

## ARMENIAN MUSIC IN TRANSYLVANIA – THE MUSICAL HERITAGE OF THE CANTOR BÁLINT ÁKOS

ÁGOTA BODURIAN<sup>1</sup>

**SUMMARY.** The author of this study is deeply preoccupied with the culture and music of an ethnic group in Transylvania that us on its way to extinction: Armenians. During our research in documenting the archives and libraries of the Armenian-Catholic parishes in the area, some materials of special value were discovered that had not yet been catalogued, representing proof of an effervescent musical life, demonstrating a rich liturgical activity, a religious life experienced deeply, in which music constituted an indispensable part of the life of the Armenian community in Gheorgheni. At the same time, these musical materials remind us about the close-knit relationships among various Armenian communities in Transylvania (Gherla, Gheorgheni, Frumoasa, and Dumbrăveni), and about the mutual influences between the ethnic cultures that coexist within the Transylvanian communities: Romanian, Hungarians, and Armenians.

**Keywords:** Armenian, Transylvania, Bálint Ákos, liturgical music, sharakan

### Introduction

The main aim of this study's author is the discovery and analysis of the traces of the music of the Armenian population, an ethnic group found in the region of Transylvania, on its way to extinction. For this purpose, we conducted field research and consulted vast bibliographic material related to the subject matter. But we must mention that at present, in the archives of the Armenian churches in the area, there are very few musical materials. Many ancient documents have disappeared, gradually lost over the centuries; another significant percentage of the Armenian cultural heritage has been saved but transferred to the museums and archives of Armenian centers

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<sup>1</sup> PhD student, Transylvania University of Braşov, Faculty of Music,  
E-mail: agota.bodurian@yahoo.com

abroad. This portion of documentation regarding the life, culture, and religion of the Armenian diaspora in Transylvania is largely found in the museums of the Mekhitarist order in Vienna and Venice – the San Lazzaro island.

For these reasons, the field of Armenian music in the Transylvania region could not be researched in depth until now. Based on previous research, as well as our own studies and acquired experiences, within the analysis of the musical material, discovered within the research carried out in the libraries/archives of the Armenian churches in the area, we present in this study some data and essential elements regarding Armenian liturgical music in Transylvania, and especially a series of manuscripts of the cantor of the Armenian church in Gheorgheni at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Bálint Ákos.

The musical heritage of the cantor Bálint Ákos was discovered by accident in January 2018, in the storehouse of the Armenian parish in Gheorgheni, in a box left untouched for an entire century. Due to this fact, the material in question was not catalogued and processed at all until now.

### **Bálint Ákos – 30 years of service to the Armenian church**

Bálint Ákos was a teacher, composer, author of school manuals, and an acknowledged cantor at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Gheorgheni and the region of the Giurgeului Basin. He obtained his diploma as a teacher at the Pedagogical Institute in Șumuleu-Ciuc, in 1912. Between 1918-1953 he worked as a teacher, then director at the Gheorgheni school. He actively participated in the development of the Gheorgheni museum (1954-56). Alongside these activities, for decades he worked as a collector of folk songs, composer, and professor, being one of the promoters of the cultural and musical life in town. He composed folk song rearrangements for choir, songs, and harmonization of religious songs. He also edited manuals, books with a pedagogical character and a small treaty of musical theory on the Beethoven centenary in 1927. The family, his wife having Armenian origins, would cultivate close relations with the Armenian parish in Gheorgheni. Due to this relationship, he became a cantor of the Armenian-Catholic church in Gheorgheni starting with 1923. Regarding his employment, we cite from *Historia Domus* of the church: *“After the death of Simonovici, the cantor position was not occupied for a period of time, the Council asking the trained cantor-teacher, Bálint Ákos, to play the organ on Sundays and feast days, offering him an honorarium of 20 crowns per month. On the 10th of May 1923, the church appointed him as a cantor for a trial year and the resolution of 24th June establishes a monthly salary of 1500 [crowns] for the work as a cantor-teacher. Even if after the expiration of the trial year, Bálint was not appointed permanently, he appointed himself effectively by means of his artistic know-how in terms of playing the*

*organ and his pleasant voice, through his modest conduct and noble manners, as well as through his popular versatility, winning over the sympathy and the unanimous esteem of the entire church community.”*<sup>2</sup>

His love and devotion for music bore fruits of major importance: on the one hand, we have him to thank for the existence of these manuscripts of special value, and on the other hand, it is worth mentioning that his descendants (grandsons) are members of the family of musicians in Cluj of European renown, the Kostyák brothers.

### **The Musical Heritage of the cantor Bálint Ákos**

The discovered material encompasses 12 copybooks in manuscript, of various lengths that we enumerated, and we are going to present in the order in which they were arranged in the box. Some copybooks seem to have been written by other persons than Bálint Ákos, being inherited from other cantors, or even other Armenian parishes.

#### **Copybook no 1:**

**Title:** *Armenian service from the Advent to the Good Friday, copybook I*

**Subtitle** in the inside cover: *Service for the use of the Armenian cantor. It was drawn up for the use of the Roman Catholic church of Armenian rite from Frumoasa in 1924.*

**The copybook contains** the text of the liturgy for the Christmas and Pascha feasts. The titles and various indications are written in red ink, and the texts in Armenian, phonetically marked as well as the text of the songs, are written in black ink, with exceptionally beautiful handwriting.

**Number of sheets:** the copybook has 142 written pages, numbered, plus the title page and its verso.

**The copybook dates:** back to December 1924.

#### **Copybook no 2:**

**Title:** Without a title, the exterior cover being in a damaged state. Inside the cover, on the back, we find the following remark: *“The property of Vákár Kristóf. This book was written in October 1859”*

**The copybook contains** litanies (including the Litany of Virgin Mary, the Litany of Saint Gregory the Enlightener etc.), liturgies and texts of the songs of the church community, phonetically marked in Armenian. On some pages, there are notes, titles and subtitles in Hungarian.

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<sup>2</sup> Historia Domus, the Armenian Church in Gheorgheni, the volume that comprises the period between the years 1772-1931, pp 105-107

**Number of sheets:** it contains 193 pages, with three blank pages at the end, with a few notes in Armenian on the last page.

**The copybook dates:** back to October 1859. It is worth mentioning that in spite of the research, *Historia Domus* and other official documents of the Armenian church in Gheorgheni, we did not succeed in finding any document regarding the person of Vákár Kristóf, the author of this manuscript.

### **Copybook no 3:**

**Title:** *Armenian funeral ceremonies.*

**Subtitle:** *Gheorgheni, February 1926.*

**The copybook contains** hymns (*sharakan*) for funerals, funeral church songs with the text in Hungarian and others in Armenian, with a phonetically marked text. After the title of each song, we find references to the function and role it fulfils for the house, near the grave, for adults, at the grave of a child, for women, for men etc.

Specifically, this copybook contains the presence of a fragment of an ancient hymn, with a text in Armenian, that the author calls *sárágán*. This *sharakan* – about which we shall talk in the following subchapter – seems to bear the mark of an ancient layer of Armenian music, preserved over the centuries and still sung at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, within the Armenian community in Gheorgheni.

**Number of sheets:** the manuscript contains 14 sheets of paper, 28 written pages.

**The copybook dates:** back to February 1926.

### **Copybook no 4:**

**Title:** Without a title, the exterior cover is damaged. In this case, there is no subtitle, including on the inside of the cover.

**The copybook contains** fragments from the Armenian Christmas liturgy in Transylvania.

**Number of sheets:** 33 sheets from various copybooks. We find 26 various sheets and 7 sheets (14 pages) from the original copybook – of which 13 are written pages and one blank one.

**Date:** there is no information regarding the start date of writing the musical fragments found in the copybook.

### **Copybook no 5:**

**Title:** *Fragments of the Armenian liturgy*

**Subtitle or remark on the cover:** *copied and drawn up by the Catholic cantor of Armenian rite, Bálint Ákos.*

**The copybook contains** fragments of the Armenian liturgy and community church songs, with a text in Armenian, phonetically marked. Specifically, this copybook consists of the presence of some songs and variants of the songs that are characteristic of the Armenian liturgy over the entire world. We find 8 variants of the song entitled *Szurp Ászdvádz* (Holy God): *oriental Szurp Ászdvádz*, *Szurp Ászdvádz from Dumbraveni*, *Szurp Ászdvádz from Frumoasa*, *Szurp Ászdvádz from Gherla*, *feast day Szurp Ászdvádz*, *funeral Szurp Ászdvádz* etc.

Also, in this manuscript several variants of the song *Hájr mjer* (Our Father) occur: "daily" *Hájr mjer*, "official and original" *Hájr mjer*, "acknowledged" *Hájr mjer*, *feast day Hájr mjer*, *Hájr mjer with the original Armenian song* etc.

We also mention the presence in manuscript of some Hungarian church community songs with an Armenian text – like the manuscript in Frumoasa, another musical document of major importance at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, studied by the author of this study. During the analysis, we discovered several songs that occur in identical form, or marked in another tonality as compared to the Manuscript from Frumoasa.

**Number of sheets:** 22 sheets, of which 41 are written pages, 3 blank pages, with notes regarding the Armenians in Gheorgheni on the second to last page, written in pencil.

**Date:** there is no information regarding the start date of the writing of the musical fragments found in the copybook.

### **Copybook no 6:**

**Title:** Without a title, the exterior cover is damaged. In this case, there is no subtitle, including inside the cover. The back cover of the copybook is missing.

**The copybook contains** 379 religious songs numbered by the author, of which 378 are harmonized with an organ accompaniment and text in Armenian and one in a single voice. On pages 742-744, other monodic songs with a text in Armenian and other handwriting occurs.

**Number of sheets:** It is a massive copybook of 770 pages of which 8 pages are blank at the beginning, 744 pages numbered by the author and 9 blank pages at the end.

**Date:** there is no information referring to the date the songs found in the copybook were started being written. It is worth mentioning that the manuscript is made in handwriting of exceptional beauty and precision; it is very possible it was prepared for printing.

### **Copybook no 7:**

**Title:** Collection of funeral songs

**Subtitle** or remark on the cover: *Bálint Ákos Catholic cantor, Gheorgheni 30<sup>th</sup> of June 1921.*

**The copybook contains** funeral church songs, most with a text in Hungarian and one in Armenian, entitled "Hájr párjekut" (*Our Father, full of kindness*), with a phonetically marked text.

After the title of each song, we find reference to the function and the role fulfilled by it: for the house, when lying in the coffin, near the grave, for adults, for babies etc.

**Number of sheets:** the copybook has 20 sheets

**The copybook dates:** back to June 1921

### **Copybook no 8:**

**Title:** Without a title.

**The copybook contains** Hungarian and Latin liturgical songs, harmonized for 4 voices. Below the title of some songs, we find remarks regarding the source: the author of the melody or text, the author of the organ accompaniment, etc.

**Number of sheets:** the manuscript has 28 sheets, of which many are blank, as follows: 6 written pages, 2 blank pages, 1 written page, 26 blank, 4 written, 1 blank, 8 written, 1 blank, 6 written, 1 blank. We suppose that the cantor intended to draw up a collection of songs for specific occasions and left the blank pages intending to write there the songs appropriate for certain feast days. This assumption is also supported by the fact that the pages were not yet numbered by the author.

**The copybook dates:** back to June 1921.

### **Copybook no 9:**

**Title:** *My collection of songs, volume I, Bálint Ákos*

**Subtitle:** on a page stuck inside, we find the text for the inner cover: *Prayers in manuscript from Gheorgheni.*

**The copybook contains** Roman Catholic Hungarian religious songs.

**Number of sheets:** the copybook has 217 sheets, of which all 434 pages are written.

**The copybook dates from:** on the first page on the inside, we find the remark "*the copying having started approximately in the summer of 1934*"

### **Copybook no 10:**

**Title:** *Collection of songs, volume II.*

**Subtitle:** there is none

**The copybook contains** 315 Hungarian community church songs altogether, fragments of liturgy, fragments of requiem (with the text in Latin) and Christmas songs.

**Number of sheets:** 168 sheets, 336 pages, of which 320 are written and 16 blanks, plus a few small sheets with notes stuck inside the copybook.

**The copybook dates:** we have no information referring to the date the manuscript was started but – as it can be observed in the notes of the author – this is certainly volume II of the previous collection of songs, numbered by us as no. 9.

**Copybook no 11:**

**Title:** Collection of songs, volume III.

**Subtitle:** there is none

**The copybook contains** 215 litanies altogether, pilgrimage songs, psalms for 4 voices

**Number of sheets:** 128 sheets, of which 254 pages are written and 2 blanks

**The copybook dates:** we have no information referring to the date manuscript was started but – as it can be noticed in the notes of the author – this is certainly volume III of the previous collection of songs, numbered by us as no. 9 and no. 10. In the opinion of the author of this study, it is possible that these three volumes were prepared for printing.

**Copybook no 12:**

**Title:** *Hungarian liturgical songs, volume II.*

**Subtitle:** Drawn up by *Ferenczy Denes, archive cashier*. On the inside cover, we find the contents of the copybook, the titles being enumerated in alphabetical order, and on the first page, on the inside, we find the remark: *Volume II. Liturgic songs. Drawn up by Ferenczy Dénes, archive cashier. 1911.IV.11.*

**The copybook contains** Hungarian and Latin liturgic songs harmonized for 4 voices

**Numbers of sheets:** 71 sheets, of which 142 pages are written.

**The copybook dates:** back to 11.04.1911

**Copybooks no. 3 and no. 5**

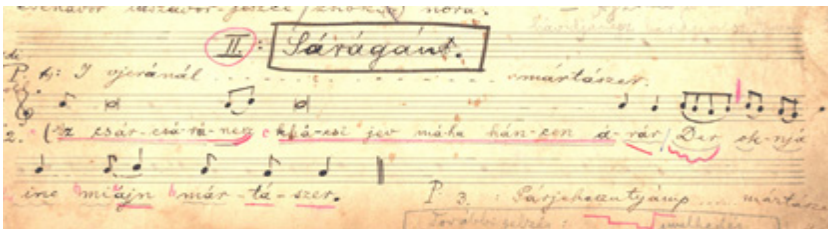
From this row of manuscripts, copybooks no 3 and 5 are particularly worth mentioning and analyzing in detail: from our point of view they have special value, containing a large amount of musical material written in Armenian and which we shall present within this study only a few fragments.

Copybook no 3, entitled *Armenian funeral ceremonies*, contains funeral songs from the use of the Catholic-Armenian songs from Gheorgheni, most with the text in Hungarian. The first song of the collection is entitled “Sárágán” (Sharakan). The term sharakan means hymn, and the origin of the name is interpreted in various ways by the Armenian music researchers. It can mean

a row of gems, “agn” meaning precious stone in Armenian language. According to the opinion of some researchers, sharakan is a word made up of “shar” (= row) and the particle “akan”, which means “belonging” or which refers to the term “row” (of hymns), associated with the 8 church modes used in the music of the Armenian church.

**The present sharakan has a text in Armenian and presents some interesting characteristics:**

**E. g. 1**



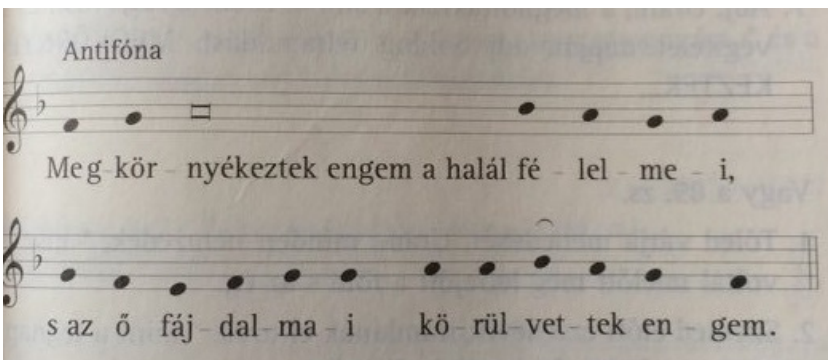
On the one hand, the presence of the mode 3 (= authentic mode 2) of the specific Armenian Octoechos, built on the A note – of which scale, according to descriptions, the tetrachord A, B, C, D, completed with E, was more often used:

**E. g. 2**



On the other hand, the song presents similarities with the Roman-Catholic funeral service „Megkörnyékeztek engem a halál félelmei”:

**E. g. 3**





This musical fragment marked in 1926 seems to preserve the most ancient layer of Armenian music. If we take into account that the ancestors of the Armenians in Gheorgheni settled here around 1672, coming from the Moldova region, where they spent approximately four centuries of wandering, from being chased away from the mother country in 1239, we reach the conclusion that inside their soul, some archetypes of Armenian music were heard and preserved during seven centuries. Taking into consideration the similarities with the musical fragment cited above, we can identify also inter-ethnic relations on a cultural and musical plane, and especially the influence of the Roman-Catholic Hungarian liturgical music, characteristic to the area.

Copybook no. 5 is a small sized copybook (180x120mm), entitled: “*Fragments of the Armenian liturgy*”. It contains fragments from the Armenian liturgy and community church songs with the text in Armenian, phonetically marked. As we mentioned before, the specific feature of this copybook is the presence of groups of variants of the songs, characteristic of the Armenian liturgy over the entire world:

- Eight variants of the song entitled *Szurp Ászdvádz* (Holy God)
- 16 variants of the song *Hájr mjer* (Our Father)

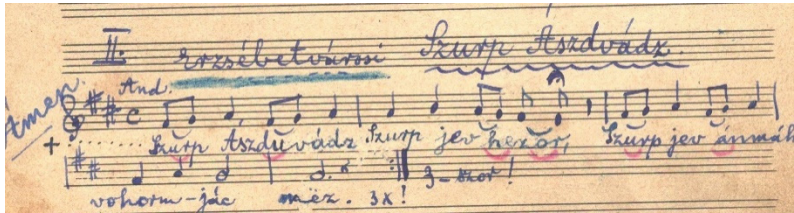
We present here only four examples of the row of variants *Szurp Ászdvádz* (Holy God):

E. g. 4



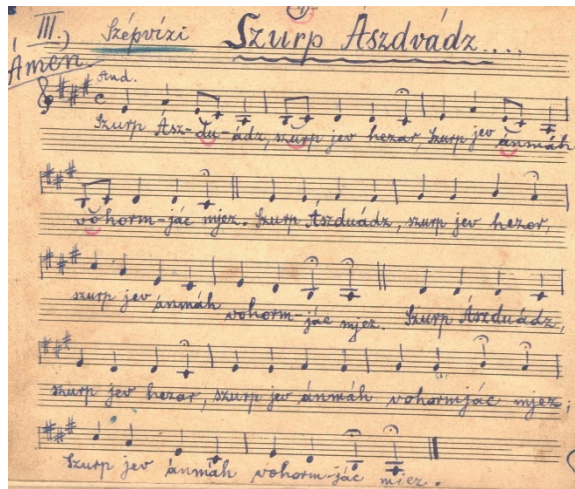
1. oriental *Szurp Ászdvádz*

E. g. 5



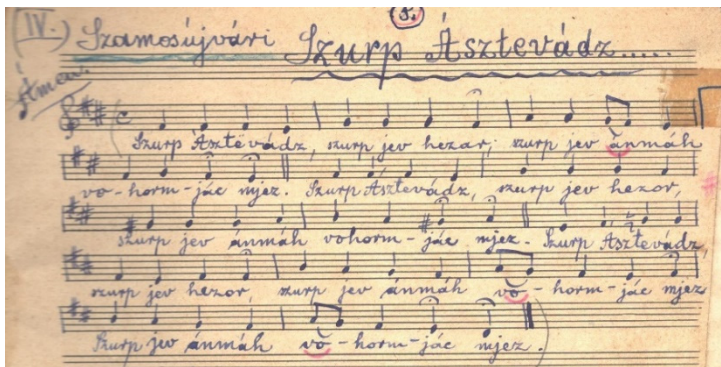
2. Szurp Ászdvádz from Dumbraveni

E. g. 6



Szurp Ászdvádz from Frumoasa

E. g. 7



3. Szurp Ászdvádz from Gherla

The presence of this oriental variant (no. 1) in the collection drawn up by Bálint Ákos proves again the existence of some effigies, traces of the ancient Armenian music in the Transylvanian region. It is very probable that the “oriental” Szurp Ászdvádz has survived through the centuries, being preserved, and transmitted from generation to generation orally – then, through the interest and care of this devoted musician, noted in this copybook in manuscript.

Conversely, the presence, within the collection of variants no. 2, 3, and 4 - Szurp Ászdvádz from Dumbrăveni, from Frumoasa, and from Gherla - supports the historic data regarding the close-knit and permanent relationship between the Armenian communities in Transylvania.

### **Conclusion**

Unfortunately, we can state with certainty that the Armenian culture in Transylvania is on its way to extinction because until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only three values that characterized the identity of Armenians on these territories remained: the Armenian-Catholic churches, the Armenian language of the liturgy and the few habits that were preserved throughout the centuries. The research and documentation of the archive and live sources, which still exist, today gain major importance.

Over recent decades, we note an increasing interest towards this portion of Transylvanian culture, more historians and researchers seeking to preserve and/or to revive Armenian traditions, and those with Armenian roots also strive to rediscover their identity, to re-learn and preserve their culture.

The aim of this study is the same: the discovery, analysis, and saving of the Armenian-Catholic liturgical repertory, discovered before its extinction.

According to the studied sources, we can state that the Armenian-Catholic liturgical musical material, used in the Armenian cultural centers in Transylvanian, bears both the mark of ancient Armenian music, as well as the influences of the Hungarian Roman-Catholic musical culture. Also, we can state that the Armenian church repertory sung in the big Armenian centers in Transylvania was largely identical and that the connections among Armenian parishes were permanent and vivid still in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Possessing these songs, it would be essential to spot and ask elderly Armenians about the Armenian musical practice in Transylvania, thus receiving new information regarding the geographical distribution of songs and, at the same time, about the authenticity of the written sources. This aspect is also valid the other way round: the study of the written sources can enrich the knowledge received from informers.

*Translated by Claudia Ciubancan*

ÁGOTA BODURIAN

## **REEFERENCES**

Historia Domus, Biserica Armeană din Gheorgheni (Armenian Church in Gheorgheni),  
volume 1772-1931