

# MNEMONIC THINKING AS AN IMMANENT QUALITY OF GEORGIAN TRADITIONAL CHANT

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The origin of Georgian sacred chant is found in Early Christianity. General norms, developing in the depths of Christian sacred chant, were enriched in parallel with the liturgical forms of divine service in an age-long development process. They transformed and formed local chanting traditions in which, together with similarities, individual developmental trends took place, some deviating from the originals significantly, and others, while keeping ties to eth source, emerged as a unique variety of Christian chant. One such tradition developed in Georgia, with the mnemonic technique of oral tradition relevant until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (until switchover to the European five-line system of chants).

Long ago, until the adoption of staff notation, the musical writing system, which carried on in the form of *in campo aperto*<sup>1</sup> even in the 18-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, also developed in Georgian chanting practices as early as the Middle Ages, much like the traditions of Eastern and Western Christian chant. In Georgia, this type of writing system represents an unchangeable system<sup>2</sup> for musical melodies, while the five-line system was in full use in Western Europe.

It is known that, even after the formation of neumatic systems in church practice, the tradition of memorizing and transmitting melodies orally remained relevant.

Due to the developmental directions of the notation system and reforms (the appearance of the European musical writing system and its further improvement, Byzantine chanting reform in the 15<sup>th</sup> century), the need to memorize melodies, at some point, lost its relevance. In

the history of Georgian chant, the practice of oral transmission remained as “a partner” to the neumatic notation, always keeping significance it has had from the beginning.

The art of mnemonics is directly connected to the forms of oral transmission and performance, and it is discussed in the present work as an inherent quality of Georgian chant. This ancient form of thinking is encountered at the initial stage of development of Christian chant and, accordingly, it would be characteristic to chanting traditions of all local churches. Taking into consideration the development of characteristics of Georgian chant traditions, studying of sources of the Middle Ages and the results of analysis of scores, lead us to believe that mnemonic thinking was characteristic to all stages of development in the tradition of Georgian chant. This feature is far more important than outlining the viability of simple oral tradition therein, because viewing the principle of mnemonic art in Georgian chant helps us discover impressive and special abilities of old chanters’ memory and, at the same time, conduct correct methodological research into the organizing principles of musical fabric.

According to scholars, mnemonic techniques are “the art of remembrance”. This is a system of rules, devices and methods designed to simplify memorizing information by means of artificial associations<sup>3</sup>. The techniques of mnemonic memory became an inseparable feature of Christian chant when professional art was formed, though they continued only until a certain stage in many chanting traditions. The origin of staff notation and its

1 *in campo aperto* is the earliest adiaستمatic type of western neumatic system.

2 Together with the so-called Chrelta Nuskhebi which approaches with its essence to neumatic writing system. See: ჩხეიძე, თ., *ჯრელოა ნუსხეები*, 2018

3 The dictionary of foreign words.

further perfection decreased the relevance of oral transmission. In Georgian chanting practice, oral transmission is found at all stages of development, among them at a later stage and proceeding from this it forms its inseparable property.

Mnemonic devices were an important mechanism in the medieval system of education for mastering the art of rhetoric. Church music adopted this method of transmission. Back when chanting repertoires were systematized only through musical hearing, chanting schools introduced mnemonic principles to study repertoires orally and “to imprint” them in the memory. At the following stage of memorizing melodic formulas, a special system of signs was developed in liturgical practice to widen the repertoire and easily memorize what has been “memorized.”

In this respect, Georgian hymnographers kept up with the latest traditions. They created an original neumatic system that acquired its final form by the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It is remarkable that, as early as the 9-11<sup>th</sup> centuries, Georgian neumatic notation was a unified system. As E. Oniani remarks, the initial phase of the writing system formation was already behind and the manuscripts of this period depict not the development process of Georgian neumatic system but a result, while its contemporary Paleo-Byzantine notation was at the initial stage of development.<sup>4</sup>

“The art of memorizing” in medieval music is a separate branch of medieval studies. The works by prominent American scholars Anna Maria Basa-Berger<sup>5</sup> and Mery Qarutse<sup>6</sup> are dedicated to this problem. Anna Maria Basa-Berger researches how the medieval art of learning, memorizing, and remembering. She studies how medieval chanters managed to memorize vast musical repertoires. The researcher emphasizes the question of

the influence of the art of memorizing on composition and transmission devices. John Graham<sup>7</sup> dedicated his work to “the art of memorizing” in Georgian chant tradition. He emphasizes the role of memory in the process of handing down chants from generation to generation, structuring Georgian chanters’ creative processes, and portraying the process in two stages: “Firstly specific melodies were studied and then harmonization of these melodies.” John Graham concludes that the first part was playing the dominant mnemonic function, though the objects of memory were both, the first part and the harmonic structure.<sup>8</sup>

Our aim in the process of transmitting and memorizing is to study influences on the formation of regularities of musical tissue of a chant. As Anna Maria Basa-Berger outlines that “the art of memorizing” greatly influences composition. We would add that, together with composition, this transmission-remembrance process must have influenced the harmonic system of a chant as well.

Therefore, we should emphasize the two-staginess<sup>9</sup> of the remembrance-studying process proceeding from the fact that, for our research aims, the activity carried out at the first stage in the process of using mnemonics techniques—to memorize “prototype one-part melodies”<sup>10</sup>—has a decisive role.

The musical writing system reflects the contemporary liturgical chanting practice. On the way of development of the neumatic writing system in the musical practice of western as well as eastern Christendom, gradual transformation of the writing system from adiaستمatic into diastematic<sup>11</sup> notation is clearly seen. The Byzantine writing system remained adiaستمatic until it moved to the medieval Byzantine notation.

Placing signs not on every syllable of the text (which is commonly characteristic to Byzantine system) but in

4 Oniani, *Georgian Neumatic Notation*, 2018, p. 67-74.

5 Busse-Berger, 2005.

6 Carruthers, 1990.

7 Graham, *Importance of Memory*, 2008.

8 Graham, *Importance of Memory*, 2008. p. 494-495.

9 Many publications or scientific researches in newspaper-magazines were dedicated to the discussion of chant teaching in Georgian tradition (f. qoriZe, iv. javaxiSvili, o. CijavaZe, m. suxiaSvili, d. SuRliaSvili). According to these methods, the skilled representative of alive tradition – Artem Erqomaishvili clearly describes two-staginess of the process. (CxeiZe, *musikaluri sistema*. 2018).

10 LEVY Kenneth, *On Gregorian Orality*, 1990, p. 21.

11 Adiaستمatic notation is the earliest phase of neumatic notation existence. Neumes in adiaستمatic notation are arranged on a verbal text by intervals and it doesn’t indicate to the precise interval movement but it has mnemonic importance.

intervals (non-syllabic placement) at an early stage of Paleo-Byzantine notation proves their mnemonic-reminding role and the existence of the tradition of memorizing formulas orally. After the reform, the syllabic principle of neumes placement formed in Middle Byzantine notation (the 12–14<sup>th</sup> centuries, neume at every syllable) shows that signs reflect the interval movement and do not present a mnemonic formula.

The same processes are visible in Russian tradition as well where neumatic chants have been retained since the 12<sup>th</sup> century. “At this time, a streamlined system of chanting already existed in Byzantine to be adopted by Russia in the same form<sup>12</sup>. Thus, in Byzantine tradition, “the method of memorizing” no longer performs the essential part in the realization of melody as the new system of signs does not necessitate it.

Notably, the evolution of the Georgian neumatic system reveals completely different traits. The neumatic writing system of the later period (the 17–19<sup>th</sup> centuries) is based on the same principles as those used in the Middle Ages.

The Georgian neumatic writing system kept syllabic placement of signs at all stages of development which proves formulating, viability of mnemonic thinking even in the late 17–19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The original *Chrelta Nuskh*a writing system<sup>13</sup> developed in Georgian tradition is a clear demonstration of using mnemonics devices (Fig. 1). Like neumes, verbal texts (*incipites*, sometimes extracts from the middle sections of a chant) arranged above line of a verbal text of a chant are indicative of the use of a techniques of artificial associations created to ease the process of memorizing. In this system, so-called prototype melodies<sup>14</sup> known to chanters are used to remind the melody to be chanted. The analogy of “prototype melodies” in the western chanting practice, according to K. Levy, is Byzantine *automela-prosomoia* interrelationship—*automela*-melodies are so firmly imprinted on chanters’ minds that their neumatic versions did not appeared in collections

as frequently. To recognize and remember melodies, a text-*incipit* sufficed in that it could be adapted to a new text<sup>15</sup>. In Georgian tradition, the existence of the same is proved by so-called original melodies added in the form of *incipit* in troparion of *Shekhvetiliani*, Giorgi Mtatsmindeli’s (George the Athonite) autographic book of Lenten Hymns.

The well-known comments added at the beginning of the same hymns testify to a strong tradition of hymns memorized by heart and of giving priority to familiar tunes, known in Georgia since “time immemorial,” over new Greek *automela* melodies that had to be avoided.<sup>16</sup> Among these important commentaries,<sup>17</sup> we will emphasize the interrelation between traditional melody and their translations. Evidently, while working on the book of Lenten Hymns, Holy Father Giorgi selected corresponding original melodies from Heirmoi, known to the Georgians since “time immemorial” and referred it to each hymn—as Giorgi Mtatsmindeli wrote, it would be difficult to learn new Greek *automela*-melodies of hymns which Greeks knew by heart.

If western musicians gave up prototype melodies and models because of the regular neumatic character of their adapted variants at a relatively earlier stage, Byzantine hymnographers kept the old tradition longer (after the collapse of Byzantine Empire). In Georgian liturgical practice, the principle of mnemonic thinking is found at all stages of its development.

We believe that devotion to mnemonic thinking conditions the peculiarities of formation of a chant harmonic system. If the Western church separated mode and voice by the terms: *modus* and *tonus*, in Georgian tradition it never happened.

The mode of main organizing melody of a chant retains the formulating structure, formulating substance until the end and is never generalized in the scale. Obviously, this influences the formation of multi-part textures and its harmonic system.

Considering said features creates preconditions for

12 oniani, dasaxelebuli naSromi.

13 It is fixed in the manuscripts of the 17–18th centuries

14 LEVY Kenneth, On Gregorian Orality. 1990, p. 218

15 Ibid, p,218

16 The Book of Hymns (Ath 38:320r).

17 See: in more detail about the Will and its novel definitions in the Master diploma: “Shekhvetiliani”, by the nun - N. Samkharadze, 2019, p. 44–48.

the correct analysis of harmonic system regularities of Georgian sacred chant. Devotion to mnemonic formulating thinking and the principle of improvisational transfor-

mation of formulas into multi-part forms define the individual form of Georgian sacred chant, securing this way its special place among Christian chanting traditions.

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