

## CONCERT

## Musical tribute to victims of Armenian genocide

RIC pianist Judith Lynn Stillman immersed herself in Armenia's culture before composing her score

By Channing Gray  
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It was about three years ago that Rhode Island College pianist Judith Lynn Stillman started thinking about staging a musical tribute for the centenary of the massacre of more than a million Armenians at the hands of the Turks. She felt she needed to turn what for most of us is an abstract moment in history into something "visceral."

So she set out to immerse herself in Armenian culture, attending church services, learning the unique style of the nation's music, even patronizing an Armenian butcher shop. She also turned to volumes of Armenian poems spanning more than 1,000 years that were translated and in some cases written by the grande dame of Armenian poetry, Diana Der-Hovanesian.

And from her research came a 30-minute score composed by Stillman called "When the Music Stopped." Her "tapestry of songs and texts," as she calls the piece, was written in just a couple of weeks last summer.

"The Armenian genocide is a story that needs to be told," said Stillman. "It has been described by some historians as the forgotten Holocaust that inspired Hitler."

For her concert Wednesday, Stillman is bringing in Armenian-American



Rhode Island College's resident pianist Judith Lynn Stillman calls her 30-minute score, "When the Music Stopped," a "tapestry of songs and texts." RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

TV actor Armen Garo, from "The Departed" and "American Hustle," to narrate, along with a couple of opera singers, and an expert on the duduk, a recorder-like instrument with a reed that makes a plaintive, wailing sound.

Trinity Rep's Curt Columbus will direct and "straighten out the logistics," said Stillman.

Stillman's piece follows something of an arc. The poems and texts she has chosen begin with the miracle of childhood, then segue into the horrors of the 1915 massacre, then emerge on a note of hope, celebrating the resilience and creativeness of the Armenian people.

"I thought about writing a little encore," said Stillman, "but the words were so glorious and captivating I couldn't stop."

Two free performances of "When the Music Stopped" are slated for Wednesday in Rhode Island College's Sapinsley Hall, one at 1 p.m. and the other at 7:30 p.m. The event will

also contain some prayers and opening remarks from Family Court Chief Judge Haiganush Bedrosian.

Mher Khachatryan's massacre-inspired paintings, which echo much of Stillman's text, will be on view. Stillman said Khachatryan, who lives in the New York area, will also be on hand painting along with the music. His images will then be projected on large screens.

But the event is mostly a concert, she said. With a Khachaturian Trio and Stillman's own piece, written in 13 parts interspersed with text. The final three triumphant sections employ choirs.

The 1915 massacre, which lasted for two years and led to the deaths of 1.5 million Ottoman Armenians, over half the population, erupted after the ethnic group was blamed for the defeat of the Ottoman Empire at the hands of the Russians in an area that sided with the Russians. They were considered traitors.

Intellectuals, artists, doctors and businessmen were rounded up and killed, while women and children were driven into the Syrian desert with little chance of survival.

The spirit of this sad chapter in history has been captured by Stillman, longtime artist-in-residence at RIC who seems to have found her voice as a composer in recent years.

Stillman joined the RIC faculty in 1980 after becoming the then-youngest pianist to earn a doctorate from Juilliard. She has played at festivals all over the country and toured Europe and the Far East.

"From the age of 3," she said, "I was groomed to be a concert pianist."

But more and more she has turned to composing, lush tuneful scores laced with hints of Rachmaninoff and Chopin. In 2012, she produced a set of songs about the Holocaust based on poems written by children imprisoned in the Terezin concentration camp that were performed



Armen Garo

on public television. And she has just been asked to write the music for a Canadian documentary.

The title of Stillman's piece, "When the Music Stopped," was, by the way, inspired by a Der-Hovanesian poem by the same name. It's about the beloved Armenian composer-priest Komitas, who was so emotionally scarred by witnessing the genocide of his students that he never again sang and later died in an institution.

Remembering the Armenian massacre is a powerful reminder not to let such a tragedy happen again, said Stillman. But she said she wasn't interested in getting into politics in her "Armenia 100" event. She just wanted to honor those who died and celebrate the richness of Armenian culture.

Wednesday's concerts, at 1 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. in Sapinsley Hall, are free on a first-come-first-served basis, although a \$10 donation is suggested.

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