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Global Music With a New York Edge

A Shattering Roulette Performance of Mary Kouyoumdjian Works Commemorating the Genocide in Armenia

by delarue

Last night's concert at Roulette included what were arguably the most harrowing moments onstage at any New York performance since [Sung Jin Hong](#) premiered his rumbling, macabre real-time depiction of the Hiroshima nuclear bombing at a Chelsea show with the [One World Symphony](#) a couple of years ago. This one commemorated the centenary of an even more lethal series of events, the holocaust in Armenia, via four works by the riveting, individualistic composer [Mary Kouyoumdjian](#).

For those with gaps in their history, no nation in the past hundred fifty years was depopulated by mass murder to the extent that Armenia was, dating from the 1890s through the Ottomans' mass extermination campaign of 1915-22. The exact death toll is not known: if the pogroms of 1894-96 and subsequent mass killings are included, the number is upwards of two million men, women and children murdered, confirmed by the fact that barely fifteen percent of the pre-genocide population remained afterward. And if genocide wasn't bad enough, who then formally annexed Armenia? The Soviet Union.

Kouyoumdjian's music is rich with history, notably [The Bombs of Beirut](#), her first [Kronos Quartet](#) commission, an examination of the effects of the civil war in Lebanon in the early 80s. That ensemble premiered an even more intense new string quartet, while adventurous chamber ensemble [Hotel Elefant](#) performed an equally gripping trio of works. The music was propulsively and often insistently rhythmic, and texturally rich, with some group members doubling on multiple instruments including accordion, vibraphone and electric piano. Kouyoumdjian worked the entirety of the sonic spectrum, from murky lows to whispery highs, often balancing them for a dramatic, cinematic effect.

A quintet including pianist David Friend, flutist Domenica Fossati, violinist Andie Springer, clarinetist Isabel Kim and cellist Rose Bellini played Dzov Erky Koonyov (Sea of Two Colors), a homage to legendary singer/composer/musicologist Komitas, who was sort of the Alan Lomax of early 20th century Armenia. An acidic, biting diptych blending elements of spectral, microtonal and circular indie classical idioms, it challenged Friend with its long series of pointillistic anvil motives, which he finally and remarkably gracefully handed off to Springer as the rest of the group provided a lush but stark interweave. Komitas spent the last two decades of his life institutionalized, broken by the horrific torture he'd suffered, referenced by Kouyoumdjian's endlessly cycling, aching phrases and distant Middle Eastern allusions.

Baritone Jeffrey Gavett gave an understatedly poignant tone to Royce Vavrek's lyrics throughout *Everlastingness*, a trio piece, over the brooding backdrop of Friend's piano and Gillian Gallagher's viola. This was a portrait of doomed surrealist artist Arshile Gorky, who survived the holocaust and escaped to America after losing his mother to starvation. The first half of the concert peaked with a full thirteen-piece ensemble, heavy on percussion, playing the eleven-part suite *This Should Feel Like Home*. Inspired by the composer's first trip to the land of her ancestors a couple of years ago, it referenced the seizure of national landmarks, forced displacement, longing for home and savagery that rose to a long, horrified, searing crescendo that left Josh Perry's huge bass drum to roar and resonate and finally fade down. While the previous piece on the bill offered elegant variations on an austere, chromatically-charged piano melody, this was replete with vividly Middle Eastern riffs and cadenzas against constantly shifting atmospherics: as an evocation of mass agony, it was almost unendurable.

The Kronos Quartet were given a more plaintive work, *Silent Cranes*, sort of a synthesis of the meticulous insistence of the first part of the program and the raw angst that followed. To make things more complicated, they were challenged to keep time with with a similarly vivid series of projections of often grisly archival images as well as snippets of haunting old recordings, including one of Komitas himself and testimony from survivors. It's a severely beautiful, dynamically vibrant if unceasingly pained and mournful portrait of an injustice that's far too often overlooked, and ended on an almost mystical note to accompany historian/investigative journalist David Barsamian's recorded commentary which essentially echoed that if we forget events like these, those things might well happen to us.

On one hand, what Kouyoumdjian has done with this is important historical work, and puts the music in an appropriately horrifying context – which the stunned audience eventually rewarded with a standing ovation. On the other hand, it would be also be rewarding to hear that string quartet by itself: it's certainly strong enough to stand on its own. The best concert of 2015 so far? By far, the most intense.

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