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Q & A; Armenian Music Inspires a Jazz Pianist

By THOMAS STAUDTER

THE jazz pianist and educator Armen Donelian, who lives in West Orange, is interested in how music crosses national borders and stylistic boundaries. Inspired by his Armenian ancestry, Mr. Donelian, who was born in 1950 in New York, founded the Jazz in Armenia Project, and in the last four years he has traveled extensively through Armenia as both a performer and educator. Next month he returns to that country as a Fulbright Scholar to lead music classes and perform at the Yerevan Komitas State Conservatory for three months, also stopping to teach at clinics in Paris and St. Petersburg.

A serious piano student throughout his youth, Mr. Donelian made his professional jazz debut at age 14 during the 1964 World's Fair in New York. He first toured and recorded with the Afro-Cuban percussionist Mongo Santamaria, and has worked with Lionel Hampton, Sonny Rollins and Chet Baker.

Mr. Donelian has been teaching at the New School University in New York for 15 years, and is the author of "Training the Ear," a standard jazz text. Widely recorded as both a sideman and leader, he has released two CD's of solo performances -- "Wave" and "Mystic Heights" -- on the Sunnyside label.

Here are some excerpts of a recent conversation with him.

Q. What made you want to travel to Armenia?

A. I always wanted to go, but during the era of Soviet rule it was very difficult. So I didn't really get a chance to travel there until 1998.

Q. What was it like to be finally there?

A. It was like walking down the street and seeing people you don't know but who all look like members of your own family. It was uncanny. A relative in Armenia I didn't know I had tracked me down at my hotel and started yelling at me in Armenian, which I didn't understand except for every other word, which was my father's, my uncle's or my grandfather's names. It ended up she was the granddaughter of my grandfather's sister.

Q. Does Armenia have an indigenous jazz scene?

A. There's a few musicians in the country who play -- a small number but very fervent. They have had jazz there since the 1920's, though. Most Americans don't realize the extent in which jazz is an international music. The best jazz pianist in Armenia right now is Vahag Hayrapetin, a real bebop fan.

Q. How would you describe Armenian music?

A. Armenian church music is very distinctive; it has kind of a plaintive, mournful quality. It was derived from ancient melodies and then codified by a famous composer named Gomidas from the late 1800's who'd studied classical music in Germany. He cast a lot of these melodies with their unusual intervals into four-part harmonies, so there's a strange mixture of Western and Eastern in Armenian music. In the folk and popular music, well, it's what is typically known as belly dancing music, which is stylistically shared with the Turks and Arabs as well.

Q. You listened to a lot of Armenian music while growing up. Did you like it?

A. It was an acquired taste for me because I didn't have any experience with it other than listening to records. When I was around 12 or 13, I began to hear this music being played live, and I tried to grasp what it all meant from an intellectual standpoint. Later on, in the late 1980's, I began to play with a group called Night Ark, which was a Middle Eastern jazz ensemble led by a guy named Ara Dinkjian, whose father was a very well-known Armenian singer. Ara taught me a lot about Armenian music and provided me with details that I needed to know as a musician.

Q. You studied classical music as a child and grew to love jazz before you were a teenager, all during a time when rock 'n' roll became incredibly popular. Did you ever feel like you were living in several musical worlds all at the same time?

A. I love classical music, jazz, the blues, rock 'n' roll, pop music -- a lot of it, anyway, but not rap -- and I love all kinds of ethnic music. There's even some country and western music I like. That's a very wide spectrum, and trying to figure out what my path is through all of it has been a real challenge. It's been uncomfortable at times, too, but out of the searching, I hope, comes something beautiful.

Q. You've performed with many notable jazz musicians over the years, and you've also worked with a lot of Latin and Brazilian musicians, and some Armenian and Portuguese singers, too. Does working with all these different kinds of musicians come easily to you?

A. There's something about labels I don't like. When you say someone is from Armenian extraction or is a Portuguese singer, you only touch the surface. What emanates from a musician comes from a much deeper place and has to do with a person's being. The people I've worked with may have come from different countries, but I feel at a deeper level we've all actually come from a place that has no name or ethnicity or particular musical style, It's just who we are, and we're all connected by our love for music.

Photo: Armen Donelian will be a Fulbright Scholar in Armenia next month. (Judi Benvenuti)