

Living Today

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The Armen Donelian Trio plays a house concert, with Donelian on piano, David Clark on bass and George Schuller on drums.

Pianist introduces Armenian troubador to jazz world

By John Mason
Columbia-Greene Media

GREENPORT — Avant-garde jazz pianist Armen Donelian has returned to his Armenian roots with his latest album, "Songs of My Ancestors," an album consisting entirely of compositions based on songs by the 18th-century troubador, Sayat-Nova.

A court musician for King Erekle II of Georgia, Sayat-Nova composed thousands of

folk songs with lyrics in Armenian, Turkish, Persian and Georgian, said Donelian, who lives in Greenport.

"He was a superb singer, whose poems have been compared to Shakespeare's," he said. "They have intricate, convoluted metaphors and coded language. He was a commentator and an entertainer, a very fine poet."

At first, Sayat-Nova's poetry didn't interest him, he said.

But then, "stumbling around on the Internet, I ran across a book by Charles Dowset, who was a storyteller and researcher into Sayat-Nova's poems. He was English, taught at Oxford; he died in 1996."

Sayat-Nova's poems are

known throughout the Middle East, Donelian said.

"Many countries consider him to be their poet," he said. "Many songs jump from language to language. He was a bridge-builder, trying to build bridges between cultures."

After 18 years as the king's musician, it was his love for the king's sister that caused Sayat-Nova to lose his position and spend the rest of his life as an itinerant bard.

There is also an element of exile in Donelian's background.

Donelian's father, who became a nuclear scientist, had been brought from Turkey as a young child by his parents, to escape the Armenian genocide. When he was growing up in Armonk, Donelian would hear his father's recordings of Middle Eastern music on family occasions.

"I can't say I knew much about them," he said. "But the

sound was familiar to my ears.

"Then, when I started moving into the world on my own," he said, "I ran across performances and recordings of Armenian, Turkish and Arabian music played by friends and other artists. They resonated with me in a way that sounded familiar, but raised questions: Who were

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Armen Donelian in his Greenport home with the book of Sayat-Nova's songs that inspired him.



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A work depicting Sayat-Nova.

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the composers? How were they played?"

By this time, Donelian was an established jazz pianist, playing with luminaries like Sonny Rollins, Chet Baker and Mongo Santamaria. But in the 1980s, he joined a Middle Eastern jazz fusion quartet led by the oud player Ara Dinkjian.

"Ara composed music in the Middle Eastern style," Donelian said. "He brought to the repertoire a great deal of experience. His father, Onnik Dinkjian, is a singer now in his 80s, a very popular singer and bandleader, who was active here and in Europe. Ara apprenticed with his father."

As a member of Dinkjian's band, Donelian said he received a lot of mentorship.

Another Armenian he worked with, in the 1990s, was the jazz singer Datevik Hovanesian, who moved to this country in 1990.

"We collaborated on the Armenian songs of Gomidas," he said. "He was a widely known composer; like Bartok, he went to villages, documenting their folk songs before the Armenian genocide. He was instrumental in saving Armenian folk music."

Donelian and Hovanesian formed a jazz quartet with a bass player and drummer. Their records were produced by George Avakian at CBS, who also produced Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald and Miles Davis.

In 1998, Donelian went to Armenia for the first time, to play in the country's first jazz festival since the collapse of Communism.

Get it here:

"Sayat-Nova: Songs of my Ancestors" is available at <http://www.armenjazz.com/stor-index.html>.

"For me, it was quite an experience," he said. "As a result, I took several subsequent trips to teach and perform there. Then, in 2002, on a Fulbright, I came into contact with a Sayat-Nova book."

The book had the lyrics and melodies of many of Sayat-Nova's songs, but not the chords or harmonies.

"For a year, I didn't know what to do with it," he said. "I kept playing the melodies."

There are many Armenian composers, but Donelian focuses almost entirely on Sayat-Nova for this recording.

"Mainly, it has to do with the music," he said. "I found his melodies so captivating that I wanted to learn more about them. When I got this book, it included 50 or 60 songs. I went through the book very slowly, picking out my favorites, playing them on the piano."

"Some I'd heard before, some I didn't know," Donelian said. "I contacted Ara and mentioned the names of some songs. He said, 'I'll put together a CD from my record collection so you can get an idea of how they sound.'"

"I started listening to the CD, folk interpretations," he said. "I was captivated by the music. I found myself hearing harmonies and arrangements that I didn't hear when I first read the music out of a book."

Eventually he began creating his own arrangements

of the songs.

"I was aiming at an interpretation of his music through the lens of my background and experience as a pianist and leader of a trio, while keep the melodies intact," Donelian said. "I was using the melodies as a kind of platform for my arrangements and improvisations."

The result was a two-CD set. On the first CD, Donelian plays solo piano on nine Sayat-Nova songs; on the second, a trio, composed of Donelian, George Schuller on the drums and David Clark on the bass, perform four.

Jesse Simon, in *Downbeat*, called the solo piano arrangements "extraordinary."

"Although Donelian is respectful of the original melodies, he also appears largely unbound by the constraints of any particular musical approach," Simon wrote, "using the spare frame of Sayat-Nova's compositions more as a compass than a map. His expansive improvisations occupy a beautifully elusive place somewhere between the taciturn introspection of Erik Satie's *Gnossiennes*, the modal lamentations of John Zorn's *Masada* songbook and the genial invention of Art Tatum's solo recordings. There are countless exquisite moments to be found within these nine extended meditations."

Like Ukraine, Armenia is one of the former Soviet states that have aspired to

be closer to the West for economic and political reasons, Donelian said.

"Russia is using its power and influence to hold them back, into the orbit of the former Soviet era," he said. "Ukraine is resisting that, but Armenia, landlocked, surrounded by hostile neighbors, has not been able to resist. There was a pact between Putin and the Armenian president, and the president signed over all future rights to its natural resources to Putin."

Donelian said he hasn't been to Armenia since the recording was released, but he's working on it.

"Part of the problem is the album is not distributed in Armenia," he said. "It's a place where Western distribution doesn't reach. I'm not sure who is listening to it there. I have a feeling it's known there."

Next year is the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide, and he said he's hoping to organize a concert.

Meanwhile, this area is lucky to have Donelian as a permanent resident. The Armen Donelian Trio can be heard at the Castle Street Cafe in Great Barrington, Mass. on Oct. 11 and Dec. 6. For those traveling to Manhattan, he will be giving solo midday concerts, from 12:30 to 2:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, Sept. 22 through 26 in Bryant Park.

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