

Judith Lynn Stillman's 'ARMENIA 100' and 'When the Music Stopped': An Extraordinary Tribute

BY DIANE MINASIAN

"Armenia 100: A Musical, Theatrical and Artistic Tribute to Armenian Culture in Remembrance of the Genocide Centenary," is a breathtaking masterpiece, conceived of and brilliantly executed by pianist, composer, and artistic visionary Judith Lynn Stillman. Stillman's innovative opus celebrates Armenian culture, acknowledges the horrors of genocide, and ultimately demonstrates the resilience of the human spirit.

The event was performed at Rhode Island College's Sapinley Hall at the Nazarian Center for the Performing Arts on Wednesday, April 22. Chief Judge Haiganush Bedrosian, the Honorable Scott Avedisian, and Reverend Fathers Shnork Souin, Gomidas Baghsarian, and Kapriel Nazarian gave opening remarks.

Stillman herself welcomed the audience in beautifully spoken Armenian—the first indication of her deeply passionate commitment to Armenian language and culture.

The initial part of the program pays homage to three great Armenian composers:

Komitas Vartabed, Arno Babajanian, and Aram Khachaturian. With a cast of remarkable musicians and outstanding soloists, Stillman weaves together music, song, projected visual images, and even "art in motion." Every sense is engaged as the audience intently witnesses the creation of a painting on stage, paced expressively to Khachaturian's "Trio for Violin, Clarinet, and Piano." Mher Khachatryan, whose work was recently exhibited at the Armenian National Gallery of Art in Yerevan, sweeps his brush (and eventually his hands) over the canvas in a tender, meditative dance that is absolutely captivating. Equally poignant is the juxtaposition of young emerging talent with the skill of a grand old master, as duduk player David Gevorkian and kemancha player David Ayriyan share the stage.

The second part of the program is devoted to the world premiere of Stillman's operatic theater piece, "When the Music Stopped: A Tapestry of Songs and Texts to Commemorate the Armenian Genocide Centenary," with music and book by Stillman. Stillman's true genius shines as she catapults the audience into a multi-layered, artistically complex

presentation exploring injustice, survival, and hope. Using narration based on centuries of Armenian poetry translated by Diana Der-Hovanessian, visual images, and a startlingly beautiful musical score, Stillman leads the audience on a journey through pain and loss, toward healing, solidarity, and growth. Stillman's sensitivity to the history, art, and psyche of the Armenian people is apparent throughout.

To execute her ambitious vision, Stillman brings together an extraordinary group of talent from near and far. Armenian-Canadian soprano Aline Kutan was a winner in the Metropolitan Opera auditions, and appears regularly in leading roles with the Montreal Opera and as a soloist with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra. Kutan captivates the audience from the start, with her nuanced and evocative singing. Vagharshak Ohanyan, born in Yerevan and currently based in New York, has been featured with the New York City Opera and at Carnegie Hall. His powerful baritone voice commands the stage with strength and grace. Armenian-American actor Armen Garo ("The Departed," "American Hustle," "The Sopranos") provides piv-



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otal dramatic narration.

A chamber choir and a chorus that emerges from the audience add to the variety and depth of vocal expression. The accompaniment throughout the program is sensitively and skillfully executed by a host of accomplished musicians; however, Stillman's virtuoso performance at the piano stands out as a highlight of the evening. Her power, her emotional intensity, and her precision at the keyboard provide an electric backdrop for the unfolding of this evocative drama.

Stillman is an internationally renowned concert pianist and composer. She holds

bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees from the Juilliard School, where she received the Dethier Prize for Outstanding Pianist and won the Juilliard Concerto Competition. Among many distinctions is her musical partnership with Wynton Marsalis, her performances for White House dignitaries, and her participation in numerous music festivals around the world. She is currently the Artist-in-Residence at Rhode Island College.

Stillman has been dubbed the "poetess of the piano," and "When the Music Stopped," a product of her creative vision, deserves to be performed worldwide. This opus is an ambitious, interdisciplinary undertaking. Stillman reaches for the stars and succeeds brilliantly in transporting us through darkness toward life and growth.

She describes her work as having been inspired by Kenneth Rexroth's words: "Against the ruin of the world, there is only one defense: the creative act." So, with bold and courageous innovation, Stillman brings awareness and appreciation for the Armenian Genocide and, in doing so, we recognize that any injustice, occurring anywhere, is an affront to all of humanity.