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Komitas Vardapet Soghomonian AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1908)



I was born in 1869, on September 26th, in the city of Kutahia (Kotahia) in Asia Minor. They baptized me on the third day [after my birth] and named me Soghomon.

My father, Gevork Soghomonian, was a native of Kutahia, and my mother, Takuhi Hovhanissian, was a native of Bursa. Both were Armenians.

My parent's family was naturally gifted with [good] voice. My father and uncle, Harutiun Soghomonian, were well-known cantors in our city's St. Theodoros Church. The melodies and lyrics composed by my parents in the Turkish language -- a few of which I wrote down in 1893 in my native land -- are still sung by the older folk of our city with great admiration.

My mother died in 1870, and my father in 1880. After my parents' passing, my paternal grandmother, Mariam, took great care of me, an orphan, and my education.

In 1876 I stepped into a school building for the first time, a school in our city, which had four divisions. I graduated in 1880 and my father, four months before his death, sent me to the school in Bursa. Before I could complete the year, I returned to our city because of my father's death.

In 1881, the prelate of our diocese, Fr. Gevork Tertzagian, were to go to Holy Etchmiadzin [the center of the Armenian Church] to be consecrated a bishop. Catholicos Gevork IV of All Armenians had ordered the prelate to bring with him an orphaned student to study in the Gevorkian Seminary, which the Catholicos had established. I was chosen from 20 orphans and the prelate took me to Etchmiadzin.

During the 1881-1882 educational year, on September 15th, I enrolled in the Gevorkian Seminary as a boarding student and graduated during the 1892-93 academic year.

In 1896, through the support of a well-known Armenian benefactor, Alexandre Mantashian, I went to Berlin to advance my education in music. I applied to the world famous violinist Joseph Joachim who was the dean of the Royal Conservatory in Berlin. He advised me to enroll in Richard Schmidt's special music school. The head of faculty, royal dean and musicologist, R. Schmidt, agreed to work with me privately.

Even though the study of the piano was familiar to me until deceitful successes, we started from the beginning so that the foundations would be stronger. I studied with Schmidt (*) for three years exactly, from July 1896 to July 1899. I completed the theoretical and, especially, the practical courses of music.

At the same time I was enrolled as a full time student at Berlin's Royal Friedrich Wilhelm University's department of philosophy, where I completed the course of studies in the history of philosophy of music. My head teachers were F. Bellermann, O. Fleischer, and G. Friedländer.

In September 1899, I returned to Etchmiadzin.

I was still a student in the sixth course of the Gevorkian Seminary, when, during the tenure of Catholicos Magar I of All Armenians, I became a member of the monastic order of Holy Etchmiadzin. In 1890, July 8th, I was ordained a deacon. In 1893, September 11th, during the tenure of Catholicos Megrdoch I of All Armenians, I was ordained a monk. In 1895, February 26th, I was ordained a priest (Vardapet). I was a priest studying abroad.

From the first day I entered the Seminary, I was one of the well-recognized students of the Holy See for my good singing voice. Catholicos Gevorg IV used to attend the religious services in the Cathedral. My friend, who also had a good voice, and I used to stand on either side of his throne and sing solos from there. When we sang, the old Pontiff's tears would descend, tumbling down his long, white beard, and would disappear behind the pleats of his cassock.

During Magar I's tenure, I was already the chief cantor of the Holy See, starting in the fourth class [of the Seminary]. During Megrdoch I, in 1893, in the beginning of September, I was appointed the music teacher of the seminary. I taught Armenian Church music through contemporary Armenian and Western notations until I went abroad [to study]. After I graduated the conservatory and the university in September 1899, I resumed my teaching at the seminary. I was appointed director of music of the Holy See and conducted the multi-voice choir of the Mother Cathedral.

The first concert [I gave] was in conjunction with my second lecture in Berlin. My large concert was held in Paris, organized by the Armenian Association of Paris in 1906, December 1st. My intention for this concert was to introduce the Armenian people's religious and popular creations to the French musical world. Virtually all music publications [in Paris] spoke about this concert; detailed discussions appeared in *Le Mercure Musical* (Vol. 2, No. 23-24, 15 December, pages. 422-424). After the Paris concert, I received an invitation from Armenian students in Switzerland to give concerts in Zurich, Lausanne and Geneva. I have given concerts in the Caucasus, Holy Etchmiadzin, Yerevan, Tiflis (Tbilisi) and Baku.

My inaugural lecture was right after I graduated, on "Armenian popular and liturgical music", at the International Music Association in Berlin, in 1899, May 10th. I was one of the founding members of this organization. Upon the request of the Association, I repeated the lecture in 1899, June 14th, to a large audience of musicians in Berlin's Scharvenka conservatory's hall.

The lecture generated great interest and newspapers wrote about it with admiration, including in the monthly publication of the International Music Association (*Zeitschrift der Internationalen Musik-Gesellschaft*, Vol. 1, No. 1 & 2, October-November 1899, pages 46-47).

I received an invitation for a third lecture, about the same subject, after the concert in Paris, from the administration of École des Hautes Études, which I presented by combining a small concert in 1907, January 13th.

I have given similar lectures in Holy Etchmiadzin at the Gevorkian Seminary, in the village of Igdir, Tiflis, Baku, Paris, Berne, Lausanne, Geneva, in the city of Venice in Armenian for Armenians.

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Translator's note: selected books by Komitas and about his work

Komitas: Essays and Articles (Translated by Vatsche Barsoumian), Pasadena, CA: Drazark Press 2001.

This volume presents Komitas's published musicological treatises in English translation. It's three main sections include studies on Armenian Peasant Music, Ecclesiastical Melodies, Music of the Divine Liturgy, and an annotated bibliography of published documents.

Armenian Sacred and Folk Music

By Komitas (translated by E. Gulbekian and edited by Vrej N. Nersessian), Curzon Press 1997,

ISBN: 0700706372

This is a collection of eight of Komitas's principal musicological studies selected from his Collected Works published in Yerevan in 1941.

Armenian Neume System of Notation: Study and Analysis

By R. A. At'ayan, Curzon Press 1999

ISBN 0700706364

Translated into English by N.V. Nersessian. The study of the Armenian system of notation called *Khazs* (Neumes) is of significance both for Armenian and Byzantine music from a historical and aesthetic point of view.

Armenian Monodic Music: History and Theory

By Kh. S. Khushnaryan, Curzon Press 2001

ISBN 0700706380

Covers the origins, development and continued progress of Armenian Monodic music alongside polyphonic and harmonic music.