

Yerevan in (H)Our Hands

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ABSTRACT

YEREVAN IN (H)OUR HANDS sheds light on the atemporal process of creating a chronological meaning through interviews conducted with people who have been and are living in Yerevan. It tackles the contrasts and similarities of a city in different timelines and how these factors help in creating the story. The research is achieved by asking odd yet familiar questions to foreign and local Yerevantsis. The study is portrayed through an artistic process that materializes in the form of a soundwalk. It is an attempt to conceptualize a soundspace and to create a general meaning out of individual stories and experiences to introduce the culture of the city throughout time to whoever has and has not experienced the culture. Additionally, it shows the essentiality of time and space in an individual's life by giving meanings to them that can be shared through this soundwalk project. The topic was chosen to encapsulate the feelings of the author experiencing the many emotions and their weight through the simplicity of an everyday walk in Yerevan. The accompanying research-creation piece portrays the charms of the city throughout time while bringing together the many changes cast upon it into a single space.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Several months of putting different ideas together, finalizing, and then changing again the topic of this project, I finally found the best path to this capstone journey. I want to express my gratitude to the people who took different roles in helping me to make this work possible.

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INTRODUCTION

The songs about Yerevan have created a bond between Armenians and their capital city throughout the years. Songwriters always located special themes in their songs about Yerevan, especially the passion and love towards the city. Songs such as “Yerevan” (1973), “Jan Yerevan” (1981), “Garun Yerevan” (1989) are some of the famous songs that people across generations know and associate themselves with through nostalgia and warm feelings. Since Armenia was a part of the Soviet Union, some of the songs are also translated into Russian and mostly remembered by those people who lived during that period.

My interest in exploring the memories connected to Yerevan through songs emerged one day during a long walk after a rain, while passing by the Puppet Theatre named after Hovhannes Tumanyan. It was probably the most heartwarming nostalgic moment I experienced after a cold rain. I immediately thought of the times when I was a careless kid, enjoying my childhood in Yerevan in the early 2000s. Some time later, this moment made me think of many questions; What is the relationship between Yerevan and my memories? Why did this moment make me feel such warm feelings that made me want to go back to my childhood? It was also interesting to me to know if it is only the place that can have such an impact on people’s emotions or songs can bring back memories too. My capstone project brings up all the memories people can form with their beloved city through songs and connections. Since memory is at the core of my research, I have chosen an approach close to oral history and based my research project on the narratives of those who feel emotionally connected to Yerevan and those who grew up listening to the songs.

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Yerevantsi: A person who was born in Yerevan or lived in Yerevan for a long time, although not necessarily living there nowadays.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In my capstone project, I look at how Yerevantsis managed to protect their memories and their association with the city. Songs by well-known local musicians, songwriters, performers like Artashes Avetyan, Georgy Minasyan, Sergey Davidyan, Forsh, Ruben Hakhverdyan, etc., always have a special place in the soul of Yerevantsis and remind them of different events in their childhood and adulthood. In my research study, I try to discover the role of songs about Yerevan, certain places, and the memories behind them that shape people's memories and love towards their city.

The Connection Between Places and Memories

Old Yerevan can be seen a lot in Soviet era Armenian films. The scenes and memories from the films are different from seeing the locations nowadays. There were cafes, parks, boulevards, and other buildings that do not exist now, but people still remember them. Seeing these locations in the movies makes the viewers reflect on them and react to their timespace around these places subconsciously as their memories take them on a nostalgic journey. Svetlana Boym describes the cherishment of shattered fragments of memories as “reflective” nostalgia (Boym, 2012, p. 81). The shattered fragments stick together and create the whole piece of the memory strongly when the place associated with the memory is seen. According to Casey (2000), these memories cannot be attached to any place. For each person, there are particular locations that have stuck in their mind as an embodiment of the memories. “Place is always

definite, and regarding a given place only some memories, indeed only certain kinds of memory, will be relevant,” (Casey, 2000, p. 189) and so it is expected that one recalls the past happenings that occurred around or in that place. These sort of places, situate and contextualize the content that we remember; they give them another dimension. The person can remember the details better when they see the place in front of their eyes. In our daily conversations, we sometimes use the phrase “cozy spot,” to refer to a location that we feel the most comfortable in. It can be different places for any person. Actually, these spots are places where the person feels safe enough to create memories and even cherish the spot itself as a part of their collective memory. And to me, after so many years, the Puppet Theatre after Hovhannes Tumanyan is still that “cozy place” to revisit my memories and be that same careless child again.

Songs as Trigger of Memories

The study of music offers many opportunities to explore music’s role in the establishment of a bond between a person and the city one lives in. When listening to the songs about Yerevan, the listener recalls among other things, the comfortable feeling of safety, and all those sensory recollections come together to create an overwhelming sense of nostalgia. Once it has become associated with a particular moment, a song can stay with you for the rest of your life (Crétien, 2014, p. 31). Certain events in the lives of people affect their take on a particular piece of music and make the music a tool to remember good and bad memories. For example, taking into consideration movie soundtracks, the music is affiliated with a certain emotion regarding the scenes or characters. Therefore, whenever the soundtrack is played outside of the film we experience the same emotions connected to the film itself.

In 19th century Armenia, music has been used to accommodate or direct the shifting of senses, shifts that correspond to “incubational” moments (Alajaji, 2009, p.182). For example, the

song “KrunK” by Komitas will bring those past moments of history and will direct our senses to experience the emotions associated in the present. Lawrence and Wishart explain what Gramsci’s theory of incubation encapsulates as

the transitional moment when a society’s past and present come together (a “variable combination of old and new”) in a meeting that leads to the dawn of a new society. (Lawrence & Wishart in Alajaji, 2009)

All songs about Yerevan contributed to the sense of being the small living particle in the city that helped instill a unified sense of self among the Yerevantsis from the times of the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a lot of Yerevantsis scattered throughout the world and found their homes far away from their motherland. At that time “Yerevan” by Georgy Minasyan, a popular tune from 1973, was one of the songs that brought back the sweet memories of the past, carelessness of youth, and expression of love towards the city. It could be concluded that “it is certainly true that “memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are” (Casey, 2000, p. 215). Space or sound, both assist the flow of memories and create a more vivid picture of the past.

The love towards Yerevan

All songs have a history behind them. Like literature, music is food to the soul and it is also considered a form of art.

I believe music does evoke meaningful representations that are grounded in symbolic performance. Music has the power to refer to other things outside of the music itself and I believe it is this power of association that we may find the most useful method to determine the importance of music....mainly with identity. (McCollum, 2004, p. 31)

Everyone can identify with the human voice especially when it is accompanied by music. This combination of human voice and instrument sounds can make up a nostalgic song for anyone and take them back to places from old times. Familiar songs that one hears after a very long time become very different when they hear them in the place they connect themselves most, so it gives an intense feeling of nostalgia. To sing the songs I chose, there is a need for some kind of a stimulus, one may not sing just out of nowhere, there must be a cause to trigger the need to sing.

I think everyone can identify with the human voice. The ritual action of singing songs was present in Armenia even before the invention of the Armenian alphabet, moreover after the acceptance of Christianity. For instance, Mesrop Mashtots wrote hymns to spread Christianity and the alphabet that he founded, which was later used by renowned artists and bards such as Sayat-Nova who inherited this ritual as an աշուղ/ashugh (minstrel). On the other hand, women sang about their everyday life, daily activities, and lullabies. Those songs were inherited from their grandmothers, mothers and passed on to their daughters, siblings, grandchildren, etc. We all remember the ritualistic childhood game songs and nursery rhymes that are affiliated with music. When remembered, the only thing that comes to our mind is our childhood and the time spent in the courtyards, kindergartens, and the people who we used to sing the songs with. This practice of voicing out a woman's song from another's memory is an example of how "a song sung in the past becomes a sonic bridge between individuals, and their collective memory" (Bilal, 2018, p. 4). This bridge is the love and loyalty that all generations and individuals kept in any circumstance in Armenia. Armenians' attempt to preserve collective love can be most evidently heard in songs about Yerevan.

Documenting Memories

A song/music is an example of oral history. “Paul Thompson [(a social historian at the University of Essex)], among others, charts the prehistory of the modern oral history movement, explaining that historians from ancient times relied upon eyewitness accounts of significant events” (Thomson & Perks, 2003, p. 1) Oral history has long been a trustworthy source to hear from people and record their saying as history. And as the oral history recordings work to save memories, songs work to revitalize them. Songs summon the memories that a person had once been an eyewitness of that happening. They have the power to bring up places and memories vividly in our mind’s eyes.

Bring the memories back / soundscapes

Sound art, which is often experienced outside on the street, tends to have a very strong connection with our sense of place. There have been some experiments with trying to walk or drift through the streets in a sanitized way to try to appreciate the place in a more lively and powerful, and connected way (Butler, 2017, p. 257). Merging the soundwalk with multiple old and new locations makes it easier for participants to sympathize with narrators’ different stories and experiences, with generic and detailed aspects (Adams et al., 2008). The soundwalk demonstrates that there are distinctions between the different eras and thus it creates different understandings of people’s backgrounds. Furthermore, it engages people from different generations in the subsequent discussion to create a meaning for both themselves individually and generally of these songs, places, and memories

RESEARCH QUESTION

When you hear a particular song about Yerevan, you are all of a sudden aware of your environment, you are aware of the place you are in, whether it is the old part of Yerevan and hearing the song of the old times' Yerevan or it is the new Yerevan. You are all of a sudden engaged in time and space and it is quite different. When you listen to music normally it will take you to another place and make you engaged with the performance. But when you hear the song in a public space it is often about the place activating the acoustics and the architecture and being aware of the increase in your own sense of self in a particular place. Thus, the questions that interest me and that fuelled this study are: What is the relationship between place and memory? How do we think about and remember certain places? How can songs heighten the sense of oneself in a particular place and time? What is the significance of songs that makes us remember Yerevan?

METHODOLOGY

The experience I gained during the oral history class at AUA helped me to come up with the idea of using oral history as a methodological tool for my research and conduct five in-depth interviews. To me, oral history interviews allow people to talk about sensitive issues from more of a personal angle and those stories are different from simple conversations. As Allesandro Portelli puts it, those stories tell us less about the events but more about their meanings (Portelli, 2003, p. 67). To present the different interpretations of memories, different personal associations with the city, and different sensations of nostalgia, I chose to talk with five people from different backgrounds and generations. Doing an interview and using interviewees' quotes seemed like a better option than putting together a survey result, because it both allowed to extend the limits of

having multiple points of views and narrations on the paper, and also made the conclusions more reliable and realistic.

“The most literal translation is hardly ever the best, and a truly faithful translation always implies a certain amount of invention” (Portelli, 2003, p. 64). Although there is never the perfect conclusion out of the ideas discussed in this paper, doing an interview is the closest to having a proper informative discussion. “Interviews often reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events; they always cast new light on unexplored areas of the daily life of the non-hegemonic classes” (Portelli, 2003, p. 67). Even though the participants were my friends and my piano teacher, they talked about some snippets of stories from their lives that I was never aware of.

When it comes to oral history, it is mostly the written form of narration (transcription) that comes to use. “The different efficacy of recordings, as compared to transcripts, can only be appreciated by direct experience” (Portelli, 2003, p. 64). The same is true for songs. The oral communication of the lyrics and the music sheet brings to light the human senses needed for sympathizing and recalling memories. Songs are better enjoyed when they are sung or heard, rather than being on paper because they give almost a real-life experience of communication. Memories are created by and belong to humans, they originate from real-life happenings. Thus, they deserve to be remembered with the help of structured vocal and instrumental sounds. Oral history is to be trusted and accepted in the academic world because it involves humanistic aspects. We have a face-to-face interaction between at least two people. And a soundscape is yet another lens through which I could include humanistic aspects to make my capstone more accessible to the general public.

A soundscape is “simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment; it is both a world and culture constructed to make sense of that world” (Bijsterveld, 2014, p. 182). I also chose to have a visual aspect in my research creation piece, since they assist me in portraying my work more confidently with the assurance that my audience will understand the depth of the subject. As a result of this, the interviews and the stories from the participants, which later became a big part of my story, created the idea of my research creation. The conversations I had with them allowed me to penetrate into their memories and understand how they associate themselves with the small parts of Yerevan. This was also the reason that made me do a self-interview and talk about these experiences from my heart. As Paul Thomson states,

the historian comes to the interview to learn: to sit at the feet of others who, because they come from a different social class, or are less educated, or older, know more about something. The reconstruction of history itself becomes a much more widely collaborative process, in which non-professionals must play a critical part. (Thomson & Perks, 2003, p. 463)

ARTIST STATEMENT

I love random walks in Yerevan. Sometimes, when I walk alone towards home or work, I get this calming feeling of living in the moment. In these moments, nothing pleases me more than capturing the details to have them forever. I take my phone out of my pocket and film the beautiful scenes I discover on my way, be it the giant buildings, or little birds filling the sky above me. When I get home, I spend a couple of minutes putting the scenes next to each other, creating a short film, and sending them to my friends. In that way, I convey to them how my evening was, in a poetic way. From my little films, I got inspired to invest my experience in a

bigger project. My way of appreciating Armenia, in particular Yerevan, is recording those small moments and putting them all together to create a symphony of memories. Since I have a big passion for classical music and songs, I decided to merge the two phenomena I found myself loving and cherishing within the project, music, and Yerevan.

I chose to create a soundscape concept because I wanted to bring together the contrast between two Yerevans, focusing on the one Yerevan we have through people's memories. Using the songs from the past and now, listening to people's memories from the two different eras, and walking through the city will help reflect on the memories associated with the places.

Participants watch two scenes in a video and hear old and more recent songs about Yerevan. Each of the videos is played simultaneously so that the audience gets the feeling that the songs are projected across time. The songs communicate with the memories of the audience and the places communicate with their emotions.

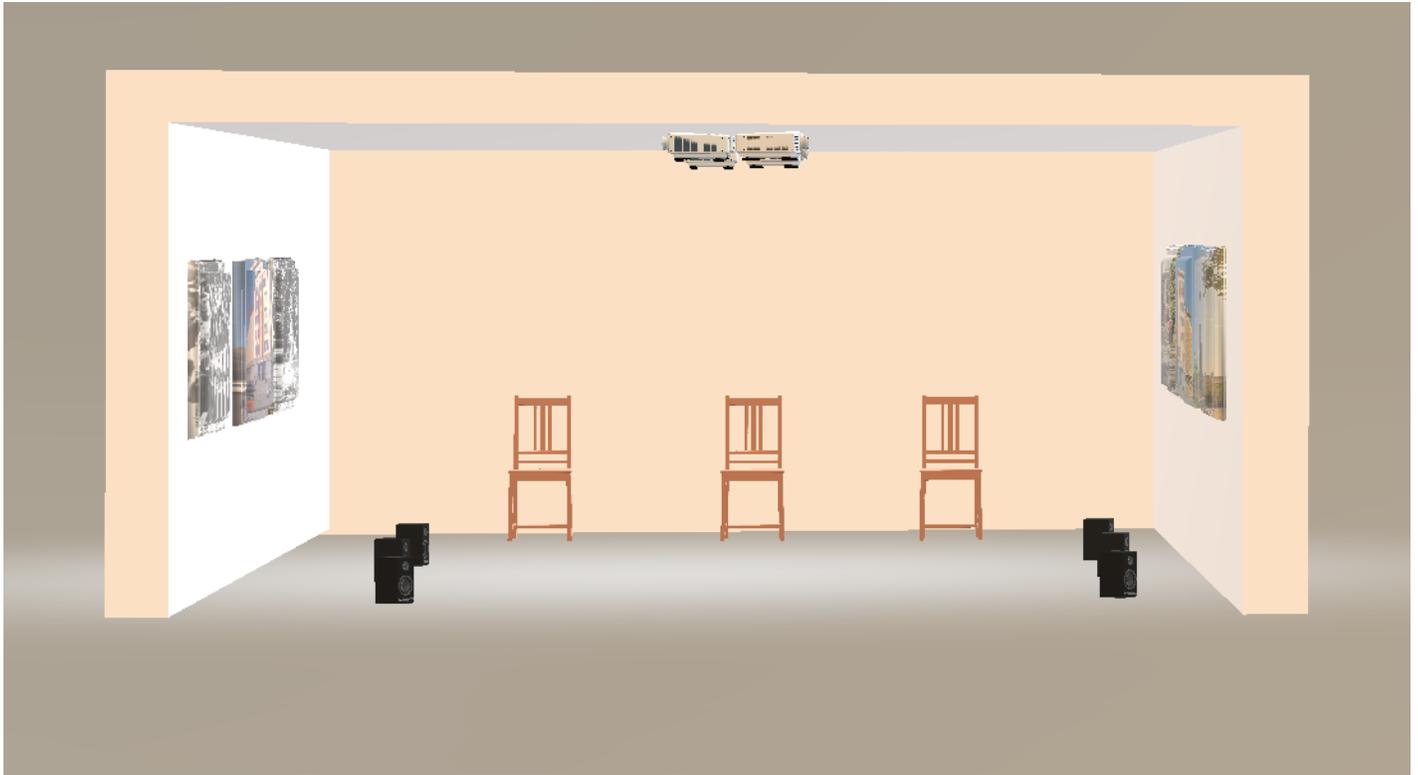
I hope when people experience the soundscape, they understand that memories stay forever, even if the place is not the same. It is through their hearts that memories remain. Places change, people come and go, but emotions stay. Also, while listening to the songs about Yerevan, the audience will be exposed to the transitions of different timelines of the same location observing the drastic changes the city has been through in its recent history. The music fades out as the conversations with the interviewees fade in, alongside the scenes, which are in synchrony with what is recounted.

As I myself love random walks that make me appreciate the city that is Yerevan, I invite others to take the same walk but in a room filled with exciting cues for them to recall their good and bad days cohesively. But my aim above the surface is not for people to only remember the

past but also to think of it in the context of place and music. I want these dynamics to give the participants the power to live their memories once again.

SOUNDWALK INSTALLATION





REFLECTIONS ON PROCESS

When I am trying to get inspiration for a work I look for a particular atmosphere, acoustic, history, architecture since all of these aspects inform a piece. One may visit sites and get hooked. A good example is my work itself, YEREVAN IN (H)OUR HANDS because that really is informed by the place, its history, and architecture. I walked a lot in the streets, I looked at the people and I felt the emotion of building my work around the city I have been living in for 20 years. Yerevan has the scars from the past and the new wounds from the present. For instance,

months ago before starting the project I made a spontaneous film portraying the popular places in Yerevan but in a new angle that was not visible to others. Later on, out of habit, I posted it on my social media platforms with no expectation of having many foreigners developing an appreciative eye for my city. However, I was proven wrong and I can say that now I have raised noticeable attention to Yerevan.

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