

For Love and Life: One Year Since the Centenary of the Armenian Genocide, Armenian Choral Music Opens Wide Horizons

By Maya Shavit, choral conductor and teacher

Impressions from 10 days with the young Armenian singers, and their Maestro Tigran Hekekyan.

Foreword

As an invited guest-conductor I was privileged to share a concert with Maestro Hekekyan and see the importance for the young Armenian generation of culture in general, and choral music in particular, through the eyes of the children.

The Beginning

My Armenian connections started with 'The Forty Days of Musa Dagh' by Franz Werfel which I read as a young girl. The book left deep marks on my soul. Armenia became more than a name of a country.

The first sounds of Armenian choral music came to my ears during the WSCM in Minneapolis. A young choir from Armenia with an amazing fresh sound and different repertoire, conducted by Tigran Hekekyan, caught my ears and my heart. The next step was an invitation for a master class in Jerusalem.

Tigran Hekekyan and Aarne Saluveer shared a week of work with

50 young Jewish and Arab singers. The repertoire was Armenian and Scandinavian. Great music by Armenian composers alongside a Scandinavian repertoire.

Armenian Genocide – The Centenary

As we approached the Centenary of the Armenian genocide, Maestro Hekekyan invited me to come and prepare a shared concert with his choir. So, in April 2015, I came to Armenia for 10 unforgettable days of work and concerts with the young Armenian singers. The concert programme had to relate to the week of events concerning the centenary of the genocide, so, following the name of the concert – **For Love and Life** –, the programme included songs and works expressing hope and prayers for peace and freedom. The week of events around the centenary united the whole community. It was in the air and visiting the memorial monument two days later the involvement of the Armenian people was loud and clear: they came from all over the country, with children, to add flowers to the ever-growing pile around bunched the everlasting fire.

The Choir

The children in the choir are young but very professional. Their ability to learn new material comes with a true enthusiasm to be as good as possible, expressing respect for the professional team in front of them, their own Maestro, the pianist, the assistant conductors and any artist coming to work with them. I brought a different use of the space to our work, as well as experiments with the sound and other ideas that were new to the children, and the response was amazing. I called them 'Children from another star...'

There was a lot of Hebrew text to study, but the choir knew it all by heart when I arrived. Scores were only used for the

musical markings during: dynamics, tempo, phrasing, expression etc.

A song like 'As Clay in the Potter's Hand' by Yoni Rechter, which also required learning complex movements – was taught by my daughter Vered Shavit and the children loved working with her. All the Hebrew was perfectly pronounced, so it was easy to work on the full meaning of the songs and all the musical aspects.



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Tigran Hekekyan

Needless to say, Maestro Hekekyan is one of the most important, highly appreciated figures in the Armenian culture. He is a true 'workaholic' who cares about the long lines as well as for the individual child who needs some extra attention. His conducting is sweeping singers and listeners alike and the choir responds with total devotion. Just look at their faces!

The Armenian Spirit

Through the eyes of a short-time visitor like me, many symbols represent the Armenian spirit: the preservation of early Christianity, the invention of the Armenian alphabet, the aesthetic principals and beauty which comes out very strongly in Yerevan with its gardens, sculptures and spacious public

places. And there is Ararat, the majestic snow-covered mountain, which on a clear day you can see 'for ever'. It carries stories, legends and longing for times when the mountain was on the Armenian border. The Genocide is the strongest of all, but now, 100 years later, the Armenian people can look forward with a spirit based on their strong culture. In music, the long line of composers bringing to life folk legends, traditions and innovations, makes the Armenian choral scenery a very bright one. 'Classical' composers like Mashtots, Komitas and Robert Petrosian are the basic bricks of Armenian choral music. At the same time, the younger generation of composers is very active, adding a rich and diverse repertoire. In this list you can find David Haladjyan, Myrzoyan, Edgar Hovhannisyan, Arthur Aharonyan, Stepan Shakaryan, Ervand Erkanyan, Svetlana Aleksanyan and Vahram Sargsyan.

The Concert: For Love and Life

It was a joint concert, woven carefully by the Maestro, from Orlando di Lasso to Nancy Telfer, from a Ladino song to Haladjian, from Yoni Rechter to Sting and from English to Armenian, Latin, Hebrew... The children were the heart and soul of the concert, like clay in our hands.

Erebuni Yerevan

'My ancient Erebuni, you became Yerevan'

Երեւան դարձած իմ Էրեբունի

This patriotic song by **Edgar Hovhanessian** is loved by both the young and the old. It was the encore piece of the concert. For this song the young choir in white and yellow joined the performing choir on stage. The first chord of the piano

stirred excited whispering all around the hall. The eyes of the singers were shining and the emotions filled the air. Maestro Hekekyan pulled me to the centre of stage to take the last verse, with a surprising joint conducting of the ending. The audience, on its feet, joined in the last few lines with great excitement.



Picture by Hakob Berberyan
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The end of this concert represented the Armenian spirit for me. This is beyond the Genocide, this is for the future, for the young generation.

When I came home, I sent a few words to the children:

'You may be young, but your hearts and souls shine through your singing – as clear as running water, as bright as stars, as fresh as the morning dew, but as loud and strong as the Armenian people.'

Thanks must be given to the supporting circle of musical/pedagogical staff: Marine Margaryan – the incredible pianist, Marine Avetisyan and Manuel Ohanyan – the assistant choirmasters, who make sure that this special diamond will continue to spread its shining message of love, beauty and peace, all over the world.

Edited by Mirella Biagi, Italy/UK