

Isabel Bayrakdarian: *Ancestral Songs, Prayers & Lullabies*

Saturday, November 22, 2025 at 8pm

This is the 1,464th concert in Koerner Hall

Isabel Bayrakdarian, soprano

Ellie Choate, harp

Ráyo Furuta, flute

Mher Mnatsakanyan, duduk

Kevork Mourad, visual artist

PROGRAM

Part I: Marian Chants, Hymns, and Children's Prayers

Komitas Vartabed: Pontifical Hymn / Օրհներգ Հայրապետական

Baghdasar Tbir: Arise, Graceful One / Չարթիր Նազելի

Hampartsum Limondjian: Incomparable One / Համեմատ Քեզ

Mkhitar Sepasdatsi: Blessed Mary / Երանուհի Մարիամ

Mkhitar Sepasdatsi: Lullabies for Infant Jesus / Ննջեա Որդեակ

Komitas Vartabed: The Lord's Prayer for Children / Մանուկներու Հայր Մեր

Part II: Komitas Vartabed - Playsongs and Lullabies (arr. Artur Avanesov)

Six Children's Songs / Վեց խաղերգեր

Five Lullaby Fragments / Հինգ Օրորոցային Երգեր

Sleep My Child – Lullaby / Զուն Եղիր Պալաս

You Are Beautiful – Lullaby from Agn / Ակնայ Օրոր

Dream / Երազ

Song of the Partridge / Կաքավի Երգը

INTERMISSION

Part III: Parsegh Ganachian - Playsongs and Lullabies from the Diaspora (arr. Ellie Choate)

Bjingo / Պճինկո

Nocturne / Խաղաղ Գիշեր Է

Sleep My Child – Lullaby / Զուն Եղիր Պալաս

Traditional Children's Songs (arr. John Hodian)

Come, My Nightingale – Popular Lullaby / Արի, Իմ Սոխակ

Bouncing Song – from Ani / Երեխայ Թռցնելու Երգ

Rocking Song – Lullaby from Ani / Օրորա՛

Part IV: Mihran Tumajian - Playsongs and Lullabies from Historical Armenia (arr. John Hodian)

Swinging Song – Lullaby from Bithynia-Bardizag / Օրիմ, Օրիմ

I Sing To You – Lullaby from Dikranagerd / Նենևի Ըսիմ

Bouncing Song – from Gesaria / Պար-պար Կենեմ

Two Playsongs – from Agn / Օր Պար...Հէ՛յ, Պար Գնա

Two Lullabies – from Agn / Աղուոր Ես...Օրոր

The Scarecrow – from Kharpert / Ալապիտիկ

Four Children's Songs – from Van / Չորս խաղերգեր

THE MICHAEL AND SONJA KOERNER FUND FOR CLASSICAL PROGRAMMING

The Royal Conservatory's mission to develop future generations of musicians and to bring the world's greatest performers to Toronto has been made possible, in large part, due to the generosity of Michael and Sonja Koerner. In 2022, the Koerners invested \$10 million to create The Michael and Sonja Koerner Fund for Classical Programming, securing the future of the finest classical music concerts at Koerner Hall and our other performance venues. This latest investment, along with the naming of Michael and Sonja Koerner Hall, support of Glenn Gould School students through The Michael & Sonja Koerner Scholarships, the donation of The Michael and Sonja Koerner Early Instrument Collection, the naming of The Alexandra Koerner Yeo Cello Program and The Alexandra Koerner Yeo Chair in Cello, and support of the annual 21C Music Festival, underscores the Koerner family's dedication to music and to the RCM.

Program notes

The seeds of this special project were planted at a young age, when I would often listen to my mother sing prayers, lullabies, and songs from a homeland that no longer existed, and from a place that seemed far away yet inexplicably familiar. I was named after my great-grandmother Zabel, born in Adana, Ottoman Empire in 1893, who survived the 1915 Armenian genocide. This strong woman comforted her orphaned children (including my grandmother Marie) during the mass deportations by passing down the prayers and songs which were sung in our ancestral homeland for generations. These in turn were passed down to my mother Lalig, and finally to me and my siblings. When I was young, I didn't fully grasp the profundity of these songs as vessels of information and essential links to my past and my identity. Now, as a mother of two children, I know how powerful these songs and hymns are, and how they can heal and soothe the soul. The timeless and universal nature of these prayers, lullabies, and playsongs reminds us that we all come from the same Source, and that we are all related, and forever connected with each other.

The Christian faith has played a pivotal role in preserving Armenian identity for more than 1,700 years. It has become a defining element of Armenian culture, uniting the people through shared beliefs, traditions, and values. During centuries of foreign invasions and rule by non-Christian empires, the Armenian Apostolic Church served as the central institution safeguarding the language, education, and moral foundation of the nation. Monasteries and churches became centers of learning, art, and literature, helping preserve the Armenian language and alphabet created by Mesrob Mashdots in the 5th century. Faith and prayers also provided strength and resilience during persecution and exile, fostering a sense of unity among Armenians worldwide. In essence, Christianity is not only a religion but the backbone of Armenian identity – binding the nation and the diaspora through faith, memory, and cultural continuity across generations.

As a singer and a scholar, it was an honour for me to curate the children's song collection, and as a teacher it was an added joy to present it from the perspective of Gomidas Vartabed (1869-1935) and his two students, Parsegh Ganatchian (1885-1967) and Mihran Tumajan (1890-1973). There are interesting instances when the same lyrics are used by both master teacher and student, which yield different musical interpretations. I was especially drawn to unearthing forgotten songs, even if they were fragments without words, or short songs that were only four to five bars long. By grouping them together in collections, my goal was to breathe new life into these neglected and overlooked songs and allow them to vibrate with new energy once again. The songs by Ganatchian hold a special place in my heart, as these are the songs that I used to sing as a child in elementary school in Lebanon. The group of songs by Mihran Tumajan are especially poignant: they were transcribed from survivors of the Armenian genocide, who sang the melodies of their lost homeland to the composer, who was carrying out his ethnographic work in the United States in the early 20th century. I honour the memory of these singers, as they were the mothers (and sometimes fathers) who sang these same songs to our grandparents and parents when they were children and kept the link to the past alive.

These songs and prayers have shown me that music truly has the power to bridge the past and the future together. It has the ability to heal, inspire, elevate, and yes, to give voice to those voices that were silenced prematurely because of their race, ethnicity, and religion. There is no better celebration of life, and survival, than through music and singing!

- Isabel Bayrakdarian

Isabel Bayrakdarian

Soprano

A winner of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions in 1997 – the same year she graduated from the University of Toronto cum laude with a Biomedical Engineering Degree – Ms. Bayrakdarian thereafter found her career taking rapid wing. She won first prize in the prestigious Operalia competition in 2000 and sang in the Lyric Opera of Chicago's world premiere production of William Bolcom's *A View from the Bridge*. She has won plaudits at the Metropolitan Opera, Salzburg Festival, Los Angeles Opera, London's Royal Opera House, San Francisco Opera, Canadian Opera Company, Paris Opera, Barcelona's Liceu, Milan's La Scala, Florence's Maggio Musicale, and the Saito Kinen Festival in Matsumoto, Japan.

An ever active concertizer, she has appeared with the premier orchestras of New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, Minnesota, RAI Torino, Paris, London, Vienna, Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal under the baton of such eminent conductors as Seiji Ozawa, James Conlon, David Zinman, Michael Tilson Thomas, Alan Gilbert, Nicholas McGegan, Christoph von Dohnányi, Christoph Eschenbach, Sir Colin Davis, Sir Andrew Davis, Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Mariss Jansons, Leonard Slatkin, Richard Bradshaw, Anne Manson, Bramwell Tovey, and Peter Oundjian. Her versatility is also reflected in being the featured vocalist on the Grammy Award-winning soundtrack of the blockbuster film *The Lord of The Rings: The Two Towers* and on the soundtrack of Atom Egoyan's *Ararat*; she sings on the BBC-produced documentary *HOLOCAUST - A Music Memorial Film* from Auschwitz; and stars in her Gemini nominated film *Long Journey Home*, documenting her first visit to her ancestral homeland, Armenia.

A winner of four consecutive Juno Awards, Ms. Bayrakdarian was recently nominated for a 2023 Juno in Best Classical Album – Solo Artist category for her recording of *La Zingarella: Through Romany Songland*. She is the recipient of the Marilyn Horne Foundation Award, Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee and Diamond Jubilee Medals, the George London Foundation Award, Canada Council of the Art's Virginia Parker Prize, and the Republic of Armenia's Komitas Medal. She is deeply honoured to have received the St. Mesrob Mashtots Medal from His Holiness Aram I Catholicos of the Holy See of Cilicia, the St. Sahag – St. Mesrob Medal from His Holiness Karekin II Catholicos of All Armenians, and the Movses Khorenatsi Medal – Republic of Armenia's highest cultural award. She holds an Honorary Doctorate from Wilfrid Laurier University and an Honorary Fellowship from The Royal Conservatory of Music (2004). Ms. Bayrakdarian is a Professor of Voice and Head of the Voice Area & Opera Outreach Program at the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB).

Ellie Choate's versatility has afforded her the opportunity to touch virtually every area of music making, including opera and symphony orchestra, with many headline artists. She has worked on the scores of major motion pictures (such as *Spiderman II* and *Mission Impossible III*), recordings (including Ray Charles's *Genius Loves Company* and Josh Groban's *Stages*), as well as on camera in film and television. Ellie is active as a soloist, chamber musician, clinician, and teacher, and has produced publications and several CDs of her arrangements of pop and jazz, classical, and inspirational music. Treasured concert performances include chamber concerts with composer and conductor Pierre Boulez and the North American premiere of Willi März's *Divertimento for Tuba and Harp*. Recording and performing with soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian is a singular joy and honour.

Ráyo Furuta, hailed as "The Rockstar of the Flute" (*Informador de Guadalajara*) is a Mexican Japanese American flutist known for his electrifying stage presence and genre-defying artistry. With command of classical, contemporary, global, jazz, and pop styles, Furuta has captivated audiences across Mexico, Japan, Korea, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Spain, Poland, the Middle East, and North America, with performances alongside Yo-Yo Ma's Silkroad Ensemble, for the United Nations, and at major festivals including Yellowbarn, Mainly Mozart, Okayama, Interharmony, Saarbarg, Banff, Sarasota, and Opera en la Calle. He tours regularly as a concerto soloist, specializing in contemporary works by Gabriela Lena Frank, Yuko Uebayashi, Jake Heggie, and Paul Schoenfield, and as a recitalist with his longtime duo partner, Grammy-winning pianist Michelle Cann.

Mher Mnatsakanyan is one of the leading voices in the modern representation of the Armenian duduk on the global stage. With a distinctive dual background as a classical clarinetist and a contemporary duduk soloist, Mher has carved out a unique path, bringing the soulful sound of Armenia's ancient instrument to diverse audiences worldwide.

In recent years, Mher has graced some of the world's most prestigious stages, including a performance at Carnegie Hall for the 10th Anniversary of AGBU Performances, and performed at Walt Disney World as a featured clarinet and duduk soloist and band leader, enchanting audiences daily, for over two years. Mher has held key, lead soloist positions as principal clarinetist at the Yerevan State Opera and Ballet Orchestra and as soloist with the Tatoul Altounian National Song and Dance Ensemble.

As a painter and video artist, **Kevork Mourad** has performed around the world at the Spoleto Festival, Korea National Opera, National Cathedral in DC, Dutch Royal Palace for the Prince Claus Foundation, Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC, Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, Walt Disney Concert Hall in LA, ElbPhilharmonie in Hamburg, and MuCEM in Marseille, among many others. His work is in the permanent collection at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, the Spurlock Museum, and his *Seeing Through Babel* was added to the permanent collection of the Aga Khan Museum. A member of the Silkroad Ensemble, he is one of the artists featured in the documentary *The Music of Strangers*. He is the recipient of a 2023 NYSCA grant and was a fellow at the Fountainhead residency in Miami in 2024.

Isabel Bayrakdarian made her Royal Conservatory debut on October 10, 2009, during Koerner Hall's Grand Opening Festival, and this is her fourth appearance in Koerner Hall. All the other artists are making their Conservatory debuts.