


TURKISH MUSIC, FOR HOW LONG A TABOO?

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Yeghishe Hajakian, Mahwah NJ, 25 December 2010 This issue has been a bone of contention for many years among Armenians whenever we remember and hum Turkish melodies and even dance to their tunes. 

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As a consequence, we witnessed a heated debate whether playing, singing and dancing to a Turkish song was proper at this function where everybody present was Armenian; how dare pure blooded Armenians give so much credit to our enemy's music when we still have unfinished business with them!! Some guests exited the ballroom shaking their heads. Many were shocked and kept asking questions "How can this happen? Where do we draw the line?"

The band leader told us privately that although he could sing Turkish songs, yet on an occasion like this such an act would be tantamount to placing a loaded gun to his own head. He stuck to singing Arabic, French, Italian, Spanish, Greek, American and mostly Armenian songs, as is the custom.

Every other nationality's culture is welcome by us except the Turk's. "Not even a piece of Turkish candy to my children" had declared an Armenian I knew once upon a time.

Now what was the causality of this phenomenon?

Only a few years subsequent to the Armenian genocide, many Armenian deportees found themselves scattered in the Middle East, Europe and the U.S. A good number of them spoke only Turkish, sang Turkish songs, danced Turkish dances and this culture was ingrained profoundly into the memories of the future generations.

Not only the charming village, the sacred land abounding in succulent fruit trees, the land of milk that did not need sugar when they drank it, the babbling brook behind their home, the path shaded with canopied trees, the narrow, winding lane leading to the pond, but also the music they sang and danced recalled the idyllic past. Even many of their weddings were blessed in Turkish songs!!!

This present generation of Armenians who are now in their sixties and seventies are genuinely enchanted with this music. This can be seen through their poetic movements and ecstatic expression on their faces as they ride away on the wings of "finjaneh dashtan oyallar anam".

Their parents cried and danced with this music.

Can anybody try to usurp their Armenian identity from them? Let's see if anyone can succeed...Even beyond the cemetery they will declare that they danced and sang "those Armenian songs" that their parents of blessed memory bequeathed to them as they were growing up...

Dear Yeghishe:

 Hovsep Melkonian, Annandale, VA

You have tackled a difficult issue that makes a "jezz" in my heart. I grew up in an "Adanatzi" family and picked up enough Turkish to follow conversation. We did not have the luxury of owning a radio then, so I did not hear Turkish music until I started venturing into some areas of Bourj Hammoud. By then there was a full fledged "baikar" against everything that reminded us of Turkey (do you recall the wall posters plastered everywhere saying DO NOT SPEAK TURKISH , REMEMBER THE ONE MILLION?), although in many articles we published in "Yeridassart Hay" in the early 70s, we kept hammering the same point as to "we ought to know more about the enemy", study its history , culture etc. if we want to succeed in our case.

So, as far as being open to other cultures, the answer is emphatic yes. For many years we refused to learn Arabic in Lebanon, mostly because we thought there was an association between Arabic and Islam and therefore between Islam and our past in Turkey. It took several generations (and the imposition of the Lebanese baccalaureate) to force the new Armenian generation into learning Arabic for their own future. Somehow speaking Arabic was tantamount to betrayal of our values!

Believe this story or not !!! I met recently in Boston at the Armenian Church there a very old and distant relative of ours (she was the wife of the vice principal of Neshan Palandjian Djemaran) . She recognized me alright but after more than forty years of separation, she looked me up in the eyes and said: "when you lived in Beirut, in Watwat, we considered you lost to the Arabs (yes, living in an Arab neighborhood we spoke impeccable Arabic but always Armenian at home!). The poor lady did not understand how I could still speak Armenian since we were "odarasatz hayer". It was insulting and I felt slighted, but there was no reason for me to break the heart of an old "fanatically armenian" woman that she was wrong in our case as she was wrong in the case of many others she had excluded from her list of "good Armenians".

Thus linking the notion of our being Armenian, good Armenian, faithful Armenian etc. to our knowledge of Armenian frankly does not wash with me . Recently I wrote a lengthy article in L.A.'s "Nor Gyank" under the title "ՍՓԻՒՔԸ ԱՊԱԳԱՅ ՈՒՆԻ՞" arguing that at the present rate the Armenian speaking segment of the diaspora will soon be outnumbered by those who do not speak it . What would we do then? Would we throw out all those who fail the "Armenianness" test on that score alone? What about creating new basis for our new generation to feel re-connected with their being Armenian through other tangible, pro-active programs and concepts with which they can

identify and thus express themselves in?

The French say wisely: "Les goûts et les couleurs ne se discutent pas". Individuals are free to love whatever they want, taboo or no taboo, and we can not judge them for better or for worse. A recent survey of Israelis by Israeli pollsters showed that a large majority of them (in fact 73%) did not want to buy any German made stuff and did not want to hear Wagner . An Israeli conductor faced the ire of the audience when he tried to explain that the link between Hitler and Wagner (and hence the rejection of the latter by the audience) was an artificial one and hence illogical. Did he win? No ! But attitudes will change over there the same way they will change among us. Mixing oranges and apples has never been a good idea under any circumstances.

Just a final word. In the early 60s when I was attending the Mekhitarian Secondary School at Hazmieh in Lebanon, we had several Armenian-Americans who were boarding (kisherotik) students there. One of them was called Aram, the other Malcolm (I do not recall their family names). They came to Beirut to study Armenian and had brought with them LPs of Armenian music made in America. When we heard these records, we, the "Beyrutsi" crowd, looked at each other askance and told Aram and Malcolm that the music was not Armenian but Turkish played by Armenians! Aram and Malcolm were horrified, hurt and angry at the same time. How could this be so? They had heard this music in Armenian homes, homes of Armenians born in the States!!!

It was only after we came to the States in 1981 that I understood and discovered what the story was. Armenians who had come to the States before 1915 had carried this music with them, and cherished them because it reminded them of home! So these songs remained in the repertory of these Armenian souls for generations, were picked up by others and remained in their families ever since, until those of us who came from Beirut and Aleppo bust open their bubble....

I love music, but my choice as to what I like to hear depends on the time and circumstances of the day, taboo or no taboo !!!

With warm regards,

Hovsep

