

Asmik Markosyan, *Stranitsy Istorii Armyanskogo Baleta* (Pages from the History of Armenian Ballet), Yerevan, “Gitutyun,” 2010, 288 pages.

Various areas of Armenian art history are still only partly explored and studied. Armenian stage dance and ballet, in particular, has not been thoroughly studied, either in factual or analytical terms.¹ This gap has been partly filled by Hasmik (Asmik in Russian) Markosyan – a ballet critic, lecturer of ballet history at the Yerevan Ballet College since 1980, who has authored three volumes on ballet history in Armenian.² Her latest volume in Russian, *Pages from the History of Armenian Ballet*, is not an academic study, rather a collection of brief sketches which outline the development path of Armenian ballet. The title “pages” already indicate that we should not expect a full history of Armenian ballet. Such a task would require an extensive study of primary documents (archives and press), which would surely bring to light many interesting facts about this little known yet quite intriguing aspect of Armenian culture.

In the introduction and nine chapters of the book, Markosyan divides the history of Armenian ballet by decades, from the 1920s till the 21st century. Such an approach is questionable since it is not reasonable to establish the history of any artistic discipline by decades. It seems more reasonable to set an analytical framework in terms of phases of development, common features, aims, achievements, ups and downs, etc. Indeed, it would be more appropriate to, for instance, survey the history of Armenian ballet starting with the period of prehistory and initial development (1920-1930s), followed by the so-called “choreodrama epoch” (1940-1950s), the “Golden Age” (1960-1970s), new trends and searches (1980s), the decline (1990s) and its current state in the first decade of the 21st century, when attempts were made to overcome the crisis. Despite this, the present volume, succeeds in its task of outlining the history of one of the newest expressions of Armenian performing arts on the basis of historical information and the author’s own studies over the past few decades.

Armenians adopted European classical choreography through Russian culture some nine decades ago. Markosyan argues against the view held in some circles that ballet is an “alien element” in the Armenian mindset and culture. She notes that classical culture is a phenomenon outside national boundaries, and every civilized nation should make it part of its own culture (p. 10). Markosyan tries to prove that Armenian ballet has its own profile, determined by the national color of music, libretto and plasticity as well as by the existence of a male performing school.

It is standard fare to begin any history of a given artistic discipline from its prehistory, which is absent in this book. The prehistory of Armenian ballet encompasses several aspects, like the emergence of professional Armenian stage

dance as part of the development of theatrical and symphonic music, and the adoption of ball room dancing culture in urban circles.

The first chapter, “The Beginning of Choreographic Education in Armenia” presents the establishment of classical dance education in Yerevan in the early 1920s. Already in 1922, the government of the newly formed Soviet Armenia founded a choreographic studio in Yerevan and invited Vahram Aristakesyan, a soloist of the State Ballet in Tiflis to be its director. “*The young Armenian Republic, aspiring to lay bases of professional choreographic education, first pursued the aim of saving the rich folk heritage and systematizing dance materials, as well as research and promotion of Armenian national dances*” (p. 14). During this period, the main purpose of the studio was to professionalize Armenian folk dances and adapt their most conspicuous samples to the stage. Markosyan repeats the standard information on Leo Délibes’ well-known French ballet *Coppelia* as the first ballet performance in Armenia, presented by the choreographic studio in 1926 (without dances in toe shoes, which were first used in 1941). Yet *Coppelia* was not the very first ballet performance on the stages of Armenia. Two years earlier, in 1924, the Armenian public had already watched two ballet performances: *Walpurgis Night*, staged by Dmitri Dmitriev-Shikanyan in Leninakan (now Gyumri),³ and *Shamiram and Ara the Handsome*, staged by Ilya Arbatov-Yaghubyan in Yerevan.⁴ If we consider the fact that already in 1921 there were significant attempts at staging an Armenian national ballet outside Armenia,⁵ then the birth of Armenian ballet should be dated years before 1926.

The next chapter narrates the formation of the ballet troupe in the newly inaugurated (1933) Yerevan State Academic Theater of Opera and Ballet, later named after composer Alexander Spendiarov/Spendiaryan. Markosyan fails to mention that a special “evening of ballet” was already organized in the theater in the first year. It mainly consisted of ethnographic dances with the participation of the Russian ballerina Presnyakova and the first Armenian ballet dancers.⁶ Markosyan repeats here the generally accepted view that the first ballet performance of the newly opened Yerevan Opera and Ballet Theater was Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake* in 1934, staged by Russian choreographer Yuri Reineke (p. 23). Actually, this same Reineke staged *Walpurgis Night* the same year in the same theater.⁷ It is true that this piece is not a separate ballet but a choreographic scene from Charles Gounod’s *Faustus* opera; however, it has been featured in world theaters for many years as a full ballet performance.

One should note that the Yerevan tours of eminent Soviet Russian ballerinas (such as Korsakova in 1924, Ekaterina Gelzer in 1928 and Victorina Kriger in 1933) played an essential role in the creation of an environment and a certain audience for ballet.⁸

The first Armenian national ballet, Aram Khachaturian’s *Yerjankutyun* (Happiness), is analyzed here. Khachaturian’s first ballet later became the internationally known *Gayane*, though its brilliant music was irrelevant to the rather naïve and artificial libretto written according to Soviet ideology and spirit. “*There was neither a single living hero, nor a single real character: only two colors – black and white with a complete lack of nuances,*” Markosyan notes (p. 31). The second Armenian national ballet – *Anahit* (Anushavan Ter-Ghevondyan,

1940) had almost the same fate. However, the third national attempt showed that they had learned from the mistakes of the previous two and it achieved a long and a happy stage life: *Khandut*, staged by Ilya Arbatov (the elaboration of the libretto had the active participation of the famous Russian choreographer Leonid Lavrovski, who was the chief ballet master of Yerevan Theater in 1942–1943). The ballet (music by Alexander Spendiarian), was based on the Armenian national epic, *The Daredevils of Sasun*. Its success was unprecedented. Markosyan compares it to the “nearly crazy public excitement in the days of the first staging of *Spartacus*” (p. 47). Along with the first presentation of Khachaturian’s *Gayane* in 1947 on the Yerevan stage, *Khandut*, with its two separate productions (1945 and 1953) encouraged the development of ballet among Armenian composers. In summary, the author concludes that the 1940s sharply defined three main directions on the repertoire of the Spendiarian theater: a) classical pieces from the 19th century, b) so-called “classics of Soviet choreography,” and c) national ballets (p. 54).

Markosyan regards the decade of 1950 as the years of the development of the national ballet through a method of trial and error. She continues the analysis of the next national ballets: *Sevan* (Grigor Yeghiazaryan, 1956), *Marmar* (Marble) (Edgar Hovhannisyan, 1957) and *Sona* (Eduard Khaghagortyan, 1957). The author regards themes of exploitation and sacrifice as typical for Armenian national ballets, regardless of the historical or contemporary plot (p. 46-47). Although the decade was quite fruitful for new ballets, she does not see them as successful. This is why, the two of the abovementioned ballets were converted into new performances (*Sevan* became *The Lake of Dreams* and *Marmar* turned into *Eternal Idol*, p. 72).

The “golden age” of Armenian ballet lasted from the 1960s until the mid-1980s. This period is characterized by a rich and varied repertoire, high-level choreographers with distinctive style, a constellation of talented ballerinas and dancers with bright acting skills and dance technique, and a number of tours by outstanding dancers and entire ballet troupes. In 1960 Charles Adams’ *Giselle*, perhaps the most famous ballet of all time, was first staged and has been on the repertoire of Yerevan Theater of Opera and Ballet for more than fifty years. From 1961–1967, an outstanding Latvian choreographer, Yevgeni Changa, worked as chief ballet master of the Yerevan troupe and staged a number of significant performances. Markosyan, in particular, analyses Changa’s perhaps most important production, Aram Khachaturian’s *Spartacus* in 1961, which triggered the rebirth of national ballet. *Spartacus* (starring the most prominent Armenian ballet dancer Vilen Galstyan) became a sort of hallmark for Armenian ballet and an inspiring source of national pride for several generations. Composer Edgar Hovhannisyan was appointed as head of Yerevan Opera and Ballet Theater from 1962-1968. In this period some seven opera and ballet performances were staged annually, and the repertoire of the theater numbered about fifty titles (p. 87). At the end of the 1960s, in less than four years, six national ballets, which have been more or less thoroughly studied in this chapter, appeared on the stage of the Spendiarian theater (*Eternal Idol* and *Antouni* by Edgar Hovhannisyan, *Prometheus* by Emin Aristakesyan, *The Lake of Dreams* by Grigor Yeghiazaryan,

Immortality by Konstantin Orbelyan, as well as three one-act ballets by Grigor Hakhinyan: *Akhtamar*, *Willow*, and *Sako from Lori*),.

The next chapter, is about the 1970s. It essentially deals with the performance of Aram Khachaturian's masterpieces in Yerevan, especially the new versions of *Gayane*. Markosyan tries to elucidate the reason why *Spartacus*, being so popular in Armenia and the entire Soviet Union, remained not properly understood and appreciated in the West, and why the leading names of Western choreography were not moved by Khachaturian's ballet. According to her, *Spartacus*' so-called revolutionary idea, so alien to the West, did not trigger any enthusiasm (pp. 186-187).

The chapter dedicated to the 1980s analyzes other ballet performances, both national and international. The author notes the modern trends that became obvious in this period (pp. 189-232). Nobody can tell how those trends would have developed had not the earthquake of 1988 ushered in the beginning of the hard and harsh 1990s, characterized by war, blockade and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Two new performances are described in the chapter on the 1990s (*Snow Queen* by Tigran Mansuryan and *Othello* by Loris Tjegnavorian). These years took their toll on the Spenidiarian Theater of Opera and Ballet, where difficulties included the energy crisis that weakened the theater, activities coming to an almost complete halt, a poor repertoire, loss of audience, and recurrent "escapes" of many talented dancers.

The last chapter, dedicated to the twenty-first century, has some positive insights. First of all, there is an abundance of talented young male dancers - a new generation graduated from the Yerevan Ballet College, mainly coming from ballet families. Currently there are about thirty male dancers from Armenia in different European ballet troupes. Their performances, despite being outside Armenia, represent a new golden page in the history of Armenian ballet. Markosyan focuses particularly on six brilliant performers: Tigran Mikayelyan, Arsen Mehrabyan, Arman Grigoryan, Vahe Martirosyan, Davit Karapetyan, and David Galstyan. The first five founded the Armenian dance group "Forceful Feelings" in 2005 to show that "*Armenian artists may achieve success worldwide, that a connection of Armenian identity and highest European dancing art may lead to success.*"⁹ Markosyan makes a detailed analysis of the group's 2008 performance in Yerevan, "Forceful Feelings and Friends" emphasizing once more, the male style in ballet, very characteristic of Armenian dancers and typical of Armenian male mentality, which does not accept any feminine hint in the character and habits of the stronger sex. She concludes the book with her review of one of the last major ballet productions in Yerevan, *Spartacus*, by the eminent Russian choreographer Yuri Grigorovich in 2009, which gave some hope for the rebirth of Armenian ballet.

Asmik Markosyan often draws valuable conclusions on various aspects of Armenian choreography. For instance, she speaks about the influence that the Armenian ballet had from both Moscow and Petersburg ballet styles, particularly due to two famous Russian ballerinas who worked in Yerevan, namely Natalia Dudinskaya and Feya Balabina (both were students of the great ballet teacher Agrippina Vaganova, who developed her famous method of teaching classical ballet). She also states that the Armenian ballet corpus rarely met world standards,

both qualitatively and quantitatively (p. 154-155). The book includes some valuable information on the views of famous Russian ballerinas Agrippina Vaganova and Galina Ulanova on Armenian folk and stage dances. Ulanova, in her review of the *Sevan* ballet, wrote that “*Soft plasticity of hands is the national feature of Armenian dances. Even in everyday life, Armenians are distinctively noticed by the skill of moving uncommonly beautifully: there is much spontaneous, native gracefulness in their gesticulation*” (p. 64). Such interesting and “forgotten” facts, unfortunately, are not that many in the book, which needed deeper research. The author’s statements as a ballet researcher are reinforced by parallels and comparisons with world ballet opuses. Markosyan compares the scenes of round dances with garlands in *Marmar* ballet with similar “floral” divertissements in Tchaikovsky’s classics *The Nutcracker* and *The Sleeping Beauty*, yet the presence of stone motives in the same ballet – queen Adamand (Diamond) and kingdom of marbles – recall again references from *The Sleeping Beauty*, as well as George Balanchine’s *Jewels* and Prokofiev’s *The Stone Flower* (pp. 68-69). It is especially worth mentioning Markosyan’s analysis of a forgotten stage masterpiece, choreographer Ashot Asaturyan’s experimental performance of *Daphnis and Chloe* by Maurice Ravel, which reveals the author’s deep understanding of the issue and her attempt to “read” the philosophical subtext of the performance. She notes the influence of Maurice Béjart and draws parallels between ballet and fine arts, especially of the Renaissance period (pp. 198-204).

The book would surely gain if it had included biographies of the most significant figures of Armenian ballet along with a brief description of their art. Several names and brief descriptions pop up here and there, yet it is hard to grasp an overall view of each artist’s contribution to ballet. Though the book is not an academic work, sometimes it would be beneficial to reference the quotations. The book also often lacks contextualization. While writing about the 1940s, Markosyan does not mention that this was a war period for the Soviet people and a logical question follows about the conditions of the ballet troupe at that time.

Although the book is based on theoretical knowledge of the subject and some archival information, together with analysis of several ballet performances and wide analogies with world ballet, its style remains rather journalistic and often emotional. Nevertheless, Asmik Markosyan has taken the first major step: an attempt to outline the evolution of Armenian ballet and set the ground for further academic studies. The book has already attracted the attention of ballet scholars.¹⁰

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ENDNOTES

¹Actually, the ballets of Aram Khachaturian and Edgar Hovhannisyan have been thoroughly researched in Georgi Tigranov’s studies (*Balety Arama Khachaturyana* (Aram Khachaturyan’s ballets), Leningrad, “Muzika,” 1974; *Balety Edgara Oganesyana* (Edgar Hovhannisyan’s Ballets), Yerevan, “Sovetakan Grogh,” 1981), but from a musicological perspective.

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- ² Hasmik Markosyan, *Baleti Endhanur Patmutyan Edjer* (Pages from the general history of ballet), Yerevan, “Gitutyun,” 2006; H. Markosyan, R. Yesayan, *Yerajeshtut’yan Ashkharhum: Balet* (In the world of music: Ballet), Yerevan, “Arevik,” 2007; Hasmik Markosyan, *Yerajeshtut’yan Ashkharhum: Haykakan Balet* (In the world of music: Armenian ballet), Yerevan, “Arevik,” 2011.
- ³ See *Khorhrdayin Hayastan* daily, June 18, 1924.
- ⁴ See R. Hov, “Balet” (Ballet), *Khorhrdayin Hayastan* daily, September 24, 1924.
- ⁵ I mean the performance *Trdat the Great and Virgin Hripsime*, staged by dancer Yevgine Kovkasyan (Yevgenya Aristakyan-Polyakina) in 1921 in the center of Western Armenian culture, Constantinople. About this subject see my article in Russian (Artsvi Bakhchinyan, “Pervaya Armyanka na Puantakh (The First Armenian woman on her toes), *Elitarnaya Gazeta* monthly newspaper, December 23, 2008). In the same year, the *Vardanank* performance in Tiflis, the center of Eastern Armenian culture, included a lengthy ballet section (see Doremi, “Vardanank (Nra Baletayin yev Yerajeshtakan Masi Artiv)” [Vardanank (about its ballet and musical part), *Mshak*, February 2, 1921).
- ⁶ R. Hov., “Petoperayi Baleti Yerekon (The Ballet evening of the State Opera), *Khorhrdayin Arvest* magazine, 1933, no. 12, p. 30.
- ⁷ See Abgar Hovhannisyan, “Aradjin Baletayin Bemadrutyune (“Valpurgyan Gishere” Petoperayi yev Baleti Tatronum)” [The First ballet performance (*Walpurgis Night* in the State Opera and Ballet Theater)], *Khorhrdayin Arvest*, no. 12, 1934.
- ⁸ The 1937 Soviet Armenian press contains information about forthcoming performances of three eminent ballet dancers from Moscow - Galina Ulanova, Marina Semyonova and Natalia Dudinskaya - in Yerevan in the 1937-1938 season (“Haykakan Petakan Filharmonia” (Armenian State Philharmonics), *Khorhrdayin Hayastan*, September 18, 1937).
- ⁹ Thomas Kirchgraber, *Aesthetic Fighters: Tigran Mikayelyan and the Power of Armenian Dancers*, Kirchbag Verlag, 2008, p. 57. See my review on this book and “Forceful Feelings”: Artsvi Bakhchinyan, “Celebrating Male Strength: National Pride in Ballet,” *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, November 15, 2008, see the same in *The Noyan Tapan Highlights* weekly, January 19, 2009.
- ¹⁰ Nazenik Sargsyan, “Ashot Asaturyan: Khoreograf Posledney Treti XX Veka” (Ashot Asaturyan: the Choreographer of the last 30 years of the 20th century), Yerevan, “Amrots grup,” 2011, pp. 156-157, 160.