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The Influence of Life Experiences on the Creative Process. A Personal Portrait. – Loris Ohannes Chobanian

“How much does a composer’s life experiences influence his or her output?” I will base my discussion upon my experiences that have influenced my own compositional output.

Thought provoking subjects initiate compositional ideas and musical development. This development does not always have to be programmatic. In fact, most of the time, unless there is text involved, the music will only express the general spirit of the ideas rather than specific occurrences. However, even abstract compositions that do not have any program may reflect how a composer is feeling at the time of writing their creation.

When composer Hans Werner Henze spoke to the Baldwin-Wallace College Conservatory students, he advised the composition students that in order to become creative composers they should read, think, and be aware of what is happening in the world. Howard E. Gruber in his article “Creativity and Human Survival” goes a step further and I quote: “The study of creative work is fascinating and rewarding in its own right, but it may also provide a valuable springboard for some useful reflections on the greatest moral question of our age – how to work effectively for the survival of our species.” Coincidentally one of my early works for Modern Dance **Sumer and Akkad** that was performed by the Cleveland Karamu Theater, posed the question: “Does civilization bring with it an inborn destiny of doom and destruction or can man learn from his experiences to build a better future?”

My experiences have been both joyful and some not so happy. Sometimes they have been painful and disturbing. I have reacted to these realities and consequently there is a duality of expression in my compositional presentations, and they fall into two distinct categories. This duality does not only express itself in the subject matter but also in the accessibility and the language of the compositional style. Newspaper critics have often recognized this duality of the dark side and the joyful side of my compositions. Over the years, when I have written a work for a specific medium, in an intensely contemporary language, soon after, I have written another work for the same medium that is more tonal and accessible in character. The duality of expression has occurred in many of the media for which I have written, whether it is for chorus, orchestra, chamber music or solo instrument.

In a concert last year, two of my compositions were performed which had very diverse and contrasting character. Pianist Robert Mayerovitch performed the light hearted **Animal Crackers** for piano with ten descriptive movements entitled Hens and Chicks, Creepy

Crocodile, Bird Calls, Awkward Donkey, Pesky Mosquitoes, Naughty Mouse, Jazzy Cat, Monkey See Monkey Do, Lost Camel and Playful Dog.

Nanette Canfield, soprano and Robert Mayerovitch, piano performed the next composition on the program, **Four Chronicles – From the Diary of a Composer**. The change of mood could not have been any more dramatic. Each of the different movements of **Four Chronicles** relates to a specific theme. The first, *Black on a Blue Sky* deals with the unfair treatment of women worldwide. The incident in question was the so-called “honor killing” of a young girl that I witnessed on an empty street in Baghdad in the 1950s. The tragic event made a strong impact. I later arrived at the conclusion that even the so-called advanced industrialized countries do not give adequate support to protecting women from harm. Women are burned alive; they are subjected to genital mutilations, and they are abused and subjugated worldwide. In the major religions, dogmas that were established by men justify and support these tragedies. There is a sect of Buddhism that describes heaven as a place devoid of scorpions, snakes and women. In the Middle Ages 63 Christian Bishops voted on the question of whether women are human. Fortunately women were voted to be human. Of all the religions Islam has the greatest potential for abuse since it was proliferated by the sword. The Prophet Mohammad was involved personally in the first 27 campaigns and was wounded in the second offensive. We read in the book “The place of Women in Pure Islam” by M. Rafiqul-Haqq and P. Newton, that women are equal to plants and that the Prophet approved punishing women by burning them alive or cutting their limbs.

The second song, *I killed a Rabbit* deals with the subject of cruelty to animals. A long time ago friends invited me to go hunting. I killed a rabbit on that day and the rabbit, heaving and half-dead, communicated to me with his eyes. I had never killed an animal before. The incident changed my outlook on the exercise of killing animals for recreation. The question came to me, “Is there an inherent need in the psyche of man to destroy and see blood?” I cannot understand what joy there is in killing animals for entertainment. Hunters claim that they kill for food. That would be plausible at a time of scarcity, but what about at times of so much abundance? Why not target practice? I understand that there are farms in Texas where weakened and sickened animals are tied to a tree so that a hunter could shoot them and later display the trophies.

The third, *Parasailing*, departs from the somber themes of the other three songs and makes an effort to point out what is truly worthwhile in life: family, friends and the joy of being kind to others. One of my favorite statements from the Koran declares, “Those who give their wealth in the name of Allah and do not follow it by harm, or expect anything in return, have their place with God and they will not be sorrowful.”

The next song, *Roosevelt Street*, highlights the absurdity of racial violence. It is based upon an incident in the early 1960s where I witnessed a traffic accident on Roosevelt Street in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. A young white man occupied one of the cars; the other had a black lady with young children who were all severely injured. The white young man was not hurt and walked out of the car. The black lady was not as lucky; she was seriously

hurt. An ambulance came and took the young white man to the hospital. They refused to take the black family. An hour later a “black” ambulance came, though it may have been too late.

This incident reminded me of the Baghdad taxi driver in 1960 who, when he was told that I was going to the U.S. embassy, started a conversation and asked me, “What is the problem with the people of the United States?” The question sounded very similar to the ones I hear nowadays: “What is the problem with the people in the Middle East? Why do they want to kill each other all the time?” The cab driver in Baghdad was asking, “People in the United States are supposed to be educated and well informed. Why is it that they treat black people so harshly?” Maybe the Baghdad cab driver had a good reason to harbor anti-West sentiments. In the Biography of Lawrence of Arabia by Jeremy Wilson I read the following passage:

On December 1st, while Faisal and Lawrence were still in France, the French and the Italian prime ministers arrived in London. They were honored with a military procession which passed through cheering crowds. After arriving at the French Embassy, Lloyd George found himself alone with Clemenceau, the French Premier. According to a later note by the Cabinet secretary, Clemenceau had asked what they might talk about, and Lloyd George, seizing the opportunity, had replied: “Mesopotamia and Palestine” . . . “Tell me what you want” asked Clemenceau . “I want Mosul” said Lloyd George. “You shall have it” said Clemenceau. “Anything else?” “Yes, I want Jerusalem too” continued Lloyd George. “You shall have it” said Clemenceau “but Pichon will make difficulties about Mosul.”

The duality of expression in my compositions is evident also in the two compositions that were written for Symphonic Wind Ensemble, **The ID** and **Armenian Dances**. Both were composed around the same time, in the early 1970s. The different movements of **The ID** represent the different phases of a criminal mind. **The ID** (the Freudian term for the instinctual energy in the unconscious) is written in a contemporary language, and at times it uses proportional notation, without meter, in which the duration of the phrases is presented in number of seconds. On the other hand, **Armenian Dances** is based upon five happy Armenian folk melodies and is written in conventional notation.

The ID was instigated by a childhood memory of an incident I witnessed on a Baghdad street. The horrific event occurred during a time of political turmoil when a mob, which was demonstrating against the pro-western Prime Minister, savagely attacked and slaughtered a lonely policeman who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. This incident, which happened so close to me, had a lasting effect and its significance became even more evident in later years when I almost suffered a fate similar to that of the unfortunate policeman.

After I graduated from Baghdad College, a high school that was administered by Irish American Jesuits from Boston, I performed the classical guitar on Baghdad television regularly, conducted an orchestra, and worked at the British administered Khanaqin Oil

Company. On July 14, 1958, the Iraqi army revolted and took over the country after killing King Faisal II and the Prime Minister Nuri Al Saeed. The Prime Minister was killed only a block away from my home and I witnessed the mobs that dragged his body through the streets. On the third day of the revolution an incident happened to me, which I call my Dostoevski experience.

On July 17, 1958, as I was returning from work, on a major plaza in Baghdad, a military policeman approached me followed by some pedestrians and wanted to see my papers. I was wearing a coat not regularly worn in Baghdad at the time. Soon a crowd was gathering around and the MP held on to my arm. He asked me to empty my pockets and found a letter from a friend who was studying in St. Louis, Missouri. It was obvious that the letter was from the United States.

“I told you so!” one of them called and another cried, “American spy!” The crowd was becoming a mob. I could not help but think of the policeman whom I had seen as a child, who was killed very close to the same spot where I was now standing. I thought *THIS IS IT!* It was now happening to me. Now I could understand how Dostoevski must have felt when he was placed in front of the Czar’s firing squad to be shot and was given reprieve at the last minute.

Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, a husky gentleman dressed in a worker’s overalls, leaped over the crowd and confronted them. “He is alright,” he declared and whispered to me to leave. He held them back as I walked away in a daze. The husky man was a worker at the oil company. Later I found out that his name was George, but I never saw him again. It is only recently that I have become aware of how much the incident confronting a murderous mob had influenced my outlook on life.

Ironically, soon after this incident, the oil company was nationalized and all the British personnel were expelled out of the country. I was given the position of Secretary to the Director General of Distribution of Oil in Iraq. I held that position for the next two years and in 1960 I came to the United States.

With the Armenian Dances I focused upon a different approach. In my youth, for about ten years, I was a member of the Komitas Choir that specialized in Armenian folk music, and thus I became very familiar with many of the Armenian songs and dances. I was able to choose five melodies that basically dealt with youthful expressions of love. Each of the melodies is repeated three times with new variations.

Another composition, Poem for orchestra, commissioned by the Skidmore College in New York, deals with the subject of the "Rights of the Individual," especially as they relate to the creative process. For a creative person the right to have an opinion is paramount. Yet it is difficult to avoid the political and social “isms” that permeate human existence. Even in democratic systems there is potential for abuse. Thomas Jefferson warned of the mob mentality taking over in a democratic society.

Following trends and adhering to fads is more of a preoccupation in democratic societies, whereas in totalitarian, autocratic regimes the state codifies the rules of behavior and many of the decisions are ready made for the individual. In a free society, because of the availability of endless choices, the decision making process becomes more difficult, hence the search and adherence to trends and fads.

The “Right of the Individual” in question therefore is difficult to define in words. Far from advocating nihilism, it transcends those protected by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. With the advancement of technology we are approaching the day when the individual may lose the right to question and the right to decide for oneself.

Why is it that so many of my compositions have dealt with concerns about the human condition? It is the way we react to our experiences and the way we accept or reject ideas that make us who we are. In my case, at an early age I began to question man’s capacity for violence. I had become aware that there was so much brutality in this world. I became very critical of injustice of all kinds, regardless of the source and regardless of who was the victim.

I was born to minority Christian Armenian parents in the city of Mosul, adjacent to the Biblical Assyrian city of Nineveh, on the shores of the Tigris River. Iraq is predominantly a Moslem Arab country. The Iraqi people are kind and hospitable and in recent years they have suffered greatly. Historically Armenians have had a strong Christian identity. Armenia was the first nation to become Christian in the year 301 AD when King Dertad made Christianity the official religion in Armenia. It was about 12 years later that Constantine tolerated Christianity in Rome. In the year 404 AD, two Armenian Bishops, St. Sahak and St. Mesrop, invented the Armenian alphabet with the sole purpose of translating the Bible to the Armenian language.

During World War I, my father was an officer in the British Army that landed south of Iraq and reached Mosul at about the time when, on the west coast of the Arabian Peninsula, Lawrence of Arabia was moving north with the Arab army toward Damascus. My mother, who was 6 years old, and my grandmother were the victims of the First Genocide of the 20th Century. They had to walk seven months through the Syrian Desert to Mesopotamia and were the only survivors from a very large and prosperous family from the city of Erzerum. For more than a thousand years, before the Turkish invasion of Asia Minor, Erzerum was an Armenian city and was known as Gareen.

On the way to Mesopotamia, the Turkish soldiers constantly tormented my mother and grandmother. My grandmother was pregnant at the time and had the baby in the desert. Turkish soldiers were waiting for the birth. They took the baby and kicked him like a football and finally threw him in the Euphrates River. The atrocious stories of my mother and grandmother’s experiences are endless and there is no point for me to dwell on them further. However, the significance of the method to this madness is worth pointing out. Unlike other means of mass murder, it was the individual Turkish soldier who took the initiative and was personally carving the helpless women and children. The soldiers

wagered each other when they tore open pregnant women to find out whether the unborn child was a boy or a girl.

I remember as a child on Saturday afternoons my grandmother and mother had visitors—other Armenian women, who exchanged stories about the 1915 Genocide of the Christian Armenians by the Ottoman Turks where, over a million and a half of the Armenian population was slaughtered. The plan was to eliminate all the Armenian inhabitants so that they would not be able to reclaim their land. The Genocide was the culmination of a series of massacres the Armenians had endured for centuries. Historically these massacres started when the Armenians made the tragic mistake of welcoming the Christian Crusaders hundreds of years earlier. They have been paying for it ever since. Turkey has torn down and defaced thousands of Armenian Churches. Today in Turkey no one is allowed to speak Armenian. The Turks have succeeded in removing the Armenian population from its ancestral land.

These massacre stories the old women told had the strongest impact on me as a young child. I heard unbelievable details of cruelty and brutality that were committed on the helpless women and children who were being driven out of their homes into the desert. My grandfather, along with all the other Armenian men of the city of Erzerum, was taken to Kamakh and was executed, in a scene possibly similar to that of Babbi Yar.

I soon came to the realization that man must be a brute. Even worse, I soon concluded that humanity has an amazing capacity to excuse and justify evil! I became obsessed with the personality of Hitler. What made him tick? How could a man be so brutal? I read all I could find about Goebbels' propaganda machine. The character of Hitler dominated the spirit of my composition **Soliloquy - Testament of a Madman**. I will discuss this work in more detail later.

I also discovered that man is a very selfish and self-serving animal and that given the circumstances, man will condemn injustice only when it serves his own purposes. Shouldn't we be concerned with the well being of all the children of the world? Does it matter whether the slaughtered children are Jews, Turks, Americans, Germans, Armenians, Biafrans or Cambodians? Does it really matter? Apparently it does.

No wonder that nowadays we hear of Auschwitz, Kosovo, Burundi, Cambodia, Tibet, it is happening again and again and, it will continue happening again and again because we do not condemn all universal injustice. We simply pick and chose which massacre we should denounce. For example, our own US government refuses to pronounce the Armenian massacres as Genocide because the US government desperately needs Turkey to help with American interests in the Middle East. Yet we give lip service to being fair and just. I wonder how much of this hypocrisy the founding fathers would have approved? As a solution, would they have suggested avoiding dependence on oil? Might they have suggested hydrogen as an alternative source of energy?

The Turkish government has instituted a major campaign to cover up and change the real and documented events of history. The Turkish government's efforts are similar to those who have denied that the Holocaust ever happened. Millions of dollars have been made available to US scholars in major American universities to bribe historians to support the Turkish government's point of view. US scholars can do research in Asia Minor provided they do not mention the word "Armenian." This omission is especially noticeable in late encyclopedia editions. I have also learned that Turkish agents have been removing from the US libraries, books or documents which discuss the Armenian Genocide. This notion sounded too preposterous to be true and I had to find out for myself. In the early 1960s, at Louisiana State University, I had access to books such as US Ambassador Morgenthau's Story and Viscount James Bryce and Arnold Toynbee's book The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-1916. On a later visit to the LSU library those two books had disappeared. A possible coincidence? Whenever I have visited other universities I have checked their libraries and still cannot find those books.

I am very much aware that I am sounding one sided and prejudiced. Consequently I would like to make it clear that I would be just as critical if I heard that Armenians were massacring Turkish children. Years ago I babysat for Turkish children. I would have protected those children with my life.

Man has an amazing ability to justify evil. Man is inherently a selfish being, seemingly in a selfish universe. "What's in it for me?" seems to be the most important question. In this context Darwin's theories on natural selection make sense. Why else does the male lion kill the baby lions which are fathered by other male lions? It is no wonder that sex is such a powerful force among humans and animals. It is often infused with the mantra "What's in it for me?"

About twenty-five years ago one of my students informed me that Catholic priests were molesting children. If I heard about it at that time, surely the hierarchy of the Catholic Church must have heard; however it was more convenient for the Church to cover up the crimes in order to retain the criminal priests. It was the convenient thing to do. Thousands of children were molested. Nowadays, only because of the danger of bankruptcy, the Church is taking appropriate action. "What's in it for me?"

In a project conducted by the University of Alabama in a parking lot of a shopping mall, it was discovered that individuals who were parked and were ready to leave took on average three minutes extra time if there was a car waiting to park in their spot. They were not about to give up "their" space that easily.

Philosophers do not always give us clear answers as to why things are as they are. In large volumes they discuss the semantics of essence versus existence or faith and reason. What is "is?" What is man? Who am I? Being-for-itself versus Being-in-itself. Most often they pose questions rather than give answers. I discovered that words and language can be deceiving. At Baghdad College High School the Irish American Jesuit fathers from Boston, step by step, proved that God does not exist. The argument was as follows:

“Anything outside everything is nothing. God created everything. God could not have created Himself. God is outside everything. Therefore God is nothing.”

I had to find answers to many of these questions for myself. I had to study humanity more closely. There is a streak in the human psyche and the human personality that enjoys seeing blood. Historically man has found entertainment in hostility. Consider the Roman gladiators being torn apart by hungry wild animals. Nowadays we have mobs that enjoy boxing, the gorier the better. The wrestlers even pretend to be violent to satisfy the hungry mob. There is much fascination about animal programs on TV that show graphic details of how a crocodile devours the wildebeest crossing the river; time and time again we see the violent chase of the lioness tearing apart the baby deer. And then there are the idiots who like to train dogs to fight each other to the death. And what is the joy in seeing two cocks bloodying each other to total destruction. Are these people who love to see blood underdeveloped and inferior human beings?

There are nations with refined and otherwise admirable cultures that have a peculiar and macabre sense of entertainment. They pierce stakes in a bull's back. They hassle and torment the bloodied and weakened animal for a final glorious kill. Ole! The cowards would not dare face the animal on equal footing. In another advanced culture people on horseback, in colorfully ridiculous costumes, let a pack of hound dogs loose in the woods to chase a helpless tiny fox and watch the defenseless animal be torn apart by the dogs. Apparently the gorier the scene, the more enjoyable it is. Have you noticed how the traffic slows down at the scene of an accident? Drivers stop and stick their necks out to see if there is death, or even better, if there are body parts scattered about. These must be uncivilized, lower level humans. Or are they?

One of the most commonly asked questions to a composer is: “How do you start a composition?” First of all, there should be intent - a passion, a desire to be creative. The creative process can be triggered by a number of factors; there is no one set way that a composer could start a new work. In my case, the initial germinating idea could start with a melody, a rhythmic motive or, an overall sound presence and sometimes even a specific text. At times it could be triggered by a life experience. The creative process is a curious exercise and I was not aware of its fullest ramifications until at one point I was forced to be more analytical about it.

One day, one of the editors from the Cleveland Plain Dealer called to tell me that Pierre Boulez was supposed to give a presentation in Cleveland on the subject of creativity. Prior to that event they wanted to interview four individuals: an artist, a composer, a poet and an architect, so that they might express their own experiences in creativity, and discuss the process as to how these individuals go through the steps of being creative. I was the composer whom they had chosen. Frankly, before that day, I had not given much thought to the subject.

I explained to them that when I worked, I needed to be able to concentrate without any interruptions. During the process of composing I did not want to be inhibited. I wanted to

make sounds, play the piano, or express myself freely. That is why I worked late at night in my studio. I referred to an incident when I was in my studio and presumed that there was nobody in the building; two o'clock in the morning, I was testing the different types of laughs of a lunatic madman, complete with gestures and cluster noises from the piano. It just so happened that it was the time when the night cleaning crew was arriving. One of the cleaning ladies, very concerned, had heard the noises and had come to the door of my studio with broom in hand and was listening to the commotion inside.

As I was working, I suddenly sensed that I was not alone and rushed to the door and opened it. There standing at the door was the cleaning lady with her broom. We both screamed. She was going to hit me with the broom! I then had to explain to her what I was doing. She said she was worried and wondered what was happening in there. We became good friends after that. She often visited me and asked how the lunatic man was doing.

The composition I was working on was **Soliloquy – Testament of a Madman** for Baritone voice and Orchestra. It was commissioned by the Ohio Chamber Orchestra conducted by Dwight Oltman and was premiered in 1976 with soloist Melvin Hakola. In addition to the soloist's lunatic laughs, at times even the orchestra members laugh at different pitches.

But the topic of the composition is no laughing matter. It deals with the horror of genocide and the justification of evil. The text is from Hitler's Mein Kampf and the Bible. Hitler's character is pitted against that of Job in the Bible. The motivating idea, influenced by the writings of Bacon, Schopenhauer and Voltaire, among others, deals with man's ability to justify evil, especially in acts of genocide and mass murder. For example, in Mein Kampf Hitler claims that he was doing the work of the Almighty Creator. When planning the extermination of the Jewish people, Hitler referred to the Armenian Genocide as a "workable precedent." In a conversation he had with his subordinates (according to evidence presented at the Nuremberg trials) Hitler said, "...who still, talks nowadays of the extermination of the Armenians? "

It is all too often forgotten, that in the histories of nations, the tyrannical exercising of brutish power has time and again wiped out valid and peaceful social structures. But with the passing of a few years, these crimes fall into oblivion, perhaps because so many of us as individuals have learned by example that it is all right to step on our neighbors, as long as it advances our own personal ends.

There are many good people in the world and they are in different religions and different races but unfortunately we do not hear much about them. They are not dictators, kings or presidents. They do not declare wars. Humans, given the circumstances, will justify evil. The exceptions are very few and far in between, those exceptions remain the only hope for humanity.

In conclusion, the collective effect of my life experiences most definitely has shaped who I am as a creative human being and composer. Some of these experiences have been beautifully inspiring and some not so pleasant, but they have all nonetheless been invaluable creative inspirations for me. I would like to believe that future composers would draw their creative motivations from even more positive and hopeful adventures and most importantly continue to create a more enriched world for the rest of us by sculpting their creativity into beautiful works of art.

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