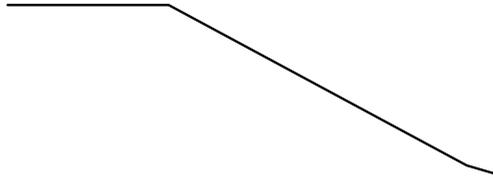


**THE  
FLAGRANT  
SOUND  
OF SILENCE**



**NAZARETH KAROYAN**

*The Composer* is the third installment of Dor Guez's multifaceted ongoing project, *The Sick Man of Europe*. This body of work includes films, photographs, source materials, texts and scanograms. In the *The Composer*, the artist constructs a narrative that resembles a harmonic triple fugue: a present-day storyteller and two interlocutors engaged with each other through a radio conversation. Similar to a polyphonic musical structure, the main theme in *The Composer* is subject to imitation, passing from one voice to another, at times distancing, at times approximating, occasionally tumbling and reversing. *The Composer* is played through three different modalities: people, places, and the relationship between them. Guez opens his film with a shot of archival glass slides he discovered showing the Turkish army in World War I. Among them is a slide of Enver Pasha, one of the main perpetrators of the Armenian genocide. This slide (number three), which we see as a negative in the video, becomes a large scale image in the artist's installation. The installation also includes a series of ten light boxes showing negative images of blueprints of ancient Armenian churches. From the collection of the Museum for Islamic Art in Jerusalem Guez traced original pottery samples from Iznik and Kutahya, two centers of Armenian situated in the western part of Asia Minor. As in many museums across the world, those objects are classified simply as "Turkish", according to arbitrary state borders. What is evident in the installation is the outstanding resemblance of the pottery patterns and the church blueprints. The link between different forms of art (architecture, painting, composing, and pottery) are key hinges in Guez's project.

*The Composer* tells a story of a Jerusalem-born Armenian musician named Hakob, whose family was deported from Kutahya during the Armenian Genocide. The main storyline of the film focuses on the connection between musicians and their homeland. This relationship

is explored further in the film via an archival radio recording from 1910 between Komitas Vardapet and Grigor Suni, two well-known Armenian composers. Like in previous chapters of *The Sick Man of Europe*, *The Composer* also starts with a story relating to the project of national origins. The film with Hagob presenting the story of the nation's conversion to Christianity in the early 4th century, making Armenia the first society to accept Christianity as the state religion. This narrative serves as a solace for many Armenians in exile, a method of maintaining their ethnic, cultural, and religious identities. Therefore, it is quite natural that Hakob expresses a deep desire to visit his homeland of Armenia before he finishes composing his songs. His main destination is Zvartnots Cathedral, where the Armenian King Trdat met Gregory the Illuminator who was responsible for converting the king and his state to the Christian faith.

Parallel to Hakob's journey to Zvartnots, we can hear the radio conversation between the legendary composers Komitas and Suni. Both studied very close to Zvartnots in the historical and religious capital of Armenia, Vagharshapat (Ejmiatsin). Their paths crossed at Gevorgyan Theological Seminary, later to be separated by their choice of music education, which took Komitas to Berlin and Suni to Saint Petersburg. The two share the same penchant for shaping Armenia as a nation through music. However, they have significant differences in political and aesthetic views. Although Suni agrees with Komitas' claim that the Armenian musical heritage distinguishes them from other nations, he feels that Armenians are fragmented geographically and socially. While Komitas places importance on intelligentsia and emphasizes the role of urban life, Suni's humble origins trigger him to adopt the leading socialist idea of abolishing class divisions. Komitas works to distinguish Armenian music from other Oriental or Western styles, while Suni claims that drawing such boundaries are impossible.

In creative practices, the difference in their views manifested in Suni's preservation of a simple, melodic thread of folk, whereas Komitas leans on rhythmic features of live performance; he engages its separate parts in a polyphonic structure developed within the frames of European music. Their debates over nation building between different parts of the Armenian diaspora, reveal how the project of modernity relates to complex and contradictory ideas of cultural identity and ethnicity.

In both previous parts of *The Sick Man of Europe*, Guez shows how the building of the nation state is an ongoing work that can destroy artistic careers. We see it in the case of Israel with *The Painter* D. Guez, who shares the same acronyms as the artist himself, and in the case of Turkey with *The Architect* Kemal P., who share the same name with “the architect” of modern Turkey, Atatürk. In the third part of the project, we can find similarity between two composers from different times: Hagop.K and Komitas. They were both born in the city of Kutahya, and they were both victims of the Armenian Genocide. Starting at the end of seventeenth century and the turn of eighteenth century, Kutahya became the pottery center of the Ottoman Empire. The ceramic production of Kutahya (decorative ceramic tiles and household wares) are distinguished by light tints, sometimes also with a transparent glaze. The works of Armenian potters were often decorated with Christian iconography. The city's pottery masters' goods were widely distributed throughout the whole empire. *The Sick Man of Europe* also refers to Komitas as someone who has experienced an unprecedented trauma. The radio conversation that we hear in the film was made in 1910, a significant time in the life of Komitas. By this time the composer's fame had spread throughout Europe. The European music community had already expressed their deep admiration, and

numerous German and French musicians embraced him: Claude Debussy had kneeled and kissed the hand of Komitas. In Armenian intellectual circles, Komitas was recognized as the founder of national modern music, and as someone who had adjusted polyphonism—the European musical modes—to Armenian cantos. After spending about three decades in and out of Ejmiatsin, Komitas returned to Istanbul in 1910, where five years later he would become one of the known figures a new chapter in Armenian history. At the time of his radio conversation with Suni, Komitas could not have predicted that he be arrested and deported alongside hundreds notable intellectuals of Armenian literature and culture on April 24, 1915. This date marks the Armenian genocide worldwide. Komitas would eventually avoid sharing the fate of his comrades. He escaped due to his international reputation, yet the trauma caused by this event would disrupt not only his creative practice, but his ability to speak. The last twenty years of his life were spent in the Psychiatric Clinic of the Villejuif suburb in Paris, in complete silence.

As a consequence of the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, a new movement was established in 1919, the “Turkish National Movement”. This party included the political and military activities of the Turkish revolutionaries that resulted in the creation of the modern Republic of Turkey in 1923. Kemal Atatürk was their primary spokesperson, public figure, and military leader. At the very beginning of the twentieth century these new nationalistic ideas were only ideas, yet to be realized. Komitas, who was educated in Germany, embraced the notion that members of the same nation are united in language, religion, culture and history. His interest in the cultural heritage of Armenia is also a source of his approach towards folklore.

## THE SICK MAN OF EUROPE: THE COMPOSER

Throughout his fieldwork research of original Armenian melodies, Komitas observed Armenia in its entirety, including various versions of the same canto performed in different provinces. Komitas' canto is based on an aspiration to rediscover the authentic folklore values of the Armenians.

The search for the origins of national culture was conditioned by the controversial criteria of nationalism and modernism. The goal to maintain such authenticity gave birth to ideas emphasizing the exclusivity of ethnicity, which fed the nationalist sentiments of small nations, but also the chauvinism of great imperial countries. The light flares of modernity were intermittent with blinding darkness, a light and darkness that are reflected throughout Guez's project. During World War I, "the sick man of Europe" reoriented his gaze towards East (Central Asia), becoming what is now known as a "Pan-Turkism". In the composer's life it was his encompassing silence that lasted twenty years until his death.

Since it was impossible to speak about the despicable, the answer was silence.