

# KOMITAS VARDAPET AND MUSIC-THERAPY IN MEDIEVAL ARMENIA<sup>1</sup>

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*“Soul Lives by Music”<sup>2</sup>  
Pythagoras of Samos  
(6<sup>th</sup> century BC)*

The positive influence of music upon human health has been discovered in most ancient times. These ideas are reflected in Indian Vedas, Greek treatises, Eastern medicine - particularly in Arabic medical tractates.

It is impossible to imagine a person impervious to the charm of music. In various medieval investigations we find interesting ideas regarding relations between music and the spiritual realm of the human being, and even the affinities between different musical instruments and the parts of human body, as well as the significant impact that music has on a person's emotions and sensations.

In Ancient Greece healing methods by using melodies of each musical mode in correlation with certain rhythms had been developed for different diseases during many centuries. The most effective art is known to be music. Through the ear it influences directly on the inner emotional state of the person, consequently on his/her soul and body. The Pythagoreans treated music as a powerful means of harmony, identifying the latter with musical modes, and in the wider sense – with Universal harmony. Plato believed that we permanently hear the harmony of the Universal music. And Aristotle

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<sup>1</sup> See Վարդումյան Ա., Երաժշտության ազդեցությունը մարդու առողջության վրա, Հայկական ավանդական մշակույթ, ՀՀ ԳԱԱ IX հանրապետական գիտաժողով, Երևան, 1997, Թեզիսներ, էջ 62-64: Вадумян А.Д., Музыкаотерапия в армянских средневековых рукописях, Հայաստանի կոմպոզիտորների միության միջազգային գիտաժողով, Երևան, 1998, Թեզիսներ, էջ 6-8: Վարդումյան Ա., Մտորումներ երաժշտաբուժության մասին, Երաժշտաբուժության I հայկական գիտաժողով, Երևանի Կոմիտասի անվան պետական կոնսերվատորիա, 1999, Թեզիսներ, էջ 2: Վարդումյան Ա., Երաժշտաբուժութեան մասին պատկերացումները հայոց մէջ, Բազմավէպ, CLXV, 2007, Վենետիկ, Ս. Ղազար, էջ 493-509: Vardumyan A., Music Therapy in Medieval Armenia, Proceedings of the 21<sup>st</sup> International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London, 21-26 August, 2006, Volume III, Abstracts, pp. 119-120. Վարդումյան Ա., Հայոց միջնադարեան ձեռագրերը երաժշտաբուժութեան մասին, Հայկազեան Հայագիտական Հանդէս, 2012, էջ 283-297. Music-Therapy in Medieval Armenian manuscripts, Theses of World Psychiatric Association Thematic Conference “Mental health and Mental Illness”, Yerevan, Armenia, 2013, August 29-31, Abstract Book, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> This dictum is taken from the book of H. Minas Bjshkyan «Երաժշտութիւն որ է համառոտ տեղեկութիւն երաժշտական սկզբանց ելեւէջութեանց եղանակաց եւ նշանագրաց խազից, 1815. (աշխ. Ա. Քերովբեանի, Երեւան, 1997) գրքի 61 և 76 էջերից՝ «Հոգին երաժշտութեամբ կեայ», իսկ էջ 64-ում վերոնշյալ բնաբանը հետևյալ կերպ է մեկնաբանվում. «ինչպէս կը պատմէ Դաւիթ Անյաղթ փիլիսոփայն, Պիլթագորեանք կ'ըսէին, թէ *հոգին երաժշտութեամբ կ'ապրի*», տե՛ս Արփի Վարդումյան, Երաժշտաբուժութեան մասին պատկերացումները հայոց մէջ, Բազմավէպ, Վենետիկ, 2007, էջ 493 (ծան. 2):

created the theory of ethos - the character of the eight modes, each somehow affecting the emotional world of a human being.

Greek mythology evidences that music influences even the beasts: the well-known story of Orpheus tells how his music calmed the wild animals and helped him to find Eurydice in the Underground Kingdom<sup>3</sup>.

In Ancient Armenia asserted that music and dance have many magical qualities: ethnologists described that even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in remote villages there were some healers who have treated people dancing ritual dances with patients, accompanied by specific musical rhythms<sup>4</sup>.

The traditional theories of music-therapy were derived in Armenian medieval science by the great philosopher of the 5<sup>th</sup> century - Davit Anhaght (David the Invincible), who adopted them from scholars of the Ionic School<sup>5</sup>. Their basic concept had taken its sources from the methods of humoral therapy and the principle of antithesis in medicine. According to this method the balance of four liquids – blood, lymph, mucus and bile – contained in the human organism, keeps human body in equilibrium and health, and even the slightest breach of the natural state of health leads to various pains and illness as a result. The only true way to avoid such consequences is to keep the liquid balance in the organism.

There is an interesting story about Alexander the Great who was very sensitive to music, which is told in Davit Anhaght's (Invincible) famous work "Definitions of Philosophy"<sup>6</sup>. They say that during a joyful party the musicians began to play a military melody - just for fun - and Alexander, even drunk, quickly reacted to music, put on his weapon to get ready to fight against the enemy. Then the musicians played another trick: they began to play party music again, and Alexander took off the weapon and went on with merry-making. Later this story was retold in other works on music, particularly in some introductions of Armenian Sharaknoc<sup>7</sup>.

The great Armenian composer, singer, conductor, ethnologist and musicologist Komitas Vardapet (Archimandrite) in his article "Music therapy"<sup>8</sup> aimed to attract attention to a medieval manuscript<sup>9</sup> (kept in the Library of Ejmiatsin (the Holy Center of all Armenians), which elucidates the relaxing and healing influence of spiritual music upon human soul and body. So Komitas is the first musicologist who studied Music-therapy described in the Armenian medieval manuscript.

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<sup>3</sup> Called Hades, Aides or Aid, «Դիցաբանական բառարան», Երևան, 1985, էջ 259-260:

<sup>4</sup> Վարդանյան Ս.Ա., «Հայաստանի բժշկության պատմություն», Երևան, 2000, էջ 22:

<sup>5</sup> Pythagoras, Hippocrates and Alcmeon of Croton.

<sup>6</sup> Դավիթ Անհաղթ, «Սահմանք իմաստասիրության», [Ս.Ս. Արևշատյան], Երևան, 1960, էջ 134:

<sup>7</sup> Selection of Armenian Hymnology, which includes medieval annual canonic spiritual sung or Canticles of Armenian Church. See «Ձայնքաղ Շարական», Վաղարշապատ, 1888, էջ 2; also Դավիթ Անհաղթ, «Սահմանք իմաստասիրութեան» (աշխ. Ս.Ս. Արևշատյանի), Երևան, 1960, էջ 134:

<sup>8</sup> Կոմիտաս, Բժշկութիւն երաժշտութեամբ, Թեոդիկ, «Ամենուն Տարեցոյցը», Կ.Պօլիս, 1915, էջ 245-246:

<sup>9</sup> This manuscript now is in the Matenadaran's collection N 2380.

The analytical and comparative study of the above mentioned and some other manuscripts certifies that their author is the eminent philosopher, grammarian, musician and physician of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Hovhannes Pluz Yerznkaci. He has not only commented on the book, but also has introduced very important ideas about the interconnection between human health and melody types in his research of grammatical hermeneutics<sup>10</sup> on the famous Greek grammarian Dionysius of Thrace's (second-first centuries BC) "Art of Grammar" - the first extant grammar of Greek<sup>11</sup>. Those are the eight traditional modes of the Armenian Church singing or hymns, four of them are authentic, called *Dzayn* (*Չայն* - *Sound*), and four - plagal, called *Koghm* (*Կողմ* - *Side*). When the proportion of four liquids is violated, one of those melody-modes can help to balance the emotional, physical and mental state, and recover the patient's health. The author argues that music-therapy can be more effective than administering medications, particularly in the cases when the person suffers from a purely psychological condition arising from sorrow and it is the result of a misbalance among the four liquids of human body. This was treated by singing a hymn called *Sharakan*<sup>12</sup> - in one of the eight traditional modes of the Armenian spiritual music. Komitas considered that there are two kinds of music: the first is spiritual which we listen to in churches, and the second is secular which we listen to in our common life. He thinks that spiritual music is the most effective for healing because it is closer to the human soul. As medicine has effects upon the body so does music, through the ear, because it is non-physical like the soul.

The great philosopher and healer, the founder of the Cilician medical school Mkhitar Heraci (12<sup>th</sup> century), has also dealt with music-therapy problems in his famous tractate "Relief of Fevers"<sup>13</sup>. He writes about "one-day temperature, the reason of which is sadness and sorrow", and in this case, as a means for cure, he suggests: "...a bard's playing on a string instrument and singing his sweet melodies, that gives inner joy to the listener". And the eminent healer of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Amirdovlat Amasiaci in his book "The Benefits of Medicine"<sup>14</sup>, in the case of similar diseases offers "...to make sweet the nature with fun and bard's music, until your spirit is better".

There are relatively few direct details concerning healing by music preserved in medieval Armenian manuscripts. However, in various works devoted to different areas of science - as art and science were not fully differentiated in Hellenistic times: Music was considered one of the four sciences in the Quadrivium with Arithmetic, Geometry and Astronomy. So, I find extremely interesting the ideas regarding the connection

<sup>10</sup> Յովհաննէս Երզնկացի (1230-1293), «Հաւաքումն մեկնութեան քերականի», [Լ.Գ. Խաչերեան], Լոս Անջելէս, 1983, էջ 134:

<sup>11</sup> This investigation served as a Grammar-book during the entire Byzantine Age and was translated into Armenian in the number of the first books after the Bible. See previous reference.

<sup>12</sup> A song from Armenian *Sharaknoc* (Hymnology), as well as the whole Hymnology, named *Sharakan* too. See «Ձայնագրել Շարական հոգեւոր երգոց», Վաղարշապատ, 1875:

<sup>13</sup> «Մխիթարի Բժշկապետի Ջերմանց մխիթարութիւն», Վենետիկ-Ս. Ղազար, 1832, էջ 18-19:

<sup>14</sup> Ամիրդովլաթ Ամասիացի, «Օգուտ Բժշկութեան», [Ստ. Մալխասեանց], Երևան, 1940, էջ 485-486:

between man's health and music. Traditional treatments of the relations between the primary four elements and the four humors of the human organism appear in the treatises of certain thinkers including Hakob Ghrameci's "Interpretation of Calendar"<sup>15</sup>, where in the course of remarks on diverse areas of knowledge, he discusses the topic of music and several musical instruments<sup>16</sup> of his time and their influence on a person's psychic state.

Similarly, the well-known physician Buniat Sebastaci devotes a special mention to sorrow in his "The Book of Medicine"<sup>17</sup>, stating that it can lead to psychological problems of various degrees, especially melancholy, the cure for which, he argues, is listening to the sound of the Eastern string musical instrument - called *saz*, and singing a light song for the patient. However, the most perfect instrument was accounted man himself, with his great vocal potential and skilful craftsmen have always tried to imitate human's singing organs in the forms of different musical instruments.

More complete details, concerning healing by music, are contained in a fragment preserved in a late medieval manuscript of the Matenadaran's collection<sup>18</sup>. It is essential that curing patients by music-therapy is presented there as being in practice already for a very long time. The author seeks to reintroduce the method, insisting that often it can be more effective than any other method of healing by common medicine, particularly in those cases when the patient suffers from unhappiness, from irresponsible love or melancholy. In the manuscript of Hovhannes Pluz Erznkaci, Komitas finds the words which say which of the four humors is out of balance and that it should be treated by playing on one of the strings of a four-string instrument. Komitas explains it means to play or to sing a melody in one of the four old modes of Armenian spiritual music based on the main sound of one of the four strings. According to the Armenian Menologium<sup>19</sup>, the number ten was considered as sacred in the Middle Ages, and arose from the ancient four original tones. Those are the above-mentioned eight modes, plus the two additional melody-modes, called *Steghi*<sup>20</sup>, all of which were attributed to St. Sahak Partev, talented Armenian Catholicus of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. He has created the Armenian alphabet – together with St. Mesrop Mashtoc - and they both were the first Armenian professional poets and composers of specific national spiritual songs, later called *sharakans*. So, number 4 and number 10 are connected with each other as follows:  $1+2+3+4=10$ .

<sup>15</sup> Հակոբ Դրիմեցի, «Մեկնութիւն Տումարի», [Զ. Էյնաթյան], Երևան, 1987, էջ 197-199:

<sup>16</sup> For instance, *sandir* or *santur* (multi-string beating musical instruments), as well as *saldir* (the other version of the previous names, which may arise from the name of *psaltery* - musical instrument of Prophet David, who have sing his psalms with accompaniment by this instrument). See Վարդուհան Ա., Հայոց միջնադարեան ձեռագրերը երաժշտաբուժութեան մասին, «ՀՀՀ», 2012, էջ 293:

<sup>17</sup> Բունիաթ Սեբաստացի, «Գիրք բժշկության» [Դ. Կարապետյան], Երևան, 1987, էջ 75:

<sup>18</sup> Մաշտոցի անվան Մատենադարան, ձեռ. N 4618:

<sup>19</sup> «Գիրք որ կոչի Այսմաուրք», Կ.Պօլիս, 1730, էջ 74:

<sup>20</sup> Ստեղի - Complicated modes of Armenian medieval modulated chants.

Thus, the four original basic tones of the Armenian Church songs correspond to the four natural elements: the first tone is paired with earth, the second with water, the third with air and the fourth with fire. As such, it was possible to situate them in the traditional medical system of circulation in the Middle Ages, using the ancient principle, already enunciated by Hippocrates of curing opposite with opposite.

Every human being in its spirit searches continually for a type of music conducive to it. This is in effect to transfer the macrocosm harmony of the higher spheres of the universe to its microcosm, the subtle realm of a person's inner world, in the process enriching, perfecting and refining every listener and rendering a person a sensitive, unique and harmonious individual.

The methods of music-therapy are nowadays being developed in many countries. The help of music in treatment without any drugs and chemicals may cure with some methods: passive listening to music, active music-making, that is: playing or singing, or a combination of the two - playing, singing or dancing accompanied by music. In healing by music the most important point is the choice of repertoire. On the one hand, for each person it must be suggested the special music to his/her individual taste. On the other hand, in the case of the same maladies more effective for a person or a group may be an uncommon music. Owing to music-therapy, the highest energetic channels in the human organism are refined and the patient's emotions and moods are greatly improved. The health care of the future must take into consideration the more harmless approaches of traditional and non-traditional medicine, reducing to a minimum the use of chemicals. Ecological safety is its main merit, which makes it attractive for everybody, because it is well-known that chemicals, while curing any disease, may harm the organism, causing another disorder.

Nowadays it is impossible to ignore the importance of alternative methods of healing which seem quite modern but come from the ancient past and bring the oldest wise traditions with them. It is well known that the best means of curing is to prevent diseases, which is possible not only by means of sports, healthy food, not smoking, but also by listening to charming music: a piece of beautiful music surely brings the organism to a harmonic state.

They bear the main idea of medicine coming from ancient times and are best expressed in the famous words of the great Hippocrates: "Do no harm", as well as in another ancient wisdom: "Cure not the disease, but the person". So, music is the universal magical language that binds us all together.

*Translated from Armenian by  
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