



Hommage à Komitas

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Fanfare (Steven Ritter - 2007.05.01)

1869 saw the birth of the future priest Komitas (Sghomon Sghomonian in the world), a man who is hailed as an Armenian national hero, yet is also a man of enormous complexities. His early life was training for the priesthood in Etchmiadzin, the seat of the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the oldest national church in history, dating from the early fourth century. He accepted ordination, perhaps precipitously, as early as 1893, and was given the name Komitas after a seventh-century saint who was both Catholicos (head of the Church) and a musician of great import. Early in his life, Komitas was a favorite of the Catholicos, but when he died and a series of successors took over, this favor turned to disdain, and Komitas was to have a difficult relationship with the official church authorities for the rest of his life.

Though profoundly religious, he was also haunted by his early ordination. (Armenian priests, like most Eastern priests, are allowed to marry before ordination, but not after.) He was enamored of one of his favorite singers and biggest supporters, Marguerite Babayan, who was to turn up at varying points in his life, and the question remains open as to the depth of his relationship with her, though he did continue to dress in clerical clothing his whole life. He was a profoundly sensitive and rather ill man, whose last years were plagued by what some have described as mental illness, others by what we today would call "post-traumatic stress syndrome."

Komitas certainly had reason for this. In 1915, after years of established fame, he was arrested in Constantinople—where he was one of a number of noted Armenian intellectuals residing in the city at that time—and deported by the Turks. What he witnessed was no less than the now-infamous Armenian genocide at the hands of the Turks, where some two million people perished. When he was brought back in 1916, his life was never quite the same, and many years were spent in various psychiatric institutions and programs for treatment. He died 20 years later, in 1935.

This tragic yet brilliant story, along with the mysteries surrounding different incidences in his life, only adds to the aura of the man who is called the "Armenian Bartók"; indeed, he is rightly recognized as the "Father of Armenian classical music." Music in Armenia up to that time had been exclusively religious, but as in so many other countries a vast amount of secular and non-religious music existed among the people in the guise of folk music. Komitas traveled the land and wrote down thousands of these melodies, and incorporated them into his own music. For this he incurred the wrath of the ecclesiastical authorities and fought a constant battle against them, often having to take secondary positions in the church since they were so against him. But his music, both secular and sacred, gained enormous popularity, and the composer's standing with the people was never in question. Today he is regarded as perhaps the greatest cultural hero the country has ever known—quite a

feat for this unassuming little priest with the golden voice that so enchanted people in his youth, who sang praises to God in middle age, and persuaded a whole generation of countrymen of the value of art and the Armenian soul found in it.

This album, "Hommage à Komitas," is a collection of his Armenian songs and a world premiere of his German songs, set earlier in life, by two of the leading artists of the country today. The Armenian songs are all of a piece, lonely, meditative, stoically bittersweet, and haunting, though many might find them easier to digest in smaller portions. They are not unlike the religious music of Armenia, but the texts betray their secular inspiration, suitable for any romantic composer. The German songs have hints of Wolf and early Strauss, and while not as good as the works of those masters, still maintain a distinct flavor about them. I am unsure as to whether I can agree with Debussy, whose opinion of Komitas was of the highest regard when he said "Brilliant Father Komitas! I bow before your musical genius!" But it does show that the devout little man attracted the attention of some major players in the classical world, and as such deserves an honest evaluation from all of us.

The sound is spectacular. This is the first SACD issue of piano and voice that I have ever heard, and the results are most gratifying, with excellent balance distributed among the five speakers. Komitas may not be for everyone, but if the hints given above attract you at all, you will not be disappointed.