

The Oud: Armenian
Music as a Means of
Identity Preservation,
Construction and
Formation in Armenian
American Diaspora
Communities of the
Eastern United States

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For generations, Armenian American communities of the Eastern United States have held the oud to be a sacred instrument.¹ This paper shall examine anecdotal and historical experiences of the Armenian American oud tradition in these communities in the contexts of identity preservation, transmission of cultural heritage and reproduction of identity.

An Armenian in the United States: Memories through Music

Survivors of the Armenian Genocide scattered around the world in the early part of the 20th century, forming large communities of Armenians in the United States. Lacking Armenian schools, these communities faced a challenge in preserving their ethnic identity over the long-term. Music and food preparation, in addition to religion and language at home, became the primary mediums through which families retained and institutionalized their traditions and practiced their identities. As would be expected, without Armenian schools to offer families a structured process of language teaching and retention, these other forms of cultural preservation became the primary receptacles, custodians and developmental sanctuaries of these Diaspora communities' processes of continued identity construction. Therefore, in the public eye, an opulent cultural tradition consisting of annual food fairs and social functions became, over time, the default mainstream convention for Armenian cultural preservation in this new American setting.² This paper examines the role of the oud as a central component of this process in the Armenian American communities of the Eastern United States.

A Musical Youth

As a child, I vividly recall the sound of the oud all around me. I would hear the instrument being played by musicians practicing their craft in my home, in recordings and at community functions.³ The oud is a pear-shaped string instrument with a smooth fretless fingerboard and three sound holes, thought to have originated in Southern Mesopotamia over 5000 years ago. After a long history of travel through various geographic regions, the oud can be found today being played by numerous cultures throughout Asia in the Middle East, Caucasus, Europe and Africa. The Armenians, as one of the oldest peoples of Anatolia and the Caucasus, have contributed greatly to the advancement and understanding of this ancient and soulful instrument. As one would expect, the Armenian institution of oud study has its roots deep in Armenians' Anatolian origins. I knew almost none of this in my youth as I decided to tackle the instrument at the age of 19 after 10 years of classical guitar study.

It was not only the instrument's alluring and expressive sound that caught my attention. The attitudes of those in the community toward the instrument proved quite poignant. The oud was sacred.

¹ Other communities throughout the United States also preserved the oud tradition, most notably in parts of California's Central Valley.

² Full-time Armenian schools in the United States did not appear until the 1960s.

³ My experience is different from the musicians interviewed in this work as I did not come from a musical, let alone oud-playing, family tradition. However, my mother did sing around the house and her family in Aleppo, Syria, with whom I had limited interaction growing up, was composed of numerous musicians.

It was the classic Armenian instrument; the instrument that everyone respected, admired and to which the most direct and special attention was paid by musicians and non-musicians alike. Performing ensembles featured various instruments; nevertheless in my observations the oud commanded a higher respect. Everyone would ask “who is the oud player?” and focus closely on oud players’ styles, mastery and personalities. The cultural significance and relative primacy of the instrument ascribed by the community left a deep impression on me as a child.

In this environment of dense community interconnectivity, I first began to study the guitar at the age of 9 as an act of early artistic individuality.⁴ My paternal grandparents’ families survived the Armenian Genocide and hailed from Sepastia, Yozgat and Arapgir, choosing to settle in the Philadelphia and Boston areas of the eastern United States.⁵ I recall my grandmother asking about whether I would pick up the oud at some point after hearing of my budding guitar study. When I finally did begin study of the oud years later, my mother told me privately that my grandparents were very pleased.

Growing up as the children of immigrants was an experience that shaped the identities of my grandparents and countless others of that period. Older generations would tell me of community events numbering in the thousands where families and Armenians from all over the east coast would gather to forget the troubles and difficulties of living in a new country. In interviewing my grandfather regarding these events, an underlying theme of celebrating Armenian identity emerged. Given the musical entertainment that permeated these large gatherings, the place of the oud as the centerpiece of entertainment and culture again emerged:

“I still play recordings of oud music over and over again in my car. It’s just a part of my heritage. There was always extra special attention on the oud players. The sound of the oud touches my soul – *you have to be Armenian to appreciate it.*”⁶

As expected, the oud would take center stage at these events, further ingraining its rich sound as a foundational component of the music that permeated these gatherings. More importantly, the oud represented bonds with the homeland, symbolizing a piece of Anatolia that could not be reinstated for his generation, and likely never for future generations. This sense of sadness colored discussions with my grandparents. The instrument not only purported to be a marker of “Armenianness” for these immigrant communities, but also in a practical sense the oud stood for one of the few relics that they successfully resuscitated and sustained in a new American environment. Perceptions such as my grandfather’s trickled down with various other families through generations making their way down to my peers as we grew up in the 1980s and 1990s in the eastern United States.⁷

⁴ I had studied art and painting from the age of 6 but transitioned to music with the guitar for personal reasons.

⁵ My paternal grandfather David Kzirian was born in Camden, New Jersey across the Delaware River from Philadelphia. His family roots originated in the Divrig village of Sepastia province; one of the hardest hit regions during the Armenian Genocide. My paternal grandmother was born in Plaistow, New Hampshire and her family settled in Haverhill, Massachusetts after arriving as refugees from Arapgir.

⁶ David Kzirian in recalling memories of Armenian functions and the role of the oud. Armenian community organizations would rent out special grounds in Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park and in the Northeast section of the city near Torresdale Avenue to hold massive picnics. Armenians from the New York and New Jersey areas would also congregate in Asbury Park. For a contextualized glimpse of Armenian American life in a similar community located in Racine, Wisconsin, please see Kherdian, David, *Finding Home*, Greenwillow Books, NY, 1981.

⁷ Please see Stokes, Martin, “On Musical Cosmopolitanism”, Institute for Global Citizenship, *The Macalaster International Roundtable 2007*, Macalaster College, 2007. Stokes’ discussion of music as an identity marker for

“Armenian Oud Playing”

Various musicians in the United States preserved the Armenian tradition of oud playing through their artistry and determination. Because of space limitations, I will limit my discussion to those artists who produced a significant number of recordings and/or performed regularly at certain points of the 20th and 21st centuries that I was able to interview for the purposes of this paper. Oud players such as Chick Ganimian, George Mgrdichian, Richard Hagopian, John Bilezikjian, John Berberian, Harry Minassian, Jack Hoplamazian, the Barsamian (Artie, Mal and Dick) and Vosbikian (Greg and Samuel) families, Joe Kouyoumjian, Mark Gavoor and numerous others would fit into this definition.⁸ These men were largely lived in the eastern United States, and each possessed a unique oud style, mannerism and repertoire. As a youth, I would be overwhelmed by listening to these oud players and attempting to model my own playing after theirs. I was fortunate to meet many of these musicians in varying degrees of personal interaction, and to learn from them and their experiences in both a musical and cultural atmosphere.⁹

As I grew older and became more exposed to a greater sample of Armenian music, I became puzzled by the lack of oud in almost all instrumentation that I would hear that did not spring from the east coast Armenian musical tradition. This was not only a modern trend either. The “Continental” form of music featured keyboards, synthesizers, full drum sets, guitars and bass to accompany vocals. This style of Armenian “pop” emerged from Lebanon as part of a cultural modernization and Europeanization process in the 1960s and 1970s. However, more interestingly, and less expectedly, the oud was barely present in traditional Armenian orchestras and ensembles from Armenia itself.¹⁰ This reality perplexed me for years as I dug deeper to research and find the cause of this phenomenon. These developments may have arisen from Soviet reformulation of Armenian identity and culture which purged some historical Anatolian influences. The oud may have been considered by some to be an “urban” and “cosmopolitan” instrument while Soviet efforts to recreate national identity and music focused on “folk” music which was elevated to a form of “art” or “classical” music. Interestingly, this theory is contradicted by the personal accounts of oud players, most notably John Berberian who stated that the oud was played by his family and other Armenians in his ancestor’s village.¹¹

Although one must assume that those Armenians in the Ottoman Empire that played the oud fled to various parts of the world after the genocide, one cannot help but wonder why this tradition did

migrant communities is quite poignant. The oud essentially served as a special instrument that Armenian musicians tended to play in the United States.

⁸ This is by no means an exhaustive list. Although John Bilezikjian and Richard Hagopian are not from the Eastern United States, they performed in a similar genre to their peers in interpreting the oud. Of course within the grouping each player’s approach and style varies considerably.

⁹ Oud players nearer to my generation include Roger Mgrdichian, Greg Nigosian, Haig Puchakjian, David Hoplamazian, etc.

¹⁰ Even if the oud was utilized in Armenian orchestras, it was demoted to a secondary role. This is evident in “folk” ensembles and orchestras that exist in Armenia today, where the oud’s role is accompaniment. In this paper, Ara Dinkjian’s interview discusses this different role of the oud below.

¹¹ Please see Nercessian, Andy, “A Look at the Emergence of the Concept of National Culture in Armenia: The Former Soviet Folk Ensemble”, *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Jun., 2000), pp. 79-94. More research is required in this area to shed light upon the history of the oud as played by Armenians.

not survive anywhere else outside of Turkey.¹² Various theories could help to explain the reasoning behind the “purge” of the oud from the psyche of most Armenian communities. However, a discussion of why the oud did not survive in other communities would go beyond the dimensions of this work and I will instead focus on why the oud assumed the role it did with Armenian Americans in the eastern United States.

Perspectives

In researching this paper, I was fortunate to interview Armenian American oud musicians such as John Berberian (oldest generation) Ara Dinkjian (2nd generation), Mal Barsamian (3rd generation) and David Hoplamazian (4th/my generation).¹³

John Berberian: Impressions of Oudi Hrant

Any discussion of the Armenian oud tradition in the United States inevitably includes the famed Oud master “Oudi Hrant” Kenkulian. Kenkulian’s style involved singing and accompanying himself on the oud as he would simultaneously play the melody of his vocal lines. Although generations of oud players that followed in his footsteps crafted their own styles and interpretations, Kenkulian’s influence is unmistakably present to at least some degree with nearly all Armenian oud musicians.¹⁴

For the purposes of this paper, Berberian provided a considerable number of anecdotes and observations of his time spent with Kenkulian. He and Kenkulian interacted several times during Kenkulian’s trips to the United States. Berberian responded with the following when asked about Kenkulian’s impact on Armenian American musicians and communities as a whole:

“He was a king in his time in America. My father’s generation that was the same as Hrant’s generation admired Hrant greatly. My father and his peers knew the instrument and could identify with the taksim form and understood the music. But they could not play the oud with quite the same finesse that Hrant played the instrument. They all admired his talent and ability as Hrant was a master of the taksim. Hrant held a special elevated standing for Armenians here. All of the visits contributed to his image and persona and set him ahead as an Armenian oud player.”

According to Berberian, Kenkulian’s visits varied in terms of duration and where he stayed. For the most part he was invited to America by Armenian oud enthusiasts. As such, Kenkulian would stay

¹² Armenians remaining after the genocide still play the oud in Istanbul and Diyarbakir.

¹³ John Berberian is one of a handful of musicians worldwide given the title of “Oudi” (oud master). Ara Dinkjian is a world renowned composer whose pieces have been performed at the Olympic games and by numerous popular artists in the middle east and Europe. Mal Barsamian is a virtuosic clarinet, oud and guitar player from the Boston area. David Hoplamazian is an accomplished violinist and oud player from Philadelphia.

¹⁴ Kenkulian was blind and would also travel to the United States for treatments. He was an innovator, incorporating bidirectional muzrab (picking) technique, new tunings, and pizzicato (palm muting). The title “Oudi” means “master of the oud”. Kenkulian was also known as “Hrant Emre” which meant “Hrant of the Soul”, “Hrant the Brother”, “Hrant the Enamored” or “Hrant of the Soul”. Kenkulian was clearly a transcendental figure. The title of “Emre” may have been linked to Yunus Emre, the sufi mystic and poet, however this has not been confirmed.

with the family that invited him and venture out into the community from there. Alternatively, hosts would frequently arrange household “kef” parties where community musicians would join Hrant for festive performances.¹⁵ Berberian described Kenkulian’s visits as being more casual at first as Armenian American organizational infrastructures were not as developed and mature as today. This meant that the primary mechanism to invite Kenkulian for visits was implemented through personal interaction and logistics coordinated by friends, family and musicians interested in meeting Hrant and giving him community exposure.¹⁶

Over time, however, Kenkulian’s visits became more high-profile. Berberian explained that Kenkulian gave a large and well attended concert in NYC which turned out to be one of his most famous performances. Berberian emphasized that this concert greatly increased awareness of Kenkulian’s work and allowed the public to see him in bigger numbers. The key of his success and heightened standing was tied to this appearance in New York City which made Kenkulian’s music accessible to the masses. Although Kenkulian was already revered by Armenian musicians as an urban legend of sorts and had performed for years on the 8th Avenue circuit¹⁷, this concert significantly amplified and elevated his mythical stature as the Armenian oud master.¹⁸

Both Kenkulian, and his contemporary Oudi Marko Melkon, worked on 8th avenue and Berberian noted that it was common for large crowds to see them perform. Berberian stated that Melkon knew Berberian to be a young Armenian oud player and Melkon would encourage him to play during breaks. Berberian implied that sitting in with Melkon was a significant step in gaining acceptance by the older musicians that performed.¹⁹ This generational linkage signified a strong affinity for assisting a younger musician because this meant that the tradition would survive through him.

¹⁵ Based on these historical accounts and personal experience, it was entirely common for Armenians to gather with musicians and friends at an individual’s home to listen to music, dance and enjoy food. The word “kef” represents this cultural phenomenon.

¹⁶ Berberian referred to house parties at Manuk Boyadjian’s home in Queens, New York. Boyadjian was a close friend of Kenkulian. Similar events would occur in Watertown, Massachusetts at Hovsep Kouyoumjian’s home and throughout the eastern United States. It appears that at this time, American Armenian organizations were not equipped to handle sophisticated events involving international travel and professional concerts. Furthermore, there was a certain gravitas in all things related to Kenkulian which meant clear social advantage and standing for those that worked with him or arranged his visits.

¹⁷ For a more comprehensive overview of the 8th Avenue music scene, please see the recording “Armenians on 8th Avenue” produced by Traditional Crossroads in 1996 with notes by Harold G. Hagopian. Hagopian describes a “uniquely American phenomenon” where “immigrants [longed] for a piece of their homeland” that “[had] rapidly changed in Turkey with the birth of the new Republic, [but] was preserved by these refugees half way around the world in New York on 8th Avenue.”

¹⁸ Kenkulian would stay at the Walcott Hotel on the lower east side, where Armenian oud enthusiasts would accompany him to his nightly performances on 8th Avenue.

¹⁹ Berberian explained that there was a stigma associated with the nightclub scene which Armenian artists dominated. Furthermore, his father did not want him to participate in the “chalghujuh” lifestyle which carried a pejorative usage for musicians that entertain audiences. The negative connotation with which Armenian elders viewed this scene was ironic as Berberian noted that his parents’ generation frequented these establishments while not wanting their children to be involved in performing there. They regarded the belly dance scene as involving staying up late, drinking, no family life and other indiscretions which they did not want for their children. Nonetheless, Berberian discussed how his parents were supportive of his recording projects, concerts, Armenian dances and his efforts “to make something of the music.” Hoplamazian also referenced the “chalghujuh” lifestyle. However, he stated that he felt that perhaps the musicians that participated in the night club scenes of the older

Berberian first met Kenkulian on one of Kenkulian's various trips to the United States and knew him personally. Berberian noted that Kenkulian was pleased by Berberian's style of playing and conferred a certificate to him. This certificate granted Berberian the title of "Oudi" that Kenkulian himself held as a title. Berberian explained that he tried to copy Kenkulian's style and that this was a special moment for him as a musician.²⁰ Nonetheless, Berberian offered an anecdote that truly conveyed the meaning of gaining Kenkulian's approval:

"He [Kenkulian] came to a club I was working at with a friend – a very informal village club. That particular night was a Friday night and all of my Armenian friends would come when I performed. Every other week when I played they would listen intently and applaud after I performed a taksim. When Hrant came and sat down he wanted to hear me. So I was nervous. The master of taksim was here listening to me. I played the best I could in the key he loved so much, which was Hijaz. These friends of mine that would've normally applauded me – they wanted to see what he was going to do first. There was silence. Hrant stood up and he applauded and they all applauded – the entire crowd was waiting for his cue."

Despite these stories of interaction, Berberian maintained that he unfortunately did not take any actual lessons from Kenkulian and instead learned from his style through listening to his recordings and seeing his live performances. Berberian stressed that Kenkulian's impact on his playing was more influential than any other oud player.²¹

Ara Dinkjian: Composer

Dinkjian, whose family is from Dikranagerd, falls into the generation after Berberian, and described his experience as a youth to be one where the oud was a forbidden instrument due to its frailty. As a result of basic human psychology, of course Dinkjian wanted to play the instrument even more given its inaccessible and delicate nature. Like the other musicians interviewed, Dinkjian professed a deep and personal affection for the oud and he idolized his father and the music he heard growing up in New Jersey.²² Dinkjian analogized the oud to the guitar in mainstream American music:

"The oud is the standard – for an American Armenian you cannot conceive of a dance or wedding without an oud – it is the standard core instrument for a group – just as the guitar is today. I never knew Armenian music without the oud – in fact I always expected it subconsciously."

Dinkjian described his musical career as split into two components consisting of 1) a domestic musical career as a chordal accompanying musician on keyboard or guitar in Armenian dance and folk ensembles, and 2) a career abroad in Europe and the Middle East founded on his compositions and oud

generations wanted to be "brought up" to cope with internal emotional conflict and personal hardship. He added that this path, which has largely disappeared today, was still available at the time to older generations of Armenian American musicians.

²⁰ Receiving the title of "Oudi" was an unusual occurrence outside of Turkey.

²¹ Berberian explained that the Greek Gypsy oud player Oudi Yorgo Bacanos worked frequently with Kenkulian and they were peers. Bacanos was a progressive oud player that many considered decades ahead of his time. Bacanos' chordal representations, clear and projecting oud mastery high up on the fingerboard were considered extraordinarily virtuosic and difficult to emulate, even by today's most advanced oud musicians.

²² Ara Dinkjian's father Onnik is a famed Armenian singer and musician and played the oud during Ara's youth.

performances.²³ Dinkjian noted that his career as an oud player in other countries began to take on a very new and unexpected character over time:

“It was so striking to me when I started to go overseas to perform. I was immediately identified as the Armenian. I was going to several countries – it wasn’t Ara Dinkjian it was ‘the Armenian oud player’ – I suddenly found myself representing Armenians and Armenian music. I did not ask to do this. I had simply organized concerts to play with my group and I ended up representing, in the minds of my non-Armenian audiences, Armenian music. Once I understood this dynamic, I felt a great responsibility to be sincere in my work, to be accurate and passionate as best I could. I became more than just a player – I realized I was defining and exposing this music which evolved into a whole other level of impact. This phenomenon was significantly different than my performances in America.”

Dinkjian also commented on what appeared to be a reintroduction of the oud in Greece:

“The Greek press wrote about my arrival in Greece, treating my performances as ‘bringing back the oud (and cumbush)’ to Greek music. This may have had to do with my ethnic identity as an Armenian and therefore status as a non-hostile element. I sensed that because of this and also my objectivity and lack of political or ethnic bias, my music may have helped to tame a potentially volatile issue.”

Mal Barsamian: A New England Story

Mal Barsamian’s story exemplifies that of Armenian American musicians from the New England area.²⁴ He noted, like other interviewees, that there was always an oud in his home and that numerous relatives played the instrument. Apart from private lessons in guitar and picking up the dumbeg at a very young age, Barsamian would play the oud in his free time and began to develop his own style. He stressed that he incorporated what he heard and saw from all around him into his playing, and that the rich world of ethnomusicology strongly influenced his musicianship.

“I played what I heard at home – and listened to Oudi Hrant all the time. I remember hearing stories about how he would play not only Armenian songs but ‘sharagans’ for hours. Without him and the oud players before me I would have never played.”²⁵

Aside from a deep reverence for Oudi Hrant and his work, Barsamian lamented what he perceived to be the place of the oud in contemporary Armenian music. Ironically, Barsamian noted that in his experience, even nationalist Armenians associated with Hrant due to his standing as a musical icon and larger than life figure.

²³ Dinkjian does not consider himself to be an Armenian American oud player in the same vein as the other interviewees as this was not his main musical identity in the United States. Dinkjian acknowledged that he did play the oud occasionally; however he did describe himself to be a very active member of the music community as a general proposition. Dinkjian also studied the oud at The Hartt College of Music and was the first to graduate from this institution with a special degree concentrating in oud study.

²⁴ Barsamian’s ancestors are from Husenig, Kharpert, Malatya and he also noted that his paternal grandmother is Assyrian. Barsamian graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music with both a Bachelor’s and Master’s Degree in Classical Guitar Performance.

²⁵ Like other interviewees, Barsamian expressed strong admiration for the work and legacy of Oudi Hrant.

“In the end, many Greek and Armenian musicians turned their backs on Hrant and his peers. I think it is because many people associate the instrument with ‘Turkishness’. But like it or not this is history – we were from there and cultures influenced each other.”²⁶

David Hoplamazian: Youngest Generation of Armenian American Oud Players

Turning to David Hoplamazian, we can examine the perspectives of an oud player of my own generation. His family had lived in America since the early 20th century and was originally from Yozgat and Malatya. Hoplamazian, like Berberian and Dinkjian, was raised in a musical family:

“From a very young age, as soon as I could remember being able to speak or listen, I recall the oud always being there in my family. My father was an oud player and luthier and he made the oud that I still use to perform today. There was always oud music playing in my house. I first started to understand what the instrument meant as I grew older in our community and at church. I was always drawn to it – especially seeing my father and musicians like Ara Dinkjian come and play at my church.”

Hoplamazian noted that the oud was a part of both his family and ethnic identity, which was reinforced by his constant exposure to the instrument in not only the community but through its more intimate inner workings and design:

“I was lucky to gain an in-depth understanding of the instrument. In my house there were always oud molds, rosettes, woods from all over the world, ebony, spruce and hand carving tools all over. This helped me understand the instrument and appreciate the artistry and tradition of making ouds.”

Like Dinkjian, Hoplamazian told a story of being denied permission to play the oud by his father. The reasons for this were complex. First, he stated that the violin was generally preferred because it could be taught in a structured system through both school and personal instructors which would in turn hone general musical skill, appreciation and theoretical comprehension. Second, prevention of poor oud habits remained paramount, and according to his father, would be difficult to correct in later years if he would have learned the oud too early or without proper teaching:

“When I was young my father would not let me play the oud – maybe I could touch it. I always had a special interest in the instrument. Not that I didn’t like the violin, but it was not the oud. So I would sneak in to play the instrument when I could. I wanted to do it all the more because it was not permitted.”²⁷

²⁶ Barsamian’s attitude regarding the oud’s symbolic nature is shared by other musicians in the Armenian American musical tradition. These perceptions are intertwined with conflicting identity definitions set forth by Armenians and are explored in the analysis set forth below.

²⁷ Hoplamazian also opined that the underlying concerns of him leading a “chalghujuh” lifestyle were also in play. Please see note 19 above.

What is the Armenian Oud Style?

Berberian's generation, like Joe Kouyoumjian, represents the first that was born in the 1940s in the United States as children of immigrants and refugees.²⁸ Dinkjian's generation was born in the late 1950s at a time when several American-born Armenians' parents had already lived for longer periods of time in the United States.²⁹ As a result, succeeding generations incorporated their own understanding of previous decades' musicians and blended their playing with music of their own respective eras.³⁰

Berberian learned about music from his father who played the oud and was also an instrument maker. Berberian stressed that his closeness in generational proximity to his father and his father's peers that had come directly from overseas provided a musical advantage to him that younger oud players such as myself could not experience. Berberian's father brought the oud, like numerous other Armenians, to America with him and Berberian emphasized that this tradition was ingrained from a young age. Berberian explained that he learned the makam modal system of Turkish music and studied the music of his father's generation, including reading music, saz semais, peshrevs and other variants of Turkish classical music.³¹

Berberian referred to hearing original Armenian village music straight from the source. Although my generation has been able to listen to certain recordings that were preserved, this more intimate connection is surely valuable not only musically but culturally. Berberian's statements imply the perception of a more authentic transfer of knowledge rooted in his generation's understanding of identity – an experience so raw and personal that it cannot be reproduced in the same primordial and visceral manner to succeeding generations. Subscribing to this perspective implies that this attenuation appears to have diluted the instrument's mantra to younger musicians.

Berberian discussed how ensembles of that period tended to be composed mostly of Armenian musicians. Berberian stated that "all Armenian musicians played the music of several cultures"; interestingly, Berberian explained that these ensembles made up of Armenians would perform, and record, the music of various cultures including Greek, Arab, Turkish and Israeli selections. He noted that other ensembles in his experience did not tend to perform music of other cultures to the degree that Armenians would. This suggests a sense of musical mastery or expertise that Armenian musicians of the east coast cultivated, perhaps proudly as keepers of the fragile oud tradition, while simultaneously

²⁸ Berberian's family was from Gesaria (Kayseri). Kouyoumjian's family was from Aintab.

²⁹ Dinkjian's father Onnik was from Marseilles, France and his family was originally from Dikranagerd which is today known as Diyarbekir / Diyarbakir in Turkey. This is a densely populated Kurdish city, where the municipality is run by Kurdish officials. A few Suryani families, an elderly Armenian couple and Keldanis still live in the city. Over the last few decades with the rise of the Kurdish movement, the city is symbolically considered to be the capital of Kurdistan.

³⁰ The amount of variation in Armenian oud playing has grown considerably in recent decades. Artists such as George Mgrdichian, John Bilezikjian, Richard Hagopian and scores of others each cultivated distinctive styles.

³¹ Unfortunately, many of the traditions and accomplishments by Armenians and other ethnic groups in the Ottoman Empire have been trivialized or obfuscated from collective memory in Turkey and also in Armenia and the Armenian Diaspora. The Armenian Genocide left strong taboos in its wake with Turks and Armenians. Composers and luminaries of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries include Baba Hampartsoum Limondjian, Oudi Hrant Kenkulian, Kemani Tatyos Ekserciyan and several others. Limondjian created the system for Ottoman classical music which is still used in the Armenian Apostolic Church today in some parishes.

offering various ethnic groups their own music during performances.³² Furthermore, this unique style of musical expression appeared to maintain the linguistic and cultural amalgamation that occurred in the ethnically dense and diverse region of Anatolia.³³

In analyzing the Armenian oud tradition in musical terms, Dinkjian explained that in the Middle East where the oud originated, although it was considered the “king” of all instruments, the oud was mostly found to be an instrument that played in the middle register while the violin, clarinet and kanun would play in the higher octave:

“In America in the northeastern part of the United States, the oud is not playing the tenor role. It became the soprano instrument – the lead melody player. George Mgrdichian had a considerable impact on everybody that played the instrument after him. Where did the oud play a solo of the Armenian folk song ‘Groong’? Nowhere else. But George did it in America as an Armenian oud player.”³⁴

Dinkjian added that early musical groups in America such as the Ardziv Orchestra and the Vosbikian Ensemble performed a rather unique and assorted musical repertoire. Furthermore, he emphasized that Armenian American music, and specifically the role and music of the oud, does not sound like any other music anywhere in the world:

“These groups took Anatolian folk songs and even some Caucasian melodies from the East, and started performing them in the time signature of their ancestral region – in the case of the Vosbikians this was Malatya – and the natural default meter happened to be 10/8. This is why today we hear songs such as ‘Shalakho’ and ‘Sari Sirun Yar’ performed in both 6/8 (Eastern) and 10/8 (Western) time signatures. Furthermore, instruments such as the saxophone were more available in America and were added to ensembles – which is why to this day almost 100 years after Armenians first started coming to America we see Saxophones in Armenian American ensembles.”

It appears the musicians of earlier generations did not consciously contemplate how their actions preserved, and contemporaneously modified, their own Armenian and musical identities. Berberian stated that “we loved to play this music – this was ‘our music’” and the visits to each others’ homes to perform casually were very much of a part of the community bonds that Armenian Americans maintained. This is evidenced in part by how these musicians constantly recorded their gatherings as a memory of their music and collaboration.

Hoplamazian explained that when his ancestors escaped from the Armenian populated areas of the Ottoman Empire, the oud-centered folk style of music was quite simply what Armenians played and that this was a component of their Armenian community life in Anatolia. This form came with them to

³² Berberian’s albums “Expressions East”, “Oud Artistry”, and “Music of the Middle East” were recorded in the United States in the early and mid 1960s. These recordings were commercially produced by New York recording companies and record producers. These albums offered an eclectic cultural mix of various songs. Berberian referred to these recordings as indicative of popular music of this era and as its own period of musical development in the 1950s and 1960s. He stressed that this genre was inherently tied to the 8th Avenue scene and venues like the Café Feenjon and El Avram in Greenwich Village. Berberian emphasized that, in his experience, Armenian bands of that era played a diverse repertoire while other ethnic musicians tended to play only their own music.

³³ Hagopian, pp. 3-4.

³⁴ Mgrdichian’s style robustly expressed a mastery of the oud’s higher register in a variety of folk, classical and fusion settings.

Boston, New York and Philadelphia where it was influenced by jazz, blues, and other styles and thus the tradition developed over time. Hoplamazian stated that, “our 3 generation old families knew that music.”

Speaking from personal experience, the songs that made up the Armenian oud tradition were very diverse in nature, reflecting the multiethnic repertoires of Armenian American musicians as they absorbed the instrument and its culturally residual accoutrements into the 1950s. Attending an Armenian event I would hear multiple songs from various ethnic backgrounds, but what made them unique was the interpretation by the oud musicians and the Armenian American experience. Hearing Berberian, Dinkjian and others play the oud over the years, there was a discernible common denominator in how the instrument fit into the ensemble. Although each musician expressed their style individually in discernible ways, the oud’s role was always the same. The oud provided a leading melodic function, explored improvisational development during songs after vocals or instrumental lines, and completed and offered overall musical presence with its soulful, fretless and plucked woody sound. If the song was Kenkulian’s *Sirun Aghchig Sirun Yar* (Sweet Girl, My Sweetheart) or Gomidas Vartabed’s playful folkloric piece *Al Ayloughus Gorav* (“My Red Kerchief is Lost”), the oud’s performance, position and projection remained the same in ensemble after ensemble.³⁵ In fact, the combination and wide spectrum of songs from various Armenian composers is what is most central to the Armenian oud tradition’s repertoire. Aside from the non-Armenian dance tunes that ensembles occasionally selected, the diversity of composers, genres and styles projected by Armenian oud players truly defined the adaptability of the instrument and the oud players themselves.³⁶

This can be said to be the enduring treasure of the Armenian oud tradition; the ability, knowledge and cultural awareness to play multiple songs from a wide array of genres and regions well and with artistic credibility.

Identity and the Oud

There is an undeniable symbolism entrenched in the oud and the community’s view of the instrument which tells a story of Armenian American identity. As explained above, Oudi Hrant’s visits were greatly anticipated by diaspora communities. In terms of historical context, Armenian Americans attached a reverence to him as a musical celebrity similar to the aura that surrounds Djivan Gasparyan, the contemporary duduk master. Kenkulian embodied one of the contact zones between Armenians in America and Turkey. He likely inspired subconsciously conflicting emotions of painful loss and nostalgic remembrance of Anatolia for the Armenians that came to hear him perform. Perhaps this dynamic is why my grandparents expressed deep emotion when my mother told them I began study of the oud in college. To my grandparents, playing the instrument meant that a piece of “home” would survive here in the United States; that although they were not musicians, they observed that I was being given the

³⁵ Of course, there was room for variation in this definition of the oud role which ultimately depended on a particular oud player’s experience and skills.

³⁶ Please see Signell, Karl, “Mediterranean Musicians in America: Tales We Tell, Recordings, 78s”, *Ethnomusicology Online*, Issue 3, Musicians of the Mediterranean. Signell discusses how musicians from the Balkans and Anatolia migrated to the United States and shaped their repertoires to reflect the preferences of their audiences. This occurred in the context of adopting new and blended styles as a result of performing with a diverse array of instrumentalists and interacting with multiethnic audiences.

“saliva-softened bread” that Seremetakis refers to in her chapter on the Memory of Senses.³⁷ Qualitatively similar experiences are conveyed through Dinkjian’s and Hoplamazian’s personal recollections where they were forbidden to play the oud as youths and only later earned the right to become oud players. These transfers signify and explore the relationship between attempting to reconcile trauma and the preservation of Anatolian identity within their respective family structures. Disallowing unprepared young Armenian Americans the opportunity to begin the study of the oud represents an ultimate sanctity and protection of the instrument, which undoubtedly serves as a metaphor for cultural and familial identity, heightened valuation of music and the instrument after the trauma of genocide and intensely sensitive and concealed longings for ‘home’.

Although many Armenians in the eastern United States were survivors or descendants of survivors from the Armenian Genocide, the oud’s relationship to the Armenian experience in Anatolia is conceptually linked to the traumatic personal and community experiences of persecution, deportation and massacre and the passing down of these psychological effects. Hoplamazian commented on the deep emotional burdens he observed from older generation of Armenian American oud players:

“There were certain songs that they always sang and played – some were genocide remembrance songs. These were songs sung in the Turkish language that reminded Armenians of pre-genocide times. One of Chick Ganimian’s songs was about the killing and death that occurred during the genocide. I remember how they would argue on stage about whether it would be appropriate to play the song on one particular occasion. This kind of thing was over my head at the time as I was a youngster. I was just happy to meet Chick who was one of the top oud players that my family always talked about.”

Based on my research and personal experience I conclude that the oud reminded Armenian Americans paradoxically of both the tranquility and violence, and beauty and horrors, of “home” much in the same way that Seremetakis explores the idea of nostalgia, except that here the means through which memory is shaped is through music, and particularly the oud in the case of diasporic Armenians in the Eastern United States.³⁸ Here we also can observe the potent flexibility of diasporic memory and experience discussed by Huyssen in his work on diaspora and the nation.³⁹

Furthermore, the tradition of oud handed down from generation to generation as with Kenkulian, Berberian, Barsamian, Dinkjian and my generation with Hoplamazian is represented by the use of metaphors. The utilization of the oud, its study and the community’s respect for it as an Armenian instrument, is as if the life stories of these Armenian musicians are put into the instrument and transferred to the next generation. Just as lullaby is a metaphor, so too is the transmitted music of Armenian American oud musicians over generations.⁴⁰

³⁷ Seremetakis, Nadia C., “The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity”, The University of Chicago Press, pp. 23-25.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Huyssen, Andreas, “Diaspora and Nation”, *Diaspora and Memory*, pg. 82. Huyssen refers to “powerful memory discourses... ..[arising] after histories mass exterminations, massacres... ..and with the struggles to secure the legitimacy and future of emerging polity by finding ways to commemorate and adjudicate past wrongs.”

⁴⁰ For reasons that are unknown but likely related to the taboos, psychological traumas and exceedingly difficult conditions of Armenian survivors in the Middle East, many Armenians from that geographic region associate the oud with only Turkish or Arab culture. This in turn implies that it is not authentic or acceptable for Armenians to play the oud and refer to this phenomenon as “Armenian music.”

Concert with Ara Dinkjian

Given my discovery and nascent understanding of these various emotive and intellectual inertias, I felt a reintroduction and revitalization of the Armenian oud tradition, even in a small and limited way, would make an impact on a potential audience. I decided to organize a concert that would explore many of the themes we discuss in class in relation to identity and the Armenian American Diaspora. The stated idea to concert-goers was the following: “The purpose of this concert is to raise awareness of these composers’ works and their contribution to the opulent tapestry of Armenian music”; this referred to works of Armenian Composers of the Ottoman period. The true meaning of the theme of the concert was much more complicated and would derive from the diversity of the canonized repertory of “Armenian music” and the taboos associated with certain genres that have not been accepted or included in Armenian musical performance over the past few decades. I collaborated with Ara Dinkjian, who had spent significant portions of his career studying all types of Anatolian music and traditions of Ottoman Armenians. Dinkjian and I possessed similar passions for mastering the oud and discovering Armenian music history.

During the concert, deliberately designed visuals transported the audience backward in time. Baskets of apricots, figs, mint plants, oriental rugs, backgammon boards, paintings of Armenians from the Ottoman era and other objects adorned the concert room to symbolize themes of earth, life, fertility, remembrance and connection to one’s ancestors. In this setting, two ouds accompanied each other, performing various works of Armenian composers from historical Armenia and all over the world. What was special about this performance was its inclusion and revival of compositions written by composers that are at times not commonly considered part of customary Armenian classical and folk performance.⁴¹ The reasons for this are embedded in the taboos that sprang from the Armenian Genocide, finding currency in the psychological trauma of survivors that fled into diaspora communities and Armenia after enduring that tragedy. Furthermore, Sovietization of Armenia left its mark not only politically, socially and culturally in terms of language – but perhaps most importantly in its influence on Armenian music – which had already been mostly purged of the ancient and time-honored Anatolian Armenian influences, notation and styles⁴² – with the oud appearing in a role as a secondary accompanying instrument in Armenian orchestras and ensembles.⁴³ One can only opine as to the

⁴¹ Of course, it would be difficult and controversial to define what “is” and “is not” Armenian music. For the purposes of this paper, a more inclusive approach is incorporated which fits the dynamics and diversity of the Armenian Diaspora. Nercessian’s discussion of the Soviet-created Armenian folk ensemble sheds light on the Armenian Diaspora’s eagerness to embrace these ensembles as “authentic” and “Armenian” as they were originating from the Armenian Republic. The Diaspora’s experience with identity crises and multiple traumatic experiences also reinforced this desire and craving for, and infatuation with, “authenticity”.

⁴² See http://www.komitas.am/eng/folk_music.htm for writings by Gomidas on Armenian modes and the microtonality of Armenian music. He both criticizes the phenomenon, (“in such cases, [minstrels] use the Turkish ‘sharki’ and ‘Turki’ melodies... ..which are inappropriate to the lyrical style”) and acknowledges the shared nature and mutual influence of cultures and music when he asks, “what music on earth is unmixed and pure? Only that of animals which vocalize the same sounds and same intonation... ..the mutual influence of national styles is undeniable, and there is no nation that remains isolated from such merging of idioms. Each nation appropriates a thing it does not possess from one that does and integrates it into its national style.”)

⁴³ Although Nercessian does not explore the reason for this, Dinkjian explained that the oud’s role as a counterpoint and countermelody instrument also represents a significant difference from the instrument’s leading role in American Armenian music; which is a derivative of the musical culture that was a part of Armenian life in

reason for this cultural subjugation, however suppression of identity and affinities for “home” may have played a role in Soviet Armenia’s elevation of other instruments into the nation’s cultural conscience.⁴⁴ Soviet policy sought to create a “national music” with all instruments holding equal importance. These instruments were recreated and restructured by Vartan Buniyatyan who constructed a family of instruments consisting of mainly Caucasian area instruments with various pitches and timbres. Out of this new amalgamation, he helped to create orchestras modeled after European symphonies where instruments were grouped together and played parts under the supervision of a composer. This completely removed the improvisational essence of traditional folk music, and was ironically a result of Soviet policies which aimed to “elevate” folk music to the level of classical music for purposes associated with social engineering objectives.⁴⁵

As a result, the fretless, 11 stringed Anatolian oud that Armenians mastered for generations became marginalized as an Armenian instrument. Interestingly, as explored above, the once vibrant Armenian tradition of oud mastery during the Ottoman Empire thrived in diaspora communities of the Eastern United States – and as Dinkjian offered, the Armenian American music of the Eastern United States is unique when compared to all other forms of Armenian music. Unfortunately, today, study of the oud and its preservation by Armenians is a fairly distinct practice and relic of centuries past – this sad irony articulates the full repercussions of the Armenian Genocide as Armenians, along with other minorities, contributed greatly to, and helped shape in fundamental ways, significant parts of Ottoman classical music and Anatolian folk music.⁴⁶ The Armenian Genocide left not only a festering wound in the practical sense when it came to staggering loss of life and displacement from Anatolia – but the genocide spawned a legacy of selective memory in future generations.⁴⁷ For these reasons, a contextualized and comprehensive understanding of the entire Armenian musical tradition – its richness, complexity, diversity and soul – is unfortunately left incomplete.⁴⁸

Anatolia. Dinkjian opined that Armenians and Greeks both subconsciously had forsaken the oud because it reminded them of Turkey. The Greeks created the bouzouki, a new diatonic system and abandoned for several decades their rich musical traditions of Anatolia, Smyrna, etc. Dinkjian noted that Armenians worldwide may have done the same thing with the oud, stressing the abandonment of the modal system in most Armenian music.⁴⁴ This may have resulted in the exclusion and demotion of the oud as a traditional instrument played by Armenians, although more research is required in this area to ascertain the veracity of this potential conclusion. However, as Nercessian states, the duduk was substantially altered from its known folk roots and reintroduced as an “Armenian” instrument in the Soviet Armenian folk idiom, combined with various instruments which it typically did not perform alongside. Overall, improvisational instincts and skills were suppressed in favor of consistency and accuracy, as these policies in the aggregate represented Soviet nativization (“korenizatsiia”) designed to suppress nationalism. (Nercessian pg. 82). Quite interestingly, this author performs frequently on the oud with Djivan Gasparyan’s grandson Jivan Gasparyan, Jr. who also plays the duduk. This cross-pollination of “Western” and “Eastern” Armenian musical traditions underscores the anthropological realities of musical and cultural development and the enormous diversity of what could be defined as “Armenian music.”

⁴⁵ Nercessian, pp. 81-85.

⁴⁶ Hagopian, p. 3. Hagopian avers that “though Armenians contributed to its development (i.e. music of the Ottoman Empire), it cannot be claimed as ‘Armenian music’. Nor, by the same token, can it be labeled as Turkish, Kurdish, Greek or Jewish, though all of these ethnic groups contributed to its creation producing a number of important musicians and composers.”

⁴⁷ Hagopian, pp. 3-4. Hagopian discusses how “no aspect of Turkish-Armenian culture [has] suffered more as a result [of the genocide] than music.”

⁴⁸ Hagopian, p. 3. Hagopian explores how “Turkish-Armenians, having fled their homeland have had no government to represent them and little means to preserve their culture.” This is in contrast to “Armenians from

But one may ask what the significance would be of such a repertoire? Why is it relevant to put all these composers together for this concert? As Douzjian's analysis of Khachig Tololyan's work reveals, any phraseology consisting of words such as "national identity" and "preservation" implies that the authentic source of culture is the nation-state. This ignores the tremendous cultural achievements and developments of historically blended sources of Armenian culture.⁴⁹ Given the distinctive composition and geographic dispersion of the Armenian Diaspora, and the significant sources of Armenian literature, music and art that were fostered and nurtured outside of what is today's Republic of Armenia, an inclusive rather than exclusive approach in defining "Armenian music" would be instructive and helpful in understanding Armenian music's variety, intricacy and opulence.⁵⁰ The Armenian American oud tradition is no different. Moreover, this new understanding of a repertory of Armenian music would involve inclusion, acceptance and appreciation for Armenian composers of the Ottoman Empire.⁵¹

The practical execution of the concert contained two levels of operation. In the first level, performing the works of Bimen Shen, Oudi Hrant Kenkulian and Kemani Tatyos Efendi alongside Gomidas, Sayat Nova and Kusan Ashod represented a powerful theme of breaking down taboos and celebrating survival, identity and healing.⁵²

On another more intimate level, taking the stage with Dinkjian symbolized a performance of our identities as Armenian American oud players.⁵³ Our performance of Kemani Tatyos Efendi's Huseyni Saz Semai and Kenkulian's Parov Yegar was at the same time a performance of transmission of tradition; yet we simultaneously restated our place in the tradition by making it a living thing. This development occurred musically as we injected hints of western harmony, chordal accompaniment and melodic experimentation alongside the conventional microtonal nuances that provide auditory color to these compositions; and personally as we accompanied each other in a setting where we presented our understanding of the Armenian tradition of oud performance to the audience as two Diaspora Armenians in America. Although Dinkjian and I are nearly a generation apart, we come from similar places in terms of our identity as Armenians. Dinkjian stressed in his interview that:

"Music is obviously one of the handful of elements that defines a people to an immeasurable degree. Without our music, as well as our language, literature, architecture and food, we are not Armenian."

the former Soviet Republic [who] had the advantage of legal boundaries with world-wide recognition, and thus a culture produced from within those boundaries [which] was recognized as unquestionably Armenian."

⁴⁹ Please see Douzjian, Myrna, "The Diaspora Ministry's Essentialist View of Armenian Identity", *Critics Forum of Literature*. <http://www.asbarez.com/78723/diadisregarding-the-spora's-cultural-production-the-diaspora-ministry's-essentialist-view-of-armenian-identity/>

⁵⁰ Hagopian, p. 3. Hagopian notes the irony of acknowledging Armenian architecture, churches, art, manuscripts, and food from the Ottoman period as "Armenian" while ignoring the work of Armenian composers.

⁵¹ Hagopian, p. 4. "Modern scholars often refer to the folk music of Turkey not as 'Turkish' but as 'Anatolian'."

⁵² Although Armenians not from the eastern United States may consider it unusual for the oud to perform Armenian classical and folk music, this is not the case for Armenian American oud players and the communities from which they came.

⁵³ A Philadelphia-born Armenian oud luthier, John Merjanian built the oud I used for the performance, further underscoring the broad musical culture, sophistication and prevalence of the Armenian American oud paradigm. Oud players refer to Merjanian's ouds as "Merjans". Special thanks to Dr. Armen Sevag for the use of the Merjanian oud and Aramazt Kalayjian for his assistance.

This theme of symbolism through music, generational connectivity and identity bonding is discussed and explored by Seremetakis in her work on memory and perception and is essential to understanding the Armenian American experience.⁵⁴

Conclusion

It is clear that over generations, Armenian American musicians in the Eastern United States maintained and refined performance and study of the oud. The underlying themes discussed in this paper of musicians' and families' generational interconnectedness correlate strongly with transmission of identity and homeland to the succeeding party. It is through this medium that the oud played an integral role in helping to sustain and evolve ideas of Armenian identity in America. As a young Armenian American oud player, this is an area of study and preservation which I aim to continue examining after my time as a student as part of a larger project to chronicle and record impressions, experiences, observations and anecdotes of Armenian American oud players.

⁵⁴ Seremetakis, p. 37. Here, Seremetakis discusses the symbolic nature of generational connectivity. Her stages of linkage ranging from "saliva" to "the journey" to "traffic" to "dust" demonstrate the power of memory and sensory acculturation. Seremetakis' analysis explores how lamentation was transferred from generation to generation through acts and symbols, resulting in the continuity of history and identity historical consciousness. The oud served a similar function for Armenian American musicians.