

The Boston Globe



LIZ LINDER/FILE

In season finale, BMOP charts the Armenian experience

By Matthew Guerrieri, *Globe* Correspondent | May 27, 2008

Centuries of upheaval have made the Armenian diaspora one of the world's largest; by some estimates, almost three times as many Armenians live outside the country as in it. Charting Armenian music and inspiration, the Boston Modern Orchestra Project's season finale, "Armenia Resounding," balanced perspectives from within and without.

The late Alan Hovhaness represented the latter; the Somerville-born composer embraced his Armenian roots early in a prolific, 67-symphony career tinged with varieties of exotic influence. His three Armenian Rhapsodies, dating from 1944, adapt folk melodies without much exegesis. Hovhaness layers melodies among a string orchestra (leavened by percussion in the first Rhapsody), musical sentences ending in drones to undergird the next phrase. It's an austere evocation, distilling a constructed essence of the culture.

By contrast, Vache Sharafyan's "Sinfonia No. 2 un poco concertante," a BMOP commission and world premiere, takes that essence as its starting point. Melodies erupt into dense, slow-shifting harmonic clouds; a repetitive figure builds into crashing waves of multitudinous, Ivesian dissonance. A solo duduk, the Armenian folk oboe (pre-recorded for this concert), spins periodic arabesques, the instrument's microtonal inflections transmuted in the orchestra. Sharafyan creates complex, deliberate, ultimately captivating grandeur - artistic director Gil Rose led a terrific, vivid performance.

The program's other commission/premiere came from an Armenian icon, composer Tigran Mansurian, making the outward gaze literal with "Three Arias: Sung Out the Window Facing Mount Ararat" the sacred mountain now, via the vagaries of history, just beyond the Armenian border with Turkey. Kim Kashkashian's solo viola took eloquent lead, over delicate, economic orchestral accompaniment. Consistently gentle, even nostalgic, the music remained content in its poised cinematic loveliness. Kashkashian was excellent, with not just a ravishing, singing tone, but a singer's phrasing, the lines as much breathed as bowed.

Hovhaness's Symphony No. 1, "Exile" - subtitled in reference to Armenians displaced by the 1915 genocide - was, in fact, the concert's least Armenian-sounding work. The melodic exoticism seemed more geographically generic, among evidence of the 25-year-old composer's as yet unassimilated models: vigorous, rustling strings from Sibelius, Mussorgsky-like fanfares and modal chorales that would become Hollywood-epic cliches. But the incisive reading also revealed virtues Hovhaness would forever rely on: a sturdy orchestrational scaffold, an uncanny dramatic pace, a transcendental faith in the power of his unadorned musical materials.

Rose and company plan more Hovhaness in advance of the composer's 2011 centenary; Friday's performance proved them ideal guides for that magical mystery tour.

© Copyright 2008 *Globe Newspaper Company*