

Diasporic Youth Music through Polytemporality:

Armenian Children's Songs in Venice

[Listening 1:31; Tatev 2004] The Armenian song you have just heard comes from *Venti canti per l'infanzia* [*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 overlapping nature of Armenian diasporic temporalities. In his song, recollection and hope coexist not as a sequential construction but as mutually constitutive layers of experience.

At the intersection of *Hayreni Karot*'s interfering timelines lies a multilayered vision of the present, inextricably shaped by the historical background of the 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 simultaneously fostered a yearning to build a self-determined Armenian community.

Partially realized with the 1991 independence of the Republic of Armenia from Soviet rule, this desire continued to resonate at the time of Nazarian's *Children's Songs* publication. In this sense, the composer's compilation engages with the concept of *coterminous time* as theorized by José Esteban Muñoz, a condition that enables marginalized communities to unveil an already-occurring future within the present through cultural production and performance, including music (Muñoz 2009: 56). Polytemporality, I suggest, extends Muñoz's insights toward a convergence of both retrospective and anticipatory negotiations within the evolving here and now of the Armenian diaspora. I argue that Nazarian's children's music expresses such an intervention in the sociocultural and political present of the community in Italy.

Central to the polytemporal dynamic, the choice to address children through lyrics grounded in inherited imaginaries of diasporic exile evokes a forward-looking orientation. 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, this repository is historically and ethnically specific. The Armenian past and the diasporic present charge the children's futurity with its temporal density, making childhood-hope not a generic utopian placeholder but a polytemporally loaded one.

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: 260). Meanwhile, from 1963, Nazarian worked as a music teacher in Venetian middle schools, a role he continued after moving to Rome in 1978 (Nazarian 2019). As an educator, he guided many of his most disadvantaged students toward conservatory study and professional musical careers. 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 2019: 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.

The musical style of the short works for children demonstrates a confluence of Armenian musical heritage and the composer's diasporic identity. In keeping with the repertoire's pedagogical purpose, Nazarian 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. From a compositional perspective, then, past and present temporalities interact in Nazarian's artistic research, which remains inseparable from political commitment.

The lyrical contents of the songs reflect a similar merging of pedagogical and sociocultural purposes. Of the twenty nursery rhymes, nearly three quarters explore themes of playground activity, bodily awareness, depictions of animals and nature, and seasonal festivities. However, polytemporal layering reaches its most powerful expression in the remaining songs that explicitly invoke the Armenian people. Within them, the diaspora takes shape as a community whose imagination navigates multiple temporal strata. Children embody that layering most vividly, carrying a collective past that simultaneously projects futures not yet realized. 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]. Reading these songs reveals more than the symbolic link among children, the diaspora’s future, and the Armenian homeland. Along with *Hayreni Karot*, they reveal childhood as the site where the Armenian historical past, diasporic present, and imagined future are held together simultaneously. Within the musical encounter conceived by Nazarian, polytemporality becomes audible not as a resolution of past and future, but as their sustained coexistence within the absence of an Armenian homeland in 1980.

The eventual performance history of the *Children’s Songs* reveals how their polytemporal context 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.

Beyond the Italian diaspora, the shift toward independence particularly influenced interpretations of *Children's Songs* within newly established Armenian academic institutions. Writing from Yerevan in 1996, the renowned musicologist Ts'its'ilia Brutyan affirms that Nazarian's compositions for youth occupy "[a] special place" within his corpus, especially due to a style "saturated with romantically inspired national language" (Brutyan 1996: 81; my translation). The hint at romantic nationalism implies a backward-looking vision of Armenian music, now reframed toward a present national reality. In addition, Brutyan explicitly ascribes Nazarian's songs—first published at a time when the diasporans could only envision an Armenian nation—to the Republic of Armenia and its supposedly consolidated musical idiom. Her retroactive reading thus reinforces the positioning of *Children's Songs* within a political presentist framework, where the construction of the homeland finds its natural counterpart in the role played by children as the living embodiment of the nascent nation's aspirations.

A parallel institutional shift occurred in the Venetian milieu. An internal document delivered by co-founder Ernesto Rubin de Cervin to all members of Venezia Nuova Musica—including Nazarian—reveals that between 1996 and 1997 the association aimed to request that the City School District disseminate the Armenian composer's children's music in urban schools (Rubin de Cervin 1997). Although no evidence of such an initiative has been recovered, the mobilization suggests an outreach operation that is no longer exclusively ethnic in its address. After decades of marginalization within Italian society, Armenian independence brought a renewed awareness of Armenian history and presence in Italy into the agendas of civic entities and institutions (Manoukian 2014: 203). Involving a diasporic composer, Venezia Nuova Musica appeared particularly responsive to a broader social trend, further allowing Nazarian to contribute to the emergence of an Armenian national discourse. More specifically, the post-1991 context demonstrates that the same musical works operate within a different temporal register than they did when first published. The utopian future they projected in

1980 has partially arrived, and the layering consequently shifts. Throughout the 1990s, Armenian children are no longer the vehicle through which a homeland-to-come is imagined, but instead inherit one that now exists. The songs, in turn, mediate between both temporal horizons at once.

The cultural meaning assumed by *Twenty Children's Songs* shifted between 1980 and 1993, remaining in each instance grounded in its historical moment: from the longing for a yet-to-be homeland to the active building of a national identity. In Nazarian's works for youth, engagement with the diasporic present connects to an ongoing interaction between past and future, rather than to a fixed temporal category. Polytemporality captures the layering underlying his compositions, expressing a distinctive sense of time inherent to the Armenian diaspora in Italy. Crucially, *Twenty Children's Songs* simultaneously sustains a past inheritance of collective loss and ancestral musical idioms, the present enactment of diaspora in relation to the Italian landscape and the Armenian homeland, and a future-oriented childhood imbued with continually reframed utopianism. Within such displaced frameworks, history, present experience and projection emerge as dynamically entangled dimensions that take shape in musical practice. Even when anchored to a specific here and now, diasporic music never addresses a singular temporality alone. The "homeland spring" of *Hayreni Karot* is sung through collective remembrance and shared expectation—but neither operates without the political present that structures their interplay.

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