

KOMITAS IN THE LIFE AND ACTIVITIES OF THOMAS HARTMANN

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Abstract

During the most tragic period of his life, in the days of the 1915 Armenian Genocide, Komitas (1869–1935) – the pioneer of Armenian music – got a mental disorder in exile and was in the psychiatric hospital of Paris. The advanced representatives of the Armenian intelligentsia undertook the care of the composer, helping as far as possible to bring him back to life. Russian composer Th. Hartmann and the “Society after Komitas” based in Tiflis also provided certain support in this regard.

Besides Hovhannes Tumanyan, Yeghishe Tadevosyan, Spiridon Mikaelyan, Russian poet Sergey Gorodetsky, other representatives of the Armenian and Russian intelligentsia living in Tiflis, one of the inspirers and initiators of the creation of the Society was Russian composer (of German origin), musicologist and conductor Thomas Hartmann (1885–1956). By coincidence, having arrived in Tiflis at the beginning of February 1919, he took an active part in the musical and public life of the city, established friendly and creative ties with the representatives of the Armenian intelligentsia. The result of this was that soon in the issues of the newspaper “Zakavkazskoe Slovo” on February 28 and March 1, 1919, his voluminous, deep and valuable article “Komitas Vardapet” from the series “Folk Song and Its Gatherers” was published which, in fact, is one of the first serious studies about Komitas.

On March 29, a lecture concert was held dedicated to the oeuvre of Komitas, where Th. Hartmann made a substantive report on the life and activities of Komitas. From that day on, the efforts of the broad circles of the Tiflis intelligentsia launched, aimed at the care of the sick composer, publishing and preserving his creative heritage.

Thus, in early May 1919, the “Society after Komitas” was founded in Tiflis, where Armenian, Russian, Georgian composers, performers, writers and painters of Tiflis were engaged.

Keywords: Thomas Hartmann, S. Gorodetsky, Hovhannes Tumanyan, Komitas, Tiflis, “Society after Komitas”, concert, lectures, Yeghishe Tadevosyan, Arshak Chopanyan, G. Levonyan, M. Babayan.

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The famous Russian poet, publicist, translator, public figure, and sincere friend of the Armenian people, Sergey Gorodetsky¹, addressed folk songs in a review written in 1917, putting forth a vital demand that remains in force to this day: “Every song, every legend of every people is sacred to us, because a song created by the people is a secret inaccessible to individual creative work. These treasures can be collected in only one way: by recording them, so that not a single word, not a single note is distorted. Every variation is precious. And it is in this form that works of folk art must be preserved”.²

During his days in Yerevan, in late April 1919, having heard Armenian folk songs, S. Gorodetsky recalled the necessity of saving these treasures from oblivion, emphasizing the significance of the work accomplished by the great musicologist Komitas. In the final sketch of his series “Journey to Erivan,” titled “II. No. 35,” he wrote that these songs, which sound with different rhymes and variations in the mouths of the national population of various parts of Armenia, need to be collected in one place, as they show “how many treasures there are in Armenian folk songs. Now, when public interest is inflamed in the person and work of Komitas, it is time to continue his work on a serious foundation. We must take advantage of the refugees gathered in the centers from different regions, listen to their songs, and record them. ... We must hope that the supposed arrival of the Komitas researcher, composer T. Hartmann, in Erivan with a lecture and a display of Komitas’s materials will attract public attention and the foundation of the great work will be laid immediately (emphasis ours – A. Z.)”.³

The emphasized words, in all probability, refer to the maturing necessity of establishing the “Komitas Society,” which was realized in Tbilisi in early May 1919. The famous Russian (of German descent) composer, conductor, and pianist Thomas Hartmann (1885–1956) made a definite contribution to this work. Due to circumstances, he arrived in Tbilisi in early February 1919, where he lived and worked until 1921, teaching at the local conservatory.

Having settled in Tbilisi, T. Hartmann was the most active participant in the city’s musical and public life. The cultural life of Tbilisi, saturated with unique local color, immediately captivated him, and Hartmann established intimate and creative ties with many of its representatives. The following fact is particularly noteworthy: on February 26, 1919, the 24th session of the “Guild of Poets”⁴ founded by S. Gorodetsky took place, dedicated to the 50th birthday of Hovhannes Tumanyan. As reported by the newspaper “Zakavkazskoe Slovo”, in addition to the members of the Guild, the celebrant, T. Hartmann, the famous Russian composer and inspector of the Tbilisi Conservatory N. Cherepnin, and others also participated in the session. After the welcoming remarks of

¹ S. Gorodetsky lived and worked in Western Armenia and Transcaucasia, in Tbilisi and Baku, during 1916–1921. See Zakaryan 2010; Zakaryan 2016 for details.

² Safrazbekyan 1980: 90.

³ “Kavkazskoe Slovo” 18. V. 1919.

⁴ See Zakaryan 2011 for details about the “Guild of Poets.”

the Guild's chairman S. Gorodetsky and the reading of poems addressed to the Armenian poet (by Al. Kulebyakin, N. Bel-Kon-Lyubomirskaya), the resolution of the "Guild of Poets" was announced, according to which Tumanyan was elected as a member of the Guild. Subsequently, "The composer Thomas Hartmann (who, by the way, often participated in the gatherings of the "Guild of Poets" as a guest – A. Z.), recalling the Armenian custom of starting every celebration with a new song, played a beautiful etude in honor of the celebrant. Alexander Cherepnin (N. Cherepnin's son – A. Z.) performed his new works... All the poets read their poems".⁵ Hovh. Tumanyan expressed his gratitude, speaking about the "kinship and brotherhood of all the priests of art." He then "invited the poets of the Guild in corpore (in their full composition – A. Z.) to his place for the next session."

From this report, it becomes clear that by those days, Hartmann had already established a close relationship with Hovh. Tumanyan and discussed Armenian folk song art, and thus the renowned musicologist and composer Komitas (1869–1935). It is also known that the Russian composer was close to Komitas's friends: Yeghishe Tadevosyan, Spiridon Melikyan, Prof. Zavriyan, and others. The result of this was the very quick publication in the aforementioned newspaper of Hartmann's profound and extensive article, "Vardapet Komitas,"⁶ a part of his series "Folk Song and Its Collectors," in which he was among the first to highly appreciate Komitas's contribution.

It should be noted that the threads of all this lead back to the person of Tumanyan and his cultural activities, intersecting with the name of Gorodetsky, as Hartmann was one of the friends of the Russian poet (who conducted aesthetics courses there) from the Tbilisi Conservatory and frequently participated in the gatherings of the "Guild of Poets" he headed. Furthermore, the composer's aforementioned article was published in the newspaper "Zakavkazskoe Slovo", whose "Art and Literature" section was managed by S. Gorodetsky.

Incidentally, it is possible that Gorodetsky's article about Komitas, the collector of "the wisdom of Armenian folk music,"⁷ was written under the influence of T. Hartmann's article.

Be that as it may, in the first part of the article titled "Vardapet Komitas," the Russian composer, after speaking about Komitas's desperate mental state, then wrote: "Although Komitas had great success in the West, his name is almost unknown to the great majority of our society, even to music specialists. Unfortunately, his concerts did

⁵ "Zakavkazskoe Slovo" 28. II. 1919.

⁶ "Zakavkazskoe Slovo" 28. II. 1919; 1. III. 1919. We have republished the article: Zakaryan 2019: 252–286.

⁷ During the days of Komitas's 80th birthday, S. Gorodetsky wrote in a letter addressed to Hovh. Tumanyan's daughter, Nvard (September 27, 1949): "30 years ago in Tbilisi I wrote about him (Komitas – A. Z.) – I wish I could find that article in my archive now. Now I know more about Komitas than I did then. However, that first living impression of my acquaintance with him at that time will help me participate in your national holiday in Moscow" (Gorodetsky 1980: 293). The emphasized lines indicate that S. Gorodetsky personally knew Komitas and met him. Unfortunately, we have no other information about this.

not take place either in Petrograd or Moscow. His last collections were published shortly before the war, and at that time, artistic issues were forgotten by many. All these circumstances lead me to believe that there are many in our developed society who are unfamiliar with Komitas's work or perhaps have only heard his name." The author then presents a detailed account of Komitas's life and work, having previously noted that: "I received all information kindly from his friends and those who respect his memory."

The second part of the article is dedicated to the analysis of Komitas's works, where Hartmann examines his compositions at the level of contemporary Komitas studies, revealing their lasting aesthetic value, noting the composer's high talent, and his invaluable contribution to the history of Armenian music. "He (Komitas – A. Z.) was the first to pay serious attention to the folk songs of Armenia. He was the first to sense the cultural and ethnographic significance of these songs for his nation. He was the first to understand that the future of Armenian music as an independent entity must be built on the firm foundation of folk song. He was the first to point out that the national songs—which were already moving from the cities to the villages—have a European origin and their tunes have no connection to genuine Armenian song. He was the first to shout confidently and loudly to the Armenians, 'Here are your true songs; they were created by the people to whom you belong, and you must love them' (his own words)," T. Hartmann writes, and adds, "Komitas's entire life is proof of how they must be loved. What a wonderful feat—to record three thousand songs, those songs sung in the unknown, remote corners of Armenia... What unspeakable difficulties Komitas faced, traveling through those mountainous regions like a poor wanderer. No ethnographically endowed assembly came to his aid. He was winged only by his boundless love for the work. All of that was not enough for him. A tremendous, difficult problem was placed before him: to create a new harmonic and contrapuntal style consonant with the spirit of Oriental music. That was to bring a new word into music in the future. He solved that difficult problem and chose the path that had to be applied in that case. He did not take the rules of the European-West as his example, but found [his] style in his fruitful material... If we examine Komitas's harmonic arrangements, we will see, in addition to the subtlety, brilliance, and charm of that harmony... an astonishing originality that naturally springs from the essence of the song... The characteristic, established style of arrangement that Komitas created not only has significance in the field of folk song but should also serve as an example for the arrangements of Oriental music. I believe that in the future this will gain wider scope and musical forms will broaden. Komitas should be considered the spiritual father of this style."

It is worth noting, by the way, that it is evident from the article that T. Hartmann is also well-acquainted with the intricacies of the Armenian people's history, particularly the enormous role of the Armenian Church in the life of the people.

...It is interesting that, according to a press report, "On March 29, a concert-evening dedicated to the work of Komitas is being organized," where composer T. Hartmann is scheduled to speak as a lecturer. In the concert portion, most of Komitas's

songs published in the press will be performed, as well as excerpts from his unfinished opera “Anoush”. Performers: Olga Hartmann (Thomas Hartmann’s wife – A. Z.), Ter-Arakelyan, and others. All proceeds from the concert will be given as financial assistance to Komitas, who, after enduring the horrors of the Armenian massacres, is now located in Constantinople in a clinic for nervous disorders”.⁸

In short, from the days of the publication of T. Hartmann’s article titled “Vardapet Komitas” and his subsequent lecture about the musicologist, efforts began among a wide range of the Armenian intelligentsia in Tbilisi to alleviate the condition of Komitas, who was being treated in Paris for the nervous mental illness he acquired in exile during the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

And so, we repeat, in early May 1919, the “Komitas Society”⁹ was founded in Tbilisi. A press release stated: “Recently in Tiflis a circle was organized to honor the famous Father Komitas, composer of Armenian folk songs. The aim of the circle is to create the Komitas Society, which will take upon itself the care and support of Komitas’s health, who is currently in a hospital for nervous diseases in Paris and, according to doctors’ statements, gives hope for recovery... 2) to preserve and disseminate his published and unpublished works, which are of immense importance for the development of the musical creativity of the Armenian people. To this end, the newly established circle intends to organize a concert on May 18th (it took place on May 21st – A. Z.) in the hall of the ‘Artistic Society’. At the head of the Society’s founders stands Prof. T. A. Hartmann (emphasis ours – A. Z.), who has repeatedly noted in his articles the great talent of Komitas and his merit, which must be appreciated by our Armenian intelligentsia”.¹⁰

Through the efforts of the Society, which included Armenian, Russian, and Georgian composers, performers, writers, and artists, an evening-concert dedicated to Komitas took place on May 21st—a memorable day in the history of Armenian song art—in the packed hall of the “Artistic Society” theatre, beginning the propaganda of his works and the collection of financial aid. At the start of the concert, literary critic M. Matenjyan and T. Hartmann delivered introductory speeches. The first spoke about Komitas’s life, and the second about his musical talent and the significance of his works. In his speech, emphasizing the high genius of the Armenian composer, Hartmann specifically clarified: “... listening to the Armenian songs arranged by Komitas, you hear genuine Armenian folk songs, you are dealing with true folk creativity, and you can be convinced that Komitas would not allow himself to change any sound, any harmony. ... Komitas’s arrangement confirms that it is truly difficult to imagine that this or that song could be harmonized any other way. The same goes for the choral works, where

⁸ “Kavkazskoe Slovo”, 20. III. 1919.

⁹ Hovhannisyan, Zakaryan 1984: 59–61; Zakaryan 2019.

¹⁰ “Kavkazskoe Slovo”, 9. V. 1919. See also Ashkhatavor 21. V. 1919. Incidentally, the “Komitas” Society was operating in Constantinople at the same time for the very same purpose (“Ashkhatavor”, 21. V. 1919).

Komitas has... an inexhaustible supply of not random, but conscious and deliberate techniques".¹¹

Analyzing in depth the Komitasian style of Armenian folk songs, Hartmann continued: there are a number of original melodies in his choral works that are woven into the whole, and that they are not only beautiful but also, by their nature, are completely presented in the spirit of Armenian song, and it is often difficult to distinguish the folk melody from the one created by the composer. "It is not just an arrangement, but a creation of style. This is where the lasting significance of Komitas's work lies, not only for Armenian but also for Western music. His choral songs are exemplary."

In his speech, Hartmann also drew the following noteworthy parallel: "The famous Russian theorist Taneyev personally told me that he had come to the conclusion that Russian folk songs should be arranged in a contrapuntal style. The genius Komitas, by the power of premonition, applied this style and with such perfection that hardly any of his Western artistic counterparts could realize it. In his 'arrangements' (I put it in quotes intentionally), it would be more correct to say, in his precious choral works, the folk melody is preserved untouchable, both from the point of view of meter and melody. He was a fanatic on this issue. Who could better protect the soul of the folk song than he?"

In his speech, besides the analysis, there were words of appreciation for Komitas from his contemporaries. Thus, Hartmann said: "I remember P. Cherepnin's admiration upon examining his work, his exclamation: 'How happy Maurice Ravel (the great French composer – A. Z.) would be to hear these works!'" Then, continuing, he emphasized that "... the attitude of the greatest representatives of the French musical world toward Komitas" is invaluable: "the most zealous musical ethnographer," a master who presented "genuine Armenian song" to the West, a brilliant arranger of Armenian folk songs, but "first and foremost... a composer." These were the opinions of Claude Debussy, Romain Rolland, and Louis Laloy about him after listening to Komitas's songs at the World Music Congress in Paris in 1914.¹²

"Prof. Hartmann, speaking about Komitas's role in the field of Armenian music, concluded that his 'Anoush,' when it one day appears on European stages, will do a far greater work for the Armenian Cause than diplomatic efforts"¹³, we read in the press report.

The introductory speeches were followed by a concert of Komitas's works, performed by singers Vahan Ter-Arakelyan, Armenak Ter-Abrahamyan, Melik-Beglaryan, and others. The choir led by Spiridon Melikyan also performed. The performances of "Antuni," "Ay Sarer," "Gna, Gna," "Keler, Tsoler," "Hov Arek," "Yeri, Yeri," "Garun A," "Habrban," and other Komitasian works were received with great

¹¹ "Kavkazskoe Slovo", 24. V. 1919.

¹² See T. Hartmann's speech at the end of this article. Cf. "Thomas Hartmann and Komitas vardapet 1935: 74–80; Gasparyan 1960: 54–61.

¹³ "Ashkhatavor", 24. V. 1919.

enthusiasm.¹⁴ From the press, we learn that the success of the concert was immense¹⁵, exceeding all expectations; it was repeated on May 29, June 8, and 14, at the public's request...

The "Komitas Society" also organized concerts in Yerevan and Batumi. Thus, in mid-June, they came to Yerevan to organize musical evenings for the purpose of materially assisting the "meritorious music master Vardapet Komitas".¹⁶ A little later, in early July, Hartmann came to Yerevan with his singer wife, Olga, for concerts. Two concerts were planned: one of European music, and the other of Komitas's works.¹⁷ Press reports reveal that at the beginning of the concert dedicated to Komitas, the Russian musicologist addressed the Armenian composer's biography and work and emphasized the national and world significance and value of the great benefactor's works. It is noteworthy that Olga Hartmann performed Komitas's songs in the original Armenian at this concert.

Incidentally, the educator, musicologist, singer, and close friend of Komitas, Margarit Babayan, provides interesting information about the concerts organized in the aforementioned cities: "These concerts were repeated in Yerevan and Batumi under the patronage of P. Khatisyan (Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia – A. Z.) and the Armenian Consul in Batumi. Because it was impossible to take Spiridon Melikyan's wonderful choir to Yerevan and Batumi, Mrs. Hartmann, who is a singer with an extremely beautiful soprano voice, learned Vardapet Komitas's songs in Armenian, astonishing and delighting the audience."

Thus, in the reality of Eastern Armenia, the universal recognition and appreciation of Komitas's invaluable contribution was, in fact, established.¹⁸

It must be noted, however, that the societal, cultural, and moral support for Komitas was greater than the financial aid. Expressing the intelligentsia's concern over the fate of the great composer, the famous artist Yeghishe Tadevosyan, one of his close friends, wrote about it in a letter to Arshak Chopanyan in Paris during those very days: "I would like to hear your opinion about Komitas's health; I know you are taking care of him there (referring to the "Committee of Friends of Vardapet Komitas" operating in Paris – A. Z.), and we here also founded a society in his name, but the currency exchange rate has dropped immensely... our contribution turns out to be a very insignificant thing after putting in a great effort. May God grant him complete health".¹⁹

The renowned literary and art critic Garegin Levonyan wrote in his memoirs about the "Komitas Society": "The mental recovery of our beloved musicologist's (Komitas's – A. Z.) condition became hopeless, but his healthy physical body required food and care.

¹⁴ "Ashkhatavor", 1. VI. 1919.

¹⁵ "Kavkazskoe Slovo", 23; 24. V. 1919.

¹⁶ "Hayastani Ashkhatavor", 14. VI. 1919.

¹⁷ "Ashkhatank", 8. VII. 1919.

¹⁸ See also Saakyan 2017: 85 regarding T. Hartmann's evaluations of the value of Komitas's work.

¹⁹ Yeghishe Charents Museum of Literature and Art, A. Chopanyan Fund, 2191.

To assist the Armenian circles in Paris with this work, the ‘Komitas’ Society was organized in Tbilisi in 1920 (in early May 1919 – A. Z.), with a tight program, aiming to send a certain amount of money annually through the collection of membership fees. The president or one of the board members of the Society was the artist Yeghishe Tadevosyan, Komitas’s old friend... What the Society practically did or when its existence ceased is unknown to me; after moving from Tbilisi to Armenia, I was no longer able to follow that matter”.²⁰

Interesting information about the activities of the “Komitas Society” is found in the extensive memoirs of Komitas’s student, Aghavni Mesropyan. According to her, every Saturday and Sunday evening during 1920–1921, at the house of Hagop Anagjyan and Margarit Zargaryan at 22 Veliyaminskaya Street in Tbilisi, who were Komitas’s compatriots—they were Zok (the composer’s ancestors were from the village of Tsghna in the Goghtan province of historical Armenia, Zok)—the composer’s friends gathered to tell a memory or an episode about him. Most of them were artists, musicians, writers, and actors. The memoirist first mentions Tumanyan’s name among the active participants of these gatherings. Besides him, those evenings were attended by D. Demirchyan, Vardapet Tirayr, B. Arghutyan-Yerkaynabazuk, Ye. Tadevosyan, G. Levonyan, G. Sharbatyan, Hovh. Abelyan, S. Khachatryan, T. Alikhanyan, S. Oganezashvili, R. Melikyan, D. Ghazaryan, St. Lisitsyan, H. Galajyan, V. Ter-Arakelyan, Sh. Khanzadyan, M. Tumanyan, and others. According to A. Mesropyan, it was through the efforts of this very group that the “Komitas” Union was established in Tbilisi in 1920 (as mentioned above, it was founded in early May 1919), whose goal was to support Komitas’s recovery and assist in the publication of his works through membership fees and funds raised through performances and gatherings. This Union, whose president was the artist Ye. Tadevosyan, often organized commemorative evenings dedicated to Komitas. In 1921, the House of Armenian Art (Hayartun) was founded in Tbilisi, with painting, music, and literature departments. Hovh. Tumanyan was elected as its president. The “Komitas” Union joined the music department of Hayartun, which was headed by R. Melikyan, and subsequently merged with it.²¹

Undoubtedly, T. Hartmann made a tremendous contribution to the study of Komitas’s person and work and the founding of the “Komitas Society” in Tbilisi. And all of this is among the memorable pages in the history of Armenian musical culture.

²⁰ Levonyan 1959: 135-136. Incidentally, this year of 1920 for the creation of the society is also mistakenly noted in Gasparyan 1960 (ed.): 44, 322.

²¹ Gasparyan 1960 (ed.): 321–323. See also Hovhannisyan 2012: 128–129.

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