

KOMITAS CHOIR HISTORICAL INFORMATION

HISTORY

Before the arrival of Deacon Haroutune Ekizian in Detroit there were a few men who brought together several young people to sing on Sundays. The first was Arshag Apoyan who, in 1920, went directly to the after-school Armenian class to find prospective choir members. In 1927 Mr. Apoyan moved to California and Dn. Haroutune Ekizian was invited to come to Detroit to see if he could organize a permanent church choir.

“When Mr. Ekizian came, in 1927, he was not too impressed, but he did not refuse us and reorganized our original choir. He named it after Komitas Vartabed whom he loved very much and who had been his teacher at one time before the war. And this man (Ekizian) did a miracle and brought together about 75 – 85 people who wanted to learn from him. You must understand we had no printed matter. Everything was from memory. He wrote on the blackboard and we had to copy it and memorize it by heart. In less than a year from the time he first arrived in Detroit, he gave his first concert. It was very successful. A great many were teenagers and some of us more grown-up; some were older married women who came with their children. It was really a hodgepodge, but we were sincere and tried to do our best.” (From the memoirs of Mrs. Nevart Kuzirian – who at the time of her death in 1995 had sung in the Komitas Choir and before for 74 years.)

Deacon Haroutune Ekizian brought together a small group of people to get things started. The charter members were Betty Hovsepian Arpajian, Blanche Demirjian Hardy, Ruth Debelian Ekizian, Siran Sohigian Yagoobian, Bartavoohi Benian Dilanian, Berjoohi Berberian, Bedros Kevorkian, Apik Kalfayan, and Hagop Vanerian. From this group Dn. Ekizian was able to reach another 60 people who joined the choir. Over the past 75 years hundreds have sung in the Komitas Choir and as noted on the list of current members, several have been members for over 25 years – eight for over 60 years. To be a choir member means actively participating several times a month throughout the year in the service and glory of God.

Since its organization, first as the Komitas Choral Union, the Komitas choir has sung the arrangement of the Holy Badarak by Magar Yegmalian. Since 1952, however, at various times the versions by Komitas Vartabed has been used in whole or selections from it. The Komitas version of the Divine Liturgy is very challenging but more authentic to Armenian traditional music. Several selections by Levon Chilingirian have also been utilized. More recently, since Deacon Rubik Mailian’s arrival, the choir has learned hymns by Ara Bartevian and Khoren Mekanejian. In addition to singing the Divine Liturgy on Sundays and on special occasions, the choir has frequently performed for outside events.

For many years the Komitas Choir has helped with the church picnics and bazaar. In 1971, after the purchase and dedication of the Teller’s Pipe Organ, Louise Sarkisian

Yardumian, the organist at that time, began to train three choir members to share the responsibilities of organist. The three were Michele Menoian Medley, Barbara Dourjalian Widener, and Marianne Hovsepian Dardarian.

Several times families of choir members have graciously established funds for the use of the choir in their honor or memory. Many people have donated their time and money to set up and furnish the Choir Room and the Music Library.

The choir members have always come together socially for picnics and Christmas parties which further enhance the camaraderie of its membership. The organization of the Association of Armenian Church Choirs was formed in 1946. The Komitas Choir has actively participated in the Association's development and functions and has hosted six of its annual assemblies.

The choir's primary goal through the years has been to preserve the traditions of Armenian Church music. The Komitas Choir is dedicated to continuing its service to the church.

CHOIR DIRECTORS

The Komitas Choir has been fortunate to have the devoted services of talented musicians as choir directors.

Deacon Haroutune Ekizian, who founded the present choir and served as its director from 1927 until 1966, received his training under the direction of noted Church musicologists Komitas Vartabed and Magar Yegmalian. His vision was to sing the liturgical hymns correctly and with splendor and solemnity as well as to perpetuate the Armenian musical heritage in Detroit. His desire to introduce Armenian music to the non-Armenian community resulted in the presentation of numerous public concerts in the Detroit metropolitan area.

Dr. Harry Begian, who served as Choir Director from 1966 to 1968, also taught music at Cass Technical High School, Wayne State University, Michigan State University, and later at the University of Illinois. He stressed the strict interpretation of the music of the sharagans. He also formed the Armenian Choral Group of Metro Detroit which presented a concert and produced a record of Armenian music from that concert.

Deacon Ara Haig served as Choir Director from 1968 to 1992. He was a long time choir member who took on the reins of leadership because of his love for the Armenian Church and her musical heritage even though he had not studied music. To his great credit, he learned to read music to further his knowledge of the music of the church. In 1969 the Komitas Choir performed in a concert of Armenian music under his direction.

Hachig Kazarian directed the choir from 1992 to 1993. His knowledge of Armenian folk music is boundless. He also studied the ancient Armenian notations of church music.

His musical education included B.A. and M.A. degrees from Juilliard School of Music and a second M.A. from Eastern Michigan University.

Over the next several years the following dedicated choir members took on the responsibility of leading the choir for Sunday Badarak:

Rita Vanerian Jury	1993 - 1995
Harry Avagian	1995 - 1996
Barbara Dourjalian Widener	1997
Varsenick Apkarian	1997 - 1998

Deacon Rubik Mailian has been serving as Choir Director since 1998. That year with the tenacious leadership of the Choir Chairperson, Varsenick Apkarian, the Komitas Choir brought Deacon Rubik Mailian, newly graduated from St. Nersess Seminary, to St. John's to serve as Choir and Music Director of the Church. Dn. Rubik was born in Teheran, Iran, and came to the United States to study music in 1989. He has degrees in Vocal Performance and Choral Conducting from the University of Houston. In 1995 he entered St. Nersess Seminary and St. Vladimir's Seminary in order to study theology. He graduated from both in 1998, earning a second Master's in Theology and was ordained a deacon. Dn. Rubik has urged the choir to blend its sound by listening to the other voices and has introduced new versions of hymns of the Divine Liturgy. With his computer knowledge, Dn. Rubik has printed many of the hymns for which no music was previously available.

ORGANISTS

The position of organist and accompanist for the choir is demanding and vital. The following is a list of dedicated organists who have served the Komitas Choir.

1927 – 1933	Ruth (Debelian) Ekizian
1933 – 1937	Almas (Kevorkian) Boyajian
1937 – 1949	Mary (Seferian) Teache
1949 – 1951	Anita (Fundukian) Tootikian
1951 – 1957	Alice (Vartabedian) Vidian
1957 – 1960	Margaret (Gasparian) Tehlirian
1960 – 1966	Charlene (Kuzirian) Apigian
1966 – 1974	Louise (Sarkisian) Yardumian
1974 – 1995	Michele (Menoian) Medley
1995 – present	Margaret Lafian