THE PROGRAMME OF ARMENIAN STUDIES

REPORT: 'DNDESIAN AND THE MUSIC OF THE ARMENIAN HYMNAL'

PRESENTED BY **HAIG UTIDJIAN**

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ON **THURSDAY 3 OCTOBER** AT **HYE DOON, LONDON**

Haig Utidjian inspects the writings that made a nineteenth-century code-breaker the unsung hero of Armenian church music

Elliot Bannister

The speaker at this evening's event, the first of the academic year hosted by the Programme of Armenian Studies in London, was the researcher, choirmaster and conductor Haig Utidjian. At the beginning of this month in Echmiadzin, he informs us, the Bishops' Synod of the Armenian Church took place for the first time in six centuries. One of the two major topics on the Catholicos' agenda was his plans to unify the baptism rite across the Armenian Church, using a tenth-century codex as his inspiration. One of the noticeable aspects about this development, Utidjian says, was the sheer absence of hymns in the ceremony.

Hymns have been a part of the Armenian Church from its early days – some grew directly out of the music of pre-Christian Armenia. In his letters, St. Basil the Great spoke of the joys of "seasoning [our] labour with songs, as though with salt." Hymns became the popular music of the Armenian people, and a *gtsourt* could be heard sung on the way home from church in the same way that folksongs accompanied other spheres of life.

The creation of the Armenian script in 406 CE provided a potential means of immortalising the words of the hymns. Another crucial moment in the development of hymnal transcription took place at the Feast of the Transfiguration in 641 CE. The cantoris were coming to the end of the hymn's first stanza, so Utidjian narrates. When they looked up, their eyes were met with a look of panic from across the chancel, as the decani began to realise they hadn't yet learnt the words to the second stanza. Against their better judgement, their mouths began simply to reproduce the words of the first stanza.

This didn't go unnoticed by the Catholicos, who thereafter ordered the first major redaction of hymns.

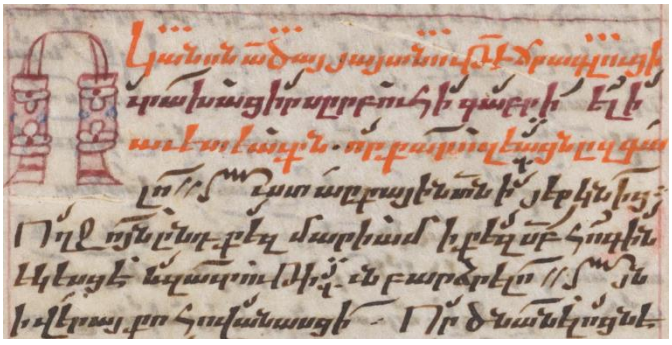
In the ninth century, Meshtots' beautifully designed characters began to be embellished with dots, lines, loops and tildes known as neumes that informed the reader of the metric and rhythmic qualities of the hymns. They appear in the earliest preserved manuscript of the Armenian Hymnal, known as the Jerusalem Codex, produced in 1198. They appear again in first printed copy of the hymnal, published in Amsterdam in 1665, at the height of the city's golden age. The neumes tell us how to render the words they accompany into music – or at least they would do, if anyone knew what they meant.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the meanings of a lot of the neumes had already become a mystery. In the nineteenth century, some of the symbols were recycled into a completely new system of notation which could provide phonic information like sequence and interval. But what about the original system that was being replaced? Who held the key to understanding those symbols?

A variety of obstacles has kept the mystery going. Sources are not the problem. Twenty-one of St. Gregory of Narek's odes are preserved in neumatic notation. The problem is that the melodies of fifteen of those are unknown.

A student of Gomidas (as well as a member of tonight's audience) suggests the ancient Armenian neumatic system had connections with the Byzantine tradition, but he was shot down by his contemporaries with accusations of treason. Even worse was the reaction to any student suggesting it had a link with Ottoman tradition!

The island of Saint Lazarus claims to have a faithful key to the ancient notation. But a few awkward questions posed by Utidjian reveal that this key may have been influenced by theories on the neumes by the outside world, brought to the monastery by new, young monks.



One man who spent his life on cracking the code was the nineteenth-century musicologist of Constantinople, Yeghia Dndesian.

Dndesian theorised, for example, that a syllable written with a short neume lasts one crochet beat, and that a long neume stretches a syllable to two, a conclusion that he reached by comparing two pieces written with the ancient notation. The first was a seventh-century hymn dedicated to the forty virgins who took refuge in Armenia and written in 36 stanzas (one for each letter of the alphabet). The second was a twelfth-century hymn written by the Catholicos St. Nerses the Gracious.

Dndesian admitted, however, that his theory only held true if the two hymns were sung in the same metre. It is this sort of cautious reasoning that makes Dndesian special, says Utidjian admiringly. He was the only musicologist of the time honest enough to keep an account of his techniques.

The detective work that Utidjian is leading us in tonight is not about decoding the neumes but about investigating the techniques Dndesian used to do so himself. When Utidjian presents the audience with an image of the hymnal printed in Amsterdam, he's not so much interested in the content of the pages as the invisible fingerprints and notes in the margins left by Dndesian.

His diaries tell us, for example, of his contemporary Taşçean, with whom he was engaged in a battle of professional rivalry. The Patriarch had opened a competition to unify hymnal melodies and preserve them for notation, and the musicologists were competing head-to-head. This was before our age of pluralistic creativity; it was one where the two had to cheat, sabotage, and most of all work their socks off for the Patriarch's seal of approval. After 47 meetings, the judging committee (whose minutes are preserved in Jerusalem) decided to adopt Dndesian's hymnal as a working edition.

Despite this success, never did Dndesian claim to have found the solution to the mystery of the ancient Armenian neumes. He was imprisoned at the age of 47 after the sultan considered one of his songbooks too patriotic, and he later died in jail. His seminal transposition of the Armenian Hymnal was published only posthumously in 1934.

The publication has been well-thumbed but is rarely used nowadays in church services. In the absence of a more definitive compilation, it is common to hear the melodies of hymns simply improvised by the congregation, Utidjian notes with a sense of badly disguised exasperation. However, when considered as a musicological work in progress, the Dndesian hymnal is a fabulous example of methodical reasoning, and paves the way for filling the remaining gaps.