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# Armenian Folk Songs and Dances in the Fresno and Los Angeles Areas\*

DONN BORCHERDT

OF SEVERAL HUNDRED THOUSAND ARMENIANS in America, about one third make their home in California. The main concentrations are in Fresno, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.<sup>1</sup> The distribution of the people varies in each of these cities: Fresno, the center of one of the largest agricultural regions in California, is the most tightly knit of the three, first, because it has the greatest concentration of Armenians, and second, because the people live closer to each other. While Los Angeles boasts a greater Armenian population, close examination shows a far greater acculturation to western customs and habits. This is logical, since families are more scattered than in Fresno, and interaction with other Armenians is impaired.

The economy of the Fresno Armenian is largely agricultural; a great number of the people own small farms or vineyards that they work themselves. Others find employment in the handling, packing, and shipping of the produce. A significant number own large businesses and farms.

Los Angeles Armenians, on the other hand, find employment in the large industries and small retail businesses. Many commute several miles to their places of employment. In Los Angeles, as in Fresno, a significant number are ranking members of their community.

The Armenian Apostolic Church has long been a strong unifying factor in Armenia. It is no less so for Armenians in the United States. Both Los Angeles and Fresno have large churches. Fresno's churches are quite strong, with large and vital congregations. Those in Los Angeles, though well attended, suffer from the scattering of the people mentioned above. The Los Angeles churches, however, are significant because they represent a focal point of integration where few others exist.

Vital to the study of any folklore is a knowledge of its background. Arme-

\* Paper delivered at the sixth annual meeting of the California Folklore Society, Stanford University, April 12, 1957.

<sup>1</sup> An estimate by Armenian social workers places the Armenian population of the cities of Los Angeles and Fresno at about 65,000.

nian written history dates from approximately 1200 B.C., though its legendary history goes back several thousand years earlier. It is thought that a band of Phrygians or Cimmerians migrated east and settled in the country around Mount Ararat.<sup>2</sup> Their leader was named Armen, thus the name "Armenian," or son of Armen.

This people eventually mixed with the Chaldeans and Hittites, whom they found in the area, to form three archtypes: The Armens, who descend from the original band of Phrygians; a second type that is an intermixture of Armens with other tribes; and the Kurds who supposedly descend directly from Chaldean and Hittite stocks.

During the reign of Tigranes the Great, about 95–55 B.C., Armenian culture reached a height not attained since. Tigranes gathered musicians and artists at his court at Ashtishat, and according to Moses of Khorene, a fifth-century historian, minstrels composed and performed a great deal of music, and were allowed access everywhere. Huge pagan festivals were celebrated, and it was during this period that the Armenian theater evolved. The period between 100 B.C. and 200 A.D. saw the succession of several puppet rulers appointed by the King of Persia.

In the second century A.D. Gregory the Illuminator converted Tiridates, and established Christianity in Armenia. Pagan music, customs, and holidays, were adapted for use in the infant church, which was destined to be the sole unifying force in Armenia. The fifth century saw the invention of the Armenian alphabet, the development of musical notation, the translation of the Bible into Armenian, and the appearance of the first Armenian historians.

The seventh century saw the beginning of the spread of Islam. From this time the history of Armenia is one of conquest and depredation. Mohammedans and Arabs invaded the country during the seventh century. They were followed by the Seljuk Turks, the Mongols, the hordes of Tamerlane, and the Ottoman Turks. Each subsequent invasion left traces of its particular culture. With the rise of the Ottoman empire to power, (ca. 1100 A.D.) came the era of the Crusades. The West found the Armenians an important ally in a vast sea of Islam.

By the eighteenth century the Armenian church notation had lost its meaning, and the music of the church had become fashionable at the courts of the Turkish nobles. We are told that the chant was often freely improvised much in the manner of the Turkish *Sharkie*, a type of love song. Subsequent to this period of virtuoso music came the invention of a new style of notation which resulted in a purge and standardization of the church music by *Catholicos* Gevorg IV. In the latter part of the eighteenth century Meka Yekmalian, a graduate of the St. Petersburg conservatory, worked out a harmonization of

<sup>2</sup> A. Safrastian, "Armenia," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1955.

the traditional mass and hymns. This Yekmalian mass is one of the earliest examples of Western influence on Armenian music, and is standard in the Apostolic churches of today.<sup>3</sup>

The latest chapter in the history of Armenia began in the twenty-year period between 1896 and 1916, the dates of the Sassoonian Revolutions. These revolutions were an effort on the part of the Armenians to bring their plight under the Turkish yoke to the attention of the West. They were only moderately successful, partly because of World War I. It was during the twenty-year period between 1896 and 1916 that so many of the bloody massacres occurred. Seldom do I find a communicant whose friends or relatives were not victims of the Turks. Stories of the atrocities committed are incredible. The inevitable result, of course, was the emigration in which huge numbers of refugees fled from the homeland to France, Italy, Africa and the United States.

Armenian activities in the United States at present include two political factions of the Apostolic church, an Armenian welfare organization, several large publishing houses, and numerous social activities.

The representations in the following pages are based entirely upon material collected in the Los Angeles and Fresno areas. The collection numbers some fifty songs, not including variants, and a similar number of dances.

In order to present the folk songs more clearly, I have grouped them under five headings for the broad purposes of this paper. The groupings are these: "Lyrical Songs," "Dance Songs," "Wedding Songs," "Humorous and Satirical Songs," and finally, "Songs of the Revolutions."

The songs of the first group, the lyrical songs, are subtler and more expressive in content than the other songs. The longing for a loved one, the distant sound of a shepherd's flute, or the plight of a partridge who has lost its chicks are examples of subject material in this grouping. The texts themselves are highly allegorical, a characteristic of much Near-Eastern poetry. In addition there is a tasteful use of "word painting." The following song is an excellent example of this technique. The translation is word for word, but the reiteration of the final word leaves the rhyme scheme intact:

The morning bells pealed sweetly;  
The dawn opened upon our world, shining sweetly;  
Brides and maidens went up the mountain swaying sweetly;  
The intoxicating fragrance of flowers spreads sweetly.

The melodies of this group are lyrical, sustained and most have slow tempi. In general the melodic phrases are long with many subtle forms of embellishment. There is considerable use of grace notes, trills, and intervals smaller than the Western ear generally hears. In spite of this rather sophisticated orna-

<sup>3</sup> Rouben Grigorian, "Armenian Music—Past and Present," *Armenian Review*, V (June 1952), 59 ff.

mentation, there are few passages where more than one tone occurs for each syllable.

### GOUJN ARA ('THE WATER JUG')<sup>4</sup>

*Slowly.*

Goujn ara ye---la sar---e Cheh Kuhda fi---dan yar--  
 --e Fi---dan yares intz d---veck cheh Kashem ah oo---  
 za-----re. Fi-----dan ya-res intz d--veck cheh Ka---  
*Quickly*  
 shem ah oo za-----re. Kha kha hed it yem sha, ha, ha, ha, ha,  
 Ooghigh yote dari ah  
 ha, ha, ha, Sari---no yar jan yari---no yar jan  
 Gar-miz Khentzor Kodit emha } Sari-----no yar jan  
 Kerna Kh-- pore ga--ra-da-ha  
 yari-----no yar jan.

Goujn ara yela sare  
 Cheh kuhda fidan yare  
 Fidan yares intz dveck  
 Cheh kashem ah oo zare

I took the water jug and went up the  
 mountain. I couldn't find my sweet-  
 heart. Give me my darling sweetheart  
 so I don't pine or sorrow.

kna kna hedit yem ha, ha,  
 ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha,  
 Sarino yar jan yari no yar jan  
 Garmiz khentzor kodit em ha  
 Sarino yar jan yari no yar jan.

Go, go, wherever you go I'll be with  
 you. My darling, my dearest, my  
 sweetheart.

Ooghigh yote dari a ha, ha,  
 ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha,  
 Sarino yar jan yari no yar jan  
 Kernakhpore garada ha,  
 Sarino yar jan yari no yar jan.

I am a beautiful red apple in your  
 sash. My darling, my dearest, my  
 sweetheart.

<sup>4</sup>For explanation of this and subsequent transcriptions, see "Notes on the Transcriptions" at the end of the article (p. 12).

In contrast to the lyrical songs, the dance songs differ in several distinct ways. The texts limit themselves to one or two short phrases per strophe with a string of nonsense syllables interspersed. The subject material usually describes and praises a beautiful girl. Phrases like, "My love is a red apple," and "breasts like to *shamam*"<sup>5</sup> are common in these songs. Melodically these songs are very melismatic, that is they have many notes to one syllable, with short accented rhythmic patterns. Most of the songs of this group are limited to a scale of no more than five basic tones, but melodic interest is achieved by profuse microtonal ornamentation, and complex rhythms.

The third group, the wedding songs, serves a distinct function in the marriage preparations. Customarily, the bridegroom is dressed in the wedding costume by several of his friends. As each piece of clothing is proffered and put on the leader will chant, "*Mer Takvorim inch bidi?*"—"What do we need for our bridegroom?" The rest of the group responds with, "We need a vest, a coat, etc."

A second type of song in this group introduces each important wedding guest with an allegorical compliment. Formal structure is similar to the vestment song mentioned in the preceding paragraph. The musical treatment of the text is syllabic, and the verse is in couplets; further, there is no use of nonsense syllables in this group. The melodic structure is simple and repetitive, and the songs are chanted rather than sung.

The humorous and satirical songs differ markedly from the relatively serious style of the first two groupings, and are easily distinguishable by their straight-forward style. The praise of drunkenness, an angry husband berating a negligent wife, subtle fun-making directed at the government—any of the above are characteristic of topics treated in these songs. Melodic elements are well developed but relatively unembellished. There are few microtonal elements, and a single tone is used for each syllable. The tempi are moderately quick, and the rhythmic techniques are not unusual from a westerner's point of view. Here is an excellent example of this group:

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<sup>5</sup> *Shamam* is a small flesh-colored melon commonly compared to a woman's breasts because of its size and color.

## KINOVI YERKE (THE DRUNKARD'S SONG)

Voh inch kaghtzez pan Uhlal gontzapan Gontzel lav kini Taparil misht anpan? Larit  
 Voh inch Daren pan Uhlal tughtapan Darvil shad poghe Kulkhin dal sev hoghe  
 tumber la lem la ha, ha, ha, Larit tumber la lem la ha, ha, ha, Larit tumber la lem la ha, ha, ha, Larit  
 tumber la lem la ha, ha, ha, Larit ha.

Voh inch kaghtzez pan,  
 Uhlal gontzapan,  
 Gontzel lav kini,  
 Taparil misht anpan.

Larit tumber la lem la ha, ha, ha,  
 Larit tumber la lem la ha, ha, ha,  
 Larit tumber la lem la ha, ha, ha,  
 Larit tumber la lem la ha, ha, ha,

Voh inch daren pan,  
 Uhlal tughtapan  
 Darvil shad poghe  
 Kulkhin dal sev hoghe.  
 (repeat chorus)

How sweet it is to be a drunkard. Oh,  
 how sweet it is to be a drunkard, to  
 drink good wine and be a loafer.

Larit tumber la lem la ha, ha, ha, (4)

How bitter it is to be a gambler, to lose  
 all your money and cover your head  
 with black ashes.  
 (repeat chorus)

Musically similar to the humorous-satirical songs are the children's songs. They differ only in textual content. In this grouping are two smaller groupings: play or game songs, and fables. The game songs are used as accompaniment to games which have their Western counterparts: "Blind Man's Buff," "Ring Around the Rosie," etc. (It should be stressed that while there are similar actions in the Western and Armenian games, they are not entirely analogous.)

The fables follow the Aesopic pattern, and are sung to simple melodies. To date only two such examples have been uncovered. The song given in the example moralizes on the fate of a chick that fails to heed its mother's advice:



## GAR OO CHIGAR (CHICK AND EAGLE)



Gar oo chigar hav me gar,  
 Tzakerov man gookar.  
 Tzavakneris gesser pokrig,  
 Kovigess mi zadvik.  
 Charen heroon gspaseh  
 Vor tzezi venasseh.

Once upon a time there was a mother hen minding her brood. "My little children," she said, "don't go far from me, harm is waiting not very far from you in order to hurt you."

Tzakme kichme heratzav,  
 Kheghch tzagook inch medz tzav  
 Ardziv m'aha yegav veran  
 Yev antzootz zine jiran;  
 Myer hima gehishem  
 Inch okood shad oosh eh.

A chick went a little farther from its mother. Ah, poor little chick; what a terrible thing. An eagle swooped down upon it and took it in its claws. "Mother, I remember now, but it's too late."

Dghrak tzake orinag  
 Ovor medik cheneh medzin  
 Badijze uhradzin  
 Ge kdne anbadjar  
 Paitz verche chega jar.

Children the chick is an example, don't forget this lesson. Whoever doesn't mind his elders will inevitably be punished for his misdeeds. He'll find punishment when it's too late.

The songs of the Sassoonian Revolution are particularly interesting, first, because they can be dated exactly, and secondly, because there is already an element of Western influence in them.

Verses in these songs are patriotic, and the poetry does not always show the finesse of some of the older lyrical songs. Rhythmically they are martial in feeling, though the occurrence of metric changes makes them somewhat difficult to march to, at least by our standards. Particularly notable are the wide ranges, at least an octave, and the use of recognizable modes. In these songs, more than in any of the others, one sees implied harmonic progressions.



## VERKEROV LI (FULL OF WOUNDS)

Ver ker--ov li jan fed--a---yem ta--para---gan  
doon choo--nim ya---ris po---khan zenkes yem kergil  
Mi degk han---kist koon choo---nim. koon choo---nim. aryhoot  
yergir sook oo shi---van ints toors ganchets pag gyankits.  
-- kits. aryhoot ---kits. Danchvats hair- e-----ni--kis se--re.  
Chi ya--ghie--tsoots ints ve--dan--kits. -- kits. shatlovah!

Verkerov li jan Fedayem  
 Taparagan doon choonim. (2)

I am a dedicated soldier sore wounded,  
 roaming and homeless. Instead of my  
 sweetheart, I embrace my rifle. I have  
 no peaceful rest anywhere.

Yaris pokhan zenkes yem kergil  
 Mi degk hankist koon choonim. (2)

My oppressed country called me from  
 my secluded life, and the love of my  
 fatherland gives me courage and faith  
 in the face of danger.

Aryhoot yergir sook oo shivan  
 Ints toors ganchets pag gyankits. (2)

They called me *jan Fedayi*, I became  
 the defender of an ideal. Let my blood  
 be an example to Armenian soldiers.

Danchvats hairnikis sere  
 Chi vaghetsoots ints vedankits. (2)

My Macedonian brother was crowned  
 with my cross, and with fraternal weap-  
 ons we destroyed the cruel mob.

Phrase groupings in Armenian songs show basic patterns. Most important is a progressive type, where each phrase is a new musical idea: *AA BBC BBC DDE*. Usually a song of this type uses no more than four distinct phrases. A second type uses longer phrases made up of short melodic fragments. Such a phrase is then repeated again and again to different words: *ABbb' ABbb'*, etc. A third type may show two or three clear melodic ideas which are then paired: *AA AA BB AA*. In all of these examples, the italicized portion of the musi-

cal phrase is usually confined to a single phrase in the text: each of the phrases given above would comprise an entire verse, and be repeated for subsequent verses. It must be born in mind that many variations of the above styles exist, and that these patterns have been derived from a large number of songs.<sup>6</sup>

The scales of these songs are difficult to identify, especially since the ranges of most songs are not wide enough for accurate judgment. Poladian suggests several of the Greek modes, and cites Arabian and Persian scales for comparison.<sup>7</sup>

Prefatory to any discussion of Near Eastern instrumental music must be an examination of the instruments. Instruments in an Armenian dance ensemble serve either a rhythmic or melodic purpose.

The rhythm instruments are *Dumballeg*, a small vase-shaped drum played with the hands and fingers; *Davool*, a large double-headed, two-toned drum played with a wooden beater and a willow wand; and finally, *Tanbur*, a tambourine. The name *Tanbur* usually implies a form of lute rather than a tambourine; this is perhaps a corruption of the English word rather than an Armenian term.

Melodic instruments include several varieties of the plucked lute such as 'Oud, Tar, or Saz. The former is tuned in the lower register, while the latter two fall into the upper register; the guitar and banjo have similar ranges.

A second type of stringed instrument, a bowed lute, is the *Kemanchâh*. This is played in an upright position like a cello, and was very popular among traveling minstrels both for solo improvisation, and for accompanying singing.

The woodwinds also fall into the category of melodic instruments. Examples of the following have been found in Los Angeles and Fresno: *Tutag*, a type of recorder played by musicians coming from that part of Armenia nearest the Caucasus; *Zoorna*, a simple bagpipe with the players' cheeks and throat forming the "bag" or air reservoir (common throughout the Near East, the *Zoorna* is usually played in conjunction with the *Davool* mentioned above); *Sring*, an end-blown flute used by the shepherds to control their flocks and to while away the lonely hours on the upland meadows.

In addition to the above, there is a zither called *Kanoon*; the clarinet and violin have been adapted to the dance style, and are very popular.

The leader of the dance ensemble is always the player of the instrument carrying the melody. He plays a short prelude which outlines the mode and identifies the piece. In many instances he may play a "tag" or short melodic phrase which remains unchanged for every piece, and which identifies him as the performer. This short introduction leads directly to the opening phrase of

<sup>6</sup> Similar groupings are cited in Sirvart Poladian, *Armenian Folksongs* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1942), p. 73, table 9.

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 72.

the dance, at which point the drummer and other instruments fall into phase with him. (See *Galus i Brungh*, mm. 1–3, below.)

As might be expected, various parts of Armenia have different styles of dancing, consequently musical styles also differ. In the part of Armenia north-east of Ararat and nearest the Caucasus the music is characterized by narrow melodic ranges and much ornamentation such as trills and grace notes. (See *Galus i Brungh*, mm. 3–end, below.) In central Armenia, a mountainous area, the music is that of the *Davool* and *Zoorna*. Melodic ranges are limited here also and ornamentation is similar.

#### GALUS I BRUNGH



In western Armenia, now a part of Turkey, there has been noticeable Persian and Turkish influence; whereas in the previously mentioned areas the dance groups are limited to one or two instruments, the ensemble of the western Armenian tradition may use as many as four or five. In the latter area there may be two principal melodic instruments which alternate much in the manner of our jazz tradition, each taking a "chorus." The melodies are more sinuous and very florid. The melodic ranges are often considerably wider, probably due to the capabilities of the instruments used; and, finally, the short prelude played by the melodic instrument is longer and more complex. Undoubtedly this lengthening of the introductory material derives from *Taksim*, which is a similar, integral, part of Turkish art music.

The dance forms fall into three categories: group or circle dances, paired dances (often done solo as well), and women's solo dances. The former two forms are by far the most popular; the latter is Armenian by adaptation only.

Round or group dances are most common. They are danced in a circle, and have a leader, usually a man. This leader is easily distinguishable because of the handkerchief carried in his right hand. The grouping along the line is boy, girl, boy, girl; they join hands to complete the circle. The steps themselves are few, and repeated again and again: The dancers move forward, back, to the side and hop, landing on both feet. This coincides with the heavy beat on the drum. The entire circle moves one or two steps to the right and repeats the pattern. When this is done at great speed, and skillfully, it is thrilling to watch.

Paired dances are also popular; one is for two men, the other for a man and girl. In the former, the dance partners stand side by side, arms linked or around each other's shoulder, and make short shuffling steps. In the latter the partners face each other with their arms extended, but not touching. The woman's dance is slow, and characterized by very graceful arm and hand gestures. The man's dance is very fast, with vigorous body movements, and difficult squatting and kicking movements reminiscent of Cossack dancing. These dances, as mentioned before, are often done solo if a partner is lacking.

Solo dances for women are slow and contain many suggestive movements. Although I have seen this particular type of dance done in Fresno, I have been assured that it is not native to Armenia, that it is Turkish or Syrian, and that true Armenian dances are not erotic.

The instrumental melodies are comparable in structure to those of the dance songs. The phrases are usually long and made up of smaller melodic patterns. Such phrases are then repeated over and over. Occasionally a second phrase will be added for contrast, but this addition seems to be arbitrary rather than consistent. Further, these phrases seem to be only a basic outline of what actually takes place, for they are skillfully ornamented with trills, grace notes, and, on the lutes, various plucking techniques. A performer never plays one of these melodies exactly the same way twice. The tune is repeated until the dancers tire.

The melodic elements of these dances are inseparably bound up with the rhythm. Henry George Farmer, the well-known scholar of Arabic music made a statement to the effect that Arabic music receives its impetus from its rhythms, just as Western music receives forward motion from its harmonies. In fact, this statement seems to apply very well to most Eastern musics.

The rhythm itself is felt in patterns or groups punctuated by a single strong beat on the center of the *Dumballeg* called *Tum*. *Tum* is the first beat as the drum enters after the *Taksim*, or short prelude. The intervening beats, called *Tuk*, and played on the edge of the drum, fill out the pattern peculiar to the

dance or song being executed. The manner of filling in these intervals between the heavy beats is also indicative of the style of the particular musician performing.


Metrically these rhythms fall into duple, quadruple, triple, and assymetric groupings. Of these four the assymetric types seem to be predominant. They are particularly noticeable in the paired and solo dances.

In Fresno and Los Angeles the Armenian folk music is given voice at dances, weddings, picnics, and during the celebration of church holidays. Because of urban living, it is the dances which have the best chance of survival, while the folk songs, though still remembered by the old people, are fast dying out. Also, the congregation of people from many different parts of Armenia has caused a blending of traditions to the extent that often the Armenians themselves aren't sure of the origin of certain tunes and dances. This blending factor, coupled with the encroachment of Western musical ideas, is gradually forming a tradition apart from that of native Armenia, an American-Armenian tradition if you will, which if it continues to grow and develop, promises to become a rich area of American folklore.





#### NOTES ON THE TRANSCRIPTIONS

1. Although an exact representation of intervallic relationships is not intended here, to approximate the actual sound the following symbols have been used to denote pitch inflection:

- (a) (+) approximately a quarter tone higher.
- (b) (−) approximately a quarter tone lower.

2. A slide from one tone to another is indicated by the following device: 

3. In all instances where no time signature is indicated, the following points should be observed as a basis for interpretation:

- (a) The eighth note is the basic rhythmic unit.
- (b) Bar lines indicate a melodic phrase, with the basic accent falling directly after the bar line.
- (c) Subsidiary accents are inferred by note groupings of two or three:  or  or their equivalents:  or .
- (d) Because all "Armenian" drums give two basic tones, the lower tone is indicated by a downward stem, and the higher tone by an upward stem.

4. In "Kinovi Yerke," mm. 1, 3, and 5, I have noted a 4/4 bar; however, on the tape they are sung as follows:

Verse 1: m. 1, 4/4; m. 3, 4/4; m. 5, 7/8.

Verse 2: m. 1, 4/4; m. 3, 7/8; m. 5, 7/8

Verse 3: m. 1, 7/8; m. 3, 7/8; m. 5, 7/8

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