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Representing Armenia at Junior Eurovision 2008



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Pedro Eustache celebrates the duduk



by Nyree
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YEREVAN – On November 11, to mark the 80th birthday of world-renowned duduk player and ambassador of Armenian culture **Jivan Gasparyan**, musicians from around the world gathered at Yerevan’s Sport and Concert Complex (Hamalir) for the Jivan Gasparyan Tribute Concert. Among the many talented artists who came to pay tribute to the great maestro was **Pedro Eustache**, the highly acclaimed multidirectional woodwind soloist, a student of Gasparyan’s for the past decade.

Born in Venezuela, of Haitian origin, to a black father and a white mother, Pedro Eustache had the genetic makeup and diverse background to make him naturally attuned to embracing other cultures. “I’m a multicultural being, both ethnically and culturally,” he says. “Growing up at home we spoke not only Spanish but Haitian Creole, and Haitian culture is very different from Venezuelan culture. So I was exposed since I was very young to a variety of elements that would help me afterwards to be flexible, sensible, and sensitive to other manifestations.”

He was introduced to a wide range of music at a young age by his brother, Professor **Michel Eustache**. “I’m the musical product of my elder brother’s artistic vision, in a way,” he says, “He exposed me to classical music, Venezuelan traditional music, and early music, which includes medieval and renaissance . . . church musical as well. The evangelical Christian church has a very strong tradition of hymns that is now almost like a lost art.” His brother, who had a musical association that included a recorder quintet, started teaching him how to play the recorder at 9, and at the same time, his sister taught him how to read and write music. Needless to say, music runs in the blood of the Eustache family.

To call Pedro Eustache a multi-instrumentalist is almost an understatement. He is a creative solo flautist, composer, and plays a wide spectrum of woodwinds, reeds and wind synthesizers. He has a collection of around 600 instruments from all over the world ranging from Indian bansuris to Japanese bamboo flutes to Persian nays, many of which have been created, built, designed, or modified by him. As far as Armenian woodwinds go, duduk is just the beginning. He also plays several variations of the shvi, zourna, b’lul, bgoos and hegoshu (a one-of-a-kind woodwind with a duduk body and a clarinet mouthpiece).

Eustache has studied extensively with some of the greatest maestros in the world, such as **Pandit Ravi Shankar**, Australian Aboriginal musician **David Hudson**, and of course, Jivan Gasparyan. He has more than 35 years of pro-



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fessional experience, including several years of touring with **Yanni**, and recordings and performances with **Paul McCartney**, **Shakira**, and his great friend, composer/keyboardist **Ara Gevorgian**. He has also been featured in the soundtracks of several films, including *Passion of the Christ*, *Munich*, and *Syriana* (with Jivan Gasparyan).

The road to becoming a world music multi-instrumentalist

The path that led Pedro Eustache to becoming a multi-instrumentalist began in his childhood, with his brother’s insistence that he stick with music and keep practicing, despite his early aversion to classical music. From an early age, he dabbled with different instruments like the Venezuelan cuatro (a ukelele-like string instrument) and the piccolo, which he played the first time he recorded an album, at age 12. “After that, I started studying the violin, but I hated it,” he says, “But my brother did not let me escape from music. He said, ‘You’re good for this. You need to stick with music.

It’s okay if you don’t want violin, but you have to choose something.”

“My brother was a great flute player and still is,” continues Eustache, “He’s a choir conductor, a composer and a very complete artist. He’s my biggest teacher. He used to practice the flute, but for me it was very boring because it was classical western music. Then I heard the flute played in a rock and roll context.” He heard it in a song called “I Talk to the Wind” by the 1970s British rock band, King Crimson. “It was beautiful,” says Eustache, “and I thought, ‘What my brother is doing, which is very boring, I think, can be played in rock and roll,’ so I told my brother, ‘I want to play the flute.’”

He went on to join a huge and still relevant musical movement in Venezuela called the National Youth Symphony Orchestra, and from there earned a scholarship to the d’Asnières school of music in Paris, where he studied flute with maestros **Raymond Guiot** and **Pierre-Yves Artaud**. From there, he went on to advanced studies in Basel, Switzerland.

After his studies in Europe, Eustache returned to Venezuela to play, record, and teach for a few years, then moved to Los Angeles, where he earned an MFA in jazz from the California Institute of the Arts. While he got exposed to many different styles of world music during his time in Paris, it was his time at CalArts that really allowed the young musician to explore these realms. After he graduated, he continued developing his skills in what would come to be his passion – woodwinds of the world. One of his favorites is the Armenian duduk, an instrument near and dear to his heart, which he has now been playing for 14 years.

The duduk: an unconventional introduction

Pedro Eustache remembers the first time he heard the duduk. “I got captivated by the soundtrack of Peter Gabriel’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which featured **Vatche Hovsepsian** on duduk. But then I heard Jivan jan,” he says, referring to the maestro with the common Armenian term of endearment, “and I was paralyzed. It just affected me. I wanted badly to study the duduk, but I didn’t know how. I hadn’t seen it. . . . I didn’t even know what it looked like.” He adds with a laugh, “At the time, I didn’t know about Glendale.”

The way Pedro Eustache got his first duduk teacher was one of those amazing occurrences of luck or fate, depending on how you’d like to look at it. He had stopped to refuel at a gas station on Hollywood Boulevard one day. “When I went to pay, the guy answered me with a beautiful accent,” he says. “I asked him where he was from and he said, ‘Armenia’. I told him, ‘I’m a musician and I really want to study duduk! Would you happen to know anyone who could teach me?’” It turned out that he did. He was friends with **Albert Vardanyan**, the professional duduk player and teacher, who has been featured in such films as *Ararat* and *Ronin*. And so Vardanyan became Eustache’s first duduk teacher.

Through his work with Yanni, Eustache became great friends with violinist **Armen Anassian**, whose father, Maestro **Henrik Anassian**, introduced him to Jivan Gasparyan after they had attended one of his concerts. That was the beginning of a musical relationship and a solid, lasting friendship. “We connected very well,” says Eustache. “Jivan jan’s daughters live in L.A. and I am good friends with his grandson, Jivancito, as I like to call him. He has concentrated much more of his time to the duduk and is extremely advanced. I have spent a lot of time studying with him.” Eustache has known Jivan Gasparyan for roughly a decade now. “Whenever he comes to L.A.,” he says, “I want to study with him. It’s difficult to study with someone like that because he has so much, and at the same time, I’m a professional doing many other things. I’m not just dedicated to one instrument. It makes it very difficult, but I enjoy it. I videotape every lesson.”

duduk



Pedro Eustache's respect for the Armenian culture is mirrored in the respect that Armenians have shown for him.

A very unusual sound, a crying voice, a prayer

Pedro Eustache articulates the emotional reaction he felt the first time he heard the duduk: "Smitten, captivated, and deeply impacted by a very unusual sound and expression."

He describes the sound of the duduk, quite fittingly, as a prayer. "It's a deep prayer that I believe incarnates our yearning, our reality of searching and connecting with a very loving, powerful, all-encompassing, graceful superior being," he says. "Besides expressing our feelings, I believe it's a great vehicle to glorify God." Eustache, who is a devout follower of Christ and a self-professed "Jesus freak" believes in the philosophy of his greatest idol in music, Johann Sebastian Bach. "Bach said that the purpose of music is double," he explains, "To glorify God, and to sublimate, elevate the human soul . . . and I believe that's beautifully embodied in the sound of the duduk."

He goes on to explain that while many other countries, from Azerbaijan to China, have instruments quite similar in design, the *color* of the Armenian duduk's sound is completely unique in its spirituality. Eustache links the intrinsic spirituality of the duduk to the cultural heritage of the Armenian people, a people whose very identity has been shaped by its distinction as the world's first Christian nation. On a more technical level, he attributes the instrument's unique sound to a variety of factors. "The combination of the apricot wood, the *ghamish* (reed), the puffy cheeks, and the lips massaging the *ghamish* makes for an unparalleled sound," he explains. "You don't know if it's a voice crying, or

a cello, or a clarinet, or a saxophone, or a mix of all of those."

You don't have to be Russian to enjoy borscht

There is no question about it. Duduk is a distinctly Armenian instrument. Its sound perfectly encapsulates and expresses the collective Armenian soul, but as much as the instrument speaks specifically to and of our culture, it reaches and touches people of all cultures. It transcends culture. "Duduk, in the reality of its *Armenism*, connects with aspects of the soul that are universal," says Eustache. "Melancholy, sadness, happiness, sorrow, are all universal human experiences, and we resonate to that. Duduk doesn't necessarily have to be sad. It encapsulates so much of the realities that resonate in all human hearts in a very specific and powerful way."

"I know many people will probably get mad at me," he continues, "because I play a lot of very special instruments from other cultures, but I cannot think of a more expressive instrument in the whole world. I really do not know of an instrument as uniquely and deeply expressive as the duduk. I don't know anybody who cannot get affected by it."

As an example of the universality of the duduk, Pedro Eustache recounts Paul McCartney's first encounter with the instrument. It was at the Concert for George, a tribute concert one year after the death of George Harrison, when Ravi Shankar had written a solo for Eustache in the middle of a 37-minute masterpiece that combined north Indian, south Indian, and Western instruments. "It was the first time ever that duduk was incorporated into classical Indian

music," says Eustache. After the concert, McCartney called Ravi Shankar asking, "Who is that Indian musician playing that beautiful Indian instrument? I need to meet him." Shankar laughed and told him, "It's not an Indian instrument, it's the Armenian duduk and the musician is not Indian, he's from Venezuela!" McCartney and Eustache ended up recording two songs together. "So there," says the multi-instrumentalist, "A Venezuelan playing the Armenian duduk with Paul McCartney."

"I believe that the duduk is a perfect example of objectivity, of how absolutes do exist," he says. "In our world, we favor not only pluralism but relativism – the idea that everything is relative and you have your own reality, but for me that is not necessarily true all the time. I believe there are absolutes. I believe there are objective things, and a perfect example of that is the duduk. You don't have to be Armenian to be affected by the truth of the depth encapsulated and expressed by the duduk. It's like good food. It's universal. You don't have to be Japanese to enjoy sushi or Russian to enjoy borscht. It's just good food and you react to it. I see the same thing with music. It's universal, the way god's love is universal."

Drinking from the source of the tradition

For years, Pedro Eustache had wanted to visit Armenia, and he almost did in 2001 to perform at the celebration of Armenia's 1700 years of Christianity, but was not able to make it due to the events of September 11. "I have tried and wanted to come many times, but it didn't work," he says. "Finally, Jivan jan won." He was

originally scheduled to stay for only three days, but he asked the organizers of the event to extend his stay, and luckily, his request was granted. He has been very moved by the performances of the Armenian Song and Dance Ensemble and the few churches he has had a chance to visit. "I look forward to more such moving experiences," he says, "and to going around and feeling Armenia. . . . It's very important for me to drink from the source of the tradition. That's my quest."

His respect for the Armenian culture is mirrored in the respect that Armenians have shown for him, and his genuine interest in our culture. "I felt in a way even better received here than in my home country," he says. "I realized that for people here, it was very significant that a foreigner is interested in their music, but for me it's not that special. What is special is that the duduk is so incredible. I'm not surprised that there are so many people in the west now interested in it."

Eustache is humbled and honored to have the chance to participate in the 80th birthday celebration of his beloved maestro. "I'm very thankful to God for the opportunity to be here and to be able to learn from people like Jivan jan, to have the honor to say that he is my teacher," he says. "Thank God for the gift of music. Among many other cultures, Armenia has been an amazing blessing to me, has opened incredible doors, and I hope I can give back as much as I can." He urges Armenians not to forget the spiritual significance of our cultural heritage, as the first Christian nation, and to go beyond the simple motions of rituals and traditions. "There should be a reality that transcends traditions on an experiential level," he says, "and music is a perfect vehicle to achieve that." ❧