

Armenian Church music: genres, modes, and notation Issues

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Abstract: *This article covers some essential elements of liturgical Armenian music, starting from its historic evolution, up to the presentation of some essential genres, church modes characteristic to Armenia and unique and specific medieval musical notation with khazes. The article describes in detail the formation and evolution of the most important Armenian musical liturgical genre, sharakan, enumerating its characteristics as well as outstanding composers of the genre. It also presents a modal system characteristic to Armenian music, comparing it with Byzantine and Latin modal systems from the same period. The article also considers a widely discussed chapter of the history of Armenian music, the use and understanding of Armenian medieval neumes, called khazes, the research carried out in the field and their results.*

Key-words: *Armenian, music, liturgy, khaz, modes, sharakan*

1. Introduction

Musical preoccupations in Armenia are as old as the Armenian people itself. The monk, the peasant, the troubadour, and the soldier, the entire population of Antiquity Armenia took part in the formation of Armenian music, which was an indispensable companion of day to day life of the Armenian people, formater of artistic and spiritual values, defender of native land, that would always activate for the purpose of lifting the nation and revitalising native culture. Thus, we can consider that from the early moments of its existence, the Armenian people had their religious songs and music, of cult, but besides these, it also created lay musical works that mirrored reality – and these two developed in parallel and in an indispensable manner over the centuries.

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We know for sure that after the recognition of Christianity as a state religion, at the beginning of the 4th Century, the Armenian Church had its own repertoire of songs, whose nature – unfortunately – until the invention of the Armenian alphabet a century later, is unknown to us.

A second, well-defined period of Armenian music starts in the 5th Century, the period of the invention of the Armenian alphabet: the moment of outlining the Armenian specific, liturgical repertoire.

In the Middle East, as in all Western countries, Christian missionaries, followers of the new religion, did everything in their power in order to remove ancient “pagan” music. *“When Gregory the Illuminator Christianised Armenia, he destroyed the traces of pagan music of which some remained vivid for the people. Especially after Mesrob, religious music starts to develop in Armenians, states the professor Emil Ciomac in a study at the beginning of the 20th Century. ”* (Ciomac 1941, 468)

Thus, Armenian musical art passed through a process of essential transformation and a special progress in the 5th Century, exhibiting characteristics that resemble the musical culture of neighbouring peoples regarding the religious practice: the music was characterised by simplicity, it was monodic and had a psalmodic character. Music was given a special importance, becoming a study subject in monastery schools from these ancient times. In music, in its universal values, faith, trust, hope, love, and sadness of the Armenian spirit have resounded. Sharakans, avetises, taghes and the other musical genres represent a specific, special world, just as the culture and art of the Armenian people represent a completely special chapter of the history of universal culture.

2. The genres of Armenian music

Unlike Western church music that exploits a variety of forms on a large scale; sacred Armenian music has much more laconic, compact dimensions. The most important musical liturgical genre is sharakan, cultivated from the oldest periods of Armenian culture.

The term sharakan is interpreted in various ways by the researchers of Armenian music. It could mean a row of gems, “agn” meaning “precious stone” in the Armenian language. According to the opinion of Hrachia Adjarian and Manuk Abeghian, sharakan is a word composed of “shar” (= row) and the particle “akan”, which means “belonging”, or which refers to the term “row” (of hymns), associated with the eight church modes used in the music of the Armenian Church.

“Each religious hymn – sharakan – had to be a pearl in its primitive form. Unfortunately, Komitas could not reveal their secret. Of course, one day science will decipher their language.” – considers the professor Emil Ciomac, with regret (Ciomac 1941, 468).

In the 5th Century, following the invention of the Armenian alphabet, a rich musical heritage was founded, added much later to the collection entitled Sharakan, by Boghos Taronetsi (Paul from Taron), in the 11th Century. This collection represents a real treasure of the songs of the sharakan type. The themes of these sacred hymns are taken over from the life and mysteries of Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary, and the saints of the Armenian Church. Very often, the composers are also the authors of the poetical text. Sharakan is interpreted in an antiphonal manner within a choir and in a responsorial style with soloists. In most ancient times, the only accompaniment to the sharakan was a prolonged note (tzinaroutiun).

There are eight types of sharakan and each of them can be identified through the content of its text. The musicologist Levon Hakobian considers these classifications of the sharakan to address strictly the text and not the musical content. These eight types of sharakan are: *Orhunutiun* (Praise the Lord for He has triumphed...), *Hartz* (Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our fathers...), *Medzatzoustze* (Praise the Lord, my soul...); *Voghormia* (Have mercy on me, O God, and blot out all my iniquities), *Der Hergnetz* (Praise the Lord from the Heaven...), *Mangoonk* (Praise God, you servants of the Lord ...), *Jashoo* (I love the Lord because He hears my voice...), *Hampartzee* (I lift up my eyes to the mountains...) (Hakobian 1993, 125).

In the description of the musicologist Aram Kerovpyan, sharakan constitutes the essence of the musical system of the Armenian liturgical song. *The book of the sharakan hymns* or *Saraknots* (*Saraknots* = which contains sharakans) is organised as a cyclic repertoire, which begins with the birth towards the world and suffering of the Theotokos (Mother of God) and ends with her Dormition. It contains specific songs, grouped in canons for almost each feast day or remembrance day in the liturgical calendar. The tempo of a sharakan can vary according to its function, and this can also lead to a modification of the melody through extension or contraction.

The origin of sharakans was and remains the most controversial subject regarding the Armenian liturgic song. Armenian historiographers did not write almost anything about the authors of sharakans until the 12th Century. The lists of authors were established starting from the 13th Century and this obviously shows a process of establishing a written base for the tradition of sharakans. Among the renowned authors of the sharakan genre, we need to mention personalities such as: Katholikos Sahak II. (6th Century), Katholikos Komitas I. (7th Century), Katholikos Hovhannes Otznetsi V. (8th Century), Stepan Sewnetsi (8th Century), Katholikos

Petros I., (11th Century), Katholikos Nerses Shnorhali (12th Century), Nerses Lambronatsi, (12th Century); Khatchik Taronetsi, (12th Century), and Hovhannes Blouz (13th Century). The genre of sharakan developed especially through the poetry and music of the famous Nerses Shnorhali.

So, as it can be seen from those mentioned, according to the tradition, Saint Mesrop, the inventor of the Armenian alphabet (5th Century) and Saint Sahak, Katholikos from that time, are the first composers of sharakans.

Kerovpyan considers that sharakan hymns have three characteristics that determine their use and helps in identifying them:

Literary theme: Resurrection, repentance, Pentecost, Cross, the repose of the souls, Theotokos (Mother of God) and Martyrs are the main themes of the sharakans.

Canonic Genre: at present, it is generally accepted that the sharakan hymns were first introduced into church services being sung with psalms and other church songs and subsequently, they were gradually replaced.

Mode: Sharakan hymns constitute the only repertoire of the Armenian liturgical song in which occurs not only the system of musical Octoechos, but also the traditional melody types and their system of variation. Each sharakan belongs to a single mode and it is sung only in that mode. According to the opinion of researchers, sharakans, although they represent a distinct genre, bear the influence of other genres of the liturgic monody in Jerusalem, Alexandria, Constantinople, and Rome of that time. Initially borrowing mainly from other notation styles, in the 5th Century there were a mix of various styles and musical practices over the entire historic Armenia.

Beside the sharakan genre, other forms of hymns (called “spiritual songs” by Komitas) also developed. They were called *tagh*, *ganț*, *avetis*, and *megheti*.

3. Modes – The system of the eight Armenian modes

According to researchers, the structure of the Armenian modal system is based on eight ehs and it stands out through special melodic formulas and characteristic scales. The eight church modes were adopted by Armenians gradually, just like the Greeks: some of them even from the 5th Century, others were introduced in the musical practice by Stepan Sewnetsi, three centuries later. These modes were further studied by musicologists, including Spiridon Melikian, the great armenian musicologist (1881-1933). His book was published in 1944 in Tiflis, but his research has not yet brought out precise, final results.

If we take into consideration sacred songs unclassified with auxiliary modes, we find approximately 20 modes in the modal system.

These approximately 20 modes were also used in folk music, considers the musicologist Jonathan McCollum. Robert Atayan also confirms that the church would use the folk song in order to obtain sacred music. This notion is of major importance, because it concerns two crucial sides of the music of any people – sacred and secular – a suggestion that blurs the lines of dichotomy often encountered between folk music and sacred music. Unfortunately, in ethnomusicology, very few practical researches were conducted regarding the development and integration of the Armenian folk music into the sacred one.

Contemporary armenian musicologist Aram Kerovpyan, in his study entitled “The System of the eight Armenian modes”, establishes some essential information regarding the Armenian modal system:

The eight modes are divided into two categories: four authentic modes and four plagal modes. The system of the Octoechos (eight voices/eight modes), called *oot tzayn* in Armenian, is practised in two distinct ways: liturgical and musical. The liturgical Octoechos and the musical Octoechos often function independently of one another. The traditional classification and the names of the eight Armenian modes are the following:

The abbreviations with Armenian letters are used to indicate the modes in all books with a liturgical, musical character and not only. These initial letters occur in old manuscripts and in printed books, as well as in the song collections created with a modern Armenian musical notation.

Armenian names	Abbreviation	Translation	Other names	
<i>Aradjin Tzayn</i>	Ա. Ձ.	<i>First Voice</i>	—	—
<i>Aradjin Koghmn</i>	Ա. Կ.	<i>First Side</i>	—	—
<i>Yerkrorrd Tzayn</i>	Բ. Ձ.	<i>Second Voice</i>	—	—
<i>Yerkrorrd Koghmn</i>	Բ. Կ.	<i>Second Side</i>	<i>Awag Koghmn</i>	<i>Principal Side</i>
<i>Yerrord Tzayn</i>	Գ. Ձ.	<i>Third Voice</i>	—	—
<i>Yerrord Koghmn</i>	Գ. Կ.	<i>Third Side</i>	<i>Var Tzayn</i>	<i>Low Voice/(Ardent)</i>
<i>Tchorrorrd Tzayn</i>	Դ. Ձ.	<i>Fourth Voice</i>	—	—
<i>Tchorrorrd Koghmn</i>	Դ. Կ.	<i>Fourth Side</i>	<i>Verdj Tzayn</i>	<i>Last Voice</i>

Fig. 1. Armenian modes

The divisions of the Octoechos called *Tzayn* (voice) and *Koghmn* (side) can be compared with the modal divisions called authentic and plagal in the systems of the Byzantine and Latin modes. Nevertheless, there is no comparable structural connection between the Armenian musical system and the Byzantine/Latin one.

4. Liturgic Octoechos: the mode of each day

Liturgic Octoechos apply to the calendar through the mode of each day. Aram Kerovpyan explains, that one of the eight modes is applied for each day of the year, following the order in which they occur in the table presented above. Within liturgical services, some component elements are chosen depending on the mode of the respective day: the readings from the New Testament, Hallelujah, litanies, prayers, and the prayers of the day, certain psalms and sharakans. The Easter Sunday represents the beginning of the cycle and the mode of this day is the first voice Tzayn. Thus, the mode of the day of the first Sunday of Lent has to be voice four Koghm, no matter what had been a day before. Starting this day, the modes continue to change daily, so that the mode used on the Easter Sunday becomes the first voice Tzayn. Consequently, certain feast days that take place in a period of time connected to the date of Easter have the same mode of the day each year. The mode of the day can be changed for other feast days each year, and the choice of elements depends both on the mode of the day and the theme of the day.

On the first Sunday of Lent, when the mode of the day becomes the fourth voice Koghm, the four authentic voices (tzayn), on one hand, and the four plagal (koghm), on the other hand, are attributed to one or the other of the two church choirs, called *Ajagoghmean tas* (the choir on the right hand side, in the northern part of the church) and *Tzakhagoghmean tas* (the choir on the left hand side, in the southern part of the church). The distribution alternates each year, on the first Sunday of Lent. This spatial ordering establishes which of the choirs will sing certain elements of the liturgy or the beginning of a sharakan over the entire year. Regarding the choice of the sharakan, the mode of the day is valid only in certain cases, because many feast days have their stable row of sharakans, each being composed in a specific way.

5. The eight musical voices

Musical Octoechos comprises the modal system that is applied to an important segment of the repertoire, namely the sharakans. Apart from this repertoire, musical Octoechos is applied only to psalms of night vigils, called *ganonaklookh* (the beginning of the canon). The modes used in the Armenian liturgical practice are not limited to those of the Octoechos. The melodies that do not belong to the sharakan genre use modes that are not organised, such as the modes of the Octoechos and they do not have original Armenian names.

In present classifications, each mode of Octoechos has one or more *tartzwadz* modes, a term that can be approximately translated as auxiliary. These modes always have the name of the main mode. In the collections with a neumatic notation, they can be recognised by using different neumes in comparison with those used within the main mode. It is easier to recognise in the Armenian modern musical notation, because the signs of this system correspond to the notes.

6. Armenian musical notation

Ancient Armenian musical notation, that of khazes, represents the subject of musicologist and historic research, considered thoroughly in the 19th Century - 20th Century, but without satisfactory results.

Regarding the occurrence and formation of the Armenian musical notation, we encounter different opinions: "The first and unique Armenian chronicler who specially mentions and provides clarifications about the old Armenian musical notes is Kirakos from Gantak (around 1250)". He reminds us that, at that time, a great singer from Taron, monk Khaciatour wandered all around Great Armenia, teaching them and working to spread notes among Armenians. Judging by this, the Armenian note system was probably born in the 11th-12th Centuries. This point of view is also strengthened by the fact that in the Armenian manuscripts so far there is no trace of musical signs.

Nevertheless, experts believe that the system of the Armenian scales has a more ancient origin. Thus, professor Velesch from the University of Vienna, who is a specialist in Oriental scales, has recently written that Armenian notes are older than the Byzantine ones (Greek) and that the Armenian ones represent the very base of Byzantine scales. According to this theory, the Armenian notes must have existed even before the 8th or 7th Centuries. As a matter of fact, one of the old chroniclers, Lazar from Pharp, seems to want to provide a vague indication, reminding the use of "musical letters". – considers Father Gr. Hepoian in a study from 1941.

The Hungarian researcher, Zsigmond Benedek, states:

"Regarding the writing of musical notes, it is worth mentioning that Armenian musical notes from the Middle Ages have not yet been deciphered. But we know that the musical notes proper were not written, but rather some groups of sounds. In our turn, we share the idea according to which the Armenian neumes did not describe a melody with precision, but only a direction of the discourse of sounds, and especially the way of interpreting it. The meaning of neumes had come to be forgotten until the 19th Century, and Armenian musicians – following "a revaluation" of this system of musical

notation signs – used them for the notation of ancient church songs, that were preserved in the collective memory” (Zsigmond 2007, 261).

Aram Kerovpyan believes that the beginning of a neumatic notation occurred in the 9th Century. Today, due to the discovered fragments of manuscripts, we know that Armenians started to use punctuation, intonation, or other symbols as musical signs at the same time as the Byzantines and the Latins. This evolution took place in a thriving period, when Armenia took back its kingdom four centuries after losing it.

Regarding the loss of grasping khazes, Father Hepoian states the following:

“Oriental peoples preserved their old musical signs until the New Ages (1500). But unfortunately, because of different obstacles encountered during an unfavourable unfolding of political events, the use of these signs has become more and rarer, until they fell into oblivion. This misfortune struck Armenians as well as Greeks and Syrians who had their own notation systems. (...)The use of Armenian notes took place until the New Ages, after which their use stopped slowly because of unfavourable political events, until they completely fell into oblivion... The significance of the old Armenian notes is still an undeciphered mystery until today. The undying Komitas who devoted himself to researching this issue for 16 years wrote in 1910 that soon he will shed light unto the solution of this musical secret of Armenian Antiquity.” (Hepoian 1941, 206)

Another reference work, *History of Armenia*, signed by Vahan M. Kurkjian also addresses the subject of Armenian musical notation. The author outlines a few ideas regarding the system of khazes: neumes, that is ancient musical signs (khaz) were introduced by the same priest Khachiatour from Taron, who arranged the collection entitled *Sharakan* in a neumatic notation. In *Sharakan* codex, there are hymns with notation of neumes under different forms and combinations, impossible to decipher. The manuscripts were studied by European and Armenian specialists, including the famous musicologist, Komitas, but the solution has not yet been found. Nevertheless, in the 18th Century, with the help of ancient songs that were preserved by oral tradition, an approximate transcription of liturgical songs was possible with a notation system, resembling the modern European one – or some elements identical to it. This system was mainly created by Hampartum Limondjian, a priest and musician originating from Constantinople (1768-1839), and his work was subsequently completed and perfected by his disciples and other musicologists. An example of a successful use of this system is represented by the volume with an imposing character, entitled “*Adyani Sharakan*” (the Book of the

Songs of the Altar), printed in 1874, in which religious hymns with the new notation are collected and written.

We find information about the activity of Hampartum also in the study of Father Hepoian, cited before: "At the beginning of the 19th Century, Baba (Father) Hampartum from Constantinople, a good connoisseur of religious hymns, wanted to enliven the old Armenian notes deprived of significance. Of the multitude of musical signs – according to Father Komitas, 198 in number – he chose only seven prevailing sounds with precise values, formulated laws and constituted thus his new musical scale, almost identical with the European one. With the help of this new scale, which is now in general use, all religious hymns from Ecimiadzin were printed, by a disciple of Baba Hampartum, called Nikogaios Tasghian." (Hepoian 1941, 207) Regarding the written form of these khazes, Father Hepoian considers:

"And as a primitive form, Armenian notes were constituted by those signs of prosody, which are used to this day, namely: grave accent, acute accent, prolonging sign, shortening sign, and the circumflex accent. Of these, the grave accent, the acute accent, and the circumflex accent were used to indicate the difference in tones (scales), and the prolonging sign and the shortening one in order to show duration. These signs of prosody that were usually called "prosodic notes" occur in manuscripts starting from the 6th Century and from the Orient, they were also adapted in the Occident." (Hepoian 1941, 207)

The Holy Apostolic Orthodox Church of Armenia continues at present to preserve a vivid tradition of vocal music – first, monodic – of an exceptional richness and beauty. Traditionally, hymnography dates back to the 5th Century, while *Hymnarium canonicum* was completed in the 19th Century. Nevertheless, the evolution of the melodies in it almost surely continued until the 19th Century. Starting from the 13th Century, the melodies of the hymns, odes, and other church songs were bestowed from generation to generation due to an individual knowledge of modes, combined with a system of neumatic notation. The oldest dated codex of Armenian hymns was copied in Jerusalem, in 1193 (a manuscript that at present is found in the archives Matenadaran, Erevan), while the oldest *talaran* (or Book of Hymns) was drawn up in Drazark, in Cilicia, in 1241 (the manuscript is preserved at the French National Library in Paris). Both codices use the neumatic notation with khazes.

Nevertheless, we know for sure that, in the meantime, church musicians lost their capacity of reading neumes and therefore, this notation cannot be deciphered at present. Consequently, we are not able to rebuild original Armenian church melodies.

It is not easy to explain how we got to such a situation but knowing the conditions and historical context can help us understand this process: Armenia lost its last kingdom in 1375, at the same time as the fall of the last dynasty of Cilicia. The population was scattered, the monasteries were devastated, and manuscripts destroyed. Thus, oral traditions were lost and no written “manual” that could explain the notation system survived. Also, before the 18th Century, there were no equivalent versions of some particular musical elements, transcribed in Western musical notation. Another factor played an important role in this process: while transcribers created faithful copies of the hymns –including the neumes for the melodies – over the centuries, in the church practice, musicians used their creativity and musical imagination to create new and sophisticated variants of the melodies and often with a melismatic character much richer than the original songs, with a notation of khazes, thus losing their interest for older melodies and for their authentic variants.

Nevertheless, the neumatic notation continued to be copied and attempts to reproduce it were made in some collections of printed hymns - starting with editio princeps of the Armenian Hymnarium, published in Amsterdam, in 1664-1665, and continuing till today. The table below presents the neumes extracted from the hymnarium published in Antelias in 1997 (which constitutes, in fact, a reedited variant of the Portable Hymnarium from Jerusalem from 1936).

շեշտ լել շ	դրբակ սուտ շ
փուշ ք'ն Վ	խունճ սու՛ շ
բուք նո՛ շ	ծունկ սուտ շ
պարոյկ քայե շ	ծնկներ արեո շ
երկար տար շ	ձակորճ յակու՛ ճ
սուղ սո՛ շ	էկորճ արե՛ շ
սուր սո՛ ճ	կրկներկար երեուեր շ
թոր Վո՛ շ	հունայ նոպ շ
թաշտ Վո՛ շ	փարութ ք'սո՛ շ
բնկորճ մնճ "large" ետար՛ ճ	զարկ զար՛ ճ
բնկորճ փորք "small" ետար՛ ճ	խում շառ շ
վերևախաղ մնճ "large" տեսալ շ	քարքաշ կ'ար՛ն ճ
վերևախաղ փորք "small" տեսալ շ	խէկորճ սուտ՛ ճ
ներքևախաղ մնճ "large" ներ՛եսալ շ	կէտերկար կերեո շ
ներքևախաղ փորք "small" ներ՛եսալ շ	խարտկայիկ ճարտայն շ
կուտ կո՛ ճ	կրկնդրակ երեուեր շ
մնկորճ ետար՛ ճ	շ ի Վ շ շ շ

Fig. 2. Neumes

From studies devoted to the subject of musical notation, we learn that these khazes, incomprehensible to a large extent, were nevertheless used for partial guiding of Armenian Church musicians in the 19th Century also.

Outstanding researchers in this field were, first, priests and Mechitarist monks – musicians of the two main world centres of Armenian culture – Constantinople and Venice, but also Armenian musicologists from the Diaspora and from the mother-country, from the entire world and of different nationalities. The most outstanding research is related to the names of Grigor Gapasakalian, Hampartum Limondjian and Minas Puzhushgian, Elia Tntesian and Ignatius Kyureghian.

An entire generation of Armenian musicologists and musicians, such as Makar Ekmalian (1856-1905), archimandrite Komitas (1869-1935), Shahan Berberian (1891-1956), Ara Partevian (1902-1986) were educated in the most elevated musical centres of the time: Paris, Berlin, and Saint Petersburg. Returning home, these musicians naturally wished to set up an Armenian national musical school and also wanted to “cleanse” Armenian songs and their interpretation from the influences perceived as “foreign” or “oriental” (nevertheless remaining wide open to Western influences – possibly in an aesthetic propensity, as well as a psychological disposition related to a political climate in which the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire were hoping that the European Christian powers could be convinced to come to their help).

Of those enumerated above, Komitas was the only one who researched medieval khazes and, as he wrote on 9th January 1909 to Katholikos Matteos Izmirlian, his motivation was “*the desire to put aside the veil that hides our oldest and most authentic melodies, from our heart and soul*” and to look for “*our celestial pure melodies*” (Vardanian 2018, 57-58) namely the melodies deprived of foreign influences. Unfortunately, his studies, the result of the research conducted perished during his deportation in 1915.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can state that of all the attempts to grasp, clarify, and re-edit the Armenian ancient liturgical repertoire, with a notation of khazes, the new system of musical notation of Limondjian-Puzhushgian was the most important musical innovation of the 19th Century and we owe the preservation of a substantial part of the sacred Armenian musical heritage to him. Despite this, within the Armenian churches, the Limondjian system never gained popularity and most church

musicians persisted in their attempts to collect semi-improvised melodies or half remembered, pursuing the medieval neumes almost completely misunderstood.

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