POETRY, SONG, DANCE AND EPIC TALE IN ARMENIA

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Category: Opinions

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Historical Armenia lies between the Taurus mountains and Caucasus, embracing the three lakes of; *Urmia* (now in Iran), *Van* (now in Turkey), and *Sevan* (the only one left for contemporary Armenia). Armenia is a mountainous country. This geographical fact is manifested in a hundred of different elemental ways, images, metaphors, idiomatic expressions, in the poetry and dance of its people. It is dramatic poetry, of dialogue, or rather, multilogue between Humans and the Elements.

An Armenian legend tells us the following story of the 'nature' of those mountains.

> **In very old times, Armenian mountains were giant brothers. Every morning, as soon as the giants awoke, they tied their belts and only then greeted each other. But one morning they hailed each other before tying their belts. For that God punished them. And the giant brothers thus, became mountains. Their belts became green fields and their tears, eternal fountains. (**A. Ghanalanian, **Avandapatoom**: (Legends). 1970. Yerevan. *Mountains, Rocks, Hills. no.9*)

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Having belts on their waists symbolised manhood and courage for an upcoming youth. It had magical powers to cast away evil, eventually ascertaining goodness in maturity. Male dancers always kept their belts while dancing, as was the case with the narrators of epics adamant to glorify courage against evil.

Maxim Gorki visited the 2nd Armenian Republic, in 1928. In his travel notes he describes **The Dance**

of the Sasoontsi, one of the most dynamic Armenian group dances, named after its place of origin, the legendry mountain range of Sasoon. It was there that one of the masterpieces of world Epic Poetry was born -- the Folk Epic of David of Sasoon, created during 9th -11th century AD. Witnessing the group dance of the people of Sasoon, M. Gorki was enchanted. He wrote:

> ***The dance of the Sasoontzi*** **is a perfect example of unique beauty…it is not meant to surprise with manifold variations, but instead manifests a deeper meaning. Two musicians each with a huge drum and a shrilling *duduk* rush out first to the dancing area. After the musicians, there swirls a multicoloured body of twenty young men. They move in unison, side by side, arms crossed in back, hand on hand, advancing with astonishing rhythmic power. This brilliant "body" whirls in a circle, then opens in a straight line while waving in ever-changing curves and spirals…And the rainbow-like "body" of dancers continue enlarging and deepening the impression of force and unity… In that dance, lies no doubt a symbolic meaning…Is it a "temple dance" or a "battle dance"? Probably *The Dance of the Sasoontzi* Armenians was a victorious battle dance.** (Haireniki Dzain Weekly. March 22 1968. Yerevan)

The eminent musicologist Curt Sachs, examining the various styles of the art of dance, thinks that

> **The whirl dance is the purest form of dance devotion…its significance is apparently astral**.
>
> (Sachs, Curt. 1963. **World History of the Dance**. Norton: New York. p.44)

Sachs continues, sketching some patterns of gestures of hands during the circle dance,

The closer the social contact, the stronger is the social character of the Choral. They hold hands, they place their hands on the shoulders or hips of their neighbours, or they lock arms…The circle as a dance motif is older than sun worship. (Ibid. pp 143-144)

We might as well remember, after all, that **Dithyramb**, the Greek Choral Dance, began as a circular dance of fifty dancers which gave birth to **Tragedy**, It was in the year 534 BC when the leader of this choral dance, a singer and dancer named **Thespis**, created the "goat-song" (**Tragoidia**) -- singing and dancing with a goat mask. This ritual was dedicated to **Dionysus**, who, according to Greek Mythology, was brought up in upper Armenia, the land of grapes and wine. (**Larousse World Mythology**. New York 1971. pp 137-138)

Originally in Armenia, dancing was accompanied by songs. No musical instruments were used other than the human voice. Clapping had the twofold function of accentuating the rhythm, and imbuing enthusiasm. Such dance-song performances were called **Geghon**, which might well be thought as being vocal accompaniments for dance-miming.

This was true of all musical cultures because, as Curt Sachs points out,

> **Instrumental dance melody is not a development from instrumental rhythmic music but rather the instrumentalising of dance songs. In all probability, the first songs to be**

> **instrumentalised are those for which words have been forgotten…**
>
> **A melodic instrumental music in the full sense appears as a dance accompaniment surprisingly late.** (Sachs, C. op. cit. p 181)

The **Pandirn** is an early Armenian professional musical instrument. Movses Khorenatzi (5th c), the "Father-Historian" of the Armenians, refers to the

> **men of the 'Armenian race' telling legends, myths, fables, stories, historical events and glorifications of valiant deeds of national heroes in 'tzootzk' and dance songs accompanied by pandirn…**
>
> (Malkhassian Stepan, **Movses Khorenatzi: History of the Armenians.** Haypethrat. Yerevan. 1961. p 94)

Khorenatzi's **Tsootsk** has puzzled many scholars. **Tsootzk** in Armenian means 'showing' or 'show'. Therefore, **Tsootzk** accompanied by a **Dance-Song,** might be well visualised as a **Pantomime** (in its original meaning of total-miming with no verbal uttering of the **Tsootsk** performer).

Lucian (b 120 AD in Samosata, on the Euphrates neighbouring closely Armenia.), might give us a better clue for our understanding of **Tsootsk** as **Pantomime**. In his **Orchesis** (his naming of **Pantomime**) of 150 AD, which is a dialogue on the art of dramatic action without words -- Lucian writes:

> **The dancer's principal task is to draw continually upon his unfailing memory of ancient story; the memory must be backed by taste and judgment… He must be familiar with every detail…Since it is his profession to imitate, and to show forth his subject by means of gesticulation, he, like the orators, must be intelligible without the aid of an interpreter; to borrow the expression of the Pythian oracle *'Dumb though he may be, and speechless, he is heard.'*** (Sachs, C. op. cit. pp 246-247).

Khorenatsi's **Tsootsk** and dance-song accompanied by **Paandirn** were also narrations, hence **Tsootsk** were most certainly **Pantomimes** (in its classical meaning) accompanied with **Tsootsk-Song** or **Dance-Song** to the sound of **Pandirns**.

Thus **Pandirn** in the Armenian musical culture might well be therefore thought of as the accompaniment musical instrument "par excellence" for **Pantomimes** or **Tzootzk**.

In 1664, the French aristocrat Chevalier Chardin visited Armenia. He wrote about his voyages in the Orient. In the town of Yerevan he witnessed a popular theatrical presentation and observed that:

> **The musicians and the dancers are the mimes or the comedians of the Orientals, or better said, these performances are their kind of opera, because they sing only in verse, and prose never enters their song.**

(Voyage du Chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient. Paris 1911, v. II, p. 207)

Chevalier Chardin was right. That innermost drive to combine the audio-visual art forms into a single, unified whole, has never been absent in the creative impulse of folk artists. The eminent Armenian art historian and critic, Garegin Levonian, was keen to insist that,

> **Music, dance and theatrical acts are all woven in ancient epic songs. The Ancient Armenian dances already embodied dramatic elements whereby the dancers also sang while dancing, enacting thus a specific subject matter.** (G. Levonian**, Theatre in Ancient Armenia.** Yerevan, 1941, p. 8**)**

In his turn, Spiridon Melikian, the renowned Armenian musicologist and ethnographer, examining the hours long cyclic performances of the Armenian epics and lyric folk tales, noted the following,

> **During the long winter nights, gathered in their warm dwellings, they narrate and sing their own operas.** (S. Melikian, **A Glimpse at the History of Armenian Music**. Yerevan, 1935, p. 10)

It is worth mentioning here that **Goosan**, the title name given to an Armenian folk musician and poet, is a multi-meaning word embracing a whole range of attributes given to a performing artist, such as, ancient bard, minstrel, troubadour, lyric poet and actor-singer, singer-musician, etc. In fact **Goosan** is the prime poet-singer-actor of the Ancient Armenians, frequently mentioned and illustrated in the Armenian manuscripts. **Goosan's** lyrical poems/songs with wide ranging contents titled **Hayrenner** enriched the musical and poetic heritage of Armenian culture.

There appears another performing ensemble which accompanied the **Goosans** in their more spectacular and melodramatic performances. They were called the **Dzaynarkous**, meaning the **Vocalists**. With loud voices and lamentations, the **Dzaynarkous** dramatised the tragic moments of the Epic tales, often with musical accompaniments of wind and string instruments.

All the above mentioned, point to the fact that Armenian folk poetry, music and mime-dance had certainly produced an exciting union of the performing arts which appeared as a metamorphic art form foreshadowing the sophisticated craft of the European musical drama called **Opera.**

Writing about the period before the creation of Opera, the distinguished musicologist, Egon Welesz is keen to emphasise the following:

When monks, artists and craftsmen from Persia, Armenia, and Syria brought their native culture in the parts of Italy and France, and workers and musicians penetrated as far as the Rhine, yet even this last effort of a culture which was continually losing ground before the increasing power of the West, must be accounted of great importance.

(Egon Welesz. **Essays on Opera**, London 1950. pp 26-27)

The style of singing is also an important aspect of that majestic art form named **Opera**, which has to be considered and closely examined. **Opera** came into being as an antithetical response to

Polyphony. After five centuries of development that resulted in the enrichment of the culture of sound with magnificent creations of vocal tapestries – befittingly called **Polyphony** – it nevertheless fell out of grace. For the new merchant class nobility and middle class intellectuals of late 16th century, **Polyphony** started to be regarded as the "enemy of music"-- in Italian, "**nemico della musica**". For them, it destroyed **Poetry**, the art for which the **meaning of the word** was, they thought, its ultimate 'raison d'être', according to their highly esteemed 'the ancients'—the Greeks, of course. In **Polyphony,** the **word** gradually becoming **unintelligible**, hence its meaning was eventually lost in the tapestry of sound, unlike in **Monody** that was destined to characterise the style of singing in **Opera.** And it did,

The truth of the matter is this. The **Monodic** style of singing had developed in such a way as to contain several oriental musical elements, like **Melisma, Tremolo, Flautato, Messa di Voce** and the freedom given to the interpreter to **Improvise** the vocal **Ornamentations**. Later on that style of singing had its Italian name **Bel Canto**, which became the most sought after singing style in the art form called **Opera,** for at least two centuries.

It's good to bear in mind that all those stylistic elements of the **Bel Canto** are the common stock of the Oriental vocal practice. Moreover, they are the quintessence of their art form of singing. In 9th century Cordoba, during the Ommayads of Andalusia, the great singer and singing pedagogue **Ziriab** had his Academy of Music, where he taught the art and techno of singing, called **Al Ghinaa al Mutqan = The Perfected Singing.** (In November 1970, I had the pleasure of presenting my paper, in Italian, titled ***Bel Canto e Ziriab,*** at the Italian Institute of Culture, which was followed by my vocal recital at AUB Chapel Hall, in memory of **Ziriab**, with a programme of Western Bel Canto repertoire).

Armenia certainly shares that Oriental musical heritage too, not only in Armenian folk music, but also in its centuries old music for rituals and worship, where those stylistic elements predominate. The Armenian church has been a sort of conservatory of music throughout the ages for such a virtuoso singing style. **Sharakans** or Hymns, **Taghs,** or Laudi exemplify those **Bel Canto** traits as early as the 10th century.

In his essay on **Eastern Chant**, the same Egon Welesz has expressed with learned enthusiasm about his admiration of the **Armenian Chant**, saying:

> **The highly developed state of Armenian ecclesiastical music as we know it from present-day practice suggests that the music of the Armenian Church in the Middle Ages must have been of outstanding beauty, comparable only to that of the Byzantine Church, if not superior. Indeed we might go further and say that we shall never be able to understand fully the development of Eastern Church music until we know more about Armenian music and its role in the development of Eastern Chant.** (Egon Welesz, in **New Oxford History of Music**. *Early Medieval)*

While the Armenian folk poetry, music and dance produced a synthesis in the Armenian Epic and Lyric folk tales, the Armenian Church became the stage where the development of a sophisticated singing style was to flourish, acquiring the label as a **Ritualistic Monody**, not devoid of theatricality.

The vastness and diversity of Armenian Chant necessitated, even as early as the 7th century, a scrupulous collection, chosen, assembled and edited by Barsegh Jonn. It soon became the source-foundation of Armenian Hymnology for centuries. (N. Tahmizian. **Music in Ancient & Medieval Armenia**. Yerevan, 1982. p. 16)

Raman Rolland visiting the 2nd Armenian Republic has jotted down these telling words:

> **Their melodies have such richness and fascination that they transform Armenia into…Italy**.
>
> (Letter to the Armenian State Publishing House, Literary Journal. Nov. 7th, 1969, Yerevan)

No wonder why the encyclopaedic writer, philosopher and composer Jean Jacque Rousseau (1712-1778), recorded down his impression about an Armenian from Venice, while the latter was listening with overwhelming indulgence to Italian music at a concert,

> **He was enchanted, he surrendered his soul to the impression of the music, the mere sounds visibly enraptured him. From that moment he could not be inclined to listen to any French air. (Source Reading in Music History.** Selected and annotated by Oliver Strunk. N.Y., 1950)

As if contradicting Rousseau's impression, the great French musician, Claude Debussy wrote about his admiration of Armenian music of Reverend Komitas. Mailing some of Komitas' music to his sister-in-law, Eleanor Debussy, the eminent composer wrote, in his accompanying letter, that he

> **could not have selected a more captivating type of music to send to her.**
>
> (Henry Begian, **Gomidas Vartabed**, Dissertation, University of Michigan. 1964)

Meanwhile, one of Komtas' most original articles on Armenian Folk Dances, which was published in Leipzig in 1901, in German, now appeared a year later in Tiflis – Tbilisi, in 1902, in Russian, published in the Russian Periodical of Caucasus – *Kavkazskaya Viestinik.* Komitas' paper appeared in a whole section dedicated to him as the most revered musician of the Armenians. It was part of an article on Caucasian music authored by the most authoritative music critic and historian of the day, Vasili Davidovich Ghorghanov (V. D. Ghorghanian, 1865-1934).

Vasili Ghorghanian was the representative of the Russian Musical Society in Tiflis. To him belong the reviews and critics on the Tiflis Opera productions which, among others, included the appearances of the much admired Bass singer F. Chaliapin. The list of Ghoghanian's monograph articles/essays was impressive: *Schiller in Music, Shakespeare in Music, Pushkin in Music, and Chaikovski in Caucasus.* (in the *Chaliapin, an Autography as told to Maxim Gorki*, Ghorghanian is mentioned as Korganov. Stein & Day. N.Y. 1969). Furthermore, the earliest important monographs in the Russian language on

Beethoven and Mozart belong to his pen -- likewise the first biography in the Russian language on Giuseppe Verdi.