

## KOMITAS VARDAPET AND HIS LEGACY TO ARMENIAN MUSIC

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This article concerns the life and work of Komitas Vardapet and his efforts to decipher the ancient *Khaz* notational system. I hope to shed some light to his general contribution to Armenian music, and the development of Armenian national music identity.

Identity can be linked to a collective sense of self-understanding shaped by various activities, habits and customs, including music, which can be systematically carried over centuries by ethnic groups, who wish to preserve it. Indeed, their survival as a community partly depends on it. This idea can apply for people currently located within the central domain of a given cultural group as well as to members of Diaspora communities, who are aware of at least two spaces of 'being' and identifying as their own: their actual location and their distant homeland. By infusing nationalism in music from their homeland, a link can be created between these two places and thus facilitate and strengthen their sense of still having a connection with their ancestral past.

Nationalism in music commenced as a movement during the XIX century and it is defined by a connection to country, region, or ethnicity. In the XIX and XX centuries, many composers who were born on the periphery of Western culture but had gone on to have cosmopolitan careers held fast to their national identities. Most often, nationalism in music consisted of writing music based on folksongs and melodies, rhythms, and harmonies drawn from local traditions. Examples range from various countries and composers including Franz Liszt who expressed the Hungarian spirit in his works, and this spirit was later intensified by Bela Bartók and Zoltan Kodály in Hungary; Edvard Grieg in Norway; Jean Sibelius in Finland; Ralph Vaughan Williams in England; Aaron Copland, George Gershwin and Charles Ives in USA.

Armenians were also faced with many challenges during the second half of the XIX century as they advocated for equal rights within the Ottoman Empire. Throughout the XIX century, Armenians and other minorities struggled to obtain equal rights. At the same time, nationalism swept through the Ottoman Empire, convincing Greeks and other nationalities to demand independence. Within these important shifts of mentalities and perceptions which were taking place, Komitas Vardapet's research sought to achieve a merging of ancient musical traditions within the modern Armenians, as a way of creating a stronger sense of ethnic identity, pride and unity. During this period, many European and Russian diplomats became increasingly concerned about the treatment of minority groups within the Ottoman Empire. Their arguments and efforts to protect those minorities would set important precedents for the international movement for human rights. Eventually, in the absence of adequate protection, Armenians found themselves facing increasing discrimination and violence.

From the early Middle Ages, Armenians had already started to devise their own system of notation for ritual and non-ritual church music as well as secular and folk songs. This was further enhanced due to the creation of the Armenian alphabet in the V century by Mesrop

Mashtots, and the translation of the Bible into Armenian which immediately followed. *Khaz* notation, as it was subsequently called, was “a method of arranging musical signs written in and above the text to mark the pitch, nuance, rhythm and cadence of various forms of recitative and plain song and of hymns employed in the Armenian liturgy and in religious ceremonies”.<sup>1</sup>

Within the Armenian liturgy, which has always included chanting, three kinds of musical functions exist: 1) recitative which is sung with a rather limited range, 2) chants which include the majority of the *Sharakan* (hymns found in the canonical hymnal), based more on traditional melodic nuances and patterns and 3) chants with more intricate melodies, for example, the *tagh*.

As Vrej Nersessian has pointed out, due to the many changes that occurred as the notation developed and expanded through time, “the musical *Khazes* constituted not a uniform, single system, but two successive, mutually related systems”.<sup>2</sup> First, there were the ecphonic signs, called *aroganutyán khazer* (signs of accentuation). From the ancient Grammarians, we know that the term *aroganel* means ‘to read’ or ‘to recite’ in such an expressive way so that the reading is not only beautiful but will also convey to the listener whether the reading contains “a command, supplication, humour, question or refusal”.<sup>3</sup> There are ten basic signs in this system divided into four categories or prosodies. The first category is *olorak* (tonos) which contains three signs – *shesht*, *bout* and *parouyk* – and signifies the varying tones of recitation. The second category is *amanak* (xronos) dealing with the extension or shortening of the duration of syllables and contains two signs – *sough* and *erkar*. The third category is named *hagag* (pneuma) which includes the signs *t’av* and *sosk* and controls the articulation and volume of the sounds produced. Finally the fourth category is *kirk* (pathi) which refers to the changing of pronunciation of words for harmonic purposes and possesses the last three signs which are *apartarts*, *entamna* and *storat*. Nersessian states that the second system “had more signs and a large number of variants and groupings. It was highly developed, detailed and consequently more accurate”.<sup>4</sup> Komitas Vardapet described the latter system in the article “Die armenische Kirchenmusik”, which was published in 1899. In it, he listed the increased number of *Khaz* categories along with their musical functions. His list included *Khazes* of pitch, nuance, melismas, dynamics, rhythm, clefs, accentuation, cadence, style, groupings and divisions and alterations.

The signs were used for the notation of the *sharakan* which utilize eight modes (*Ut dzayn* in Armenian, *oktoechos* in Greek). These modes are first divided into four called *dzayn*, regarded as the authentic modes and use the first four letters of the Armenian alphabet (Ա, Բ, Գ, Դ). The other four are known as *koghm* (side), regarded as Plagal modes although that title has no functional significance as to the nature of the modes. *Dzainer* may be termed as ‘melodic motives’, which differ in pitch and construction depending on the structure and cadences of the melodies. In the present-day classifications, each mode has other auxiliary

<sup>1</sup> Vrej Nersessian (ed.), *Essays on Armenian Music* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1978), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Robert At’ayan, *Armenian Neume System of Notation* (Curzon Press, 1999, Routledge 2013), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Vrej Nersessian, (ed.), *Essays on Armenian Music* p. 7.

modes called *tartzvadzk* (strophe), as well as other deviations known as *sdeghi* (branched combination of modes). The modes are all independent systems with a definite semantic character, and each of these is peculiar to a particular range of emotional expression.<sup>5</sup> After the X century the Khaz notation system entered an enhanced period of expansion and development. It continuously became more detailed and after the XV century it had become so complex, that it gradually fell into disuse.

The liturgical songs continued to be transmitted orally until they were eventually written down in a more accessible notation. Hambardzoum Limondjian, who was concerned with what he regarded as the potential corruption of the Armenian liturgy and hymns, devised the “Armenian modern musical notation”. Also known as the “Limondjian system”, it was a method of codification that was unlike European notation and was specifically tailored to Armenian monodic tradition. Limondjian wanted to make a notational system that was easier to learn and use for transcriptions of medieval chants, as well as for the notation of folk songs while still keeping some elements of the old notation. Within this method, each note symbol of the octave is borrowed from the original *Khaz* system. Additional dashes are used to distinguish the octaves and to add supplementary rhythmic indications.<sup>6</sup> It became widely accepted and implemented within Armenian music for many years until it gave way for the European notation. This final change was inevitable due to the system’s function towards only monodic vocal lines.

Modern studies of the original *Khaz* neumes began by various European musicologists, such as *Guillaume André Villoteau* (1799), François-Joseph Fétis (1874) and Hans Georg Adler (1920) among others. There were also Armenian scholars such as Eghia Tntesian (1834 – 1881), a church musician, teacher and a pioneer of his time, who provided several detailed academic studies of the Armenian Khazes performance practice, modality, history and neumatology.

Komitas Vardapet was the leading Armenian musicologist of the early XX century. Additionally, he was a gifted vocalist, composer, choir director, and teacher. Unfortunately he was orphaned at a young age but in his twelfth year his outstanding singing voice caught the attention of Kevork Vartabet Tertzagian, who chose him to study at the Gevorkian Theological Seminary in Vagharshapat (now Echmiatsin).

According to Henry Finnis Blossie Lynch, a traveller, businessman, and Liberal Member of the British Parliament, who visited the school in the fall of 1893, the curriculum offered “*theology, history and literature, foreign as well as Armenian*”.<sup>7</sup> The students were also taught courses on pedagogy, psychology and philosophy. According to church tradition, newly ordained priests were given new names and Soghomon was renamed Komitas (named after a VII century Armenian Catholicos). Two years later he became a priest and obtained the title Vardapet, meaning a church scholar. As a student he began to collect and transcribe folk songs, using the Limondjian system, which eventually became a life-long pursuit. After

<sup>5</sup> **Alina Pahlevanian**. Armenia, Republic of (Armenian Hayastan). *Grove Music Online*. (Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> **Vrej Nersessian**, (ed.), *Essays on Armenian Music*, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> **Harry Finnis Blossie Lynch**, *Armenia: Travels and Studies* (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1901), I, 272.

his ordination, he went to Berlin to study musicology for three years. He then returned to continue expanding his catalogue of folk songs, by collecting them from remote villages since he believed that the musical tradition was stronger within peasant populations instead of urban areas. In 1910 he moved to Constantinople, where he created choirs that would sing arrangements of his collected folk songs and would also tour and lecture on his research in internationally. For the Armenian Diaspora of the Near East of that time, his concerts and lectures helped to promote strong feelings of national identity. His work would have a much broader impact following the tragedy of the Armenian Genocide which imparted extreme emotional poignancy and immediate urgency to his efforts to preserve Armenian identity.

Komitas Vardapet hoped to distinguish a distinct Armenian national sound. This sound would be appropriate for both sacred and secular songs since he believed they possessed a parallel musical structure. With regard to folk song specifically, as a collector his aims were: 1) to write down and thus preserve the national musical heritage; 2) to make this music available, thus promoting the performance of folk song and dance as a living art and as a part of daily life; and 3) to utilize folk music for ethno-musicological and historical study.<sup>8</sup> He expressed his views about a national ethnic ‘sound’ in the conclusion of one of his lectures at a symposium, organised by the International Society of Music in Paris in 1914. With the aid of his own live performance of music examples, he demonstrated that foreign music had influenced Armenian liturgical and folk music performance practices. Specifically, after centuries of Ottoman dominance in the region, Turkish and Persian music had had the greatest influence. He showed the differences of interpretation by performing various songs in their original form, devoid of foreign influence, as well as in the Turkish and Persian-influenced styles preferred at that time.<sup>9</sup>

The reasons for those outside influences were due to Armenia’s turbulent past of numerous conquerors and wars throughout the centuries which naturally led to the additional elements found within the various musical styles. Komitas’s research led him to conclude that the older Armenian singing style consisted of linear melodic lines without much embellishment. The melodies should not include modal inflections and additional notes found in Turkish music. Similarly, he asserted that singers should take care neither to sing with nasal vocal timbre favoured by Turks of the time, nor to employ guttural trills common to Persian music. The encroachment of these Eastern practices within Armenian tradition led to a deviation away from the sound that Armenians had developed. Therefore he cautioned that for matters of transcription of melody and rhythm, thoughtful modifications, if any, should be applied sparingly to prevent as he has stated: “*unnecessary trills, turns, and patterns which violate the spirit of our nation’s ecclesiastical music*” and “*its harmonic structure should not be disturbed, but should be clarified: its melodies should not be reinvented but corrected in accordance with its character; its rhythms should not be subjected to unnecessary disturbances, without negating its irregularities*”.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Vrej Nersessian, *Essays on Armenian Music*, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, there are no recordings of the lecture for the musical examples, but Komitas’s written notes have survived.

<sup>10</sup> Կոմիտաս, Երգեցողությունը սրբոյ Պատարագի, *Արարար*, Էջմիածին, 1898.

Key to understanding Komitas's position was his desire to carefully distinguish the Armenian modal system. Armenian modes are based on a series of interlocking tetrachords (a succession of four notes forming an interval of a perfect fourth with varying combinations between them), which consist of sequences that ascend and descend in seconds and thirds void of any unnecessary colorations and with no trills. According to Komitas Vardapet, *"all Armenian melodies are formed with the various combinations of tetrachords"*.<sup>11</sup> He strived to show the changes that had occurred within the performance styles of that time, which had changed the characteristics of the Armenian musical tradition. As he stated, *"the distinction between our melodies and other Eastern ones is that we take a simple tetrachord and change the internal intervals by semitones, while they augment and diminish the outer members. In Persian, Turkish and Arabic music, even impractical and meaningless 1/3 and 1/4 notes are utilized"*.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, each scale degree corresponds to the intonation of the Armenian language and punctuation, which has its own specific and unique rhythmic feel. As Komitas stated: *"In order to decipher the meanings of the Khazes, it is essential to analyse the accentuation in folk songs and, accordingly, as a principle of prosody, to research, compare and reconstruct the actual meaning. Khazes in the early stages of their existence also indicated nuances in songs. Since our folk melodies have deep-rooted associations with the Armenian language, they contain too ancient Armenian reflections of the nuances of Armenian songs or, even deeper, it's very principles"*.<sup>13</sup>

He considered his study of the Khaz notation as the basis for how the Armenian language should be shaped and interpreted within the musical tradition. Additionally he believed that: *"every nation's music originates and evolves from the intonational system of that nation. The Armenian language has a unique pronunciation; therefore it has an appropriate music as well"*.<sup>14</sup> He asserted the implications of applying changes within accentuations without considering the history of the language, as he stated: *"within the Armenian tradition, there is a strong connection between the accentuation of music and language. The harmony cannot be separated between the two. Otherwise, the harmony of the language and melody would be fundamentally upset, because where language is accented, the music would be unaccented and vice versa, and hence the melody would not fit"*.<sup>15</sup>

In accordance to his views of restoring the unique characteristics of Armenian music, the Armenian Divine Liturgy (Patarag) was concluded, where, again, the purpose was to: 1) abstain from foreign and redundant embellishments; 2) select the most appropriate sung versions of the melody; 3) make the harmonization correspond as much as possible with the meaning of the text, while retaining both the style and spirit of Armenian church music and the faithfulness and reverence befitting such a sacred heritage; 4) use the manuscript liturgies and ancient neumes as guides in correcting the melodies and prosody, for indeed our neumes

<sup>11</sup> Komitas, Die armenische Kirchenmusik, *Sammelbände der internationalen Musik-Gesellschaft*. Jahrgang 1, Heft I. (1899/1900). Breitkopf: Leipzig, S.54.

<sup>12</sup> Komitas, The Singing of the Holy Liturgy, in *Armenian Sacred and Folk Music*, p. 127.

<sup>13</sup> Կոմիտաս, Հայոց եկեղեցական եղանակները, *Արարար*, Վաղարշապատ, թիվ 7, էջ 222:

<sup>14</sup> Կոմիտաս, Հայն ունի ինքնուրույն երաժշտություն, *Ազատամարտ*, թիվ 1316:

<sup>15</sup> Կոմիտաս, Երգեցողութիւնը սրբոյ Պատարագի, *Արարար*, Էջմիածին, 1898:

which are now dead, are more eloquent than our living yet lifeless modern notation.<sup>16</sup> For matters of polyphony, he was very careful to not compromise the historic nature of the Armenian ‘monodic sound’ by treating each voicing as a separate unit with its own characteristic tonal texture. As Robert Atayan describes: “He [Komitas] did this by subordinating conventional rules of harmony and polyphony to methods originating in the folk material. In polyphony he used Armenian intonations in melodically independent voices, freely allowing the occurrence of polymodality and polytonality”.<sup>17</sup>

Komitas Vardapet dedicated most of his life to researching ancient manuscripts and transcribing folk songs in order to, in his view, ‘rediscover’ the distinct Armenian musical style of the past and implement ways of applying it to the present. He believed that without his extensive investigation of the *Khaz* notation, he would not have been able to realize and fulfil his work. He lived during a time of increasing Armenian nationalism, fuelled by a desire to maintain their unique ethnic identity in the face of oppression. The Armenian Genocide and its consequences, such as mass deportations, made the musical languages of the *Khaz* and ancient folk songs even more important to be studied and shared as a ‘bridging’ of the Armenian sense of identity throughout the scattered Diaspora. After all, of the two million Armenians that resided within Asia Minor during the beginning of the XX century before the Genocide, only approximately eighty thousand remained by 1922.

Komitas’s own fate made him a ‘hero’ for some and a martyr for others. On April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1915 hundreds of Armenian figures of leadership were arrested and exiled by the Turkish authorities, amongst them Komitas Vartabed. Many were tortured and eventually killed but Komitas was saved by the intervention of Henry Morgenthau, the United States’ ambassador to Turkey. The psychological trauma affected his psyche for the remainder of his life. He eventually had a mental breakdown - recently some scholars identified it as severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder - and was hospitalised, the last hospital being in Paris where he spent the rest of his life. Rita Kuyumjian, who has conducted a biographical study about Komitas, states: “survivors of the Armenian Genocide have recognized Komitas’s prolonged suffering as a symbol of their own personal and collective anguish, and ranked him among Armenia’s martyrs”.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, musicologist Georgi Geodakyan has written: “In the destiny of Komitas, on his thorny and tragic path, the whole historical epoch of the Armenian nation is reflected: the rise of national consciousness, struggles, emerging hopes, and the era that concluded with the terrible tragedy of 1915, overshadowed by the most horrible pages in the history of much-affected Armenia”.<sup>19</sup>

His life-long studies of the *Khaz* notation, the transcriptions of ancient folk songs, and his relentless efforts of promoting Armenian musical culture, established Komitas as a leading figure of Armenian musicology. His efforts and strong belief of securing an Armenian musical identity within a culture that had influenced it otherwise, left a legacy for future

<sup>16</sup> **Կոմիտաս, Երգեցողությունը սրբոյ Պապարագի:**

<sup>17</sup> **At’ayan,** Komitas, Grove Music Online.

<sup>18</sup> **Rita Soulabian Kuyumjian,** *The Archeology of Madness: Komitas, Portrait of an Armenian Icon* (Princeton: Gomidas Institute, 2001), p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> **Գ. Գյոդակյան,** *Կոմիտաս*, Երևան, ՀՀ ԳԱԱ հրատ., 2000:

generations who, even though for a period of time had become powerless due to the tragic events they experienced, eventually could utilize it to strengthen their own Armenian identity.

### Abstract

This study concerns the life and work of Komitas Vardapet. The goal is to understand further his contribution to Armenian music both as a composer and a pioneering musicologist whose work appeared before that of other notable scholars such as Zoltan Kodaly and Bela Bartok. Of the (Armenian) scholars who studied the ancient Armenian *Khaz* notation system, the most extensive and pioneering was Komitas Vardapet, an Armenian priest who many regard as the leading figure of Armenian folk and church music research. His study of Armenian music is based not in secondary sources but on original research with musical manuscripts in the collections of Etchmiatsin, an ancient cathedral in Armenia - considered of being one of the oldest in the world, and Venice. These measures thus raise the value of the credibility for his work. His explicit purpose in his life-long research was to write down and thus preserve the national Armenian musical heritage, to make the music available to the public, and to utilize Armenian folk music for ethno-musicological and historical study.

**Key words:** Komitas Vardapet, Armenian national music identity, Khaz notation, Hambardzoum Limondjian, tetrachords, Armenian Genocide, legacy.

## ԿՈՄԻՏԱՍ ՎԱՐԴԱՊԵՏԸ ԵՎ ՆՐԱ ՆԵՐԴՐՈՒՄԸ ՀԱՅ ԵՐԱԺՇՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՄԵՋ Ամփոփում

Ալիս Ալվազյան (Կիպրոս)  
Նիկոսիայի երաժշտության համալսարան

Այս հոդվածը վերաբերում է Կոմիտաս Վարդապետի կյանքին և ստեղծագործությանը: Նպատակն է հասկանալ Կոմիտասի՝ որպես կոմպոզիտորի և երաժշտագետի ներդրումը հայկական երաժշտության մեջ, քանի որ նրա աշխատություններն ի հայտ են եկել ավելի վաղ, քան նշանավոր այլ գիտնականների՝ Զոլտան Կոդալիի և Բելա Բարտոկի գործունեությունը: Խազերի հնագույն նոտագրման համակարգն ուսումնասիրող հայ գիտնականների շարքում առավել ծավալուն հետազոտություն է իրականացրել Կոմիտաս Վարդապետը, որը հայտնի է որպես հայ ժողովրդական և եկեղեցական երաժշտության ոլորտներում հետազոտություններ կատարած առաջատար գործիչ:

Հայկական երաժշտության նրա ուսումնասիրությունները հիմնվում էին ոչ միայն տեղեկատվության երկրորդական աղբյուրների, այլև էջմիաժնում՝ հայկական հնագույն տաճարում, և Վենետիկում պահվող բնագիր ձեռագրերի հետազոտությունների վրա: Այս ամենն առավել արժանահավատ է դարձնում կատարված ամբողջ աշխատանքը: Կոմիտասի կյանքի բացահայտ նպատակն էր գրի առնել և այդպիսով պահպանել հայկական ազգային երաժշտական ժառանգությունը, այն հասանելի դարձնել հանրությանը և էթնոերաժշտագիտական ու պատմական ուսումնասիրություններ իրականացնելիս օգտագործել հայ ժողովրդական երաժշտությունը:

**Բանալի բառեր՝** Կոմիտաս Վարդապետ, հայ ազգային երաժշտական ինքնություն, խազային նոտագրություն, Համբարձում Լիմոնջյան, տետրախորդ, Հայոց եղեռն, ժառանգություն:

## КОМИТАС ВАРДАПЕТ И ЕГО ВКЛАД В АРМЯНСКУЮ МУЗЫКУ

### Резюме

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Данная статья относится к жизни и деятельности Комитаса. Наша цель — осмыслить вклад Комитаса-композитора и музыковеда в армянской музыке, поскольку его исследования появились до того, как развернули свою деятельность другие крупные музыковеды — Золтан Кодай и Бела Барток. Среди армянских музыковедов, изучавших древнюю хазовую систему нотописи, более масштабное исследование совершил именно Комитас, который является одним из крупнейших специалистов в области армянской народной и церковной музыки. Его исследования основывались не только на вторичных источниках информации, но и на изучении подлинных рукописей, которые хранились в Эчмиадзинском храме и в Венеции. Данный факт подчеркивает достоверность работы проделанной Комитасом. Целью жизни Комитаса была фиксация и, таким образом, сохранение армянского национального музыкального наследия, обеспечение его доступности для общественности, а также использование армянской народной музыки в этномузыковедческих и исторических исследованиях.

**Ключевые слова:** Комитас Вардапет, армянская национальная музыкальная идентичность, Хазовая нотопись, Амбарцум Лимонджян, тетрахорд, Армянский Геноцид, наследие.