

The History Of Syriac (Suryoyo) Music

Syriac Music before Christ

Introduction

“The archaeologist Prof. Dr. Hugo was deeply offended when one of his colleagues did not immediately acknowledge that every invention, every flash of genius – shortly that everything good and reasonable directly came from Babylon.”

(Johannes Lehmann: Die Hethiter. p. 37)

Konfuzius (551 BC – 479 BC) says: “If one wants to know how cultivated a people is, one has to inquire after its music.”

Shakespeare (1564 AC – 1621 AC) says: “Musicians and angels are on the same level.”

The subject “history of Syriac (Suryoyo) music“ is as long and extensive as its cultural, social and political history. I will try to present it as shortly as possible.

Nearly all books in the world about history of music, whether from the East or the West, begin with the Sumerians and Egyptians. In the circle of expert it is still a case of dispute which one of them both was there before the other.

When I use the term “Suryoye“ in this lecture, it means to me a description of the peoples that have lived in Syria and Mesopotamia, namely Sumerians, Akkadaeans, Babylonians, Chaldaeans, Aramaeans and Assyrians.

It is historically known that music in Mesopotamia began with the Sumerians in 4500 BC. Our information about the history of music is based upon the following sources:

1. Musical instruments in archaeological discoveries
2. Pictures showing musical instruments and their employment
3. Descriptions of these instruments and their employment on clay tablets

According to archaeological discoveries, the Sumerians have one of the oldest fundamentals of music in the world. In the following generations Akkadaeans, Babylonians, Chaldaeans, Aramaeans and Assyrians have adopted and improved them.

A researcher of history of music must have knowledge of music science itself to understand it and interpret the connections in the right way. This is also about the correct quotation of historical facts.

Let us begin with musical instruments ,that can tell a lot about the history of music. At this point I want to honour the achievements of the following archaeologists and scientists: Layard, Bath, Zaulinken, Georg Farmer, Stephan Langdon, Salim Al-Helou, Bessler and Schneider, Wilhelm August, Enkel and Al-Rashid. With their efforts they have made either musical instruments and the history of music known to the world.

The golden harp. (sumer. *Balako*)

The discovery of the golden harp from the year 2400 BC showed archaeologists how finely developed musical instruments were even then. This harp had the same measurements as many other harps of this period. From these harps we gather information about the basics of the first musical scales of the Mesopotamian area and probably the whole world. The instruments were played with one's hands – just as today. A silver harp (see pictures) and many others were also discovered.

Portable harps. (*Qanun*, akkad. *Zamo*)

There were different kinds of these harps. They were used for music in the streets and other occasions that needed portable instruments. The *Zamo* was needed for almost every festive event.

Wind-instruments: Flute, Horn, Zurna, Double-flute

Percussion instruments (*Liliso*):

Different kinds of kettledrums that were sometimes played by two musicians because of their size. Just as today there were the so-called Daff, Darbakke, Bandir (see pictures). Another intriguing archaeological discovery was the ancient development of the so-called African drum.

→ Lutes (sumer. *Gudi*, akkad. *Ino*)

There were different kinds of lutes, among them such of the same size as today. The lute with the long slim neck is called Sas by the Turks.

Cymbals

Different kinds of cymbals were discovered. They were mainly made of bronze or copper and were used for street music and other festivities.

Bells

They were made of bronze or copper, too. Many of these bells were found in Ninive. It is believed that the Egyptians have imported them from Mesopotamia. Of course there are many other musical instruments which can't be mentioned here.

Musical scales (suryoyo: *Sebeltho musiqoyto*)

According to literature about history of music there are the following musical scales in the world:

1. Mesopotamian or Sumero-Akkadaean Seven-Note-Scale (with quarter and half note)
2. Egyptian Five-Full-Note-Scale
3. Chinese and Japanese (Five-Note-Scale), between 3rd and 4th note one-and-a-half-note (or 14 commas)
4. Indian Scale
5. Other oriental scales: Persian, Jewish, Arabian, Turkish are equal to the Sumerian scale
6. European scales, so-called Pythagorean Scales: seven-note-scale (full and half note) came to Europe via Greece

For musical scientists the discovery of the harp with seven strings gives evidence of the fact that the Sumerian scales consisted of seven notes. In the Assyrian era the harp was improved to a twelve-string instrument.

Even then the Sumerians had developed an own scale for every string (*Maqam*), just as they still exist today in oriental music.

1. Maqam: Ishata, 2. Maqam: Kitmo, 3. Maqam: Ambubo, 4. Maqam: Bitto, 5. Maqam: Nit Kablit,
6. Maqam: Nish Kabari, 7. Maqam: Kablito.

The question comes up if Sumerian had notes in former times. It is said that if Mesopotamians knew about the Pythagorean proposition, they also had to know musical notes.

The scientists Draffon, Goteborg and Wulston have asked themselves this question. They have decrypted notes from clay tablets, played the piece of work and recorded it. This cassette is available in most Syrian museum (see notes in the appendix).

An interesting historical development took place in Egypt. In the 11th century BC in the time of Hexos the Egyptians left their own five-tone-scale (Salim al-Helou). Nowadays they use the Sumerian scale.

Plato has pointed out to his people the importance and influence of music as a method of educating a character and a society. He has recommended to teach music in school and at the same time warned against using the Sumerian scale because of its sorrowful sound and depressing

effect on the soul. Instead he has suggested to use the Egyptian five-note-scale which cheers up the soul.

Music Schools

Discoveries on clay tablets show us that there were music schools in former times. Most of them were under royal supervision. Some tablets show contracts made between a teacher and the pupil's father. In these contracts even the curriculum, the number of lessons and the fee were fixed. Teachers came to school with a stick to enforce discipline in the classroom.

On another tablets we read that the king's physician says: "The singers and musicians are of good health so they will be able to perform this evening."

Musicians were wealthy in former times. They had many pieces of land and servants and they were very popular. The Sumerian king for example was proud that his daughter could sing and play musical instruments, also the granddaughter of the Akkadean king Neramsin.

Application of music

Music was used in many fields of life. Small and large groups of up to 65 musicians with or without singers performed their pieces. In the Sumerian language a musician was called "Gala" while a "Naro" was a musician and a singer.

Music played an important role in religious ceremonies, state festivities e.g. New Year's Day (April 1st), weddings, in wars, work e.g. during pulling heavy loads.

In funerals which were performed with music appropriate to Sumerian tradition the musician's fees were so high that once king Gudea had to intervene.

Another tablet tells us that king Shimshi-Addad I. looked for a singer to accompany his troops.

On another tablet he mentions that he has forced a singer called Sin-Ikisham to go to war with his army (see pictures).

Syriac (Suryoyo) Music under Persian and Greek Rule

(539 B.C.)

After the conquest to Babylon by Kurosh (Kyros) the Persians have made Babylon the capitol of their empire. They have adopted the Mesopotamian culture, among it the musical culture. The Persians used the Sumerian scales and improved them in the following centuries. The famous historian Herodot who has visited Babylon in the 5th century BC reports that the Persian music is well developed and sound just as beautiful as the Mesopotamian music.

The people of Mesopotamia lived its culture and music under the rule of Persians and Greeks. The books of history don't report too much about this period. It is often the case that history is written by the conqueror and not the defeated. Much of the defeated one's culture is adopted by the conqueror and presented as one's own. The Syriac (Suryoyo) people had to live under these circumstances till the turning-point of their history arrived: the conversion to Christianity.

Music among Christian Suryoye

The new "world empire" of Syriacs (Suryoye) had once again taken shape, but this time in a peaceful, Christian way. Its borders reach from the Mediterranean sea to Persia and from Arabia to Armenia.

The Syriac (Suryoyo) people have revived their culture and their music under the given circumstances. One should mention that neither Arabians nor Persians or Caucasian people (except Armenians) have adopted Christianity.

Syriacs (Suryoye) knew about the power and influence of music on society and have therefore integrated it into church.

At this point I'd like to cite some authors.

Produean Privoste: Greeks have adopted their music scale from the Orientals.

Prof. Stephan Langdon: The connection between the Assyrian, Hebrew and Arabian music is very close.

Georg Farmer: From the Semitic womb a child is born, and that was the Arabians.

Georg Farmer: The roots of Arabian music are in the Semitic music.

Salim Al Helou: The Assyrians have one of the oldest music in the world, they have passed that music on to Persians, Greeks, Arabians and other western Asiatic peoples.

Al Farabi: Arabians have adopted their music from Persians and Greeks.

Gabriel Asaad: Today's oriental scales stem from the Sumero-Akkadaean ones. The Sumerian scales and those of today's Suryoye are directly connected, e.g. Ishata corresponds to Qadmoyo and so on.

Bishop Yohanon Dolabani: The roots of today's church music date back to times before Christ.

Bishop Yohanon Abrohom: It is not excluded that our church music has its roots in the music of pre-Christian Mesopotamic-Syrian peoples.

Nuri Skandar: Today's music and liturgical dramas and tragedies date back to times before Christ.

Bar Dayson (physicist, astronome, priest, philosoph, poet, musician, 154 – 222 AC)

Bar Dayson was born in Urhoy (Edessa) and was a friend of Urhoy's king Abgar VIII.

He was the first Christian cleric to introduce music to church. He has composed 150 songs (including lyrics) in the same way as the psalms of David were written. During this period he had many followers. His songs were so popular that they were sung even generations later. But then he fell into conflict with the Syrian-orthodox church.

Mor Afrem (306-373 AC)

Suryoye call him the sun of Suryoye (“Shemsho d’Suryoye”) or the Holy Ghost’s harp (“Kenoro d’Ruho d’Qudsho”).

After Bar Dayson Mor Afrem was the first one to be accepted having officially introduced music into church. His intentions were the following:

1. to replace the songs of Bar Dayson by his own ones
2. to perform mass in a more interesting way
3. to support the effect of prayer with music
4. to preserve the music of the Suryoye

He has written thousands of church songs, he has introduced music and choirs consisting of either men or women into church.

In the following generations many other church musicians have continued the work on the basis of Mor Afrem’s work: Rabula d’Qen Neshrin (360-435 AC), Shamoun Quqoyo (485-536 AC), Ishoq Urhoyo (491 AC), Mor Balay (342 AC), Mor Yaqoub D’srug (421 AC), Mor Severius Antakoyo (459 AC), Marutha Takritoyo (649 AC), Yaqoub Urhoyo (708 AC) and many others.

They all have developed an imposing church music. They have composed songs with lyrics and in certain key signatures for special opportunities. Those required – just as today – a ceremony and, in a musical understanding, a program and concert. Over generations those musical works have been passed on from the 3rd century to present day preserving identical lyrics and tunes.

At the end of the 7th century these developments were officially declared finished and complete by the Syriac (Suryoyo) church (Patriarch Mor Afrem Barsom in Berule Bdhire).

After this, the Suryoye together with the Greeks have called their music scale *Akkadaeus* (Gabriel Asaad).

Key Signatures (*Maqamat*) in the Syrian-orthodox church

Suryoye call the key signature “Qolo”. But I don’t agree with that, because “Qolo” can also simply mean “song”. I prefer the expression “Mqomo”. This word is Suryoyo and similar to the oriental expression “Maqam”. The Syriac church has got eight key signatures (*Mqome*) from Qadmoyo to Tminoyo. This is equivalent to the ancient Akkadaean keys from Ishata to Kablito (Gabriel Asaad) and the key signatures of other oriental peoples.

If someone is interested to learn more about those church keys acoustically and by notes, he can get the recent CD ("Key signatures (Mqome) in the Syrian-orthodox church", 2002), published by me, available in St.-Petrus-church of the Suryoye in Stockholm or other churches.

It is interesting to hear that Salim Al-Helou said that the Greek have adopted the Gregorian chant from the Syriac choirs.

Rhythms in the Syrian-orthodox church

Many Suryoye but also Non-Suryoye try to reserve church music to church only and to keep it from being used as folk music. In my opinion this is wrong. Church music meets all requirements to be folk music as well regarding different rhythms, scales, tunes and lyrics.

In my eyes this music is the oldest continuously traded music in the region if not the whole world. Most popular rhythms of the Orient, namely those of the Persians, Turks, Arabians, Egyptians, are all included in the music of the Syrian church. If someone's interested in these rhythms, he can hear them on my CD "Rhythms in the Syrian-orthodox church", published in 1997.

Poems

Patriarch Mor Afrem Barsom says: The majority of church songs is written in certain verse forms (*Mkaylo*). This is a precondition for a folk song. In one song more than one form of verses may appear to make the song more interesting. One verse of a Syrian poem consists of three to twenty-one syllables. The lyrics are written by the most famous clerics of the Syrian-orthodox church and authorised by a higher institution of church.

Forms of Singing

There are at least 37 ways to sing in the Syrian-orthodox church, every way is made for a certain opportunity or scene. For example there are *Sogitho*, *Conitho*, *Madrosbo*, *Hulolo*, *Zumoro*, *Tachsbefto* and others (see supplement).

At the end of my lecture I'd like to point out that the music of the Syrian-orthodox church is one of the oldest continuously traded forms of music in the world, and this is done by strict principles to learn and pass on this knowledge. That music dates back to the first centuries of Christianity and must be supported not only by Suryoye themselves but also by programs of the UNO to protect and cultivate this heritage. This music is a heritage of world culture itself.

Music of the eastern Suryoye

We don't know why the western Suryoye didn't sing about love and beauty. Maybe they have regarded them as a sin or their folk music was prohibited by the ruler. One has called the western Suryoye the "people that does not sing", but in my opinion they have sung, namely church songs as a substitute for folk songs.

But the eastern Suryoye have cultivated their folk music just as the other oriental peoples. They know – to the present day – many exquisite rhythms especially such suitable for dancing. They are known in the whole orient for the great number of folk dances. They have wonderful songs for soloists called "*Rawe*", moreover they have many different forms of folk songs.

Their musical liturgy is similar to that of the western Suryoye but not identical since the church had divided in the year 450 AC.

The folk song among western Suryoye

As mentioned above the western Suryoye had stopped singing about love and beauty at a certain point of time. But in the 20th century they noticed that they needed a folk song.

Naum Fayegeq has begun with developing a new folk song. He has written new lyrics to songs of other peoples e.g. the Turks. Bishop Yohanon Dolabani has done the same, but the musician Gabriel Asaad thought that there was something missing in their music and therefore new songs had to be composed. He was the first one of a generation of composers of the western Suryoye. These songs were about culture and nature. They weren't meant to be love songs or wedding songs.

The turning-point was in 1967 when a patriotic group from Kamuchly in Syria developed a folk song with the following attributes: 1. The lyrics were in colloquial language. 2. It talked about love and beauty. 3. The rhythms were simple and made to dance. Last not least these new songs were composed for dancing and singing in Suryoyo on weddings and not to sing in foreign languages.

The history of this development is long and can't be told here. I hope to refer about this topic on another occasion.

Thank you for your attention.

References

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