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Chapter IV
KOMITAS AND FOLK MUSIC

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KOMITAS AND THE PROBLEMS OF ARMENIAN MUSIC FOLKLORISTICS

Komitas is the first name that comes to one's mind when speaking about Armenian musical culture, for he is the beginning of many core concepts in Armenian music. This is an absolute truth: Komitas is the founder of classical Armenian professional music. His genius paved a way to transmit the Armenian musical tradition from typically *monodic* to polyphonic thinking and, with all the richness of its means, helped underline the hues and the beauty of national melodies, always following the essence and the laws of Armenian unique singing tradition.

Yet, the task was not merely to find ways of transition to polyphony; the Armenian ear had to be introduced and accustomed to new ways of musical thinking. Komitas undertook this task also as a choral conductor, organizer, teacher, and a propagator of good taste. Apparently, without prepared audiences it would be impossible to develop the national musical tradition.

Komitas knew very well that one man would not be enough, and that there was a need to educate apprentices and followers. It is a fact that Komitas aimed at founding a school, where he would be able to prepare music professionals. Against all odds of his time, Komitas managed to gather around himself talented youth, devotees, and to give them the knowledge they needed, to inspire them, and to guide them in their endeavors, both in Ejmiatsin and Constantinople. Among Komitas's apprentices were Spiridon Meliqyan, composer, pedagogue, choral conductor, and folklorist who had a formal musicological education in Germany; and Mihran Toumajan, one of Komitas's five most renowned

apprentices, who, upon his teacher's plea, dedicated his life to collecting folkloristic materials from Armenian refugees around the world and transcribed more than two thousand samples of Armenian folk culture.

Komitas was also a researcher who became the founder of Armenian ethnomusicological studies. No issue in folk music studies ever escaped Komitas's attention, whether being related to the foundations of the discipline or data collection, which he did throughout his life and transcribed three to four thousand musical samples, his contemporaries recalled. The exact number is now unidentifiable in practice, and the academic community has agreed on a number of some 1800 pieces.

Robert Atayan wrote: *“Shortly before Komitas, efforts to gather and to transcribe samples of Armenian folk music were undertaken by Sahak Amatuni, Christapor Kara–Murza, Nikoghayos Tigranyan, and Makar Yekmalyan... Those were prominent people, who had made immense contributions into the development of the national music, also by transcribing samples of traditional songs. And yet, the Armenian ethnomusicological studies lagged behind the folk studies. It was obvious both in terms of the number of collected materials, the degree of exploration, and also in terms of certain limitations when it came to their genres and styles. Therefore, in his early years Komitas's undertakings to collect and transcribe traditional melodies, their comprehensive and full identification on academic level, were matters of priority.”*¹

Komitas, surely, took notion of the experience of his contemporaries and continued collecting the material with most accuracy, understanding that searching and finding traditional songs with typically national features would help him identify the specifics of traditional Armenian musical thinking, musical imagination of people, and the uniqueness of traditional musical language.

¹ **Կոմիտաս**, *Երկերի ժողովածու*, հատ. 9, խմբ.՝ Ռ. Աթայան, Երևան, «Գիտություն» հրատ., 1999, էջ 9 (**Komitas**, *Works*, Vol. 9, ed. R. Atayan, Yerevan, “Gityutyun” publishing, 1999, p. 9).

Interestingly, the understanding of this came to Komitas when he was still a young man, aged 16–18: he committed himself to the mission fully and for a lifetime. He was actually the first to put these endeavors on academic grounds, undertaking collection of materials in Armenian villages. R. Atayan wrote: “*Komitas viewed peasants, which were the majority of Armenian population in those days, as the true bearers of national musical tradition, and which, owing to relatively isolated lifestyle, had escaped foreign influences... Komitas had to accurately choose the most typical forms of peasants’ songs and transcribe them and all their elements with most accuracy.*”¹

Being in perfect command of the Armenian system of musical notation Komitas masterfully wrote down samples of varying complexity along with the performance process. By making numerous transcriptions of the same song types, Komitas tried to preserve the variety of interpretations, understanding all too clearly that folklore is an ever-changing matter, spontaneous, and improvisational, and that the one version fixed by means of musical notation can never give a comprehensive picture of a certain type of song.

Interestingly, Komitas was one of the first to bring about the idea of variations across territories and time, an approach currently widely accepted in academia. The approach implies that the same song type recorded in various geographic locations may bear characteristics typical of a given location and influences of the time, even when transcribed from the same signer, and, therefore, is of specific value for different academic purposes.

Indeed, in traditional singing both lyrics and melody alter with each performance, even as they travel across households. That means that versions of traditional melodies and lyrics can get as many interpretations as performances. To separate a basic sample, which

¹ Ibid.

could be called 'canonic', is impossible, because there is no such thing as a canonic sample in folklore studies. In the studies of folklore all versions are basic, and each version has equal right of existence. It was this understanding that made Komitas pay attention to all the possible versions of traditional songs.

By recording interpretations of song types in provinces of Armenia Komitas defined many academic problems and outlined ways how to solve them. Subdivisions into genres, musical dialects, the problem of authorship or its inexistence in music were among those problems. Komitas was also interested in questions such as how long the melodies could live, as well as how the typical melodic phrases developed and changed. All these issues remain central in the Armenian ethnomusicological studies even today.

Komitas used stationary research methods. Staying in a village for a while, living among ordinary people, taking part in the everyday life of the community, he both heard and transcribed samples of folk music, deeply comprehending the process in which songs were born, their grounds, and their meanings. The materials recorded on the spot, in their own time, helped identify their function, obtaining reliable and authentic samples: e.g. *horovel*, transcribed while the peasants were ploughing the land, a lullaby sung while putting children to sleep, chants praising the groom at weddings, etc. The well-known *Lo'iva Gut'anerg* (The Plough-songs of Lori Region) was transcribed as peasants sang while working in the field: Komitas observed and listened to the song writing down its various fragments.

Nowadays transcribing traditional music observing the requirements of generally acceptable research methods of ethnomusicological studies is impossible, since the ploughing is not practiced any longer, and *horovel*, having lost its function, has practically ceased to exist. In an attempt to trace the disappeared genres, the musicologists now have to ask elderly villagers to recall the ways they used to sing when they were

working in the field. Such records which can be compared with ‘staged’ performances, surely cannot be considered as samples of folk culture, although they give some information about the once existent labor singing traditions in the given location.

Komitas wrote: “*People do not know what it means to sing artistically: every song is created and learnt in its place and in its time... People do not know what it means to sing a song that is separate from time or place, and do not create one or sing one.*”¹

Being well aware of the lifestyle of the ordinary people, and creative potential of peasants, Komitas knew perfectly that the folk music was born and preserved solely in an oral form. This explains his genuine interest in the spontaneity of traditional music and people’s abilities to improvise. With elaborate methods of observation, he witnessed the birth of the most widely spread and popularly available genre of the peasant vocal culture – the dance–song. Komitas’s observations on the birth and development of *Aman Tello* dance–song during the Resurrection festivities near Harich Monastery is a subject of major academic interest for Armenian ethnomusicology. Komitas wrote down all the variations of melody, rhythm, range and mode, as they evolved in the course of dancing, and observed how the dance–song got its final shape.

In his studies, Komitas explained how the improvisation ability of the folk singers evolved and showed the inner logical relations between the traditional and improvisational components. Komitas wrote: “*Ability to create songs is an innate talent of peasants; everyone knows how to versify and to sing, whether good or bad.*”² “*Every peasant perfectly knows the native melodies and songs like one’s own dialect. The ability*

¹ Կոմիտաս, Հոդվածներ յեվ ուսումնասիրություններ, հավաքեց՝ Ռ. Թերլեմեզյան, Երևան, Պետական հրատ., 1941, էջ 30–31 (Komitas, *Articles and Studies*, collected by R. Terlemezyan, Yerevan, State edition, 1941, pp. 30–31).

² Ibid., p. 17.

to intuitively improvise is well-developed, and this knowledge has been obtained gradually, in the course of centuries...”¹

Those are very important observations which help to properly understand the phenomenon, perceive the difference of variations of a song against its recorded unchanged version. That complete form of a piece of art is not typical of folk at all. A professional musician used to a text will be much astonished if told that a familiar and popular folk song is born by improvisation, for he or she sees a complete recorded piece, and can hardly imagine the ‘canonic piece’ in a different interpretation.

One more crucially important issue in the focus of Komitas’s attention was the notation of folk songs and the issue of rhythmic and metric definition, which are closely related to the matter of notation. Yet in the early years of collecting folk songs, while transcribing the materials with Western notation, Komitas paid special attention to the placement of the melody. The question was how to notate and how to divide into bars in order to make the stressed syllabus of the word coincide with the strong beat of the bar. The years of experience convinced Komitas that shaping, let alone applying a rule like that is practically impossible. By developing his own principles of notation of folk songs and by striving to disclose the specifics of rhythmical organization of the Armenian folklore Komitas questioned the European theories of rhythm prevailing in the 18th–19th centuries. His own approach was based on the idea that “*in the Armenian folk music the emphasis and the time are unrelated*”, and “*The bar lines indicate only metric unity and measure.*”²

By mentioning time Komitas implied the unit on which the rhythmic organization of a piece was grounded. According to Komitas, the bar

¹ Ibid., p. 29.

² **Կոմիտաս**, *Երկերի ժողովածու*, հատ. 1, խմբ.՝ Ռ. Աթայան, Երևան, Հայպետհրատ, 1960, էջ 159 (**Komitas**, *Works*, vol. 1, ed. R. Atayan, Yerevan, Arm. State Edition, 1960, p. 159):

lines functioned solely as divisions and did not entail mandatory emphasis of the first section.

Komitas applied long and short bar lines in his transcriptions and arrangements. He developed this principle with a purpose of being able to separate musical sentences and phrases with long ones, and to indicate some rhythmical units, i.e. measures inside them by means of the short ones. This was one of his inventions in the early 20th century, which outlined two conflicting approaches to rhythm – qualitative (emphatic) and quantitative (chronometric).

Worth mentioning, upon developing a specific understanding of the rhythmical characteristics of Armenian folk music in later years, Komitas refused to apply time signatures when transcribing melodic songs. The approach he applied to dance melodies was quite different and the metric ‘pulse’, tied with measure, was clearly tangible with a certain periodicity, in which case indicating the measure was natural, and no conflict with the rhythmic nature of a folk melody emerged.

Examining Komitas’s approach to music notation, we conclude again that he was ahead of his time, since he was the one to develop instructions which guided the new generations of musicians and students of folklore. Indeed, the issues of rhythm and meter remain a focus of attention in Armenian musicology and ethnomusicology, in particular.

The Armenian musical folklore as an art form, which originated in ancient times, reached our days embracing all the influences of its time. Armenian folklore is a fertile material to study the dynamics in the development of rhythm from the recited rhythm of prehistoric times to medieval chronometric rhythm and emphatic rhythm of modern times. All these stages have naturally somehow influenced the Armenian folklore and, being genetically connected to it, have impacted the folk and professional arts within the oral tradition. Here *gusan* and *ashugh* (*ašut*) arts are considered as well.

The emphatic metrics of the new times is inseparably connected with the problem of division into bars, which emerged when polyphony embarked on its development. Meanwhile, in the monodic music of early medieval times, the rhythm was regulated by correlations of short and long syllables and pitches. The value of a short syllabus could serve as a unit of measurement for all the rhythmic values including the rests.

Thus, the rhythm in the Armenian folk song is characterized by unique combination of quantitative, free chronometric, and the qualitative principles. Further yet, the bar line predominantly played separating, syntactic role. The emphasis of words may coincide, but oftentimes does not, with emphasized parts. We can conclude the emphasis of words does not play a role in dividing into bars, and is not a decisive factor; the bar lines and measure indications are not mandatory in the cases, when they are not significant and are conditional, as Komitas considered.

Being the founder of the Armenian folk music studies, Komitas served his academic achievements for the noble purposes of formation and development of modern Armenian professional art music.

Abstract

Collecting several thousands of folk songs and tunes, Komitas studied and classified them into genres. The next step was searching for the polyphony convenient for the Armenian music structure. This article attempts to explain why Komitas was the founder of the national school of music composition, as commonly accepted in Armenian musicology. The following problems propounded by Komitas are addressed to:

- ✓ What is the oral tradition in Armenian folk music? What role does permanent improvisation have inside an oral tradition?
- ✓ What is the advantage of music notation? What losses can be registered in the case of notation? How do written and oral traditions relate to each other?
- ✓ Revealing the “music dialects” typical for each region.
- ✓ The problem of the existence or the absence of an author in folk song creation.

- ✓ The viability of the songs, their lifespan. Which songs live longer and which do not?
- ✓ Identifying the musical phrases typical for the songs and finding the formulaic expressions. To what extent may improvisation exist within formulaic constructions?
- ✓ The stationary approach in song collection work.
- ✓ The rhythm in Armenian folk songs.

Obviously, Komitas surpassed his time–period preordaining several problems of folkloristics. Komitas actually proposed pathways for further development of ethnomusicology.

Keywords: music collecting, transcription, rhythm, meter.

Ալինա Փահլևանյան (Հայաստան)

արվեստագիտության թեկնածու

ՀՀ արվեստի վաստակավոր գործիչ

Երևանի Կոմիտասի անվան պետական կոնսերվատորիա

ԿՈՄԻՏԱՍԸ ԵՎ ՀԱՅ ԵՐԱԺՇՏԱԿԱՆ ՖՈՆԿԼՈՐԱԳԻՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՀԻՄՆԱԽՆԴԻՐՆԵՐԸ

Հավաքելով հազարավոր ժողովրդական երգեր և մեղեդիներ՝ Կոմիտասը դրանք ուսումնասիրել է և դասակարգել ըստ ժանրերի: Հաջորդ քայլը եղել է հայ երաժշտության կառուցվածքին համապատասխան բազմաձայնության որոնումը: Սույն հոդվածը փորձ է բացատրելու, թե ինչու էր Կոմիտասը հայ ազգային կոմպոզիտորական դպրոցի հիմնադիրը, ինչպես ընդունված է համարել հայ երաժշտագիտության մեջ: Քննվում են Կոմիտասի առաջադրած հետևյալ խնդիրները:

- ✓ Ո՞րն է հայ ավանդական երաժշտության բանավոր էությունը: Ո՞րն է իմպրովիզացիայի դերը բանավոր ավանդույթի ներսում:
- ✓ Ի՞նչ դեր ունի նոտագրությունը երաժշտության մեջ: Ի՞նչ կրուստներ են լինում նոտագրության դեպքում: Ինչպե՞ս են փոխհարաբերվում գրավոր և բանավոր ավանդույթները:
- ✓ Յուրաքանչյուր տարածաշրջանին բնորոշ երաժշտական բարբառների բացահայտումը:

- ✓ Ժողովրդական երաժշտական ստեղծագործության մեջ հեղինակի գոյության կամ բացակայության խնդիրը:
- ✓ Երգերի կենսունակությունը, նրանց կյանքի տևողությունը: Ո՞ր երգերն են ապրում ավելի երկար, և որոնք կարճ կյանք ունեն:
- ✓ Երգերին հատուկ երաժշտական ֆրագների բնորոշումը և բանաձևային արտահայտությունների դուրս բերումը: Ինչ չափով կարող է իմպրովիզացիան գոյություն ունենալ բանաձևային մտածողության մեջ:
- ✓ Բանահավաքչության մեջ երգի ստացիոնար գրառման մոտեցումը:
- ✓ Ռիթմը հայ ժողովրդական երգի մեջ:

Ակնհայտորեն Կոմիտասը գերազանցել է իր ժամանակը և կանխորոշել է ֆոլկլորագիտության մի շարք հիմնախնդիրներ: Փաստորեն, նա ուղիներ է առաջադրել ֆոլկլորագիտության հետագա զարգացման համար:

Հիմնաբառեր՝ բանահավաքչական աշխատանք, գրառում, ռիթմ, մետր: