

Michael Gandolfi

“Ascending Light,” for organ and orchestra (2015)

MICHAEL GANDOLFI was born in Melrose, Massachusetts, on July 5, 1956, and lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was offered the commission to compose a work for organ and orchestra for the Boston Symphony Orchestra—the first work for organ and orchestra to be specifically commissioned by the BSO—in summer 2009. Most of the active stage of composition took place in 2014, and the completed score was ready by January 2015. The score is inscribed, “Com-missioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Andris Nelsons, Music Director, with generous support provided by the Gomidas Organ Fund, in memory of Berj Zamkochian and commemo-rating the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide.” The composer’s dedication is “in loving memory of my father.” These are the world premiere performances.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO ORGAN, the score for “Ascending Light” calls for three flutes (third doubling piccolo), three oboes (third doubling English horn), three clarinets (third doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, two trombones and bass trombone, tuba, percussion (three players: xylophone, glockenspiel, two sets of tubular bells, bass drum, large and medium suspended cymbals, crash cymbals, tambourine, triangle, mark tree, ratchet), timpani, harp, and strings. The duration of the piece is about twenty-eight minutes.

The impetus for this Boston Symphony Orchestra commission for Michael Gandolfi’s *Ascending Light* for organ and orchestra came originally from the Gomidas Organ Fund in honor of its founder, the late Armenian-American organist Berj Zamkochian (1929-2004), as well as to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide. Zamkochian, a longtime presence in the Boston music community, was also active worldwide as a soloist and for many years a faculty member of the New England Conservatory, where Michael Gandolfi is a member of the composition faculty. While still in his twenties, Zamkochian gained the attention of BSO music director Charles Munch, who brought him to Symphony Hall as organ soloist in such works as the Saint-Saëns Symphony No. 3 (his recording of that work with the BSO is considered a classic) and the Poulenc Concerto for Organ, Timpani and Strings. He performed in Symphony Hall’s erstwhile regular series of organ recitals and, following Munch’s departure, continued to appear with the BSO and Boston Pops for many years. Zamkochian established the Gomidas Organ Fund to mark the centenary of the great Armenian priest and composer Gomidas Vardapet (1869-1935).* A teacher, composer, and musicologist, Gomidas remains the single most important figure in the more than millennium-old tradition of Armenian music. His efforts to catalogue Armenian folk music as well as the complex system of church modes helped focus the cultural identity of a people that had largely come under Ottoman rule for centuries. In part because of this, he was one of the several hundred Armenian intellectuals and artists arrested in Constantinople in April 1915, an event marking the beginning of what has come to be known as the Armenian Genocide.† Michael Gandolfi celebrates the lively and enduring foundation of modern Armenian culture represented by Gomidas and the other deported intellectuals in the majestic, energetic music at the beginning and end of *Ascending Light*. He also quotes specific Armenian church and folk music elsewhere in the piece.

Gandolfi’s embrace of these musical materials, so richly a part of Armenian culture, reflects a wide-ranging intellectual and artistic curiosity that is also on display in the composer’s earlier commissions from the BSO. The first of these, for the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra, was *The Garden of Cosmic Speculation* (2004), which was inspired by a vast Scottish garden, designed by Charles Jencks and based on various subjects of exploration in modern science. (He later expanded this piece into an eleven-movement, seventy-minute work, premiered in its complete form by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra.) His *Plain Song, Fantastic Dances* (2005), commissioned for, premiered, and recorded by the Boston Symphony Chamber Players, incorporates Gregorian chant melody as a reference to St. Botolph, after whom the city of Boston is named. His orchestral commission *Night Train to Perugia* (2012), commissioned for the 75th anniversary of Tanglewood, is a short fantasia alluding tongue-in-cheek to an experiment done at the CERN Large Hadron Collider suggesting (mistakenly) that neutrinos can move faster than the speed of light. Among other science-based works is his *Q.E.D.: Engaging Richard Feynman*, for the Atlanta Symphony and Chorus (2010), with which, along with music director Robert Spano, he worked closely in recent years. Literature has figured strikingly in his work, from Shakespeare to Pinocchio to Boris Vian, as has visual art, especially the unexpected juxtapositions of the surrealists, the visual games of M.C. Escher, and the pattern dynamics of American minimalists.

Gandolfi’s inquisitiveness has expanded naturally into collaborative projects. He has worked extensively with the writer Dana Bonstrom, who has provided texts and narrative scenarios for a variety of works, including the large-scale chorus-and-orchestra work *Chesapeake: Summer of 1814*, commemorating the 200th anniversary of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and *The Queen and the Conjuror*, based on Tarot cards. The composer has also collaborated with the videographer Ean White in several multimedia projects, including video accompaniment for *The Garden of*

Cosmic Speculation. He is offered commissions from all over the country, and in addition to the BSO and the Atlanta Symphony has worked frequently with the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (which has released two CDs of his music) and his hometown ensemble, the nearly 100-year-old Melrose Symphony Orchestra, for which he has written several pieces.

As mentioned above, Michael Gandolfi teaches at the New England Conservatory, his own alma mater; he has also taught at Harvard and Indiana universities and has been on the faculty of the Tanglewood Music Center since 1997. He was a Tanglewood Fellow in 1986, when he worked with Oliver Knussen and earned a commission for his orchestral work *Transfigurations*. This summer he is one of the curators for Tanglewood's annual Festival of Contemporary Music, during which a new ensemble work, commissioned for the TMC's 75th anniversary, receives its world premiere.

Michael Gandolfi's *Ascending Light* for organ and orchestra takes its title from that of an Armenian hymn, "Aravot lousaber," upon which the last section of the piece is based. The work is in two movements: the first is an energetic, highly patterned series of exchanges between the orchestra and the organ titled "Vis Vitalis." This translates as "vital force," referring to the ancient philosophical idea of a non-physical substance that animates life; here, the "life force" of Armenia is its people, and in particular the artists and intellectuals deported or killed in Turkey in April 1915. The placement of two sets of tubular bells, flanking the timpani at the rear of the stage, echoes the visual motif of the Symphony Hall organ pipes; trumpet-and-trombone pairs on either side of the stage are a deliberate ceremonial gesture. The composer writes, "The passages of the first movement allow the organ to show many of its myriad guises. It is alternately leader, follower, virtuoso (replete with elaborate pedal-work), initiator of change, etc. At one moment, central in the first movement, the organ introduces motivic figures in sequence that quickly find their way into the orchestra only to become accompaniment for further elaboration by the organ, which elaboration is in turn added to the orchestra, etc., creating a complex web of accompaniment that rivals the organ's next contribution."

Various types of harmonic and metrical aural illusions heard throughout the piece are characteristic of Gandolfi's music. For example, metrically the winds' rising arpeggiated figure near the start of the piece can be heard as either groups of four notes (suggested by pitch) or groups of three (suggested by the insistent quarter-note rhythm of timpani). The composer uses this ambiguity to foreshadow changes in metrical and rhythmic perspective within the movement. Harmonies are based on triads (the basic chord of traditional tonal music), but evolve in unexpected ways, abetted by the metrical sleight-of-hand, use of harmonic pedal points, and the shift of material from foreground to accompaniment, like perspective fields in a Medieval landscape painting.

The first movement's grand finish is connected to the second via a pedal note in the organ. The melody here is transcribed from recordings of a "Lullaby of Tigranakert," which in its free, improvisatory flow contrasts with the intricate interlocking patterns of the first movement. As in the first movement, though, Gandolfi takes fragments of this primary tune to use in accompaniment patterns; a rising sixteenth-note figure, passed among orchestral sections, is especially persistent. The second of the three shorter variations is an organ solo; the longer fourth variation, "Grand variation: scherzo" is virtually a movement in itself. Upon its winding-down, the Reverie, a piccolo solo over chorale harmonies, leads us to the final section, "Aravot lousaber," "Ascending light." That hymn's melody, first presented in simple chorale form, then combines with the music of the first movement in a joyous, vital, uplifting coda.

Robert Kirzinger

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* -Gomidas, or Komitas, was the name given to the monk Sghomon Sghomonian upon his ordination in 1894; "Vardapet" and "Vardabed" are transliterations designating the title for a class of Armenian priest.

† -Following Gomidas's arrest and a traumatic imprisonment in a deportation camp, his stature as an artist led to his being released and ultimately sent to Paris, where he spent the last fifteen years of his life in fragile mental and physical health. He died in October 1935, and his remains were reinterred in Yerevan the following year.

Michael Gandolfi on "Ascending Light"

I was first presented with this commission for a work for organ and orchestra in the summer of 2009, by Anthony Fogg, Artistic Administrator of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He made it clear that it was the wish of the members of the Gomidas Organ Fund that I have complete artistic freedom in writing the piece: the work need not be conceived as a requiem for those who perished in the Armenian Genocide. However, it was immediately clear to me that I would not be able to compose this work in ignorance of this terribly tragic event.

I found an appealing and well-known Armenian lullaby, known as the lullaby of Tigranakert (Tigranakert was the ancient capital of Armenia). My research led to many recorded examples. I transcribed several, realizing that this

would be a prominent feature of the piece at some point. After doing this I became interested in researching sacred Armenian music and found a choral work titled “Aravot Lousaber,” which translates as “Ascending Light.” The plaintive melody dates back several centuries, but a simple and elegant four-part harmonization was by the Armenian priest, musicologist, and composer known as Vartapet Komitas. (I learned only after completing the piece that Komitas *is* Gomidas, after whom the Gomidas Organ Fund is named—a fortuitous and remarkable synchronicity.) I then had two Armenian musical references that provided a superb balance: one of earthiness, one of heavenliness.

In fall 2014, after a long session of reading about the great number of intellectuals murdered at the outset of the Armenian Genocide, I found myself viewing portraits of a number of these victims, apparently taken in the prime of their lives. Suddenly a very powerful, almost defiant music emerged in my inner ear. This music was rich and full of life. It was a courageous music. The full form of the piece was suddenly made clear. The first movement would be a celebration of the vitality of life or “life force.” The second would move from the earthly to the heavenly. The finale would merge the transformation of the second movement with the life-force music of the first. I felt that the generally positive ethos of the piece would align with the vital and developing Armenian culture that has prevailed in spite of the horrors of 1915.

Once all of this was in place, the piece was written rather quickly. I was excited to write a work for the newly renovated organ at Boston’s Symphony Hall. I was also greatly aided by hearing Olivier Latry in recital in Montreal at the very early stages of writing. We met for several hours after his recital and he played through my transcription of the “Lullaby of Tigranakert.” He also generously revealed many features of organ-writing that proved most useful in the following weeks. He is a remarkable musician, with a great stage presence. In addition to Olivier, I sought counsel in writing for organ from Kathryn Salfelder, a fine DMA composition student of mine and an accomplished organist, as well as from organist and New England Conservatory faculty Tom Handel. I was also fortunate to have the New England Conservatory Wind Ensemble, led by my friend and colleague Charles Peltz, read through the opening of the piece.

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