

FILM REVIEW

Funeral Chants from the Georgian Caucasus. Producer: Hugo Zemp; Director: Hugo Zemp; DVD; 21 minutes. 2007 (filmed 1991). Distributor: Documentary Education Resources, 101 Morse Street, Watertown, Massachusetts 02472, (800) 569-6621; www.der.org.

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Hugo Zemp's short film documents an intense cultural ritual in one of the most remote regions of Georgia. The title is somewhat misleading since the film actually covers only one of over a dozen regional music cultures within the country. Still, the film's production techniques, the nature of the material, and the accompanying on-line study guide make a significant contribution to Georgian ethnographic material and address a lacuna in research from the Caucasus in general. Although some may criticize the film's lack of background and explanatory material (Graham 2009; Eller 2010), these shortcomings allow for a more aesthetic experience that contributes to the film's success in developing an esoteric, ethereal awareness of a Svan funeral.

Georgian music culture is known for its three-part vocal form performed in the limited range of a baritone-tenor. The country boasts many musical dialects, and can vary from a simple polyphonic structure, featuring antiphonal vocal lines over a two-note drone to complex melismatic and/or contrapuntal forms. Compared to the rest of the country, the musical form in Svaneti typically features a more homo-rhythmic polyphonic structure, as exemplified by

the men's funeral lament featured in this film.

In Svaneti, this lament is called a *zär*. The film opens with a group of elders singing the *zär* as they stand around a small table laden with food and wine, just outside the deceased's home where crowds have amassed. For the most part, the camera stays with these elders: at the wake, during the procession to the cemetery, and near the grave as the deceased is being laid to rest. But the film also offers glimpses into other Svan funeral observances. Particularly interesting are a few brief scenes closer to the corpse, where women and, curiously, men individually and collectively wail.¹

Footage for the film was taken by a single handheld camera. Following his principals for filming human behaviour, Zemp avoids the cinematographic editing typical of commercial films as well as the sterile standardized film techniques used for scientific documentation (1988). Also, out of respect for the music, the *zär* is filmed and edited in its entirety, except in the last take. According to the study guide's section on "Shooting and Editing Strategies," Zemp had run out of film. Left with only simple edits, no interviews, no voiceovers, occasional subtitles and transparent inter-titles, and tasteful camera panning, the film presents a very powerful and moving experience of a Georgian funeral.

Certainly, the pedagogical value of the film could have been enhanced. Interviews and background information could have contextualized the making of the film and answered questions about the length of the funeral observances, about

the female and male wailing activity, or about the obscured and eerie movements by those near the grave as the corpse was being laid to rest. The scarcity and quality of the subtitles are also misleading, especially for those unfamiliar with Georgian polyphony. For instance, while the film states the *zâr* is sung in three parts and makes use of nonsense syllables, much of Svan and Georgian polyphony in general can be described the same way. And while the study guide provides some resources to Georgian ethnographic and ethnomusicological literature, it fails to identify an excellent and very concise article on the *zâr* (Kalandadze-Makharadze 2005), which contextualizes the different performances of the lament in different regions of Georgia.

Whatever its limitations, the film's contribution to research and resources on the region are invaluable. And whether you are Georgian or have never heard Georgian music before, the film will elicit an emotional response, probably similar to the one you may actually experience at a Svan funeral. ❀

NOTE

¹ In the Caucasus, like elsewhere in Africa, Asia and parts of Europe, wailing activities to mourn the deceased are typically restricted to women.

REFERENCES

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