



Mary Kouyoumdjian's *Silent Cranes* gives voice to a century of turmoil in U.S. première at Roulette

REBECCA LENTJES on May 29, 2015 at 6:00 am

How refreshing to experience an entire evening of works by a woman, even if the subject matter—the centenary of the Armenian genocide—was somewhat less uplifting. Armenian-American composer [Mary Kouyoumdjian](#)'s May 12, 2015 concert at [Roulette](#), performed by her ensemble Hotel Elephant and the Kronos Quartet, was a gem of new music programming, placing Kouyoumdjian's compositional soundscape and political agenda front and center while allowing the audience to absorb a slew of talented performers' interpretations thereof. Although artworks with an unsubtle political agenda often let the perceptual experience slip loose in their efforts to tell rather than show (or sound), Kouyoumdjian's works for the most part managed to be not only eye-opening but ear-opening.

Dzov Yerku Kooynov ["Sea of Two Colors"] (2011) and *Everlastingness* (2015, here in its world première) were smaller-scale chamber works that whetted our appetite before Kouyoumdjian's more intense pieces. In the first, Kouyoumdjian paints a portrait of Komitas Vardapet, an Armenian composer who survived the genocide but spent the remaining years of his life in psychiatric facilities. Pianist David Friend's opening ripples on the keyboard were joined by sharp attacks from [Domenica Fossati](#) and sloping legato melodies from clarinetist [Isabel Kim](#) before the eventual entrance of violinist [Andie Tanning Springer](#) and cellist [Rose Bellini](#). Throughout the piece, the piano lines

acted as catalyst for change, whether provoking sawed-out phrases from the other instrumentalists or leading the way with upper register trills and lightly oscillating chords. Friend was joined by baritone Jeffrey Gavett and violist Gillian Gallagher for *Everlastingness*, another portrait of a witness of the Armenian genocide. Here, Arshile Gorky was illustrated with broad, almost Romantic strokes of color and sound, with Gavett's voice ringing out over silkily swirling piano and viola patterns. Royce Vavrek's lyrics felt more or less unnecessary in the endeavor to sum up an abstract expressionist painter in such a non-abstract way; the texts felt heavy-handed and unsubtle rather than providing depth or spurring speculation.



Hotel Elephant

More complete in its effect was *This Should Feel Like Home* (2013), during which a much larger and louder incarnation of **Hotel Elephant** took to the stage. For this seven-movement work, twelve musicians led by the incomparable conductor David Bloom played alongside a prerecorded track of field recordings from Kouyoumdjian's trip to Armenia, which incorporated everything from "conversations with the locals to folk music to environment." The disjuncture between what was seen and what was heard effectively conveyed Kouyoumdjian's theme of expectation vs. reality. In the early moments, the pitched percussion being struck on stage did not match the hollow drum beats wafting across the loudspeakers; the sounds of falling water and distant, staticky voices were overlaid with jaunty accordion passages and flute and guitar progressions that eventually crescendoed, along with the other instruments, into a surge of unabashed cacophony that thundered on as the musicians throttled their instruments until a sudden cut-off replaced the clamor and clangor not with silence but with the continuing sounds of the recording. This powerful moment faded into the pastoral sounds of birds chirping and legato passagework from the strings, once again letting the easily-swayed ears (and eyes) of the audience confuse what was happening and what had already happened.



Kronos Quartet (photo: Jay Blakesberg)

After intermission, **Kronos Quartet** took the stage for the U.S. première of *Silent Cranes* (2015), a four-movement work that once again matches live acoustic sounds with prerecorded Armenian folk songs and moving testimonies from genocide survivors. The fluttering notes of the first movement, intensifying into broader repeated patterns, were joined by vocal laments and then, during the second movement, shrill and emotive acoustic sounds and the taped voices of genocide survivors. The third movement was the most stirring part of the entire evening. As the disembodied voice of Elisa Hagopian Taft recounted dead bodies all around, the musicians fell silent, letting her words carry the narrative for a brief moment before intervening with long jagged bow strokes. Taft's testimony drew the movement to its finish as she recalled a snowy night in Syria during which her father pointed out constellations; the Kronos Quartet strung their own delicately piercing constellations of notes across this startling lucidity in a passage that could have finished the whole piece. Following such a breathtaking moment, the fourth movement felt almost superfluous, especially the shift from the stark, gut-wrenching testimonies of survivors to the recitation of a poem by investigative journalist David Barsamian. Clumsy lines like "A century is a long time" once again felt like obvious attempts to tell rather than show and ultimately distracted from the work as a piece of music. The only other drawback to the performance was the accompanying projections which had all the subtlety of a high school instructor's social studies powerpoint. Although the images of 'Eastern'-looking carpets and plates and blood-stained maps were fine in and of themselves, they felt condescending and distracting in the face of such a strong musical and textual narrative. Despite the lackluster visual (and occasionally lackluster textual) component, however, the evening proved proficient in spotlighting not only Kouyoumdjian's compositional voice, but the voices of those whose lives were devastated by these tragic events one hundred years ago.

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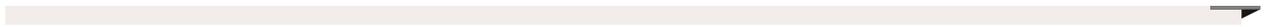


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