AN INQUIRY INTO THE AESTHETICS OF SYRIAC HYMNS

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God and Beauty

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Introduction

Syriac rites have suffered persecution in their homeland for centuries. From oppression under the early Persian Empire[1] to ISIS, they continue to be tyrannized for their Christian beliefs. Despite the continuous suppression of their voice, their hymns remain alive in Syriac liturgies.

This paper will introduce the contemporary practice of Syriac chant[2] across a representative sampling of liturgical rites,[3] including the Church of the East,[4] the Syriac Orthodox Church, and the Chaldean Catholic Church. While these Christian traditions have nuanced differences, they all are a repository of a distinctly Syriac hymnic tradition. Following a brief historical overview of the Churches as well as the history of the composition of chant, I will analyze a famous Syriac chant to introduce the potent affective elements of Syriac hymnology. I will then argue that their execution in the context of liturgy (specifically their elements of *maqam*, lyricism, and *nashaz*) is fundamentally aesthetic: that is, though there are formal qualities of the music and a set of common hymns, the embodied practice of singing infuses and enfleshes these hymns with powerful affective and theological content. Syriac hymnology embodies Christ and incarnates Syriac persecution in a manner ineffable by pure academic description.

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[1] Mar Awa David Royel, "Singing Hymns to the Martyrs: The 'Antiphons of the Sahde' in the Assyrian Church of the East," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 12 (2012).

[2] In Western culture, chants are seen as repetitious; this is not to be confused with Syriac chants which are melodic.

[3] This essay will not discuss the Syriac liturgical rites in India and will omit churches that are not apostolic.

[4] S. P. Brock, "The Nestorian Church: A Lamentable Misnomer," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 78, no. 3 (September 1996): 23–35, https://doi.org/10.7227/BJRL.78.3.3. The Church of the East includes the Ancient Church of the East and the Assyrian Church of the East. The only difference between the churches is that they follow different liturgical calendars. This church does not hold Nestorian doctrine despite being referred to as "The Nestorian Church." More can be learned here.

Context: Syriac as a Language

Syriac is described with different terms; some of these terms[5] involve Neo-Aramaic,[6] Syrian,[7] Assyrian,[8] Suryoyo,[9] and Chaldean. In this paper, I will refer to these under the umbrella term Syriac. Each rite can have a different dialect but are united under the term Syriac. For example, the Western dialect[10] includes the Maronite Church, the Syriac Orthodox Church, and the Syriac Catholic Church. The Eastern dialects[11] are practiced in the Church of the East and the Chaldean Catholic Church.

Despite dialectical differences, the liturgies of these churches are similar; in particular their hymnologies bear a striking resemblance to each other. This makes sense considering They date from 600 A.D. with famous patrons like St. Ephrem (306-373) and St. Narsai (339-502). These two have been widely credited as the most talented hymnographers of the Syriac tradition.[12] They have composed lyrics that the above rites still sing today. St. Ephrem is known for his nearly 400 hymns composed with 50 different meters meant to be sung in different *qale*, or melodies. He is also known for promoting women choirs. St. Narsai is very well known for his *memre*, or homilies, which focus on human salvation throughout history.[13] Both of these poets focus on the unique divine and human natures of Christ and the Trinity to provide exegeses which have shaped Christianity.

Musicology: *Maqam*

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[5] Syriac, Syrian, and Neo-Aramaic are umbrella terms. The rest describe dialectical differences.

[6] All of these terms are Neo-Aramaic languages. However, the terms that follow are dialectically different.

[7] Syrian is only used academically but is now outdated due to confusion with Syrians who live in Syria.

[8] Most commonly used to describe Eastern Syriac language native to Iraq and Iran.

[9] Most commonly used to describe Western Syriac language native to Syria.

[10] The Western dialect is Suryoyo.

[11] The Eastern dialects are nuanced by tribe but fall under Assyrian. Chaldean is also an Eastern dialect. These liturgical rites stem from the Church of the East.

[12] Eve Sada, "Assyrian - Syriac Chants from the Liturgy of the Church of the East" (2021), 24 https://shareok.org/handle/11244/332527.

[13] Lucas Van Rompay, "Narsai," *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage: Electronic Edition*, accessed May 3, 2024, https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/Narsai.

Having considered, however briefly, the lyrical history of Syriac hymnology, we can then transition into Oriental musicology. The Syriac hymns are composed of mainly modal[14] scales known as *maqam*, especially prevalent in Middle Eastern music. It is common for these scales to consist of microtones; these tones describe intervals smaller than the smallest interval in Western music, the semitone (the distance from a white key to a black key on a piano). In other words, Western notes are split in half (e.g., instead of quarter notes, Middle Eastern music can consist of eighth notes).[15] For example, between a C and a C# is a C half #, a note that does not exist on an American Yamaha. Thus, we cannot play all[16] *maqam* on the typical Western keyboard.[17] In fact, we would have to play it on a special oriental keyboard designed for *maqam*.[18] However, *maqam* is represented well with vocals. It is expressed similarly to Western vibrato: when one trills their voice between two adjacent tones. Everyone's vibrato is unique, and it is ultimately produced through training and then subconscious execution. This means that one releases control of their voice to naturally ”vibrate” their vocals. Instead of a scalarly stagnant[19] vibration between two notes, *maqam* usually contains a trill consisting of many tones. The change between tones is so rapid that it is impossible to consciously think about each tone.[20] In this manner, *maqam* feels similar to vibrato but requires much more control due to rapid scalar change.

A Note on Martyrdom

[14] Modal describes music centered around melody. Almost all Western music is tonal and thus can be harmonized, unlike modal music.

[15] Sami Abu Shumays, “*Maqam* Analysis: A Primer,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 35, no. 2 (October 2013): 236, https://doi.org/10.1525/mts.2013.35.2.235.

[16] Some *maqam* do not contain microtones. These scales can be played on any piano and harmonized.

[17] *Evelyne Daoud (Syrian Orthodox Church): Like the Merchants V. 1.1*, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIwtziFrCiU. A great visual and audio explanation of *maqam* exemplified by a Syriac Orthodox hymn.

[18] Eve Sada, Conversation with Eve Sada, Phone Call, May 3, 2024.

[19] “Scalarly stagnant” refers to not switching notes much, or remaining stagnant, on a musical scale.

[20] Tala Jarjour, *Sense and Sadness: Syriac Chant in Aleppo* (Oxford University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190635251.001.0001.

There are eight common *maqamat*[21] which the Syriac rites follow, two of the most popular being *Bayati*, associated with "vitality, joy, and femininity,"[22] and *Saba*, associated with "sadness and mourning."[23] *Saba* is an Arabic word derived from Syriac, meaning old man or martyr. *Saba* and its variation *Sada* are common names within Assyrian culture. Drawing back to the notion of Syriac rites being oppressed from their formation to the current day, they originated as a sign of a child's solemn destiny to become a martyr.[24]

Each scale is unique and conveys an emotion. For example, *Bayati* is used for joyful songs, and *Saba* is used for solemn songs. To the typical Westerner, or to me when I first began singing Syriac chants, all hymns sound grave and sorrowful. I will not delve extensively into the psychoacoustics of why this is due to space constraints. For now, understanding the difference between musicology in the Western and Eastern rites are essential. I will also describe a test-case of how a maqam scale integrates within a song, particularly within the song *Brikh Khannana*, meaning "Blessed is the Compassionate One."[25]

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[21] Plural of *maqam*. There are many *maqamat*, but there are eight main ones used.

[22] Patricio Fadel Molina, "Arabic Music and the Piano - The Use of the Piano in Lebanon and Egypt During the Golden Age of Arabic Music" (Ph.D., United States -- New Jersey, Rutgers The State University of New Jersey, School of Graduate Studies, 2020), 15, https://www.proquest.com/docview/2512279908/abstract/3768053B87EA4037PQ/1.

[23] Molina, 20.

[24] Interestingly, Eve Sada's last name is a variation of *Saba*. This is a common Assyrian name reflective of Syriac rites' history of martyrdom. Sada, Conversation with Eve Sada.

[25] Sada, "Assyrian - Syriac Chants from the Liturgy of the Church of the East," 63-86.

Hymnological Differences between Western and Eastern Syriac Rites

Two inspirational sources I have used for my research are Eve Sada's dissertation on Church of the East hymns and Tala Jarjour's journal about hymns of the Syrian Orthodox Church in Aleppo, Syria.[26] These respective Eastern and Western Rites have different *qale*, or melodies. The Church of the East has a single *qale* per hymn while the Syrian Orthodox Church follows the Octoechos structure in which they rotate between eight *qale* during their liturgical calendar.[27] Essentially, the Syrian Orthodox church sings in a different *maqam* depending on the day. In this manner, the same hymn is given a different emotional mood per rehearsal.

An Exploration of Maqam: *Brikh Khannana*

Brikh Khannana, "Blessed is the Compassionate One," is a hymn composed by Babai the Great (ca.551- 628) in the 6th century.[28] It is one of the most famous Syriac hymns and is sung during Advent. It also carries fame outside of the Syriac community; it is stored in manuscripts across the world including Iraq, Paris, Berlin, London, and the Vatican.[29] It explores the nature of Christ, similar to the poems of St. Ephrem and Narsai. This *Tišbuḥta*, or praise hymn, glorifies Jesus. The majority of it expresses Babai the Great's theological beliefs, including the virgin birth of Jesus, the distinctness of His divinity and humanity, and the similarity between the Trinity's essence and the duality of Jesus's natures. Despite being about Christ's identity and glory, it is in the *maqam Saba*, the solemn *maqam*.

In this section, I will detail the differences in *Brikh Khannana*'s performance between churches. I will focus on the melodic development in two videos produced by the Chaldean

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[26] My own observations are mainly based on the Chaldean Catholic Church.

[27] Eric Werner, "The Origin of the Eight Modes of Music (Octoechos): A Study in Musical Symbolism," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 21 (1948): 214.

[28] Sada, "Assyrian - Syriac Chants from the Liturgy of the Church of the East," 63.

[29] Sada, 64.

Catholic Church and the Church of the East. I will then expand this conversation to the significance of Syriac women's choirs.

Performance by the Chaldean Catholic Church

In St. Mary's Christmas Concert,[30] the soloist sings a melisma, or a several-tone trill in a single syllable. The video is linked in the footnotes but is not a required watch to understand this section. He does this on the word *kiane*, meaning natures. As mentioned before, the hymn is based around conveying the divine and human natures of Christ, a common theme within Syriac chants. The preface to the first vowel sound (*kiah*) contains a trill reminiscent of a typical Western vibrato, perhaps not possible on a Western scale, and a short melisma on the *ih* sound. This complex melisma stresses particular words like Jesus, nature, came from (the Father), and glory.[31] These words in the video sound like a cry. The glissando, or continuous sliding of tones,[32] mimics the release of a cry: Intensity is most extreme at the release of a sob and quiets when breath runs out.[33] Similarly, the glissando starts off intense, wavers between tones, and quiets at the end. On words that seem jovial or influential, we hear even more grave tones. These words -- Jesus, nature, came from (the Father), and glory -- are essential to the doctrine Babai the Great sought to convey and the theology Syriac rites were martyred for.

Performance by the Church of the East

Another video composed by a Church of the East parish had a melisma on *kiane* that was much more straightforward.[34] This video is linked in the footnotes, but opening it is not essential

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[30] *B'rykh Khannana*, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w85bFDjwW4s. Refer to timestamp 1:34.

[31] *B'rykh Khannana*. Time stamps 1:26, 1:32, 1:38, and 2:22 respectively. There are many more melismas in the video than the aforementioned.

[32] Sami Abu Shumays, "The Fuzzy Boundaries of Intonation in Maqam: Cognitive and Linguistic Approaches," in *Conference of the Society for Ethnomusicology; 2009 Annual Meeting (54th): Mexico City, Mexico, November 19*, vol. 22, 2009, 1.

[33] *Evelyne Daoud (Syrian Orthodox Church)*. This video visualizes the decrease of intensity as a trill progresses.

[34] *Brikhanana- Blessed Is the Compassionate One*, 2020. Refer to timestamp 1:50.

to understanding this section. The woman singing on *kiane* clearly sings three tones without a vibrato-esque sound. Certain words, like *kiane*, can be sung differently with inexact trills, like in the first video, or straightforward, 3-tune melisma, like in this video.[35] The doctrine expressed by this hymn's lyrics remain consistent when repeated by different liturgical rites, but the performance and presence of the songs can be wildly different. Here, we see *Brikh Khannana* in two performance styles: one in a Christmas concert and the other during liturgy. While the Chaldean Catholic video turns a yearning *Saba* scale into a powerful back-and-forth between women's and men's choirs, the Church of the East's video is a simple solo. In this manner, the concert rendition beckons audience excitement and is stage-friendly[36] while the liturgical is more suitable to be repeated solemnly during liturgies as a declaration of faith. *Brikh Khannana* is an example of many versatile hymns that can carry different meanings based on execution.

Women's Choirs: An Ephremic Take

Near the end of the first video, the men's choir delays a line from the women's choir declaring God's single lordship, power, and will. This delay creates a crescendo, or an increase in volume, within "Lordship" and "Power," and matches on-time with "Will" to evoke a separate melisma from the women. The potent masculine response that trails behind the emotive feminine even borders on yelling, especially on the word "Power," or *khayla*. When they join on "Will,"[37] they are harmoniously united to declare the Trinity. From a theological perspective, the feminine-masculine lag could signify the different roles that men and women have in worshipping the Lord. Their final unity is symbolic of their dual suffering on earth for the Lord and of their equal place in the Kingdom of Heaven.

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[35] Note that these different renditions of the song are not characteristic of their respective rites. They have simply been developed for different purposes.

[36] This rendition was melodically developed by a bishop who intentionally added drama with crescendos.

[37] *B'rykh Khannana*. See around time stamp 3:00 for crescendo and unity on "Will."

Throughout the Golden Ages[38] of Syriac hymnology, Women's choirs have been included in Syriac chant.[39] As mentioned before, St. Ephrem composed hymns with unique roles for women. Poet-theologian Jacob of Serug (d. 521) proclaimed that Ephrem "labored to devise two harps for two groups [and] treated men and women as one to give praise"[40] In *Brikh Khannana*, the split between men and women convey two distinct "harps" traditionally characteristic of each gender (i.e., Women are emotive while men carry power.). Ephrem himself identifies the women's choir role in the church as "distinct, separated… uniquely the source of doctrinal truth: of right Christian faith."[41] The unity following the highlight of distinct (emotive and potent) voices is reflective of the past and present Syriac rite doctrine. From Ephrem to the present day, this masculine-feminine Syriac hymnic style thrives.

Ultimately, these examples of *Brikh Khannana* are only two of many examples of what the famous hymn can sound like. This hymn establishes a solid base and example of *maqam*, performance structure, and women's role in chants. In the next section, I will detail the vocal aesthetics of Syriac hymns.

Syriac Vocal Aesthetics

The emotions of *maqamat* and the wailing of glissando are ineffable by academic paper; however, I will describe the inherent vocal aesthetics of Syriac hymns through an exploration of *maqam*, lyrics, and *nashaz*.

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[38] Sada, "Assyrian - Syriac Chants from the Liturgy of the Church of the East," 15. Fourth to seventh centuries.

[39] "Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant: Women's Choirs and Sacred Song in Ancient Syriac Christianity†," Text (Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies), accessed May 4, 2024, https://hugoye.bethmardutho.org/article/hv8n2harvey.

[40] "Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant, 17."

[41] "Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant, 27"

Elaboration on *Maqam* and Lyricism

One of the most vital aspects of this section is the idea that not one person can interpret (hear or sing) a Syriac hymn the same. This idea forms nuance between the congregation and the chorus. The hymns are written in a manner so that there is a traditional way to perform them, but there is no strict guidance on the trills of the music. *Maqamat* necessitates vocal tone changes so rapid that it is impossible to identically emulate a performance even with the same voice(s). It ends up being slightly improvised every time. One person's vocal chords will never be able to vibrate in the same manner twice due to genetic and skill differences. This mimics the notion of no one being able to hold the same relationship with God. Each individual has a different soul with unique pains and yearnings. Communication with God, from each individual, will be of different levels of skill, tone, and frequency both in a musical and in a prayerful sense.

Hymnic rehearsal in oriental modes expand the possibility to convey more emotion. In this manner, I have already discussed how each *maqam* is intended to evoke a particular emotion, but because *maqam* explores intervals smaller than Western music, these smaller pitch variations can explore more expressions and offer more complex melismas.[42] Paired with the impossibility to perfectly replicate a hymn, each hymn can detail both emotion and individuality more extensively. When asked about the theological content of *maqam*, Sada believes that, "Oriental modes, particularly those with microtone pitches, have a profound impact on the soul because of their interval sensitivity."[43] Due to this nuance, each church personalizes the melodic development of the hymn to their own aesthetic desires. Even then, forms of improvisation and *nashaz* are hard to repeat, personalizing the hymn to the soloist or choir.

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[42] Eve Sada, "Syriac Chants," email to Renee Aziz, May 4, 2024.
[43] Sada.

The current emotions of the choir dictate the intensity and tonality of the hymn being sung. For example, a soloist who is going through a spiritual struggle might have intense impatience with God. He might cry out in a glissando by starting at an extremely high intensity and singing a long melisma to mimic vocal whining. In this manner, *maqamat* disclose our humanity and our attempts at singing imperfect prayer, or hymns. Each congregation has different relationships with God and unique pains in their life. There is an element of pain to every hymn due to the solemn nature of *maqam*, and this pain is exacerbated through the singer's spiritual take on the song.

The dichotomy between ancient lyricism and current vocal nuance turn these hymns into a living music. Most importantly, it aids the transition from ancient lyrics, or the history of martyrdom, to the present pains Syriac rites endure. The *Onyatha D-Sade*,[44] or the Antiphons of Martyrs, are a series of hymns that extol the martyrs of the Syriac rite.[45] They were composed by Marutha of Maypherqat (d.420) regarding the martyrs in Persia killed by King Shapur who put "as many as tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Christians" to death.[46] Although Syriac poetry glorifies God, the nuance within maqam ties together Christianity with suffering. This is a prominent theory as to why *maqam* sounds solemn.[47] The emotional expanse *maqam* and its lyrics permit build on top of each other to convey modern-day suffering.

[44] This is the plural of *Sada*, meaning martyr.
[45] Royel, "Singing Hymns to the Martyrs: The 'Antiphons of the Sahde' in the Assyrian Church of the East."
[46] Royel.
[47] Sada, Conversation with Eve Sada.

Nashaz as Eerie

Nashaz,[48] or dissonance, is a striking element of Syriac melodic development. Tala Jarjour, who analyzed Syriac Chant in Aleppo, Syria, inquired clergy at St. Gerorge's Church regarding the topic. *Nashaz* is *"*to stray from the rule; in music it expresses discord or being out of tune[,] not only unruly, but stand[s] out as aesthetically undesirable and incorrect."[49] This is purposefully carried out within hymns, but singers who have a natural dissonance to their voice can sing *nashaz* the best. Jarjor describes this as an "instance of experientially understood modality" in the sense that its emotional effect is best understood in-person.[50] *Nashaz* is typically included at the end of a melodic sentence and has the lowest intensity of adjacent tones.[51] It is musically ornamental and not an error.

Essentially, off-tune *nashaz* serves to jar the audience, and its plainness serves as a grim end to a hymnal statement. For example, *nashaz* is always unfamiliar to the ear because it is less common and can catch the listener off-guard from a perfectly melodic tune. While melody is associated with order, dissonance is associated with chaos and anxiety. It ultimately causes unease and is used to convey negative emotions.

From the singer's perspective, the *nashaz* is sung at the lowest intensity. While the preceding words are sung according to good vocal technique, the last word is sung "poorly" with little intensity. It mimics running out of breath during a song: The statement is so heavy that it drains the energy from the singer and causes an off-tune and low intensity note.

Jarring the audience and emphasizing the melody's weight stresses these hymns' ties to persecution of the Syriac people. Once again, every hymn's subject, especially those about

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[48] This is an Arabic word. In Assyrian, it is known as *shnozya.*

[49] Tala Jarjour, "Ḥasho," in *Sense and Sadness: Syriac Chant in Aleppo*, ed. Tala Jarjour (Oxford University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190635251.003.0008.

[50] Jarjour.

[51] Jarjour.

martyrs, reveal an inherent suffering intertwined with Christian doctrine. In this manner, Christianity and persecution are tied together in song. *Nashaz* incarnates persecution. Although Syriac poetry glorifies God, the discomfort and profoundness that the *nashaz* evokes is the symbol of continuous martyrdom throughout Syriac history.

Conclusion

Many elements of hymnography, including *maqam*, lyricism, and *nashaz* infuse Syriac hymns with potent theological content, particularly about suffering and martyrdom. This essay first explored an overall context and history of Syriac rites and a rudimentary explanation of *maqam* (highlighting *Saba* as an essential *maqam*). *Brikh Khannana* was used as an introduction to the emotional nuances of *maqam* before discussing what the hymn could sound like in a different liturgical rite, the Church of the East. We also discussed the theological significance of women choirs. With *Brikh Khannana* as an example of Syriac hymnology, we dove into the theological effect of vocal aesthetics regarding *maqam* and *nashaz.*

Above all, Syriac hymns carry ancient theological doctrine to the present day. They serve to embody the suffering of the Syriac peoples. *Saba*, the most common *maqam*, is the gravest, despite all *maqam* sounding somber to the Western listener. These poignant melodies weave a narrative that illuminates the profound connection between Christianity and suffering in Syriac tradition. Despite being dismal, this exact narrative mirrors that of Christ Himself. The poignant chants are a living reminder of the trials and tribulations of Jesus. Ultimately, the aesthetics of Syriac hymns carry theological and emotive qualities explained through history, musical theory, and vocal nuance.

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