

FILM REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS DE FILMS

Zemp, Hugo, dir. 2019. *Polyphonic Lullabies of Kakheti*. Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources. DVD. 57 minutes.

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Polyphonic Lullabies of Kakheti is Hugo Zemp's fifth film to document music-making in the post-Soviet Republic of Georgia. As with three of his four previous films on Georgia, *Polyphonic Lullabies* is a genre study that addresses formal musical structures, origins in ritual, and the historical evolution of musical forms and performance practices. The title may bewilder potential viewers — first, because few will be aware that Kakheti is the easternmost region of the Republic of Georgia and second, because of the seeming paradox in the phrase “polyphonic lullabies,” which bears explanation never explicitly delivered in the film. While lullabies, or songs for lulling a child to sleep, were traditionally sung solo by Georgian women, in the late Soviet era some men's vocal ensembles began setting the melodic formulae of lullabies in multi-part arrangements that mimicked the traditional polyphonic singing style of the Kakheti region in particular. What Zemp calls “polyphonic lullabies,” in other words, were newly composed multi-part songs spun off from a traditional women's solo genre, for performance on stage, by men, under the banner of Soviet Georgian national folklore.

The film pieces together footage taken by Zemp himself in the field with audio

and video recordings from the Soviet era. Subtitles and intertitles guide the viewer through the Georgian-language material, which is organized in two parts. The first half of the film tracks the diffusion of a single song prototype from cradle-side to centre stage, while the second half zooms out to explore related genres and their ritual contexts. Despite its title, Zemp does not limit the film's subject matter to the *nana* lullaby in its polyphonic translation for the stage, but incorporates valuable historical and ethnographic material pertaining to the traditional women's solo genre in the form of interviews with local singers, archival photos, and footage of actual rituals, including some material recycled from his 1998 film *The Feast-Day of Tamar and Lashari*.

The Georgian term for lullaby, *nana*, is dense with meanings only partially addressed in the film. Just 30 seconds in, Zemp's onscreen text states, “Nana is one of the most popular female names in Georgia,” though the filmmaker never suggests why. An appellation with sacred valences, Georgian folklorists have long believed it to be the name of an ancient goddess, and across the Black Sea, Balkan and Mediterranean regional variations on the word are linked to pre-Christian cults of motherhood, matriarchy, and sometimes lullaby genres as well (See Tuite 2009: 67-87; Tuite also attests to the documentation of the word *nana* in the glossolalia of female spirit mediums and prophets in the eastern Georgian highlands). It is also widely attested as a vocable in polyphonic songs across Georgia, and typically explained as a linguistic relic retained for its usefulness

in producing vocal sonority (Ninoshvili 2011). *Polyphonic Lullabies* considers the Georgian nana not only as a traditional cradle song, but as part of a constellation of related women's genres — among them, songs for the healing of a sick child and supplicatory incantations in contexts of pseudo-Christian, syncretic religious worship. Thus, the title of the film, which indexes the performance-centred, masculine appropriation and reconfiguration of the nana genre, is woefully inadequate to describe its much more heterogeneous contents.

To this viewer, the highlights of the film are the segments that juxtapose layers of mediated music history. Two-thirds through, members of the Kakhetian women's ensemble Nelkarisi, in an interview with the filmmakers, invoke a supplicatory nana sung by the late Salome Aghniashvili. As the five women attempt to recall the text and interpret the song themselves, the image shifts to a still photograph of Aghniashvili, and the soundtrack to a recording of her singing precisely that song in 1963. Old and new, solo and ensemble, voices continue to alternate verses of this rare archival gem, suggesting the inextricable link between recorded specimens and the maintenance of traditional repertoires today (See Fairley 2020). Notably, none of the mature women's ensembles Zemp consulted seemed to have a polyphonic nana in its repertoire, though every ensemble member could hum the melody of a lullaby she sang to her children and/or grandchildren. Two brief clips of the more youthful women's ensemble Satanao are the only moments in the film that feature women performing a multi-part nana for a public audience. As such, they highlight the gen-

dered, generic, and perhaps generational slippage of Zemp's titular genre. In the first clip, Satanao performs a healing nana for a local TV broadcast on a set staged to resemble a traditional eastern Georgian hearth; in the second, amateur video captures their theatricalized performance of a healing nana on stage during a tour of England. In both cases, the women's movements are choreographed to mimic the prayerful gestures associated with the nana's execution in a ritual context, thus distinguishing them from men's staged nana performances.

The cross-section of emic perspectives is necessarily constrained in every documentary project, but to this viewer the voices of certain key contributors to the contemporary scholarship and performance of traditional nanas are conspicuously absent from *Polyphonic Lullabies*. Though nana is originally a women's genre, Zemp tacitly positions a man — Anzor Erkomaishvili, who is widely regarded as the patriarch of the Georgian folk music establishment — as the film's most authoritative voice. Erkomaishvili is heir to an exceptionally rich archive of recorded Georgian music and hails from a long line of famous singers. Zemp features him repeatedly in an interview in his museum-like home in Tbilisi. In one segment, he is shown viewing a video of the Rustavi Ensemble, the internationally touring, extensively recorded professional Georgian folk choir that Erkomaishvili founded in 1968 and has directed since, performing a Kakhetian nana in polyphonic rendition in concert in the 1980s. As with Nelkarisi's alternation of verses with the late Salome Aghniashvili, Erkomaishvili's nostalgic commentary on the voices of this ear-

lier generation of singers inscribes this performance as canonical within the accumulating layers of Georgia's mediated musical history. According to Erkomaishvili's own account in this interview, it was the Rustavi Ensemble and its venerated soloist Hamlet Gonashvili who originated the concert performance of the polyphonic nana. While his claim is plausible, it has the effect of masking the extraordinary efforts some of his peers have made to research and revive the nana in its traditional form and context. Interested readers and viewers are directed especially to the work of Nat'alia Zumbadze and her colleagues in the women's vocal ensemble Mzetamze, who have been studying and performing traditional Georgian lullabies and other heretofore exclusively women's genres since the 1980s. Zumbadze's scholarship is cited twice in the film in brief intertitles, but her contributions warrant far more attention. Any account of the genre in its historical and present iterations remains incomplete without mention of Mzetamze's contributions.

As with Zemp's other films in Georgia, *Polyphonic Lullabies* whets the palate but leaves much unexplored. The status of nana-as-lullaby, -healing song, -supplicatory prayer, and -staged folklore outside of Kakheti, in other Georgian regions, is not addressed. The film would certainly be of interest to researchers of the lullaby genre in cross-cultural perspective. While Georgian polyphonic song has received increasing attention from Western scholars in recent years, this film is valuable for introducing audiences to traditional repertoires beyond the relatively well-documented, male-dominated, three- and four-part secular and Christian liturgical songs. Still, the basic thrust of

the film is the polyphonization, musical elaboration, and indeed nationalization of a monophonic, formulaic genre associated historically with eastern Georgian women. While the value of the nana as concert repertoire is subject to debate among contemporary Georgian musicologists, its appropriation by professional male choirs was in its time a popularizing move which, along with the "salvage" recordings and ethnography conducted by a few dedicated individuals, may have helped save the genre from oblivion. ❀

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