

Critics' Forum

Music

Elements of a Universal Alphabet

By Sam Ekizian

The musical forms known as folk-fusion and folk revival have often served as the vehicles of creative expression for performers seeking to adapt, translate, and modernize traditional musical styles. The new folk-fusion scene draws inspiration from widespread and multicultural sources, a process that often entails the popularization of previously non-mainstream music, the adaptation of folk styles to pop and rock structures, and the introduction of new instruments.

Within the Armenian music community, performers such as Arto Tunçboyacıyan, Gor Mkhitarian, and Armen Chakmakian have already led critically acclaimed forays into the folk-fusion scene. With the recent debut of its full-length album, "Yev O Phe," Element has navigated into this emerging but still somewhat forbidden genre. The band includes Ara Dabandjian (keyboard, guitar, accordion), Saro Koujakian (vocals and guitar), Gars Sherbetdjian (vocals), Shant Mahserejian (violin), and Jeremy Millado (bass). Dabandjian is also the band's arranger as well as creative and musical director.

Element performs traditional Armenian folk songs as well as more contemporary compositions laced with its own sensibilities, some of them distinctly non-Armenian. The band's members are aligned in their determination to elevate their cultural heritage through music, while paying homage to South American and Mediterranean traditions—the band's stylings are variously embossed with the sounds of Flamenco, Tango, Rembetika, as well as more contemporary influences.

This commingling of cultures has been the source of much debate. After all, it tests the bounds of Armenian cultural identity and seems to present a considerable obstacle to the adaptation of traditional Armenian music. Therefore, precisely because fusion presents fertile ground for artistic exploration, it may find itself bound by a number of powerful cultural constraints, including anxieties about assimilation. As a result, the growing influence of fusion may be viewed by some as the dilution of an otherwise pure sound and a deep-seated cultural memory.

But that view conveniently ignores the fact that much of Armenian music has developed precisely as a result of its interaction with outside elements and its rich fusion of disparate influences. After all, Gomidas Vartabed himself, an ordained monk and ethnomusicologist, spent the early 1900s initiating a renaissance of traditional Armenian folk music by visiting far-flung provinces and villages to take record of the varied traditions of native songs and dances found there.

Gomidas's quest clearly suggests that Armenian music is an undeniably fecund source of musical expression and adaptation. The characteristic palette of this expression, both musically and lyrically, manifests itself in rural songs of yearning, spiritual songs of

remembrance, and other traditional expressions of longing, lament, and rebirth. The recent popularity of folk-fusion and folk revival reminds us that these musical styles, like traditional Armenian music itself, succeed when they manage to remain true to the intrinsic features and inherent values of the various musical influences they bring together.

“Yev O Phe” delivers Element’s unique expression of folk-fusion by seamlessly incorporating deft instrumentation, lush vocal harmonies, and rich multi-ethnic musical styles. And nowhere in the album does the band impose embellishments otherwise foreign to its core musical material. The songs are not weighted down by deliberate rock inflections or plodding digital treatments. The album also manages to retain the purity of the folk elements and various instruments it brings together. And throughout, the sound somehow remains undeniably Armenian.

“Yev O Phe” is elevated by Dabandjian’s hypnotic arrangements and his superb command of several different instruments, as well as Koujakian’s deeply soulful vocals. In fact, the most alluring tracks on the album are those featuring this combination’s performances. Dabandjian’s talents are on full display on the album’s fifth track, “Yar Ko Parag Boyin Mernem,” which manages to make a powerful emotional impact while retaining an understated delicacy. Koujakian’s masculine yet smooth vocals take center stage on “Mardigi Yerke” and “Anoush Hayrenik,” without overpowering the songs. All in all, “Yev O Phe” represents a powerful fusion of fervent rhythms and infectious melodies, rippled through with multi-layered and multi-ethnic influences.

It is worth mentioning that Element is an accomplished live act. There is an immediacy and improvisational aspect to the band’s live performances that lend themselves well to its particular adaptation and re-imagining of the fusion genre. During a recent show at the Ford Amphitheatre, Element’s soulful performance enveloped the audience and drew it inescapably into the music being performed on stage. This captivating quality of Element’s music is due in no small part to the band’s repertoire, at once intimately familiar and distinctly different, allowing listeners to celebrate their own cultural heritage while embracing a more universal perspective.

Element has already acquired a diverse and loyal fan base. But it is too early to declare whether the band has brought Armenian folk music back into our collective consciousness or successfully bridged geographic, linguistic, and multi-cultural divides. What is undeniable, however, is that Element has cast aside deep-seated cultural constraints and adopted a more progressive musical register.

In the current era of globalization, music has become the indispensable mode of communication and integration, a modern and universal vernacular. Fusion provides opportunities to use varying elements of this vernacular to stretch creative boundaries and to spread indigenous music to wider audiences, a crucial stage in the evolution of the

world music scene and of Armenian music itself. Element's rendering of folk music is nothing more than an extension of this evolution, the adoption of a genuinely universal alphabet.

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