



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

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IARO 2006-2007
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Music, Cultural Policy and the New Georgian Transnationalism

Topic of research

In the last twenty years an elite group of Tbilisi-based musicians has sought to systematically reinvigorate three-part Georgian polyphonic singing, a tradition which two centuries of political-ideological oppression nearly devastated. Georgian policymakers are meanwhile invoking traditional musical culture in the interest of national renewal, while international organizations are approaching Georgian polyphony as an artifact in need of preservation and a tool to be mobilized in the interest of economic development. In today's global politics of local citizenship, traditional polyphony has quite conspicuously reentered Georgian mainstream culture.

My dissertation research has sought to better understand Georgia's traditional polyphony revival as an emergent cultural form and mode of social critique. It asks how notions of musical-cultural authenticity have been deployed in contestation of the overwhelming recent encroachments of non-native discourses and practices. Through the lens of traditional expressive culture, it uncovers the ways in which macro-processes of political, economic and cultural transformation have intersected with micro-processes of self- and group identification for an increasingly globally dispersed people.

Relevance and contribution to field

The Republic of Georgia has just begun to be recognized in western ethnomusicological literature. A handful of ethnographies addressing musical culture in Eastern Europe in the late socialist period and the early post-socialist years address questions of national identity, legacies of socialist cultural policy, and the significance of musical interventions in contexts of social conflict or economic crisis. None, however, engages with questions of musical revival as a social movement fueled by powerful post-socialist cultural-nationalist agendas.

My research traces the circulation of data acquired by Georgian folklorists and ethnomusicologists during field expeditions, particularly recordings, photographs, and textual records. In this way it seeks to uncover who, in the end, benefits from so much Georgian state, international donor and individual investment in traditional polyphonic song. It reveals the uneven distribution of power between rural-based cultural knowledge-bearers and the urban-based, institutionally-supported researchers who gather, classify and catalogue endangered cultural material.

Methodology and research sites

My field methodology was primarily ethnographic, with supplemental archival and text-based research. I gathered material by means of audio and video recording, still photography, and documentation of interview data, personal observations and impressions in the form of field notes. Singing, as a form of participant observation, was one of the most instructive and enjoyable aspects of my field research experience.

As the urban milieu in which the traditional polyphony revival took root, and the site where Georgian culture intersects most dynamically with greater global processes, Tbilisi served as the focal point for my research. The Tbilisi State Conservatory was a major source of research data, a key site for networking with local musicians and scholars, and a frequent venue for staged performances of traditional folk repertoire. I also visited other major Tbilisi cultural venues such as the State Opera, the Rustaveli and Marjanishvili Theaters, and the Ethnographic Museum's amphitheater on a regular basis. In warm weather, outdoor music festivals in western Georgia in particular presented important opportunities for observing and interacting with musicians. Liturgical services in Orthodox churches—during which traditional polyphonic chant can be heard in appropriate ritual context—in and outside of the capital served as a key ethnographic venue throughout the calendar year.

Still, the most valuable sites for ethnographic inquiry were also the most informal. The *supra*, a shared meal accompanied by elaborate ritualized toasting, and frequently song and dance, was as often an unexpected source of ethnographic data as it was a deliberately planned one. Conversations and informal lessons over tea or coffee, intimate chats with aging song masters in their homes, professional and amateur ensemble rehearsals, television and radio broadcasts marking state holidays, and cultural events organized by the Tbilisi municipality all informed my research in unique ways.

Summary of research findings and preliminary conclusions

As a result of the widespread institutionalization of Georgian polyphonic singing, competence in traditional music as a whole has shifted from rural areas to the capital city. Professional, urban-based folklorists and musicologists have assumed the role of gatekeepers of the tradition. A certain repertoire is gradually being canonized in the form of volumes of musical transcriptions, historical recordings of renowned folk singers, and regular concert programming.

One, perhaps unintended, consequence of the large-scale institutional investment in Georgian culture has been a concentration of policymaking power and access to knowledge in the hands of an exclusive contingent of Tbilisi-based professionals. Given these circumstances, it is particularly problematic that Georgia lacks a legal framework for the protection of intellectual property rights. Institutions with a desire to commercially release or otherwise broadly circulate archival recordings are rarely held accountable to the performers documented on them, or to their descendants. Nor is there a standardized mechanism in place for protecting the rights of living musicians whose performances are being documented today.

Among the generation of folklorists and scholars who launched their careers during the Soviet period in particular, there is a general consensus that the kinds of knowledge documented in archival and contemporary field recordings belong in the public domain. Still, there is increasing debate among Tbilisi-based scholars regarding the need for, and appropriateness of, remunerating musicians for their willingness to share esoteric cultural knowledge with field researchers. The problem of unequal exchange between institutionally-backed field researchers and rural-based “master singers”/tradition-bearers is especially acutely felt given the severe drop in material standards of living that many of the latter have faced since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Despite discourses claiming that traditional musical knowledge belongs in the (Georgian) public domain, however, institutions with traditional music archives carefully circumscribe access to their holdings. In a case of what one respondent described as “extreme preservationism,” access to field recordings made by State Conservatory faculty is frustratingly restricted. The same is true of valuable recordings currently held in the archives of Georgia’s National Museum. Even ensemble leaders in search of new repertoire, or new variations on old repertoire, are forbidden access to these holdings. The disconnect between institutional discourses of ownership of traditional knowledge on one hand, and institutional practices on the other, thus remains a serious concern.

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UNESCO’s 2001 proclamation of traditional Georgian polyphonic song as a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity” was a watershed moment for cultural policy in post-Soviet Georgia. Two years later the proclamation was followed by the launch of the UNESCO project “Safeguarding and Promotion of Georgian Traditional Polyphony.” This major cultural revitalization project coincided with the ascent to power of a new, post-Rose Revolution government bent on putting national culture to work in the service of politics.

Two major institutions were founded as part of the UNESCO program: the non-governmental organization International Center for Georgian Folk Song and the Tbilisi

State Conservatory's Research Center for Traditional Polyphony. Since their inception, both centers have issued an unprecedented number of publications pertaining to issues of Georgian polyphony, including contemporary and historical scholarly research, transcriptions of traditional polyphonic song to European five-line notation, and monographs documenting the lives of 19th- and 20th-century master singers. The Tbilisi Conservatory's Research Center has hosted three international symposia, all on the theme of "traditional polyphony." The use of polyphony as an organizing framework for the symposia has proven an expedient way of representing Georgia culturally to an international community of academics and musicians.

In the summer of 2006 Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili gifted twenty-five hundred *chokhas*, traditional uniforms for Georgian men, and corresponding traditional gowns for women, to folk ensembles based outside of the capital. With this he officially launched his "President's Support for Folklore" campaign. He followed up by dispatching teams of photographers to the same regions to capture the handsomely clad ensembles singing and posing while "extras" squeezed grapes in the background. More substantial "President's Support for Folklore" programming began much later, in June 2007. In June a handful of Tbilisi folk music professionals were dispersed to various parts of eastern Georgia to provide recommendations to local ensembles on their manner of execution of traditional folk songs.

In September 2006 the Tbilisi-based Georgian State Folklore Center organized the country's first-ever National Folklore Exhibition-Festival—a two-year selection tour circuit culminating in a three-day spectacle of cultural display at the State Opera in downtown Tbilisi. The Soviet-era "Olympiad," originally launched in the 1930s, was widely acknowledged as the inspiration and model for independent Georgia's National Exhibition-Festival. Consistent with the Soviet-era paradigm, 2006 festival adjudicators rewarded faithfulness to tradition while restricting creativity and innovation. Independent Georgia's first National Exhibition-Festival was an elaborately orchestrated display of national unity in diversity. Like its Soviet-era precursors, the display was carefully controlled: performers were strategically selected to represent an eclectic mix of authentic regional traditions.

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While traditional Georgian polyphony as captured in images of young men in *chokhas* serenading grape harvesters, as documented in newly released historic recordings, and as celebrated in events like the National Folklore Exhibition-Festival enjoys increasing public visibility, there are differences of opinion regarding the manner in which the tradition ought to be recuperated. A number of young ensembles have deviated from the now-institutionalized movement and taken upon themselves the task of recovering traditional song within its original, ritual frame—or the closest thing possible. Their vision includes curbing the impact of increasingly global cultural practices on local tradition and on responsibly returning that which has been uprooted from rural communities in the name of Soviet-socialist nationality and, more recently, cultural "development." In practice, this has meant de-formalizing performance manners, reenacting ritual activities to accompany song onstage, and traveling to rural areas to perform and "restore to" villagers the folk repertoire native to their communities.

While Georgian cultural policy is overwhelmingly developed and implemented in Tbilisi, the Saakashvili administration has identified a handful of sites for large-scale "cultural rehabilitation" projects outside of the capital as well. One of these sites, the picturesque

fortress town of Signaghi in the heart of eastern Georgia's wine country, is also home to the Zedashe Ensemble, a small mixed choir with a unique vision for the restoration of traditional folklore. In a classic mix of aesthetics and politics, President Saakashvili designated Signaghi as a national cultural rehabilitation priority during a speech marking the third anniversary of his inauguration as president, in January of 2007.

Zedashe is a small ensemble comprised primarily of non-music-professionals who seek to uphold a traditional folk aesthetic and ethic. The ensemble's leaders are committed to counteracting the hierarchical relationship so easily obtained between musical folklore collectors and ethnographers on one hand, and the individuals and communities who have preserved the sought-after tradition on the other. In their own words, Zedashe's members seek to maximize their interactions with both accomplished singers and regular people whose lives are influenced by things that get sung about in folk song, i.e. the weather, the harvest, the work day, etc. By maintaining regular contact, they seek to build meaningful relationships with their interlocutors over time. Zedashe returns to perform in the same communities from which it has gathered new repertoire. In several instances Zedashe concerts have been the first signs of a local cultural tradition to surface in decades. Some ensemble members have invested significant time in education and transmission of the tradition, reaching out to local children who may not have the opportunity to benefit from state-sponsored cultural education programs. Ensemble leaders have made their recording studio in Signaghi available at no cost to local families and ensembles who express a desire to record their repertoire but cannot afford professional studio time.

Ensembles like Zedashe are rare emblems of resistance to the urban-based institutionalization of Georgian folklore. As in the Soviet era, officially validated forms of cultural capital continue to confer formidable status on Georgian musicians, and to blur the distinction between cultural and political power. In these circumstances, ensembles like Zedashe who rank ethical integrity above all other interests willfully limit their potential sources of financial sponsorship and opportunities for public exposure. Their non-gender-exclusive membership has also contributed in part to their marginal status in the context of contemporary institutionalized folklore. While ensembles like Zedashe acknowledge the increasing universality of a certain set of ideas, practices and institutions about culture, they have assumed for themselves a key role in shaping the nature of Georgia's local-global encounter.

Suggestions for future research

The current movement to reinvigorate traditional Georgian polyphonic song, like revival movements elsewhere, is organized around notions of ethnicity and shared national identity. Cultural policy in Georgia today is guided by a need to hold the nation together in the face of internal, ethnic-irredentist threats and the increasing diffusion of Georgian citizens throughout the world. As such, policymakers are deliberately crafting a selective national memory which both includes and excludes. Traditional Georgian instrumental music, for example, is frequently excluded from discussions and public displays of national musical heritage. Non-polyphonic vocal music which continues to this day to be sung within Georgia's borders, most frequently in minority (Armenian, Azeri, Ossetian, etc.) communities, is also given short shrift. In brief, since the collapse of the Soviet Union public culture in Georgia has witnessed a consolidation of the hegemony of polyphonic song.

While vocal polyphony is likely the musical paradigm with which ethnic Georgians have historically identified above all others, the contributions of ethnic minorities to the country's traditional music texture deserve more attention from local and international scholars than they are currently receiving. The same is true of instrumental genres, many of which reflect the centuries-long intermingling of Georgian and neighboring (Persian, Armenian, etc.) musical styles. As an historical crossroads of east and west, Georgia offers many yet untapped possibilities for exploring hybrid, syncretic musical traditions.

Recommendations for the US policy community

As suggested above, Georgia needs support for the development of intellectual property rights. That said, social relations are structured much differently in Georgia than they are in most of the western world. Western ideals of individual empowerment and the legislation that protects it cannot be imported wholesale for use in Georgian society. Instead, a framework for the protection of specialized knowledge that takes into account the Georgian individual's sense of membership in, and solidarity with, a larger community of fellow nationals must be worked out in cooperation with native Georgians.

Targeted financial and/or technical support for the digitization of archival recordings, texts, photographs, etc. could help to increase the accessibility of these important materials. Many institutional representatives claim that access to archival materials is limited due to the fragile nature of these holdings. Wax cylinder recordings, for example, deteriorate in quality each time they are played. Digital technology, however, facilitates a limitless number of playbacks and the potentially worldwide circulation of valuable recorded materials.

International support for the development of an intellectual property rights framework and the harnessing of digital technology to increase the accessibility of knowledge of Georgian traditional polyphony can help to increase interest and engagement in the tradition on both a local and global scale.