

## Tigran Tchouhadjian's Zemire Operetta In It Los Angeles Revival After 117 Years

Based on an article in Armenian  
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For the third time since 2004 and 2005, the A.G.B.U. Ardavazt Theatre Company and the Lark Musical Society have joined forces to stage the last of Armenian composer Tigran Tchouhadjian's operettas, The opera semiseria entitled Zemire will be presented on three successive days, Friday and Saturday evenings, May 30 and 31, at 8:00 p.m., and in a matinee performance, Sunday, June 1, at 3:30 p.m., on the stage of the Pasadena Civic Auditorium.

Tchouhadjian's musical creations have enjoyed great popularity in many of the world's cities, and his unparalleled artistry has earned him well-deserved appreciation. Flourishing in the second half of the 19th century, Tchouhadjian holds a respected place among the ranks of Armenian composers. The talented composer, community activist and pedagogue lived in the unfavorable conditions of Ottoman Turkey. Undaunted, he struggled for the development of a national culture, with active participation in the Armenian Musical Society of Constantinople, and on behalf of the advancement of music periodicals and symphonic orchestras, as well as toward the establishment and activities of musical theatre groups.

Having received his musical education in Milan, Italy, Tchouhadjian had mastered the traditions of the Italian operatic art form. In the history of Armenian music, his contributions to the creation and development of opera, operetta, and musical theatre genres have great significance.

Considered the father of Armenian opera, Tchouhadjian was born in the Pera district of Constantinople in 1837, to the family of a court watchmaker. His father, Kevork, was a man of fine taste and a lover of the arts, who supported the musical education of his talented son. At age 15-16, the young Tchouhadjian had already captured the attention of the music-loving public with his piano performances and musical compositions.

After matriculation in Milano, he returned to his birthplace in 1864 and immediately engaged in musical theatre production and community activism. In the early years, he suffered privations and experienced many days of anxiety because of the meager financial resources he earned as a piano teacher. However, very soon he began to write outstanding musical plays, with performances one after the other, which earned him great public acclaim.

Tchouhadjian's students were attached to their teacher with enthusiasm and love for his artistic erudition. One of them, the poetess Anaïs, writes admiringly in her memoirs, "He was different from everyone I knew. He never wore his fez indoors. His graying hair was like Beethoven's. He was a unique character, with imposing stature and elegant movements. He wanted his students to put their heart and soul into their playing. Altruistic and unassuming, he always wore a dark grey tail-coat.

Usually his necktie was askew and his collar was rumpled; nevertheless, he enjoyed great respect from all. He was easy to understand, kind and forgiving, yet impressive to look at, an enchanting personage in his beliefs and a romantic in his creativity. He was always the center of attention among artists, young ladies, matronly women and foreign beauties."

Tchouhadjian's adolescent years coincided with the renaissance and rebirth of one of the Armenian people's most brilliant eras. The confirmation of the "National Constitution" in 1860 and two years later the heroic rebellion of Zeytoun inspired the Armenian intelligentsia. Also, the impression left by visiting Italian operetta-performing groups upon progressive Armenian nationals had promoted a great enthusiasm for theatrical productions. The people dreamt of having a national opera. In this ambiance, being well-acquainted with the European operatic genre, in 1868, Tchouhadjian conceived and skillfully created one of his most audacious and beautiful works. This first Armenian opera, Arshag II, was based upon an episode taken from the royal history of the Armenian people.

Regrettably, the efforts of the composer to see his opera on stage were fruitless, due to insufficient financial resources and performing capabilities. Nevertheless, 80 years later, in 1945, the opera, which had been doomed to oblivion, had its premiere in a performance by the National Opera Theatre of Armenia.

Tchouhadjian strove to master the most unusual musical genres and forms. It is said that he liked to roam the streets and public squares and to scribble on his shirt cuffs tunes, rhythms and distinctive sounds he heard, and the spontaneous melodies they inspired.

In the 1870's, convinced that it was impossible to present operas in the conditions existing in Turkey, Tchouhadjian turned to the operetta genre, which was more palatable to the public and the staging of which was easier to implement. He devoted much effort and energy to create a musical theatre company, recruiting vocally and dramatically talented boys and girls, to whom he could teach music, song and dance, thus honing their acting abilities. With obdurate persistence, he succeeded in creating one of the first theatrical groups able to perform the operettas that he had created.

In 1873 he wrote Arif's Ruse, which was met with huge success in many venues. A year later, the second operetta, Keosse Kehia was performed more than 60 times. Then in 1875 he wrote his masterful comic operetta, Leblebiji, which was played more than 100 times on the stages of Constantinople and various Armenian communities of the Caucasus, to great popular acclaim.

After a long intercession, Tchouhadjian wrote the opera semiseria Zemire, which differed somewhat from



Tigran Tchouhadjian

the others, being based on an Arabian Nights' motif. The work was premiered by a French theatrical company. In spite of the positive response to the performance, due to quarrels among the actors, the performances were halted without any financial remuneration for the composer.

Tchouhadjian's operettas were per-



A scene from Zemire

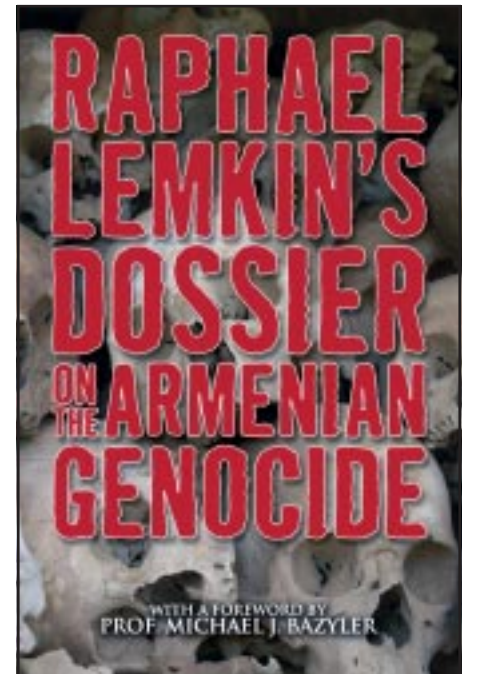
formed numerous times by Armenian or foreign actors, whether under the direction of their creator or of others. His Leblebiji was rendered in various languages, from Egypt all the way to France, Germany, the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Russia, gaining the author wide public recognition. In addition to his operettas, Tchouhadjian also composed a significant number of symphonic, chamber, and instrumental works, as well as songs, romances and sacred works.

In 1896, Tchouhadjian moved to Smyrna, hoping to meet benefactors with whose help to improve his financial condition. Although he was surrounded by his students and friends, due to an incurable cancer, the famed composer died on 10 March 1898, in abject poverty, at the age of 61. Witnesses say that at the time of his passing he was holding in his hands the score of his beloved Giuseppe Verdi's Othello. Funeral arrangements were undertaken by the Society for the Care of the Needy. Concerning Tchouhadjian's death, the newspaper Mshak wrote, "Death in poverty and a glorious funeral."

Dikran Tchouhadjian is one of the Titans of Armenian national music. Considered the father of Armenian opera, he was the first among Armenian musicians to use the classical standards of the West in his musical creations. His rich legacy must be recognized within our musical life with the merit it deserves, whether in the Armenian homeland or internationally.

## New Publication

### "Raphael Lemkin's Dossier On The Armenian Genocide"



GLENDALE -- Raphael Lemkin was one of the greatest and most influential lawyers and human rights activists in the last century. Not only did he coin the word "genocide," but was also the prime mover for the enactment of the United Nations Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide (the "Genocide Convention"), the international law document that in 1948 made genocide an international "crime of crimes."

Distressed by the cyclical slaughter of Armenians by Turks in 1894, 1909, and 1915, Lemkin compiled a dossier and searched for legal remedies to punish perpetrators of mass murder and to deter and prevent future genocides.

"Raphael Lemkin's Dossier on the Armenian Genocide," a stunningly graphic book published by CAR, the Center for Armenian Remembrance, constitutes an important contribution for scholars, human rights activists and others seeking to know what the originator of the term genocide and the "father" of the Genocide Convention had to say about the Armenian Genocide.

This timely book, which was published through the efforts of Attorney Vartkes Yeghiayan, is the perfect antidote to the denialist campaign that has lately intensified by the banning of a book in Toronto and its replacement by books by denialist historians Bernard Lewis and Guenther Levy.

It is impossible not to be touched by the eyewitness reports that Lemkin has meticulously compiled in this dossier. The reader will quickly be convinced that the brutal campaign against the Armenians is the very definition of Genocide. This book has the power to inflame the reader with indignation, sorrow and righteous anger.

"Raphael Lemkin's Dossier on the Armenian Genocide" also contains a lucid foreword by eminent professor Michael J. Bazylar, and a meticulous, complete bibliography on Lemkin by Eddie Yeghiayan.

"Raphael Lemkin's Dossier on the Armenian Genocide" is the fifth book in the "The Armenian Genocide and the Armenian Case" series put out by CAR Publishing. It can be purchased at CAR Publishing P.O. Box 250322 Glendale, Ca 91225 USA, www.centerar.org, and Armenian bookstores.