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DAVID AYRIYAN, KEMANCHE WITH LEVON AYRIYAN. DUMBEK

TRADITIONAL ARMENIAN MUSIC FROM RHODE ISLAND



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DAVID AYRIYAN, KEMANCHE WITH LEVON AYRIYAN, DUMBEK

David Ayriyan was born into an ethnic Armenian musical family in Azerbaijan. He received his initial musical training from his father who played the *tar* (an instrument resembling a European lute) and who was one of the most gifted early 20th century musicians playing traditional Armenian music. When he was 18, David entered the Baku Conservatory where he studied the *kemanche* with such great masters as Nefton Gregorian. As a young man, David also started participating in music competitions. His remarkable musical abilities secured him a seat in the Moscow festival orchestra, and he subsequently became a full-time member of the Baku Philharmonia, serving as its concertmaster for several years. In 1957, he took first place for his *kemanche* playing in the World Festival in Moscow, a Festival he had already excelled at in previous years.

In 1988, ethnic discrimination in Azerbaijan forced David's family to move to Yerevan, Armenia's capital. David taught at the Yerevan Conservatory and became concertmaster of the conservatory's orchestra. Because of worsening conditions in Armenia, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, David and his family moved to the US in 1991. They eventually settled in Johnston, Rhode Island.

The *kemanche*, originally from Persia, is an ensemble string instrument that dates back to the 15th century. Though used as a chordal instrument for accompaniment, it can also carry a melody and be used as a solo instrument. It was found in Iran, Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan and is still played in all of these countries, mostly as a folk instrument. The *kemanche* could be considered the Eastern equivalent to the Western violin, sharing many of the violin's characteristics, including a resonating chamber, four strings, a bow of approximately the same length and width, and moveable tuning. Unlike the violin, it is played vertically, with the tip of the instrument placed on a pad (usually made from leather) resting on the player's knee. Also unlike the violin, it is the instrument that is angled or swiveled when played, rather than the bow. The bows, too, are different: while a violin's bow hairs are tightened or loosened with a screw mechanism, the *kemanche's* bow hair is adjusted by finger pressure from the playing hand, adding to the technical difficulty of playing the instrument. The beautiful *kemanche* that David plays is over fifty years old and was made by Shushinsky, one of the best known luthiers of his day.

David Ayriyan's ability to incorporate several genres of music, including Western classical music, is due partly to the similarities between the *kemanche* and the violin, and partly to the variety of regional genres that musicians from that part of the world incorporate in their repertoire. Armenian musicians have always been adaptable since they mastered musical styles from the entire region including Persia and Turkey.

When asked about his favorite musical pieces, David always mentions Sayat Nova, a composer who lived between 1712 and 1795, and whose work is heard wherever Armenian music is performed. Other composers whom David admires are Aram Katchaturian, the famed Armenian composer of "Masquerade," and the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich, whom David met when he was a teenager during one of his trips to Russia. David is also deeply influenced by Armenian ethnomusicologist and

composer Komitas Vardapet, who was born in 1869. Besides his vast knowledge of Armenian, Kurdish and Turkish music, Komitas modernized Armenian Church music. Unfortunately, much of Komitas' unprecedented work in ethnomusicology and his extensive research through the Armenian countryside did not survive the region's upheavals. The five hundred or so folk songs that did come down to us have impacted the repertoire of all Armenian musicians, particularly those who, like David, played in national folk orchestras. Komitas is so well known that the music academy in Yerevan is named after him.

In addition to Armenian (and other regional) classical and folk music, one of David's favorite musical genres is the *mugam*, a very sophisticated form that originated from the Iran-Arab-Turkish *makam*; it is a lesser-known form of solo instrumental music that is foreign to Western music. Like the Indian raga, *mugam* includes a series of improvisational interpretations, ornamentation, and modal changes. It is therefore not surprising that David would be attracted to jazz, and that he is able to play it with deep understanding and prowess.

During his extensive travels and his prolific career in his region of origin and beyond, Ayriyan became renowned as one of the few great masters of the *kemanche*. He himself states that he is one of the top three remaining *kemanche* players in the world.

Since moving to the United States, David has expanded his repertoire and is able to meet new requests and exploit the full range of the *kemanche* to satisfy demands for more familiar pieces from the classical Western repertoire. Thus, to accommodate dwindling opportunities to play his *kemanche* in a context where the instrument remains largely unknown, David had to make adaptations in style and repertoire. His technical mastery, his versatility, his knowledge, his adaptability, his vast repertoire of different genres, and his virtuosity, position David Ayriyan as one of the great musicians of our era.

Winifred Lambrecht
Director
Folk/Traditional & Community Arts
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Winifred Lambrecht (Ph.D) is an anthropologist and documentary filmmaker. She is the Director of the Folk/Traditional & Community Arts Program at the RI State Council on the Arts and teaches at the Rhode Island School of Design.

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Folklife Center includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Check out our web site www.loc.gov/folklife

