

Creating with Ghosts:
Identity and Artistic Purpose
in Armenian Diaspora

Mary Kouyoumdjian

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ABSTRACT

Creating with Ghosts: Identity and Artistic Purpose in Armenian Diaspora

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The creative submission for my dissertation includes two of my documentary works: *They Will Take My Island*, a thirty-minute multimedia collaboration with filmmaker Atom Egoyan for amplified string octet, electronic track, and film, commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art; and *Paper Pianos*, a ninety-minute staged collaboration with director Nigel Maister and projection artist Kevork Mourad. The written submission for my dissertation is an examination of the ways in which experiences around transgenerational trauma inform and manifest in my creative practice. I offer a summary of my own family history of survivors of the Armenian Genocide and Lebanese Civil War, as well as a survey of displacement amongst the Armenian community in the past century. Furthermore, I discuss identity processing as diaspora and the act of cultural preservation, as inspired by genocide survivor, composer, priest, writer, and musicologist, Komitas Vardapet. I later examine these ideas in the context of creating *They Will Take My Island* and *Paper Pianos*, both of which were constructively motivated by transgenerational survivor's guilt and draw from extra-musical documentary and horror genre practices.

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My gratitude goes to *They Will Take My Island* collaborator Atom Egoyan, who has been a model for the living Armenian artist, even before I knew I wanted to be a composer, and to the collaborative Alarm Will Sound team of *Paper Pianos*, who have been extraordinarily kind and understanding while I navigated a complex relationship with the work after loss, and who have fully supported the wild and limitless dreaming for this project. I would like to thank my parents, who did not have the opportunity to go to college, and who tirelessly and so selflessly worked at a California bodega for thirty years so that I could have access to an education and reach every possibility I could hope for.

I dedicate this dissertation to Matt Marks. Had it not been for Matt's encouragement, I never would have had taken the risk of dropping out of a previous

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Chapter 1 | INTRODUCTION

As the daughter of refugees who immigrated to the United States as a consequence of the Lebanese Civil War, and as the granddaughter of refugees of the Armenian Genocide, topics of political and social conflict, diasporic communities, and creating understanding between audiences and storytellers have played a large role in my music. My own family was not in a safe position to speak up about the atrocities they experienced, and, as such, I feel a great responsibility and an innate need to use my own privilege to further explore experiences around conflict and displacement. Celebrating freedom of expression and raising one's voice are important for any community to move forward, and it is for this reason that I work primarily in musical documentary.

Through musical documentary, I utilize self-recorded and licensed interviews with incredible human beings who have gone through unimaginable circumstances, often integrating field recordings of environment and folk music in hopes that direct sound representation will allow seemingly distant stories to feel closer, revealed, and relatable through the listening experience. I am interested in writing music that is accessible to people of various backgrounds and experiences, while sharing content that is challenging, creating a musical context in which an audience member feels the narrator is speaking naturally and intimately in human-to-human connections. I firmly

believe that approaching controversial topics through the arts opens conversations with audiences when words alone may be too difficult to say or hear.

For nearly twenty years, I have devoted myself to documentary-inspired projects pertaining to topics in Armenia, the Middle East, and the United States, with a hope of encouraging action and prompting dialogue with those willing to listen. Such projects include:

Odaraganeen Sharagan [Stranger's Song] (2001), my first piece exploring the Armenian Genocide, written for mixed chamber ensemble and integrating audio of a family wedding pulled from my mini-DV camcorder;

Multimedia work *Bombs of Beirut* (2014) for the Kronos Quartet, in which I interviewed my parents, family, and friends about what it was like for them to live through the Lebanese Civil War, and sampled tape recordings of bombings in a civilian neighborhood;

The *Children of Conflict* series (2013-2016), inspired by the work of the late war photographer Chris Hondros;

Silent Cranes (2015), an Armenian genocide centennial intermedia project with Kronos, sampling folk song recordings taken from the World War I era and

testimonies that I and others have recorded from the now handful of genocide survivors left;

This Should Feel Like Home (2014), an electroacoustic work for Hotel Elefant, integrating field recordings of a trip to Armenia, an autobiography as a member of the Diaspora returning to one's homeland;

Become Who I Am (2016), a piece commissioned by the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, including interviews with young women about gender and imposter syndrome;

I Can Barely Look (2017) commissioned for Brooklyn Youth Chorus and International Contemporary Ensemble integrated responses of teenagers to photographs of the Syrian refugee crisis;

They Would Only Walk (2020) commissioned by Buffalo String Works for their students of refugee families and the Buffalo Chamber Players, integrating interviews with children and parents regarding their journeys to Buffalo and the meaning of music in their lives;

Ervoom em [I am burning] (2020), a self-recorded fixed media work created over the pandemic, integrating field recordings from Armenia as well as recordings

taken from 2020 protests in New York City in response to the 2020 Nagorno–Karabakh war and the United States' lack of interference.

In this document, I will present two recent large-scale documentary works. The first is *They Will Take My Island* (2020), commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and created in collaboration with Oscar-nominated filmmaker, Atom Egoyan. This thirty-minute multimedia work, written for an amplified string octet comprised of the Silvana and JACK Quartets, electronics, and film, reflects on Armenian genocide survivor and Abstract Expressionist painter Arshile Gorky, along with themes of identity, home, and expression. The work was originally intended to premiere on March 27, 2020 at the Met as a hybrid of live performance and video installation, but due to the pandemic, it was reimaged for a fixed virtual premiere given on January 26, 2021.

The second piece is *Paper Pianos* (2016-2021), a ninety-minute staged documentary work for the chamber ensemble Alarm Will Sound. This work is a collaboration between myself, stage director Nigel Meister, and projection artist Kevork Mourad, and investigates the refugee experience through the lens of four refugees who immigrated to the state of New York.

In this document, rather than providing an in-depth musical analysis of the construction of these projects, the goal is to share the contexts and trajectories that have led to their creation. Here, I privilege the *why* over the *how*, the *purpose* over

the *craft*. The “why” and “purpose” are deeply entwined with my own family history, heritage, displacement, and relationships to trauma, and has led me to ask a few questions of my own work: What roles do identity, heritage, survivor’s guilt, and horror play in motivating my creative practice? What of my creative work is internal processing and what is external activism? Is music a suitable medium for presenting the very real and difficult experiences of others, and if so, how can it do so respectfully and ethically?

To help answer some of these questions, this document will survey events of modern Armenian history, including the diaspora, transgenerational trauma, ethical documentary practices, and horror as a tool of processing. I will highlight Armenian artists exploring these and related themes, and conclude with a look into *They Will Take My Island* and *Paper Pianos*.

With so little academic literature written about Armenian composers (such as Tatev Amiryan, Artur Avanesov, Eve Beglarian, Joseph Bohigian, Arman Gushchyan, Alan Hovhannes, Cevanne Horrocks-Hopayian, Tigran Mansurian, Serj Tankian, and Tatev Yeghiazaryan, among others), and within that literature, nearly nothing written about Armenian women, I see no need to wait for someone else to write about my music in the context of Armenia’s creative output. Thus, I choose to write primarily about my own work. In the Armenian community, the psychological understanding of how ancestral traumas—our ghosts—impact our lives and

engagement with the world is often culturally neglected, and I am grateful for the opportunity to further understand how this translates to my compositional practices.

Chapter 2 | DISPLACEMENT

2.1 | Modern Armenian History and Erasure

While the history of Armenia dates back approximately 3,700 years, making it one of the world's oldest countries, I will focus my survey of Armenian history in the period from the turn of the twentieth century to the present day, with the early 1900s marking a turning point that has overshadowed the thousands of years prior. Much of today's preservation of Armenian culture is a response to its near-erasure during the Armenian genocide (1915–1923), but it is important to understand the context that led to the first genocide of the twentieth century.

Conflicts between Muslims and Christians have long saturated the Caucasus and surrounding regions, and between 1894–1896, Armenia experienced the Hamidian Massacres, the first direct series of brutalities committed by the Ottoman Empire on its Armenian community.¹ Named after Sultan Abdul Hamid II, these massacres were an effort to hold onto what was then a collapsing Ottoman Empire by means of attempted reassertions of Pan-Islamism.² While Armenians were the primary ethnic group affected by these massacres, with an estimated 80,000–300,000 killed, other Christian groups,

¹ Rouben Paul Adalian, "Hamidian (Armenian) Massacres," Armenian National Institute, accessed February 25, 2021, <http://www.armenian-genocide.org/hamidian.html>.

² Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 42.

including 25,000 Assyrians, were also murdered.³ These same communities would later be targeted even more aggressively twenty years later.

1914 marked the beginning of World War I, with Germany declaring war on Russia, and a new alliance arising between Turkey and Germany with the Turkish military under German command. Around this time, the Christian population in the city of Diyarbekir, Turkey, was targeted by the Ottoman Turks, with 1080 shops run by Armenian and Greek merchants burned, Turkish soldiers stationed at Armenian schools and places of worship, and Armenians required to turn in weapons of any kind. As Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire, accusations began to rise against the Armenians, with the Turks suspecting that the Armenians would ally with Russia and turn against the Empire. This accusation was used, and continues to be used by Turkey's current government, as a justification for the gathering and mass extermination of an estimated 1.5 million Armenians.⁴

As deportations began, on April 24, 1915, 250 of the Armenian community's educated intellectuals and leaders were arrested in Constantinople; most of them were

³ Anthony O'Mahony, "Syriac Christianity in the modern Middle East, in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, Vol. 5, Eastern Christianity, ed. Michael Angold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 512.

⁴ "Armenian Genocide History and Timeline," Genocide 1915: Armenian Genocide Information, accessed February 25, 2021, <http://www.genocide1915.info/history/>.

killed.⁵ Soon after, many editors, journalists, and families met the same fate,⁶ followed by several years of murders upon sight. Armenians were marched into the desert to die of starvation and dehydration, or tossed into rivers and lakes to drown. Many committed suicide to avoid rape and physical abuse by Turkish soldiers. The intent was not only to eliminate Armenians from Turkey and Western Armenia (now within modern-day Turkey's borders), but also to eliminate Christians beyond Turkey's borders and from the region as a whole.

Of the Armenians who survived and stayed in Turkey, many were cornered into participating in their own cultural erasure, often converting to Islam or changing their "-yan" or "-ian" ending names to Turkish names out of safety. Although these survival strategies made tracing family lineages difficult for many Armenians, the advent of DNA-based ancestry services has rendered these lineages more accessible. The western regions of Armenia were eventually swallowed into the borders of what is now modern-day Turkey, while the eastern regions of Armenia would become part of the Soviet Union, finally gaining independence as recently as 1990 as the Republic of Armenia.⁷

⁵ Those arrested included Armenian composer Komitas (Komitas Vardapet), who I will later discuss as an icon of the Armenian genocide and an inspiration to cultural preservation for the diaspora,

⁶ "Armenian Genocide History and Timeline," Genocide 1915.

⁷ Sylvia Angelique Alajaji, *Music and the Armenian Diaspora: Searching for Home in Exile* (Indiana University Press, 2015), 6–7.

Erasure of the Armenian people extends beyond the crimes against humanity committed during the genocide, but also into the denial or lack of formal government recognition of the atrocity itself. The Turkish government currently denies the Armenian Genocide and claims that the 1.5 million Armenians estimated to have perished in a deliberate attempt at ethnic cleansing were closer to 300,000 Armenians who died of disease and hunger as a consequence of deportation. Furthermore, those in Turkey who use the term "genocide" to describe these events risk prosecution,⁸ or, in the case of journalist Hrant Dink, assassination.⁹

Congress voted to formally acknowledge the Armenian Genocide only as recently as 2019,¹⁰ making the United States one of 30 countries to do so.¹¹ On April 24, 2021, the 106th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, President Joe Biden became the first American president to formally state the atrocities as "genocide,"¹² an act of prioritizing human rights over political allyship with Turkey that the Armenian community

⁸ Madeline Roache, "What Biden's Recognition of Armenian Genocide Means to Armenian-Americans," *TIME*, April 27, 2021, accessed April 28, 2021, <http://time.com/5959135/biden-armenia-genocide/>.

⁹ Sebnem Arsu, "Editor of Turkey's Armenian Paper Is Killed," *New York Times*, January, 19, 2007, accessed April 28, 2021, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/19/world/europe/19cnd-turkey.html>.

¹⁰ Catie Edmondson, "Senate Passes Resolution Recogniing Armenian Genocide, in Defiance of Trump," *New York Times*, December 12, 2019, accessed April 28, 2021, <http://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/12/us/politics/senate-armenian-genocide.html>.

¹¹ Armenian National Institute, "Countries that Recognize the Armenian Genocide," https://www.armenian-genocide.org/recognition_countries.html, accessed April 29, 2021.

¹² Madeline Roache, "What Biden's Recognition of Armenian Genocide Means to Armenian-Americans."

has long advocated for. In any case, while I appreciate and celebrate this gesture of acknowledgement, it is long overdue, and the silence of the United States government over the past century—a silence that enabled both the erasure of Armenian trauma and Turkish accountability—has spoken loudly.

The Armenian genocide is as far back as my own family history can be traced. While some of my family of course survived, most were murdered in front of their families. I know that my great-grandmother was orphaned and that she miraculously survived when she momentarily left her orphanage, only to return and find everyone slaughtered. I know that my grandfather watched his own father forced from the hair salon he worked at and placed in a line with other men. He then watched as each man was shot, one at a time. I know that my great-grandfather had an esteemed reputation for transporting children on his back as he swam laps across a river to get them to safety. I also know that answers are missing to the questions about what happened to most of my unaccounted-for family. Neither my grandparents nor my surviving great-grandparents talked much about their experiences during the genocide, and my family records contain only a few cities and dates, based on fading memories. My family's choice to stay silent or forget the past is not dissimilar from other families who also experienced these horrors.

Both sides of my family, like many Armenians, marched into the deserts of Syria and, upon escaping, either chose to settle, often in refugee camps, or eventually walked all the way to Lebanon. These places of refuge have experienced their own

erasure of Armenian communities in the past few decades. With the Syrian Civil War, much of the Armenian population fled during the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis. Over 22,000 Armenians sought refuge in Armenia, while only 14,000 remain in Syria.¹³ Lebanon has experienced its own displacement of the Armenian population with the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) and the recent Beirut port explosion (August 4, 2020).

Each of these tragedies have severely impacted, and continue to impact, my own family. My parents and brother, like many Lebanese–Armenians, are refugees of the Lebanese Civil War, and settled in San Francisco in 1978 with the intent to move back to Beirut once the war ended. They did not anticipate that the war would last fifteen years. With the 2020 port explosion occurring blocks away from the Armenian neighborhood in Beirut, members of my family were killed, injured, or lost their homes and businesses. Nearly all of my family in Beirut, like so many other Armenians, had been preparing to leave a post-explosion Lebanon for a fresh start in Armenia, which had offered citizenship and refuge to those impacted to thank Lebanon for welcoming so many refugees after the genocide. This was the plan until a war broke out in Nagorno–Karabakh in September of 2020, a territory long disputed between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

¹³ Anahit Hayrapetyan, “UNHCR helps displaced Syrian-Armenians facing hardship amid pandemic,” *UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency*, accessed February 26, 2021, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2020/5/5ecf78874/unhcr-helps-displaced-syrian-armenians-facing-hardship-amid-pandemic.html>.

Nagorno–Karabakh, or “Artsakh” to the Armenian community, has been occupied by Armenians since the 6th to 9th centuries B.C.E.¹⁴ While the majority of the population has been and is Armenian, after the Armenian genocide, Joseph Stalin gifted the territory to Azerbaijan. As such, both Azerbaijan and Armenia have long fought for the territory to be absorbed into their respective countries, including wars between 1988 and 1994, and, most recently, 2020. Both instances resulted in mass displacements of both Armenians and Azeris, with the most recent conflict being declared a win for Azerbaijan. Borders of the territory have now been redrawn, forcing indigenous communities of Armenians to leave. Many of these communities burned their houses and belongings so that the Azeris could not live in their ancestral homes, exhibiting similar behaviors to the Armenian communities who destroyed their homes when the Ottoman Turks invaded Armenian neighborhoods during the genocide. Monasteries and churches that have stood for nearly 2,000 years have been stripped of their Christian markings, historic art is now held by the Azeris, civilians have been killed, and Azerbaijan still holds prisoners of war long after the treaty has been signed.

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War was not the first time Azerbaijan had destroyed Armenian cultural artifacts. In a 2019 study, Simon Maghakyan, a human rights activist and international relations lecturer, and Sarah Pickman, a historian and co-author of the study, found that “over the past 30 years cultural and religious Armenian artifacts

¹⁴ “Artsakh Republic: History and Current Reality,” *The President of the Republic of Armenia*. accessed February 27, 2021, <http://www.president.am/en/Artsakh-nkr/>.

were covertly and systematically destroyed in an alleged Azerbaijani campaign to eliminate indigenous Armenian culture in Nakhichevan, an Azerbaijani exclave between Armenia, Iran and Turkey." Among the destroyed artifacts, despite a UNESCO order demanding their protection, were 5,840 cross-stones, or *khachkars*—large-scale, flat sculpture-stones, carved with a cross and ornamentations. Often found in churches and monasteries, *khachkars* were characteristic of medieval Christian Armenian art.¹⁵ All of this contributed to what Maghakyan refers to as an attempted "cultural genocide."¹⁶

To further complicate the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Turkish President Tayyip Recep Erdoğan financially backed the Azeri military in efforts to ethnically cleanse the territory of Armenians. He continues to deny the occurrence of the Armenian genocide, and has praised the Grey Wolves party, which has been violently targeting Armenians around the world since the conflict broke out in the fall of 2020. In addition to these political conflicts, a massive earthquake struck Armenia in 1988, which killed 25,000 and displaced 12,000.¹⁷ This tiny nation has experienced a series of events that have erased

¹⁵ See Vahram Balayan, *Artsakh History: From Time Immemorial up to Our Days* (Yerevan: Zangak 97 Press, 2005), 196 ff.

¹⁶ Madeline Roache, "What Biden's Recognition of Armenian Genocide Means to Armenian-Americans."

¹⁷ "1988: Death toll rises in Armenian Earthquake," BBC: On This Day, accessed February 27, 2021, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/december/10/newsid_2544000/2544077.stm.

lives and physical artifacts of culture, instilling an immense sense of grief, loss, and cultural preservation amongst its diaspora.

2.2 | Komitas: Laying the Foundation for Identity & Musical Preservation

My present-day sense of cultural preservation goes back to composer, writer, musicologist, priest, and genocide survivor Komitas Vardapet. Born Soghomon Soghomonian (1869–1935), and more commonly referred to as “Komitas,” he began a study of what he considered to be native Armenian music in 1890 in an attempt to find the root of Armenian music that was without influence of other cultures. Since the eleventh century, Armenia’s folk music had become influenced by Persian, Arabic, and Turkish music, but Komitas claimed that certain communities in the mountains had remained mostly isolated and had preserved “true” Armenian folk music.¹⁸ On musical influence, Komitas writes:

May I be excused if I stress here again that our music in its national spirit and style is as eastern as is the Persian–Arabic, but that the Persian–Arabic is not our music, nor is our music a branch of theirs. The situation is that ours has been subjected to their influence. This is analogous to the position of our language, which like Persian, Kurdish and German, etc., is a branch of the Indo–European family, yet is not German, nor Kurdish, nor even Persian.¹⁹

Turkish influence is evident in the Armenian liturgical songs which have been sung since ancient times during household festivities. In Turkey, *tiratsous*, i.e., the cantors in the church, began to embellish the Armenian songs with Turkish colorations when they sang for the banquets of their rich patrons [...] in this way

¹⁸ Alajaji, *Music and the Armenian Diaspora*, 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 27.

the Armenian liturgical music of the metropolis slowly lost a degree of its purity and national character as it acquired a Turkish laxity.²⁰

Komitas's musicological work before the genocide already demonstrates a desire to preserve the integrity of Armenian folk music, to better understand the fragility of identity in the context of influence, and, I would propose, to protect against the cultural loss that came as a consequence of the Hamidian massacres leading up to the genocide itself. Komitas visited these villages and transcribed more than four thousand folk songs, of which only twelve hundred survive. He was arrested by the Ottoman secret police on April 24, 2015 under the accusation of having included politically subversive songs in his concert programs;²¹ upon escaping the Armenian genocide, Komitas spent the remainder of his life in psychiatric hospitals in treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder, with most of his folk song transcriptions being sold or destroyed.²² As others were displaced after the genocide, Komitas's original songs—often themed around “home” and deeply saturated with mourning and longing—as well as his transcribed folk songs, became anthems of remembrance for the diaspora.

These folk songs are so intensely treasured, I argue, that the responsibility of preservation has tended to discourage Armenian musicians from creating new and

²⁰ Vatsche Barsoumian, *Komitas: Essays and Articles: The Musicological Treatises of Komitas Vardapet* (Pasadena, CA: Drazark Press, 2001), 167.

²¹ Rita Soulahian Kuyumjian, *Archeology of Madness: Komitas, Portrait of an Armenian Icon* (Princeton, NJ: Gomitas Institute, 2001), 74.

²² Alajaji, *Music and the Armenian Diaspora*, 26, 28.

original work, with imputed artistic value being wildly imbalanced between pre- and post-genocide creative work. Even my own compositional work is not without direct influence from these songs; I often directly quote Komitas's own work, or draw from melodic and harmonic gestures from his catalog. Musicologist Sylvia Angelique Alajaji argues that "as survivors became exiles, the musical language these folk songs embodied became implicated in the boundary constructions needed to mark 'us' and 'them'—boundaries that were all the more necessary to construct since actual, physical boundaries were unattainable."²³

2.3 | The Exiled and the Armenian Diaspora: Preservation and Development

This idea of "us" and "them" is deeply ingrained in the Armenian community. When you come from a people who has had to fight for its survival, particularly a very small ethnic group that received little international interference in the genocide and Nagorno–Karabakh wars, you learn that you have to fight, not only for your own basic human rights, but also for the memories and contributions of your ancestors.

In Armenian, we have a word for everyone who is not Armenian: *odar*—which quite literally translates to "stranger." I have always been fascinated by this word, as it is far from a neutral word. When we think of a "stranger," we often think of someone who is not a part of a community, someone who does not belong, or someone to perhaps be wary or fearful of. There is *caution* when interacting with an *odar*, and this caution

²³ Alajaji, *Music and the Armenian Diaspora*, 14.

translates to protection and preservation of self, tradition, authenticity, and culture.

Musicologist Alajaji has followed resilient Armenian diasporic movements into Lebanon, Los Angeles, and New York, cities with significant and tightly-knit Armenian communities. I will focus on Lebanon, as my own family is rooted in Beirut, and the amalgamation of Armenian and Lebanese cultures has a direct influence on my musical language and extra-musical topics.

There are a few reasons why so many Armenians settled in Lebanon, aside from the clear and safe route from Syria following the exile of the genocide. Alajaji notes that the Dashnak, Hunchak, and Ramgavar political parties, the primarily Armenian political parties during the Ottoman Empire, relocated to Beirut, making Lebanon the “unofficial capital of the Armenian Diaspora.”²⁴ A progressive Lebanese government and strengthening cultural, political, and religious Armenian institutions allowed the space for Armenian nationalism to grow well beyond what had existed during the Ottoman Empire, even before the genocide.²⁵

Alajaji argues that the common thread of music, whether taught in schools, in church, or at cultural clubs, was the means by which the Armenian language was learned and preserved.²⁶ While such institutions were playing their part in holding onto heritage, the Armenian language became deeply influenced by Lebanon's primarily

²⁴ Alajaji, *Music and the Armenian Diaspora*, 89.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 83.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 85.

language of Arabic. Like so many members of the diaspora, my family's version of "Armenian" partially integrates both Turkish words, taught to my parents by my Turkish-born grandparents and great-grandparents, and Arabic, as a result of living in Beirut.

This amalgamation is not too far from Komitas's statement regarding influence on authentic Armenian music, and the movement of the diaspora into Lebanon, and later into the United States, would further change the Armenian sound. Of this, Alajaji writes about a modern Armenian area of music called

kef, or *kef time*, which was begun by first-generation Armenian–American Musicians who build on the traditions brought over by the survivors. The songs performed were sung in a mix of Turkish and Armenian, and the musicians frequently collaborated with their Turkish, Middle Eastern, Greek and Eastern European Jewish peers.²⁷

Kef and Armenian–Lebanese pop are the music that I grew up with and digested as "Armenian" music. While there is so much effort to hold onto authentic folk music, I feel there are a few reasons why Armenian music continues to branch further away from this authenticity here in the United States—a primary reason being an acceptance of what sounds "close enough." Speaking from my own personal experience as a diasporic member in the U.S., I have found myself immensely drawn not only to Middle Eastern and Mediterranean sounds, but also to the food, attire, people, and current events from these communities. Having not grown up in any Armenian community beyond my immediate family, I found myself often drawn to sounds that felt "close enough" to

²⁷ Ibid, 58.

Armenia's, and I think my experience is close to why so many Armenians, Turks, Greeks, Jews, and Arabs have found themselves drawn to collaborating with each other. When you are far from "home," you make a new one with others who might remind you of it, who have shared similar experiences, and who innately understand what can be difficult to articulate.

Alajaji takes this amalgamation further than just the sounds, asserting that diasporic Armenians' multiplicity of musical worlds and spaces "become metaphors for the political and social struggles they encounter in their host communities."²⁸ She continues:

In this sense, musical narratives speak to the complex relationships between diasporas and homelands, between diasporic communities and communities themselves. The space in which these worlds and struggles intersect becomes the site where the search for meaning takes place and, consequently, reveals the extraordinarily complex mediation that occurs not only between cultures but within the cultures themselves.²⁹

For me, this "meaning" becomes an incredibly complex pursuit of understanding that is navigated through the act of music making. In order to find meaning, I have found the question of identity to be increasingly important, and in order to understand identity, the question of *home* has often been raised in my own work. How can one find their identity without any true sense of origin or home? Is "home" the home of my ancestors and where I would have followed (Western Armenia/modern-day Turkey), the home of

²⁸ Alajaji, *Music and the Armenian Diaspora*, 2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

my parents and brother and where I would have followed (Lebanon), a
“symbolic/spiritual Home” as Alajaji calls it³⁰ (modern-day Armenia), or is it my
birthplace of the United States, where I currently reside?

³⁰ Alajaji, *Music and the Armenian Diaspora*, 9.

Chapter 3 | IDENTITY AND PROCESSING

3.1 | Andouni (Homeless)

*The heart of the homeless is gloomy and errant.
Ah! May your heart never be so black with grief.
Oh! To be without a home!*³¹

— Komitas, translation excerpted from “Andouni” [Homeless]

Race and identity are particularly complex areas for members of the Armenian diaspora, and I have found this ambiguity to both positively and negatively impact not just my music making, but also my “success” in my compositional career. I am an Armenian woman born in the United States to parents who fled the Lebanese Civil War. This means that I come from an ethnic group that does not unanimously identify either as white or Middle Eastern. Nonetheless, upon their arrival to the United States after the Armenian Genocide, when they faced racism from Americans for being “starved” and “poor” people, members of the diaspora went to court to be reclassified as *white* by the U.S. government. Of this, Alajaji writes:

Not all Armenians happily accepted the ‘Middle Eastern’ designation. In the 1920s, a number of significant court cases took place in the United States in which Armenian immigrants petitioned to be considered legally white. Although in the most significant of these cases the Armenians were found to be “biologically white,” Janice Okoomian asserts that the “success” of each case was based on the replacement of “Oriental” with “European.” One judge, she states “affected a rhetorical displacement of Armenian subjects, metonymically substituting Europeans in their place and evoking a picture of European suffering

³¹ “Lyrics: Andooni (Without a Home),” accessed March 11, 2021, <https://www.nonesuch.com/albums/gomidassongs/lyrics?page=1>.

at the hands of Turkish invaders." She continues, "This substitution of Europeans for Armenians in the place of the colonized enabled [the judge] to argue in favor of white status to Armenians by suggesting that their racial congruence with Europeans rested upon Turkish racial difference."³²

I have always found this question of whiteness vs. Middle Easternness to be complicated, particularly because, in the United States, so many people from Middle Eastern countries experience discrimination because of the color of their skin and their cultural differences, while nonetheless being classified as "Caucasian" on government forms. While many of my cousins are brown, I am white, but culturally, I grew up Middle Eastern. What this means in contemporary classical music is that I receive the privileges of a white woman, as far as access to education, institutional support, and other opportunities I am both aware and unaware of, while my music and ambiguous identity can attract curators hoping to ethnically diversify their programming.

Middle Eastern women often do not have freedom of expression without backlash in the United States, and without the threat of silencing (sometimes through arrest and violence) abroad, and I acknowledge that living somewhere between the identifiers of "white" and "Middle Eastern" has allowed me a space to safely express myself through the arts. While my parents did not have access to freedom of expression or an education beyond high school, they worked together making sandwiches every day for thirty years in the Californian equivalent of a bodega—their work and generosity provided me with the access to four university-level degrees. Furthermore, I live in New

³² Alajaji, *Music and the Armenian Diaspora*, 61–62.

York City—a place that provides me with access to musicians, organizations, and immense opportunity. Living here in the United States means that I have access to music making—something which can seem to be a fundamental means of expression—but I understand that having the ability to raise my voice without threat is an immense privilege. And with that privilege comes a responsibility, not only to speak and create, but to research, support, and cherish the voices of displaced communities—especially those who have historically been silenced.

3.2 | Unsung Songs: Trauma and Silence

As mentioned earlier, my family did not speak much about their own traumas, whether in experiencing the Armenian Genocide or the Lebanese Civil War. I had always thought this was specific to my family, which has always been proud of its resilience and clear in wanting to leave the past behind them. However, upon further research, including years of interviewing displaced individuals for my compositions, I learned that silence is a common theme among many survivors of severe conflict.

Musicologist Rita Soulahian Kuyumjian proposes that artistic people, and specifically Komitas, who dedicated much of his life to understanding “true” Armenian music, would create in order to process loss. Kuyumjian suggests that Komitas’s musicological work was an attempt to mourn and “symbolically resurrect” the parents

he lost early in childhood.³³ However, upon experiencing further trauma through the genocide, Komitas is famously known for having stopped all musical work; although musicologists sometimes disagree and argue that he occasionally sang, his compositional work seemed to come to a halt. Kuyumjian writes:

Komitas's creativity was crucial to his mental stability. His stunning restoration of the foundations of Armenian music opened a way for him to move through the consecutive phases of mourning [...] but his inability to respond creatively to the enormity of internment and genocide, a trauma so dire as to be virtually beyond mourning, brought about psychological disaster. This nightmarish turn of events deprived him of the very instrument of sublimation that he relied upon to heal him of grief and protect him from psychopathology, and its absence propelled him into severe Posttraumatic Stress Disorder complicated by psychotic symptoms.³⁴

Komitas, like so many others, had an inability, or perhaps even a lack of desire, to discuss and work through his experienced trauma. I have found this to be especially true with my own family, when I have gone to them to seek further understanding of our history and their experiences. I have also found it difficult to locate case studies about Armenian genocide survivors, but while documentation around post-trauma experiences for my own community is lacking, there has been ample research regarding the post-trauma of Holocaust survivors, which has been helpful in attempting to understand closely-related Armenian experiences.

³³ Rita Soulahian Kuyumjian, *Archeology of Madness: Komitas, Portrait of an Armenian Icon* (Princeton, NJ: Gomitas Institute, 2001), 201–202.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Writer and journalist Helen Epstein, the daughter of two Holocaust survivors, interviewed a number of survivors and writes about their silence in the context of processing and therapy:

Most of them [the survivors] did not want to be in a psychiatrist's office at all. They went under duress to claim a right not to request treatment. They resented the doctor for representing an authority whose opinion would validate their experience. They perceived him as a judge and a prosecutor, an official paid by the government of the country that was responsible for causing their pain.³⁵

She continues with a conclusion to her interviews that I have found particularly true amongst my own family members and interviewees in my projects:

Few survivors requested treatment for that implied that liberation had not put an end to Hitler, that Nazism had achieved a posthumous victory. Moreover, many survivors had developed a profound distrust of words, of the futility of trying to communicate their experience to anyone who had not participated in it. In 1968, Dr. Henry Krystal, a survivor himself and a psychiatrist in Detroit reported that of 697 survivors in the Detroit area receiving pensions from Germany and eligible for fully paid-for psychiatric care, only one-third had requested treatment.³⁶

What Epstein observes here are *choices* amongst survivors that allow them to claim control over what was horrifically uncontrollable: (1) the *choice* to be silent, rather than be silenced, and (2) the *choice* to erase their trauma, rather than be erased themselves. However, with immense respect and empathy for those who have experienced genocides and conflict, I personally find it difficult to honor this silence—to *choose* not to confront the past as part of my own processing and to not shout and

³⁵ Helen Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 103.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

draw as much attention to these experiences as possible. There is a name for this feeling; this is what psychologists call *survivor's guilt*, and it has been deeply connected to my creative work long before I could identify it.

3.3 | Survivor's Guilt

*For it was this grief and anger that irrevocably altered the narrative of Armenian identity in a shift that was in some ways as drastic as the one caused by the genocide itself... it was this grief and anger that eventually shaped an entire generation's understanding of what it was to be Armenian.*³⁷

— Sylvia Angelique Alajaji

Through her own findings and additional study of Dr. Robert Jay Lifton's research, who studied survivors of both the Holocaust and Hiroshima, Epstein defines *survivor's guilt* as "an unusual form of mourning where the survivor remained 'stuck in a magnification of the guilt which is present in every bereaved person'." She notes that these survivors would continue to spiral into deeper states of depression and mourning whenever friends, family, or even public figures died.³⁸ While this may seem obvious today, given that over the past few decades we have largely accepted post-traumatic stress disorder as a very real artifact of having experienced severe distress and disturbance, the idea that survivor's guilt can be passed down from the one who experienced the trauma to their children is a newer understanding. While some have controversially

³⁷ Alajaji, *Music and the Armenian Diaspora*, 108.

³⁸ Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust*, 107.

theorized that transgenerational trauma can be passed down through epigenetics and DNA methylation³⁹, I will focus on how this trauma is passed down *socially*.

Epstein offers various accounts of children of Holocaust survivors often exhibiting depression and impacted daily function. In one interview, subject Deborah Schwartz is questioned about her fascination with *suffering* and responds:

Suffer? [...] No. I never wanted to suffer. Certainly not to establish a link with my parents or to prove myself. Why would anyone choose to suffer? I was sick and tired of suffering. If anything, I felt chosen to strive for a full life and to make up for my parents' losses. I felt an obligation to my family who perished and to my parents who survived but that obligation was to transform the past... Didn't you ever feel that they were all looking down on you from up there? [...] I didn't want to let any of them down. I wanted them to be proud of me.⁴⁰

While this subject denies her interest in suffering, if I am being honest with myself and acknowledge the dark corners of my mind, I admit that I have always had a fascination with suffering, though this acknowledgement comes after much denial. As I will discuss further through specific samples of my compositional work, I have been drawn to creating sonic portraits of individuals who have suffered through extremely difficult circumstances. While this curiosity lies partly in my interest in social and political activism, it also stems from a personal interest in understanding the suffering of my own family—experiences that often manifest themselves into my own survivor's guilt,

³⁹ Benedict Carey, "Can We Really Inherit Trauma?", *New York Times*, December 10, 2018, accessed April 23, 2021, <http://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/10/health/mind-epigenetics-genes.html>.

⁴⁰ Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust*, 302.

because I will never fully understand what they felt. I continue to search for that understanding through my own creative processing.

Epstein offers another example of a subject who discusses suffering, but in the form of rage and violence, when reflecting on the Holocaust:

Why didn't anyone do something to stop it? I fantasize about my being there and taking arms. One of my fantasies today[...] is getting my hands on a Nazi. I think of all of them as one person who killed my family. I would like to torture him and mutilate him. It scares me when I have thoughts like that. It shocks me because I am not a violent person. In normal circumstances I can't imagine myself doing violence to any other human being.⁴¹

I do not include this quote to portray any interest in physical violence or harm, but I include it because much of my work does display some kind of *sonic* violence, and this form of violence has many motivations at its root. My 2014 Kronos Quartet-commissioned work *Bombs of Beirut* was the first of my pieces to integrate recordings of self-conducted interviews. In this case, the interviews were those of my family and friends, sharing their day-to-day experiences living during the Lebanese Civil War.

In addition to these interviews, I integrated field recordings of bombings taken by a family friend and sound recordist for the local Beirut news, who had placed a handheld tape recorder on his apartment balcony in the late 1970s. These recordings of the attacks are amplified on their own, the lights fade to black, the quartet stops

⁴¹ Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust*, 31.

playing, the voices silence, and the sounds of bombs overwhelm the performance space.

Similarly, in my 2015 piece *Silent Cranes*, also for Kronos, there is a six-minute stretch in which the quartet is accompanied by tens of layers of Armenian genocide survivor testimonies, prerecorded dense textures of string quartet, and further amplification and distortion of the live quartet on stage in an insistent wall of sound. In my 2021 piece *Paper Pianos*, which I will later examine more closely in this document, I include a nearly six-minute stretch of mostly silence in which the audience is asked to connect with a real-life account of a suicide bomber bombing a theater during a performance in Afghanistan, followed by eleven minutes of sampled and relentless paper-tearing at high decibels.

These violent moments in *Bombs of Beirut* and *Silent Cranes*, have prompted complaints from some audience members and negativity from some concert reviewers. I believe that these responses mean that the piece is achieving a level of success in its purpose of creating *discomfort*. Discomfort and violence are tricky to present, as they can risk reading as “trauma porn” or feel exploitative of individuals’ very real experiences. However, I believe that there is a place for these elements in music-making when it comes from a place of research, respect, and thoughtful intent. In classical music, I feel we can often be overly protective of our comfort in the listening experience—from the seats in the hall to the silence among the audience, the volume of amplification in a space, and even the temperature control, among other

conditions. I cannot help but wonder what kind of impact music could have if we embraced discomfort more fully. Does safe and comfortable music spark change? Ultimately, I would argue that most change in our greater world does not occur until people feel and internalize discomfort, and in turn want to see, hear, and experience less of it. While I do not believe that music on its own often translates to direct change, I do believe that discomfort in music can help cultivate an audience and culture that is more ready to create direct change. And while this may not be measurable, I do maintain hope that it is true.

3.4 | Music as Processing

If one wants to encourage change in this world, why do it through music as opposed to more “hands on” methods of change? I have thought about this often, while navigating my own frustrations around the slowness of change, particularly as Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey entered the war in the fall of 2020 and reopened old wounds of the first Nagorno-Karabakh war and Armenian Genocide. Epstein shares an account by interviewee Aviva, in which Aviva reflects on her mother's experience in Auschwitz:

I did try to imagine what kind of experiences she had to go through. A friend of mine gave us a play, *The Deputy*, by Hochhuth, and somehow that made it more vivid. I knew the facts. I had always known the facts—gas chambers, the treatment, the dehumanizing atmosphere. I knew all about it. It was nothing new. But somehow in the form of a play it seemed much more real. It stopped being part of history and I related it to my mother.⁴²

⁴² Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust*, 122.

I cannot offer any concrete reason why music—or any art for that matter—has the ability to provide healing, open connections, reframe, and offer a different entry point to engage with a topic. Perhaps art invites us to shed a few layers, to become more vulnerable and honest with ourselves, and to internalize as we experience and reflect on it. I do know that it does these things for me, and it seems to be the case for Aviva and others who choose art. For me, this is true of the act of creating music, as well as the act of receiving it. To draw from Aviva's own words: somehow in the form of composition, the Armenian Genocide and Lebanese Civil War seem much more real. They stop being part of history, and I relate it to my family. The separation between myself and my ancestors lessens.

This separation is shared with so many diasporic individuals, and it is what unites those of us who are away from "home." Of this, Alajaji writes: "[...] for the generation born in the United States, there was a double separation from two of the essential identity markers of the previous generation: place of birth and the traumas experienced (whether due to the atrocities suffered or the loss of home)."⁴³ And while I have no personal desire to actually experience those traumas or to uproot my life and move to my ancestral homeland of Armenia, there is a shared desire to understand it, as so much of the diasporic experience is being told that (1) we are not Armenian enough (Alajaji points out that those of us born in the United States are often called

⁴³ Alajaji, *Music and the Armenian Diaspora*, 147.

deghatsis,⁴⁴ meaning “natives”, which carries a negatively charged connotation similar to *odars*), and (2) we are responsible for preserving our entire people's history, culture, and traditions, that were and continue to be at risk of being lost.

While the motivation to act and preserve can often come from survivor's guilt, that does not mean that the actions themselves are not positive and constructive.

Armenian kanon player Ara Toupouzian states in an interview:

Often I feel as if I am contributing to the preservation of our cultural history. It is very important to me that this music doesn't become lost one day. I identify very clearly with it as my grandparents came from Ancient Armenia (Turkey) and it's this music which was halted at the point of Genocide. Think about it—100 years ago this music stopped. We were deprived of any new songs, artwork or poetry from our homeland.⁴⁵

I do understand to some extent what Toupouzian states about a significant halt in the creation of new songs, artwork, or poetry from home, but I disagree that this marked a halt in art making. Simply because Komitas stopped composing does not mean that Armenian musicians stopped creating, and I have felt that often the Armenian decision-makers and power-holders of commissions and programming seem to be stuck in 1915, choosing to turn a blind eye to anything that could be new—to any work that does not hold the past on a pedestal. But music does not live in a museum. It constantly evolves, and like Komitas had said of Armenian folk, it constantly receives influence from other cultures and moves forward.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 142.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 163.

This act of moving forward is driven by political and social activism, not just for myself, but for many Armenian artists who will be soon discussed. Epstein eloquently articulates the reason why so many children of trauma survivors feel a need to center activism in their lives, as she reflects on her Holocaust surviving parents:

Being their child has given me a certain depth, a seriousness about life that most people can't possibly have. I'm aware of the evil in the world and I'm not complacent. I feel it requires an active struggle to prevent a revival of the sort of thing that led to the murder of my family. I'm especially sensitive to racism because I identify with the target. That brings out a certain activism in me that wouldn't be there otherwise.⁴⁶

In the next chapter, I will discuss my work in collaboration with and in reference to Armenian artists who actively move Armenian music and art forward—artists who raised their voices because their ancestors were not in a position to do so, artists for whom activism is a primary force in their creative work. New work is being made, and it is vibrant, adventurous, and celebrates cultural survival.

⁴⁶ Helen Epstein. *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 31.

Chapter 4 | ACTIVISM THROUGH ART

4.1 | Atom Egoyan & Arshile Gorky

Atom Egoyan, an extraordinary Oscar-nominated Canadian-Armenian filmmaker, was my first role model of a living Armenian artist—one who speaks loudly through incorporating his heritage into contemporary and socially complex narratives. Born in Cairo, Egypt, he later moved to Toronto, Canada. Egoyan initially rejected his Armenian roots as a child. He later found his own relationship to his heritage during college, much like myself, where he studied Armenian history at the University of Toronto.⁴⁷ I was first exposed to Egoyan's work twenty years ago, through his 2001 film *Ararat*. In this film, Egoyan presents the story of real-life genocide survivor and Abstract Expressionist painter Arshile Gorky through direct historical narrative, a fictional “present” day narrative through the lens of a fictional art historian, genocide education, and (because this is an Egoyan film) incredibly complicated interpersonal relationships through disconnected timelines. At the heart of the film, he shares stories with his international following that are not typically heard by *odars* and raises questions of bigotry, loss, preservation, and resilience. Whether or not he directly confronts these themes in the context of Armenian events, these themes are consistently present in many of his films, such as *Calendar*, *Adoration*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Guest of Honour*,

⁴⁷ Miguel Mera, “Interview with Canadian–Armenian Filmmaker Atom Egoyan,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 18, no. 1 (2009): 73.

and *Next of Kin*. Egoyan has a platform with a wider reach than most of the Armenian community, and he chooses to use it.

Egoyan's works and courage to speak out stem from another resilient Armenian artist, Arshile Gorky—a central figure not only in *Ararat*, but in various other projects of Egoyan's and in his own personal life. Egoyan named his own son after the artist, and later created the incredibly personal short film *Arshile*, in collaboration with wife and actress Arsineé Khanjian, in which the two read a proud and heart-breaking letter to their two-year old son, explaining his namesake. Later, *Arshile*, *Ararat*, and new footage and perspectives would be integrated into my own collaboration with Egoyan, the multimedia documentary project *They Will Take My Island*, centering around the life and work of Arshile Gorky.

Personally, having earlier written a song cycle with librettist Royce Vavrek through an imagined perspective of Gorky's, and having spent countless hours staring at his paintings at the Whitney Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Museum of Modern Art, I have found myself drawn not only to Gorky's resonant works, but also to Gorky himself as a strong personality. Egoyan and I share an interest in Gorky because he is a representation of resilience that we cannot fully understand from our own family, so we understand it through his existence and the art he has left behind.

Gorky should not have survived. His father left him as a child, his mother died of starvation in his arms on a genocide march into the desert, he suffered an accident that left him temporarily paralyzed, his studio burned with many of his paintings in it, and

then he had cancer—after which he chose to commit suicide at the age of forty-one. This act allowed Gorky to finally take control of his life and body, which had been spoken for since childhood. Through all of this, he created works that ranged from natural scenes depicting places in the United States to memories of Armenia, including the horrific *Charred Beloveds* and his iconic and perhaps best-known painting, *The Artist and His Mother*. One can stand across from these paintings and ask Gorky: “What was it like during the genocide? What does grief feel like? What is it like now that you’re here?” and he can offer you space to find the answers.

4.2 | *They Will Take My Island*

In 2018, I was commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art to create a new score for Soviet-Armenian filmmaker Sergei Parajanov's *The Color of Pomegranates*. One month before the premiere, despite appropriate licensing through the Criterion collection and pleading from Armenia's Ministry of International Affairs, the film's original composer and his colleagues put a halt to the premiere; the film was to stay in its original form. I bring this up for two reasons (1) as an example of a cultural tendency to stunt the creation of new art due to an obsession with preserving the old and (2) the silver lining of this cancellation led to the dream opportunity of later collaborating with Egoyan.

In response to this last-minute cancellation, the Metropolitan Museum of Art commissioned me to write a new work that would be part of a portrait concert including my other hybrid documentary works *Bombs of Beirut* and *Silent Cranes*. With the openness of the commission, I wrote Egoyan, asking if he would consider collaborating on a project. What sparked from that letter would be dream sessions in which we further connected on Gorky, particularly around his painting *They Will Take My Island*, which resides at the *Art Gallery of Ontario* near Egoyan's home. While there are many theories as to what this "island" represents both metaphorically and physically, we strongly connected to the theory that this island represented Akhtamar Island. Previously a part of Armenia and now part of modern-day Turkey, Akhtamar Island would have been a place that Gorky had access to, and is located in Lake Van, where Armenians were either drowned or drowned themselves during the genocide.⁴⁸ This separation from "home" due to the "taking" of it, translates beyond the painting to a larger Armenian experience, and one that Egoyan and I wanted to further explore.

They Will Take My Island is a thirty-minute work for film, amplified string octet (Silvana and JACK Quartets), and fixed audio playback consisting of audio sampled from Egoyan's films *Arshile* and *Ararat*. The work also includes interviews that I recorded and edited from discussions with Saskia Spender (granddaughter of Gorky and President of the Arshile Gorky Foundation), Parker Field (Managing Director of the

⁴⁸ In my interview with Gorky's granddaughter Saskia Spender, she mentions his proximity and personal references to frescos on the island.

Arshile Gorky Foundation), and Michael Taylor (Chief Curator and Deputy Director of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts). The electronic track not only makes use of human speech, but also samples Armenian folk songs, either sung in the film *Ararat* or played as diegetic sound, with Komitas's *Groung* sampled most heavily along with abstracted arrangements performed by the string octet.

In most of my film collaborations, I have received the final cut of the film with a “temp track” that is meant to guide my compositional choices, but the process of creating *They Will Take My Island* was the opposite. After quite a few collective brainstorming sessions, I edited the interviews, sampled audio from Egoyan's films, and created a mockup of the music. Egoyan and his editor Cameron Davis collaged and edited picture to the nearly finished composition, all granting me a lot of well-appreciated creative freedom in a medium that traditionally does not offer it. Originally intended for a live premiere in March of 2020, scheduled two weeks after New York City closed venues due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we later adapted the project for a virtual medium, which premiered in January of 2021.

The folk song *Groung [Crane]* has become an anthem of the diaspora. In its lyrics, the singer desperately calls out to the migratory crane and begs for word from their home. The bird gives no response and flies away. This song is deeply embedded in my chamber works: *Dzov Yerku Kooynov [Sea of Two Colors]*, a portrait of Komitas's deterioration; *Silent Cranes*, a musical documentary around the genocide; several

arrangements of singer Zabelle Panosian's interpretation of the folk song for various configurations of strings; and, now, *They Will Take My Island*.

Kro'onk, oos-ti koo - gas, tsa - ra em dzay - mid.

Kro'onk, mer ash - khar - hen khap - rik muh choo - - nis.

Kro'onk, mer ash - khar - hen khap - rik muh choo - - nis.

Figure 1: *Ground* melody derived from Komitas's transcriptions. Spelling variation in lyrics due to variations of dialect.

In *They Will Take My Island* alone, the melody appears in three instances:

- (1) Introduction (film timecode: 01:47-05:03; mm. 29–92): sampling the actor portrayal of Gorky's mother in *Ararat*, voice recorded by Armenian soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian; pitch shifting, time stretching, reverb, distortion.
- (2) Art historians discuss Gorky's birth at Lake Van, his refugee experience, abandonment by his father, being orphaned by his mother, emigration through Ellis Island, and bravery of his art and identity shaping in the context of these experiences

(film timecode: 10:40–11:40; mm. 233–263): string octet plays a direct quote of *Groung* and then original, melodic material continues, inspired by the song's folk melody.

(3) Art historians discuss the difficulty surrounding Gorky's experience in losing his mother, as the film shows how this is reflected in the act of painting and erasing portions of *The Artist and His Mother* (film timecode: 16:30–18:50, mm. 348–382), sampling the actor portrayal of Gorky's mother in *Ararat*, voice recorded by Armenian soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian (this is in the very background, as there is original vocal material recorded by myself that is in the foreground), pitch shifting, time stretching, reverb, distortion; (film timecode 17:15–19:30, mm. 359–392), string octet plays abstracted arrangement of *Groung* in a section of both reharmonized melody, distorted string textures, and washy electronics.

As I point out these instances in which I reference *Groung*, I ask myself: "Why do I feel the need to reference this folk song over and over again in my work?" Though perhaps I should be asking: "Why do so many Armenian musicians reference this song in their work?", as this piece is very popularly programmed amongst Armenian musicians. I think this comes out of my survivor's guilt. While I am my own independent artist with my own musical voice that aims to move forward, albeit one that is undoubtedly influenced by the musical language of my heritage, I not only feel a responsibility to do my part in preserving this music that was so nearly lost, but also, I feel the act of musical preservation is a part of my own identity, whether I chose for it to be or not—it is as

inescapable as the pressure I have felt since childhood to speak the language, remember the recipes, and practice the traditions.

As members of the diaspora, we return to these songs, themes, and moments of history time and time again. I composed *They Will Take My Island* as a reflection of the Armenian genocide through the lens of Arshile Gorky—a study of one individual that also promotes an awareness of the genocide with very large hopes of preventing further genocides from happening in our world. Egoyan and I never would have anticipated the relevance of *They Will Take My Island* in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh war that broke out in fall of 2020. Of this conflict, Egoyan shares:

In this moment where the frailty of an ancient heritage is so clear, when we can already see the Armenian presence being erased from historical lands, we are offering a meditation on the transmission of culture. *They Will Take My Island* begins with a photograph of a young Arshile Gorky with his cherished mother, taken in the city of Van just before the Armenian Genocide of 1915. It ends with an image taken in the Art Gallery of Ontario, where Gorky's painting *They Will Take My Island* hangs today. How the complex story of this great Armenian–American artist shifted from an island located in Lake Van and migrated to a studio in New York is at the root of the exploration Mary and I have taken to create this piece. Given the current threats against national Armenian heritage, we feel this work is particularly urgent.⁴⁹

I share this statement by Egoyan because while *They Will Take My Island* is both inherently political in its subject matter and a symbol of perseverance of an ethnic group's voice that was meant to be silenced, artists do not live in a vacuum through

⁴⁹ “Metropolitan Museum to Present Program Dedicated to Arshile Gorky,” *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, accessed March 18, 2021, <https://mirrorspectator.com/2021/01/21/metropolitan-museum-to-present-program-dedicated-to-arshile-gorky/>.

their work. The Metropolitan Museum of Art released a statement in November of 2020 condemning the destruction of historical Armenian art and standing with the Armenian community. However, the museum refused the Armenian artists they commissioned to create new work, and those who had been commissioned through the mentioned *Armenia!* exhibition, the right to reshare or associate with the statement.

The recent bloodshed and destruction in the Nagorno–Karabakh region is a global tragedy of grave concern to us all. In addition to our plea and hope for the violence to stop, as museum leaders we urge that cultural heritage sites be protected. The Metropolitan Museum of Art is dedicated to preserving and exhibiting human creativity of over 5,000 years from across the globe. As the organizer and host of the *Armenia!* exhibition in 2018—which was the first major exhibition to explore the remarkable artistic and cultural achievements of the Armenian people in a global context over fourteen centuries—we have watched in horror and sadness at the recent violence and bloodshed in the Nagorno–Karabakh region. We implore all those involved to respect these international cultural heritage sites, which enrich our world and have survived for thousands of years. The loss of cultural heritage sites is permanent, and is a grievous theft from future generations.⁵⁰

It is not enough for an institution to offer a statement that they cannot honor two months later, and where institutions fail, I feel it is an artist's ability—it is my ability—to speak out. As Saskia Spender says in her interview for *They Will Take My Island*: “When people are not in a position to talk about truths, perhaps because there is a political or conflict situation, then the artists are the truth tellers.”

⁵⁰ “Statement from The Met on Armenian Cultural Heritage Sites,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accessed March 18, 2021, <https://www.metmuseum.org/press/news/2020/statement-about-armenian-cultural-heritage>.

4.3 | *Paper Pianos*

Who gets to tell the “truth”? Where are the lines between “constructive activism,” “savior complex,” and “appropriation”? What stories are to be shared, with whom, and how? Is music an appropriate medium for reflecting on the horrors of what people are capable of and what traumas individuals have experienced? When it comes to integrating documentary elements, such as interviews and field recordings, how does one do this *ethically*? These are questions I have asked myself throughout my explorations into musical documentary, particularly in the creation of *Paper Pianos*. These are the questions that I am humbly still seeking answers to.

Paper Pianos is an evening-length musical documentary for contemporary sinfonietta Alarm Will Sound that explores the dislocation, experiences, expression, and optimism of four refugees who have relocated to New York. These refugees include: pianist Milad Yousufi (Afghanistan), who fled to New York from Kabul, where he lived under threat from the Taliban for pursuing music; and resettlement workers Getachew Bashir (Ethiopia), a high-ranking judge who left his country when the judiciary and his independence came under threat of being co-opted by the regime; Hani Ali (Somalia), who was born on the run and came of age as a young girl negotiation the terrors of being stigmatized in a displacement camp; and Akil Aljaysh (Iraq), who came from a prominent family and fled Iraq after being tortured, worked his way through Syria and Lebanon, and eventually settled in the United States. Recorded interviews with these

individuals conducted by myself and director Nigel Maister are incorporated into the electronic track and are complemented by hand-drawn projected animations by Syrian–Armenian visual artist and long-time collaborator Kevork Mourad, whose own personal work has been dedicated to displaced peoples over the past few decades. *Paper Pianos* is scheduled to premiere at The Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC) in March of 2022.

4.3.1 | The Choice and Ethics of Documentary

*We address the unspeakable to give it form. The raw experience of encountering atrocities poses the challenge of contextualizing and determining responsibility, including perhaps our own.*⁵¹

— Bill Nichols

I will be referencing texts around film documentary, as “new music,” compared to the film world, is unfortunately quite behind in conversations and research around ethical use of documentary materials (for instance, Steve Reich’s delayed accountability for *It’s Gonna Rain* or *Come Out*, as thoughtfully explored in Sumanth Gopinath’s “The Problem of the Political in Steve Reich’s *Come Out*”⁵²). For me, this “responsibility” that film critic Bill Nichols mentions is linked to the “survivor’s guilt” mentioned earlier. There

⁵¹ Bill Nichols, *Speaking Truths with Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 182.

⁵² Sumanth Gopinath, “The Problem of the Political in Steve Reich’s *Come Out*,” in *Sound Commitments: Avant-garde Music and the Sixties*, ed. Robert Adlington (New York: Oxford University Press), 122.

are many reasons why displacement and ethnic cleansing continue to happen in our world, but one of the reasons is simply that we, as a society and individually, continue to enable and allow them to happen. With social justice pieces gaining particular popularity in our present times—often out of a genuine interest to do good—sometimes these types of projects feel like all we *can* do. Moreover, often these pieces are advertised as giving a platform to those who are unable to speak on behalf of themselves. Documentary director and editor Michael Rabiger comments on the danger of this approach:

Speaking on behalf of others is almost a disease among documentarians [...] Behalfers make it their business to represent those without a voice, which in the end is everyone unable to make films themselves. This should remind us how charity gets dispensed by the privileged, how it can feel to the recipients, and how self-serving it can be to imagine one is promoting someone else's interests.⁵³

In the past, I *have* felt and wrongfully claimed that my works aimed to give voice to those who cannot speak out, but that was (and is) my privilege talking, and this approach does more harm than good. In further studying documentary and social conflict works, when creating *Paper Pianos*, it was important to me that the testimonies came from individuals who *wanted* their stories to be shared, and these individuals did so in hopes that others will not experience the same as they did.

The interviewees are volunteers, well-practiced in sharing their experiences in documented mediums, with three of the four being professionals who have dedicated

⁵³ Michael Rabiger, *Directing the Documentary* (Abingdon, Oxon: Focal Press, 2009), 357.

their lives to refugee resettlement. Hani Ali is a care manager at Mary's Place Refugee Outreach of Rochester, NY; Akil Ajaysh is a case manager at Catholic Family Center of Rochester, NY; and Getachew Beshir is the Refugee Program Manager of the same Catholic Family Center. Milad Yousufi's involvement is unique, as he is not professionally linked to refugee services. I met Milad through Alarm Will Sound, when their resident bassoonist Michael Harley sent out an email on behalf of his sister-in-law, an immigration lawyer, who mentioned that Milad had just fled Afghanistan and was hoping for access to a piano to practice on while in New York. Having an upright piano that was getting very little play, I volunteered mine, and in turn received an email from the immigration lawyer to arrange a meeting with the three of us.

It was at this meeting that Milad generously shared his story of growing up as a musician in Kabul, Afghanistan where the Taliban had forbidden music amongst other artistic expressions. He had silently taught himself to play piano by practicing on keyboards that he would draw on paper, that fled Afghanistan after his life was threatened as a consequence of his music making, and shared that he wanted to tell his story so that people in the U.S. could better appreciate their own freedom of expression.

It was also through Milad's lawyer that I learned how Milad's involvement in a piece like *Paper Pianos* could help his immigration case, and how I could be of direct help in his case by helping him integrate into New York's music community in hopes of proving his contribution and impact to anyone reviewing his materials. In addition to

inviting Milad to share his story through *Paper Pianos*, I (along with generous individuals from the music community) have helped him to secure a teaching position through the New York Philharmonic Very Young Composers Program, admissions into undergraduate and graduate universities, and several commissions (perhaps most notably with the Kronos Quartet with a performance at Carnegie Hall), as well as donations of instruments, technical equipment, and books. I have given him composition lessons and advice as he establishes himself as a music maker here in the United States. More than this, Milad has become a part of my own family, and we have shared celebrations and heartbreaks together.

For the other interviewees, Alarm Will Sound and I have offered in-kind donations to their respective resettlement organizations. We have plans to further contribute, in partnership with a secured presenting organization, in ways that each interviewee sees fit, and we hope to integrate language into the future licensing of this work that includes revenue shares to interviewees or their chosen organizations. None of these gestures are legally required, but feel *ethical*, and I mention these gestures not to boast of my own involvement in Milad's acclimation here or the ensemble's efforts, but rather to share that for me, documentary work is not about being neutral and uninvolved. It is activism—both artistic and tangible—and it is highly personal work with real people, often with those who have experienced traumas and are generously and vulnerably sharing their traumas with strangers. More important than the music making itself is the connectivity with individuals as *humans* and not *subjects* or points of inspiration.

Bill Nichols discusses instances in which filmmakers break an unspoken rule that cautions against engaging with the subjects of the film and instances in which the creators interfere or help out. He then states, "...those who understand the documentary as a form to help us see the world anew understand that it is not bound by a journalistic ethics or by illusions of objectivity, this has also proven an Achilles heel. Critics cite the lack of objectivity as evidence that a given film is bad journalism and therefore unworthy of our attention."⁵⁴ Nichols continues:

The film may join important and timely issues. The filmmaker's moral or political perspective on those issues will be conveyed by expressive techniques that strive to move and perhaps persuade the viewer...documentary filmmaking is an art that involves other people directly. It is fashioned from the lives of others, sometimes in very raw, unmediated forms⁵⁵

For Nichols, "Documentary film seeks to evoke feelings, alter or strengthen commitments, and propose actions that are propelled by shared beliefs."⁵⁶ These "shared beliefs" are drivers of empathy, and without an establishment of empathy between storytellers, audiences, performers, presenters, and creators, I think it would be very difficult for any *good* (whether in thought or action) to spark from social or political works. I would argue that this is *because* documentaries are not journalism, and because they have the flexibility of not being neutral, they have the ability to spark thought towards concrete change.

⁵⁴ Bill Nichols, *Speaking Truths with Film*, 221.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 155.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 161.

This said, Nichols raises some good questions: “How does a documentary, or any film or work of art, have a significant impact on the culture within which it circulates? [...] Do the most profound forms of social impact for any work of art, including documentaries, yield to quantifiable measurement?”⁵⁷ While I think these questions are nearly impossible to answer, and are certainly even more impossible to measure by any quantifiable means, the motivation to *attempt* impact—to cultivate an audience that is more sympathetic of the refugee crisis, more aware, and, hopefully, more ready to donate, vote, and volunteer help for the communities affected globally by this—is very present in *Paper Planos*. Nichols writes that “no one film has ever been the cause of fundamental social change,”⁵⁸ but perhaps many projects can be.

4.3.2 | Music Making and Language

In my first few weeks at Columbia University, I was asked to present a short introduction to my creative work in the composition seminar, and I chose to share an excerpt of my documentary piece *Silent Cranes*. In response, I received similar feedback between faculty and peers: the musical language was “too direct.” I have thought about this feedback often, and to be honest, I found it created a great deal of tension in my own creative process as I started *Paper Planos*. Does great art have to be difficult to understand? Does it have to be complex in sound, structure, or craft? Does it

⁵⁷ Ibid, 200.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 225.

have to be geared for an audience that is educated in understanding a particular musical language?

This feedback was correct in that the musical language was direct, but in the context of my own work and objectives, the music *has* to be direct. I want audiences to understand, and I want them to “get” the objective of a work. The moment a listener feels alienated as a result of musical language or construction can be the very moment in which I lose the listener’s willingness to empathize and further understand stories and testimonies that, by their very nature, may already feel unrelatable and distant. For me, this is not a compromise in compositional choices, but rather a happy realization that I believe keeps my listeners engaged and more ready to digest difficult testimonies. These testimonies are ones that the music needs to not only support, but to stay out of the way so that the text is understood.

My approach to writing music is similar to that of my approach to film scoring. The purpose of the music is to support the emotional and psychological trajectory of the speaker(s). In other words, the sound is at the *service* of the text. For the most part, this text is offered in its nearly original sonic state. In *Paper Planos*, while various interviews have been edited together to create a well-entwined and overarching narrative constructed partially by myself with primary heavy lifting by director Nigel Maister, there is little processing on the voices themselves. I often think about Steve Reich’s *Different Trains*, an undeniable influence on much of my work that utilizes interviews of Holocaust survivors through repetitions of recordings that highlight the

melodic contours of spoken speech. I find, however, that this approach can detract from the integrity of the testimonies and lighten the weight of the shared content. Through the repetition of text, we can often find further meaning, but we can also become desensitized to content, and the melodic synchronization of instruments-to-text can make a game or gimmick out of the listening experience.

In making *Paper Pianos*, it was important to me that all of the text be understood, and presented as close to its natural delivery as possible, in order to remind listeners that the stories are *real* and that they are *human*. Only in very specific moments does the music drown out the text (i.e. timecode 00:15:30–00:16:03, mm. 235–248; timecode 00:41:20–00:45:16, mm. 776–886). These are moments in which the text is intended to melt into chaos and create tension, as the listener tries to decipher the words they had so clearly heard before.

The musical material that the instrumentalists perform tends to live in two worlds: tonal and noise. Tonality is not only a choice of accessibility and directness of musical language, but it is also simply ingrained into my own musical voice, deeply saturated with Armenian and Middle Eastern folk and modes. My connection with folk tradition has often raised the question of what to ask of non-Armenian and Middle Eastern performers when playing my work. Looseness in both time and tuning is very important to me in moving away from a polished “classical” sound toward the informality of folk. In the score, introductory performance notes include “Play like folk instrumentalists,

grittily and digging in. Everyone does not need to play perfectly in time or in tune with each other."

Because of the various multimedia components and the need for synchronicity between musicians, track, staging, and projections, the ensemble plays to a click track, which can often foster a very clear and locked in performance. However, this click is only made available to the conductor, pianist, bassist, and percussionists, who play complex material and often offer a rhythmic foundation when others do not. This limited access to click creates the freedom for other performers to push in and out of time where needed, and to really listen and respond to each other, rather than remaining stuck and isolated in their headphones.

This said, writing a request for performers to play grittily and to not play in tune with each other is not enough, and notating all of these desires across a piece, while helpful, can also take away from the looseness and spontaneity of folk. Much of our workshop process has included in-person communication and experimentation to accomplish these sounds, much like how folk would be shared and passed on to other musicians orally—whether encouraging more grit and bite on bow contact for the strings, or coaching a vibrato for the clarinet that more closely matches that of a particular duduk recording.

This balance between Armenian and Middle Eastern folk music and Western music practices and instruments has long existed in my work, mostly out of access, but also reflective of my own conflicted identities between heritage and current place.

And while I am comfortable asking performers of Western instruments to move more closely to those of folk, I am not comfortable asking these performers, who often double on voice in *Paper Pianos*, to emulate vocal traditions from these influences. Performers may sing modes connected to these regions, but I never ask them to sing the languages or integrate the ornamentations and inflections associated with them. Any instance of such is delivered by my own pre-recorded voice on the backing track. My most formed understanding of this is that the voice is so human and so personal, that it seems to cross into an ethical space which feels uncomfortable when offered by individuals outside these singing traditions.

4.3.3 | Horror, Discomfort, and Violence

*[W]e make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones.*⁵⁹

— Stephen King

While the musical language in *Paper Pianos* is rather accessible and often aims to create a comfortable space that invites empathy from listeners, this comfort also exists in juxtaposition to horror. Exploring horror in my own music making serves a few different functions. It becomes a form of personal processing and allows me to empathize with the experiences of my family—violence, abuse, senseless killing, and the resilience of victims in attempts of survival. Furthermore the exploration of horror augments understandings of how humans, not “monsters,” are capable of such horrific acts

⁵⁹ Stephen King, *Stephen King's Danse Macabre* (New York: Everest House, 1981), 13.

against humanity. I place a strong emphasis on *not monsters*, as I believe labeling individuals as monsters removes the blame from society's role in enabling people who carry out these atrocities. My own music also leans towards moments of horror in an effort to create a shared experience with an audience. In *Danse Macabre*, a book in which Stephen King shares his own approach to writing horror and breaks down the effectiveness of the genre in its history in cinema, he argues that it is *horror*, and not *love*, that creates a space for mass empathy:

Terror [...] often arises from a pervasive sense of disestablishment; that things are in the unmaking. If that sense of unmaking is sudden and seems personal—if it hits you around the heart—then it lodges in the memory as a complete set. Just the fact that almost everyone remembers where he/she was at the instant he/she heard the news of the Kennedy assassination is something I find almost as interesting as the fact that one nerd with a mail-order gun was able to change the entire course of world history in just fourteen seconds or so. That moment of knowledge and the three-day spasm of stunned grief which followed it is perhaps the closest any people in history has ever come to a total period of mass consciousness and mass empathy [...] Love cannot achieve that sort of across-the-board hammerstrike of emotions apparently. More's the pity.⁶⁰

Do we need collective grief in order to unite? Is collective trauma more powerful than collective love? And if so, is focusing on trauma or horror necessary to bring people together to ultimately spark direct change? In the case of artmaking, I would argue yes. Love may offer too much comfort in the concert experience. Horror offers the opposite, and it is this discomfort that moves people towards action.

⁶⁰ Stephen King, *Stephen King's Danse Macabre*, 8–9.

There are two moments in *Paper Planos* which most clearly and aggressively lean into horror to create a space of mass empathy between the audience and the interviewees: (1) Milad Yousufi shares a story of witnessing a suicide bomber detonate a bomb during a theatrical performance and (2) a relentless soundscape of amplified paper tearing. In the prior moment (timecode 00:54:40–01:00:20, mm. 1125–1257), nearly nothing happens except the playback of Milad recounting this event in his life. The ensemble stops performing, the projections switch off, and the lights fade to black. Sonically, we only hear the sound of Milad's voice, with a very subtle low frequency rumble and white noise in the background, mostly included to conceal cuts between interview soundbites, with the side effect of creating a slight uneasiness for the listener.

In this stillness, Milad shares, in unfiltered detail, the experience of watching a play in Kabul, Afghanistan about suicide bombers called *Heartbeat: The Silence After the Explosion*, only to have an actual suicide bomber enter the space. This moment was covered in news sources such as *CNN*, *The New York Times*, *BBC*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, but the experience of reading about it is not the same as hearing an individual share their first-person account of the sights, sounds, and smells of this tragedy. These six minutes, to me, are the most important moments of the entire piece, and they are ones that feel incredibly risky to share in the context of a musical composition (again, in hopes of avoiding exploitation)—but these moments have the ability to create empathy. Without music playing or visual cues from staging or projections, an audience member is left with only the sound of Milad's voice and their imagination. It is in this

moment, as an individual is seated in the theater, that they can hear Milad's account and imagine themselves in a similar situation. Yes, they are likely safe in the theater as they watch a performance of *Paper Planes*, and without actually compromising that safety, they are left with the space to imagine what it would be like if that safety were unexpectedly threatened.

The second moment immediately follows this account in the form of an eleven-minute wall of sound, consisting of sampled paper tearing, heavily processed with massive amounts of distortion (timecode 01:00:20–01:11:39, mm. 1257–1619). The lights come up as we emerge from Milad's story, the sound begins to build, the projections show distorted static, and the performers begin tearing and shredding parts of the stage set, built mostly out of paper. This tearing builds for about 8.5 minutes and then sits at its highest and most intense volume (without causing physical discomfort) for 2.5 minutes. This lack of clear sonic change or obvious landmarks to help guide the audience through this section is essential. It works because the listener does not know when the paper tearing will end, and the intensity of sound just continues and continues. In this moment, the audience reckons with having no control. King speaks of this lack of control in relation to the effectiveness of horror, giving an example of the fear of flying in a plane: "They are not afraid because they believe air travel to be unsafe; they are afraid because they have surrendered control, and if something goes

wrong all they can do is sit there clutching air-sick bags or the in-flight magazine. To surrender control runs counter to the survival directive.”⁶¹

With no sense of rhythm, narrative arc, or guiding posts offered between the music and the visuals, the audience is put in a position of surrendering control, waiting for someone or something—the conductor, the actors, the film, the music—to put an end to it. It is my hope that this discomfort provides the space to deeply internalize the account that Milad shares moments before, as well as the testimonies heard up to this point. I will consider this piece successful if the audience can feel a fraction of the discomfort the interviewees have experienced in their real lives—and, ultimately, it will *only* be a fraction, as we live in the safety of the United States and likely have not experienced these atrocities ourselves. I understand that it is possible that people may leave the concert hall during the piece, unwilling to experience eleven minutes of tireless distortion, but for the people who choose to stay, I truly wish that connectivity and impact will be made. After all, it is just eleven minutes of listening to sound waves pushing through the air while seated comfortably on a padded chair, far from any real-life horror.

⁶¹ Stephen King, *Stephen King's Danse Macabre*, 101.

Chapter 5 | CONCLUSION & MOVING FORWARD

They Will Take My Island and *Paper Planes* are not only examples of my documentary work as methods of processing, understanding, and activism, but they are also pivotal pieces in my own growth as a composer, as they are of a larger scale than the projects I have traditionally worked with, and involve collaboration with other creative directors and partners. In looking towards current and future projects, I will continue this process of collaboration and activism, including further collaboration with Atom Egoyan in an opera adaptation of his film *Adoration* with a libretto written by Royce Vavrek. Commissioned by Beth Morrison Projects and OPERA America, *Adoration* follows Simon, who appropriates a fictional terrorist news story (inspired by the real-life Hidwawi affair) and convinces his classmates that the terrorist is his deceased father. The story promotes conversations surrounding racism, societal obsessions around terrorism, and grief. While this project deviates from my documentary work, I am looking forward to exploring historical conflicts through fiction and theater.

I am also scoring Pakistani–American filmmaker Nausheen Dadbhoy's feature-length documentary *An Act of Worship*, exploring the last 20 years of Muslim life in America through the perspective of four women activists who came of age during 9/11, and concluding with the travel ban imposed by the Trump administration in 2016. I am especially looking forward to supporting another artist's documentary vision through my music making and learning from a team who has dedicated their career to this

medium. Other upcoming projects include new documentary works for the New York Philharmonic, Knoxville Symphony, and Minnesota Philharmonic Orchestra, and recording *Bombs of Beirut* and *Silent Cranes* on an album with the Kronos Quartet. In this next year, I also hope to return to Lebanon and Armenia to gather my own interviews and field recordings, as the nations have been completely transformed after the explosion and war respectively.

I am grateful for the opportunity to write this document in connection to my works. As a music maker, I have found that the available moments to pause and look inward—to reflect on how life experiences and environments motivate the work itself, or to understand what one is trying to say—are few and far between. Writing this has invited me to articulate what have often been blurry shadows of ideas that have been a part of my identity since childhood, but that I had not had the vocabulary to name with words until now. It has also invited me to examine my own relationship to cultural and artistic preservation in art making; from this examination, I believe my future work could benefit from a recalibration of its balance between referential and forward-looking creativity, and I look forward to discovering how that may translate to my sound. I continue to dedicate my work to examining moments of trauma in the past and present, understanding that music and art, even at their most horrific, are by their nature beautiful, and fail to truly present traumatic experiences in any way that does them full service. With this said, *music* is the way that I engage with and process the

world, and it is my hope that sharing music creates and invites a space for others to engage and process as well.

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