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FROM THE HISTORY OF THE LENINAKAN STATE ORCHESTRA OF FOLK INSTRUMENTS

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Abstract

Introduction: The Leninakan (present-day Gyumri) State Orchestra of Folk Instruments played a significant role in the development of the city's musical and cultural life. This article examines the establishment of the orchestra, the factors that contributed to its formation, and the early stages of its development. **Methods and Materials:** The research was conducted through a combination of historical-analytical and musicological methods. Archival materials, press publications, concert programs, and specialized scholarly literature were employed in the study. **Analysis:** The organizational processes related to the establishment of the orchestra, its artistic orientation, and the characteristics of its repertoire were examined. Particular attention was also given to its role in the musical life of Leninakan. **Results:** The study demonstrates that the orchestra held considerable importance in the development of folk orchestral art and in the preservation of national musical traditions. Its activities contributed to the revitalization of the city's cultural life and to the advancement of professional musical art.

Key words: *Leninakan, Gyumri, State Orchestra of Folk Instruments, folk music, orchestral art, musical and cultural life.*

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ИЗ СТРАНИЦ ИСТОРИИ ЛЕНИНАКАНСКОГО ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОГО ОРКЕСТРА НАРОДНЫХ ИНСТРУМЕНТОВ

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Аннотация

Введение: Ленинанканский (ныне Гюмри) государственный оркестр народных инструментов сыграл значительную роль в развитии музыкально-культурной жизни города. Работа посвящена истории создания оркестра, предпосылкам его формирования и начальному этапу деятельности. **Методы и материалы:** Исследование выполнено с использованием комплекса историко-аналитических и музыковедческих методов. В работе использованы архивные материалы, публикации в прессе, концертные программы и специальная научная литература. **Анализ:** Рассмотрены организационные процессы создания оркестра, его художественная направленность и особенности репертуара. Также исследована его роль в музыкальной жизни Ленинанкана. **Результаты:** Исследование показывает, что оркестр имел важное значение для развития искусства народного оркестрового исполнительства и сохранения национальных музыкальных традиций. Его деятельность способствовала активизации культурной жизни города развитию профессионального музыкального искусства.

Ключевые слова: Ленинанкан, Гюмри, государственный оркестр народных инструментов, народная музыка, оркестровое искусство, музыкально-культурная жизнь.

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INTRODUCTION: Leninakan, historically established as a major cultural center of the northern region of Armenia, is distinguished by the deep roots of its musical life and its multilayered traditions. Beginning from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the city emerged as one of the unique environments in which folk and professional musical cultures not only coexisted in parallel, but also interacted, shaping a distinctive artistic identity. It was here that *Anoush* by Armen Tigranian was staged for the first time, an event of symbolic significance not only for Armenian operatic art, but also for the history of Leninakan's musical self-awareness.

An important contribution to the development of the city's cultural environment was made by the craftsmen's guilds, whose activities encompassed far more than economic functions alone. These guilds served as socio-cultural centers where music, song, and dance constituted an organic part of public life. In Leninakan, certain craftsmen were as renowned as artists, while folk singing acquired particular prestige within the urban environment. All of this created a cultural foundation in which the professional representation of national music became not only desirable but historically necessary. During the Soviet period, the city, renamed Leninakan in 1924, continued to preserve its musical vitality. In the 1950s and 1960s, the city witnessed a revitalization of concert life, the consolidation of professional educational institutions, as well as the gradual development of the teaching and performance traditions of folk instruments. Nevertheless, for a long time the city lacked a state ensemble capable of comprehensively representing the musical color of the Shirak region, based exclusively on the sound of folk instruments.

The idea of filling this gap emerged in the mid-1980s, under the conditions of political and cultural liberalization taking place within Soviet society. The years of Gorbachev's perestroika-era

reforms created new opportunities for cultural initiatives; however, obtaining state status required a clear ideological foundation and a high professional standard.

The initiator and ideological founder of the Gyumri (then Leninakan) State Orchestra of Folk Instruments was the musician and pedagogue Jivan Khachatryan. His aim was to establish a professional ensemble that would represent the folklore of Shirak at the state level in all its diversity and integrity. During the initial stage, a small ensemble of folk instruments operated within the music school under the direction of Jivan Khachatryan himself. The musicians of this ensemble were later admitted to the Kara-Murza Music College, while Khachatryan moved there to teach.

On the basis of this ensemble, a larger performing group was gradually formed, already outlining the image of the future orchestra. During this period, the necessity of a new program that would meet state standards became increasingly evident. Composer Andranik Nersisyan created a concert program in an original style that combined folk material with professional musical arrangement.

A turning point for the orchestra was the presentation of the program at the Grand Hall of the Yerevan Philharmonic (the Aram Khachaturian Concert Hall), attended by distinguished cultural figures of the time, including Alexander Harutyunyan, Emma Tsaturyan, and others. The program's highly positive reception became the basis for granting the orchestra state status. Although the orchestra had been founded in 1985, it officially received state recognition in 1986 [1]. Reflecting on the period of the orchestra's establishment, its founder Jivan Khachatryan emphasized the difficulties of the formative years, particularly the shortage of qualified personnel, since the professional training of folk instrument teachers and performers was not always sufficient. Nevertheless, owing to the dedication of talented young musicians and sustained collective effort, a professional ensemble was formed within only a few years [3]. The orchestra's activity was grounded upon a clearly defined artistic principle: the professional arrangement and presentation of the folklore of Shirak. As artistic director, Jivan Khachatryan selected the principal thematic directions of the repertoire and supervised their performance. Among the orchestra's artistic consultants were the composers Khachatur Avetisyan and Andranik Nersisyan, whose contributions proved especially important in shaping the new repertoire.

The first orchestrations and arrangements introduced a new sound to the art of folk instrument orchestras. Of particular importance in the artistic formation and development of the Gyumri State Orchestra of Folk Instruments was the inclusion of a concerto for tar in the orchestra's repertoire. This step not only expanded the ensemble's performing possibilities but also symbolized a new stage in the academization of folk instruments, affirming their full presence on the major concert stage.

The Tar Concerto, composed by Andranik Nersisyan, differed significantly in both structure and artistic conception from the folk instrumental arrangements common at the time. The composition was distinguished by symphonic thinking, a clearly defined structure, and innovative approaches to orchestration, in which the tar appeared not merely as an accompanying or orchestral instrument, but as a fully developed solo instrument with broad expressive capabilities. Through this work, the tar was presented for the first time in an orchestral environment in the role of a concerto soloist, highlighting its technical, timbral, and expressive potential [1].

The performer of the Tar Concerto, tar player Artem Khachatour, emerged as a direct bearer of this new artistic language. His performing art combined the traditions of folk performance with a high level of professional mastery, which was particularly essential for the realization of such a structurally complex composition. During the performance process, special significance was attached to the fact that the work demanded not only technical skill but also stage composure and the ability to react quickly in performance situations. In this regard, particularly symbolic is the

episode recalled by Artem Khachatour, when, during a concert performance, a string of the tar broke. Owing to his rigorous prior preparation, the performer managed within only a few seconds to restore the instrument and continue the performance without disrupting the flow of the composition. This fact testifies not only to the exceptional professionalism of the individual performer, but also to the overall performing discipline and preparedness of the entire orchestra, formed through consistent and intensive work [3].

The performance of the Tar Concerto took place in 1987 at the Aram Khachaturian Concert Hall during the final stage of a competitive concert program, where the Gyumri State Orchestra of Folk Instruments appeared as a fully developed and artistically mature ensemble. The performance received wide recognition within professional circles and became one of the most important milestones through which the orchestra established its place in the concert life of the republic. Andranik Nersisyan's Tar Concerto played a significant role in shaping the artistic identity of the orchestra, opening new horizons both in orchestration and in performing thought. It became one of the key works that contributed to the perception of the State Orchestra of Folk Instruments as an innovative cultural institution aligned with the artistic demands of its time and distinguished by a high professional standard.

During the process of obtaining state status in 1986, rehearsals were held in the same theater where, nearly a century earlier, the opera Anoush had first been staged. Throughout the summer, the orchestra worked intensively for several hours each day, while Khachatur Avetisyan and Andranik Nersisyan actively participated in the rehearsals.

The 1988 earthquake dealt a severe blow to the cultural life of the city. The orchestra lost its rehearsal venue, and its normal activity was disrupted. Nevertheless, only a few months later the ensemble was sent to Jermuk, where it resumed its work and from there departed on an international tour to France. The concerts held in France received considerable acclaim, and the audience's enthusiastic reactions at times even interfered with the full perception of the music [2]. In the following years, the orchestra again toured in France and later in Baghdad (1992-1993), where Andranik Nersisyan's composition *Gyumrva Tuy-Tuy and Ghashange* gained exceptional popularity.

In 1990, when the orchestra had already established itself as a professional ensemble and possessed approximately four years of experience as a state institution, an important development took place in its creative life: singer Murad Malkhasyan joined the orchestra. The first work performed with his participation was Khachatur Avetisyan's song *Hin Fayton* ("The Old Carriage"), which later became one of the symbolic pieces of the orchestra's concert repertoire. The singer's inclusion significantly expanded the artistic possibilities of the ensemble and contributed to the active development of vocal-instrumental programs [3].

In the same year, the orchestra's creative staff was also joined by its current artistic director and chief conductor, Jemma Qaghtsrikyan [3]. Her appointment took place at the initiative of the artistic director Jivan Khachatryan. During that period, the orchestra's rehearsals were held at the Palace of Culture of Textile Workers. Jemma Qaghtsrikyan worked primarily with the singers, since the orchestra's repertoire included complex and large-scale works requiring a high degree of performance discipline and vocal-instrumental balance.

The repertoire of the State Orchestra of Folk Instruments was formed gradually, reflecting both the ideological demands of the period and ongoing artistic explorations. In the initial stage, arrangements based on the folklore of Shirak predominated, together with original works by Khachatur Avetisyan and Andranik Nersisyan. Beginning in 1986, patriotic songs occupied a special place in the repertoire and were warmly received both in Leninakan and during international tours. Among the classical arrangements, particular importance belongs to the adaptations of Komitas's

works *Antuni* and *Gutanerg*, arranged by Andranik Nersisyan. *Antuni* was performed by the singer Gagik Zakaryan, whose powerful vocal abilities led audiences to perceive the work as an interpretation of a new artistic quality. Over time, the orchestra's repertoire also expanded to include popular and jazz arrangements, following the advice and encouragement of Andranik Nersisyan [1].

Notable examples include Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumblebee*, Vittorio Monti's *Csardas*, as well as Astor Piazzolla's *Libertango*, all of which acquired a new artistic quality through performance on folk instruments. A special place belongs to the songs of Sheram, the urban folk songs of Alexandrapol, and peasant dance songs, which constitute essential components of the orchestra's identity. These works were not only preserved but also presented in new interpretations while maintaining the stylistic and intonational foundations of the originals. For many years, discussions of the orchestra's activity emphasized the fact that rehearsals often took place under extremely difficult conditions. Material and technical shortages, the absence of a permanent rehearsal venue, and instrumental difficulties did not hinder the collective's continuous work. The orchestra members' devotion to national music was boundless; even under such circumstances, they did not miss rehearsals and continued their creative activity.

Today, the situation has changed significantly. Located on Khrimyan Hayrik Street in Gyumri, the orchestra now benefits from a new building and a modern rehearsal space, which have greatly improved its working conditions. Nevertheless, the hardships of the past played an important role in strengthening the ensemble's unity and internal discipline.

The ensemble has been significantly renewed with young performers, most of whom are professional musicians who graduated from the Gyumri Branch of the Komitas State Conservatory of Yerevan. Over time, solutions have been found to the instrumental challenges that arose, owing to consistent and purposeful work.

The mission of the State Orchestra of Folk Instruments is the popularization, preservation, and transmission of the national musical heritage to future generations. The orchestra consistently functioned as a bearer and disseminator of regional cultural identity. Within the ensemble there are no creative pauses, but only musical ones. Despite temporary difficulties, including the incorporation of European instruments, the orchestra continues to work systematically toward the full restoration of the national instrumental composition, regarding this step as a temporary necessity.

The orchestra's director, Karen Mayilyan, stated that the ensemble's repertoire is multi-genre, encompassing ashugh, folk, and patriotic music. Many musicians who began their professional journey within the orchestra are now successfully pursuing distinguished careers both in Armenia and throughout the Armenian diaspora [5].

The orchestra's activities have received numerous distinctions and awards, including prizes at the Tsitsernak National Music Awards, the "Best Orchestra of the Year" award, and the "Best Album of the Year" award for Khachatur Avetisyan's album *Qez em Hishum* ("I Remember You") in 2018; the "Komitas" Medal awarded by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Armenia (2012); the "Coat of Arms of Gyumri" commemorative award presented by the Municipality of Gyumri (2012); and the "Komitas" commemorative medal of the Armenian Composers' Union (2012) [4].

The ensemble has consistently sought to preserve the monodic musical thinking originating from Komitas, ensuring that the essence of the original is not disrupted within the framework of polyphonic arrangement. Today, the orchestra's artistic director and chief conductor is Honored Artist of Armenia Jemma Qaghtsrikyan, while its director is Karen Mayilyan.

Thus, the history of the formation and development of the Gyumri (Leninakan) State Orchestra of Folk Instruments testifies to the inner vitality of the city's musical culture, the continuity of tradition, and the synthesis of innovative artistic exploration. The orchestra emerged not because of accidental circumstances,

but upon the foundation of long-standing historical, cultural, and educational prerequisites, continuing the line of Leninakan's musical life which from its earliest stages had been characterized by a strong sense of national identity and high artistic standards.

CONCLUSION: From its earliest stages of development, the orchestra's activity has been directed toward the systematic preservation and professional presentation of the musical heritage of the Shirak region. The principle of cultivating a professionally grounded polyphonic environment, as well as the inclusion of original compositions and arrangements, has contributed to the formation of the orchestra's distinctive artistic identity.

Despite the personnel, material, and organizational challenges faced during the first years of its establishment, the orchestra succeeded in developing into a professional state ensemble, maintaining a high level of performance and achieving broad public recognition. The orchestra's concert activities, international tours, and participation in festivals contributed not only to the popularization of national music, but also to the affirmation of its place within the pan-Armenian cultural sphere.

Today, the Gyumri State Orchestra of Folk Instruments functions as an institution that preserves and transmits cultural memory. Its activity is grounded in a balance between tradition and modernity, ensuring the continuous presence of national music within contemporary cultural processes. The orchestra's mission remains unchanged: to preserve, develop, and transmit national musical values to future generations as an inseparable component of both regional and national identity.

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Դիանա Կամոյի ԽԱՉԱՏՐՅԱՆ՝ Երևանի Կոմիտասի անվան կոնսերվատորիայի Գյումրու մասնաճյուղի դոցենտ, Գյումրի, ՀՀ
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