

CALENDAR

Monday, October 22, 2007

WORLD MUSIC REVIEW

Armenians cross genres

The massive Kohar Symphony Orchestra and Choir spells enjoyment.

By DON HECKMAN
Special to The Times

It was apparent, even before a single member of the Kohar Symphony Orchestra and Choir arrived onstage Thursday at the Gibson Amphitheatre, that a special event was about to take place. The front edge of the stage was covered with a colorful garland of flowers, two pillars spelled out the word "Kohar" and the stage was set for a full orchestra and a large choir.

Despite the setting, the first performer — Hamlet Tchobanian — was neither a musician nor a singer but a mime. His arrival announced by a loud cymbal crash, he lurked across the stage in classic, white-faced, Marcel Marceau fashion. Opening a pair of illusory gates, he majestically introduced the 130-plus members of the Armenian Kohar

Symphony and Choir.

Led by artistic director Sebouh Abkarian, his long white hair waving dramatically with each thrust of his baton, the Kohar players offered a buoyant waltz to begin a long, stirring evening of Armenian-tinged music. Here, as in many of the pieces to follow, Kohar's sound and style often had the lightweight but entertaining quality of a summer pops orchestra.

But Kohar crossed genres far more freely than the average pops ensemble. Gagik Malkasian's virtuosic *duduk* playing and the busy fingers of *kanoun* artist Anahid Valesian added Armenian authenticity. Classically oriented pieces were delivered in well-crafted fashion, and Kohar went so far as to open the second half with a surprisingly swinging number titled "Tetmajazz."

As the mime-introduced opening implied, however, a Kohar performance is more spectacle than concert. Most of the music was vocal, sung by soloists whose styles ranged from big-voiced operatic to international lounge. In most cases, the sing-

ers' numbers were enhanced by the engaging presence of eight female dancers led by the gorgeously lithe Sousana Mikayelian. Letters from the Armenian alphabet were spotlighted across the ceilings and walls, and the program climaxed with a burst of golden streamers flying out into the audience.

Much of the second half of the concert, in fact, was strongly oriented toward the predominantly Armenian crowd. Spirited patriotic songs, pop tunes and familiar traditional numbers drew an escalating response — hand-clapping, sing-alongs and enthusiastic shouts.

Kohar was founded in 1997 by Harout Khatchadourian and his brothers, who entirely sustain the ensemble and its concerts. Named in honor of their mother, Kohar, the founders' goal with the ensemble is the "aim of reviving and promulgating the Armenian alphabet and culture." Kohar did that and more Thursday, positioning the capacity of Armenian music to reach out stylistically while retaining its rich creative identity.