

## A Deferred Primordial Sound:

### Resurfaced Musical Performance in the Milanese Armenian Avant-Garde

“The flute (primo[r]dial archetype of sonority) transforms the whole thing into a perfect musical abstraction. An abstract tale: light and colours, nothing more” (Bazil 1977: 3). This evocative sentence appears in the liner notes of *Ararat: Music by Ludwig Bazil*, a printed musical publication released in December 1977 by the Milanese-Armenian publishing house I/COM. The volume formed part of a broader constellation of cultural projects emerging from the homonymous I/COM Institute (Institute for the Research and Dissemination of Non-Dominant Cultures), founded in Milan in 1975 by Milanese-Armenian painter Herman Vahramian, diasporic Armenian composer Ludwig Bazil, and Italian sociologist Giorgio Pacifici. A multidisciplinary association centered on diaspora studies, I/COM organized conferences on Armenian artistic heritage and culture—as well as concerts and art exhibitions—throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, in Lombardy and Bavaria, where Bazil lived at the time (Vahramian 1997: 34–35). Its cultural program officially launched in March 1977 at the Church of San Maurizio in Milan. There, Vahramian and Bazil staged *Ararat*, an avant-garde, total-art performance that featured fifteen of Bazil’s musical compositions, whose vocal parts were drawn from both ancient and 20th-century Armenian poetry (Ararat 1977). Throughout the musical enactments, a video projector displayed Vahramian’s abstract black-and-white graphics. Opening the performance at San Maurizio, the flute solo played a key role in establishing the event’s atmosphere and emotional resonance.

Nine months separated the *Ararat* performance from the publication of the flute piece. This delay appears even more striking given that, at the time of the event at San Maurizio, the organizers had already provided the audience with a thoughtfully curated catalogue introducing the performance. The volume featured introductory essays by prominent figures from Milan’s cultural scene—such as theatre critic Ugo Ronfani, ethnomusicologist Michele L. Straniero, and art critic Vanni Scheiwiller.

Additionally, it included the poems set to music as well as the full scores of Bazil's compositions, which included string quartets, soprano and bass arias, and an a-cappella choral piece. The flute part, however, was absent from this initial publication and only resurfaced in printed form months later—at a time when *Ararat* had likely faded into a mere echo within Milan's broader cultural memory, with the exception of continued resonance in the Armenian community.

As an initiative emerging from a long-standing yet marginalized urban diaspora, the publication of *Ararat*'s flute score reflects the proactive engagement of artists like Vahramian and Bazil in advancing a politics of self-enactment for the Milanese Armenian community. A clear determination to make the contemporary musical legacy of the Armenian diaspora more publicly accessible crucially marked their efforts. However, the belated publication of the score suggests an underlying process of negotiation between the creators of the performance and the broader environment in which public reception unfolds. The audience—and particularly the Milanese newspaper critics who attended the *Ararat* performance—responded with fascination to the flute solo, frequently framing their reviews of the San Maurizio total-art event around the impressions evoked by the flute interpretation, performed by the young musician Cecilia Vallini (Arruga 1977; Cavalleri 1977; Manin 1977; Notte 1977; Ronfani 1977b). The liner notes accompanying the December 1977 score publication thus emerged from a complex interplay—both temporal and epistemological—between the artists' aesthetic conceptualization of a challenging diasporic sound and the audience's reception of their intermedial project. Far from unidirectional, these dynamics ultimately shaped a musical edition that the Armenian community could recognize as resonant with their sensibility—even if it reflected a marked shift from the original vision presented at the premiere.

I argue that *Ararat*'s flute score—especially in its *primordial* connotations—does not appear as the final product of a linear authorial intention. Rather, it reflects a negotiation in which Armenian diasporic stances adapted to public reception, embracing the transformative meaning Bazil's music came to hold for the Milanese audience. In his analysis of the historical interactions between musical cultures in diasporic contexts, Jim Samson notes that “[a] key point about displacement is that two

existing worlds establish a dialogue” (Samson 2010: 190). This dynamic is vividly present in the musical activities of the Armenian diaspora in Milan, where cultural expression may unfold as a dialogic process shaped by both internal self-definition and external interpretation. How such cross-cultural interplay takes shapes lies at the core of my study, particularly through the tensions between belatedness and re-emergence, performance and materiality. *Ararat* inevitably connects to a post-traumatic condition and to the delayed effects of historical violence in shaping diasporic narratives. The Armenian diaspora of Milan established in the Lombard capital following the 1915 Genocide, perpetrated by the Committee of Union and Progress of the Ottoman government. Consequently, the forced deportation and the physical as well as cultural erasure experienced by Armenians during that period resonates within a traumatic framework—one that the resulting diaspora communities worldwide, including in Milan, harrowingly inherited.

Still, my reading of the *Ararat* flute score’s belated appearance in print extends beyond a re-enactment of delayed awareness. Strikingly, it offers a vantage point for reflecting on what Armenologist Boghos Levon Zekiyian defines as the “multidimensional identity” of Italian Armenians—an identity that balances strong commitment to ancestral cultural values with active engagement in the structures and epistemologies of the host society (Zekiyian 2000: 152–154). From this perspective, the flute score’s emergence takes on new significance, aligning with Lydia Goehr’s suggestion that musical works are better understood not as fixed objects, but as evolving conceptual constructs. “Emergence,” writes Goehr, “is not a pre-determined process showing the inevitability or predictability of the rise of a given concept. It is rather a contingent, retroactively discovered, bonding and roping process. [...] Only when it has emerged can we retroactively discover its original threads” (Goehr 1994: 108). Despite its final material form as a printed edition, *Ararat*’s flute score reveals a far more fragmented process of recasting musical meaning.

A contextualization of the performative features of *Ararat*—with particular emphasis on the role of the flute piece—helps frame the setting for subsequent negotiations between artists and audience. Notably, the architectural design of San Maurizio facilitated an explicit spatial

performativity. Until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the building served as a cloistered monastery for benedictine nuns. This historical context shaped the internal configuration with a double-spaced layout intended to separate different groups of attendants. The devotees occupied the courtroom at the entrance, while the nuns prayed and sang in the exclusive chamber behind the altar. After the suppression of the convent during Napoleonic dominance in 1798, a narrow aisle beside the apse connected the Public Room and the Nuns' Room (Agosti et al. 2016: 68). In *Ararat*, the double-space prompted the organizers to place the spectators in the Public Room, where the flutist Cecilia Vallini, dressed in a black cloak, performed the instrumental solo based on a series of Armenian folkloric melodies and an extensive use of silence. The preamble served as an initiation into the performance. A sparse arrangement of ceremonial candles dimly enlightened the nave where the spectators gathered, while a pervasive aroma of incense infused the space (Manin 1977). Upon concluding her solo, Vallini guided the audience from the Public Room to the Nuns' Room, where the total-art event was set to begin. [\[Listening.\]](#)

The restrained theatricality of the performance's opening left a strong impression on all the critics covering the premiere, who consistently highlighted Vallini's flute solo in their reviews. The prominent Milanese newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* praised the flute's evocative power, noting its ability to "[throw] [the spectator] into a world far away in time and space" (ibid.; my translation). Another major daily, *La Notte*, described the part as "a piercing but not acute melody: of a deaf and doleful nostalgia" (Notte 1977; my translation). Even more revealing were the reflections of Lorenzo Arruga and Cesare Cavalleri, respected music critics for *Il Giorno* and *Avvenire*, respectively. Arruga observed that "all the components of the performance [...] are set out as if in a search for that unitary and mysterious something that lies in the primordial," and emphasized that "[t]he flutist Vallini seems the most committed to repeating that primordial gesture in a direct manner, almost the generating sound of harmony" (Arruga 1977; my translation). An identical reference to primordiality appears in Cavalleri's review, which similarly defined the flute's sound as "seamless, primordial." He adds a further detail about Vallini's role in the closing moments of the spectacle: "At the end of the

performance, [...] flutist Cecilia Vallini takes up her theme from behind the wall [of the Nuns' Room], which, as in Basil's other musical pieces, attempts to recover that primordial sound" (Cavalleri 1977; my translation).

The archetypal qualities of Basil's flute music emerge as a central theme in the notes published by I/COM several months after the performance. However, they do not stem directly from the Milanese critics' reviews; rather, they reflect a subtle semantic reconfiguration rooted in Vahramian and Basil's artistic vision. In fact, primordiality had already featured in the original *Ararat* catalogue, demonstrating how the Armenian artists' conceptual framework helped shape the audience's reception. The catalogue addresses the notion of primordiality most directly in a caption accompanying the a cappella choral composition *Matian Voghbergutian (Corpus Doloris)*, which sets to music excerpts from the eponymous medieval poem by Armenian theologian Grigor Narekatsi. The text notes that the poem's distinctiveness lies in "the rhythm of the verse [...] aimed at the conquest of musicality evoking primordial sound, that sound [u]ncreated and creator whose nature has been illustrated by Marius Schneider, and here imagined as being the origin of the different forms of artistic expressiveness" (Ararat 1977: 118). The reference to German musicologist Schneider is far from incidental, purposefully evoking intermediality—central to *Ararat's* ambition to articulate an Armenian total art. In the catalogue's introductory essay, Ugo Ronfani additionally cites Schneider's work when describing the project's aspiration to restore "the ability to 'hear with [one's] eyes' and 'see with [one's] ears', to achieve, that is, that unity of the sense lacerated by so many discordant cultural models" (Ronfani 1977: 13–15). In other words, an ancient sensory integration—characteristic of early humanity and now obscured by the fragmentation of contemporary culture.

[Listening.]

Throughout the *Ararat* catalogue, the interpenetration of media—sound, word, and image—stands out as the project's conceptual core. Iranian musicologist Khachi Khachik describes Basil's compositions as "a musical story," intertwining medieval modal structures from ancient Armenian repertoires with a deliberate narrative impulse (Khachik 1977: 62). Commenting on Vahramian's

drawings, Vanni Scheiwiller explains that his sinuous arabesques aim at “the merging of hearing and sight [...], seeking to operate musically in order to obtain a ‘sound painting’” (Scheiwiller 1977: 95). Interviewed by *Il Corriere della Sera* at the San Maurizio premiere, Vahramian further emphasized the performance’s totalizing artistic orientation. Echoing both Ronfani and Scheiwiller, he remarked: “While listening to the sound, the eyes read the image or the word. Then our senses also become less atrophied, more elastic. We also begin to listen with our eyes and see with our ears. Art [...] is a cosmic moment, of union and integration of the parts” (Vahramian in Manin 1977; my translation).

The “cosmic” qualities evoked by Vahramian may serve as a bridge between *Ararat*’s intermedial ambition and the presumed primordial character of Bazil’s music. However, at the time of the premiere in March 1977, neither the creators of the performance nor the catalogue’s contributors explicitly addressed the flute solo—whose score remained absent from any official publication. Moreover, the association between a vocal composition such as *Matian Voghbergutian* and Schneider’s theories on musical cosmogonies renders the flute’s later incorporation into the discourse of primordiality potentially unorthodox. In his 1960 essay *Le rôle de la musique dans la mythologie et les rites des civilisations non européennes*, the German scholar extensively examines creation myths from diverse non-European cultures, observing that the genesis of the universe almost invariably begins with a chant, a cry, or other forms of vocal performance. In his analysis, even when instrumental music features in mythic narratives, it typically supports the creator-god’s voice—simultaneously sound, utterance, and visible object—rather than replaces it (Schneider 1960). That the flute is presented as an “archetype” of primordiality in the score issued by I/COM, stands in contrast to a philological reading of Schneider’s vocal-centered insights, as echoed in *Ararat*’s original presentation. Yet the reciprocal influence between the theoretical frameworks advanced by the project’s creators and early collaborators, and the critics’ tendency to frame the one musical piece omitted from the catalogue as embodying primordiality, played a decisive role in shaping the final printed edition.

From the late 1970s to the late 1980s, I/COM served as a key representative of the Milanese Armenian community's cultural activity. Its editorial initiatives, therefore, actively contributed to the process of self-enactment and identity sustenance for the Armenian diaspora in Milan. As a cultural and musical production committed to elaborating a strategy for spreading an overlooked artistic heritage, *Ararat* crucially claimed cultural distinctiveness through specific symbolic and aesthetic values. The flute score's liner notes aptly highlight that Bazil drew inspiration from the Armenian folkloric heritage—just as, in the performance catalogue, Khachik emphasized the composer's skill in modernizing the musical teachings of the classical Armenian school. At the same time, the flute's printed edition blends cultural specificity with a broader negotiation, acknowledging the relevance of a critical tendency that had not been made explicit from the outset. The liner notes incorporate the primordial framework suggested by the reviews as a form of re-appropriation, ultimately aiming to reintegrate it into an intermedial context akin to that of the premiere. This is particularly evident in the description of the flute's sound as an “abstract tale [made of] light and colours,” exploiting its visual and synesthetic connotations (Bazil 1977: 3). In the few lines of the late 1977 musical edition of the *Ararat* flute part, primordially (re-)emerges as a carefully integrated component, fostering a definitive connection to an all-encompassing conception of contemporary Armenian art.

In conclusion, the approach pursued by Vahramian and Bazil through I/COM in the months between the *Ararat* premiere and the publication of the flute score closely aligns with the multidimensionality that characterizes the social and cross-cultural performances of the Armenian diaspora in Italy. The December 1977 liner notes resist interpreting the reference to primordially as a passive adoption of reviewers' observations. Rather, for the Armenian artists, public and critical reception became a means to reframe aesthetic notions that had already been central to the project nine months earlier. This interplay enabled the Armenian community to articulate new conceptual definitions and theoretical clarifications, mediating between political commitment and critical reflection. A historiography of *Ararat*'s flute score—and its performance—thus reveals the active role of key agents within the Milanese Armenian community in constructing a multidimensional

negotiation involving ethnic and cultural identity, sociocultural exchange, and temporal belatedness. It also affirms that studying the musical culture of the Armenian diaspora is inextricably linked to complex forms of interaction—not only between communities, but between ethnicity and historicization. In this light, displacement serves as a dialectical, generative platform for music and its understanding.

## Bibliography

Agosti Giovanni, Battezzati Chiara and Jacopo Stoppa. 2016. *San Maurizio al Monastero Maggiore. Guida*. Milano: Officina Libraria.

*Ararat: poesia, musica, pittura*, 1977. Milano: Scheiwiller. Catalogue of the performance.

Arruga, Lorenzo, 1977. “Fascino di un mito”. *Il Giorno*. March 12, 1977. 17.

Bazil, Ludwig. 1977. *Ararat: Musiques de/Musiche di/Music by/Yerashetut'yuny*. Milan: I/COM.

Cavalleri, Cesare. 1977. “Arte «sacra» dall’Armenia”. *Avvenire*. March 11, 1977. 8.

C.M.C. 1977. “L’arca di Noè”. *La Notte*. March 15, 1977. 11.

Goehr, Lydia. 1994. *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Khatschi, Khatschi. 1977. “With Ludwig Bazil”. In *Ararat: poesia, musica, pittura*, 62-63. Milano: Scheiwiller.

Manin, Giuseppina. 1977. “I tre volti dell’Armenia”. *Il Corriere della Sera*. March 12, 1977. 15.

Ronfani, Ugo. 1977. “The name chosen for this show”. In *Ararat: poesia, musica, pittura*, 11-21. Milano: Scheiwiller.

Ronfani, Ugo. 1977. “Ararat un viaggio affascinante”. *Il dramma* 52(34): 106-107.

- Samson, Jim. 2010. "Little Stories from the Balkans". In Erik Levi and Florian Scheding, eds., *Music and Displacement: Diasporas, Mobilities, and Dislocations in Europe and Beyond*, 181–195. Lanham-Toronto-Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press.
- Scheiwiller, Vanni. 1977. "In the ambition of "Ararat"". In *Ararat: poesia, musica, pittura*, 94-95. Milano: Scheiwiller.
- Schneider, Marius. 1960. "Le Rôle de la musique dans la mythologie et les rites de civilisations non-Européens". In *Histoire de la Musique : I, Des Origines à Jean-Sébastien Bach*, 131–214. Paris: Gallimard.
- Vahramian, Herman. 1997. *Herman Vahramian: Sculture*. Milano: Museo civico archeologico. Catalogue of the exhibition at the Civic Archeological Museum. Milano, 16 October 1997 – 11 February 1998.
- Zekiyan, Boghos Levon. 2000. *L'Armenia e gli armeni. Polis lacerata e patria spirituale.: La sfida di una sopravvivenza*. Milano: Guerini.