

[Listening 0:23] The musical extract 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 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. 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. 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 unflinching need for utopias." 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 and actively participated in mobilizations for his people's self-determination within and beyond the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, from 1963, he worked as a music teacher in Venetian middle schools. 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.

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” [Listening 0:19]. 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's modal harmonies—drawn from Armenian folk and liturgical traditions—sustain a sense of suspended tension that translates the condition of diaspora into musical form: neither fully rooted nor fully adrift. [Listening 0:24]. When considered alongside *Hayreni Karot*, these songs reveals more than the symbolic link among children, the diaspora's future,

and the Armenian homeland. 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.

The eventual performance history of the *Children's Songs* reveals how their multitemporal context adapted to changing political realities. Strikingly, the youth compositions did not receive staging in Italy throughout the 1980s. 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 Venetian composers shortly beforehand. 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.” 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.” 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.

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.