

BIRTH OF OPERA IN ARMENIAN CULTURE

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**The Speniarian Armenian State Opera & Ballet
Academic Theatre in Yerevan.**

Category: [Opinions](#)



Prof. Khatchatur I. Pilikian, London, 15 August 2013

All the above mentioned theatrical and musical elements (See [Audio-Visual Art & Techno in Culture and Civilisation](#) and [Poetry, Song, Dance and Epic Tale in Armenia](#)) – as the historical and scholarly studies and impressions abundantly witness -- were mature enough in Armenia for a final synthesis, but it lacked the indispensable socio-political conditions for achieving it.



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In Italy, for example, it was not only the dominance of monody and the passion for Greek tragedy that were responsible for the creation of Opera. The courts and the courtyards of the merchant class nobility were also the cauldrons wherein the elements of Opera were amalgamated. (Its worth remembering that the same was also true for the rise of the prestigious **Chinese Opera**, the exuberant Japanese musical theatres called **Noh**, the magical **Bunraku** and the popular **Kabuki**).

Opera's *raison d'être* today, reflects in its turn Democracy's transmutation. An aristocracy of talent performs opera. It has become the hobbyhorse for the rich, who can afford the exuberant prices of its productions. The Rule of the Chosen/ Wealthy -- **Timocracy**, has placed its own elitist mask on opera's flexible image. The eminent historian and musicologist Manfred Bukofzer is keen to point out:

The extravagant expenses of the court opera could only be covered if the patron received a steady revenue. The Duke of Brunswick, for one, relied not only on the most ingenious forms of direct and indirect taxation but resorted even to slave trade. He financed his operatic amusements by selling his subjects as soldiers so that his flourishing opera depended literally on the blood of the lower classes.

(M. Bukofzer. **MUSIC IN THE BAROQUE ERA**. New York, 1947, p 398)

Alas, the Baroque epoch too was emulating even the darkest aspects of Greek culture, as the eminent scholar George Thomson concluded, in his pioneering "Study in the Social Origins of

Drama", saying:

It is necessary for us to remember the blood and tears that were shed on the raw materials of Greek Art. (G. Thomson. **AESCHYLUS AND ATHENS**. Lawrence & Wishart, 1946, p.150)

It becomes obvious then why in the century of national reawakening, **Opera**, the most popular art form, was to trigger not only mass demonstrations but even, for that matter, a revolution, as the late venerable historian E. J. Hobsbawm has pointed out:

Even the apparently least political of arts, music, had the strongest political associations. This was perhaps the only period in history when operas were written as, or taken to be, political manifestoes and triggered off revolutions. (E. J. Hobsbaum, **The Age of Revolution** 1789- 1848. Mentor Book, 1962, p.302-303)

On the 25th of August, 1830, at Brussels, a performance of Auber's opera, *La Muette de Portici*, or *Masaniello* set off the Belgian popular uprising against the Dutch rule, which resulted in Belgium becoming an independent state. And it is worth mentioning that the hero of the opera of Auber, Masaniello, was a historical figure --- a Neapolitan fisherman who had led a revolution at Naples, in 1647, against the Spanish rule.

Opera indeed as a popular art form had gone a long way since the first ever public opera house was opened in the Republic of Venice, in 1637, just ten years before Masaniello's Neapolitan revolution and nearly two centuries before the Belgian uprising. Opera had thus become the democratic art form supported by the new merchant and middle class, just like in ancient Greece, where **Theatron=Theatre had become Greek society's greatest cultural achievement which exemplified its civilization. To my mind, Theatre became its Democracy's Artistic Parliament.** In mid nineteenth century Europe, the radical democrats had re-molded opera in their own image.

When librettos of Operas shifted their interests from Myths and Fables, soon historical subjects with their protagonists as Emperors, Kings, Queens, Rulers and what not, started to rule their days in the librettos, before yielding their stage pedestals to the common people as in the case of the fisherman **Masaniello**, or the courtesan **Traviata**, without forgetting the pioneering and amazing English trope, **The Beggar's Opera**. Surprise, surprise, even Armenian historical events and their Rulers, or tales associated with Armenian history, played their prominent place in Italian, German and French operas, long before an opera as a distinct art form was composed by an Armenian composer. Both the librettos and the music of those operas with Armenian historical subjects were written and composed by the masters of the art of Opera of the day. Here are but few examples:

Tigrane, Re d'Armenia. Music by T. Albinoni. The same also by M Bononcini

Il Tigrane. Music by Alessandro Scarlatti. Text by D. Lalli, in 3 acts. Scarlatti's most famous opera, his 106th on stage. Horns were introduced in the opera orchestra for the first time. 1715, Naples.

Tigrane. Johann Hasse's first opera. Written for Italy and the first that is extant. Text by F. Silvani, in 3 acts. 1723, Naples. Originally titled **La Virtu Trionfante dell'Amore e dell'Odio**, composed by M.A. Ziani, in 1691.

Tigrane. By various other composers, Lampugnani, Tozzi, Piccini, Riccini,

Il Tigrane. C. W. Gluck. 3 acts, 1743. The Text of the opera is Goldoni's version of F. Silvani's La Virtu...of 1691; Goldoni's version was first composed by G. Arena in 1741.

Arsace. C. W. Gluck, in collaboration with G.B. Lampugnani. 1743. Also by various other composers, Gasparini, Giacomelli, etc.

Artaserse. Various composers: Vinci (1730, Rome), Hasse (1730, Venice), Gluck (1741, Milano. His first opera), Graun (1743, Berlin), Terradellas (1744, Venice carnavalle), Jomelli (1749, Rome). Text by Metastasio. 3 acts.

Ariarate. Angelo Tarchi. Text by F. Moretti. 3 acts. Milano, 1786. The most successful of Tarchi's numerous Italian operas. Bologna 1786, Trieste 1787, Palermo 1787, Napoli 1787, Warsaw 1787.

The above mentioned operas are still waiting to be rediscovered and staged, at least and hopefully perhaps in the Armenian Opera & Ballet Academic Theatre in Yerevan.

Armenia had lost its national sovereignty in A.D.1375, and the country was seized by the Ottoman Turks in 1514. The Armenian people suffered under the ottoman yoke for more than four centuries.

The 19th century national reawakening and liberation movements of many suppressed nations of the Ottoman Empire, were instrumental for revitalising those national cultures, among them the Armenian culture. Literature, theatre and music began a process of mutual influence. Professional theatrical companies such as those of Vartoovian, Benglian, Menakian, all started commissioning composers to write incidental music for their stage productions. The great poet Petros Dourian was also a playwright. The actors Adamian and Siranoush – both famous for their Shakespearian performances in Armenian – were occasionally appearing as singers in newly written and produced musicals and eventually operettas with Turkish and Armenian librettos.

Around the middle of 19th century the Italian librettos of Metastasio were translated into Armenian

✘ and published in Venice. The Armenian revolutionary poet [Mikael Nalbandian](#), a comrade of

Herzen and the like, was thrown into the Tsarist prison. From prison, Nalbandian advised his friend, the writer Sahradian, to translate Verdi's opera, **Il Trovatore**, into Armenian. Thus the Armenian score of **Il Trovatore** was published in 1864, in St. Petersburg, by the said translator, Sahradian, dedicated to the poet Nalbandian. In Tblisi/Tiflis, where Armenians counted at least half

of the population, there opened the first Italian Opera House of Transcaucasia, in 1851. Translations into Armenian of various operas started to flourish, the productions of which were also enjoying popular support, as Verdi's **Aida** and **Rigoletto**, Gounod's **Faust**, Bizet's **Carmen**, Puccini's **Cio-Cio-San** (Mme Butterfly), etc. Musicians composed overtures, interludes and songs for stage plays. The famous 4th century Armenian kingdom's turbulent episodes -- soon after Armenia accepted Christianity as its state religion -- captivated the Armenian spectators of 19th century. The much loved composer of songs and choral music, Christopher Kara Murza, composed 24 items, including areas, duets, choruses and orchestral prologue, all part of the dramatic stage play by the noted poet Mekertich Peshiktashlian, titled **Arshak II**, before the latter came to be the title of another libretto for the first Opera of the Armenians, and a Grand Opera at that.

The Armenian Diaspora in the Ottoman Empire was thus experiencing, as in the Russian Empire, its own 'Risorgimento'. On March 17, 1863, the Armenian National Constitution was ratified by the Ottoman government. Astonishing as it might sound, it's worth highlighting that in mid-19th century the Ottoman Caliphate had even entertained the idea to officially adopt the Armenian Alphabet for the Turkish language. A whimsical joke? Apparently not so. The eminent linguist, Hrachia Ajcharian, had this to say about some Ottoman Pashas' fleeting wish:

Many Turks learned the Armenian Alphabet and were reading *Manzoume* and *Mejmouwai*. The spreading of Armenian letters through the news-media made the Turkish informed classes to really appreciate the admirable simplicity of the Armenian script. In 1860, both Fouad and Ali Pasha entertained the idea to abandon the Turkish script and adopt the Armenian Alphabet as the official script. Rashid Pasha, the Grand Eparchos, learned to write Armenian to be able to spread its use among the Turks. It is said that the Assembly of the Ottoman Parliament too had agreed for the change, but national vanity or the early cessation of the Assembly did not allow the implementation of the act.

(Hrachia Ajcharian at the Armenian Academy of Art & Science, 1943. A presentation for his forthcoming monograph, titled, ***The Role of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire***. Yerevan University Herald. 1967, no. 1)

The above 'temptations' notwithstanding, the victory of the Greek independence of 1829 was not forgotten by the Armenians as well as the other nations still under the Ottoman rule. Around the same time, Eastern Armenia was finally out of the Persian dominance, somehow or seemingly enjoying more liberal status under the Russian Empire. (The cataclysmic upheavals of the 1917 Russian revolution notwithstanding, the historical fact remains that since 1918, all the three Republics of Armenia were established on that same Eastern, so called Russian Armenia.)

Bulgarians, Serbs, Macedonians, Arabs, Armenians and even Assyrians and some Kurdish tribes, were all politically re-awakened, hoping to get self-rule and, eventually independence. In 1867 the

Bulgarian struggle for determination was crushed in bloody massacres, culminating in the massacre of ten thousands in 1875. The heroic insurrection for Armenian self-rule in Zeitoun was already alive and kicking. Meanwhile the entire market at the centre of Van, mostly belonging to Armenians, was burned down to ashes, after a vandalising wholesome plunder. The intolerance of the Ottoman rule was intensifying. The much popular and professionally active **Oriental Theatre** was also axed out of action, albeit on and off. The said theatre was established in 1861 and survived numerous restrictions until 1876, It was the focus of artistic, political and social reawakening of the public who were familiarised not only with the best of Armenian national literary and stage works of the time, but also with the Italian and French stage masterpieces.

Eventually, to try to block the interference of European powers the first ever Ottoman Government Constitution was officially announced, on November 30, 1876. But racial and religious bigotry were already in their most ominous posture and behaviour. It is in such an atmosphere that Kâmil Pasha (1838-1912) was to become Sultan Abdul Hamid's Prime Minister four times over. A statement penned by Kâmil Pasha was cited in the prestigious Armenian periodical of the time *Pordz* (Trial, Attempt), in Tiflis=Tbilisi, in 1879. It graphically formulates a premeditated genocidal plan, even, mind you, before the emergence of the Armenian political parties, later accused by the Young Turks as the *Casus Belli*=war involvement, of their genocidal deed. The Ottoman Grand Vizier stated:

If we nurtured snakes in our midst in Europe, we should not repeat the same folly in Asiatic Tajkasthan . Thus, we must eliminate, leave behind no traces of that Armenian nation. And to accomplish this task, we are lacking in nothing; we have all the means we need--Kurds, Cherkez, governors, judges, tax-collectors, police, in short everything. We can declare a religious war--waged against a nation that has no arms, no army, and no defender, whereas, in contrast, we have one of the greatest and richest states of the world as our comrade-in-arms and the guardian of our Asian world.

(The fuller text is in *PORTS* (Trial), the Armenian periodical, Tiflis, v.7/8, pp. 204-205, cited by Hovsep Shishmanian (1822-1888), better known as Dzerents -- the renowned novelist and historian -- in his monthly column *Armenian Theory*, under the heading: *The Ottoman Autocracy, Turkish and Russian Armenians*, pp.200-211)

The Armenian national reawakening was therefore struggling in an ominously contradictory social, economic and political environment that had its repercussions in the Ottoman Capital where Tigran Tchukhajian (a contemporary to Kamil Pasha, mentioned above) spent most of his creative life. He was born in Constantinople – Istanbul, in 1837. His fist music teacher while at school was Gabriel Yeranian (1827-1862), master of the Armenian novel notation, then followed by piano and theory lessons from the Italian teacher active in Istanbul, named C. Manzoni. Advised and recommended by Manzoni, Tchukhajian continued his music studies in Italy at the Milan Conservatory during the years 1861-1864. Returning to Constantinople, where some semblance of tolerance and legality were wrestled with, Tigran Tchukhajian soon became the major organiser of a symphony orchestra and

promoter for publications of musical journals too, including the **Armenian Lyre**, the periodical of the homonymous **A. L. Institute**, founded by his first music tutor G. Yeranian in 1862. While never abandoning composing, his fascination with Italian operas, especially those with librettos tackling themes of national reawakening, guided his attention to write music for stage productions of Armenian historical plays. The performance in 1867 of the play *Vartan Mamikonian, the Liberator* by R. Setefjian, with music and songs written by Tchukhajian, occasioned a political demonstration. No wonder, because the play was honouring the memory of the great Armenian revolutionary poet Mikael Nalbandian.


But Tchukhajian's obsession was still on. He had in mind to write his major and first **Grand Opera**. The fresh quality of his musical style was already well received by the music critics. The Italian Critic Riccardo Torre named him as The Italian Verdi (*Il Verdi Armeno*, the title of his article). He thought that Tchukhajian:

By amalgamating the melodies of the Oriental people, he became the creator of a new school. (Reported In Bazmavep. Periodical of the Mekhitarians. Venice, 1909. pp 136-137)

As the French critic Adolpho Talasso wrote in the *Revue Theatrale*,

Tigran Tchukhajian was the first to apply European techniques to Oriental music. His highly original ideas, freshness of musical language, colourful orchestration – all these are impregnated with rays of the orient. His skilful use of harmony and counterpoint has ensured an integral structure of his compositions, so full of power and enchantment.

(Programme Notes for the MELODIA records, 1985 of the opera ARSHAK II)

Finally in 1868, Tchukhajian composes the first Opera of the Armenians, called **Arshak II**. The  librettist was Tomas Terzian, a well known Italian Armenian writer whose name appears in Verdi's letters as Tomasio Terziani.

To let an Armenian King appear on the opera stage, even if tormented in his conflicts with the land owning Armenian aristocracy, the feudal lords, while struggling to hold on the Armenian national sovereignty against two major empires of the time in AD, 4th c. – Persian and Byzantine – proved too much for Ottoman censors. The latter imposed the change of the title of the opera. The Armenian king Arshak's name was dropped and the opera was called **Olympia** -- the name of the Byzantine princess, wife to Arshak II. The main plot of the opera, according to the original libretto, was brought to an end with the death of Olympia, poisoned by a revengeful Armenian princess, Parandzem. The latter's husband Gnel, was condemned to death by his own uncle, Arshak II, who was fascinated by the beauty of Parandzem. The latter then allied herself with the conspiring feudal lords to topple Arshak II. (Historically, Parandzem herself becomes the Queen to Arshak II).

The sad paradox remains that the first Opera of an Armenian composer, who is claimed to have written "the first original opera in Turkish...in 1874" (as mentioned here below), was never produced during the composer's life time, even if its singing language – the libretto -- was originally in Italian. After the opera was composed, Terzian, the librettist, published his opus in 1871, in Armenian and called it **Olympia**. It's good to know that **Arshak II**-s overture, *Sinfonia*, was the only section of the entire work which had its performance in 1868, in Istanbul, welcomed by an enthusiastic audience.



Albeit, the resurgent nationalism was inflaming the racial and religious intolerance of Ottoman rule and igniting the resurgent pan-Turkic sentiments associated with it. Soon, Kâmil Pasha's conceptualised genocidal premeditation was put into an operational program during 1894-1896 at Sassoon, Van, Zeitoon and Diarbekir, resulting in the massacre of 300,000 Armenians, 3000 villages were burned and

Tens of thousands were forced to flee their native land into all corners of the earth...

(E.K.Sarkisian and R.G.Sahakian, *Vital Issuers in Modern Armenian History*, translated and edited by E.B.Chrakian, Massachusetts: Armenian Studies, 1965, p.18)

Prof. Em. Dillon (1854-1933), the Irish linguist and journalist, visited Turkey in 1895. He asserted:

It is already proven that the pillage and the massacres of Sassoon is the deliberately organised act of the Sublime Porte, an act planned in advance meticulously and executed mercilessly. (Sarkisian and Sahakian, op. cit., p.18)

Failing to produce his opera, **Arshak II**, in the social milieu foreshadowing the forthcoming tragedy as mentioned above, Tigran Tchoukhajian began composing **Operettas**, both with Turkish and with Armenian librettos, The Turkish librettos were also written by Armenian writers. It is a historic truth that Tchoukhajian and the Armenian writers and singers of Constantinople enriched the Turkish musical and theatrical culture with operettas sang in Turkish. The following are Tchoukhajian's operettas and comic operas.

1872 – **Arif**. *Opera Buffa* in 3 acts, Libretto in Turkish by Ajemian, based on Gogol's *Inspector General*.

1874 – **Kyose Kehia** (Kehia the bald). *Opera Buffa* in 3 acts. Libretto in Turkish by Reshdouni. A new libretto was written in Armenian, in 1965, by the distinguished Armenian writer of the Diaspora, Armen Darian, in Beirut, Lebanon. Darian called it **Zvart**. The story echoes the plot of Donizetti's opera *Elisir d'Amore*.

1876 – **Leblebouji Horhor Agha** (The Master Nut-Vendor Horhor). *Opera Buffa* in 3 acts. Libretto by Nalian, based on the story of Verdi's opera *Rigoletto*. It had great success in the Balkans, Rumania, Bulgaria, Greece, Egypt and London. In 1943, it was revised and given a new name, **Karinè**, which was also performed for a film production in Armenia during 1960s.

1891 – **Zemireh**. *Opera Comique* in 4 acts, Libretto by Galemjian, based on an Arabic legend. It was first performed by Penatti's French company at Concordia theatre in Constantinople, and later, in 1894, by Franzini's Italian company at the new French Theatre.

1897 – **Indiana**. Tchukhajian's last opera, the manuscript of which and even his watch he had to sell to be able to escape from Constantinople.

Tchukhajian died in extreme poverty, on 23rd March, 1898, in a village near Izmir. Verdi's opera score of *Otello* was found in his hand.


Here is a quotation from **Wikipedia** where Tchukhajian is claimed to be the author of the “first original opera in Turkish”...:

One of the earliest Turkish operettas was *Leblebici Horhor* (Horhor the chick pea seller), by the Armenian composer *Dikran Çuhacıyan* who is also remembered as the composer of what may have been the first original opera in Turkish, *Arif'in Hilesi* (Arif's Deception) 1874.

([The Athenæum](#) 1874 Page 616 "Tun Festival of the Ramazan, in Constantinople, has been marked by the production of an opera in Turkish and the foundation of an Opera house for the Moslem quarter of Stamboul. The name of the piece is ' Arifiu-heilessi'; the composer is ... The name of the piece is 'Arifiu-heilessi'; the composer is Mr. Digran Chohajian (= Tailor-son), an Armenian ; and the authors of the libretto are Haled Bey, Mahir Bey and other Turkish gentlemen. The piece was received with enthusiasm by ...")

One wonders if the opera **Arif** of 1872 (libretto in Turkish by Ajemian) mentioned above, is the same **Arif in Helesi** of 1874 (libretto by Haled Bey and Maher Bey, surely in Turkish) mentioned in *The Athenæum* of 1874. When considered the different names of the librettists, it is fair to conclude that the same opera had different librettos; otherwise deleting the name of the original author seems unethical.

If Tigran Tchukhajian was the first Armenian composer who wrote an opera and operettas, Alexander Spendiarian's opera **Almast** was the first opera to be performed to inaugurate the new Armenian State Opera & Ballet Academic Theatre, in Yerevan, on January 20th, 1933.

Alexander Spendiarian (1871-1928), a graduate of St Petersburg Conservatory where he studied with Rimsky Korsakov during the years 1896-1900, began writing his opera **Almast** in 1916. The libretto  was based on Hovhanness Toumanian's poem titled **Temkaberti Aroume** (The Capture of Tmook Castle).

Spendiarian had to his credit, three Glinka prizes for his symphonic poems, **The Three Palm Trees**, of 1905, **Beda the Preacher** of 1907 and the incidental music of 1910 to Anton Chekhov's play, **Uncle Vania**. His fame had spread to Berlin, where the great choreographer Fokin had staged, in 1913, Spendiarian's symphonic poem, **The Three Palm Trees**, with the ballerina soloist, Anna Pavlova.

It was after all these successes that Spendiarian wrote his first and only opera **Almast**. It had its first performance in Moscow at the Bolshoi Theatre Filiale (fringe theatre), in 1929, after Spendiarian's death in 1928. Thus both Tchoukhajian and Spendiarian could not see the production of their first and only operas.

After the inauguration of the Armenian State Opera and Ballet Academic Theatre of Yerevan with Spendiarian's opera **Almast**, in 1933, the Opera House was named after Alexander Spendiarian.

While the 1929 production of **Almast** in Moscow was originally in Russian by the librettist S. Parnok – based on Toumanian's poem – the libretto of **Almast** inaugurating the Armenian State Opera was in Armenian, retranslated and edited by T. Hakhoumian.

The libretto of **Almast** dealt with the historical event of the capture of the Armenian Castle of Tmook by the Persian Shah Nadir, in 18th century. The betrayal of the princess **Almast**, wife of the Armenian prince **Tatool** was instrumental for the capture of the Castle. In return, **Almast** hoped to gain the crown of the queen of Persia, as the minstrel of Shah Nadir had promised her. But **Almast** is thrown in the Shah's harem. Later on when she decides to revenge and attempts to assassinate Shah Nadir, the latter condemns her to death.

In the newly edited version in Armenian, **Tatool's** comrade-in-arms, **Ruben**, leads the rebellious people to free the Castle and force the invading Persian army to retreat. The tragic fate of the betraying princess **Almast** is kept intact.

The much admired poet of the Armenians, **Hovhanness Toumanian**, is to the Armenian operas as **Pushkin** is to the Russian operas. Many Armenian librettos are based on **Toumanian's** poems.

A contemporary of **Toumanian**, **Reverend Komitas (1869-1935)**, the most admired musician of the Armenians, met the poet in May 3-7, 1904. **Komitas** discussed with **Toumanian** about the need for a proper libretto for him to compose an opera based on **Toumanian's** popular poem, **Anoush**. **Komitas** had already composed song excerpts from the said poem. But, alas, a completed opera by **Komitas** was not to be. His initial attempts did not come into fruition.

But **Anoush** as an opera was born eventually, in 1908. It was composed by **Armen Tigranian (1879-1980)**, to the composer's own libretto. The first performance of **Anoush** took place in **Alexandropol (later, Leninakan, and now Gyumri)**, on August 4, 1912. The role of **Saro**, the lover of **Anoush**, was sung by one of the most admired singers among the Armenians, **Shara Talian**, himself the son of the great Armenian minstrel, **Ashough Jamal**,

Armen Tigranian was born in **Alexandropol**. While studying in **Tbilisi**, he won the audition to study at the Conservatory of Music. The noted composer **Klenovsky** became his tutor in theory and composition. After his graduation in 1901, **Tigranian** pursued his musical carrier, directing choral societies. His activities helped to vitalise the musical events in many cities in the Caucasus, as **Yerevan, Kars, Alexandropol and Baku**. Eventually he started teaching at various schools. It was then

that he started writing the libretto and composing the opera *Anoush*, during 1908–1912. He later elaborated and completed his major opera in 1938, even after *Anoush*'s premières in 1912 and 1933. Tigranian's second and last opera was **David Bek**, yet again to his own libretto, based on the prolific Armenian novelist Raffi's book of the same title.

The story of *Anoush* is located in the mountainous region of Lori. **Anoush**, a village maiden and **Saro**, a young shepherd, are deeply in love with each other. During one festive day, to enliven a wedding ceremony, Saro and **Mossy**, the brother of *Anoush*, engage in a friendly wrestling game – traditional youth game of the villagers. The time honoured habit forbade any attempt to act and claim victory among friends. Excited by the presence of *Anoush* and with a burning desire to attract her attention, Saro topples his friend Mossy on the latter's back on the ground. Feeling humiliated, *Anoush*'s brother vows to revenge his knock out. He even threatens *Anoush* and forbids her love towards Saro. Despite all his threats, *Anoush* dares to elope with Saro to the mountains. Eventually Mossy finds them and shoots Saro with his hunting gun. Overwhelmed by grief and loneliness, *Anoush* throws herself down the abyss into the Debed River.

Tigranian's **Anoush** became the second opera to inaugurate the newly born Armenian Opera house, on March 17, 1933. Eventually **Anoush** proved to be *the* Armenian National Opera, as Weber's opera **Die Freischutz** is for the German culture, or Mussorgsky operas are for the Russians.

But the first Opera of the Armenians, **Arshak II**, composed by Tigran Tchukhajian had to wait its rediscovery in 1941-1942 by the musicologists Gevorg Tigranian and Alexander Shahverdian. It was diligently revised musically and textually, with an Armenian libretto by A. Gulakian. Finally, Tchukhajian's opera **Arshak II**, had its operatic *première* at the Armenian State Opera & Ballet

Academic Theatre, in Yerevan, on 29th November 1945, marking the 25th Anniversary of the 2nd Armenian Republic and celebrating the victorious ending of the WWII against Nazism, the struggle for which the Armenian people had its more than fair share of valiant gallantry and sacrifice. And all that a quarter of a century after the WWI, when, starting in 1915, the proto-Nazi government of the Young Turks committed the ultimate crime at the onset of the 20th century –the Genocide of the Armenians. Hence the *première* of the opera **Arshak II** to celebrate the crushing of Nazism was an auspicious historical event indeed. The edited version in the Armenian *première* production reflected the mood of tolerance and reconciliation after a major victory against serfdom and foreign rule, notwithstanding the martyrdom of many innocent victims, including King Arshak's nephew, Gnel, and the King's Byzantine wife, Princess Olympia.

The leading role of **Arshak II** was sung by the baritone Poghos (Pavel) Lisitsian, later to become the leading baritone of the Moscow Bolshoi Theatre. After the world renowned Shaliapin, Lisitsian became the first opera singer from Bolshoi to sing at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York.

The three major operas mentioned above, namely **Arshak II. Almast, and Anoush**, brought a considerable impetus for the creation of other prominent Armenian operas and ballets, apart from

the non-stop productions of Italian, Russian, French and German operas at the Spondiarian Armenian State Opera Theatre. Here are but some of the Armenian operas:

Kaj Nazar (Brave Nazar). Music by Haro Stepanian, Libretto by Derenik Demirchian

Sassoon's David (David of Sassoon). Music by H. Stepanian. Libretto by D. Demirjian.

Loosabatsin (At Dawn). Music by H. Stepanian. Libretto by T. Hakhoumian.

Herosoohi (The Heroine), Music by H. Stepanian. Libretto by A. Adamian.

Seda, Aregaki Tsoikeroum (In Sunshine), **Hro Harse** (Bride of Fire), **Anahit**. Operas by Anoushavan Ter-Ghevondian

Taparnikos. (Wanderer). Music by A. Aivazian. Libretto by V. Adjemian. (Based on H. Baronian's comedy)

Sapho. Music and Libretto by A. Mayilian.

Namous (Honour). Music and Libretto by L. Khoja – Eynatian. (Based on A. Shirvanzate's novel).

Artsevaberd (Eagle's Nest). Music by A Babayev. Libretto by Z. Vardanian and G. Borian (Based on N. Zarian's novel, **Hatsavan**)

Khatchatur Abovian. Music by G.Armenian. Libretto by G. Armenian and V Poghosian.

Krake Oghak (Ring of Fire). Music by A. Terterian. Libretto by V. Shahnazarian.

Indeed, the whole story of the Armenians and their burning desire to have their operas can be characterised as a Ring of Fire, as if emulating one of the earliest **Sung Poems** accompanied by

Tsoutsk and the sound of a **Pandirn**, all revealed to us by Movses Khorenatsi of the 5th c., as **The Birth of Vahagn**. Here it is, rendered into English by that most formidable Armenian artist and intellectual of London of the first half of the 20th century, the poetess, painter, playwright and translator, Zabelle Boyajian.

Concerning the birth of this king the legend says—

“Heaven and earth were in travail,
And the crimson waters were in travail,
And in the water the crimson reed
Was also in travail.
From the mouth of the reed issued smoke,
From the mouth of the reed issued flame.
And out of the flame sprang the young child,
His hair was of fire, a beard had he of flame,

And his eyes were suns."

With our own ears did we hear these words sung to the accompaniment of the harp . They sing, moreover, that he did fight with the dragons, and overcame them;and some say that his valiant deeds were like unto those of Hercules.

(Zabelle Boyajian. **ARMENIAN LEGENDS & POEMS**. London, 1916. **Vahagn, King of Armenia**.

From **The History of Armenia**. Chapter XXXI. By Moses of Khorene of 5th c.)

