

The evolution of Armenian liturgical music

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to briefly outline the evolution of Armenian music, from Antiquity to the nineteenth century. The troubled history of the Armenian people defines to a great extent the way the arts have developed, and also the way that vast and rich culture that characterizes the Armenian people, spread throughout the world, has formed. Starting from the earliest roots of music, our study follows the path of the different secular and liturgical genres, which developed in close correlation over the centuries. The paper presents the local traditions and the influences of the peoples with whom the Armenian people came in contact, the reciprocal receptive attitude, the cultural interpenetration that contributed to the development of the musical art. At the same time, we discuss some fragments / texts from the first songs that were preserved from the ancient times, as well as the troubadours of the Armenian Middle Age; we mention the most famous scholars and composers and to the founding of the first universities and present in a concise manner the first attempts of an Armenian music notation system. The paper - as mentioned before - presents only briefly this vast and very interesting topic, and the in-depth study of the problem is to be carried out in the continuation of the doctoral studies.*

Key-words: *liturgical music, Armenian, sharakan, khaz, Komitas*

1. Introduction

In addition to the older heritage of the Indo-European and ancient civilizations of the Armenian Plateau, the Armenian people also came into contact with the Assyrian-Babylonian and Medo-Parthian Persian civilizations, and afterwards with the ancient Greek and Roman culture and civilization, with the Hellenistic and Byzantine, and finally, with Western medieval and Arab-Muslim culture. This contact with the prominent and often divergent cultures and civilizations as well as the desire to study and acquire everything that is most valuable from other peoples, enriched and increased the value of the Armenian spiritual and material culture. The receptive attitude towards the foreign cultures led the Armenians to translate into their national language everything that gave humanity significance in

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the field of philosophy, science, literature, to assimilate the work and also to acquire the artistic experience of other peoples, and on this basis to develop their philosophical thinking, literature and art, characterized by maturity and depth, humanism and artistic perfection. Like any culture, the Armenian one borrowed and at the same time contributed with impressive values to the human civilization. (Grigorian 1993, 361) Musical concerns in Armenia are as old as the Armenian people themselves. The monk, the peasant, the troubadour, the soldier, the whole population of ancient Armenia participated in the formation of Armenian music, which was an indispensable companion of the daily life of the Armenian people, a trainer of artistic and spiritual values, a defender of the homeland, who was active always with the purpose of uplifting the nation and revitalizing the native culture.

2. Antiquity and the Middle Ages

From the recounts of the Armenian historians of the fifth century, we know that in Antiquity the representatives of the music were the *vipasans* (storytellers or declamators), who sang the poetic text accompanied by the *pandir* – a musical instrument with strings, characteristic of the period. The chronicler Movses Khorenatsi reports that in pagan Antiquity, in the Goghtn province of eastern Armenia (today Azerbaijan) the *vipasans* sang different ballads and legends, some of which were still circulating in his lifetime (fifth century). A fragment from such a song is the birth of god Vahagn narrative - known from Armenian mythology - a fragment of exceptional artistic beauty, whose melody unfortunately was not preserved:

*“The travail was the heavens, in travail was the earth
And the purple sea too,
In travail was the red reed in the purple sea.
Through the stalk came forth smoke
Through the stalk came forth flame
And out of the flame a fair boy ran
He had fiery hair
And a flaming beard
And his eyes were as two suns.”*

(Grigorian 1993, 357)

“This sung poetry, arising from the depths of the centuries, reveals a compelling picture of the poetic level reached by the vipasans of Armenia, over 2000 years ago.

The original text in classical Armenian itself has a rhythm and musicality of an outstanding aesthetic” (Grigorian 1993, 357) considers the famous researcher, armenologist Tigran Grigorian.

During the early Middle Ages and feudalism, the folk song continued its evolution, developing in the interpretation of the *gusans*, who were not only known in Armenia but also abroad, being often invited to sing in foreign royal courts, such as Sargis, being invited at the beginning of the seventh century to the palace of the Persian Shah, to organize the musical activity at the royal court. During this period the repertoire of the *gusans* was also enriched with songs written by renowned poets, such as the poetry of Davtak Kertog about King Tigran Ervandian from ancient Armenian history.

Following the recognition and acceptance of Christianity as a state religion, at the beginning of the fourth century, the Armenian Church had a repertoire of its own songs, whose nature - unfortunately - until the invention of the Armenian alphabet a century later, is not known, in the absence of written sources. Some researchers, such as *A.G. Arakelian* believe that in the initial stage - given the close ties with the (illegal) Christian churches in Syria and Cappadocia - the Armenian Church not only used the Aramaic and Greek religious language but also the songs of these churches. Other armenologists, like *N.K. Tahmizian* are of the opinion that the Armenian Church could not have been isolated from the Armenian folk song - widespread, due to the activity of the *gusans* - and the national secular musical tradition. Unfortunately, this issue is not and probably will not be elucidated soon.

However, it may be assumed that the invention of the Armenian alphabet - the moment of beginning of the composition of religious hymns in the Armenian language as well – also set the foundations of the national religious music. Music was given special importance, as it became a subject of education in the monastery schools from the earliest times.

From this period (fifth century) date the first *sharakans*, written by *Mesrop Mashtots*, and their songs are sung even nowadays within the Armenian Church. They are characterized by a simple, ascetic melodic line.

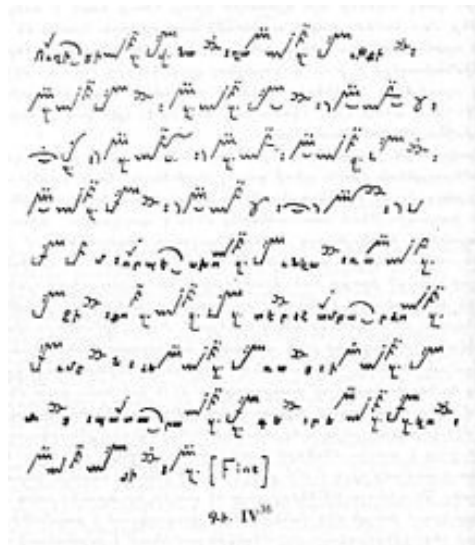
In the sixth century, the interest in Byzantine religious music increased again, but in the following century a new advance of the Armenian culture was emerging: higher education developed in the Armenian monasteries, where - next to the usual subjects - aesthetics and acoustics were also taught, paying particular attention to the theoretical part of music. Under the patronage of the kings, princes and bishops, the theological seminaries, *Vartabedaran*, flourished under the governance of the boards of professors which comprised philosophers, theologians, historians, astronomers, rhetoricians, prominent musicians (Grigorian 1993, 357).

In the field of aesthetics, the teaching of *Movses Kherthogh* was used, whereas in the field of composition the principles of *Komitas Aghthetsi*. Original Armenian liturgical songs, called *katsurd* or *kondak* (kontakion), were composed, which – according to contemporary sources – were characterized by a greater musicality than the corresponding Byzantine ones of the same era.

National creativity in the field of music extends to the first quarter of the eighth century, notable composers from the previous period being *Sahak Dzorophoretsi*, *Barsegh Cion*, or the mathematician-philosopher *Anania Shirakatsi*. (Grigorian, 1993, 358).

The first collection of original religious songs was realized under the title of *Cionintir*, after the name of its author (seventh century), and afterwards in the ninth century, at the initiative of the Catholicos (The supreme leader of the Armenian Christian Church, seated in Etchimiadzin) *Mashtots I legivardetsi*, one of the main collections of religious hymns of the Armenian Church was compiled, called *Mashtots*.

As early as the eighth century appeared the first attempts of musical notation with specific Armenian signs, called *khaz*.



Regarding the emergence and formation of musical notation, we come across different opinions: “The first and only Armenian chronicler who makes a special mention and gives us explanations about the old Armenian musical notes is *Kirakos from Gandzak* (around 1250). He remembers that at that time a great singer from *Taron*, the monk *Khaciatur* wandered all over Greater Armenia, teaching and

spreading music notation among the Armenians. Judging from this fact, the Armenian notation system probably came into being around the eleventh-twelfth century. This view is also reinforced by the fact that in the Armenian manuscripts until that time there is no trace of musical notation."

However, experts believe that the Armenian scale system has an older origin. Thus, Professor Velesch from the University of Vienna, who is a specialist in the Eastern musical scales, recently wrote that the Armenian notes are older than the Byzantine (Greek) ones and that the Armenian ones are the basis of the Byzantine scales. According to this theory, the Armenian notes must have existed before the eighth or seventh centuries. In fact, one of the old chroniclers, Lazar of Pharp, seems to want to give us a somewhat confused indication, noting the use of "musical letters" (Siruni 1941, 206) considers Father Gr. Hepoian in a writing of 1941.

In the eighth century emerge the first names of Armenian poets and composers, such as Sahakaducht and Chosrovaducht, who wrote liturgical hymns, also called sharakan. They continue the older tradition of the second century Armenian female musicians named *Nazenik* and Princess *Pharandzem* (fourth century), of whom we find only brief information in ancient Armenian historiography. Sahakaducht was known as a performer of the genre of 'vardzak' singers and dancers, at weddings and public festivals in ancient times, and Chosrovaducht was the initiated performer of funeral mourning.

During the 10th-14th centuries there developed mainly the folk music sung by untrained *gusans*, lacking musical instruction, which created songs spontaneously, and learned these songs orally. This type of music preserved almost unchanged the old national folk background, especially among the peasant population. The lyrical songs sung by the *gusans* were called *ierg*, a term / word used also at present, in modern Armenian, to denote a song.

Folk music mirrored the concerns of the simple people, their daily life, work, family relations, love, pain, the suffering of the wandering times, the longing for the homeland, the social contradictions, the liberation movements of the Armenians, the resistance against foreign invaders, against the oppression and exploitation of the feudal masters, the regime of the sultans and tsarism. From ancient times the Armenian folk songs were related to the practices of field labour, hunting, the suffering caused by wars, to ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, etc. In this category we must also include the cradle songs, the satirical and humorous songs, full of special emotional force.

Armenian folk songs are characterized by a distinct complexity of intonation, rhythm and harmony, and by the clarity of the exposition, presenting themselves as examples of monodic style. (From the ancient Armenian folk heritage, about the

pain of those who lost their home, it is worth mentioning the song entitled *Antuni* [homeless], a pearl of Armenian and universal folklore, adapted at the end of the nineteenth century by Komitas.)

The instruments used for musical accompaniment by the *gusans* and by the *sazandars* (instrumentalists) are specific to Armenian music since ancient times, but many are common with the instruments used by other peoples of the East or the Balkans, such as the wind instruments called *sring* (flute), horn, cornet, *djnar*, *zurna* (trumpet), *tutak* and *duduk* with specific sounds, *tik* or *tikzar* (bagpipe). Beside these instruments, we must also mention the five-tube bone flute, discovered during the archaeological excavations at Garni and Dvin. The lyre and the harp were also used on a permanent basis, as well as percussion musical instruments such as the drums, bells and cymbals.

The genre of *dagh* developed during the Middle Ages, denoting poems written to be sung. Among the most beautiful *daghs* are some by Grigor Narekatsi and more from the 12th-14th centuries. They are characterized by a high degree of emotionality, enthusiasm, and festive character. They were accompanied by free verse songs, polyphonic, complex.

An important representative of cultural life, Hovhannes Sarkavag Imastaser founded in the eleventh century a renowned school in Ani, due to the high level of teaching philosophy, geometry and other sciences. A great cultural figure, Imastaser was a great advocate of music as well. As a poet and musician he proved to be a forerunner of realistic art, given his original ideas in the field of aesthetics. He composed religious music pieces, *sharakans*, and wrote countless poems of special artistic value. (Nersessian 2006, 199)

Music also became one of the main subjects taught at the first Armenian university in Gladzor (founded in 1284) and in other higher education institutions, by musician-philosophers, theorists, the names of many of them being known even today. The establishment of Gladzor University was an important event in the cultural life of the Armenian people. Gladzor, also called “the second Athens” was one of the oldest universities in the world, well recognized at the time, for the high level of knowledge teaching by renowned professors. Like the University of Paris, founded in 1257 by the theologian Robert de Sorbon, the higher education centre at Gladzor functioned on the basis of the analytical program of teaching the seven liberal arts: trivium (grammar, rhetoric, logic) and quadrivium: arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. Structured into three sections: Natural Sciences, Art of Writing and Music, the university trained specialists in natural sciences, philosophers, mathematicians, musicians, architects, miniaturists, teachers, who, after 7-8 years of study, obtained the title of doctor in “sciences” (Vartabet) by

defending a thesis, as in other higher education institutions in Europe (Nersessian 2006, 203).

“Gladzor was different from the European universities by way of a few peculiarities. First of all, teaching was carried out in the national language, for the first time in the world, while in Europe the teaching was in Latin and no country had a university in the national language until the fifteenth century. Secondly, lacking a national cultural heritage, the European Universities lacked the care of preserving the inherited values, while at Gladzor University this was a serious concern, and the copying and preservation of Armenian works of centuries took time. The University of Gladzor saved many works of Armenian culture, organizing the struggle for the survival of the Armenian people as an ethnic entity, with a specific culture.” (Grigorian 1993, 322)

In the 12th-14th centuries Armenian music went through a period of remarkable development in the territory of the Kingdom of Cilician Armenia, being known the names of poets and composers such as *Nerses Snorhali*, *Konstandin Srik*, *Grigor Chul*, *Gevorg Skevratsi*, *Thoros Thaphrots* and others, who were noted especially through their religious hymns, some of great popularity. Snorhali's chants (Morning of light, The entire world, etc.) represented a novelty in Armenian culture, both through the versification taken from secular poetry and through the use of expressive melodies, as well as through the classical simplicity of the composition. With Frik's first secular daghs, new perspectives for the Armenian secular music emerged, enriched by the creations of Konstandin Erzinkatsi, Hovhannes Erzinkatsi and others.

3. From the Middle Ages to the 19th century

In the 13th-14th centuries there began to generalize the notation of liturgical hymns with Armenian khazes, of which a considerable number was preserved. However, given that their secret disappeared in the fourteenth century, so far the attempts to decode them have failed. Komitas carried out the most advanced researches, but his manuscripts disappeared during his deportation in 1915.

In the following centuries the influence of Persian-Arab-Turkish music was perceivable, but nonetheless it failed to change the national specificity preserved on the one hand in the gusans and on the other hand in church music.

The Armenian city of Agn and its surroundings (on the upper Euphrates) was one of the regions that remained, for centuries, the keeper of the national musical traditions. (Later in the nineteenth century, Komitas also researched the music of

this region, with the help of Hovsep Djanikian, a native of Agn, and afterwards he published a series of authentic folk songs from the area).

The first collection of *tagharan* Armenian songs was published in 1512-1513, under the care of Hakob Meghapart, in Venice. This work contributed to the preservation of the national traditions of Armenian music.

The country being under foreign occupation, Turkish-Persian, the new musical genres could develop in the following centuries rather in emigration. Thus, even since the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries, there appeared in Nor Djughha, afterwards in Constantinople and Tiflis the new genre of *ashugh* singers (trubadours), doubled by voice singing, who sang accompanying themselves with *saz* or *khamancha* (stringed musical instruments), as well as the *sazandar* genre, players of folk instruments: *khamancha*, *kamani*, *santhur* (triangular dulcimer), *kanun* (a kind of harp), *thar*, *oud* (string instruments), *blul*, *shvi* (two-pipe flute), bagpipes, tambourine, etc. While the songs of ashughs are characterized by the thoughtful, meditative spirit, the lyricism and the love, the feeling of wandering in exile and the patriotic message, in the music of the sazandars the aim is to create an atmosphere of joy and celebration, of the joy of life.

For the perpetuation of Armenian music brought their contribution the well-known poet-composers such as Naghas Hovnathan, Petros Ghaphantsi, and in the 18th century, the brilliant Sayat-Nova, the greatest poet-musician of the Caucasus.

We know with certainty that until the nineteenth century Armenian liturgical music was exclusively vocal, monodic. The liturgy had and still has constant and changing parts - depending on the character of the service (wedding, funeral, etc.) or the current feast (Easter, Christmas, etc.). The various parts are sung by the priest, others by the choir or soloists. In the nineteenth century Armenian composers began to harmonize the constant parts of the liturgy, in Romantic style, for 4 voices. The characteristic genres of religious music were: hymns – constant in the liturgy, the canon – consisting of 9 parts, and songs with strophic structure (from well-known authors, or songs invented by the people, paraliturgical).

In order to note the Armenian songs, the cultural centre in Constantinople took the initiative to create its own system, a task that was taken on by the musicologist Hampartsum Limondjian. He managed to develop in 1815 a system that used both the principles of the Armenian khaz and modern European ones, expressing the tones and semitones of the diatonic scale. Although the system was imperfect, being adapted to monodic music and unable to meet the demands of symphonic music and polyphonic choral music, it had the great merit of saving many Armenian musical pieces and especially religious songs and the liturgical, religious music.

The European musical notation system was introduced into Armenian music and schools only towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.

4. Conclusions

We may consider that from the earliest moments of their existence the Armenian people had their songs and religious, liturgical music, but next to these they also produced secular musical creations, which mirrored the reality – and these two developed in parallel and indispensably over the centuries.

An important stimulating factor in the creation of songs and music in general were the working tasks. The great musicologist himself, Komitas, when talking about his in-depth research into identifying authentic Armenian folklore, stated that:

“Work is the part that belongs to the Armenian peasant, so through his work songs we must weigh and measure all the songs that are called Armenian.”(Komitas, 2018)

Music and its universal values were pervaded by the faith, trust, hope, love and sadness of the Armenian spirit. *Sharakans, avedises, daghs* and other musical genres represent a specific world, singular, as the culture and art of the Armenian people represent a distinct chapter in the history of universal culture.

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