

Interview with Dr. Arusyak Tamrazyan



Hi Dr. Arusyak Tamrazyan. Welcome at the ZAZH – Zentrum Altertumswissenschaften Zürich! Please introduce yourself.

Thank you very much. I would like to indicate, that from the very beginning of my arrival I could feel all the warm attention and considerate care, both professional and personal, from the faculty and the personnel at your Center and at the Theological Faculty, as well as the considerate willingness to involve me in the process of the academic life here. I live in Yerevan, Armenia, and presently work at the Matenadaran, Institute of Ancient Manuscripts. Prior to that, my life led me to work with children and adults and to stage performances inspired by them, to lecture at the Institute, and to play the organ.

What is your field of research? What are you interested in generally?

At the Matenadaran I work in two departments: as musicologist at the Department of Medieval Armenian Art and Scribal Centers, and at the Department of Armenian Medieval Philology and Literature, more as specialist in literary texts (preparing critical editions of unpublished works [or, as in the case of my last monograph, restoring a corrupt text, filling lacunae] and analyzing them). In general, I am especially interested in the aesthetics and the symbolism of music, the imaginative factor in exegetical tradition; in a word, everything to do

within the realm of the spiritually symbolic. Simultaneously, in recent years I have gotten into studying and presenting all extant Armenian musical manuscripts called *Manrusumn* (fine art) and *Kc'urdk'* (liturgical anthems) found in various depositories of Armenian manuscripts: in the Matenadaran, the libraries of the Venetian and Viennese Mekhitarists, Jerusalem (St. James Monastery), Aleppo (Forty Martyrs' Monastery), and in other particular collections. I try to analyze these manuscripts in their entirety: the symbolism of their ornamentation, neumatic notation (as far as it is possible), the ways of singing and textual matters.

What are you currently researching at the ZAZH?

Generally speaking, my work is researching the symbolic and aesthetic perception and experience of music in the medieval Armenian interpretive tradition, in the light of Middle-Platonic and later traditions.

Why are you researching this topic? What motivated/motivates you?

I think, music is one of the substances that touches the very existential core of our being. In medieval interpretive experience, as phenomenon and one of the forms of music appropriation, it touches the human being, intertwines with the theory of prayer and worship, and draws from its depths this kind of spiritual experience. At the same time, it is a substance which easily disappears, in keeping with its ethereal nature, as is well known in every culture. So too is Armenian medieval music, where a substantial part of it has been lost or forgotten.

Your question is rather difficult when it comes to my work in general. Maybe, it is the only thing I can do! We always try to touch the foundation of something; and things in turn as living ones, demand from us their revival.

We live in a very complicated world, perhaps in its most difficult times. It seems to me, whole worlds, sounds and spiritual “smells” have been reduced to mere memory of themselves. We can see, how doors of whole cultures are closing forever before our eyes. We can feel that perhaps these times they are for the rising of something new, but we are somewhere before and between.

For me, our research in the humanities—be it valuable or not—is about remembrance and memory, memory in its most profound sense, as (re)creative experience in us, the only thing in this sometimes incomprehensible creation that keeps the very human within the human.

Once, when I just started my work at the Matenadaran, I came across a manuscript where the scribe all of a sudden in the middle of the text began to pray ceaselessly (it took, as far as I can remember, three pages of this sizeable manuscript): “be patient, be patient, be patient, in order to be patient...” I read all this out of respect for someone else's soul speaking to us. I think our work is about being considerate to any kind of what is *other* for us, and it is the way of consciousness through understanding. We can leaf through Armenian manuscripts and hear the voices of scribes, whereas the places where they were created are for the most part completely destroyed... You are seized with the same feeling when you succeed in filling textual lacunae, even when you find only a word; at this moment you seem to transfer something from nothing to the second world of sound, logos.



What are the biggest challenges in your research right now?

I have to beg your pardon, because my answer again will seem more abstract and general. The challenge is, as it seems to me, everywhere the same. It is like a process—as our life path; when you try to dive into, you approach a door and open it, beyond is only

one thing, another door; you open it to get into the inner room, but again, there is another door, and then again another, and another, and another... thus endlessly. In most parts of my research, the



beginning and the end of the work are in quite different places.

As regards my staying and working here, my biggest challenge will be of course to acquaint European scholars with aspects of the early Armenian literary tradition, to make it interesting and something valuable for them in the context of eastern Christianity.

Which ancient person would you most like to have a coffee with?

Oh, there will possibly be more than one. There are persons or things which pertain to our inner life, which are remembrance about us; e.g., for me Bach for his Passions, Rilke, some of the images in the movie "Mirror" by Andrei Tarkovsky, the sounds of organ and many other things. But these things and persons do not call for any kind of personal communication.

Given these most complicated and terrible days in the country from where I come, maybe I would like to see beloved Armenian poets: Vahan Terian, for his vision of the land of Nairi, and Eghishe Charenc' for expressing in a most profound way the pathos of the very Armenian language, the rhythm and nerve of this language, and for me only to sit silently in their shadows (under the blue, lasting, bright sight of my father, which is over, above, and beyond all that I used to call homeland).

If your question pertains to a really and completely ancient person, I would recall one of the scribes of an Armenian musical manuscript, to sing for me

from a medieval Breviary with its mysterious signs of neumatation —now incomprehensible.

What do you like the most about Zürich?

I like swans most of all, especially at night, their graceful poise, their hesitant approach and velvety glide over the glittery waters. I like to end my day with them.

What are you doing / enjoying to do when you are not researching?

Unfortunately, in recent years I do research almost all the time. In earlier years I liked to write essays, allegorical stories in the style of fairy tales (the latter, however, would not have been were they not necessitated by my work to tell stories to children). Nowadays, in general, I like to play the piano sometimes (unfortunately now rusted), read authors I like (Hermann Hesse, Carl Gustav Jung, Russian poetry of the twentieth century, such as of Boris Pasternak, etc.). I like leafing through Armenian manuscripts (these days in Zürich, those available online), looking at their marginal illuminations, fine curves of silent notation signs (hitherto not deciphered), which is the thing that really gives me peace, and finally I like just sitting in a café at dusk, in the evening lights with a glass of wine, completely doing nothing.

What advice would you give to your younger self who is just about to enter the academic world and wants to pursue a career?

I will bracket the word “career”. I think that “career” and the test of time in the academic world are completely different spheres. I am just one who tries to touch blindly this or that object, who sometimes feels the breathing of these things. Sometimes I even prefer a life where I would have no imprint left, which is the surest way not to stumble—just silence...

The interview was conducted by Barbara Holler and Ajla Prasovic. Photos: Ajla Prasovic

