

Nostalgic Sound for Diasporic Youth:

Armenian Children's Songs in Italy

[Listening 1:31; Tatev 2004] The Armenian song you have just heard comes from *Twenty Children's Songs*, an anthology for youth choir and piano by the Armenian-Italian composer Avedis Nazarian, published in Venice in 1980. In the edition, the Italian translation renders the title as *Nostalgia*, failing to convey the explicitly ethnic framework of the original Armenian *Hayreni Karot*—literally “Nostalgia for the Homeland,” or even “for Armenia,” since *hay* denotes how Armenians refer to themselves as a culturally defined people. The somber piano accompaniment, paired with the choir's homorhythmic, intimate yet solemn melody, deepens the sense of longing for a lost homeland, embodied in the image of the singing “beautiful swallows.” In the lyrics by the obscure poet M. T'at'ul, the birds' imagery allows children to express a wish for “spring”—a metaphor for a future reunited community—while also revealing the pain of the “sons of exile” who imagine such a utopian return (Nazarian 1980: 49). For Nazarian, this “homeland's song of spring” becomes a site for musically staging the contradictory emotions of Armenian diasporic temporality: the tension between a harrowing past and an enduring hope for renewal, filtered through the imaginative reworking of collective memory.

Nostalgia, as a dimension where lived and coming timelines intersect, serves as crucial to understanding the interplay between experience and aspiration within the Armenian diaspora. Following the 1915 Genocide—the campaign of physical and cultural annihilation carried out by the Committee of Union and Progress within the Ottoman government—Armenians were forced to flee their ancestral homeland and resettle across the Middle East, Europe, and North America. The tragedy of displacement entailed not only the difficult processing of collective trauma but also a profound sense of loss that fostered both nostalgic sentiment and a yearning to build a self-determined

Armenian community. Partially realized with the 1991 independence of the Republic of Armenia from Soviet rule, this dual desire continued to resonate at the time of Nazarian's *Children's Songs* publication. Notably, it aligns with Svetlana Boym's argument that nostalgia is not merely a longing for a real or imagined past but a utopian impulse directed toward that past—one inevitably linked to conceptions of futurity (Boym 2002: XIV). Within the Armenian diasporic framework, and especially in its musical expression, nostalgia and utopia become mutually reinforcing. I suggest here that understanding how nostalgia operates in Nazarian's song reveals its future-oriented dimension, where remembrance itself gestures toward hope.

Similarly, the choice to address children in a song grounded in nostalgia evokes a forward-looking projection. As a social group typically framed as heirs of a community's cultural values, youth may appear as ill-fitting bearers for a nostalgic, even pre-diasporic memory of the Armenian homeland. Armenian children of the 1980s did not personally witness the trauma of the Genocide and the resulting cultural uprooting; instead, they engage with their diasporic identity through the narratives of parents and grandparents, navigating the Armenian temporal syncopation of past and future embedded in these accounts. At the same time, children do not simply assimilate the collective loss constituting the Armenian diaspora: they actively incarnate what Peter Kraftl terms *childhood-hope*. As Kraftl writes, "childhood-hope seems [...] to embody that most *universal* need *for* hope, fulfilling this ontological need by constituting a key repository for humanity's seemingly unfaltering need for utopias" (Kraftl 2008: 84). In Nazarian's songs, I argue, childhood-hope becomes particularly powerful through the nostalgic lens adopted by both lyrics and music. By linking the utopian future represented by the young singers to a broader retrospective that encompasses the Armenian diaspora across generations, the composition illustrates how nostalgia functions as a generative force in Armenian cultural production, blending collective memory with aspirations for political and social possibility.

Nazarian was a key figure in articulating the politics of diasporic hope from both youth and intergenerational perspectives. Born in 1930 in Kharpert (present-day Elazığ, Turkey), and raised in

Syria, he grew up as a self-taught musician in Aleppo before pursuing formal musical training at the Academy of Fine Arts in Beirut, Lebanon. In 1954, he moved to Venice to study composition at the Benedetto Marcello Conservatory, where he soon emerged as a politically committed artist. One year later, he founded one of the first civic associations of Armenian diasporans in Italy, the Union of Armenian Students, which marked the beginning of his enduring advocacy for the valorization of cultural communal life in the diaspora. From the mid-1970s, Nazarian responded to the Armenian community's growing desire for public engagement with Italian society. In particular, he actively participated in mobilizations for the recognition of the Armenian Genocide and for his people's self-determination within and beyond the Soviet Union. These efforts culminated in the establishment of the Costan Zarian Circle, a cultural hub Nazarian co-founded with researcher Yeghis Keheyan in Rome in 1983, during his temporary relocation there. The circle hosted conferences, Armenian language courses, and music and dance workshops aimed at familiarizing Roman audiences with the Armenian diasporic heritage (Manoukian 2014: 260). Meanwhile, from 1963, Nazarian worked as a music teacher in Venetian middle schools, a role he continued after moving to Rome in 1978. As an educator, he guided many of his most disadvantaged students toward conservatory study and professional musical careers (Nazarian 2019). The entangled temporalities underpinning Nazarian's *Children's Songs* reflect both commitments—political and pedagogical—revealing diasporic youth music as a fertile ground for their convergence.

Composed between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s, *Twenty Children's Songs* chart a fragmented editorial history mirroring the political shifts within the Armenian diaspora in Italy. Alongside *Garoun* [Spring] and *Tzitike* [The Little Bird], *Hayreni Karot* first appeared through the Paduan publishing house Zanibon in 1971—more than fifteen years after its original draft, according to the 1980 edition (Nazarian 1971; Nazarian 1980: 49). The timing proved significant, as the long-delayed publication reflects the surge of social engagement. In 1976, indeed, the Italian-Armenian community held in Rome the first public commemoration of the Genocide, following decades of private remembrance within communal gatherings and domestic settings (Manoukian 2014: 157–

159). The 1980 compilation of Nazarian's songs engaged directly with this new public orientation, embodying the community's emerging social consciousness and political aspirations.

At the same time, Nazarian's pedagogical commitment complemented his musical vision. Of the twenty nursery rhymes, nearly three quarters explore themes of playground activity, bodily awareness, depictions of animals and nature, and seasonal festivities. The interplay between nostalgic loss and utopian imagination reaches its most powerful expression in the remaining songs that explicitly invoke the Armenian people. Within them, the diaspora takes shape as a community fractured by time and displacement, while the children sublimate collective longing into a forward-looking hope for reunification and self-realization. In another of T'at'ul's lyrics, *Ourakh Ellank* [We Shine Joy], the youth choir identifies themselves as "the children of the Armenian people" who "shall rise together, to become sweet fruit-bearing trees of the future." The final stanza is particularly eloquent in drawing the expectancies placed on young diasporans: "We are the generation of dawn, of the 'Blossoming Sun' of tomorrow. We sing and dance together, with a dream of future" (Nazarian 1980: 30–32) [Listening 0:19; Tatev 2004]. The following *Birthday Song*, with lyrics by Tik. S. Tasnapetyan, fuses the personal joy of a boy's and a girl's celebration with a collective duty toward the entire Armenian diaspora. The birthday girl, Tsovik, "will become a beautiful young lady," while the boy, Arshak, "will become a proud child," both "loyal to [their] homeland" (Nazarian 1980: 33–35) [Listening 0:24; Tatev 2004]. A holistic reading of these songs reveals more than the symbolic link among children, the diaspora's future, and the Armenian homeland. When considered alongside *Hayreni Karot*, they suggest that childhood-hope gains force only when it embodies the collective experience of the Armenian past. As children come to embody the faithful future citizens of the diaspora, longing emerges as an integral part of cultural projection. Thus, nostalgia functions as a productive engagement with the diasporic future represented by youth, rather than as a mere utopian recollection.

In addition to thematic aspects, productive longing deeply embeds in the songs' musical language. Nazarian's compositional style plays a central role in shaping the interwoven temporalities

that his notion of nostalgia sustains throughout the *Children's Songs*. In keeping with the repertoire's pedagogical purpose, he favors simple, singable melodies built on repetitive rhythmic patterns, minimal harmonization, and piano accompaniments that reinforce the children's leading vocal line in unison. While the structures and instrumentation draw from the Western musical canon—a heritage Nazarian absorbed through his studies and work in Beirut and Venice—his songs for youth simultaneously reinterpret key traits of the Armenian musical legacy. The homorhythmic texture shared by the singers and piano, together with the absence of counterpoint, recalls Armenian Christian chant, whose conservative liturgy prioritizes sacred text over compositional elaboration. Nazarian additionally integrates the modal harmonies typical of Armenian folk and liturgical traditions, where melodic motion sustains a sense of suspended tension. In a 1987 essay on Armenian music, he noted that Armenian composers approach harmonization with restraint to preserve the modal character of vocal themes. As he explained, these melodies “[move] within a range that cannot be clearly defined as either major or minor, giving the listener a sense of indefiniteness and vagueness” (Nazarian 1987: 117; my translation). Within the *Children's Songs*, the frequent use of modal endings—chromatic transitions between major and minor inflections in the final bars, as heard for instance in the *Birthday Song*—represents a notable example (Nazarian 1980: 35) [[Listening 0:12](#); [Tatev 2004](#)]. Such compositional components illustrate Nazarian's creative engagement with ancient Armenian idioms in conceiving music specifically aimed at children. Through an encounter between ethnically rooted musical pasts and the future-oriented vision of diasporic youth, the dynamic interplay of nostalgia and utopia acquires a sonic form—one that complicates temporal boundaries while offering younger generations the means to transform inherited longing into a generative horizon of hope.

The eventual performance history of the *Children's Songs* reveals how their future-oriented nostalgic framework adapted to changing political realities. Strikingly, the youth compositions did not receive staging in Italy throughout the 1980s—a period when Nazarian's sociopolitical commitment reached its peak. Their first documented performance occurred in June 1993 at the Church of Santa Maria della Fava in Venice, during a concert by the American ensemble Chattanooga

Boys Choir organized by Venezia Nuova Musica—a contemporary music association co-founded by Nazarian alongside American and Venetian composers shortly beforehand (Gazzettino 1993; TAO 1993: 55). The concert took place less than two years after Armenian independence from Soviet rule in September 1991, reflecting both a consolidation and a reconfiguration of the strategies of hope Nazarian had advanced through youth music. As Italian-Armenian sociologist Agopik Manoukian observes in his historiography of the diaspora in Italy, the early 1990s independence enabled Armenians to perceive their homeland as a national entity whose “future is more realistic, but less idealizable” (Manoukian 2014: 202; my translation). For Nazarian, the shift from envisioning Armenia to actively contributing to its institutional construction remained grounded in a utopian framework informed by musical childhood-hope. Within this context, after 1991, Armenian children assumed the capacity to help build the self-determined community imagined by the diaspora (and its music), thereby enacting their forward-looking responsibilities in the present. This political engagement translates the ethnic, proactive nostalgia expressed in the 1980 edition of the *Children’s Songs* into a negotiation between diasporic identity and the nascent nation.

In diasporic cultural production such as Nazarian’s *Twenty Children’s Songs*, longing for the homeland unfolds as both a temporal and existential concern. The challenging conception of nostalgia illuminated by the choral cycle condenses the tension between collective past and yet-to-come imaginaries through a mutually generative interplay with utopia. Armenian youth music, in particular, transforms nostalgic loss and historical displacement into tools for envisioning futurity within diasporic communities in Italy and beyond. Songs like *Hayreni Karot* complicate linear visions of communal nostalgia as a mere narrative of yearning for a shared past, revealing instead its simultaneous motion across past, present, and future. Within this framework, the figure of the child remains crucial: embodying collective aspirations for social renewal and political emancipation, youth soundscapes expand the politics of longing into desires, hopes, and active forms of mobilization. Nazarian’s children’s music offered an artistic arena where fragmented diasporic histories and expectations converged, ultimately electing nostalgia as the medium through which

coexisting temporalities sustain productive connection. Sung by the “sons of exile,” nostalgia emerges as a voice of hope rather than a symptom of immobility.

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