

A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In the year 301 AD, Christianity was proclaimed the national religion of Armenia.

Armenian pagan art gradually infiltrated the new Armenian Christian practice. Early Christian churches were erected on the foundations of ruined pagan temples, and many pagan priests converted to Christianity and continued to serve as stewards of the church.

Grigor Lusavorich (Gregory the Illuminator), who had received his education in Greece, brought with him foreign priests from Caesaria, who became the first ministers of the Armenian Church. Under their charge, education in schools was conducted in Greek and Assyrian, as were the rituals and ceremonies of the church. The people, unable to understand the songs in foreign languages, memorized prayers translated into Armenian, and sang them in native, age-old, Armenian melodies. For an entire century, the Armenian Church sang Christian music based on Greek and Assyrian models.

In the fifth century Mesrop Mashtots invented the Armenian alphabet. His efforts, alongside those of Catholicos Sahak Partev, produced translations of the Holy Bible and certain church rituals in Armenian. In regards to music, Mashtots and Parhev placed traditional Armenian melodies at the core of church chants, and standardized the modal system of the music of the church. Mashtots personally traveled through Armenia's provinces establishing schools and teaching the new alphabet and the songs. In time the *Eucharist*, the *Psalter*, and the *Breviary* took shape, and they were translated and sung in Armenian.

Mashtots sent a number of his students to study in Greece. Upon their return, they translated important books on grammar and philosophy into Armenian. Around the same time they chronicled the history of the Armenian people.

In church practice the gospels were read in a distinctive recitation derived from the accents and intonation of Classical Armenian ("Grabar"). Historians record that the translation of psalms and nativity songs into Armenian brought them into great popularity and they were sung everywhere enthusiastically. Mashtots and Parhev composed original songs. To date we have 129 *sharakans* by Mashtots and 60 by Sahak Partev preserved alongside their melodies.

Komitas writes:

"The invention of the alphabet and the translation of the Bible in the fifth century led to the composition of sacred songs. Gradually, the ceremony and liturgy of the church developed. There arose a number of singers who composed *sharakans* (hymns), *chars* (homilies) and *nerbogh*s (odes) designed to interpret the meaning of ecclesiastical, dominical, and saints' feasts for the people.

"...The singing of psalms was replaced by the singing of *sharakans*.

"Sharakan singing was supplemented with the singing of *taghs* (special chants), *gandzes* (ascriptions), *avetises* (annunciation chants) and other types of sacred songs to accommodate the requirements of the increasingly elaborate liturgy. The latter were also odes, but sung only by the people. Over time, these songs became widespread – so much so, that every ecclesiastical feast had its own *tagh*. Special collections were compiled under the names of *Tagharan*, *Gandzaran*, and *Ergaran*.

"We must assume the origin of these to be around the 5th century, as many *taghs*, *meghedies*, annunciation *avetises*, coming down to us by tradition, are attributed to Movses Khorenatsi (Moses of Khoren). This may be explained in either of two ways. Even if Khorenatsi did not actually create these works (for in the course of centuries the literary style has been corrupted), the fact of their attribution to him might indicate that they originated during his lifetime in the 5th century. Otherwise we must adhere to the generally held belief that every new addition, after the invention of the alphabet and the translation of the Bible, was generated by the Holy Fathers of the 5th century."

From the 5th to 10th centuries, seminaries were established in Armenia where music and other subjects were taught, many of these seminaries became famous and eminent musician-philosophers there produced hundreds of songs, developed a comprehensive system of music theory and aesthetics, and compiled a number of liturgical books. Starting in the ninth century, neumes were used to transcribe melodies and music. This does not, however, preclude the possibility that neumes were in use prior to that time.

Neumatic notation became progressively richer and more elaborate. Increasingly, liturgical books were notated with neumes, and neumes were adopted for the transcription of both traditional and newly composed songs. Beginning with the 12th century, the practice of writing with neumes witnessed a new rise, which then declined in the 15th century due to its complexity and

inaccessibility as a “secret” knowledge. The political situation also contributed to its decline: over time, repeated invasions by nomadic tribes destroyed Armenia, and brought about unfavorable conditions for day-to-day education and worship. By the 17th and 18th centuries, neumes were no longer decipherable. Many traditional cultural connections had already been destroyed, and restoring those traditions had become an impossibility.

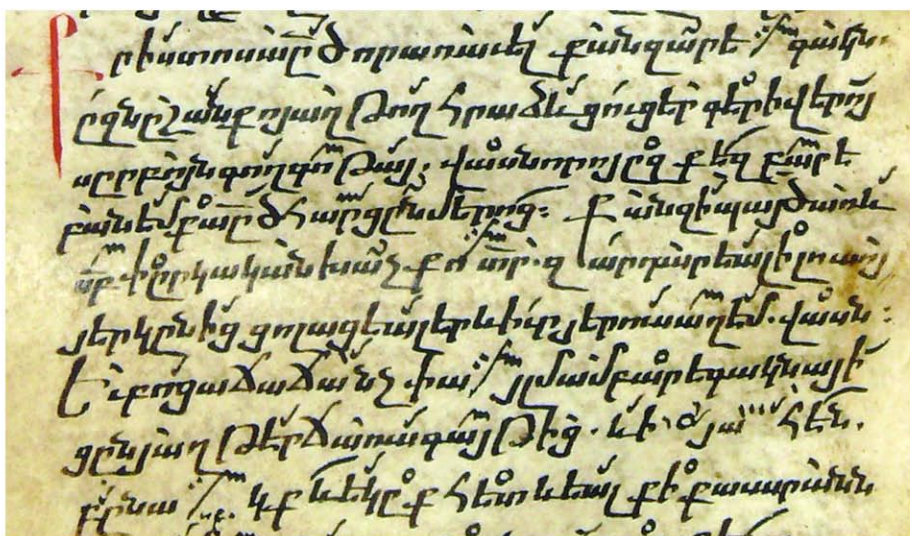
Ecclesiastical songs were transmitted orally. This practice, aided by the idiosyncratic singing styles of various clergymen, resulted in the distortion of many songs. By the 19th century, there were at least six distinctive styles of Armenian ecclesiastical singing, performed according to regional convention: a. Ejmiatzin, b. Nor Jugha, c. Jerusalem d. Constantinople e. Venice and f. Vienna. A new notational system was devised in order to preserve the vestiges of the ecclesiastical singing tradition. Musicians used the system to document traditional Armenian music, thereby preventing the loss and further decline of the *Sharakan* (Book of Hymns), the *Zhamagirk* (Book of Hours), the *Divine Liturgy*, and a few odd songs like *taghs* and *meghedis*.

By the end of the 19th century, elements from the traditional and the adulterated hymns had thoroughly blended together. The Assyrian, Greek, and Byzantine styles of previous eras and the Persian, Arabic and Turkish styles of modern times had fused with Armenian songs. Only a prophet could have identified and restored the genuine melodies of Armenian music from the ruin of the centuries. Komitas was just such a person. He selected and transcribed a few thousand folk (as well as sacred) songs from Armenian villages. Having familiarized himself first with the music of other nations, Komitas retrieved Armenian music out of the rust of centuries and foreign influences. An Eastern musician and scholar, he had also mastered Western music conventions. He studied, in depth, the music of many cultures including: Assyrian, Byzantine, Greek, Old Indian, Jewish, Latin, Persian, Arabic, and Kurdish. Through numerous lecture-recitals he introduced Armenian folk and church music to the world, and an able neumologist, he conducted scientific research of great importance in that domain. He was also an outstanding singer, composer, conductor and teacher. Armenians revered him greatly and considered him among their greatest luminaries, esteemed as highly as Mesrop Mashtots.

Komitas researched hundreds of manuscripts over the course of twenty years, and ultimately discovered the key to deciphering Armenian neumes, which enabled his initial readings of *simple* melodies. He believed that his re-

search would shed new light on the music of other cultures as well, including Greek, because Armenian manuscripts, with their exacting records, had preserved critically important sources. Further, Komitas himself also researched manuscripts that are now lost or destroyed. In 1914, Komitas was invited to Paris again. This time he addressed an international commission presenting the world with his theory of neumes (*khazes*). In that same year, the impending Genocide of Armenians interrupted the apostle's creative life; after that, he spent twenty fruitless years in a psychiatric hospital in Paris. During this period a portion of Komitas's manuscripts were destroyed, and others were left scattered in different countries. Along with Armenian churches, thousands of ancient manuscripts were burnt and destroyed.

Today, within the Matenadaran – the manuscript depository in Armenia named after Mashtots – are preserved around 15,000 manuscripts and fragments which contain invaluable information. There are hundreds of musical-liturgical books in *khaz* notation, including more than 290 *Pataragamatouyt-ses* (Book of Sacred Oblation), about 300 *Zhamagirqs* (Book of Hours), 350 *Sharakans* (Hymnbooks, Troparion), tens of *Tagharans* (Songbooks) and *Gandzarans* (Ascriptions), books of *Harousoumn* ("Adjuvant Arts") and other materials containing centuries-old Armenian Church music. Other similar manuscripts are also housed in Jerusalem, Venice, Vienna, as well as in depositories and private libraries around the world.



[illegible]

Armenian scholars had long since known that towards the end of his creative/scholarly life, Komitas had discovered the key to the Armenian medieval notation and had even begun to read simple *sharakans*, but during the years of the Armenian Genocide, alongside with his other manuscripts, Komitas's neumological research, his neume transcriptions, and the key to deciphering the neumes were all lost.

The scholarly literature bears no adequate description of the neumological materials existing in Komitas's manuscripts which are housed at the E. Charents Museum of Literature and Arts (Komitas archives)¹. The same was also true for his research on accentuation symbols, until I first put to print these unpublished materials.²

During an examination of Komitas's archives in 1984, I was very surprised to find among his documents not only the "essential key" (his words) to decoding the neumes, but also decipherments of individual neumes and even transcriptions of neumed *sharakans*. I spoke on this topic in two separate appearances on TV broadcasts, where I also sang a deciphered *sharakan*. In Paris, in 1990, I gave an exposition on the subject at a conference devoted to Armenian music (October 1, 1990), I also published an article in the *Gegharyest* journal entitled "The key to neumes is found;" and gave other presentations not listed here. But to date, it has not been possible to publish my research in its entirety.

It is puzzling to consider that Komitas's manuscripts, after traveling far and wide and finally landing in the Komitas archives, had waited 85 years for public recognition. It is even more puzzling the wide acceptance of the tale that Komitas's find was then lost again.

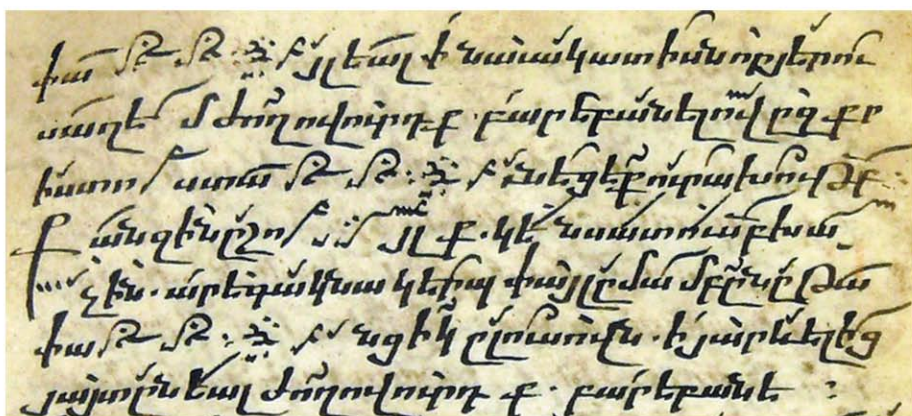
Evidence suggests that *khaz* use began in the 9th century. The 12th century saw a surge in this practice, which then declined in the 15th century. By the 17th-18th centuries the neumes were deemed unreadable. But at the beginning of the 20th century, in a surprising declaration, Komitas announced that he had found the key to reading the neumes. Here, a painful question is

1. The distinguished late Robert Atayan, who realized the publication of Komitas's musical legacy, did not reflect on Komitas' neumological handwritings except for one or two quotes. Nor did he make much mention of Komitas' unpublished theoretical writings, due to the fact that he had not, ultimately, finalized the publication of Komitas's compositions and ethnographic works. Neither did Nikoghos Tahmizyan - who authored numerous books and articles devoted to Armenian medieval music - address the preserved Komitas manuscripts dealing with neumology.

2. Shahnazaryan, A.M.: "The Medieval art of *khaz* notation in the context of Armenian musical culture", v. 1 "Prosody, *Aroganoutian*", Yerevan, 1990, 820 pp.

raised: why did Komitas not clearly demonstrate in his Paris lectures in 1914 the aspects of his find? They would have been preserved for posterity. Or, moreover, why did he not communicate his work in this area to his students, thereby ensuring its safeguarding? Could it be that the most important discovery in his twenty years of research on the “lost” key of *khazes* had been preserved nowhere in writing? It turns out, in fact, that it was preserved, and we happened upon the “lost” key in the archives containing his research.

From 1984 onward, in continuing Komitas’s work, I prepared a five-volume study relating to *khazes*, divided into the following areas of discussion: Volume I: Prosody³ (Aroghanoutiun), Volume II: Prosody⁴ (Taghachapoutiun), Volume III: Modes and melody types, Volume IV: Neumes and their meaning, Volume V: Decryption.



Volume I was published in 1990 (Shahnazaryan A.M.: “The Medieval art of *khaz* notation in the context of Armenian musical culture”, v. 1, “Hayastan” publishing, Yerevan, 1990, 820 pp.).

To give a general idea of the scope of this volume we provide below its table of contents. The book addresses prosody (*aroganoutiun*) and simple neumes, and is based on references from medieval manuscripts, early grammarians, and scholia from ancillary sources. The book assembles all extant materials on the subject, and includes examples of deciphered recitatives.

3. [Translator’s note: The word “prosody” (*prosodia*) stands for both *aroganoutioun* and *taghachapoutioun*. The former designation is used in linguistics, signifying the study of the elements of oral expression and deals with stress and intonation patterns of speech, it is the art of correct reading aloud. The latter is applied in literary context (next instance), which is the study of poetic meters and versification. In order to distinguish the two, we have always used the Armenian word next to them.]

4. [Translator’s note: Prosody as in the literary use.]

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5. [Translator's note: As defined earlier.]

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At a later date, in 2001, I published Komitas's neumological studies in a separate volume along with my inquiries, comments, analyses and research, offering a sampling of hymns decoded by me (A. M. Shahnazarian: *Uncovering Komitas's Neume Decipherings*, Yerevan, Hayastan Publishing, 2001). Six years later, most of the materials I made public were reprinted by others, who claimed they were publishing these materials for the first time, thereby misinforming their sponsor, the Galoust Gulbenkian Foundation, and the general public (see *Komitas Vardapet: Essays and Articles*, Volume 2, Yerevan, Sargis Khachents-Printinfo, 2007).

In 1909 Komitas disclosed to A. Chopanian that he had found the key to the neumes, and could read the simple melodies, and in an article he sent to the literary journal *Azatamart*, in 1910, he declared: "I can even read the simple figures," and later: "I hope that in the near future it will become available to the public in separate volumes." I have demonstrated in my book that Komitas not only had not prepared "volumes" on this subject, he had not even prepared a brief description about its most essential topic, "Prosody (*aroganoutiun*)."

The reports of his contemporaries on this issue are consistent with the manuscripts he left behind. Komitas only asserted that he can read the simple neumes, and this fully corresponds to the decoded samples he had prepared with his own hand. Despite these facts, "musicologists" who have no inkling about neumology have declared that Komitas's neumological manuscripts were not preserved. We can confirm that Komitas's decipherments are in fact preserved, and musicologists can either agree or disagree with his readings.