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AFFECT AND PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE GARABAGH VOICE

Abstract. *Mugham* belongs to the transnational classical tradition *maqamistan* (Simms 2009), stretching from Xinjiang in north-west China to Mauritania in Africa. The *maqam* tradition in Azerbaijan, known as *mugham*, can be distinguished from other *maqam* branches by the particular timbre of the singer's voice, which has been developed historically in the western region of Azerbaijan Garabagh. Indeed, the mountainous landscape of Garabagh is linked to a particular kind of *xanəndə* singing – *Qarabağ səsi* (the Garabagh voice) – one that has a wide range, brilliant virtuosity, and especially beautiful expressivity in the high register. In this article, I discuss the history of this voice, and argue that its power rests in its affective potential. I compare the powerful experience of the Garabagh voice before and after the Second Garabagh war in 2020, when the Garabagh lands previously occupied by Armenia were regained.

Key words: Garabagh voice, *mugham*, affect, trauma, phenomenology.

Introduction. *Mugham* belongs to the transnational classical tradition *maqamistan* (Simms 2009), stretching from Xinjiang in north-west China to Mauritania in Africa. The *maqam* tradition in Azerbaijan, known as *mugham*, can be distinguished from other *maqam* branches by the particular timbre of the singer's voice, which has been developed historically in the western region of Azerbaijan Garabagh. Indeed, the mountainous landscape of Garabagh is linked to a particular kind of *xanəndə* singing – *Qarabağ səsi* (the Garabagh voice) – one that has a wide range, brilliant virtuosity, and especially beautiful expressivity in the high register. In this article, I discuss the history of this voice, and argue that its power rests in its affective potential.

I compare the powerful experience of the Garabagh voice before and after the Second Garabagh war in 2020, when the Garabagh lands previously occupied by Armenia were regained.

The affective turn in the academy

Regional variants of maqam traditions have been explored by ethnomusicologists primarily in terms of their modal functions. Only recently have scholars begun to seek insight into the affective dimension of these traditions [Gill 2017; Racy 2003], spurred, in part, by the turn to affect in the field of ethnomusicology [Gitzen 2013; Gray 2013; Hofman 2015]. There is a belief of new affect theorists and neuroscientists [for example, Massumi 2002] that affect is independent of meaning. These convictions are part of the “two-layer” scheme: natural and bodily raw affects versus cultural and cognized emotions. Affect seemingly resides in the precultural, visceral experiences, which are divorced from signification. They are also more powerful, indeterminate, and govern in the realms beyond language. Emotions, on the other hand, are culturally defined and can be interpreted, grasped by our minds and understood.

I would like to look at the experience of Garabagh voice in *mugham* as affective, considering the intense feelings accompanied by bodily states, such as crying, that are part of this experience. Even those listeners and performers who are unable to decipher *ghazal* messages conveyed with complex Arabic and Persian words [also observed by Naroditskaya 2002: 18] are deeply moved on the affective, bodily level when listening to Azerbaijani *mugham*. The Garabagh voice in *mugham*, thus, is a force that stretches one's imagination and overpowers one's senses, escaping beyond the discursive, and is better understood as an affect, rather than as an emotion or a feeling.

History of the Garabagh Voice

Throughout history, Shusha has been known for its rich *xanəndə* traditions, inspiring one of Russia's poets Sergey Esenin (1895-1925) to remark: “If one is not singing, one is not from Shusha!” Indeed, a particular style of singing called the Garabagh voice developed in this region, unmatched by its cathartic, intense, and virtuosic timbre in the high register.

One major factor that contributed to the enrichment of *xanəndə* art at this time was a particular style of teaching young *mugham* singers. Specifically,

there were “schools” designed for *xanəndə* students and they were also closely tied to religion in Azerbaijan because the main purpose of the training was preparation for performances during the holy month of Muharram. Shusha was the pioneering city when it came to these establishments. As Firudin Shushinsky writes,

The art of *xanəndə* reached its blossoming state in the second half of the nineteenth century. In Shusha, and then in Shemakhi and Baku, special music schools were opened. At that time, this tradition was most famous in Shusha. This was the result of the city’s geographical location and wide cultural and economic ties [Shushinsky 1979: 11].

The first schools for teaching *xanəndə* singers opened in the city of Shusha in mid-nineteenth century. Master Kharrat Gulu (Karbalayi Gulu Yusifi, 1823-83) owned the first institution of this kind, and two other prominent schools opened shortly after: one headed by Kor Khalif and the other by Molla Ibrahim [Gasanova 2006: 20]. The graduates lived to become some of the most renowned *xanəndə* performers: Haji Gusi, Abdulbagi Zulalov, and Jabbar Garyagdioglu. These were accomplished singers recognized for their mastery of texts and creativity. For example, they were able to sing *ghazals* in different languages and added many new sections to existing *mughams*, analogous to the formation of new *mugham* parts by tar players that was also happening during this time. In addition to prioritizing pronunciation and proper *əruz* usage, religious training honed the students’ interpretative skills because one of the demands was profound understanding of texts linked to the Islamic sciences.

Preparation for Muharram began three months in advance. In addition to local religious figures who taught at the schools, other teachers from Iran who were usually dervish masters travelled to Shusha to instruct aspiring *xanəndəs*. As Sanubar Bagirova explains, many dervish sects and brotherhoods existed in Azerbaijan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The local dervishes were educated in religious schools (*mollaxana* or *mədrəsə*) where they became proficient in numerous languages (especially Arabic and Persian), *mugham*, and poetry, while many of them were poets themselves [Bagirova 2007: 159].

The art of *mugham* was thoroughly taught at these schools. Religious rituals during the month of Muharram were centred on sacred texts that were sung in the *dəstgah* form. For example, depiction of the young warrior Qasim ibn Hasan in the Karbala battle would begin in *mugham bayatı*-

şiraz, and the participants, one after another, sung a *şöbə* in a sequence [Shushinsky 1979: 14]. As such, *dəstgah* cycles were performed in their entirety as part of these rituals. If singing *şurdəstgah*, the progression would be: *şur*, *şur-şəhnaz*, *dügah*, *şikəsteyi-fars*, *hicaz*, *əraq* or *sarənc* [Shushinsky 1979: 14]. Shushinsky reports that *xanəndə* singers would perform on their knees and often with eyes closed [Shushinsky 1979: 15]. In addition to the sacred texts, *ghazal* poetry by Khagani, Nizami Ganjavi, Imadaddin Nasimi, Fuzuli, and Khurshidbanu Natavan was part of instruction at these *xanəndə* establishments.

Bagirova characterizes the manner of religious singing as such: “The primary demand made on renditions of *mugham* in ritual settings was strictness and relative simplicity of the melody. Rich ornamentation, common in Azerbaijani music in general and in *mugham* especially, here was gravely limited” [Bagirova 2007: 158]. The incongruity between the virtuosic Garabagh voice and singing in the religious contexts described above – devoid of any kind of dazzling display of complex technique – raises questions. How exactly did the Garabagh voice evolve to be so musically complex and unique in this milieu of training in religious schools? How did the religious style of singing influence the formation of the Garabagh voice?

One explanation for the technical complexity and ornamented nature of the Garabagh voice is the overriding role of the non-religious *məclis* tradition in which the *xanəndə* style evolved together with the *tar* technique and could not lag behind the advancements in virtuosity. The soaring achievements in *tar* performance had to be met by advances in *mugham* singing. Both elements of *mugham* had to be in harmony. Therefore, when Sadigjan crafted the new *tar* in Shusha, precipitating the invention of new tricks and skills for performance, the singing had to evolve accordingly, and hence the powerful and virtuosic Garabagh voice was created.

Furthermore, I would like to propose that the opportunity for singers in this region to develop their voices in religious schools resulted in a timbre that is highly affective. Scholars writing about rituals in Shi’i Islam have focused on the intense affect that defines its singing traditions. This level of intensity is caused by the combination of strong emotions that are felt by actors and singers simultaneously: pain, elation, devotion, ecstasy. It is possible that this affective experience greatly influenced the development of the Garabagh voice, giving it its cathartic resonance.

Affect of the Garabagh voice today

For local audiences in Azerbaijan today, the Garabagh voice is extremely affective. This voice is not only specific with its high register, but also the timbre is peculiar, described with the words *şirin* (sweet), *qaltanlı* (thick), and *mürəkkəb* (complex). This is the voice of masterful *zəngulə* – ornaments in the high register often sung between words, on the last syllable of a word, or between lines of poetry. These embellishments are often compared to sounds of birds, and call forth remarks about the opulence of birds as an indicator of Garabagh's beauty and nature. Roland Barthes writes about the “grain” of the voice as that indeterminate meaning: “The ‘grain’ is that: the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue...” [Barthes 1977: 182]. The experience which it bears is one of possibility, because the affect it engenders surpasses interpretation. “There is something there...,” “...it is unexplainable, maybe it is mystical...” are phrases that Azerbaijanis use to describe the Garabagh voice. There is a surplus of meaning that cannot be captured and this points to the affective intensity of experience. In my interview with the renowned mugham singer Nezaket Teymurova, she highlighted the enigmatic and inexplicable power of the Garabagh land as the cradle of the specific magical timbre with the common phrase “There is something there...”:

I always say that the land (*torpaq*) is important for bringing up a person. Seyyid Shushinsky was born there. All the prominent artists come from the lands of Garabagh. We are a drop from the land...It is the land that gave us the voice (*səs*), intelligence (*ziyalıq*), and talent (*istədad*). There is something there in that land [Nezaket Teymurova, interview, 29 May 2019].

Based on the interviews I conducted from 2014 to 2019, that is before the Second Garabagh war, the Garabagh voice has often been experienced as trauma and its affect was used to address that trauma. As scholar Cathy Caruth explains, trauma is the “the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” [Caruth 2016: 4]; trauma is beyond consciousness and beyond comprehension, but it haunts us with truth that is too unexpected and too soon to be fully known. This kind of truth cannot be captured in a straightforward way, and I believe that the affectivity of the Garabagh voice to convey trauma lies in its liminality. The *zil* voice is strained and distressed; it is described as painful, sweet, nostalgic and traumatic all at once. Nezaket Teymurova described the feelings associated with Garabagh as such:

A human being has pure (*pak*) feelings, especially in youth. My eyes and mind have been attracted (*meyliçəkmək*) to those places (Garabagh). It was so great there, for example, during the summer it was very cool and people were coming to rest. For us those places are irreplaceable, cannot be substituted (*əvəzedilməz*). During the day those places pass in front of my eyes, and I also dream about those places at night. That's why for me these feelings cannot be substituted. Now we go to Agdam and we can see our mountains there, and my heart becomes so wounded, a bird can fly further and see but we cannot, and just look there with a feeling of separation (*həzrət*) [Nezaket Teymurova, interview, 29 May 2019].

Many of my informants had a very affective response to the timbre of the Garabagh voice because it brought pain, and they mentioned the feeling of choking (*boğulmaq*), or started to cry. This intense bodily response aligns much more with affective rather than emotional experience. For example, Samir Jalilov who used to be a singer in the Nightingales of Garabagh ensemble, having to relocate to Baku as a refugee due to the escalating conflict, explained:

Let me tell you. I lived through very difficult times – coming here to Baku as a refugee from Garabagh. If I myself sing *mugham* now, I start to see the refugee life that happened to me, it passes before my eyes, and I cannot sing anymore. It affects me so much (*təsirlənmək*), that I feel I am suffocating (*insanboğullur*). You become full of tears (*qəhərlənmək*) and remember the hardships: what was lost, what was left behind, and singing becomes very difficult. There have been moments when people asked me to sing, but those feelings and memories have stopped me from singing. It suffocates you. You can't sing [Samir Jalilov, interview, 31 July 2019].

Some Azerbaijanis mentioned the especially powerful influence of the dazzling virtuosity that the voice executes in *zil*. It was as if the pain was claimed, recognized, and desired. There is a certain enjoyment in pain that Azerbaijanis felt when they listened to the high voice. As if they knew that the lands remained theirs: after all, they asserted, the Garabagh voice is born in Garabagh and belongs to Azerbaijan. Owning trauma in this way is important for the creation of hope, an orientation towards an ideal future when the nation will be whole and repaired.

Following the victory over Garabagh in 2020, the *zil* voice today allows Azerbaijanis to live through the paradoxical experience of pain and joy that is linked to this region. For many today, the voice in high register signifies

intense joy being linked to the recent triumph. Yet, the history of atrocities and wars is unavoidable and the pain of these events is also part of the experience.

Experience of the Garabagh voice as sensing the lands

For Azerbaijani audiences today, this voice is not only about the embodiment of pain, but is also about the relationship between the body and its surroundings. Listening to the recording means sensing the physicality of the Garabagh highlands. Extending Vincent Crapanzano's claim that "pain intensifies the experience of the body, delineating, for example, its contours, creating a sense of interior" [Crapanzano 2004: 83], one can argue that pain can also delineate a sense of the exterior. The vocal line of the Garabagh voice, indeed, is most affective at the thrusts upwards, described by many as a "flight into the Garabagh mountains" that transforms listeners into birds hovering over the worshipped peaks. The voice *has* the highlands in it: they comprise the melody, and create the ontological realm to situate the body in Garabagh.

This is affect as *sensed*: the feeling of being a body in a specific environment. But this affective experience also happens in one's imagination. For those who have never been to Garabagh still envision the land and feel as if they are transported there with the Garabagh voice. This is possible because, as phenomenologist Don Ihde writes, sounds have shapes and give rise to imaginary spatiality – "music gives the idea of space" [Ihde 2007: 71] and there is a "directionality" to sound [Ihde 2007: 76].

The land is imagined through and with the body in a way that would be impossible in reality: the sensation is that of flying as a bird. Compared to other mental acts, such as remembering, perceiving, hallucinating, etc., imagining differs precisely because of its possibilities beyond the real [Casey 1976]. According to phenomenologist Edward Casey, the imaginal world is divorced from strict temporal and spatial dimensions. Of course, among listeners there are those who remember particular instances of the war or their escape from Garabagh, and exactly what one sees, feels, senses while listening to the Garabagh timbre is limitless. But the imagination of a flight above the beloved lands is conspicuously common, even for those who have never visited Garabagh. For many, it is the joy of imagining the flight and reuniting with the beloved lands in the future.

On this journey to Garabagh triggered by the voice, one not only sees the beloved geographical region, but experiences being reunited with it through the whole body. The sounds of animals, smells of rare flora, feeling of air, taste of water, are all part of the journey. Exactly due to this richness of the sensed imaginary, traversing the landscape while listening to the zilvoice offers opportunities to address the Garabagh trauma. Being in Garabagh with the entire body – that is, an imagined flight as felt by the body – becomes an act to address the trauma. It is a realm to be reunited with the beloved lands, and thus it is a realm to inhabit the wound itself. The voice as the land creates the liminal time-space world for exploring the traumatic experience. Crapanzano [2004:92] writes about the impossibility of trauma to be articulated or to become a historical event for an individual – it is antistructural, a phenomenon of the liminal, of another time-space. It cannot be accessed because as a trauma the Garabagh war has become a deep psychological wound and insult. Only in the moments of the Garabaghvoice, turned into a bird's journey, the trauma is brought from underneath consciousness to be felt and contemplated.

In conclusion, with its high altitude, tension at breaking point, and cries of “*aman!*” the grain of Garabagh voice is best described as expressing pain, but its affective potential has breadth and equivocacy. There are a number of affective dimensions of the Garabagh voice: becoming the physicality of the land in one's imagination, becoming the pain of the nation's traumatic history, and becoming the paradoxical expression of pain and joy as a result of the successful liberation of Garabagh lands in 2020. The rawness of affect in zil exclamations creates an experience that may encompass pleasure as well as pain. In this way, the Garabagh voice truly becomes affective as its expression escapes any neatly labeled categories of emotions, and stands for the unity of joy and pain, war and victory.

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QARABAĞ SƏSİNİN TƏSİRİ VƏ FENOMENOLOGİYASI

Muğam transmilli klassik magamistan ənənəsinə aiddir, Xinjianqdan şimal-qərb Çindən Mavritaniyaya Afrikada yayılmışdır. Azərbaycanda maqam ənənəsi muğam kimi tanınır, digər maqam qolları xanəndənin səsinin xüsusi tembri tarixən Azərbaycan Qarabağının qərb region kimi inkişaf etmişdir. Əlbəttə, Qarabağın dağ mənzərəsi xanəndə oxunuşu ilə birləşir – Qarabağ səsi dəbdəbəli məharət və xüsusilə gözəl ifadəli yüksək registr. Bu məqalədə müəllif bu səsin tarixini müzakirə edir ki, bu onun emosional potensialına uyğun gəlir. Müəllif Qarabağ vokal sənətinin xüsusiyyətlərini Ermənistan tərəfindən işğal edildikdən əvvəl və Qarabağ müharibəsindən sonrakı durumla müqayisə edir.

Açar sözlər: Qarabağın səsi, muğam, təsir, sarsıntı, fenomenologiya.

Полина Десятниченко (Канада)

**ВОЗДЕЙСТВИЕ И ФЕНОМЕНОЛОГИЯ
КАРАБАХСКОГО ГОЛОСА**

Мугам относится к транснациональной классической традиции магмистана и распространен от Хинжиана на северо-западе Китая до Мавритании в Африке. В Азербайджане традиция магама известна как мугам, а другие ветви магама с присущими им особенностями тембра исполнителя развивались в западном регионе Азербайджана – Карабахе. Конечно, горный пейзаж Карабаха словно сливается с вокалом исполнителя, что отличает выразительный высокий регистр Карабахского голоса. В этой статье автор рассматривает историю голоса, соответствующего данному эмоциональному потенциалу. Автор сравнивает состояние вокального искусства Карабаха до оккупации этих земель Арменией и после II Карабахской войны.

Ключевые слова: Карабахский голос, мугам, воздействие, травма, феноменология.