Not a Revival, a Tradition of Revivals: Reinterpreting Georgian Traditional Polyphonic Practices through the Ensemble

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Abstract: The focus of this paper is polyphonic practices in Georgian traditional music with emphasis on the ensemble and related political and social influences. Throughout this discussion, the author argues that the historical rural background of the ensemble, linked to the nation's sacred singing tradition, played a critical role in the preservation of Georgian polyphonic songs, and the revival movement associated with this music.

Over the past few hundred years, the evolution of Georgian traditional music within an ensemble format has been a curious one. In much of Eastern Europe, this evolution is one which has been influenced by 19th-century Western art music and subject to the cultural manipulations of 20th-century Soviet policy. More recent ethnomusicological writings have in large part focused on changes to the ensemble format due to the impact of Soviet cultural policies and/or globalization. William Noll's research on Ukrainian *bandura* (small lute) ensembles reveals how Soviet cultural policies effectively programmed an ensemble heritage at the expense of individual blind minstrels who were the original rural source of *bandura* performances (1997). Donna Buchanan's ethnography of Bulgarian folk orchestras recognizes the complex interplay between tradition and policy and observes how the professionalization of the musician, the standardization of instruments and instrumentation, and the creation of a hierarchy of musical institutions, among other things, affect the ensemble practice (2005).

Like these publications, this paper concerns itself with the relations between traditional musical practices, the ensemble unit, and the political/social complex influencing them. But in this case, the focus is more narrowly de-

fined, recognizing the ensemble unit historically and as part of the original village context rather than some artificial heritage created through 19th-century Western art influence or artificially imposed Soviet policy. In particular, this paper suggests how aspects of the rural ensemble practice of Georgian polyphony, closely linked with the nation's sacred singing tradition, had most likely a significant impact on the development and preservation of traditional Georgian polyphonic songs. Moreover, a diachronic survey of the ensemble practice in Georgia considers how the current musical activity, and its association with the preservation of Georgian heritage in general, should not simply be seen as a contemporary revival but should be seen as part of a series of revivals. In other words, the current musical revival is part of a larger tradition of revivals.

In order to engage this historical exploration of the ensemble, this paper is divided into four sections. The first introduces the reader to historical Georgia: the fragmented nature of its existence and the role Christianity played in uniting the nation. The following section then introduces the reader to Georgian polyphony: the characteristics of the music and an overview of the current musical practices, especially as they exist within the capital city of Tbilisi since this is where most of the population lives and hence most of the musical activities occur. Interestingly, the musical activities within Tbilisi are often viewed as inauthentic, in part because the ensemble format is negatively associated with the concert stage. This thus leads to the next section which reviews the origins of the ensemble tradition, starting with the first concert stage presentation in Tbilisi in 1886 and working backwards. Having reviewed the historical literature on the matter, I suggest in this section that the ensemble tradition has earlier rural origins closely associated with the professional sacred singing tradition. The paper then turns to the revival theme, drawing parallels between the revivalist sentiments and activities of the late 19th century (discussed in the previous section) with musical innovations in the ensemble practice that have occurred over the past fifty years. Finally, these revival sentiments and activities are further contextualized in other cultural expressions, such as language and art, identifying a tradition of revivals within which the current musical activities exist.

The History of a Fragmented Nation

The venerable country of Georgia, with its lands inhabited since Palaeolithic times and no migratory myths to speak of, is located in the mountainous region of the Caucasus on the eastern side of the Black Sea. It is relatively impossible to summarize adequately the epic history of the Georgian nation with its

complex dynamics, fluid borders, and unlikely fissures and alliances. Over the past 1,600 years, this small Christian Orthodox state, struggling to survive amongst more powerful nations, such as the Romans, the Arabs, the Turks, the Persians and the Russians, has managed to function as a single unified people for only a few centuries. Despite this, a uniquely Georgian people and culture have survived, most likely due to the role Christianity played.

Historical accounts describe the country as being founded on two kingdoms: Colchis in the west and Iberia in the east (see Figure 1). While there are speculations of an earlier unification of these two states in the late Bronze Age as well as in the third century BCE (Suny 1994:7, 11), it was not until the end of the tenth century CE that Georgia was united as a country. This first unification was short lived but eventually led to most prosperous growth under King David the IV (1089-1125) and subsequently Queen Tamar (1184-1213), where the state expanded to twice the size of present day Georgia. Long before this occurred, however, these two regions of Georgia were united under the Christian belief and its cross-regional practice.

The Georgian Orthodox Christian church, with its roots in the visiting Apostles of the first century and its nationalization in the fourth century, is arguably the stability upon which Georgian identity was built, and as I conjecture later, it also had a significant role on Georgia's ensemble tradition and polyphonic practices. Suffice it to recognize that the unity of the country was

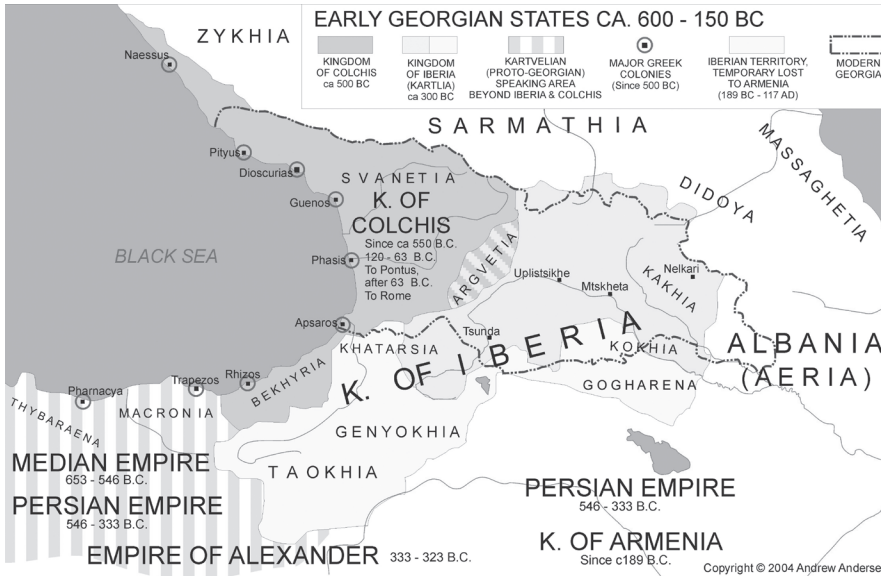

Figure 1: Map of Early Georgian States 600- 150 BCE (Anderson, 13 April) 2010, cf., website

enabled through a uniquely Georgian practice of Christianity which was affected by the translation of sacred texts into a shared vernacular language that spanned the region (Kuzmich 2007:30).[1] After this occurred, sometime between the middle of the fourth and the fifth century, Persians or other occupiers of non-Christian beliefs could physically occupy the land but would continually need to wage ideological wars.

It should be recognized, however, that Georgian unity did not survive from a simple dualistic division of the two kingdoms of Colchis and Iberia. Georgian states have been invaded, divided, renamed, allianced, united and fragmented over and over again (Suny 1994; Tournamnoff 1963).[2] Most likely such fragmentation had a profound effect on the psyche of the people and nurtured a preservationist sentiment; without a doubt, this fragmentation along with the cross-traffic of different ethnicities and the geographical nature of the land itself has resulted in the seventeen distinct set of provinces that make up Georgia today.

Figure 2: Map of Georgian States 1640 -1722 CE (ibid)

Polyphonic Practices

Many would say that a testament to the unity of these different provinces is the practice of polyphonic singing, a multi-part musical form that curiously ceases at Georgia's borders. Georgian polyphony typically involves three-part songs that feature a small compass, resulting in a dissonance difficult to define in terms of Western art music. The multi-part form comes in a plethora of regional styles to reflect the geographical and cultural makeup of the country. Traditionally, the performance context of songs is rurally defined and travel songs, work songs, round dances, lullabies, healing songs and other forms of the polyphony are attributed to what many Georgian singers and ethnomusicologists describe as a "simple" peasant life.

As opposed to this original village context, the ensemble format is what dominates traditional musical activity in Georgia today, especially within the capital city, Tbilisi. Urbanization has displaced much of the rural population to the capital, including musicians, and today the city hosts a vibrant independent traditional music scene. Many of these ensembles are composed of younger musicians who are concerned with the preservation of their national heritage. They resist the lingering Soviet stylization and standardization of songs, involve themselves in archival and field research, and incorporate improvisation and their own variants into performance. These activities and the underlying preservationist ethic establish the current traditional music scene as a revival. Indeed many of Tamara Livingston's "ingredients" for a revival exist in the current performance practice (Livingson 1999; Kuzmich 2007:5).

For traditional Georgian singers and ethnomusicologists, however, the "revival" status determines the musical practice as inauthentic. In particular, concern is directed towards the concert stage format, which is believed to be an artificial urban presentation. Interestingly, this view overlooks a most important social function of the ensemble: the role of singing at a traditional dinner and the prevalence of such dinners in the lives of ensemble members. It very well could be argued that this aspect of the performance practice marks a continuity with the *supra* tradition, a tradition of eating, drinking, toasting, and singing that is believed to predate Christianity. Except for a few recent publications that have addressed the tradition of master singers at the turn of the 20th century (master singers are like musical gurus and were often the leaders of ensembles) (Chokhonolidze and Rodonaia 2004a, 2004b, 2004c; Rodonaia 2005a, 2005b, 2005c) most of the literature on Georgian polyphony focuses on the role of the music within the original village context, thus representing a disconnect between this authentic context and the master singer/ensemble practices. In an attempt to reconcile this disconnect, the following

section rereads Georgian polyphonic practices through a historical analysis of the ensemble.

The Rural Roots of the Georgian Ensemble

It is generally quoted by Georgian singers and ethnomusicologists alike that the first ensemble or "ethnographic choir" was organized in 1885[3] as part of a national liberation movement against Russian occupation. While this was and continues to be hailed as a significant historical move for the preservation of traditional music (Chavchavadze 2005), it, and the concertization process in general, is criticized for its imposition of Western European aesthetics and form on traditional music (Araqishvili 2005). What the singers and ethnomusicologists fail to acknowledge is that the concept of a choir was not a new one at this time.

By the end of the 19th century, there were already ensembles established in the rural regions of Georgia. Some of their performances from 1902-1914 were released on a 2001 CD called *Drinking Horns and Gramophones,* which features ensembles from two divergent regions, Guria and Kartli-Kakheti. The three choirs from Guria were known to be very active at the end of the 19th century. Members of two of the Gurian choirs, from upper Aketi and Makvaneti, are described as peasants and farmers dedicated to their cultural heritage (Linich 2001). They sang for pleasure and in some cases also chanted in church services (Erkomaishvili 1987:9). The quality of their singing made them popular; hence, they were in great demand for a variety of celebratory occasions. In the liner notes of a rare archival LP set released in 1987 on the Russian Melodia label, Anzor Erkomaishvili, the great-grandson of Gigo Erkomaishvili who led the Makvaneti choir, had this to say about his great-grandfather's trio: "The group was often invited to different villages, nearly no party, folk or religious celebration were held without them" (Erkomaishvili 1987:10).

One music historian I interviewed, Manana Akhmeteli, suggested that groups singing in the village were better organized into village ensembles as a response to the ethnographic choir's first performance of 1886 (Interview, August 2005). However, it seems quite possible that the village-based choral unit must already have been firmly rooted to deserve the popularity Erkomaishvili attributes to it by the late 19th century. Certainly the singing tradition must have been long established since all but two out of the six choir leaders from the *Drinking Horns and Gramophone* CD were sons of, or taught by, master singers – men who were experts in song (Erkomaishvili 1987). Furthermore, as

Erkomaishvili has suggested, in the 1870s the trio of Gigo Erkomaishvili, the trio from which the Makvaneti choir grew, was renowned throughout Guria. And by the late 19th century, the choir led by Samuel Chavleishvili was already a professional group: "they earned their living by songs[,] travelling a lot in different villages" (Erkomaishvili 1987:10). The International Research Centre for Traditional Polyphony's (IRCTP) website further corroborates the earlier existence of the choir unit. On the "Georgia, History" page, the IRCTP mentions an early 19th century encyclopaedia known as *Kalmasoba,* written by Ioane Batornishvili, which discusses many musical concepts, including the structure of the secular Georgian choir (2008).

The idea of a choir existing within the village setting at such an early stage in history blurs the idea of the original context for folk songs. Organized choirs suggest that songs not only functioned outside of typical calendric life cycles but were also developed for their aesthetic values. This speaks to another unique aspect of music culture in Georgia, where music was highly valued within the community and functioned as a profession, not in the context of folk songs, but in the context of sacred chants sung for Georgian Orthodox Christian church services.

In Georgia, music as a profession existed for centuries within the context of the Georgian Orthodox church – a consistent symbol of great pride and identity over the past 2000 years. This sacred polyphonic practice is believed to have developed through the influence of indigenous polyphonic practices. Georgian musicological-liturgical terms exist in a lexionary as early as the seventh century, and tenth- century manuscripts of tropologians with neumatic notation that differentiates from Byzantine neumes suggest the uniqueness of Georgia's practices (IRCTP 2008: Georgia, Sacred Polyphony). Given that 1) the polyphony of Georgian Orthodox chants defies Western European conventions, 2) that historical documentation from the eleventh century refers to an already established neumatic system of notation with unique indigenous terms for each of the three voices (Petritsi in Pirtskhalava 2003:120-2), and 3) that any Orthodox musical influence (coming from Syria in the east or Byzantium in the west) would have been monophonic, it is likely that the polyphony of Georgian chants did not originate from the West and could very well have been influenced by an already established folk tradition. Noteworthy in this theory is the link between sacred and secular music since the relationship between Christianity and polyphony is central to an understanding of the Georgian singing tradition.

There are many resemblances between the secular and sacred forms of singing since there was never a differentiation between secular and sacred language that existed in Western Europe.[4] While there was a system of notation

that accompanied the professional chanting tradition, it was referential and not fixed reflecting characteristics of collective music making, anonymity, and variety. It was an oral tradition, and for a millennium it coexisted with, influenced, and was influenced by, the folk tradition, resulting in regional schools of chant paralleling the different dialectical regions (Ositashvili 2003:478-9).

Yet, according to Malkhaz Erkvanidze, there were separate cultures surrounding the sacred and secular traditions with significant implications for the cultural appreciation of musical skill. In particular, it should be noted that chanters were professional musicians and highly esteemed. "At the court of the King, the most valued person was a good singer of church chants. This [skill was like], for example, the knowledge of computers and English are today" (Erkvanidze 2005). There are even historical records of social mobility granted to those blessed with good voices. The Khelashvili family offers such an example. Three generations of teaching and singing chants for the royal court afforded them not only the title of *aznauri* (noble) but also the proprietorship of an entire village (Karbelashvili 1898:61-7). Thus, this level of appreciation, established through the religious function of the music, defined a deep cultural appreciation for musical skill.

The popular saying today, that the best chanters were the best folk singers, reflects not only the relationship between the two forms of singing, but identifies how the secular musical practice was influenced by a sacred, professional singing practice. This in turn suggests an interesting path in the development of folk songs, one where highly skilled singers who were also deeply spiritual individuals would foster the growth of the folk heritage which most likely had influence on the ensemble practice as well.

Tallying Up the Revival-Like Activity

While it is impossible to accurately determine when ensemble singing was established, it is clear that an early rural form of the ensemble existed and most likely played an instrumental role in the development of the music. Most interesting, however, is how the activities of the singers from the early 20th century exhibit conditions of a music revival. As it is discussed in the series of books on master singers (Chokhonolidze and Rodonia 2004a, 2004b, 2004c; Rodonia 2005a, 2005b, 2005c), the leaders of these ensembles and their singers were described as an independent group of enthusiasts committed to spending time researching, recovering, and archiving unique variants of songs as well as creating their own variants. Thus, revivalist activities were also significant in the development of the musical folk heritage – at least at this point in Georgia's

polyphonic history. Moreover, the nature of these musical activities parallels the current revival activities in Tbilisi, the latter of which are linked to earlier revival-like activities in the mid-Soviet period.

It is important to understand that the musical climate during Soviet rule was very repressive and had serious consequences on the structure, repertoire and practice of the ensemble. Similar to the persecution of *bandura* players in early Soviet Ukraine (Noll 1997), musicians, chanters, and choir directors in Georgia were persecuted during the late 1930s as mass ensembles of instrumentalists, singers, and dancers were turned into propaganda tools for the Communist regime. Tamar Meskhi documents some of the changes in her paper, "On Georgian Traditional Music During the Soviet Period," and describes how regional characteristics of polyphony were standardized with songs that favoured a homophonic texture, parallel harmonies in the top voices, and typical Wetern Art harmonic movement in the bass (2003). Although there were smaller more traditional ensembles that functioned throughout this time, they were for the most part isolated and inaccessible compared to the culturally programmed mass ensembles of the Soviet regime. Most exemplary of how the Soviet music policies affected Georgian polyphonic songs is reflected in Anzor Erkomaishvili's description of the 1950s as a time when "Georgian folk music was practically forgotten" (2005).

Gordela, a student ensemble and the subsequent professionalized version of this ensemble, Rustavi, set a precedent in 1961 for the re-introduction of indigenous qualities of Georgian polyphony which included songs from the traditional repertoire, unique variants of songs, intonational peculiarities, and some songs from the sacred music repertoire. Gordela started as a group of students studying at the Tbilisi State Conservatory who happened to have access to, and be inspired by, a small surviving ensemble from Guria called Shvidkatsa. Similar to the master singers at the turn of the century and the ensembles of today, Gordela studied from master singers, researched archival material and collected unknown songs and song variants in field expeditions. It should be noted that Gordela's and Rustavi's use of academic and classical training manifested in a smooth, professional performance that features a western art vocal sound – perhaps explaining the acceptance and success of these ensembles during Soviet rule. Many ensembles, in many formats (men, women, children), in rural regions as well as urban centres, followed the Gordela/Rustavi example. They did so, however, mostly in musical content, since access to archival material and especially access to field research were strictly controlled by the Soviet regime.

Twenty years later marks the second stage of this revival with the ensembles Mtiebi and Anchistkhati. Most likely influenced by the success and

popularity of Prokief's Russian ethnographic ensemble which toured throughout the Soviet states in the 1970s and 1980s, Mtiebi (whose leader was an ethnomusicologist and the only singer/musician in the group) expanded on the Gordela/Rustavi direction by not only incorporating field work and study with villagers, but as non-singers, they used a different singing style/aesthetic. Anchiskhati, a group of students at the Tbilisi conservatory in the late 1980s, followed suit and in particular were instrumental in reintroducing more complicated polyphonic forms (which Mtiebi as non-singers were not performing) and a great number of chants, including those sung during the liturgy.

Traditional music activity in Tbilisi today is still a part of this second stage. Although the ability to engage in field work or study with villagers is limited by economic circumstances, archival study and study with master singers are defining characteristics of the ensembles' activities. Despite such limitations, each of the musical periods I have described, the turn of the 20th century, the early 1960s and current practices, is characterized by a movement to present the music more authentically, motivated by a desire to safeguard a traditional culture which appears threatened; and according to Tamara Livingston, this movement to authenticity "is the centerpiece of music revivals" (1999:74).

The Revivals that Add Up to a Tradition

Georgian traditional musicians consider the current revival activities in Tbilisi very significant for both the current and future direction of Georgian music and identity. This differs considerably with what Judith Frigiyesi found in her research on the Hungarian Dance house music revival. She notes that many Hungarian musicians, while finding the musical activities deeply moving in the short term, foresee no significant consequence in the long term (Frigyesi 1996). It could very well be that these different cultural perceptions are due to Georgian's history of preservationist activities – which have touched other cultural forms as well (the most obvious examples are that of copper enamel, language, literature and theatre). Most certainly, today's music revival has benefitted from the studies and work done in the revival of 100 years ago, and not just because the singers from the early 20th century left artefacts in the form of manuscripts, descriptive writings, and sound recordings. The efforts and the examples made by these earlier preservationists, which were part of a larger nationalist movement, left a mental legacy. As Manana Tabidze, a Georgian linguist describes late 19th century preservationist activities on language: "the national mentality" and "the policy of

self-defence" were awoken and most likely never died (1999:206).

Interestingly, John Graham, in a working paper on Georgian chants, speculates on how periods of such national re-identification (or as he describes "re-identification with traditional roots") stretch deeper into Georgia's past. He discusses this in light of the attempts by King Erekle II and the Patriarch Anton I to organize a chanting school in the aftermath of an 18th century invasion of eastern Georgia (Graham 2007). Davit Shugliashvili sources the details of this correspondence and the subsequent success of the school to Karbelashvili's 1898 manuscript (2003:432; see also Karbelashvili 1898:69-73). Moreover, Shugliashvili attributes the school's success to the function of a revival (2003:433). It is important to recognize, however, that the context of this revival was part of a larger nationalistic response against a lengthy period of turmoil inflicted by the Persians, the Russians and the Ottoman/Turks, which prevented access to one of the country's most cherished monasteries.

Luarsab Togonidze, a chant historian and archivist, believed that such revivals must have occurred numerous times in Georgia's past in response to major invasions and ensuing devastation. Even literary historian Donald Rayfield notes that the Georgian literary tradition had to be rebuilt time and time again, in response to incursions by the Arabs, the Persians, the Mongols, or Russians (2000:10). Thus, it is understandable how the music revivals discussed in this paper could be seen as part of a larger tradition of revivals – a tradition which extends beyond the musical sphere, reflects the survival of a nation and a fundamental characteristic of Georgians built into their psyche after centuries and centuries of invasion, fragmentation, devastation, fighting, reviving and surviving.

Certainly, more research can be directed towards this theory. Little research or information on traditional musical practices of the Soviet era exists, and further exploration of revival activities in historical texts and manuscripts needs to be conducted. It would also be interesting to question whether such a traditional of revivals is unique to Georgia or whether the people in other countries with war-torn histories exhibit similar preservationist activities. Nonetheless, it still seems troubling to describe the current musical practice of Tbilisi ensembles as a revival without contextualizing it as continuity in a tradition of revivals.

Notes

1. Ositashvili (2003) and Rayfield (2000) consider the reflexive relationship between local culture and Christianity in the development of Georgian Christianity. Also see endnote 4.

2. Dr. Andrew Anderson, a conflict specialist, has visually documented the frequent and radical border changes Georgia has endured in an extensive series of maps dating from 2100 BCE to 1931 CE (available on his web site at http://www.conflicts.rem33.com/images/Georgia/geor_geschichte.htm). An example of such border changes can be seen in the Map in Figure 2 in this paper and the maps preceding and following this map in Dr. Andersen's collection. In the map in Figure 2, dated 1640-1772 CE, the country is divided into three kingdoms and four principalities. The map preceding this one in Andersen's collection (dated 1555-1639) is divided into three kingdoms and two principalities while the map following (dated 1772) is divided into two kingdoms and four principalities.

3. While the choir was organized in 1885, the first actual performance occurred in 1886.

4. It is speculated that soon after the sacred texts were translated into Georgian (something forbidden in European Christianity), the new Georgian "edition" of Christianity was established in the sixth century, with secular music deeply influencing the chanting system through its common scales, intonational vocabulary, cadence construction and polyphonic form (Ositashvili 2003:476). Drawing a literary analogy, Rayfield reflects on the use of pagan-folk poetry in Georgian hymnography (2000:28).

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