the Armenian patriotism that his music and likeness engenders, I argue that, with recent events in Armenia and the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, Komitas and his music have come to represent persistence and survival for individuals in both the diaspora and the homeland.

Komitas Vardapet

Born as Soghomon Soghomonian in 1869 in Kütahya, a city in the Ottoman Empire, and orphaned at 12 years old, Komitas' musical talents were recognized by a

member of the Armenian clergy, and he was sent to the Holy See of Etchmiadzin³ in Armenia to study at the Gevorgian Seminary. As an adult, he continued to study European music theory in Tbilisi, Georgia and then in Germany, where he studied in the private conservatory of Richard Schmidt and the Friedrich Wilhelm University⁴ (Nercessian 1998, 16). Armenians are indebted to Komitas for writing the *Badarak* or Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Apostolic Church. In his work examining music in ritual contexts among the Armenian communities of Soorp Khatch and St. Mary's Armenian Apostolic Church in Washington, D.C., ethnomusicologist Jonathan McCollum explains that "Armenian liturgical music acts as a device for the conception of faith as well as maintaining cultural identity" (McCollum 2004, 276). Komitas' music pervades both secular and sacred life in providing a vehicle through which many Armenians express and sustain their cultural, religious, and ethnic identities.

From 1890 to 1913, Komitas traveled throughout villages of historic western Armenia (present-day eastern Turkey) where he collected and transcribed thousands of folk songs sung by Armenian villagers. He classified folk songs into five categories: children's songs, dance songs, epic songs, funeral songs, wedding songs, and songs of nature (Komitas 2001, 164). In his musicological treatises, he made distinctions between the various musical dialects he observed in the villages, explaining that topography played a large role in the songs that villagers sung. He explained that "in mountainous regions you will find mainly rough, fierce and violent,

³ The Mother Cathedral of the Armenian Church.

⁴ Now named Humboldt University of Berlin.

hostile, even martial melodies, because nature itself is violent and hostile with windstorms, thunder, lightning, floods, et cetera. In contrast, among the people living on the plains you find calm, soft, tender, gentle melodies, which are the result of the corresponding nature” (Komitas 2001, 164). Komitas notated and arranged these songs to become a part of what is considered the classical Armenian music canon. According to musician Hachig Kazarian, Komitas presented “Armenian folk songs with piano accompaniment. He created a new sophisticated genre of Armenian music that is now considered more Western.... [His] goal and vision was to introduce Europe to Armenian folk and sacred music” (Kazarian 2023: 22). In his arrangements, he purged the Turkish, Persian, and Arab musical influences, and presented what he believed to be pure Armenian music. According to Komitas, impure Armenian music was “inundated by Turkish embellishment” or “lost in the particularly copious coloration and guttural trills common to Persian music.” He explained that “the scales of [Armenian] liturgical and folk music are simply sequences that ascend or descend in seconds or thirds, void of any useless or extraneous colorations, with an absolute absence of trills and chromaticism” (Komitas 2001: 168-170). I presume Komitas’ incorporation of Western elements and cleansing of Turkish influences from Armenian folk tunes functioned predominantly to instill a sense of national pride within the oppressed Armenian minority of the Ottoman Empire, and Alajaji mirrors this sentiment in her own work (Alajaji 2015, 53).

On April 24, 1915,⁵ Komitas and other Armenian intellectuals in the Ottoman Empire were arrested, deported, and detained in prisons in central Anatolia. While his

⁵ April 24 is Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day.

contemporaries were executed, Komitas was eventually released through mediations by Henry Morgenthau Sr., the American Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire (Poladian 1972, 83). After witnessing the horrors of the 1915 Armenian genocide, Komitas suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder; he was hospitalized in Constantinople and then transferred to a Paris sanitarium in 1919, where, after years of refusing to speak, he died in 1935 (1972, 83). Approximately two thousand of the nearly three thousand songs he collected were lost or destroyed during the years of the genocide. Komitas' remains can be found in Komitas Pantheon, a cemetery in Yerevan, Armenia, where only the most esteemed composers, painters, poets, writers, and actors are buried.



Figure 1: Komitas Monument and Armenian Genocide Memorial in Paris, France. Photo by Alexandra Yarialian.

For many Armenians today, Komitas' main objective in collecting Armenian music and arranging it to be purged of Turkish influences is especially important considering the threat of cultural erasure that Armenians were subject to as a minority group in the Ottoman Empire. This is evident in current performances of his music by the Armenian public and professional musicians who consider the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, which involved forty-four days of fighting between the Republic of Armenia and Azerbaijan, as a continuation of the threat of ethnic cleansing of Armenians from that region. Nagorno-Karabakh⁶ is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan, but the region has been inhabited and governed by Armenians for centuries. With the most recent attacks in September of 2023, Azerbaijan has gained control of all Armenian territories in Nagorno-Karabakh and over 100,000 people, the majority of its population, have fled to Armenia.

Introducing My Interviewees

The enduring power of Komitas' music was evident in interviews I conducted with five women whose varied experiences as Armenian Americans reflect those of many Armenians in the United States: Aida K. Bagdasaryan, Grace Vertanessian, Nanor Balabanian, Nayiri Shahnazarian, and Maral (the anonymous mother). Aida, Grace, Nanor, Nayiri, and Maral all identify as Armenian American, although the ways in which they perceive of their own identities are dissimilar.

⁶ Nagorno-Karabakh is known as the Republic of Artsakh to Armenians.

Aida emigrated to the United States from Yerevan, Armenia when she was eight years old and grew up in Glendale, California, a city where the Armenian community represents an estimated forty percent of the population. Aida's parents arrived in the United States with strained financial resources, spoke only Armenian at home, and made it a priority for Aida to participate in Armenian dance and music classes and attend Armenian cultural events. She primarily plays melancholic Armenian pieces on the piano because she feels that these songs are "closest to [her]" and allow her to best express herself. Playing the piano offers Aida emotional release, and Armenian dance similarly allows her to "focus on being able to feel the pain of Armenians and express it through movement" (Aida Bagdasaryan, personal interview, 11 December 2022). Aida's mother and my mother have been friends since their adolescence, and I have known Aida my entire life. Because of this, I am aware of how important it is for Aida to have been raised with Armenian cultural values.

Grace Vertanessian is a first-generation Armenian American born in Los Angeles and grew up in the wealthy suburb of Agoura Hills where there are few Armenian households and few opportunities for her to be immersed in Armenian cultural practices. Grace's parents relocated to the United States, her mother in the 1960s and her father in the 1970s, which was an era for immigrants that highlighted the values of the American Dream and achieving freedom and prosperity as Americans. Because of this, her parents made a conscious decision to speak only English at home to better assimilate into American culture. By ceasing to speak the Armenian language, they renounced a part of their identity, which metaphorically can be considered as a migration away from their Armenian roots. However, Grace's

parents always had Armenian folk tunes playing in the house, which she associates with her family and the memory of her late father. On a Facebook group titled “UCLA Class of 2022 - Official Group,” newly admitted freshmen posted introductions in the hopes that they would find roommates with similar interests and living preferences. In her post, Grace introduced herself as an Armenian American from the Los Angeles area who has an identical twin sister. These two similarities that we shared motivated me to message her and after meeting in person at a prospective students’ day, we decided to become roommates. Grace was my freshman-year roommate and the extent of her connection to Armenian culture was limited to listening to Armenian folk tunes on her laptop while she studied. Coming from two very different backgrounds as Armenian Americans, Armenianness was a topic we often discussed. Together, we attended Armenian Students’ Association (ASA) meetings and events and became active members of the university’s Armenian community.

Nanor Balabanian was born in Anjar, a town in Lebanon with a population that primarily consists of ethnic Armenians. She has relocated multiple times during her life, living in Armenian communities in Syria, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Los Angeles. In Lebanon, Nanor went to Armenian school and only spoke the Armenian language with her family and classmates. She grew up in a musical family and was exposed to Armenian songs both at home and in school. Growing up in the 1990s, a decade that marked Armenia’s secession from the Soviet Union and the liberation of Nagorno-Karabakh⁷ by Armenian forces in 1994, Nanor explained that it

⁷ The First Nagorno-Karabakh War lasted from 1988-1994 and resulted in Armenian victory.

was unsurprising that she was exposed to a large number of patriotic Armenian songs as a child. This upbringing instilled within her “a subconscious love for Armenia” (Nanor Balabanian, personal interview, 26 October 2023). According to Nanor, “diasporan Armenians are raised with an even stronger appreciation for and determination to speak the Armenian language and practice Armenian culture because it allows them to emotionally connect with their homeland, despite being physically disconnected” (Balabanian, 26 October 2023). Nanor made the decision to repatriate to Armenia in 2020 with the expectation that she would be able to benefit her homeland to an even greater extent than if she stayed in the United States. I met Nanor through the Hidden Road Initiative (HRI), an organization she founded as an undergraduate student at the University of California, Santa Barbara, more than ten years ago. The organization provides occupational and educational opportunities to students living in remote Armenian villages. Serving as co-president of the UCLA HRI Chapter from 2019-2022, I was in frequent communication with Nanor during the war.

Nayiri Shahnazarian was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, but dreams of one day moving to Armenia. Her first language was Armenian, and she was exposed to Armenian culture and history as a student at the Armenian School of Greater Baltimore, a Saturday school that offers classes to students ranging from ages three to sixteen. I met Nayiri soon after I moved to Washington, D.C. when I walked into the Soorp Khatch Armenian Apostolic Church for the first time hoping to meet other Armenians my age. While Nayiri was always involved in her Armenian community, she described her role as marginal until 2020. In 2019, Nayiri

participated in the Armenian Relief Society’s Camp Javakhk program and spent her summer as a camp counselor with other Armenian youth from North America.

Javakhk is a region located in present-day Georgia but has a predominantly Armenian population. After this, she decided to study abroad for a semester at the American University of Armenia. These two experiences motivated her to take on an active role in her Armenian community. In 2023, Nayiri served as Chairperson of the Armenian Youth Federation⁸ Washington D.C., “Ani” Chapter. She also teaches Armenian language and culture to three-year-old children at the Armenian school in Baltimore. Nayiri admitted to me that while she used to constantly listen to Armenian music, ranging from contemporary, popular Armenian songs to traditional folk tunes by Komitas, she no longer does because it evokes feelings of despondency over the war in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Maral is an Armenian mother with three teenage children based in Virginia. She emigrated from Syria to Virginia as a young adult and said that she wished she could have raised her family in Los Angeles, where her children could grow up in a vibrant Armenian community. Maral explained that her parents ensured that she was immersed in her Armenian community and because of this Armenian-centered upbringing, she is motivated to pass these same values to her children. Maral teaches her children about Armenian history, language, culture, and especially music with the hope that they will proudly embrace their Armenian identities rather than assimilate

⁸ Founded in 1933, the Armenian Youth Federation (AYF) is the youth organization of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF). There are thirty AYF chapters in the United States. The AYF is dedicated to the improvement of Armenian youth by organizing cultural, educational, social, political, and athletic activities. One of the main objectives of the organization is attaining a free, independent, and united Armenia. See here for more information on the Armenian Youth Federation: <https://ayf.org>.

into American culture as they grow older. For many members of the diaspora, assimilation into American life is critical, but the idea of being Armenian is even more pronounced. In his fieldwork, Jonathan McCollum observed that, “when Armenians come together on Sunday and perform the Divine Liturgy, they are then able to express their ‘Armenianness,’ which otherwise becomes lost during their weekly lives” (McCollum 2004, 247). My interlocutors did not stress the importance of performing liturgical music as a means of connecting with their Armenian heritage but highlighted the importance of social gatherings held at church. Because Maral lives in a small Armenian community where the church is the only place to practice and maintain customs, the concept of identifying as Armenian is particularly emphasized for her. Each woman’s individual experiences and upbringing impact the ways in which they perceive Komitas and his contributions to Armenian music. As revealed in my interviews with them, their interpretations of Komitas are also in relation to recent events in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

My Interviewees’ Interpretations of Komitas

Aida is keenly aware of what Komitas and his music represents to many Armenians. She feels that Komitas “laid the foundation musically for the...preservation of our culture.” She states that “if people had not fallen in love with his music and continued to play it, we would’ve lost it. When I hear Komitas’ music, I think of survival” (Bagdasaryan, 11 December 2022). Aida acknowledges Komitas as the individual who preserved Armenian musical culture because the folk songs that he made accessible have now widely become an integral part of

commemorative, political, and cultural events for Armenians. She associates his music with survival because while Komitas was a victim of the genocide, his music has endured to be celebrated by both Armenians and non-Armenians today. Nayiri also recognizes Komitas' impact on Armenian music and expresses similar ideas as Aida, explaining that Komitas is "very important in preserving Armenian culture" and "without him, so much of our music would be lost" (Nayiri Shahnazarian, personal interview, 29 October 2023). As a teacher, Nayiri plays recordings of Komitas' songs such as the children's song "Kaqavik" ("The Little Partridge") for her students. Maral also stresses the importance of the youth in the diaspora learning the music of Komitas and emphasizes that her children "know all his songs" because she has taken great pains to ensure that they are aware of his lasting imprint on Armenian culture. Because many songs Komitas arranged were historically sung in rural settings by Armenian villagers, Maral considers Komitas' music as the most "authentic" Armenian music. When she regards Komitas' music as "authentic," I believe Maral refers to the music's ability to accurately depict Armenian life in various social and cultural contexts and resonate with many Armenians in both the homeland and diaspora.

Nanor grew up in a religious family (her father is a pastor at an Armenian congregational church), so it came as no surprise when she explained that Komitas' music provides her with a sense of peace and spirituality. However, she expressed that the ways in which she views Komitas have transformed after having witnessed firsthand the displacement that accompanied the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. Nanor was in Nagorno-Karabakh, stranded on a road guarded by Azeri soldiers, the day that

a large portion of the region was to be surrendered to Azerbaijan. She witnessed Armenian villagers burning their homes and schools because they did not want to leave the lives they had built for themselves to benefit the Azerbaijani government and people. Nanor connects with Komitas in a more visceral way than my other interlocutors because she witnessed firsthand the “brutalities” in Nagorno-Karabakh. Demoralized and devastated, Nanor explained “that’s the day I understood why Komitas might have lost his mind” (Balabanian, 26 October 2023).

Individuals with whom Komitas was incarcerated discuss his mental state as similarly shared and experienced by Nanor. In his memoir, church bishop Grigoris Balakian recounts his experiences in the genocide and his detainment with Komitas as they head to the city of Çankiri. According to Balakian, “Father Komitas, who was in our carriage, seemed mentally unstable. He thought the trees were bandits on the attack and continually hid his head under the hem of my overcoat, like a fearful partridge. He begged me to say a blessing for him (“The Savior”) in the hope that it would calm him” (Balakian 2009, 66). While Nanor explains that she only “got a tiny glimpse of [what Komitas saw,]” she equates the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and the fleeing of Armenians from the region with the massacre of 1.5 million Armenians and the removal of the population from historic western Armenia. She considers the 2020 war a continuation of what Komitas witnessed because more than one hundred years later, history repeats itself as a new generation of Armenians experience the similar persecution and displacement endured by Komitas and his contemporaries.

With the most recent attacks in September of 2023, Azerbaijan has gained control of all Armenian territories in Nagorno-Karabakh and over 100,000 people, the

majority of its population, have fled to Armenia. Ghazanchetsots Cathedral is being converted into a mosque, which is testament to Azerbaijan's agenda to remove any traces of Armenian presence in the region. Komitas' "KrunK," a song that is centrally discussed in Chapter 2, has resurfaced to memorialize the Armenian lives lost, members of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh who are now left homeless, and the territories that no longer welcome Armenian entry. In an Instagram reel posted on September 26, 2023, with a caption partially dedicated to marking Komitas' birthday, a recording of "KrunK" accompanies scenes that narrate the last days of Armenian presence in the region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenian individuals young and old are shown hastily packing up their lives, members of the Armenian Red Cross Society offer aid, wounded civilians are wheeled away on gurneys, and Stepanakert, a once vibrant capital city, is turned into a check-in point for Armenians now in exile. In Russian, individuals share in the comments section: "history repeats itself," "Lord help us," "God, it hurts to see this horror," and "it is impossible to watch without tears..."⁹ When his song is used to accompany these scenes, Komitas becomes associated with and contextualized within this displacement of the Armenian people from their homeland.

In contrast to the other women, before our first interview Grace only knew of Komitas by name and, listening to Armenian songs that were played by her parents during her childhood, she did not connect them specifically to anyone or anything. Despite being unable to understand the lyrics of Komitas' songs, Grace expressed that

⁹ The reel is available on Instagram and was accessed on October 12, 2023: https://www.instagram.com/reel/CxqFMEQoOF/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

listening to his music allowed her to determine what it “means to be Armenian.” Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino explains that “artistic practices have a special place in the realization and presentation of identity because they are usually framed as heightened forms of representation for public perception, practice, and effects” (Turino 2004, 10). As a person who grew up in the diaspora and does not speak Armenian, Grace appreciates being able to listen to Komitas’ music because it allows her to immerse herself into the Armenian language and culture. Grace’s experience with this music reshapes her identity in the diaspora in the sense that it enables her to share values with other diasporan Armenians in how they perceive Komitas and Armenian music.

Through discussions with each woman, it was evident that Komitas and his music impart feelings of national pride within listeners. According to Alajaji, Komitas’ work in preserving Armenian music “made possible a site from which to imagine Armenia—a site to which Armenians could cling and lay claim when physical boundaries were unattainable” (Alajaji 2015, 26). Conversations with my interlocutors reveal that although the physical boundaries of their homeland remain unattainable, Komitas’ music provides a means of expressing their cultural identities while also allowing them to form a conceptual landscape of their homeland. Alajaji also explains that:

Komitas and his work allowed for a recovered sense not only of Self but, perhaps more important, of unity. In light of the continuing traumas of the genocide, the continued sense of loss of Home, and the disconnection felt in the diaspora between communities and from Armenia, Komitas is an increasingly rare shared symbol that not only connects the diasporic communities to each other, but, given his significance in Armenia, connects the diaspora to Armenia. (Alajaji 2015, 138)

Aida's perception of Komitas as emblematic of the genocide confirms Alajaji's statement, but Aida goes further and, for her, Komitas has come to "represent Armenian endurance." While Alajaji depicts Komitas as an individual whose music bridges Armenians throughout the diaspora and in the homeland, conversations with my interlocutors reveal that he and his music have also grown to represent survival of past atrocities, continued persistence amid current conflict with Azerbaijan, and a means by which individuals in the diaspora connect with their cultural identities.

Chapter 2: Examining Intergenerational Trauma, Collective Memory, and Identity of Armenian Women in the Diaspora Through Komitas' "KrunK"

The Crane has lost his way across the heaven,
From yonder stormy cloud I hear him cry,
A traveller o'er an unknown pathway driven,
In a cold world unheeded he doth fly.

-Hovhannes Tumanyan,¹⁰ "The Crane"

The representation of birds in Armenian cultural history dates back centuries. Beginning with ancient rock carvings, mosaics and murals, religious icons and miniatures, birds are represented as figures in the characters of the Armenian alphabet, woven into elaborately patterned rugs and textiles, cast in intricate jewelry, and indelibly imbedded in both art and music (Manaseryan and Balyan, 2002). The impact of bird imagery is so rooted in the shared cultural values of the Armenian diasporic community that many members often compare themselves to migratory birds who have left their homeland but are hoping to be repatriated. These include the stork, swallow, and crane that are associated with imagery of exile and longing in songs such as "Tsitsernak" ("The Swallow"), "Bari Arakil" ("Kind Stork"), and "KrunK, Barov Darnas" ("Crane, Return in Good Will") and are sentimentally regarded and found in popular Armenian culture. This chapter focuses on the emblem of the crane in Armenian music. The crane is characterized as the bird that brings good tidings and news from the homeland to Armenian immigrants who long to return to their ancestral lands. But for many members of both the contemporary Armenian citizenry and the diaspora, the crane also embodies their capacity to endure

¹⁰ Armenian poet and writer (1869-1923).

persecution and the continual threats of ethnic extermination by the Turkish and Azerbaijani governments. Numerous Armenian songs are titled “KrunK,” meaning “The Crane,” but the composer and ethnomusicologist Komitas Vardapet’s (1869-1935) “KrunK” is particularly meaningful for Armenians today. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that the emblem of the crane represents shared cultural values among many Armenians and is indexical of Armenian diasporic identity. As exhibited by five interviews analyzed in this chapter, the different interpretations of “KrunK” determined by each individual’s experience and upbringing are indicative of how nuanced and fluid Armenian diasporic identity is in the United States. My interlocutors’ interpretations of “KrunK” also demonstrate the extent to which the song and the emblem of the crane shift in meaning based on the developments of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War.

Introduction to Komitas’ “KrunK”

The version of “KrunK” that Komitas transcribed and arranged likely originated in the 17th century in the Akn region (Hacikyan et al. 2002, 1027), located in present-day eastern Turkey. The reality of the song originating from an area that is no longer Armenian territory makes the song that much more meaningful to Armenians and highlights the importance of keeping Armenian musical traditions alive. “KrunK” is from the *antoonee*¹¹ genre of Armenian music, which translates to a person who has no home. In her discussion of the *antoonee* genre, musicologist Tatevik Shakhkulyan explains that,

¹¹ Also spelled *antuni* or *adouni*.

Formerly the *antoonees*¹² were various in content, presenting love, joy, concern, sadness, protest, wedding, other ceremony episodes etc. Although medieval *antoonees* of various content had been sung...[in 20th century Armenian music], they are perceived as songs of expatriate workers or, so called, *pandookht*, that is to [say], pilgrim people. (Shakhkulyan 2016, 374)

In terms of thematic content, *antoonee* songs discuss the exilic state of Armenian people; musically, they are characterized as melismatic and improvisatory, and because of their difficulty, are generally sung by skilled vocalists. Throughout centuries living under the sovereignty of powerful countries and empires, many Armenians struggled to attain social, economic, and political independence, and it became commonplace for male family members to find work outside the homeland to support their families (2016, 375). Many of these individuals would sing *antoonees* to express their yearning for relatives they had left behind. The following lyrics express the sentiments of an expatriate begging for the crane to bring him any news from Armenia:

O crane, whence do you come? I am captivated by your voice!
O crane, do you bring me news from our homeland?
O fly not away; you will soon rejoin your flock:
O crane, do you bring me no news from our homeland?

I have left all my goods and my vineyards behind me,
And my heart is cloven with my sighs.
O crane, tarry yet a while, and soothe my soul with your voice:
O crane, do you bring me no news from our homeland?

O God, I entreat You, have pity and mercy
On this exile's heart, which is wounded and bruised;
He feeds on bread that is sour and drinks water that is putrid;
O crane, do you bring me no news from our homeland?

I know not the day of the week, nor the Sunday of the year;
A spit has been run through me, and I am roasting on the fire;
I do not mind thus burning, but I yearn for you to visit;

¹² Plural of *antoonee*.

O crane, do you bring me no news from our homeland? (Hacikyan et al. 2002, 1027)

Shakhkulyan states that the medieval author of the song's lyrics is unknown, but the song was first transcribed by Komitas in the early 20th century and has changed in significance since his arrangement to its current associations with the Armenian experience in the diaspora (2016, 381). The song resonates with members of the diaspora today and is heard at genocide commemorations, cultural events, and political protests amid the continuing conflicts with Turkey and Azerbaijan. For many Armenians, the lyrics share the larger message of the desolation experienced by their people as they were forced out of their country following the massacres of 1915 and as they now witness their compatriots facing removal from their ancestral lands of Nagorno-Karabakh. According to Komitas, "music's mode of expression, that is, its spirit, is associated with nature. Its content, however, is more closely related to the living conditions of the people" (Komitas 2001, 164). Komitas' statement remains an accurate representation as *antoonee* songs articulate the contemporary circumstances of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh who are now emigrants compelled to reestablish themselves in the diaspora. In his article in the *Armenian Mirror Spectator*, Father Zaven Arzoumanian quotes Komitas' well-known song "Antuni" and states that the Armenian emigrant "recalls his house collapsed like his heart is, where inside the broken ceiling wild birds have found refuge" (Arzoumanian 2019). My interlocutors expressed the shared belief that this state of life outside of Armenia was imposed on them and their families due to social, economic, and political factors, rather than something that was chosen or willingly embraced.

My Interlocutors' Interpretations of "KrunK"

Widely accepted in Armenian culture as a bird that brings good tidings, it is not coincidental that Armenian people choose to personify the crane as the bird that embodies the experiences of members of the Armenian diaspora who hope to return to their homeland. When discussing the emblem of the crane, Aida Bagdasaryan from Los Angeles states that,

When I think of *krunK*, [the crane] always comes back. *KrunK* is a return to home. I consider myself an Armenian American. I am extremely proud of being Armenian American. This is my home too. America is my home and always will be. But if I really have to return to my heart of hearts, it would be something that is in an Armenian realm. So, I find myself returning back home when I play piano or if I dance or recite Armenian poetry. When I was a kid, I thought it was silly, unimportant...why did we have to do this? Why do I have to sit here and practice piano and recite these Armenian poems? But it turns out that had it not been for this upbringing, I would feel very, very incomplete. (Aida Bagdasaryan, personal interview, 11 December 2022)

Ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes explains that “music is socially meaningful not entirely but largely because it provides means by which people recognize identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them” (Stokes 1994, 5). Aida personifies the crane in herself and recognizes her own identity as a diasporan Armenian through “KrunK.” Just as a crane always returns to its nest, Aida explains that she feels most herself and can metaphorically “return home” when she is playing or listening to Armenian music. For Aida, conceptions of the homeland and returning home are directly associated with Armenian music, poetry, and literature. Her understanding of the Armenian homeland is linked with the aesthetic qualities of Armenian texts and music, rather than associated with fixed geographical boundaries. While Aida’s perspective is not representative of every Armenian in the diaspora, her experience with “KrunK” and the cultural emblem of the crane shows how, despite

being physically removed from her homeland, she feels whole because of her Armenian-centered upbringing.

Unlike Aida, Grace Vertanessian had not heard a recording of “KrunK” until our interview. Grace mentioned a figurine of a crane from her grandmother given to her after she had passed. Her grandmother was an Armenian born in Iran and told Grace stories of her life as a Christian Armenian being raised in a Muslim world and their challenges to retain their Armenian culture. As a result of my interview with her, Grace shared that when she now thinks of “KrunK,” she associates the song with the figurine and, in turn, the memory of her grandmother. The revelation Grace experienced with her grandmother’s crane figurine implies how the crane becomes an emblem passed down to connect multiple generations of family members. Grace’s revelation demonstrates how cultural memory is formed among different generations, with older members safeguarding cultural markers for descendants who are not raised in an environment where opportunities for immersion in Armenian culture are abundant. Her experience as an Armenian who grew up outside of her homeland can be compared with the emblem of the crane. In the song, the crane is described as having left its homeland, leaving everything behind. Similarly, Grace’s family migrated away from their homeland and made a conscious decision to dissociate themselves from the Armenian language. As a result of the interviews and the evocation of family memories, particularly her grandmother’s figurine, Grace now has made a conscious decision to reconnect with her Armenian identity and, like the crane, is figuratively migrating back to her Armenian roots.

My role as an interviewer impacted the ways in which Grace understands her American Armenian identity; specific questions I posed shaped her responses concerning her evolving interpretations of “Krunk.” Ethnomusicologist Kay Kaufman Shelemay explains that “in the case of the ethnographic interview, the ethnographer’s strong interest in testimony may inflect both the memories brought to the fore and the memories associated with them” (Shelemay 2006, 30). In this way, my discussion with Grace brought forth an epiphany into how she perceived her own Armenian identity because she began to realize that the song conjured memories of her childhood, her grandmother, and her connection to her Armenian heritage. Because Grace and I are close friends, the interview dynamic resembled many of our usual conversations revolving around the topic of Armenianness. During our formal interview, however, I had predetermined questions I planned to ask. Because our interview was taking place after the announcement that the state of Artsakh was to be dissolved, I knew I wanted to learn how the events of the war have potentially impacted how Armenians in the diaspora view this song. In my first interview with Grace in December 2022, the war did not have a focal point in Grace’s interpretations of the song, so it was interesting to see how the time frame in which I chose to conduct interviews and the questions I chose to ask impacted the kinds of statements I heard from my interlocutors.

As demonstrated by my interviews with Grace, my conversations with my interlocutors show how the meaning of “Krunk” and the emblem of the crane have been transformed for members of the Armenian diaspora throughout the unfolding of Armenia’s war with Azerbaijan. Had it not been for the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh

War, Grace would not have discovered a significant part of her ancestral heritage. During the clashes in 2020 and through an Instagram post made by her cousin to raise awareness of the war, Grace discovered that her father's grandfather was born in Shushi, a city in Nagorno-Karabakh. With this recent realization of her ancestral heritage, Grace now regards "Krunk" as particularly meaningful considering the current state of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict:

The song makes me think about how Armenians are once again losing their homelands after fighting for so long to keep it. I don't feel that the song is particularly hopeful. It's just kind of a yearning for what they've lost. Those poor people are going to be feeling like that for the rest of their lives and that is very sad. I don't associate this song with hope right now because I don't think Artsakh is ever going to go back to Armenians. Armenians might go back to Artsakh, but I don't think Artsakh will ever be a free and independent state ever again. With the concept of exile, nothing is the same as the home you grew up in, and when you're forced out, that must be so heartbreaking. (Grace Vertanessian, personal interview, 24 October 2023)

Grace now associates "Krunk" with despair. I spoke with Grace in October 2023, a month after Azerbaijan's invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh that left the entire Armenian population displaced. The 2020 war and the attacks in 2023 that marked an end to an Armenia-governed Artsakh strongly influence the polyvalent meanings that are attached to this song. Before September 2023, Grace associated "Krunk" with her family members; after September 2023, she now more strongly links the song with Armenians' losses from the war.

My discussion with Nanor Balabanian similarly demonstrates the extent to which "Krunk" grows in meaning for contemporary listeners during the development of the war. Nanor relocated to Armenia on September 27, 2020, the day the Nagorno-Karabakh war began. As she realized the urgency of the situation, she redirected the mission of the Hidden Road Initiative to solely focus on raising funds and sending aid

to wounded soldiers, their families, and displaced civilians. As co-president of the Hidden Road Initiative Chapter at UCLA from 2019-2022, I had worked closely with Nanor, who oversaw the chapters in California universities while living in Armenia. Because of this, I was also aware of the trauma that she had experienced during the war. I interviewed Nanor in October 2024 over the phone, and with each question I asked, she expressed that these were difficult topics to discuss because they conjured painful memories of what she had witnessed in Nagorno-Karabakh. When I asked Nanor what “KrunK” means to her, she began talking about her family and explained that,

We were one of those unique families that grew up in Syria, then Lebanon, then America, then Armenia and we were always, like a *krunK* [crane], immigrating from place to place.... When I was young, it just meant “we miss Armenia” and “it is sad being far from the homeland even though we had never lived in it.” Now as a thirty-three-year-old, I feel like the song has a new meaning and perhaps that is what is so amazing about that song because based on where you are at, the meaning changes. Because the Armenian genocide is continuing, people are dispersing themselves more, and we just lost land, the song has an even newer meaning. (Nanor Balabanian, personal interview, 26 October 2023)

Through “KrunK,” Nanor recognizes her family experiences of repeated relocation and acknowledges the evolving significance of the song as it is heard in various contexts reflecting dark periods in Armenian history. Meaning in music largely depends on the context in which it is heard. For Nanor, as with all my interlocutors, it is evident that the meaning they attach to “KrunK” depends on their surroundings and the different sociopolitical milieu in which they were exposed to the song. Does Nanor mean to signify that “KrunK” holds different meanings for its listeners depending on the physical space they find themselves in, such as country of residence, or being at a particular Armenian event, whether it be of genocide

commemoration or a celebration of culture? Additionally, does an individual's closeness or disconnection with their Armenian identity and cultural heritage impact the ways in which they resonate with this song? Nanor settled in many countries before finally putting down roots in Armenia. Her understanding of "KrunK" has evolved based on her physical location, her emotional state, and geopolitical events that unfolded over time. Nanor's perspective was reshaped once she moved to Armenia and fulfilled an aspiration held by many Armenians in the diaspora. However, the significance that the song holds for her is also impacted by her cultural upbringing and the toll the war has taken on her mental state. Each of my interlocutors reveals that these factors are crucial to understanding their distinct interpretations of "KrunK."

Regarding her Armenian upbringing and understanding of "KrunK," Nayiri falls between the perspective of Grace, who knew virtually nothing about the song before our conversation, and that of Aida and Nanor, who were both very confident in their understandings of what the crane means to them. For Nayiri, the emblem of the crane is representative of Armenian culture, its people, and the homeland. When I asked what "KrunK" means to her, instead of answering my question, she asked: "and this was written by Komitas *after* the genocide?" (Nayiri Shahnazarian, personal interview, 29 October 2023). Nayiri believed that Komitas wrote "KrunK" because of the genocide and did not know that it was a song originally sung by expatriates before 1915. Nayiri considers "KrunK" as a song sung to commemorate the genocide, a view typically held by many Armenians in the diaspora. After learning that its composition predates the genocide, Nayiri's interpretations grew to emphasize general Armenian

trauma and “KrunK” has acquired an extended association with the Nagorno-Karabakh war. These evolving interpretations demonstrate how songs are constantly assuming new indexical meanings during social and political turmoil. After reading the lyrics of the song, Nayiri expressed that,

Homesickness, sadness, frustration...all of that put together is probably what the song means to me. You know, obviously wishing you could always be there [in Armenia] instead of here and that internal conflict of “well, will I ever do that? Will I ever make that step? Will I ever do these things?” I don’t know. It brings a lot of sadness when I read those lyrics especially.
(Shahnazarian, 29 October 2023)

Nayiri embodied the crane within herself because the song served as a reminder of her future aspirations in establishing a life for herself in Armenia. Nayiri is disheartened at the implications of the song. She questions what her future is as a diasporan Armenian. She laments the current political and social upheaval in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, her own circumstances of living in the diaspora rather than her homeland, and especially the self-doubt she feels when she contemplates if she will ever have the opportunity to repatriate to Armenia. According to historian James Clifford, “diaspora cultures...mediate in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place” (Clifford 1997, 255). Each of my interlocutors acknowledge their physical presence in the United States and simultaneously form imagined conceptions of their homeland. However, unlike the other women, Nayiri conveys an internal struggle because although her family, career, and community are in the Washington, D.C. area, she hopes to soon fulfill her goal of settling in Armenia.

Maral perceives Komitas' "Krunk" and the emblem of the crane as a metaphor for members of the Armenian diaspora more than the other interviewees. She explained that,

A lot of our Armenian songs are about different birds such as the crane, quail, stork, nightingale, and swallow. I consider the bird as the most innocent animal because it doesn't have teeth. They don't kill, quite the opposite. Birds sing beautifully without expecting anything in return from the person in front of them. During the fall, birds leave to find new homes in warmer climates. But unfortunately, the story of the Armenian people is very similar to this.... Armenians are an innocent people who have lived in the Armenian highlands for centuries. They lived there and created their culture and music. Unfortunately, there have always been other nations who have wanted to conquer our lands, destroy our culture, and kill our people. Because of this, we have had to leave these lands.... Like birds in flocks, we left and created new homes. (Maral, personal interview, 4 November 2023)

For Maral, the crane holds the quintessential representation of Armenian diasporic identity, but her emphasis on comparing the harmless nature of birds to the essence of Armenian people is novel. She associates "Krunk" and the emblem of the crane with innocence because "we [Armenians] sing, we give to humanity, and to Armenian culture. We don't just go fight and kill everybody. We want to create." Maral considers "Krunk" a testament of the creative contributions of Armenian people. Armenia is a small, land-locked country that is under the constant threat of attack by its neighbors, so it is understandable why Maral chooses to compare its people to graceful creatures that are not predatory in nature.

Although cranes are often represented in Armenian music, it is also worth mentioning songs in which other birds transmit among listeners messages of resilience and awareness of impending conflicts. An example of this is the lullaby "Ari Im Soghak" or "Come My Nightingale." The lyrics by poet Raphael Patkanian narrate a mother's efforts to lull her crying son to sleep. The mother implores the

nightingale, lark, and turtledove for help. Ironically, the hawk is finally able to soothe the child with songs of war:

Come hither, Nightingale, leave our gardens
Sing hymns to bring sleep to my son's eyes
But he cries, Nightingale, don't come
My son does not want to become a deacon (cleric)

Little Lark, leave your field and sowing
Lull my son, he is longing for sleep
But he cries, Turtledove, don't come
My son does not want to become a monk (recluse)

Leave your hunt, brave-hearted Hawk
Perhaps my son will listen to your song
When the Hawk arrived, my son quieted
Listening to songs of resistance, my son fell asleep.¹³

“Ari Im Soghak” incorporates the theme of migratory birds, but its overall message deviates from that of longing for the homeland to calling for future generations of Armenians to be prepared for imminent war.¹⁴ Songs such as “Krunk” resonate with Armenians who, like the crane, reside outside their homeland. On the other hand, “Ari Im Soghak” speaks directly to individuals living in Armenia, calling on them to be heedful of future invasions. Because of this, “Ari Im Soghak” does not resonate the same way as “Krunk” does with my interlocutors, who currently live through the circumstances of the song. Maral’s interpretation of birds as serene yet impotent in Armenian music aligns with her comparison with Armenian individuals who have been defenseless against external forces and reluctantly left their homeland.

¹³ Translation of song lyrics by Zulal trio can be found here:
http://www.zulal.org/uploads/8/2/9/2/82927610/12._ororotsayin.pdf.

¹⁴ For more information about the figure of hawks in Armenian lullabies, see “Thou Need’st Not Weep, for I Have Wept Full Sore: An Affective Genealogy of the Armenian Lullaby in Turkey” by Melissa Bilal.

“Krunk” epitomizes Maral’s own circumstances as a diasporan Armenian who, raising her family outside of her homeland, feels compelled to instill within her children the continuation of Armenian cultural and social values. Explaining how the emblem of the crane resonates with her, Maral explains: “Armenian identity is very important to me. Because, as you know, we lost everything after having so much for centuries and centuries.... [But] they took everything from us, they killed us. Therefore, my obligation, my duty is to pass [Armenian culture] on to the next generation.” Maral speaks about the metaphor of the crane with an eloquence that is reflective of her experiences as a mother who has larger responsibilities than the other women I interviewed, who are unmarried and have no children. Each woman alludes to the idea of living outside the homeland when discussing “Krunk,” but they also introduce perspectives that suggest the different ways in which they live as Armenians in diasporic settings.

“Krunk,” Nostalgia, and “Semantic Snowballing”

While Aida is confident in her knowledge of the crane in Armenian culture, Grace is not. Grace’s understanding of the crane in Armenian culture differs from Aida’s because it serves as a discovery of her own understanding as an Armenian American. Grace admitted that to prepare for our conversation, she asked her mother what the crane represents to Armenians and was told that the crane is a symbol of the Armenian homeland. Grace also explained that as a diasporan Armenian who did not grow up speaking Armenian she is still able to feel a sense of “being Armenian” when she listens to Armenian music. Nayiri expressed similar views and explained

that even though she cannot fully understand the meaning of the lyrics, these songs nonetheless were integral in sustaining her love for her Armenian heritage. The Washington, D.C. area is home to a community of around 10,000 Armenians, a very modest population compared to that of Los Angeles, where there are currently more than 200,000 Armenians; listening to Armenian music allowed Nayiri a gateway into an Armenian cultural realm where, similar to Grace's situation, opportunities for cultural immersion were not easily accessible. According to Martin Stokes, "a sense of identity can be put into play through music by performing it, dancing to it, listening to it or even thinking about it" (Stokes 1994, 24). This resonates with both Nayiri's and Grace's experience with music, which enabled them to contemplate their Armenian identities in ways they previously had not considered. Aida's assurance in her own identity as an Armenian American and Grace's ability to feel Armenian by listening to Armenian music underlines music's role in reinforcing cultural identity and heritage among members of the diaspora.

These women's interpretations of "KrunK" are also revealing of music's power in evoking feelings of nostalgia. Without having ever traveled to Armenia, many members of the Armenian diaspora have imagined conceptions of their homeland. Cultural theorist Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy" (Boym 2001, XIII). Boym distinguishes between two types of nostalgia: restorative and reflective nostalgia. According to Boym, "restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia

dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance” (2001, 41). Restorative nostalgia makes individuals feel positively about the past, while reflective nostalgia makes individuals mourn past experiences and feel loss in the present time.

The ways in which these women discussed “KrunK” demonstrate their feelings of both restorative and reflective nostalgia. The women expressed a melancholic yearning for the past in which there was a free and independent Armenia. Concurrently, when listening to “KrunK” and discussing Armenian music, these women expressed that they were able to “return home,” whether that be in a spiritual or physical sense and envision the landscape of Armenia. Grace has never traveled to Armenia but expressed that when she listens to Armenian music, she is able to visualize cultural and religious landmarks, such as the Temple of Garni¹⁵ and Etchmiadzin Cathedral. As a child, Nanor connected “KrunK” with missing Armenia, even though at that point in her life she had not actually seen the homeland. Nayiri also has similar feelings of nostalgia and speaks on behalf of many Armenians in the diaspora:

I’m sure with a lot of diasporan Armenians, they’re always thinking... “Will I ever move back to Armenia, will I ever be able to go back to western Armenia, will I ever be able to go back to Artsakh, will I ever be able to go back to Javakhk, or any of these other places that we’ve been removed from or forced to leave?” That is something that is always on my mind and something that is on a lot of Armenians’ minds. (Shahnazarian, 29 October 2023)

Western Armenia, Artsakh, and Javakhk have not been acknowledged within the legal borders of Armenia proper for decades. However, many members of the

¹⁵ This is the only surviving pagan temple in Armenia.

Armenian diaspora still refer to these regions as their native homelands. Armenian youth in the United States grow up learning about Armenian history and the ever-shrinking borders of their lands, but rather than dwelling on the past, they are optimistic and aspire to return to the lands that are found within both the historic and current borders of Armenia. Grace, Nanor, Nayiri, and Maral are nostalgic for a constructed imaginary of Armenia's past geopolitical stability and view this with sentimentality compared to the unpredictable nature of its most recent conflicts. Aida feels nostalgia for a return to home as someone who emigrated as a young child, while Nayiri longs for a home that she has never seen. For each woman, the nostalgia that is evoked by "KrunK" enables them to conceptualize and memorialize the lost lands of their homeland.

"KrunK" represents emotions of despair caused by centuries of displacement and misery for many members of the Armenian diaspora who are descendants of genocide survivors and grew up learning about their family histories of loss and relocation. Hearing "KrunK" at genocide commemorations, many recognize that the song is associated with the Ottoman persecution of Armenians, even though the lyrics are not associated with mass killings. The song has become a reminder of the shared trauma that brings diasporan Armenians together and communicates the larger world issues of ethnic cleansing.

Nanor, Nayiri, and Maral view "KrunK" as a poignant reminder of history repeating itself with many Armenians being forced to leave their homelands as result of the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. For these three women especially, "KrunK" is a sonic act of remembrance of Armenian trauma. The song allows them to

commemorate September 2023, when Armenian control of Nagorno-Karabakh was ceded to the Azerbaijani government. The three women acknowledge that while “KrunK” is widely known as a song that commemorates the genocide of 1915, it has now grown to include the current state of displacement of the Armenian population from Nagorno-Karabakh. The timeline during which these interviews were conducted, from December 2022 to November 2023, accounts for the varying interpretations of “KrunK” by my interlocutors. If I had not spoken with them following this past September, I would not have gained insight into how this song has evolved to include the despair that accompanied the dissolution of the Armenian-governed Nagorno-Karabakh.

Nayiri and Maral highlight the importance of using “KrunK” and other Armenian songs to educate the Armenian American youth on Armenian history and cultural traditions. Maral believes that the Armenian community in D.C. “needs to have a curriculum in both schools and cultural organizations so that the youth pass [their culture] on to the next generation. Hopefully when they grow up, they will appreciate their culture even more. This way, they keep their connection to their Armenian identity through music” (Maral, 4 November 2023). Nayiri has similar ambitions. As a teacher who incorporates Armenian music in her curriculum, she explained that “it’s important for the young ones, especially since now they are second-generation Armenian Americans, to hear at a young age the Armenian music they might not hear at home or in the future. When they get older, they’ll recognize it, be more interested in it, and will want to hear more” (Shahnazarian, 29 October 2023). Maral and Nayiri associate “KrunK” with the continued struggle to identify as

Armenian in the diaspora. I believe that this view is largely reflective of the circumstances of the Armenian community they live in. The emphasis on the importance of teaching the youth about their Armenian heritage through music was not touched on by the women based in Los Angeles because of the very large Armenian community and multiple Armenian schools where these values are addressed daily. A tendency I have heard among my interlocutors is that because the Washington, D.C. area is home to one of the smaller populations in the United States, the emphasis on reinforcing Armenian values within the youth through music is much more pronounced.

The layered meanings of “KrunK” as expressed by my interlocutors are significant examples of “semantic snowballing” in music. Drawing on the semiotic theory of Charles S. Peirce, who describes an index as “a sign that is related to its object through co-occurrence in actual experience,” ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino argues that musical indexes can hold many meanings within a single sign (Turino 1999, 227). Turino coined “semantic snowballing” to explain a process driven by human interpretations in which signs accumulate various indexical meanings over time. Musical signs can take on new meanings, while still retaining their former associations. Applying this approach to “KrunK,” listeners attribute new layers of meaning to the song and the emblem of the crane because of social processes and events they are experiencing. “KrunK” develops in significance for its listeners to reflect periods of displacement and grief beginning with the meaning it held for the expatriate in the *antoonee* genre, the events of the genocide, and now to the wider experience of the diaspora as a shared cultural value that connects the

generations to their Armenian identity. The multiple indexical meanings of the crane currently include Armenian diasporic identity, immigration, fortune, genocide, sorrow, memory, and nostalgia. As a result of semantic snowballing, “KrunK” retains its original associations as an *antoonee* song for its listeners and has also grown to resonate with the individual experiences of Armenians in diasporic settings. With the recent events in Nagorno-Karabakh, my interlocutors now associate the song with the war with Azerbaijan and the exodus of Armenians from the region.

Parallels in My Interlocutors’ Interpretations of “KrunK”

“KrunK” and the emblem of the crane become a generational bridge for many Armenians in the diaspora. It must be emphasized that had it not been for our interview, Grace probably would not have asked her mother about the crane and would not have come to the realization that the crane is a significant emblem that plays an intergenerational role within the diaspora. While Grace uses “KrunK” to reflect on her childhood and memorialize family members who have passed, Maral acknowledges “KrunK” as a song that can teach her children about their national identity and history. Maral’s experience is demonstrative of music’s impact in connecting members of several generations. She expects that in her community, hearing and learning Armenian music will enable the perpetuation of Armenian identity within the youth.

“KrunK” allows Aida to transcend geographical boundaries and figuratively return home to Armenia, while for Grace, “KrunK” serves as a link that allows her to connect with family members from older generations. For Nanor, “KrunK” is a song

with ever-evolving significance because it resonates with the traumas experienced by many Armenians during various periods in their modern history. Nanor is also able to reflect on her own experiences as an Armenian living in the diaspora who ultimately decides to repatriate to Armenia. Nayiri expressed that “Krunk,” while powerful in its associations with the genocide of 1915, is now even more potent and communicates the current migration of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh. Considering the song’s overall message of the Armenian diaspora’s return to the homeland, “Krunk” leads Nayiri to question if she will ever return home to Armenia, even though she has a strong desire to. Lastly, Maral understands “Krunk” as a metaphor for the Armenian people and acknowledges her crucial role as a mother to educate her children about Armenian music so that they are aware of and embrace their cultural heritage and ethnic identities as they grow older. In each of these interviews, I saw how “Krunk” carries different interpretations for these women who have grown up in different environments and have seen the ways in which “Krunk” accumulates meaning that reflects the current relocation faced by the Armenian inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Each woman told me that listening to “Krunk” makes them feel grief-stricken.

However, Nayiri’s outlook is most distinctive:

I’m thinking about the people of Artsakh right now who are forced to leave where they’ve been living for millennia. I feel sadness for them. The lyrics of the song ask: “what news is there of the homeland? Can you tell me what’s going on?” I’m sure a lot of people are feeling that way. What’s going on with the house they had to leave? What’s going on with their livestock or the trees that they love but had to leave behind? I feel sadness because this has happened so many times in Armenian history. Seeing it happen during my lifetime brings an extra level of sadness, especially after listening to “Krunk.” (Shahnazarian, 29 October 2023)

Ethnomusicologist Louise Wrazen explains that “a carefully chosen text could provide a welcomed vehicle through which to communicate personal thoughts or feelings otherwise considered difficult to express” (Wrazen 2007, 192). The lyrics of “KrunK” allow these women to communicate their sadness, cope with the intergenerational trauma imposed upon them, sympathize with the displaced population of Nagorno-Karabakh, and navigate their own circumstances as individuals in diasporic settings. While not representative of the entire Armenian diaspora in the United States, the different interpretations of “KrunK” by these women manifest the range in which Komitas influences the Armenian experience in the diaspora. “KrunK” and the emblem of the crane are generally attributed to Armenian diasporic identity, but the meaning they hold for many Armenians are ever shifting. The experiences of each woman exhibit the extent to which the crane holds various meanings for Armenians as a result of one’s individual experiences with identifying as Armenian in the diaspora.

Chapter 3: “It’s Better to Sing Songs that Give People Hope:” Music and Genocide Commemoration in the Washington, D.C. Area

Every year on April 24, Armenian communities around the world commemorate those who perished in the 1915 Armenian genocide through events that include organized peaceful protests in front of Turkish consulates, services at the Soorp Khatch Armenian Apostolic Church, and concerts where community members come together in solidarity to celebrate their musical culture while grieving for their ancestors and historical homelands. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how music memorializes trauma experienced by survivors and is a mediator of intergenerational trauma that is transmitted to today’s youth in the diaspora. Music functions in commemorative settings to memorialize lost lives, but also provides a means of coping with loss and can prompt those affected to fight for wide-scale recognition rather than dwell on past injustices. Music plays a role in the formation of collective memory, and through intentional repertoire selection in commemorative events, can also transform the ways in which members of a group perceive their collective future. This chapter focuses on how the genocide is commemorated among Armenians in the Washington, D.C. area and also explores musical commemoration of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and the exodus of the Armenian population from the region in September 2023. Many individuals with whom I have spoken consider the war to be a continuation of the genocide. Lastly, I will reintroduce Komitas Vardapet’s “Krunk” as it is performed in or excluded from commemorative events, further demonstrating the varying purposes of music in memorializing trauma.

A Survey of Genocide Commemoration in Armenian Diaspora Communities around the World

Before I share my observations on music and remembrance among the Armenians of Washington, D.C., I will first broadly survey ethnomusicological work on Armenian genocide commemoration. I draw on the works of ethnomusicologists Sylvia Angelique Alajaji and Alyssa Mathias who survey genocide commemoration among Armenian communities in the diaspora and pay particular attention to repertoire selection and musical solidarity. Their work shaped my approach to analyzing my observations for genocide commemoration among the Armenian community in Washington, D.C. As an Armenian American who is a descendant of genocide survivors, Alajaji writes that she has had to cope with the trauma that has pervaded collective Armenian identity. In her work on concerts of remembrance in the Armenian communities of Paris, Vienna, Fresno, Toronto, London, Beirut, Rome, New York, and Los Angeles, Alajaji makes observations about the repertoire that is performed and composers who are represented. She explains the relationship between commemorative concerts and identity formation in the diaspora:

The concerts I discuss...give form to both the unrepresentability of the genocide and the ambiguities of diasporic belonging. They are sites of memory, yes, but also sites of identity construction. In their framing and positioning of the genocide, they consequently frame and position the Armenian diaspora. Though presented as acts of remembering, these are moments of sonic positioning and alignment—positionings and alignments that work against the ruptures and multiplicities of the diaspora and thus stabilize, and give meaning to, the diaspora. (Alajaji 2020, 221-222)

According to Alajaji, the commemorative programs that she discusses “represent the unrepresentable” and simultaneously brings the past events of the genocide into the present (2020, 221). She emphasizes how the commemorative concerts she discusses

attempt to represent the events of the genocide while also function to play a significant role in how Armenians in the diaspora perceive their ethnic and cultural identities. Prior to 1915, there was not a large diaspora community, but it significantly grew because of the forced immigration of Armenians from their homelands. According to Alajaji, this distinct diasporic identity that is interconnected with the genocide impacts the music that community members choose to have performed and represented at commemorative events around the world.

In her discussion of commemorative programs in the diaspora for the genocide's centennial in 2015, Alajaji explains that many of the pieces that were performed have lyrics that depict the ancient lands that many individuals were driven from and are simultaneously representative of current injustices and Turkey's continued denial of the genocide. An example that Alajaji discusses is the song "Bingyöl," which is the name of a village in eastern Turkey that was once populated by Armenians. A translation of the song's lyrics by poet and writer Avetik Isahakyan is shown below:

When the green doors of Spring opened
The springs of Bingyöl sang like a lyre
A caravan of camels went by in pairs
And carried my true love to the fields of Bingyöl.

I miss my precious love's bright face
I miss her small waist, her hair wavy like the ocean
I miss her sweet words, her sweet smell,
And her dark eyes (like a deer) of that beauty of Bingyöl.

Even for cold waters, my parched lips won't open
Even with layers of beautiful flowers around me, my crying eyes won't open,
My heart won't open until I see my true love,
Alas, even the beautiful springs of Bingyöl won't open my heart.

I am lost, these roads are foreign to me
These thousands of lakes, rocks, and rivers are foreign to me
I'm a drifter, I'm not familiar with these parts
Sister, tell me, which is the road to Bingyöl?¹⁶

The song depicts a migrant in Bingyöl searching for his lover whose physical features are compared to the beauty of the village. In the last stanza, feelings of displacement are evident as the migrant expresses the thought that Bingyöl is no longer familiar to him. In the case of “Bingyöl” and other songs performed at commemorative events, song lyrics do not directly refer to the persecution experienced by Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. However, they have grown to be associated with past suffering and mass exodus. While the commemorative events she discusses include the performance of songs describing and mourning the loss of ancient Armenian lands, she also discusses the incorporation of Western classical music.

Alajaji demonstrates the intentionality of repertoire selection when she refers to the program for a commemorative concert in London on May 3, 2015 titled “Music for Armenia.” Komitas’ “Krunk” was performed, which is typical for commemorative events. In the same concert, Mozart’s *Requiem* was also performed (Alajaji 2020, 233). Alajaji reflects on these creative decisions: why was Mozart’s *Requiem* performed rather than an Armenian piece with thematic elements of genocide, trauma, and memory? What was the purpose of including a piece from the Western classical music canon? In commemorative concerts in Finland, Denmark, and Norway titled “I Remember and Demand,” Soviet-Armenian composer Aram Khachaturian’s *Spartacus* was performed, as well as Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg’s Piano

¹⁶ Translation of song lyrics by Zulal trio can be found here:
http://www.zulal.org/uploads/8/2/9/2/82927610/7._bingyol.pdf.

Concerto (Alajaji 2020, 233). While it is unsurprising that Armenians would choose to incorporate a piece by a Soviet-Armenian composer who is revered by the Armenian community and whose compositions are heavily influenced by Armenian musical traditions, it is significant that they also choose to incorporate Western classical music that has no direct connection with the genocide or the Armenian people. Alajaji also makes important observations on the Armenian composers who are represented in commemorative programs. She notes that the works of eastern Armenian composers, or composers from present-day Armenia, were predominantly represented, while Ottoman Armenian composers were mostly excluded. The main Ottoman Armenian composer whose work is represented in and largely dominates the programs of genocide commemorations is Komitas Vardapet. Program selections discussed by Alajaji that incorporate both Armenian and Western classical music are indicative of the cultural, social, and political experiences of many diaspora communities. Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino explains that diasporas are “distinct in that they combine habits from the original home and their new home and are influenced by cultural models from other places in the diaspora” (Turino 2008, 118). For members of the Armenian diaspora, drawing from musical traditions from the homeland and incorporating influences from the host country enable easier integration into the host country.

While Alajaji explores Armenian genocide commemoration through a survey of case studies around the world, ethnomusicologist Alyssa Mathias focuses her research on commemoration in Turkey. Mathias demonstrates how Armenian communities in Turkey can commemorate the genocide and exert group agency

despite the potential dangers of speaking in opposition to the Turkish government. In 2015, Mathias conducted fieldwork in Istanbul, where 235 Armenian intellectuals and leaders had been exiled and killed one hundred years prior. Her observations of commemorative events in Istanbul show how the locations of diaspora communities influence their musical output. She notes that individuals in Istanbul use music to directly speak to and reprimand their own government, demanding justice for the crimes that the Turkish government refuses to acknowledge today. Mathias observed a concert titled “In Memoriam, 24 April: In Memory of the Armenian Intellectuals Sent to their Deaths in 1915.” The event program explains that “without Emotion there is no Memory, without Memory there is no Justice, without Justice there is no Civilization and without Civilization human beings have no Future” (Mathias 2015). The program notes suggest that in order for survivors and descendants to move forward from the tragedy, they must always keep in their memory the lives of those who were killed. The program notes also suggest that music plays a significant role in how community members preserve the memories of those who perished. The concert planners selected musical works that they believed would elicit strong emotions from audience members and would motivate them to continue with their efforts in gaining wide scale recognition of the genocide. In field recordings she produced, Mathias documents the performance of a song titled “Agladikça” (“As We Cry”) by Ara Dinkjian, an Armenian oud player from the United States. In genocide commemorations in the United States, it is unheard of to include a song with Turkish lyrics, regardless of the composer’s Armenian identity, because this would be regarded as a sign of disrespect to those who were killed. While the song's lyrics are

entirely in Turkish for the purpose of it being fully comprehensible to both Armenian and Turkish audiences and features quarter tones that are typical in Turkish music, the song also embraces Armenian musical elements through the incorporation of the *duduk*, a double reed aerophone made of apricot wood. According to Lilit Zakoyan from *The Armenian Weekly*, the “distinctive, mournful melodies of duduk music have always been [capable] in registering the history of the long-suffering and thriving Armenian nation” (Zakoyan 2021). Zakoyan also explains that the music played on the *duduk* mitigates feelings of malevolence between descendants of genocide survivors and perpetrators. Both Alajaji and Mathias demonstrate the intentionality behind repertoire selection for commemorative events in diaspora communities. They demonstrate how Armenian identity revolving around the genocide is constructed through music and exhibit the extent to which sociocultural factors and physical location play a role in the music that is present in commemorative contexts. In my research among the Armenian community in Washington, D.C., I also discuss repertoire selection and demonstrate how music is used to memorialize the past. I demonstrate how music performance is used to simultaneously transform the ways in which community members envision their collective future as Armenians in the diaspora.

Genocide Commemoration in Washington, D.C.

In April 2023, Armenians in Washington, D.C. organized week-long events in commemoration of the 108th anniversary of the genocide. There were observances on Capitol Hill with remarks given by Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi among others, a

commemorative concert with Lebanese-born Armenian musician Vicken Tarpinian at Soorp Khatch Armenian Church, a Holy *Badarak* (Divine Liturgy) in honor of martyrs, and a program organized by the Shnorhali Armenian School at St. Mary’s Armenian Church.

Armenian Genocide Commemorative Committee of Greater Washington DC
4906 Flint Drive, Bethesda, MD 20816 | anc_gw@anca.org | 818-723-7431

Community Programs Commemorating the 108th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide

Soorp Khatch Armenian Apostolic Church
Der Hayr
Board of Trustees
Ladies' Guild

Armenian Revolutionary Federation
Sebouh Gomideh

Armenian National Committee of Greater Washington

Armenian Relief Society
Satenig Chapter

Armenian Youth Federation
Ani Senior Chapter
Sevan Junior Chapter

Hamasdegh
Armenian School

Hamazkayin Armenian Cultural and Educational Society

Homenetmen Athletic and Scouting Organization

Soorp Khatch Armenian Apostolic Church Senior Group

Wednesday April 19 | 6:00pm | US Capitol HVC-215 | Capital Hill Armenian Genocide Observance
Bus transportation available from Soorp Khatch Armenian Church at 5:00pm. To reserve, email: April24info@gmail.com. For more information, call the ANCA (202) 775-1918 | anca@anca.org

Saturday April 22 | 7:30pm | Armenian Genocide Commemorative Concert with Vicken Tarpinian
at Soorp Khatch Armenian Church, Arabian Hall, 4906 Flint Dr., Bethesda MD. Organized by the ARF Sebouh Gomideh & AYP Ani Chapter. Donation \$25. To reserve, call/text Sipan Ohannesian (818) 723-7431

Sunday April 23

- 10:30am – Holy Badarak in Honor of Armenian Genocide Holy Martyrs.**
Soorp Khatch Armenian Church | 4906 Flint Dr., Bethesda MD
St. Mary's Armenian Church | 4125 Fessenden St. NW, Washington DC
- 1:00pm – Wreath Laying Ceremony and Prayer**
Organized by Soorp Khatch Armenian Church at the "Khatckar," 4906 Flint Dr., Bethesda MD
- 1:00pm – April 24th Commemorative Presentation by Dr. Khatchig Mouradian,**
Library of Congress Armenian and Georgian Area Specialist
St. Mary's Armenian Church | 4125 Fessenden St. NW, Washington DC

Monday April 24 | 4:30pm – 7:30pm – "We Demand Justice!" Demonstration
Protest starts at the Azerbaijani Embassy, followed by a march to the White House. Organized by the AYP.

Sunday April 30 | 1:00pm | Armenian Genocide Commemorative Program
Organized by the Shnorhali Armenian School, to be held at St. Mary's Armenian Church, 4125 Fessenden St. NW, Washington DC.

Չորեքշաբթի, 19 Ապրիլ 2023, Երեկոցան ժամը 6:00-ին 9:00
Հայոց Ծղուղուհարությունից Ոգեկերպում՝ Հովհաննուսյանի և ԱՄՆ Քոնգրեսի Հայկական Հարցերու Տնօրենչության Համախմբումի և ամբիվիտանոց կոալիցիոնայթիաներու: US Capitol HVC-215

Շաբաթ, 22 Ապրիլ 2023 - Երեկոցան ժամը 7:30-ին | Ա. Թադ Եկեղեցի "Արարական Մրտի"
«Բխալի Մկր. Բաժնալը Հայոց» կրթամտկու կալիքուտ Մկրոց Կանոնադրոց Տնչարարությունից Հայոց Երգիչ Կիլիկ Դարբինեան: Կարգավերաբերումը՝ ՀՅԴ / ՀԵԴ: Մուտքի կուկը՝ \$25.

Կիրակի, 23 Ապրիլ 2023

- Արտուտան ժամը 10:30-ին, Ա. Պոռոպալ ի Տիչուտակ Մկրոց Կանոնադրոց Տնչարարությունից Հայոց.**
 - Ա. Թադ Եկեղեցի, 4906 Flint Dr., Bethesda, MD.
 - Ա. Մարիամ Եկեղեցի, 4125 Fessenden St. NW, Washington DC.
- Ժամը 1:00-ին - Շաղկերանի գեաներամ ի յարգանու Մեծ Եղեռնի Մուրթ Կանոնադրոցի և Կանոնադրոցի և Ա. Թադի Խարչարի աղթը:**
- Ժամը 1:00-ին - Դուռնադրոցի Վեկա Խաչիկ Մուրթուտան**
Ա. Մարիամ Եկեղեցի, 4125 Fessenden St. NW, Washington DC.

Երեկոցաթի, 24 Ապրիլ 2023 | Ժամը 4:30-7:30 - Բարոցի ճոց և Քարադաշ՝ Ապրիլանի դիտարանուտեհն դիտի թուրք դիտարանի Sheesian Circle-ի բնակարանը, և արքա դիտի Մոլիտակ Տուն. Կոչ կուտվեթ գալուր թիտ յուրք կարդոլիկուտ ամեն գեղո ժամանկեղու արաննուտիկուտակտ արքա գուցի:

Կիրակի, 30 Ապրիլ 2023 | Ժամը 1:00-ին - Ապրիլի 24-ի Ոգեկերպան Շեքերանցի | Ա. Մարիամ Եկեղեցի, 4125 Fessenden St. NW, Washington DC. Կարգավերաբերումը՝ Ընդհանուր Հայ Դարցի:

On April 24th, buses have been organized from Soorp Khatch Church to the Azerbaijani Embassy, departing at 4:30pm. To register, email april24info@gmail.com. \$5 donation appreciated.

Thank you for attending and supporting the events in commemoration of the Armenian Genocide. Your donations would be very helpful and deeply appreciated. Please make checks payable to the "April 24 Commemoration Fund" and mail it to Armenian Genocide Commemorative Committee of Greater Washington, 4906 Flint Drive, Bethesda, MD, 20816. Online Donations to the April 24 Commemoration Fund can now be made securely online at: soorpkhatch.org/support-your-church/april-24

Figure 2: Armenian National Committee of America’s flyer for commemorative events in the D.C. community from April 19-30, 2023.

On April 24, members of the Armenian American community came together in solidarity for a protest and commemoration titled “‘We Demand Justice! Demonstration,” which I attended. Approximately 250 community members,

including clergy, students, elderly, and Homenetmen¹⁷ scouts, were present. Peaceful protest began at the Embassy of Azerbaijan, continued past the Embassy of Turkey, and concluded at the White House with an official program organized by community leaders. Protesters waved the Armenia, Republic of Artsakh, and United States flags while collectively chanting phrases such as “1915 never again,” “Turkey is guilty of genocide,” “eastern Turkey is western Armenia,” and “we remember Erzurum, Van, Mush, and Adana.”¹⁸ During our “march for justice,” we made frequent stops where designated speakers gave remarks in both English and Armenian and read testimonies of genocide survivors, evoked optimism among the crowds, and called on Turkey to recognize the genocide. Of course, music also played a significant role in the protest and commemoration event. In her work on musical commemoration in Poland, ethnomusicologist Andrea F. Bohlman explains how the events of remembrance that she observed relied on the active participation of individual citizens: through clapping along or engaging in call-and-response, “audience members are called upon to configure and reconfigure attention, formulate and reformulate the history that they are honoring and the memory they are weaving” (Bohlman 2020, 213). In this context, individuals who are not necessarily musicians but are a part of the community in mourning are encouraged to assume an active role in sonic acts of remembrance. Similarly, in the Washington, D.C. protest, the public

¹⁷ Homenetmen (Armenian General Union for Physical Education and Scouts) is a non-profit organization founded in 1918. “Homenetmen provides the Armenian American youth with moral, physical, and social education. In addition, it exposes the youth to the wealth of the Armenian culture and heritage...” (Homenetmen Los Angeles). Homenetmen currently has 108 chapters worldwide. For more information on Homenetmen, see here: https://www.homenetmenla.org/about_us/.

¹⁸ Erzurum, Van, Mush, and Adana are pre-genocide Armenian-populated cities located in present-day Turkey.

played a large participatory role as they engaged together in chanting, cheering, singing, and mourning in silence.

The program of commemoration continued in front of the White House. Members of the clergy from Soorp Khatch were invited to lead the community in singing “Hayr Mer” (“The Lord’s Prayer”). Students from the Holy Martyrs Ferrahian High School in Los Angeles were invited to sing popular Armenian songs. Because community members knew that my sister and I are musicians, they asked us to sing an a cappella version of the song “Kilikia,”¹⁹ which is the name of another historic Armenian region that is currently located within the borders of Turkey. The lyrics are by Ottoman Armenian poet Nahapet Rusinian (1819-1876) with music by musician and composer Kapriel Yeranian (1827-1862). The lyrics are inspired by a regionally specific sentiment of pride and demonstrate the adoration many Armenians feel for Kilikia. The translated lyrics are below:

When the gates of hope are opened
And the winter takes leave of our homeland,
When our beautiful land of Armenia
Beams its euphoric, delightful days;
When swallow returns to its nest;
When the trees are clothed in leaves,
I yearn to see my Kilikia,
World that deluged me in eternal sun.

I saw the meadows of Syria,
The mountains of Lebanon and its cedars;
I saw the land of Italy,
Venice and its gondolas;
No other island is like our Cyprus,
But truly compared can be nowhere
With my exquisite land of Kilikia,
World that deluged me in eternal sun.

¹⁹ Kilikia can also be spelled as Cilicia.

There is an age in our lifetime
When every desire dissipates in air,
An age when the yearning soul
Aspires to reach the memory's trail.
When my lyre quivers and chills,
Sending love its final smile.
Let me go rest in my Kilikia,
World that deluged me in eternal sun. (Hacikyan et al. 2005, 227-228)

“Kilikia” is “both nationalistic and emotionally gripping” (Hacikyan et.al. 2005, 227).

According to Syrian Armenian writer Avo Katerjian, “Kilikia” was written before the *Mets Yeghern*²⁰ and has grown to become an anthem for Kilikia Armenians after attacks on the region in which “cities were destroyed, villages were left in ruins, thousands of Armenians were murdered, and their lands and possessions were stolen”²¹ (Katerjian 2010, 148). When I asked organizers why they asked us to sing this particular song, they explained that while it drives them to memorialize their peoples’ past, it also instills within them optimism for the future. “Kilikia” was also performed at a commemorative performance organized by the George Washington University Law Students Association.²² The performance of this song among a community whose members have roots from many places in eastern Turkey demonstrates how this piece has become an anthem for many Armenians in the D.C. area, no matter where their ancestors came from. Community members with whom I have spoken expressed that listening to “Kilikia” allows them to remember the

²⁰ Translates to Great Crime and is the Armenian term for the genocide.

²¹ Translated from Armenian.

²² See article titled “Armenian Law Students Association at George Washington University Marks Active First Year” by *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, <https://mirrorspectator.com/2023/06/20/armenian-law-students-association-at-george-washington-university-marked-active-first-year/>.

Anatolian region from which their ancestors originate, although they themselves have never seen these lands. As in other songs that evoke collective memory of the homeland, “Kilikia” describes the longing to return and die in native lands when the “swallow returns to its nest” and “the trees are clothed in leaves.” In addition to “Kilikia,” many songs at this event were participatory in nature, with both youth and elderly singing along, which Thomas Turino explains “serves a deeper function of creating a special sense of social synchrony, bonding, and identity” (Turino 2008, 48). As demonstrated by the Armenian community in Washington, D.C., participatory music-making allows them to commiserate in solidarity and carry the intergenerational trauma that has been imposed on them.



Figure 3: Members of the Washington, D.C. Armenian community at Lafayette Park in commemoration and protest of the 108th anniversary of the Armenian genocide.

Washington, D.C. community members demonstrate what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory.” According to Hirsch, ““postmemory” describes the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors, among which they grew up” (Hirsch 2012, 5). In the case of the Armenian community of Washington, D.C., I extend her concept of “postmemory” to generations further removed. Many individuals have been exposed to narratives and songs passed down by their grandparents or great-grandparents who survived the genocide. Songs tell stories, and as these songs are passed down through generations, youth in the diaspora who are second or third generation descendants of genocide survivors inherit their ancestors’ narratives of trauma. Members of the D.C. area community make up a unique *postgeneration* of individuals who share particular qualities and symptoms and are all affected by their grandparents’ and great-grandparents’ accounts of genocide and dislocation, assuming these experiences as their own (2012, 4). None of my interlocutors lived through the genocide, but they “remember” the events of the genocide through the mediation of objects, stories, images, and songs from members of older generations. Songs such as “Krunk,” “Bingyöl,” and “Kilikia” are passed down through generations and transmit to contemporary listeners the grieving and displacement that followed the genocide. These songs simultaneously transform over time to hold new layers of meaning for listeners today as Armenia’s territorial integrity is at risk and the Armenian people are coping with the aftermath of war.

During an interview with me, Tereza Yerimyan, Hamazkayin Washington D.C. chapter chair and Director of Government Affairs at the Armenian National Committee of America, explained how organizers choose the songs that are present at these marches and commemorations. When I asked why Komitas' music and more specifically "KrunK" was absent at the protest and commemoration in 2023, Tereza explained that:

To get a crowd riled and pumped between chants, the organizers have chosen to do revolutionary songs in between. From the organizers' standpoint, it's not necessarily that a sad song brings people down, but you want to respect Komitas. You can't do that when you've got Turks and Azeris blaring music and, in some cases, appropriating Armenian music and making it as if it's Azeri or Turkish, dancing to it, and just flailing that in your face. And so it becomes hard for people to show respect and it gets hard for people to hear [the music]. (Tereza Yerimyan, personal interview, 14 February 2024)

Tereza, who plays a large role in the organizing of these events, brings to attention questions of musical ownership and the appropriateness of the performance of Komitas' songs in certain commemorative contexts. As a member of the Armenian American community, I understand Tereza's perspective in neglecting to perform Komitas' music where Turkish and Azerbaijani counter-protestors are present. How could Armenians play Komitas' music in front of Turkish and Azerbaijani counter-protestors, when some of their ancestors may be responsible for his eventual decline? For many Armenians, performing the music of the man who is considered a martyr of the genocide in front of people who openly celebrate genocide and displacement is insulting to Komitas' memory. In these commemorative contexts, it is more impactful and motivational to perform songs that celebrate the valor of Armenian revolutionaries who defended Armenians from Ottoman oppression.

While Tereza comments on commemoration within the context of peaceful protest, Virginia resident Maral discusses commemoration within educational settings. During an interview with me, Maral discussed “KrunK” as it is used or excluded in commemorative events and when I asked her about music and remembrance, she began discussing a video performance by the Hamasdegh Armenian School and Chorus²³ posted to YouTube by the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA).²⁴ She was eager to talk about how the theme of birds appeared in several of the songs that were performed. One example is “Tsitsernak” (“The Swallow”). When I asked if “KrunK” was performed at this event, she firmly replied “no.” She explained that it is important that the Armenian youth not be continually reminded of the losses of the Armenian people. Maral expressed her belief that it would be more powerful for audience members to listen to songs that evoke feelings of hope and pride, rather than pain and mourning. The exclusion of “KrunK” demonstrates how repertoire selection in commemorative contexts in this community functions to shape a collective identity inspired by cultural pride and a motivation towards achieving wide-scale acknowledgement of the genocide. In their introduction to their edited volume on musical approaches to commemoration, Annegret Fauser and Michael A. Figueroa explain that,

Music...is not only or always a coping mechanism or a surrogate for that which language cannot represent when trauma creates a “breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world” (Caruth 1996, 4). Instead, music

²³ The Hamasdegh Armenian School was founded in 1967 and is based at Soorp Khatch Armenian Church in Bethesda, Maryland. The school currently has 91 students. The YouTube video of the commemorative performance can be accessed here: <https://youtu.be/VgVI6jN9OOY?feature=shared/>.

²⁴ The ANCA is an Armenian American grassroots political organization. Their headquarters are in Washington, D.C, and they have regional offices in Glendale, California and Watertown, Massachusetts.

represents a process through which performance can shape—for the better or worse—people’s memories and interpretations of trauma. (Fauser and Figueroa 2020, 8)

Fauser and Figueroa state that musical commemoration plays a significant role in how members of the impacted community remember the traumatic event. As demonstrated by members of the D.C. community, musical performance shapes the ways in which the youth understand the intergenerational trauma that is instilled within them.

Through repertoire selection, it is evident that event organizers ensured that the children performed only a small number of the classic genocide commemoration songs that narrate the shared traumas of Armenians both in the diaspora and the homeland. Instead, they selected Armenian folk, revolutionary, and spiritual songs to be performed with the intention of reminding the youth of the past that their ancestors have endured, while also ensuring that songs that they performed would make them feel empowered, proud, and motivated to contribute to the Armenian cause. The songs selected for this event not only serve the purpose of commemoration, but they also educate the youth about their history and heritage. In her discussion of Armenian identity, family and consumer sciences professor Ani Yazedjian explains that many Armenians choose “to associate the trauma, in this case the Armenian genocide, as an integral part of their group identity. The group mourns their loss and their grieving becomes fused with their identity.... Thus, a collective memory is built around traumatic experiences, the memory of which is transmitted across generations” (Yazedjian 2004, 43). However, organizers of this commemorative event deviate from Yazedjian’s conception and, through music, strive to alter their Armenian community’s collective memory that is primarily constructed around the traumas of

the genocide. Based on conversations with organizers of this event, their choice of repertoire for genocide commemoration shows that “Krunk” is indicative of the unwanted reminder of the experienced traumas of the Armenian people.

Commemorating Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020

Many Armenians I have spoken with consider the ethnic cleansing of Armenians from the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region as a continuation of the genocide. To raise awareness of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, Belgian Armenian cellist Sevak Avanesyan performed Komitas’ “Krunk” in Ghazanchetsots Cathedral, a now destroyed church under Azeri control. In the video that circulated throughout social media platforms including Instagram and YouTube, Avanesyan is seen playing his cello amidst the ruins of the cathedral, a context that was meant to bring his performance to an even more heart-wrenching level for the Armenian people.²⁵ In the comments section, Armenians dispersed around the world reacted to this performance in both English and Armenian. An individual asserts “only we [Armenians] can make a broken church look as beautiful if not even more beautiful. Bravo. This gave me chills where I had a smile on my face, tears in my eyes and pride in my heart.” Another individual addresses Avanesyan and writes: “thank you for filling our spirits with hope and peace. This performance is very powerful and demonstrates that Azeris make war while Armenians make music.” Music was used to instill optimism within a despondent Armenian populace; by performing this piece

²⁵ The YouTube video can be accessed here: <https://youtu.be/tWp5uSb6snU?feature=shared>.

in a crumbling cathedral, Avanesyan represents members of the Armenian community who refuse to cease playing their music and practicing their cultural traditions during times of collective hardship. Following this performance, Yo-Yo Ma also played the piece during the “Gratitude in Action” event of the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative.²⁶ With his world-wide recognition, Ma appeals to his civic duty as a musician in promoting awareness of larger political and humanitarian issues in the world and connects the music of Komitas Vardapet with a greater audience who otherwise might know little or nothing about Armenian culture and the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. In these contexts, it can be argued that the crane has grown to index violence against Armenian people but is also indexical of their survival. “Krunk” is a reminder for many Armenians of their dark past, but also serves as a source of solace in providing hope for a brighter future. The song resonates with the strength and sadness of a people who have left their homeland in the hopes of establishing better lives. My interlocutors explains that while the song evokes feelings of great sadness within them because it reminds them of the violence endured by their ancestors and contemporaries in Nagorno-Karabakh, it is also indicative of Armenians’ persistence to survive.

Plans for Washington, D.C. Commemorations in April 2024

To learn more about how members of the Washington, D.C. community are planning for 2024 commemorations, I spoke with Tereza Yerimyan, Hamazkayin

²⁶ Yo-Yo Ma’s performance of “Krunk” can be accessed here: <https://auroraprizet.com/en/yo-yo-ma-krunk-means-something-very-special-because-it-represents-a-mix-of-sorrow-and-hope>.

Washington D.C. chapter chair and Director of Government Affairs at the Armenian National Committee of America. As discussed in this chapter, the Hamasdegh Armenian School often holds commemorative performances at Soorp Khatch. According to Tereza, one of the songs they will be singing in April is the folk song “Lerner Hayreni” (“The Mountains of Armenia”). The lyrics express nostalgia for the mountains of Armenia and the strength and resilience the sight of the homeland emanates to the singer:

Oh how much I have longed for you,
Haughty mountains of Armenia,
I have ran and grown tired along your foot hills,
My mountains, mountains, mountains of my fatherland.

Clouds have slid from your peaks,
Like sheep descending into a valley,
I wish I was now in your midst,
To embrace you again, mountains of my fatherland.

Emerald mountains, I have left my heart with you,
And instead I took with me the fragrance of your rose,
The strength of my homeland runs through my veins,
My mountains, mountains, mountains of my fatherland.²⁷

According to ethnomusicologist Louise Wrazen, “music performance can create a performative space through which a variety of place-bound experiences and possible identities may be accessed” (Wrazen 2007, 187). As similarly demonstrated by the Hamasdegh Armenian School and Chorus performance, collective memory of the genocide that is imparted to the youth is transformed into one that celebrates the beautiful landscapes found within the current borders of Armenia. It is evident that through repertoire selection, the Armenian youth of the Washington, D.C. area are not

²⁷ Translation can be found in the Armenian Youth Federation’s *AYF Camp Songbook: Camper Handbook*.

taught to be downhearted by their peoples' past but are encouraged to grow as Armenian Americans who feel proud of and are grateful for their homeland.

As demonstrated in this chapter, music in commemorative contexts gives community members an opportunity to voice their hopes for their people and homeland and narrates the atrocities that find limited representation in Western media outlets. Ethnomusicologist Kay Kaufman Shelemay states that commemorative events look “backward to perpetuate traces of events, communities, and individuals at risk of falling out of memory.... Similarly, a core purpose of...commemoration is to ensure that a memory will be sustained, rendering performance not just about the past event and the present moment, but intending it to echo into the future” (Shelemay 2020, 265). In her research on musical remembrance among Bulgaria's Armenian diaspora, ethnomusicologist Donna Buchanan explains that “while these expressive phenomena indexically invoke the Armenian lands, even the very soil itself, thereby denoting historical losses and the displacement that followed, they also signify renewal in important ways” (Buchanan 2017, 153). For many Armenians in Washington, D.C., people using music in commemorative contexts functions to set a precedent for how community members should be educated about their shared past, while also not allowing collective trauma to define their futures. As exhibited through the aftermath of the 1915 Armenian genocide, music that emerges after a traumatic experience can commemorate the tragedy and trauma experienced by a group of people. Music that is created as a result of a traumatic experience allows members of a community who have endured oppression and violence to cope with their grieving and heal from their pasts. Musical commemoration plays an important role in the

identity construction of marginalized groups in diasporic settings. Lastly, messages conveyed in music that are used to commemorate atrocities impart to members of society the need to demand for change and fight for justice for crimes that are committed against humanity.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the theme of birds in Armenian music and how Armenians in the United States use music in the context of genocide commemoration. In Chapter 1, I explored Komitas Vardapet's significance as a cultural figure for many Armenians. As revealed through interviews with my interlocutors, Komitas' music instills national pride within these Armenian listeners and, more significantly, represents survival and endurance. I believe that his music and image as a martyr of the genocide have shaped my interlocutors' distinct motivations for Armenian cultural survival as individuals living outside their homeland. Aida, Grace, Nayiri, Nanor, and Maral have varied levels of knowledge of the Armenian language and Armenian culture, but Komitas' music enables each of these women to retain Armenian cultural values in the varied social environments within which they have established themselves.

In Chapter 2, I discussed individual interpretations of the song "Krunk" ("The Crane") by Komitas, a song commonly performed at genocide commemorations. Today, individuals believe that this song epitomizes many Armenians' experiences in the diaspora. My interlocutors' interpretations of the song demonstrate how varied Armenian diasporic identity is in the United States. Their interpretations are also indicative of the polysemic values of "Krunk" as it reminds listeners of the 1915 Armenian genocide and now the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. Nanor shares a sentiment that my other interlocutors also share:

"Krunk" is not just for the [1915] genocide. The song is an ever evolving, changing song that fits into the different pains of Armenians.... We were singing about the people in the genocide of 1915 with this song because they dispersed all over. We're now all over in different places and the *krunk* has to

go and deliver news to loved ones who immigrated. A month ago [in September 2023], all of that happened again. That is more important to show here. This song isn't just about 1915.... There is a longer-term evolution of this song to the other genocides we didn't even think we would see but we are so definitely seeing.... So, I think the meaning there is the *krunk* is bringing news of loved ones from different places that have dispersed because of genocide and war, whether that's then or here or now. (Nanor Balabanian, personal interview, 26 October 2023)

While it is recognized as a song used to commemorate the 1915 Armenian genocide, “KrunK” now carries more immediate associations with the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and the departure of Armenians from the region in September 2023. “KrunK” is a prime example of how music is constantly shifting in meaning and accumulates new indexical associations over time. My interviewees’ perceptions of the song change as the events of the war unfold. Interpretations of the song are also dependent on the lived experiences of the listener. As Armenian Americans, my interlocutors resonate with the individual portrayed in “KrunK” who yearns to return to their homeland.

In Chapter 3, I explored how Armenian American individuals use music to memorialize the 1915 Armenian genocide. I conducted in-person participant observation at cultural events in the Washington, D.C. area and attended genocide commemorations and cultural events at the Soorp Khatch Armenian Apostolic Church in Bethesda, Maryland. Through the repertoire that community members chose to present at their commemorative events, it is evident that individuals used music to transform collective memory revolving around pain and mourning as a result of genocide, oppression, and displacement, and encourage their youth to avoid dwelling on past injustices. Rather than solely presenting songs that narrate persecution and suffering, community members chose to incorporate patriotic songs that remind listeners of the beauty of their homeland and the bravery of Armenian

freedom fighters who have defended Armenian lands and people. In this chapter, I showed the extent to which repertoire selection can play a role in identity construction among members of the Armenian diaspora.

This thesis has explored the interpretations of avian motifs in Armenian music among members of diaspora communities in relation to genocide commemoration. However, it does not consider Armenian listeners who have firsthand experiences at the site of trauma. Besides Nanor, who personally witnessed the aftermath of the war, this thesis largely explored how diasporan Armenians physically removed from the site of war use music as a means of coping with collective trauma. For future research, I plan to examine how music mediates trauma for refugees of Nagorno-Karabakh. Conducting fieldwork in Armenia, I plan to investigate how music allows people who experienced trauma to memorialize loss of life and homeland. How would Nagorno-Karabakh refugees interpret Komitas' "Krunk?" How would their perceptions of commemorative songs compare to perspectives shared by Armenian individuals living in the diaspora? Lastly, how might Nagorno-Karabakh refugees interpret the theme of birds in Armenian music more broadly? Art historian Christina Maranci explains that "in the Armenian church liturgy, as practiced even today, bird imagery is associated with death and resurrection" (Maranci 2020, 38). To what extent does this statement on bird imagery relate to Armenian secular music? In conversations with my interlocutors, they emphasized "rebirth" and "Armenian survival" when discussing the emblem of the crane. By conducting more interviews, I hope to learn more about the varied interpretations of "Krunk" and the theme of birds in Armenian music.

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