

Listening to Armenia: A Musical Friendship

By Daniele Faye Sourian Sahr

"Going deep into each other's past...is the best beginning for a friendship." – Tigran Mansurian, Composer

A friendship in music can begin from a common past, but it lends itself even more beautifully to discovering that past together and fostering an engaging present. Tigran Mansurian, composer from Armenia, and Kim Kashkashian, violist born in Detroit, have cultivated such a relationship with the hearty ingredients, shared between them, of cultural connection, cultural passion, and cultural creativity.



Recently, these two collaborators brought their friendship to the stage, playing the historically influenced yet emotionally present works Mansurian wrote for Kashkashian's famously lucid and receptive viola repertoire. They were joined by percussionist (or "texture expert," more aptly put), Robyn Schulkowsky, and traveled three cities, Boston, New York, and Washington, to feature works from two ECM New Series releases – *Havron* (2003) and *Neharot* (2009).

I caught them at Le Poisson Rouge in Greenwich Village. The music-club setting invites an inevitable clank of glasses and plates. But, undistracted, the audience was gripped by the mystically hypnotic

creations on stage: Mansurian, at the piano, humbly offering his compositions and voice; Kashkashian, a narrator-like violist, spinning lyrically a silk melodic thread from one piece to another, reaching out to the listener while embracing her fellow musicians; and Schulkowsky, exploring the spaces in between, like a wizard in a percussionist's lab mixing one element of sound with another.



The Mansurian and Kashkashian musical friendship has initiated an extraordinary dichotomy of preserving while creating. His compositions in tandem with her fresh timely interpretations not only transport one back to Armenian lands and memories but bring them rushing forward to find us, here and now. The work *Three Medieval Taghs* inspired by ancient Armenian songs does not sound like a modern reinterpretation but instead plays like a discovery, as if having come across an exquisite manuscript illuminated centuries ago but unearthed by a set of 21st century hands.

