THE OTTOMAN MUSICAL MODERNIZATION

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By Margarita Krtikashyan, Yerevan, 6 November 2025

The modernization of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century was not confined to political and administrative reforms; it also transformed the empire's cultural and artistic landscape. Central to this process was the adoption of Western musical forms, institutions, and pedagogy. Among the most important figures in this transition was Tigran Chukhajian (1837–1898) an Armenian composer, conductor, and educator whose work laid the foundation of opera and modern musical performance in the Ottoman world. His career illustrates both the creative potential of the period's cosmopolitan environment and the crucial role Armenians played in shaping Ottoman and Middle Eastern cultural modernity.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Armenians were among the most active participants in the empire's intellectual and artistic life. The Tanzimat era (1839–1876) created new opportunities for civic engagement and cultural exchange. Armenian architects designed public buildings, printers published multilingual newspapers, and teachers introduced European curricula into schools. In the field of music, Armenian musicians were instrumental in professionalizing performance and education. They founded choirs, taught European notation, and trained both civilian and military ensembles.

Armenian craftsmen and instrument makers, such as members of the Chukhajian, Limonciyan, and Dallakian families, produced pianos, violins, and wind instruments for Ottoman orchestras. Armenian choirs in Istanbul and Izmir performed Western sacred and secular music, often translating Italian and French works into Armenian or Turkish. This network of musicians and educators became the backbone of Ottoman musical modernization. It was within this environment that Tigran Chukhajian's career developed.

Born in Constantinople, Chukhajian studied piano and theory under European instructors before traveling to Milan, where he absorbed the traditions of Italian opera and Romantic composition. His education in Italy exposed him to the compositional practices of Verdi, Donizetti, and Rossini, but upon returning to Istanbul, he sought to adapt these forms to local cultural realities.

In 1861, Chukhajian founded one of the city's first orchestras and began organizing public concerts, introducing audiences to symphonic and chamber works. His compositions combined European harmonic techniques with Armenian melodic and modal elements. He also established a music school and wrote theoretical texts to promote Western musical education among Armenian and Ottoman students alike.

Chukhajian's most significant achievement was his role in developing opera and operetta as new genres in Ottoman cultural life. In 1868, Chukhajian composed "Arshak II," the first Armenian opera and arguably the first opera written in the Middle East. Based on an episode from ancient Armenian history, the work was notable for its scale and ambition. It combined European harmonic structures with Armenian melodic and rhythmic idioms, offering a distinctly local form of Romantic opera.

However, due to political sensitivities, the work was banned by Ottoman censors and was not performed in its complete form until 1945 in Yerevan.

Chukhajian's subsequent works were composed in both Armenian and Ottoman Turkish, reflecting the multicultural character of Istanbul. His operetta "Leblebici Horhor Agha" (1875), written in Turkish, achieved particular success. Blending European operatic form with Ottoman humor and everyday urban life, it became one of the most popular stage works of the late Ottoman period. The piece was performed for decades and is often cited as the first example of Turkish-language comic opera.

Through these works, Chukhajian did more than compose music; he created an infrastructure for performance. He founded the Oriental Opera Company, which toured in the Ottoman provinces and Egypt, presenting operas and operettas to diverse audiences. The company's activities represent the earliest organized attempt to establish a permanent operatic institution in the Ottoman world.

Chukhajian's career coincided with a broader movement among Ottoman Armenians to institutionalize art and education. The Getronagan Armenian High School, the Armenian Lyceum of Galata, and the Mekhitarist schools in Constantinople and Venice were central to introducing Western art, music, and languages. These institutions trained many of the musicians who later worked in Ottoman orchestras and theaters.

Armenians also played key roles in the Ottoman military music system, particularly after the reforms initiated by Sultan Mahmud II and Giuseppe Donizetti, the Italian bandmaster who modernized the imperial bands. Armenian musicians served as instrumentalists, arrangers, and teachers, ensuring the transmission of European techniques to Ottoman institutions.

In civilian life, Armenian printers and publishers facilitated the circulation of music. Sheet music was printed in Armenian, Turkish, and French, reaching both Christian and Muslim audiences. This circulation of musical culture exemplified the transnational dimension of late Ottoman modernity — one in which Armenians acted as cultural intermediaries between Europe and the Ottoman East.

Chukhajian's music reveals an early attempt to negotiate between modernity and identity. His

compositions demonstrate that adopting Western musical forms did not necessarily mean abandoning local traditions. By integrating Armenian melodic motifs and rhythmic structures into European harmonic frameworks, he created a hybrid musical language that reflected both his Armenian heritage and his Ottoman context.

In *Arshak II*, for example, Chukhajian used motifs derived from Armenian ecclesiastical chant within an Italianate orchestral setting. In *Leblebici Horhor Agha*, he employed Turkish-language lyrics and urban subjects within a European comic framework. This dual approach made him a genuine modernist one who viewed modernization not as imitation but as synthesis.

Chukhajian's career also reflects the mobility of ideas within the empire. His opera *Zemire*, staged in Cairo, demonstrates how Ottoman-Armenian composers participated in a regional exchange of culture that extended beyond national boundaries. His work contributed to a broader Eastern Mediterranean modernism that included Greek, Arab, and Jewish musicians adapting European art forms for local audiences.

By the early twentieth century, many of the Armenian musicians who had shaped Ottoman culture were displaced or killed during the genocide of 1915. Their works, institutions, and contributions were absorbed into the cultural fabric of modern Turkey, often without acknowledgment. *Leblebici Horhor Agha* continued to be performed and even filmed in the early Republican period, but Chukhajian's name largely disappeared from official accounts.

Today, musicological research in Armenia and the diaspora has begun to restore his place in history. Scholars now recognize Chukhajian as a foundational figure not only in Armenian music history but in the development of opera and Western-style composition in the Middle East.

Tigran Chukhajian's life and work encapsulate a key chapter in the history of Ottoman modernization. His synthesis of Western musical form and Eastern cultural sensibility represents one of the earliest examples of modernity expressed through art in the region. His career demonstrates the indispensable role Armenians played in creating the institutions, techniques, and repertories that defined Ottoman musical culture in the nineteenth century.

Recognizing Chukhajian's contribution is therefore not only an act of historical correction but an acknowledgment of the cosmopolitan character of the Ottoman reform era. It reminds us that the modernization of the empire was a collective process, one in which Armenians, through their artistic, educational, and intellectual work, stood among its principal architects.

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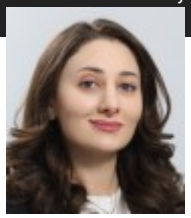

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