

Brigitta Davidjants. *Armenian National Identity Construction: From Diaspora to Music / Armeenia rahvusliku identiteedi konstrueerimine: diasporaast muusikani.* Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre Dissertations 8 / Eesti Muusika- ja Teatriakadeemia Väitekirjad 8, Tallinn: Eesti Muusika- ja Teatriakadeemia, 2016, 129 pp.

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In her cumulative dissertation, the author, who is partly of Armenian descent, sets herself the challenging and difficult task “to shed light on the various aspects of Armenian national identity with primary focus on Armenian music culture, on Armenian national cultural symbols, on the concept of historical homeland (or country of origin), on the notion of diaspora and on the Armenian genocide” (p. 10). Her dissertation consists of four papers, published recently, in 2015 and 2016, in academic journals in the English language and, in one case, in a collective monograph in Germany. B. Davidjants is also author of an earlier monograph *Orientalism ja muusika (Orientalism and Music; 2007*, in Estonian), in which she explored the phenomenon of diverging transcriptions of Armenian folk songs, similar to the fourth article of her dissertation. The applied methods are largely qualitative and, in the case of the third article, a reception analysis. Two of the articles deal with Armenian musical history, in particular the cleric, composer, ethnologist and musicologist Komitas (Soğomon Soğomonēan, 1869–1935), whose outstanding significance for modern Armenian music can be compared with that of Komitas’ older Romantic colleagues Béla Bartók, Edvard Grieg and Antonín Dvořák (during his ‘Slavonic’ periods of 1876–1881 and 1886–1891) for modern Hungarian, Norwegian and Czech (Bohemian) ‘national’ music.

B. Davidjants approaches her task of deconstructing Armenian identity, culture and music from quite different perspectives. Her first dissertational article, *Identity Construction in Narratives: Activists of the Armenian Diaspora in Estonia* is based on semi-structured interviews. However, a cohort of only eight persons, belonging to more or less the same generation (55–75 years of age, at the time of the interviews) and of same social and cultural Soviet background cannot be representative for the entire Armenian Diaspora, as the

title of the dissertation suggests. Nor is the obviously almost monolithic Armenian community of Estonia typical for the worldwide Armenian Diaspora(s) of perhaps seven million. This lack of representativeness is admitted by the author herself, when she mentions “Estonia’s peripheral position among the countries hosting Armenian diasporas” (p. 7). Many of these Diasporic communities are characterized by high diversities, because they consist of immigrants and their descendants from various regions and countries of origin. The values, traditions and habits in these communities not only reflect the different, diverging and sometimes incompatible influences of the respective countries of origin, but also testify to multiple, hybrid (hyphenated), symbolic and fluid identities. This relates not only to Armenian communities in the Near East, Western and Central Europe or Northern America, but even to communities in the post-Soviet space. For example, and unlike the result of Davidjants’ analysis of the Armenian community in Tallinn, the largest Armenian Diaspora of today – in the Russian Federation – is far more diversified, taking in the traditional ‘Russian Armenians’ (about half a million of people, usually Russophones, who already resided in the RSFSR before the collapse of the USSR), Armenian refugees from Central Asia, Azerbaijan and Georgia (including Abkhazia), and, increasingly, labour migrants from the Republic of Armenia. Nevertheless, Soviet socialization and the command of Russian as the *lingua franca* in the Soviet and post-Soviet space provide common denominators, whereas Armenian Diasporas in Central and Northern Europe display an even higher degree of diversity. This causes trouble and discord – not so much with the resident majority populations or with Muslim immigrant communities from Turkey or elsewhere, but inside the Armenian communities themselves. In Germany, where most of the Armenian immigrants originate

from Turkey, the conflicts arose between 'Turkish' and other Armenian immigrants from the Near East (usually Iran and Lebanon), until the arrival of 'hayastanc'iner' (Armenians from Armenia) since the 1990s transferred and re-shaped the internal-Armenian divide. Many of the traditional Diasporic Armenians perceive (and reject) the newcomers from Armenia as alien, 'non-Armenian', and their behaviour as 'shameful', 'Soviet'. But not only this internal segregation of Armenian Diasporas complicates any generalizing discourse about identity construction: a closer look at the key elements that are named in this context and also by Davidjants – religion / Armenian Apostolic Church, language, culture, territory and state, genocide awareness – one finds that each element possesses both connective and distinctive capacities, i.e. they simultaneously integrate and exclude. In Turkey, for example, Muslims of Armenian descent ('hidden Armenians' in the perspective of Armenian nationalists) are barred from the average definition of 'Armenianness', as are, for other reasons and in other countries Armenians who have no command of Armenian or represent the 'other' branch of the Armenian language (usually Western Armenian). Secondly, the combination of the above mentioned five key elements of Armenian national identity are represented in Armenia, Turkey and the Diaspora(s) to varying degrees.¹

Consequently, the answer to the question "who is an Armenian?" is far less uniform than the publications of B. Davidjants suggest. Her concept of Diaspora does not take into account the dynamics inside the Armenian Diasporas or between the Diasporas and the Republic of Armenia, which claims to be the homeland of all Armenians despite the fact that the majority of Diasporic Armenians descend from previous subjects of the Ottomans. Although Davidjants claims to possess "extended participatory observations in Armenian communities in both their historical homeland as well as in the diaspora, and in Turkey" (p. 14) her critical analysis limits itself to the situation of the current Republic of Armenia, including its Soviet

predecessor; the analysis of the Armenian Diasporas is limited to Tallinn.

It is the author's research interest to demonstrate how seemingly apolitical phenomena such as folklore can be affected by ethnocentric ideology. In her second dissertational article, together with her co-author Jaan Ross, B. Davidjants analyzed the dispute on the YouTube forum over a contested popular folk song with different textual versions in Armenian (Մարի աղջիկ – "Sari ağçik", "Girl from the Mountains"), Turkish and Azerbaijani languages ("Sarı gelin" – "Bride in Yellow" or "Blonde Bride"), as well as in Persian (Farsi) and Arabic,² of which the authors Davidjants/Ross consider only the Azerbaijani and Armenian versions. The folk song *Sari ağçik* / *Sarı gelin* represents a telling example for many similar contests between neighbouring peoples over folklore, cuisine, national costumes etc., that all date back to times before modern nation states emerged. The analysis by Davidjants/Ross covers a period of seven years and shows, not surprisingly, only few differences in the positive or negative reactions of commentators on both sides of the Armenian-Azerbaijani divide. In the positive reactions, written in the spirit of Soviet 'družba narodov', the song was perceived as evidence for the 'peoples' friendship' or even brotherhood, whereas all blame for their current alienation was simplistically placed on the 'shameful politicians'. More interesting are the invectives: both sides insult 'the other' as murderers, liars and thieves, but only Azerbaijanis call the Armenians 'traitors' (p. 8 of the article). Sadly, Davidjants/Ross did not comment on this particular invective, which indicates the continuity of Pan-Turkish narratives among Azerbaijanis, nor do the authors explore its historic-political dimension: With the military coup d'état of the so called Young Turks, or *İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti* (Committee for Union and Progress, C.U.P.) of 1908, and in particular since the Balkan Wars of 1912/13, the two major Christian church-nations (millet) in the Ottoman Empire were accused of being disloyal and 'traitors'. Sus-

1 Cf. Hofmann, Tessa 2011: *One Nation – Three Sub-Ethnic Groups: The Case of Armenia and Her Diaspora*. Yerevan: Institute of Philosophy, Sociology and Law of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia.

2 The Turkish and Azerbaijani languages are closely related and both belong to the Southwestern subgroup of the extensive Turkic language group. The Turkish and the Azerbaijani versions are cited on this Wiki page: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sar%C4%B1_Gelin (last accessed on 23 August 2017).

picion of a generalised Armenian treason and of alleged alliances with Turkey's traditional enemy Russia have until today served as justification for the nationwide deportations of Ottoman Armenians during the First World War, and are still mentioned to justify this crime. The fact that Azeris, who had no political or historical reason whatsoever to blame Armenians for treason 'adopted' the C.U.P accusation, confirms indirectly the identification of Azerbaijanis with Turkey, as is more explicitly highlighted in the Pan-Turkish doctrine of President Heydar Aliyev ("one nation in two states").³ Armenians in the Republic of Armenia and in Nagorno Karabakh, as well as Azerbaijanis in and outside the Republic of Azerbaijan, accuse each other of genocide: while Armenians perceive Azerbaijanis as 'Eastern Turks' and successors of the C.U.P. perpetrators, who allegedly intend to continue the extermination of the Armenians beyond Turkey's state borders, Azerbaijan's historiography and politicians constructed a century of Armenian genocide against Azeris, starting with the March 1918 slaughter of 3,000–12,000 Muslim victims and ending with the alleged massacre by Armenian forces in the village of Khojaly in Nagorno Karabakh (25–26 February, 1992).

Against this background of firmly entrenched fears of extermination, of experiences of war, mutual expulsion and ingrained hate it is nearly impossible to imagine how a 'real dialogue' can happen, as the authors seem to believe it can, in spite of everything (p. 11 of the article). It is likewise improbable to assume that it is just the "official policies of the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments" that cause ethnic stereotypes in both countries. Again, the duration and dimension of the conflict and its dialectic dynamics are much more complex than can be fathomed in such a relatively brief paper. To mention just one objection: Elected governments and politicians are driven by their electorate's interests, whether these interests are imagined or real. This dependency causes opportunism and populism, but politicians are not – or at least not the only – authors of the rightly deplored stereotypes. Instead, governments and their actions reflect societal conditions.

When analyzing constructs in collective and individual identities, a differentiation between facts on the one hand and their perception and evaluation on the other is necessary. The geopolitical position of the South Caucasus in the borderlands between the Near East and Europe is a matter of fact – and not a mere construct – resulting in foreign rule, oppression and conflicting zones of interest among the rival regional hegemonies. In this situation, the indigenous people of the area have since ancient times sought for alliances with the regional hegemonies. Being geographically more exposed, Armenians were the least successful in finding co-religionists as protectors, for they belonged to the smallest and least influential group of Christian churches, i.e. the pre-Chalcedonian, or ancient Oriental churches. From the perspective of the Byzantines, and later the Russians, Armenians were schismatics, and consequently under Czarist rule became the targets of a massive Russian Orthodox mission and, after 1882, were exposed to Russian state discrimination in education and church policies. Typically, the notorious slogan of an 'Armenia without Armenians' was coined by the Russian diplomat and Foreign Minister Prince Alexey B. Lobanov-Rostovskij (1824–1896). B. Davidjants does not mention the – at the very least – ambivalent Russian policies towards Armenia, or the aversion of Armenians inside and outside the Russian Empire to these policies, but depicts the Armenians as a people stubbornly refusing to acknowledge its Asian origin, insisting instead on being 'European', because of their Christian faith. According to Davidjants, Armenians use culture to distinguish themselves from their neighbours and position themselves to the West. For this purpose, Armenians create historical narratives that support the European self-image, and they try to demonstrate that perhaps, somewhere, there may be authentic music which, after being cleansed of borrowed elements, could shine like a jewel in its purity (p. 362 f. of the third article).

This is perhaps a gross generalization, since the author bases her conclusions on only six monographs on the life and work of Komitas to prove

3 Cf. the joint statement of Turkey's then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the President of Azerbaijan, İlham Aliyev of September 15th, 2010: <http://en.president.az/articles/736/print> (accessed 23 August 2017).

her point. She deplores the fact that the trans- and international regional culture which was shared in Asia Minor and the Caucasus in pre-modern times by many peoples, is currently ignored by Armenians, while at the same time reducing the diversity of opinions and cultural or political activities of Armenians under Ottoman and Russian rule. In the face of historic realities, this simplification seems unjust, for in the Ottoman Empire many Armenian intellectuals of the 19th century were far from being ethnocentric, but worked towards reforms in a state that eventually failed to accommodate its Non-Muslim citizens and even denied their right of existence. These numerous Armenian voices for an integrated Ottoman homeland were permanently silenced in the last decade of Ottoman rule. If genocide is the ultimate exclusion, then the C.U.P. regime has to be blamed for ethnocentric exclusivity more than Komitas and those Soviet Armenian musicologists who naively speculated about national purity in Armenian music. Undoubtedly, it is relevant and useful to study the impact of ethnocentric ideologies and nationalism in seemingly remote areas such as musicology. However, especially in the case of a

highly diversified community (or nation), generalizations have to be avoided, and the standards of today must not be applied to the opinions and behaviour of historical persons. This would be an ahistorical approach.

Finally, I would like to point out two major errors that require revision. Mistakenly, the author (referring to an article of Razmik Panossian) states that the Armenian Diaspora goes back to the Ottoman genocide of 1915 (p. 62, or p. 2 of her second paper); in fact, Armenian Diasporic communities had already emerged after the Seljuk invasion in Asia Minor and the Seljuk's victory over the Byzantine Empire in the Battle of Mantikert/Malazgirt (1071). In Romania, Moldova, Poland, Moscow, on Crimea and Crete, in Tbilisi etc., merchant colonies and permanent communities have existed since medieval times. Another grave mistake is her quote of the Soviet doctrine of cultural and ethnicity politics that she describes as "socialist in form and national in content" (p. 355 of the third paper). As we all remember, the opposite was true ("national in form and socialist in content"), for Soviet communists believed in the primacy of 'content'.