

Original Research Article

Melik-Aslanian's Approach to Utilizing the Potential of Music Mode for Establishing Cohesion in "Dance Variations on an Armenian Theme"

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Abstract

The application of folk music modes in contemporary composition is a significant and appealing topic for many researchers and composers, with Melik-Aslanian's work serving as a key point of interest. Understanding how he establishes cohesion in his pieces and explores the potential of modes, formal issues, and the development of ideas derived from folk music is a compelling area of study. By examining his works, we can gain valuable insights that can inform our compositions and research. The research question is as follows: First, how and what harmonic or melodic aspects of the folk mode does Aslanian utilize in "Dance Variations"? Secondly, what harmonic factors make the piece coherent? This paper first summarizes the characteristics derived from folk modes in composition based on library resources. Next, each variation and its harmonic and melodic ideas are clarified. Finally, this paper organizes the melodic materials to facilitate an understanding of the relationships between the sections. The analysis results of this piece show that the composer utilizes the intervallic potential of the Armenian theme in the Lydian mode and shapes the vertical structure of chords, chordal pedals, and contrapuntal lines based on the (016) cell, derived from the Lydian mode. Emphasis on a consistent intervallic structure throughout the piece creates overall cohesion in the work.

Keywords: *Aslanian, Composition, Harmony, Lydian.*

Introduction

Composers in the 20th and 21st centuries sought ways to incorporate their indigenous elements into their works. The inclination to use folk elements can offer new approaches to composition. On the other hand, the use of Polyphony with folk themes can present difficulties in establishing structural cohesion because, depending on the folk theme, the way of establishing cohesion, polyphonic techniques, harmonic possibilities, and

development method in the piece's Process will likely differ from classical examples.

Furthermore, understanding the roots of such works is not only academically enriching but also practical for performers. For instance, recognizing modal elements, intervallic content, and metric emphasis in a theme and variation based on a folk theme can help a performer re-identify the theme's elements in polyphonic variations. Similarly, displaying the theme and placing caesuras between phrases requires an understanding of the folk

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theme's structure. This practical insight can significantly enhance a performer's interpretation of the piece.

Emanuel Melik-Aslanian is a composer with a unique perspective on music. He pays special attention to ancient music and non-classical folk themes, believing that 'musical technique is like fertile soil, and folk music is like a plant seed. Just as a seed transforms in the soil, a composer must bring a folk melody to a new quality (Berberian, 2003). This perspective significantly influences his compositions, making them a fascinating subject of study.

He also believes that by relying on the past, one can have "supra-national thinking." In his view, "international" and "global" thinking is rootless, but "supra-national" thinking has roots somewhere. Melik-Aslanian gave an interview in 1973 in *Iran Music Magazine*, rejecting European Romanticism. He believed that romantic music distances humans from the absolute and hinders truth-seeing (Mansouri, 1973, 1-7). The piece "Dance Variations on an Armenian Theme" is a collection of variations on an Armenian theme in the Lydian mode. In 1960, at the International Music Symposium in Tehran, among 60 musicians, the committee selected Melik-Aslanian's Dance Variation as the best example of Eastern music (Berberian, 2003). Apart from judging Melik-Aslanian's views, he pays special attention to ancient elements and folk music in his works. Therefore, by studying his works, one can gain insight into how folk music elements and their potential are used in a contemporary piece.

Research Background

Regarding Melik-Aslanian's works, a 2018 study examined the form, mode, and harmony in the piece "Parvaneh" (Tafazzoli & Ghanbari, 2018). This paper examines the Chahargah dastgah's reflections and its gushes in the piece's harmonic structure, but the piece's basis is not a folk theme. Of course, there are writings about the other composers' works and the application of folk themes, but no analytical writing has examined this work, except for some brief interviews.

The main research question is: How and what harmonic, melodic, or formal aspects of the folk modes does Aslanian

utilize in "Dance Variations on an Armenian Theme"? Moreover, how does he establish cohesion in the piece? This paper draws upon library resources to examine these aspects and discuss their practical implications for composers and researchers. In the next stage, the essays discuss each variation's ideas and the transition from one idea to another to determine how folk themes and cohesive factors influence them. The research method is descriptive-analytical and qualitative, with no hypothesis. To define the analytical framework, four aspects of influence from folk music in specific pieces are first identified based on sources. The analytical aspects include the direct use of folk themes, Polyphony derived from folk music (such as texture, chord progressions, structure, and voice leading), form, and rhythmic perspective. For interval structure analysis, the study employed the Fort method. In chord naming, especially in the Lydian mode, the naming system is derived from jazz theory. By understanding these aspects, composers and researchers can gain practical insights into how to effectively utilize folk music in their compositions.

Potentials of folk music in the composition process

Folk music usage in the composition process is evident in the works of national romantic composers and, in the 20th century, in some works by Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály. Folk music can influence the composition process in the following ways.

• Direct use of folk themes

The influence of folk themes is evident in genres such as rhapsody. Hodeir (2006, 111) considers rhapsody a freestyle based on a folk theme that lacks a specific formal structure. This type is perhaps the most obvious way of using folk music as a theme.

• Polyphony derived from folk music

Heterophonic types of folk music, the drone pedal technique, and fourth, fifth, and seconds doublings, which typically differ from the functional music of the common practice period. Of course, polyphony-type examples exist in medieval music, but they also exist in many other cultures. The "Traditional

Polyphony” symposium, held annually, examines various types of Polyphony from different regions of the world (*International Research Center for Traditional Polyphony, 2025*). In Iranian folk music, Mohammad-Taqi Massoudieh describes various polyphonic techniques, including parallelism, drone, and heterophonic variants (*Masoudieh, 1998, 95-103*). The polyphonic possibilities of folk music allow the use of non-tertian structures to strengthen the mode. For example, sometimes structural interval notes, such as the final and the Shahed, act as pedal notes.

The harmonic approach in Russian diatonic music differs from that of the common practice period. The first difference exists in plagal cadences, where instead of a fourth leap in the bass, there is a leap in the soprano. The second difference lies in the approach to chordal structures, which sometimes permit the use of quartal or quintal harmony. The third difference lies in the approach to chord connection, where, given the presence of the Aeolian mode without a leading tone, the plagal becomes more significant. On the contrary, in Viennese classical works, the major dominant tonic progression has a higher value than the plagal cadence. In Russian types, the minor dominant tonic progression gains importance. Modal interchanges in functional progressions in minor (using Phrygian and Dorian with the same tonic) and in major (using Mixolydian and Lydian with the same tonic) are among the ideas derived from folk music that differ from the harmony of the common practice period and have roots in folk music (*Dobovsky et al., 2007*).

In a nutshell, the ideas derived from folk music in Polyphony are:

Texture: Musical texture can deviate from a four-voice structure and reduce to diaphony, two-part harmony, unison, and successive octaves and fifths. Even the texture sometimes resembles folk monody (*Grigorieve & Müller, 2012, 195-224*).

Different progressions with functional progressions: Chord progressions, even if tertian, may differ from conventional types in the common practice period. First,

authentic progressions were weakened. Second, plagal progressions strengthened.

Chordal structure and voice leading: The chordal structure can be a dyad of any interval, even quartal and quintal, or a perfect fourth root dyad. Forbidden parallel motions, such as successive perfect fifths and perfect octaves and transitions from two-part to one-part, are entirely possible.

• **Process and form derived from folk music**

Koregian (*2017, 554-555*), in 20th-century forms, refers to a type of “standard form in folk music.” The forms referred to by Koregian are from composers such as Messiaen, Sviridov, and Tormis, and they apply pre-classical and folk examples. Instead of using classical contrast and development in the progression of the piece, the mentioned forms rely on folk music methods of expansion, such as increasing the voice register, changing voice centrality while maintaining the same melodic foundation, and deriving the entire piece structure from a single theme or a minimal melodic foundation. Of course, the mentioned examples can freely select modal and polyphonic materials. Additionally, in these types of forms, influenced by folk music, sentence structure does not adhere to the meter and eight-measure periodicity characteristic of Viennese classical music.

• **Rhythmic perspective of the work based on rhythmic cycles and cells**

One of the characteristics of folk music in some regions can be considered the cyclical system in the composition process. This cyclical system, which was prevalent in the ancient Turkic-Arabic-Iranian sphere, influences melodic composition and melody form. Cycles, such as Aksak, characterized by limping and multi-time rhythmic cells, have their roots in cultures like those of Turkey, the Balkans, and Romania.

For example, in Arabic music, the periodicity concept is consistent with the cyclical system, meaning that the melody aligns with the strong beats of the cycle and is its beginning and end. According to D’Erlanger (*1959, 9-40*), the modern Arabic rhythmic system also has

the exact alignment with the old theory. There are also studies on Tajikistan's music that show composition based on rhythmic cycles. Faizullah Karamatov (2014) illustrates the rhythmic cycle notation in Tajikistan's music, where the Daf percussion instrument is consistently the fundamental rhythmic cycle element. As we have mentioned, in Iranian-Arabic-Turkic music, the cyclical approach and variation on the rhythmic cell give rise to the emergence of melodic ideas (periods). That is, the initial rhythmic cell serves as the basis for the phrase's formation. At the same time, other instruments create the melody by introducing contrast at specific points while adhering to the initial structure. This approach is exemplified in Bartók's works, such as the *Microcosmos* collection and the *Bulgarian Rhapsodies*, as well as Dave Brubeck's piece "Blue Rondo à la Turk," which resembles the Turkish Aksak cycle. Among Iranian composers, Vali (2018) also incorporated folk music into his works during his second period, which Fasaie (2018) examines. Of course, not all folk music types possess the aforementioned characteristics, and composers have moved mainly towards a free interpretation of folk music.

- Research Findings: Analysis of the piece and each variation's ideas

- Harmonic ideas influenced by folk music

In this section, according to the theoretical framework presented in section 1, various aspects of influence from the folk theme are examined. Section 1-a shows the direct use of the theme in the piece. The piece theme is a 12-bar theme, consisting of two four-measure phrases in C Lydian, which ends with a four-measure complement. The theme form is a two-measure phrase $aba'b'cb'$, where cb' is a complement after the perfect cadence. Such a theme, with its special emphasis on the second degree, clearly deviates from the Vienna school' approach. Table 1 shows the piece's overall plan.

The first three variations are ornamental (strict) variations on the theme, where the theme's length remains unchanged, and the 12-bar structure of the theme remains intact. The fourth variation is a link

towards section B, changing the key from C to G. Theme B is built on a G-D ostinato pedal and has a contrasting relationship with the theme and the first four variations. Following this section, Section C is marked by an increase in tempo and rhythm, introducing tension to the key. Finally, the piece returns to theme B, but this time in the key of E. If we consider a form for the entire piece, it would be ABCB. Sections B and C are related to Section A, but their connection is much more distant than the first section, to the extent that it can be considered an entirely new section. However, the internal connections are with the central theme. The most important commonality among the three sections exists in the emphasis on note D and a rhythmic cell. The essays will discuss the topic later. Fig. 1 shows a comparison of three different sections, which, despite their different centers, all emphasize the note D. Even in the transitions, the soprano emphasizes the note D.

Texture: This piece's texture often deviates from a four-part structure and takes on a drone (pedal note) with a melody. Sections B and B1, and even a large part of C, are based on a pedal derived from the mode of a static cell based on the cell (016) (initial form {E, A#, B} or {G, D, A#}). The figure below illustrates the melody in Lydian E, based on the E-B progression (Fig. 2).

In this piece, the texture occasionally adopts folk music types, including diaphony, parallel fifths, and parallel octaves. In the figure below, the sequence of successive fifths and texture reduction to parallel movements evoke the folk music polyphony, previously mentioned in sources such as Grigoriev & Müller (2012). Parallel fourths evocation is also similar to the parallel playing technique in folk music (Fig. 3).

Chord progressions in this work are often non-functional, and parallel structures play a greater role. Due to the Lydian mode's dominance, chromaticism, and avoidance of standard chord progressions in the common practice era, it becomes clear that neither authenticity nor plagiarism has superiority. Instead, the composer employs modal chromaticism to create cadences (tension-release), a concept that the essays

Table 1. The piece’s structural plan, “Variations on an Armenian Dance Theme”. Source: Author.

Section	First theme a	First variation a1	Second variation a2	Third variation a3	Transition based on them a4	Second theme b	Transition to C	Theme C and variations on dance	Return to B1
Bar Numbers	1-12	13-24	25-36	37-48	49-61	62-77	78-85	86-278	279-309
Details	F Lydian Theme	Ornamental variation	Ornamental variation	Ornamental variation	Free variations for changing the key from C to G	-	Key of G	Changing the key in free variations	Key of E



Fig. 1. A comparison of the melody of section A in (a) with the melody of section B in (b) and the melody of section C in (c). Source: Author.

will explain in further detail. Chordal progression is associated with two distant modes. The figure below shows an example of the piece’s chord progression. In this section, quintal chords’ progressions are dominant. The given example’s first bar is a quintal chord based on C, and the second beat shows the first inversion of an E minor chord first inversion. The second bar’s first beat can also be considered the first inversion of a C major thirteenth chord, in which quintal voicing is dominant. These two bars could be considered variations of Cmaj13 (#11) and the Lydian mode representative. In the third bar, the composer harmonizes the note D (the second degree of C Lydian) with an Ebmaj7 chord from the Bb major mode (or modes derived from it, such as C Dorian). In this bar, parallel fifth intervals are also dominant. The fourth and fifth bars are in C Lydian. Chordal structures influence melodic leaps, often featuring perfect fourths and fifths, with omitted thirds to reinforce quartal-quintal spacing. The sixth and seventh bars also show parallel fifths voicing similar to the third bar. It is noteworthy that chord changes and contrast creation occur on note D, which emphasizes the importance of note D’s role in the piece (Fig. 4).

The piece’s harmonic formula expands and develops tension-release ideas within the cadential logic. However, instead of using the instability or tension factor {dominant to tonic}, the composer uses a mode change {C Dorian to C Lydian}. Based on the common practice era, the composer considers the tonic as the central element,



Fig. 2. A section taken from B1. Source: Author.

Fig. 3. Fifths' Association and parallel fourths in section C. Source: Author.

which represents stability or release, and movement to other elements represents instability or tension. In this piece, in variation A, the central element is the C Lydian mode, and moving away from it towards C Dorian represents tension. This approach also exists in sections B and B'.

In the variations, the composer employs the polymodality technique of C Lydian minor, and the countermelody in measure 7 in the F clef also utilizes the theme. In this variation and three other variations, the composer creates tension by contrasting the C minor (or C Dorian) modality with Lydian, then returns to the Lydian structure. Fig. 5 illustrates that mode changes create crest tension or instability points, which we have labeled D, and relaxation points are indicated by T.

This approach also exists in sections B and B'. These sections also use modal contrast as tension in the cadential factor. Fig. 6 illustrates an example of a mode change from G Mixolydian to G Phrygian, where modal shifts are employed to create tension.

The concept of modal contrast creation becomes a relatively consistent idea throughout the rest of the piece. The following figure shows an example of creating a modal contrast between C Lydian and C Dorian (Fig. 7).

B-3) Chordal structure and voice leading: The first section's chordal structure and variations are mostly quartal-quintal and influenced by the Lydian mode. Figs. 4 & 6 illustrate this phenomenon. In other cases, chords with parallel quartal, quintal, and even tertian structures are also found. This analysis piece illustrates the fundamental



Fig. 4. A sample from the variation on the C Lydian theme and harmonic progressions in the variation. Source: Author.



Fig. 5. The first variation, measures 13-24. Source: Aslanian, 1943.



Fig. 6. End of section B and a cadential formula creation using modal



Fig. 7. Creating harmonic progression based on modal contrast. Source: Author.

cell (016) derived from the Lydian mode. The figure below illustrates the connection between this cell and the Lydian mode.

Cell is derived from the Lydian mode and establishes coherence in the piece

One of the prominent intervals in the Lydian mode is the augmented fourth relative to the tonic, which distinguishes Lydian from its parallel major. Contemporary theorists also emphasize this interval. Theorists, in identifying sub-modes of the melodic minor, also refer to the 3rd and 4th-degree modes as Lydian Augmented (Lydian with augmented fifth) and Lydian Dominant (Lydian with flatted seventh), respectively, because both mentioned modes contain an augmented fourth interval relative to the tonic. For example, let us consider the scale of A melodic minor. The 3rd-degree mode will be the notes {C, D, E, F#, G#, A, B, C} (C Lydian Augmented), where the 4th and 5th degrees are characteristic of the mode and distinguish it from its parallel major. The 4th degree mode of A melodic minor will also be the notes {D, E, F#, G#, A, B, C, D} or the D Lydian Dominant mode. In this mode, the characteristic notes are the 4th and 7th degrees, which are the distinguishing factors between D major and D Lydian Dominant.

Additionally, some theorists consider the major seventh chord with an augmented fourth to be a Lydian chord, in which the augmented fourth is more pronounced. For example, in jazz theory, Cmaj7(#11) can represent the C Lydian mode (Levine, 2015). Persichetti (2012), in his classification of primary Lydian chords, considers chords containing an augmented fourth note relative to the tonic as primary chords, in addition to the tonic itself. For example, in C Lydian with the characteristic note F#, the primary chords, in addition to the tonic, become the 2nd degree chords {D, F#, A} and the 7th degree chords {B, D, F#}. However, Persichetti (ibid.) excludes the 4th-degree chord with a diminished fifth (or tritone) due to its evocation of tonal music. These examples show that the Lydian quality is reinforced by the augmented fourth above the tonic.

The composer emphasizes the augmented fourth in various ways throughout this, explored in the following variations. The characteristic Lydian chord in this piece consists of the tonic, the fourth above the tonic, and the dominant. For example, in C Lydian, the primary chord will be {C, F#, G}. The composer uses this factor as a unifying cell throughout the piece. Fig. 8 shows the opening theme of the piece, which includes the Lydian augmented fourth interval.

In the Variation 2 vertical structure, bars 29 and 32 of Variation 3 contain the cell {A, D, Eb}, which resolves to {E, B}. However, in sections B and B', this cell is more prominent. Section B employs a {G, D} pedal, where this pedal always embellishes the note C#. In the key of G, the set {G, C#, D} emphasizes the Lydian cell. In section B' as well, in bars 280-304, the E, B pedal is elaborated by the note A#, creating the set {E, A#, B} and resembling the E Lydian mode. Fig. 9 shows a part of the E Lydian pedal idea from B'. Section C also shows this cell as a pedal in different parts. In bars 78-121, there is also a {G, C#, D} pedal to evoke G Lydian. Fig. 10 shows a part of the Lydian cell along with the dance rhythm. In other sections, such as the transition bars 132-140, the pedal contains {Eb, A}, with a D-C motion accompanying the melody line. The note C is a neighboring note, and the mentioned pedal, with the emphasized melodic note, forms the cell {Eb, A, D}.

Noteworthy, other pedals also have a close relationship with this cell. For example, in section C, bars 123-131 and 163-166, the pedals {Ab, A natural} along with the repeating motif {G, F, G} evoke the cell {G, Ab, A}, which shares two members with the previous cell. In addition, the melodic emphasis on the note D along with the Ab-A natural pedal evokes the cell {D, Ab, A natural} with the same interval structure. Of course, this section's motif is also similar to that of the previous sections, which strengthens the connection between them. Fig. 11 compares parts of these sections.

The Fig. 11 (a), with its emphasis on D, evokes the



Fig. 8. bars 1-12 of the piece Variations and Dance, score. Source: Aslanian, 1943.



Fig. 9. bars 278-284, score. Source: Aslanian, 1943.



Fig. 10. bars 88-93, score. Source: Aslanian, 1943.

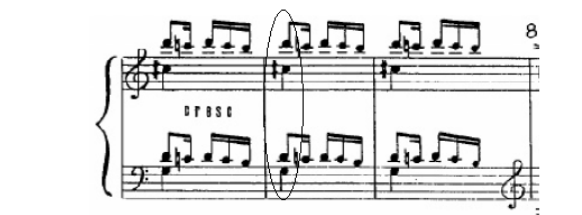


Fig. 11. the primary cells' comparison of three parts of the piece. Source: Author.

cell {D, A, natural, Ab}. Fig. 11 (b), derived from the second part, emphasizes the cell {G, D, C#}. Fig. 11 (c), also derived from the third part, emphasizes the cell {D, Eb, A}. All of these cells share the note D and have the same interval vector. However, section B's repetition at the end of the piece is a transfer from section B's cell to the central note from G to E; therefore, it emphasizes B instead of A. This transition serves as a dominant for the next section, as the published collection's fantasy section is the key to A Natural Minor. However, this section relates to the previous section, the Parvane piece. The central tonic of the previous section is F# (F# Lydian), with the prominent note being C# Lydian. The composer may have considered such relationships. Fig. 12 compares cells derived from different parts of the piece.

In this piece, the potential of folk themes (j and d) is not discernible. Composition based on non-classical forms (with folk or medieval origins) is not a significant consideration in this piece. Instead, the composer employed a combination of ornamental variations alongside free variations, a technique also prevalent in the Romantic era. Composition based on

rhythmic cycles is also absent in this piece. However, shaping the form of the piece around the note D, which originates from the primary mode, seems innovative.

Conclusion

This paper examines how Melik Aslanian's "Dance on an Armenian Theme" variation utilizes the potential of folk themes and how it creates coherence in the piece. Aslanian has leveraged the folk music's potential in Polyphony across various aspects. The theme is presented, like some folk examples, over a drone (in this piece, based on prominent Lydian intervals). Tension-release is created based on modal contrast (C# Lydian - D Dorian). The piece's melody in C# Lydian determines the piece's polyphonic Process. The piece's theme in C# Lydian emphasizes D. In the piece's different parts, the Lydian mode's prominent role, in its prim form (016), is present. All cells of the piece with the aforementioned prime form, except for one, share the note D. This indicates that the composer, in addition to directly using the folk theme, also utilizes the characteristics of the theme in Polyphony.

Prominent cells	Pitch class	Normal form	Interval vector	Prime form
A	{C, F#, G}	[6,7,0]	100011	(016)
Transition	{G, D, C#}	[1,2,7]	100011	(016)
B	{G, D, C#}	[1,2,7]	100011	(016)
C	{Eb, A, D} {Ab, A, D}	[9,2,3] [8,9,2]	100011	(016)
B1	{E, A#, B}	[10,11,4]	100011	(016)

Fig. 12. Comparison of prominent cells in different sections using the Fort method. Source: Author.

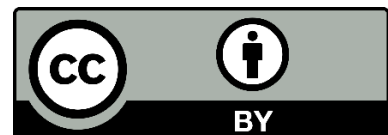
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