

Tribute to a Music Educator Mrs. Sona Aharonian

Mrs. Sona Aharonian is a well-known music educator in Lebanon whose career over the past 50 years has been marked by genuine love and dedication to the aesthetic and musical development of the succeeding generations of youth in Lebanon. Some of her students have already won international fame like Raffi Ourganjian, who is a world famous organist living in France. Cynthia Khatchadourian is a graduate of the famous Julliard School of Music and is a renowned concert pianist in New York. Tim Fuller is also a famous concert pianist; Walid Hourani's early training was with Mrs. Aharonian, Norayr Artinian is a professor of piano at McGill University in Montreal.

Mrs. Aharonian acknowledges the role of her father, the late Dr. Vartabedian, in her musical career with a deep sense of gratitude and appreciation. She reminisces with a feeling of nostalgia the open concerts at their house in Jemeyze, East Beirut, that lasted for about 25 years from the 1920's until 1945. Dr. Vartabedian was a well-known physician practising in Beirut, who had a passion for music and organized free concerts every Sunday afternoon at his house. He invited foreign and local musicians and paid for their performances which were attended by friends and music lovers in the community. During those days Dr. Vartabedian's concerts were a landmark in the country's cultural life. It was his ambition to encourage one of his children to become a professional musician. He himself played the flute, although he did not have any musical training, being an orphan stranded from his homeland in Turkey during the Armenian massacres in 1915. It fell upon his daughter Sona to pursue her father's unfulfilled ambition in music.

Young Sona's inclinations at school were towards journalism. She loved to write but she also loved music for which she had her early training at home with her mother and father. After completing her secondary studies at the Armenian Nun's School Hripsimiantz and College Protestant, she was admitted to the music department of the American University of Beirut where she received her B.A. degree in 1939. Right after her graduation she won a scholarship, to specialize further in music, but lost it, as the Second World War broke out the same year.

Dr. Vartabedian encouraged his daughter to go to the United States for graduate studies through his own personal funds. Sona was a shy young woman and did not have the courage to travel alone and to live away from

her family. The public opinion also blamed the Vartabedians for such a daring step because a young woman lost all chances of a future marriage if she took the adventure of traveling alone. No one could convince the father to change his mind so Sona had to obey and went to do graduate studies at Yale University. She happened to be the only student from the Middle East at Yale. The University community knew her as the young woman from Khalil Jibran's country Lebanon, who was at the same time the compatriot of the world famous Armenian composer Aram Khatchadourian.

After completing her graduate studies in music at Yale University with a Master's Degree, she attended the famous Julliard School of Music in New York. This is where she specialized in the most avant garde methodology in music education-psychopedagogy which was considered an artistic revolution in the 20th Century. The method which is also called "La Methode Vivante de Piano" is based on the concept of psychology, sociology and aesthetics. It is a method that tries to bring out the personality of the child by enriching it through the cultivation of his inner, feelings through aesthetics. It also trains the child to relate to people and society in love and harmony. This new approach to music education aims to train and develop the soul and the body at the same time by directing the visual and auditory sensations. It is founded primarily on the serenity of the soul, the inner resources of warmth and humanity, and a fascinating penetration into the spiritual realm of the individual.

Mrs. Aharonian returned to Lebanon after completing her training in this avant garde methodology in music education. She started her pioneering work in this field in Beirut and founded her own school of music. She continued her work after her marriage in 1953 to the late Kersam Aharonian, a prominent journalist, community leader and intellectual who encouraged his wife to pursue her career unhindered and showed real appreciation for her achievements in the field of music. However, combining career and family was not an easy way of life for Mrs. Aharonian. Therefore she decided to limit her music school to elementary training in the piano only. Students ages 7 to 16 had seven years of regular instruction after which they received a diploma. The program included the piano, music instruction and history of music.



Mrs. Sona Aharonian

As her background and training demanded a new concept in teaching the piano, Mrs. Aharonian did not stress the technique of the instrument — the piano alone. She gave great importance to the inner feelings, the joy, the vibrations of the notes, the sensations arising from the enjoyment of the melodies and not merely to the mechanical exactness of playing the right notes. In her conception of the field of piano music the instrument was transformed into a human entity and stopped being merely a machine.

In order to achieve these aesthetic and musical goals, Mrs. Aharonian has tried throughout her career to create an atmosphere in which young people enjoy music and feel free to express themselves and to cultivate their inner resources. She tells them fascinating stories about musicians and artists and recreates an environment of imaginary and legendary worlds where children freely associate with characters and communicate their innermost feelings. Her main goal being to direct the young people to attain refinement of the soul through self realization; to establish healthy relationships with their social environment and to live lives with high moral standards. She believes all of these developments together constitute the happiness of the individual.

However edifying and constructive these ideals are to prepare generations with a high cultural level, Mrs. Aharonian admits that talented pianists everywhere in the world refrain from specializing in piano teaching. They prefer to become concert pianists or accompanists free from the responsibilities that music education demands from them. With the aim of preparing Piano teachers for the Lebanese community, Mrs. Aharonian ventured into the big project of starting a training program for teachers just before the war (1975). She intended to pass on to the new generation of teachers her rich experiences and knowledge in the new methodology that had proved to be so effective in the lives of her students. As in the case of many other constructive projects, the war hindered its continuation. It would be most commendable for organizations to pursue this goal and establish a workshop or a seminar to prepare qualified piano teachers for the community. The best way to fight the ravages of the Lebanese war would be to create centers where music and the arts regain their importance in the lives of young people.

According to Mrs. Aharonian the Lebanese women were remarkable in their appreciation of music during the war. Under heavy shelling and impossible conditions the mothers brought their children to the piano lessons. More and more families had music as part of their daily life and activities during this time. It was a special way to fight the war and to secure the survival of spiritual and cultural values for which the Lebanese women should be highly praised. She told a wartime story to prove this point:

In 1976 West Beirut had no water except for those buildings that had a well and Mrs. Aharonian was not one of the fortunate people during those hard times. A neighbour who had a well came to her with a perfect bargain: to teach her children the piano in exchange for plenty of water. She was overjoyed with the idea and taught the children free of charge.

With gratitude and deep appreciation we greet Mrs. Aharonian's 50 years of service to the artistic and musical development of generations of youth in Lebanon. Undoubtedly, great has been her contribution to the cultural life of Lebanon.

We are inspired by her unyielding zeal, relentless efforts and persistent drive to train the youth in Lebanon for a deeper sense of humanity on the aesthetic, spiritual and social levels. We are proud to acknowledge her pioneering achievements in the field of music education as a Lebanese Woman Artist.

Azadouhi Simonian (Kaladjian)