

This article will convey part of my experience learning Armenian liturgical chant from two of the last major diasporan¹ exponents of the Constantinopolitan tradition of the Armenian Church (Հայաստանեայց Եկեղեցի), Dr. Aram Kerovpyan (K'erovbean) and Mr. Yeprem Yepremian (Ep'remean). In the context of this article, the word *modal* will be used to describe this music: it is a monophonic music, characterised by the intrinsic relationship both between melody and drone, and in the use of unequally-tempered intervals. Another important characteristic which defines a *mode* here is movement according to distinct melodic patterns. The most commonly used modes in the Armenian Church are found in an Octoechos; a system shared (albeit with differing modes) with the Byzantine, Syriac, Georgian, Slavic and Latin churches. I shall briefly analyze a portion of the 'Head of the Canon' or *Kanonaglux* of ԳՁ, the *Third Voice* of the Octoechos found in the Armenian Horologion. This mode is comparable to *Hicaz* in the Ottoman musical system. The text of the *Kanonaglux* is a portion of a Psalm 106 from the Night Office, the first of the cycle of canonical hours (or Offices) of the Armenian Orthodox Church.

My contribution is given as that of a vocalist working in contemporary jazz and song writing, a classically-trained pianist and experimental improviser, and now a student of this traditional music with three years of independent study outside an academic institution. My interest in this music came about from a young age. I had a desire to uncover and understand my voice in relation to my Armenian identity, and later as my musical education continued and developed I wanted to expand my creative vocabulary as a vocalist. The Constantinopolitan tradition, being a lineage of oral transmission in Armenian liturgical music that is still living, offered me a way to learn modes using unequally tempered intervals systematically through the Octoechos system. Additionally, as I began understanding microtonal aspects of Armenian sacred music, I noticed common points with

¹ The issue of the Armenian diaspora is an extensive topic, only to be touched upon here. To give an idea of the journey of these two cantors from Istanbul, I shall give a very brief explanation: although Constantinople was never part of historical Armenia, it was a key cultural centre for Armenians. At the start of the Genocide, key intellectuals and artists within the Armenian community in Constantinople were gathered and massacred. Even so, many escaped towards the city during the Genocide, as the massacres were much worse in the provincial regions. Additionally, both provincial and Constantinopolitan Armenians escaped abroad to the Middle East, Europe and the United States, amongst other areas of the world. Today in Istanbul Armenians are a minority, and live with a social standing which is vastly different from that of the socially and economically successful (although unstably so) lifestyles of the pre-1915 past. The two cantors discussed in this article left Istanbul and became part of the larger Armenian diaspora in Europe and the United States, joining many other Armenians who were survivors and/or are descendants of those massacred in the provinces of Anatolia during 1915-1923.

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An apprenticeship with Constantinopolitan master musicians in exile: The last remnants of a living oral tradition

Abstract

The paper presents, compares and analyses two versions of the 'Head of the Canon' or *Kanonaglux* of ԳՁ, the *Third Voice* of the Octoechos found in the Armenian Horologion, in interpretations by two of the last major exponents of the Constantinopolitan tradition, Aram Kerovpyan and Yeprem Yepremian. Attention is devoted to the documentary sources on which the master musicians based their interpretations, as well as to the stylistic differences between their respective versions. These are of especial interest, in view of the fact that the musicians originated from different lineages within essentially the same tradition. Due emphasis is given to the world of intonational nuances, developing modal structures and the melodic patterns featuring in their interpretations – presenting a far richer picture than more standard versions (influenced as the latter are by Westernisation and thus the use of equal temperament).

Keywords: Armenian chant; Constantinopolitan tradition; Kerovpyan, Aram; Yepremian, Yeprem; oral tradition; comparative analysis; *Kanonaglux*; Armenian Horologion

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the modes of Armenian folk music.² At present, however, my studies have led me to develop interests within liturgical music, such as performing the music of the Offices in a liturgical setting accurately (with respect to this particular lineage and the musical flow of the service), learning Classical Armenian (the language of the church rites), learning the order and rotation of the canons, the spiritual content, meaning, and effect of the music upon the body, mind and spirit, as well as methods of teaching modes using unequally-tempered intervals in the most effective way. The ideas presented here should be taken in this light.

It is also important to note that this music – the Constantinopolitan tradition of Armenian Liturgical chant – is endangered and nearly extinct. At present only a handful of individuals are actively chanting the Offices of the church having learned them through the traditional method of oral transmission. In the light of this, the experience of learning with these two master musicians and the content of this article in no sense presents a final conclusion on the performance practices of this music within the context of history, but merely relays experiences of sounds and practices from a small fraction of a living tradition.

In 2015 and 2016, enabled by grants awarded by the Gulbenkian Foundation, I had intensive three-month and two-month independent studies with cantor Dr. Aram Kerovpyan and his wife Virginia Kerovpyan in Paris (➤ Fig. 1). I resided in their home, studied with them on a daily basis and attended church services on Sundays as well as during the week, in accordance with the feasts of the church calendar. As a bit of background: Dr. Kerovpyan was born in 1953 in Istanbul, Turkey. He grew up in the church environment and also studied Ottoman music with a master of the Turkish



Fig. 1:
Aram and Virginia
Kerovpyan

Kanun, Saadeddin Öktenay. With this background, his main studies and devotion to liturgical chant began in his young adulthood under the guidance of the late cantor Aramaneak Arabean (1898–1990), in Paris, at the Cathedral Saint Jean-Baptiste, where Dr. Kerovpyan served until very recently. Arabean was a student of Nšan Sergoyean (1889–1982), student of Grigor Meht'erean (1866–1937), himself a pupil of Nikolayos T'ašćean (1841–1885). Dr. Kerovpyan also leads the professional group, Ensemble Akn, formed in 1990. The main work of Akn is to “revive and develop the tradition of Armenian liturgical chant”.³

As a student of Dr. Kerovpyan, I was taught the modes step by step, through full immersion. A large part of the training entailed adopting natural diatonic and Pythagorean intervals into my musical vocabulary – intervals which are fundamental to the particular style of singing in the Istanbul churches generally. Growing up in an Armenian Evangelical family in Los Angeles, these sounds, although familiar through hearing Armenian folk music, were not dominant in my daily surroundings. I therefore willingly unlearned many of the ways in which I produced sound physically through my voice, in order to access the particular vibrations of these intervals – most slightly larger or slightly smaller than the common tempered intervals of today's orchestras and pianos. This required deep listening, and sensing the pitches from within the body. It resulted in the unearthing of what seemed like a subconscious familiarity of the material. After three months of listening and repetitive experience, with holding a drone and daily intervallic training as the building blocks, I developed a level of comfort with only two or three modes, and an introduction to two others of the Octoechos and its auxiliary modes known as դարձուածք (*darjuack'*).

Upon my return to Los Angeles in 2015, I met Mr. Yeprem Yepremian, a cantor living in Los Angeles since 1985 (➤ Fig. 2). I have been studying with him for two years. Like Dr. Kerovpyan, Mr. Yepremian was also born in Istanbul, but in 1930. He is a student of the late master singer Nersēs Xiwtavertean (1880–1952), also a student of Grigor Meht'erean (1866–1937). At the age of seventeen Mr. Yepremian began his formal studies with Nersēs Xiwtavertean, which lasted three years. From then on he quickly advanced into liturgical chant leadership, having his own vocal ensemble at the age of nineteen. He later became cantor at several churches in Istanbul. In 1954, Yepremian moved to Beirut, Lebanon, leading chant in several churches

² The extent to which the liturgical and folk melodies have been transformed independently of one another throughout history is open to discussion. It is fair to note that there is a relationship between the two musics, but not necessarily an exact parallel.

³ Website: <https://akn-chant.org/en/>. Ensemble AKN, 2005.

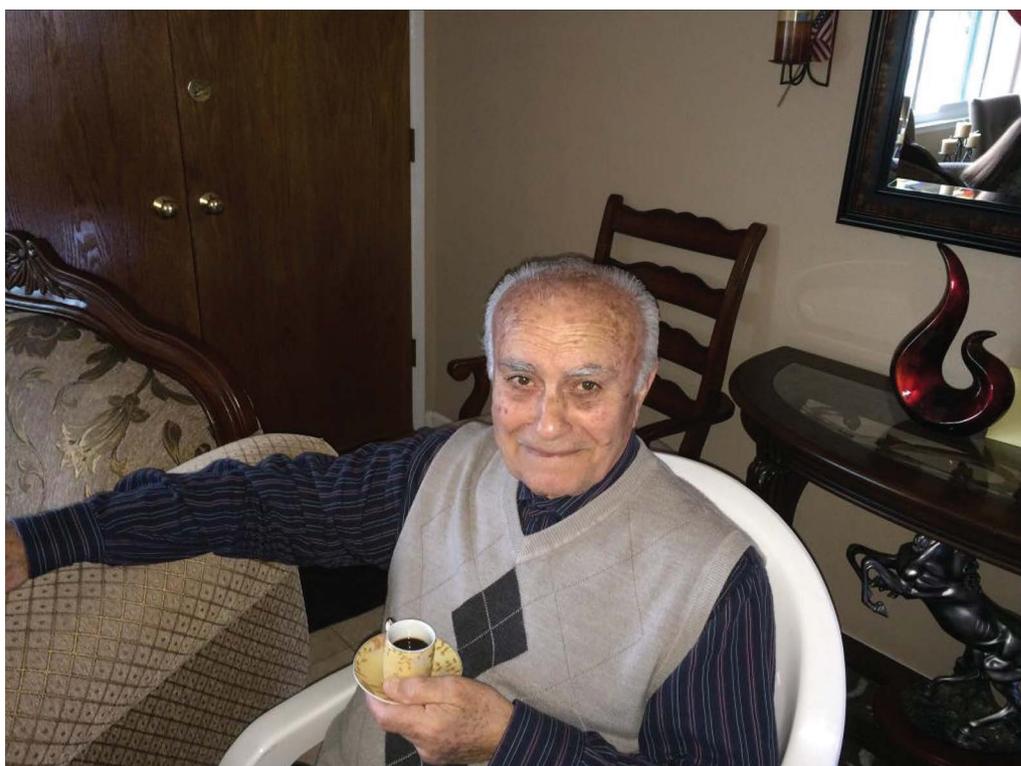


Fig. 2:
Yeprem Yepremian

before emigrating to the United States in 1985. He currently serves at St. Peter's Armenian Apostolic Church in Van Nuys, CA, a neighbourhood of Los Angeles. My educational course with Mr. Yepremian is ongoing to the present day, focusing on the *Kanonaglux* and on the Հարց (Harc' or Patrum hymn)⁴ of each Sunday. Due to the volume of works within the church canon, some of the hymns are only visited once a year or quite infrequently; thus, acquiring mastery of these songs and becoming accustomed to the order of the rituals requires numerous one-year cycles. Attempting to understand the order within these services was like walking in the dark. However, I soon discovered that experiencing the rituals through the body – meaning the physical experience of going through the church service within the shared memory of the participants – was extremely vital. I had to stop myself, being a true 'Westerner', from attempting to understand everything with an analytical mind. Now, having reached a certain level of confidence, I do take additional practice time during the week, and complement my studies by reading musicological sources. However, in the initial stages of learning it was very important to accept that the successful transmission of this repertoire and understanding of the rituals occurs through being consistently steeped in the devotional practice, and doing so with humility.

In my time with both my teachers, I observed that diversity and variation are abundant in this musical tradition. And one may, by studying it, realise how alive and different the chants can be, and must have been, amongst the many different singers. I spent time with both Dr. Kerovpyan and Mr. Yepremian listening to archival recordings, which have given me numerous examples of the creative differences between cantors and church singers from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. As I understand it, the handwritten notebooks that we have (sources from the older cantors) are documentation of chants sung in these live moments of human expression throughout musical history – from what the singers heard and from what they themselves preferred and deemed it correct to sing thanks to their education and musical environment. As fewer singers are now available, we must use our ears and our education about modal movement to enliven and recreate a pleasurable experience for the ears of the listeners from these written sources and from the information we have.⁵ As Dr. Kerovpyan states in his writings:

⁴ The *Harc' or Patrum* is based on a section of the canticles in the Morning Hour of the Armenian Church, devoted to Երից մանկանց (Eric'mankanc') – the three Hebrew youths, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the book of Daniel.

⁵ After having given this talk in July 2017 at MedRen in Prague, a new written source – Haig UTIDJIAN, *Intesean and the Music of the Armenian Hymnal* (Červený Kostelec: Mervart, 2017) – was brought to

“Approximately a century and a half ago they would try to transcribe modal melodies as best they could; whereas today we attempt to read the notation as best we can.”⁶

The reasons for the rarity of performances of this music are numerous. As a result of the Genocide of 1915–1923, the era of monastic life in the provinces of Armenia came to an end, and with it also the manifold variety in the musical traditions. Moreover, an overall disconnection with ritual time in the world, the westernisation of the music of the Armenian Divine Liturgy and the use of the organ and four-part harmony, have also hindered the flourishing of this style of monophonic music. Fewer practitioners equals less creative activity and less development. This puts the music at the risk of petrification, in the state documented in standardised arrangements in Western staff notation. As mentioned above, the Limōnčean notational system on the other hand is most useful when the performer already has the modes in mind. In and of itself it does not describe the exact frequencies of the pitches to be sung, but gives many clues in its representation of modal degrees as to what the distinct Armenian church modes may have sounded like. Few know this notation system, and even fewer practise it. However, from what remains in handwritten sources from cantors, and what is being transmitted to me by both Dr. Kerovpyan and Mr. Yepremian, we can have a glimpse through a very small window into the past.

Practice

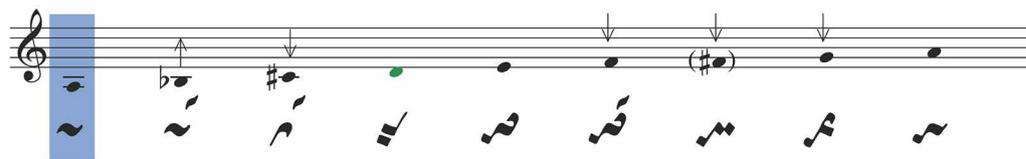
How do I approach the singing of this music? Apart from some technical musical aspects, which I will address later on, for me the most important things have become to observe and to listen. For a long time now, I have gently mumbled alongside my teachers, until I am able to join the chanting. This is due in most part to the complexity of the rhythm and texts, and to the time it takes to develop familiarity with the modal sphere. Another part of the practice of this music which is important is the spiritual mindset, an open heart, and a musically and historically informed imagination: an imagination that will take one back to a time when this music was flourishing – antiphonal choruses, calling and responding to one another; a sense of joy, immersion into the sound, with no distractions, phones, cameras or microphones; a focus of the heart and the mind in reverence, all for the purpose of deep prayer and celebration. But above all, listening. Since the sounds in this music are not as common to the modern ear, listening and absorption are key to the prospect of learning how to chant the texts within the modal patterns and microtonal intervals. One must not be so quick to sing, or to ‘perform’, thereby risking reverting to predisposed musical training and habits.

The mode we will be briefly discussing in this article is the ԳՁ, the *Third Voice* (> Fig. 3), which is comparable to and has a close relationship with the Ottoman mode *Hicaz*. Although the mode is transposable in practice, according to the vocal comfort of each singer, a common convention of ‘Eastern’ musicians transcribing into Western notation entails the pitches: *A, B flat, C sharp, D, E, F (F sharp), G, A*. Some of the main features of this mode with regard to pitch are a second degree hovering slightly higher than what is customarily heard on the piano, a slightly lower and richer *C sharp*, a pure fourth emerging from within the sound of the fundamental/drone, a bright fifth, a lighter and slightly lower sixth with a close and

my attention about the Tntesean hymnal (published posthumously in 1934). In this monograph Dr. Haig Utidjian very eloquently and systematically describes his process of establishing how the Limōnčean notational system (developed in the early 19th century) was used by the musicologist and cantor Elia Tntesean (1834–1881) to represent a unique system of modes used in the Armenian Church. In effect, Utidjian states that this system ‘nods and winks’ to the Ottoman system, but does not duplicate it exactly. In his detailed and thorough explanations of the evidence discovered, Utidjian explains some of the notational features deployed by Tntesean to capture aspects of the Armenian system of unfixed, unequally-tempered intervals; their deployment appears to have varied from mode to mode, and possibly from singer to singer. In fact Tntesean’s own chart, presenting ‘Eastern’ and ‘European’ scales alongside each other, makes it apparent that it would not necessarily be possible to determine the pitches of this notation fully without the corroboration provided by the practice of present-day singers, coupled with further, less direct evidence on the Armenian church modes from source material from the 19th century. Utidjian states “a single chart with a single ‘Eastern scale’ alone cannot suffice to define the pitches implied by the symbols” (section 3.1.3 therein). The same notational symbols deployed in different modes most probably implied different pitches and hence intervallic values from one mode to another (and perhaps from singer to singer). Therefore, the sound represented by the notational symbol would have been supported by previous aural familiarity with the mode, in order to sing it appropriately and according to the practice of a particular branch of the tradition.

⁶ Aram KEROVPYAN, *Voice from the Desert* (Paris: AKN Association, 2017), p. 139.

Music example 1:
The ԳՁ modal
structure



dependent relationship to the fifth, and a lower leaning and richer seventh. *A* is the home tone. There is a secondary stable point at *D*.

Yet a mode is never sung as pitches in a row. To achieve the sound of the mode one can think of the modal degrees less in terms of pitch, and more in terms of character and function. Where does each degree lead to? Like the choreography of a dance, each mode has its steps and its arrival points. Each mode tells its own story, and has its own melodic pattern or behaviours. So, one must understand the interdependence of the resonance, pitch and character of each modal degree, in order to create the sound. The sound is based on intention, direction and (of course) vowel formation. For instance, in other modes some of the degrees might be lower or higher, depending on direction (ascent or descent), stasis or movement. This is found more often in the diatonic modes such as the *Second Voice* (or ‘authentic’ mode), ԲՁ, closely related to the Ottoman mode *Hüseyni*, the *Fourth Voice* ԳՁ, closely related to the Ottoman mode *Nevâ*, and the *Fourth Side* (or ‘plagal’ mode), ԳԿ, closely related to the Ottoman mode *Üşhak*. This approach to the voice takes flexibility, and requires relaxation and a speech-like relationship with the words. As an example – once during a lesson I complained to Dr. Kerovpyan of my lack of ability to duplicate the modal intervallic patterns with exact precision at each attempt. He looked at me and said “You are not a piano. You are a voice and a voice has nuance.” Of course, one can also sing according to present-day Ottoman theory, measuring and utilising the ‘commas’⁷ by machine; but this use of machines was implemented in the late 20th century and can be seen as a new contribution.

Sources

The version of the *Kanonaglux* sung to me by Mr. Yepremian was transmitted orally to him by his teacher Nersēs Xiwtavertean (> Fig. 4). The version given to me by Dr. Kerovpyan is a transcription of an older interpretation by Mr. Yovsēp’ Ptalikean (1922–2001), another Constantinopolitan cantor who had many students, at least two of whom are serving in Istanbul currently (> Fig. 5). This version was not orally transmitted by Mr. Arabeian to Dr. Kerovpyan, but was chosen by Dr. Kerovpyan from written sources. At the time he was learning from Mr. Arabeian, the latter was too old and frail to make it to church on time for this part of the Offices, so Dr. Kerovpyan never heard his version. (This was a phenomenon unique to the late 20th century and more recently, and would not have happened at earlier times in the tradition when the music was still flourishing.) Dr. Kerovpyan later told me that years of listening to Mr. Arabeian influenced the way he interpreted this written source.

In this short passage (*Xōstōvan eferuk’ Teān, zi k’alc’r ē, Alēluia*) I have outlined in colour the main tones, the skeleton of the structure of the phrase.⁸ The passage mentioned is the opening of Psalm 106. It translates as “Give thanks to the Lord, for He is Good. Hallelujah!” Both singers have similar ‘landmarks’, but arrive at different points, and with a different timing with respect to the prosody and syllables of text, and entailing slightly different journeys through the mode. The slope of the skeleton of the music, however, is similar, as it progresses through the words. I have marked the journey through the mode and through the words in colour so that the reader may see the similarities and differences between the two versions. In essence, both versions of this *Kanonaglux* exhibit the movements expected of ԳՁ – in particular finding a stable point at the fourth degree and a resting place on the first degree.

⁷ Rauf Yekta (1871–1935) and Hüseyin Saadettin Arel (1880–1955) were two Ottoman music theorists who contributed to the current theory of Ottoman music, according to which the whole step is divided into nine sections or ‘commas’. At present, however, tuning machines which are used to tune the instruments according to these theoretical measurements have created a difference between the ‘schools’ of those who measured by ear (a less precise style, still governed by the comma system but not by tuning machines) and those who measured by machine (deploying more precise and fixed intervals).

⁸ The Limōnčean font in Figs. 4 and 5 is the Aneumatic Font by Vladimír Faltus and Haig Utidjian, and its development was funded by the Charles University Grant GAUK 1746214: *The music of the Armenian Hymnal* held by Principal Investigator Haig Utidjian, January 2013 – June 2016.

Խոս-տո-վան ե-ղե-րուք Տեա-րնն զի
 Xös-to-van e-ł-ruk' Tea-fön zi
 Խոս-տո-վան ե-ղե-րուք Տեա-րնն զի
 Xös-tō-van e-łe-ruk' Tea-fön zi
 քա-ղցր է Ա-
 k'a-łc'r ē A-
 քաղցր է Ա-
 k'alte'r ē A-
 Լե-լու-իա
 lē-lu-ia
 Լե-լու-իա
 lē-lu-ia

Music example 2:
Kanonaglux
from Yepremian

Recording 1:
Kanonaglux
from Yepremian



Therefore, we observe that the differences between these two singers imply that there could be other variants as well. And of course they do exist, although they are not presented in this article. The method of oral transmission itself encompasses ideas of musical evolution from one generation to another. In this living musical language, the tones and vowels are delivered slightly differently by two people within essentially the same musical culture. There lies the essence of the music – it is continually composed, in a sense, by its practitioners throughout time. A brief story from Mr. Yepremian may demonstrate how these differences in versions may have come about: in learning the fast-moving chants in the compilations of Շարակաւք (*Šarakank'* or hymns) known as Քաղուածք (*K'afuack'*), Nersēs Xiwtavertean, his teacher, would teach the students the first two verses alone of the entire string of verses. The students were then expected to bring the rest of the verses (with a variety of words) to him for the next session, based on their familiarity with the features and patterns of that particular mode learned by ear. With practice, guidance, listening and correction, the chants were then moulded according to the tradition and lineage of the cantor.

So we see that orally transmitted music has an 'open door' to change. It is living beyond the confines of the page, and lives within a person. In fact, most cantors will not read items in the Limōnčean notation exactly as written. Learning through this process can be very confusing, until a practitioner realises that it is a common phenomenon. A broad definition of improvisation is a key to learning this music: freedom within a certain limitation or structure. In this case, the modal structure and knowledge of its behaviour and movement poses the

The image displays four systems of musical notation. Each system consists of a staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a line of neumes below it. The lyrics are written in Armenian and Latin script below the neumes. The first system is highlighted in red and orange, the second in yellow and green, the third in green and blue, and the fourth in blue. The lyrics for the first system are: *խոս տո վա ն ե լե ռուք Տեա ռըն* / *Xōs tō va n e le ruk' Tea fōn*. The second system lyrics are: *զի քա ղիտ* / *zi k'a itc'r*. The third system lyrics are: *է Ա լե լու* / *ē A- lē- lu-*. The fourth system lyrics are: *իա* / *ia*.

Music example 3:

Kanonaglux from Kerovpyan limitations with which one works. I witnessed this phenomenon in the various ways in which Dr. Kerovpyan and Mr. Yepremian dealt with cadences of hymns written out in the Limōnčean notation. A cadence may be written in one way, but there are always several traditionally accepted ways of singing these endings. A certain amount of variation and improvisation is also evident in the speech-like⁹ approach to the chants, while being read from the old neumatic system, the *խազ* (*xaz*), the complete meaning of which is lost. A method of reading *from* the neumes remains, but it is a remnant of a system. We cannot read or understand the neumes in their entirety at present.



21st-century diasporan influences and modern-day transmission

The assimilation of an Armenian adult into this tradition who has grown up outside it is a different process from the traditional method, specifically in terms of the cultural context. I had learned some standard versions of certain traditional Armenian sacred hymns as a child in the Armenian Evangelical Church, yet I had no long-term exposure to the context of the music within the rituals or to the Octoechos system. In contrast to the training of a young

⁹ The term for chanting in Armenian is *կարդալ* (*kardal*), which means to proclaim, or study and read, in Classical and Modern Armenian, respectively, according to the dictionaries by Չախչախեան, *Բաղզիրք ի բարբառ հայ եւ իտալական* (1837), p. 760 and by ՃԷՐԷՃեան, Տօնիկեան and Խաչատուրեան, *Հայոց լեզուի նոր բառարան* (1992), p. 977.

acolyte from his or her childhood, my own experience with this music came much later in life. How this affects the result of my singing merits a much longer discussion, and is yet to be determined. However, Dr. Kerovpyan's teaching through natural and progressive assimilation by experience within the church rituals and the daily practice of intervals perhaps constituted a condensed version of the tradition, which he succeeded in conveying through his pedagogical method. It is hard to say how I would have absorbed the material taught to me now in Los Angeles by Mr. Yepremian without my initial exposure to natural intervals and Armenian notation from Dr. Kerovpyan.

So if each individual is leaving a mark on this music, what is my mark as a student? Needless to say, how I hear what I am being taught, according to my musical and cultural background and environment, and my ability and the effect that I desire, will also determine the direction of the music. Traditionally, the music would have been taught by one teacher to one student. In my case, after a seventeen-year search for a teacher of Armenian music which is connected to the oral tradition, my studies led me to two teachers in two different locations. How would this manner of research and study, with two main influences, affect the evolution of the music? How do I choose, having heard the common aspects and differences in the music from one cantor to another? How does this affect my interpretation? These questions remain to be addressed as I progress in my studies.

There is much more to be learned, researched, and written, but for the present I merely introduce a very small branch of a very large tree. My purpose in this brief study has been threefold. First, to inform the reader of one of the last preserved living systems of Armenian liturgical chant to have reached us, by presenting the aforementioned cantors; second, to relay my trajectory as a diasporan student integrating this music into my musical practice; and, third, to witness the expansive, creative and improvisational possibilities of this music, exemplified in this article by the two versions of the *Kanonaglax*. My hope is that more people will be creatively involved in continuing the tradition of this exceedingly ecstatic and spiritually healing music.