



AMERICAN
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Armenian-American composer keeps an ancient aesthetic alive



Composer and JFund awardee Mary Kouyoumdjian is drawn to colliding worlds. As a first generation Armenian-American, Kouyoumdjian is perfectly poised to take advantage of the old and the new, juxtaposing the most avant-garde of experimental compositional techniques with the centuries-old traditions of her Armenian musical roots. As a result, she is in high demand as a composer for both the concert hall and the silver screen, and her unique compositional aesthetic landed her in the enviable position of working on Derek Cianfrance's upcoming film *The Place Beyond the Pines*.

There is however a serious side to the young composer's work. Kouyoumdjian's rich cultural heritage is tempered by generations of tragedy shared by thousands of Armenians: her grandparents were survivors of the Armenian genocide during World War I, and her own parents fled the decades-long civil war in Lebanon. Perhaps then, it is unsurprising that the young composer draws from this dark history in the creation of her work.

"Telling the stories of my ancestors and reflecting on these events," says Kouyoumdjian, "are ideas that I connect to and can be honest with when I'm writing. As a first generation American born into the freedom of speech, I do feel certain responsibility to bring up these sensitive topics while those who argue for these issues in Armenia and Lebanon are often met with violence."

Her work funded by the [Jerome Foundation's Fund for New Music \(JFund\)](#) certainly continues this aesthetic. *Dzov Yerku Kooynov [Sea of Two Colors]* is a "portrait piece" about Armenian composer Komitas Vardapet, considered to be the father of modern classical Armenian music. Vardapet was, like Kouyoumdjian's own grandparents, a survivor of the Armenian holocaust. As Kouyoumdjian recounts however, the trauma of enduring such a brutal event caused the composer to suffer severe post-traumatic shock, and he spent the remainder of his life in psychiatric hospitals. *Dzov Yerku Kooynov* was, for her, a way to connect with a man who formed an important part of her musical and cultural heritage.

"Part of the reason I proposed this piece is my personal fascination with him and just people in general – their psychological progressions, deteriorations, and everything in between – really getting to know a person better through sound. Another huge part," she adds, "is to bring awareness to the Armenian Genocide."

Kouyoumdjian is referring to the fact that, despite the tragic events that took place in Turkey during the early 20th Century being generally accepted as genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman empire, both the Turkish and US federal governments have yet to formally acknowledge them as such. Her art, she says, is a way for her to continue to create awareness of the subject. "I'm a strong believer that through the Arts, one can successfully open a dialogue about topics that can be too delicate or taboo to verbally discuss."

Dzov Yerku Kooynov is a personal triumph for Kouyoumdjian in another way: the piece was premiered at the inaugural concert of her own contemporary music ensemble, Hotel Elephant, which she co-founded with composer Leah Maria Villarreal. Having the support of the Jerome Foundation on such a controversial topic was, therefore, an immense boost for not only Kouyoumdjian, but also the more than twenty young artists associated with Hotel Elephant.

"The funds allowed us to make our first professional recording, to rent rehearsal space, a venue, and many aspects of production," Kouyoumdjian enthuses. "As a starting ensemble, the JFund's support made a tremendous impact on Hotel Elephant's inaugural concert. It says a lot that they were willing to take that risk and put their faith in me without ever asking me to water down the programmatic content – it was all very encouraging".

To learn more about the Jerome Foundation, visit their [website](#). For more information about JFund and to apply, visit the [ACF website](#).

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