

AZNAVOORIAN
DUO

*Gems
from
Armenia*

CEUILLE

AZNAVOORIAN DUO

Gems from Armenia

KOMITAS VARTABED (1869–1935)

- 1 Chinar Es (2:47)
- 2 Tsirani Tsar (3:13)
- 3 Garoun A (4:01)*
- 4 Al Ailux (1:23)
- 5 Krunk (3:49)

ARAM KHACHATURIAN (1903–1978)

- 6 Ivan Sings (arr. Antti Hakkarainen) (1:41)
- 7 Yerevan (3:04)

ARNO BABAJANIAN (1921–1983)

- 8 Elegy (4:16)*

Aria & Dance (5:33)

- 9 Aria (3:52)
- 10 Dance (1:40)

AVET TERTERIAN (1929–1994)

Sonata for cello and piano (20:41)

- 11 I. Andante (9:19)
- 12 II. Adagio (6:08)
- 13 III. Presto (5:06)

SEROUJ KRADJIAN (b. 1973)

- 14 Sari Siroun Yar (Traditional) (4:52)

ALEXANDER ARUTIUNIAN (1920–2012)

- 15 Impromptu (4:25)

VACHE SHARAFYAN (b. 1966)

- 16 Petrified Dance (5:15)

PETER BOYER (b. 1970)

- 17 Mount Ararat** (9:31)

TT: (75:41)

*for solo piano

**WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING

Personal Note by Ani & Marta Aznavoorian

It's an odd feeling being completely connected to a culture, but never fully immersed in it. Our parents ensured that we grew up with traditional Armenian values and all the splendors of Armenian home cooking (thanks Mom!), but the desire to visit our homeland was difficult to suppress. We were thrilled finally to have the opportunity in 2017, when we were invited to perform our debut recital in the celebrated Khachaturian Hall in Yerevan.

Our preparations for the concert were intense, our excitement and expectations high. We wanted to give the best possible performance for the people of Armenia. Above all, we were most touched by the extensive efforts and measures they took to welcome and host two Armenian Americans into their beautiful country for the first time.

The idea for this CD sprung out of gratitude to the proud and soulful people of Armenia and our homage to the historical challenges they have overcome and continue to engage with.

As we recorded this poignant music, our thoughts turned to our grandfather, the first member of our Armenian family born in the United States. He was not a musician, but he was an integral part of our music education. These Armenian melodies would have evoked many memories and emotions for him, as his parents sacrificed so much to come to the United States and escape the ravages of World War I, all while preserving the Armenian soul and spirit that is present in the music we play here.

To the people of Armenia and to our "Dede," we give this music and our love.



Program Notes by Gary Peter Rejebian

Looming over the capital city of Yerevan, Armenia, Mount Ararat on some days seems so close you can reach out and touch its snow-capped peaks. This cloud-veiled mountain upon which Noah's Ark came to rest in the Biblical story is such an iconic symbol of Armenia, as the first Christian nation, and its people that it is a prescribed feature in Armenian Orthodox altar paintings. Yet the mountain remains locked behind a hostile armed border that its historical owners cannot pass by land. Such a conflict, of having a piece of yourself in someone else's possession, is emblematic of the history of the Armenian people and the intensity of emotion in the music with which they express their very soul.

Gems from Armenia voices a range of opposing emotions across three periods of time: some ringing clear in their own right, others but a whisper of other peaks and valleys in the Armenian story. Originally a people of the land who worshipped the sun before they adopted Christianity in 301AD, the Armenians

have a storied history of tragedy and periods of triumph reflected in the breadth of this musical collection, as divergent as their agrarian roots and the thriving urban centers in which they've earned renown and respect as people of learned accomplishment and sharp mercantile acumen.

The album also speaks to a defining quality of Armenians, a people bridging cultures as the largest Christian minority in the Middle East. Just as one of their largest population centers, modern-day Istanbul, has one foot in Europe and the other in Asia, each grouping here is a bridge from one time period to the next.

The stories *Gems from Armenia* conveys begin with a collection of works by the revered composer **Komitas Vartabed**, an Armenian Orthodox priest who applied his advanced education in Western classical music to notating and arranging ancient Armenian folk songs. Komitas strove not merely to capture melodic tunes, but to evoke the very life and heartache of the people who passed down poetic lyrics in song over centuries as he documented them for the ages. He is known primarily for introducing lush modern harmonies to a traditionally melodic art form, incorporating independent harmonic voices built on the traditional modal form of Armenian music. His songs speak of a far-away lover personified as a tall plane tree (*Chinar Es*); an apricot tree that bears

no harvest (*Tsirani Tsar*); a girl's stolen veil (*Al Ailux*); of the crane (*Krunk*) as a personification of every Armenian refugee from the Ottoman Genocide of 1915–1922 longing for home; and even of a springtime snow (*Garoun A*) as the lamentation of a forsaken lover over his beloved's heart turned cold.

The Soviet-era composers **Aram Khachaturian**, **Arno Babajanian**, **Avet Terterian**, and **Alexander Arutunian** collectively represent a musical renaissance for the Armenians; a period of greatness analogous to the first millennium "Golden Age" of the Armenian kingdom. The Soviet composers built on Komitas's life's work, carrying his melodies to soaring heights of grand orchestral composition to instill national pride at the political will of their governmental patrons.

Khachaturian's glorious ode to Armenia's capital (*Yerevan*) and Babajanian's tribute to Khachaturian, his mentor (*Elegy*), speak with impassioned fondness in very different voices. In pre-Soviet days, Yerevan was a large village of mud huts. Developed into a city of majestic

stone structures, Khachaturian's thriving Yerevan bustles with grand melody and syncopated rhythmic flourishes. The piece is widely performed as a rousing emblem of Armenians' pride in their capital and homeland.

Babajanian composed *Elegy* at the very end of his career, upon learning of Khachaturian's death. He embraces the listener just like his dear old friend, with a sweetly sentimental and memorable melody that speaks as though he were raising a glass and delivering a toast — a deeply ingrained custom at Armenian gatherings. Indeed, Babajanian performed the piece literally as a musical toast at Khachaturian's funeral.

Terterian's *Sonata*, first performed in 1956, precedes the symphonies and stage works for which he is best known. He has been hailed for his musical ingenuity and the breadth of his prolific oeuvre spanning nearly every genre, including operas and motion picture scores. The overall tone is brooding and contemplative, and on the whole represents the transition from "Armenian" composition to Western





masterworks composed by Armenians. The piece begins with a piano solo that gives way to an extended cello aria with an independent rhythmic line in the piano. The lyrical second movement is marked by luscious Armenian harmonies. After this, a lively finale repeats a series of rhythmic patterns between the two instruments. A sense of longing fills the final section before it builds to an energetic conclusion.

As a snapshot of his lively style inspired by memorable folk melodies, Alexander Arutunian composed his *Impromptu* in 1948, the same year that his graduation piece for the Moscow Conservatory, a cantata titled *Motherland*, bested Shostakovich to win the USSR's Stalin Prize. With the piano setting the rhythmic tone for the duet, the cello sings a sweet folk melody enlivened with vigorous *spiccato* bowing and *staccato* piano chords. In its middle section, the piece shifts to soulful lamentation echoed by grand piano chords and a moment of lyrical repose that launches into a galloping finish by both instruments.

A third era, of contemporary music, is represented by **Serouj Kradjian**, **Vache Sharafyan**, and **Peter Boyer**.

Lebanese-born pianist and composer Kradjian arranged *Sari Siroun Yar* (Beautiful Mountain Girl) as a faithful retelling of the troubadour Ashod's ballad about a mountaineer pining for his beautiful village love. Bringing her flowers on his black stallion, he arrives to find the door shut, and extols her graces as he leaves feeling greatly dejected and wishing for her return. Delicate broken chords and trills from the piano beneath the plaintive melody mimic the sounds of the *oud* (Middle Eastern mandolin) and the distinctive vernacular of Komitas's compositions.

Kradjian writes:

One of the fondest memories I have of my childhood in war-torn Lebanon, where family gatherings were the most important activity, was singing together. The song that always received repeat performances was "Sari Siroun Yar." . . . Years later, when I was arranging it, I realized how much it helped us all get through the traumatic experience of war and filled us with hope for a better tomorrow.

Sharafyan, a prolific composer of works including opera and ballet who hails from a musical family and was Terterian's student, composed his *Petrified Dance* through multiple iterations of string-piano combinations for Harutyun Khachatryan's documentary about Armenian street artist Vahan Ananyan. Sharafyan drew inspiration for the piece haunted by the memory of Armenian soldiers who had recently died in a month-long assault provoked by Azerbaijan while valiantly trying to retain recaptured homelands.

Boyer composed *Mount Ararat* for the Aznavoorian Duo specially for this project as a reflection of how Armenia's biblical heritage resonated with a composer from a completely different background. A recipient of the Ellis Island Medal of Honor, Boyer's *Ellis Island: The Dream of America* is one of the most performed American orchestral works of the last 15 years. He has also contributed orchestrations to a host of major Hollywood films.

The composer writes:

To those of Armenian heritage, Mount Ararat holds great significance as a symbol of Armenia. As Ani Aznavoorian has stated, "countless wars have been fought and lives lost over the land where the mountain lies." Both that tragic history and impressions of the breathtaking mountain itself were in my mind while composing this music.

Boyer's piece begins with deeply thoughtful tones, growing energetically as it unfolds with piano and cello trading rhythmic and harmonic phrases that reflect the historical conflicts of its namesake. Lifting piano arpeggios waft like the wind over the mountain, resolving with an echo of Komitas's *Krunk* as the piece concludes, retelling an ancient tale in a modern voice and bringing the recording program around full circle.

Gary Peter Rejebian serves on the board of the Armenian General Benevolent Union/Chicago Center, and is cultural chair of the Evanston Taste of Armenia Festival hosted by St James Armenian Church.





Aznavoorian Duo

Cellist **Ani Aznavoorian** and pianist **Marta Aznavoorian** are Armenian American siblings renowned for their passion, artistry, and energy. The *Los Angeles Times* describes Ani as an artist “who shows great sensitivity and great virtuosity at all moments” while Marta has been praised as a pianist “of exceptionally finished technique and purity of musical impulse” (*Boston Globe*).

Cellist Ani Aznavoorian is in demand as a soloist and chamber musician with some of the country’s most recognized ensembles and has appeared with many of the world’s leading orchestras. This season marks Ms. Aznavoorian’s 15th year as Principal Cellist with Camerata Pacifica. She has also been a member of the International Sejong Soloists and Jupiter Chamber Players.

Pianist Marta Aznavoorian has performed to critical acclaim throughout the world as an orchestral soloist, recitalist, chamber musician, and educator, and has been nominated for multiple

Grammy Awards. She is a founding member of the Lincoln Trio and has a vast discography.

The Aznavoorian Duo has toured France, Armenia, and Finland, performed at Carnegie Hall’s Weill Recital Hall, and presented countless programs in their hometown of Chicago, including a 1988 fundraiser for the Armenian Earthquake at the Armenian Benevolent Union. They have worked with leading contemporary composers including Lera Auerbach, Ezra Laderman, William Bolcom, Osvaldo Golijov, Shulamit Ran, Peter

Boyer, Augusta Read Thomas, Stacy Garrop, Bright Sheng, Pierre Jalbert, Laura Schwendinger, Daron Hagen, Patrick Zimmerli, Vache Sharafyan, Debra Kaye, and Colin Matthews, among others. As individual artists, the Aznavoorians have recorded for the Warner Classics, Cedille, ARTEC, and Erato labels.

The sisters' musical ambitions started at an early age when they together won first prize in the Illinois Bell Young Performers Competition, resulting in a live performance with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra televised on PBS. The Aznavoorian Duo went on to win the National Foundation for the Arts' Recognition and Talent Level 1 Award, leading to their appointment as Presidential Scholars in the Arts and performances at The Kennedy Center and The White House. Ani went on to study with Aldo Parisot at The Juilliard School, where she won first prize in the concerto competition, becoming the youngest cellist ever to win. A student of renowned teacher Menahem Pressler, Marta received her bachelor's

degree and Artist Diploma at Indiana University and her master's from the New England Conservatory.

Ani has been a member of the music faculty at the University of Illinois in Champaign/Urbana and, in the summers, has served on the faculty of the Great Mountains Music Festival in South Korea. Marta is an Artist-in-Residence and faculty member at the Music Institute of Chicago and is on the piano and chamber music faculty at the DePaul University School of Music. In addition to their busy performance and teaching schedules, The Aznavoorian Duo's new foundation works to help create training pathways for students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds and provides funding to help them achieve their full musical potential.

Ani proudly performs on a cello made in Chicago by her father, Peter Aznavoorian. Marta is a Steinway Artist.

Learn more at aniaznavoorian.com and martaaznavoorian.com.

Producer James Ginsburg

Engineer Bill Maylone

Steinway Piano Technician Ken Orgel

Recorded August 11–13, 2021
Reva and David Logan Center for
the Arts at the University of Chicago

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Cover Photo Lisa-Marie Mazzucco

Booklet Photos Alex Ishchenko,
iStockPhoto; Hasmik Ghazaryan Olson,
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Graphic Design Bark Design

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