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NON-CHANGE IN TBILISI ENSEMBLES

“The most remarkable feature
of culture is non-change.”
(Blacking 1977:17)

Introduction

Since the disintegration of the Soviet block, contemporary research on traditional musics from the region has focused primarily on change, which was either a product of socialist policies or was in opposition to them (Sugarman, 2004; Buchanan, 1995, 2005; Rice, 1996). In comparison to these other musics, there has been little change in the traditional polyphonic songs of Georgia. Even though today’s urban-based ensembles perform songs outside of the traditional rural context, the songs, their musical (harmonic and rhythmic) structure, are comparable to archived recordings and historical descriptions of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Moreover, this musical practice, singing in ensembles, is not a recent revival. It is a continuation of a tradition which both urban and village folk exercised as early as the turn of the twentieth century.

Such a continuity in a music begs many questions. Is this really “non-change”? Has the music, in its rhythmic and melodic form, really remained the same? If so, then is its performance reflective of authentic practice? Can this century old musical-sound still be a part of a current expressive traditional culture? And what does this stability say about the people and the culture? This paper, which is based on ongoing research and analysis of the Georgian ensemble tradition, represents only the start of such an inquiry. I am honoured to be presenting them to such a respectable group of scholars today and look forward to your feedback so that I may further develop these ideas.

In an attempt to answer the questions above, I will first address the issue of “non-change” only in connection with the musical sound-structure of traditional Georgian polyphonic songs. This involves a summary of a comparative analysis I carried out on recordings of the same songs performed by both contemporary and old ensembles. Following this, I will address the questions of authentic practice by examining the historical context of the ensemble unit, which in turn may help answer the final question “What does this stability in the music say about the people and the culture?” Unfortunately, I will not have enough time to elaborate on this, but will conclude by introducing several observations of current ensemble practices in Tbilisi in order to further the discussion of what this stable characteristic of the music reflects.

I must note, however, that while my discussion focuses on non-change it does not negate that Georgian polyphonic folk songs are threatened. The original context of most of the traditional songs has been lost. Singing songs, which was once a part of daily activity, is currently non-existent in many villages. Many of the ensembles that

do exist in the rural setting have adopted Soviet-style performing practices which standardize the songs to the detriment of particular regional characteristics. Virtuostic singers have not passed on their techniques and Georgian ethnomusicologists fear the loss of variants, the ability to improvise, and traditional tuning systems.

There are, however, some younger ensembles in Tbilisi and neighbouring regions, which are resisting musical standardizations, whether it be in structure and form or intonation. These ensembles are involved in field and archival research and have made a conscious decisions to present the music in a way that they feel reflects the unique characteristics of Georgian music. It is such younger, current ensembles – like *Anchiskhati*, *Basiani*, *Lashari*, *Zedashe*, and a few others — which are in part the subjects of this research.

I. Is it Really Non-Change?

The term “non-change” comes from a landmark essay on musical change, written by Blacking in 1977. In his paper he articulated the need to understand music in its social and cultural context and provided guidelines for identifying and studying the phenomenon of musical change. Within his discussion he recognizes many types of musical change, in particular he notes the difference between major stylistic and structural changes of a musical system versus superficial minor variations. Innovation, acculturation and superficial changes are naturally expected within a living musical system and eventually lead to larger structural changes. This is why he is so fascinated with non-change (1977: 6). His use of the term, however, is not clearly defined, but in one instance is associated with “carefully rehearsed passages of music” (1977: 6). My usage of the term is slightly more liberal and concurs with Blacking’s reluctance to label minor variations as change (1977: 17). Thus for the purposes of this essay, non-change in a musical system is not void of change, it is simply one where significant structural changes do not occur. This in turn is significant for my thesis, as Georgian music, like many folk musics is a flexible system. But within a defined range of improvisation, variation and intonation, this flexibility appears to be an enduring quality and a defining characteristic of the Georgian singing tradition.

My method of addressing the musical continuity involved a comparative analysis of contemporary performances with archived ones which I accumulated during my several trips to Georgia. Out of this material I organized over 25 units where both archived and contemporary performances of the same song existed. I did not have time to do a thorough analysis of all these units, but instead focused on a single song. Results from the exhaustive analysis of a single song equipped me with some approaches for an analysis of eight other units. Consequently, the summary which follows is preliminary as a thorough one would require far more samples than I have accumulated and years rather than months to realize.

My analysis involved assessing form, melodic motifs, pitch and tuning systems, timbre, tempo and other stylistic traits. In order to help with this, I used a computer program called Transcribe! which can slow down a piece, alter its pitch, adjust EQ, offer a spectrum analysis to identify frequencies, and calculate tempo. The obvious expectation with such an analysis is for differences to be found between the two

classifications, the old archived performances and the new; however, as expected, I also found similar differences in the archived versions.

In considering form and melodic motifs, it is assumed that current ensembles use less improvisation and variation in their performances, as this skill is one of the threatened aspects of Georgian traditional singing. Certainly *Anchiskhati's* performances of "Guruli Vakhtanguri" and "Aghdgomis Simghera" have a more stable form (that is, appears to demonstrate less variation and improvisation) than Simonishvili's 1930s version of "Vakhtanguri" or Mikadze's 1980s version of "Aghdgomis Simghera". But one of Simonishvili's contemporaries, Kirile Pachkoria, performed a version of "Vakhtanguri" which is also stable, perhaps even more stable than *Anchiskhati's* performance. Moreover, there are occasions in a supra setting when I have heard *Anchiskhati* perform songs with far more variation than I would ever expect in a staged performance.

Consider further examples from performances by *Basiani* and *Lashari*. In "Orira", *Basiani* is not as excessive in the variations as the 1930's Artem Erkomaishvili version from which they learned the song. For "Acharuli Maqruli", however, the young ensemble explores more variants, especially in the top voice, as well as extends the song with bass lines not found in two archived recordings of the song. Similarly, *Lashari's* version of "Kakhuri Mravalzhamier" uses a style of ornamentation combined with a dynamic interchange between the top two voices that I have not heard in any other performance of "Mravalzhamier," including four archived versions.

Another expectation for divergence between the old and the new ensembles deals with intonation. As mentioned, with the prevalence of the standardized tempered intervals, many Georgian ethnomusicologists have concerns for the loss of the traditional tuning systems. The issues of tuning and scale systems are complicated as can be seen by the three different tuning systems presented in the 2002 Symposium on Traditional Polyphony (Erkvanidze, 2003: 178-85; Geltzer, 2003:194-200; Westman, 2003:212-20). Rather than assuming a tuning system, however, I have attempted to approach the issue by addressing a few specific intervals.

For instance, in some of the archived performances there are peculiarities in intonation which are not reproduced to the same extent in the contemporary performances that I have heard to date. In particular, I am thinking of a lengthy sympathetic vibration (which could be described as a buzz or shimmer) that results from intervals a little smaller or larger than standardized tempered ones. Examples of these include a smaller fourth found in the fourth and fifth trios of Simonishvili's "Vakhtanguri" and the smaller third found in the fifth bar of Artem Erkomaishvili's "Orira". Even though I have not identified a similar reproduction of this tuning in any of the recordings of the contemporary ensembles, there are many other archived performances recorded in 1930s which also lack this characteristic intonation.

Another example I can draw upon focuses on the reoccurring resolving interval from trio to chorus in five performances of "Vakhtanguri". Measurements I made of these intervals in cents revealed a pattern where the two contemporary performances seemed to be closer to equal temperament than the three archived performances (tables 1 and 4). Despite this, these intervals were still significantly distant from the tem-

pered standard or the performances still exhibited enough non-tempered intervals to elicit an exotic non-Western sensation.

What became most apparent when conducting this analysis was the amount of variability existing even within the performance of a single song. For instance this reoccurring resolving interval in Simonishvili's 1930's version (table 2) measured between 131 cents and 201 cents. And the other four performance had a range of at least 50 cents. Some other aurally-obvious intervals in "Vakhtanguri" which demonstrate this variability can be found in the middle step of the four note ascent in the chorus' second voice as well as the top note in the two variants which define the cadential phrase for the trios' first tenor. And such variabilities can easily be found in performances of other songs as well.

This lack of stringency, ranging from macro issues of form to micro issues of intonation, seems to be the nature of folk and oral traditions – flexibility that allows individuals to express how they feel at any given time. But in the songs I analyzed, this flexibility is discrete and consistently spans the generations of performances thus defining the character of non-change. It also allows these younger ensembles, whose members feel they are struggling to regain the techniques and spirit of past generation, to perform with their own characteristic voice, distinct from any other ensemble, yet somehow uniquely Georgian. But does that make it authentic?

II. Is the Character of Non-Change Reflective of Authentic Practice?

The question of authenticity rests on a slippery slope and must be approached with caution, as the concept is relative depending on how we define the term and what values and beliefs are assumed. Given that I myself am a foreigner, it makes it even more difficult for me to discuss this question with authority. I dare to say, however, that the music, as a unique intangible heritage which survives in its variability as already discussed, continues to be apart of an expressive traditional Georgia culture, especially if we consider the historical nature of the Georgian ensemble itself.

Over the past few hundred years, the evolution of 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 nineteenth-century Western art music and subject to the cultural manipulations of twentieth-century Soviet policy. More recently, unable to resist the hegemony of popular music within a globalized economy, hybridized forms with rock, rap and other world musics have appeared. In retrospect, traditional music, with its ability to identify and mobilize groups of people, has been uprooted from its original context (particularly during the Soviet years in Eastern Europe) and become the subject of complex negotiations of power.

Indigenous Georgian music has also suffered similar interferences. During the Soviet era, traditional songs were uprooted from their original contexts and reharmonized to fit mass choirs and folk orchestrations. Folk instruments were chromaticized and made in various sizes to supply the range of parts required for these ensembles. Standardized versions of songs resulted, replacing the variations and improvisations of smaller ensembles. In Georgia, however, alongside these transformations, traditional music continued to exist in a smaller-ensemble format which

arguably is of an earlier expression in Georgian folklore.

Georgian traditional songs were removed from their original village context well before the Soviets took power in 1921. As part of a national liberation movement, the first ethnographic choir was organized in 1885 by a member of the intelligentsia, Lado Aghniashvili, and they gave their first staged performance in Tbilisi on November 15, 1886. While this event was hailed at the time as a remarkable historical move for preserving the traditional culture of Georgia (Chavchavdze, 2005 reprint of 1886), the concertization process has been repeatedly criticized for imposing Western European aesthetics and form on traditional Georgian music.

Yet, it appears that the concept of a choir was not new. By the end of the nineteenth century, there were already groups established in the rural areas of Georgia. Some of their recordings from 1907-1914 were released on a 2001 CD called *Drinking Horns and Gramophones*. The CD primarily 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 nineteenth century. Members of two of the Gurian choirs, from upper Aketi and Makvaneti, were 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). 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: “The group was often invited to different villages, nearly no party, folk or religious celebration were held without them” (Erkomaishvili, 1987: 10).

While one historian I interviewed, Manana Akhmeteli, suggested that groups singing in the village were better organized into village ensembles as a response to Aghniashvili’s ethnographic choir’s performance of 1886 (interview, 2005), it seems quite possible that the choral unit in the village must already have been firmly rooted to deserve the popularity Erkomaishvili attributes to it by the late nineteenth 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 Gogi Erkomaishvili, the trio from which the Makvaneti choir grew, was renowned throughout Guria, and by the late nineteenth 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). The Research Centre for Traditional Polyphony’s (RCTP) website reports something else which corroborates the earlier existence of the choir unit. On the “Historical Sources of Georgian Music” page, the RCTP mentions an early nineteenth-century encyclopaedia known as *Kalmasoba*, written by Ioane Batornishvili, which discusses many musical concepts, including the structure of the secular Georgian choir.

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 the typical calendric or life cycle rituals but were developed for their aesthetic values. This speaks to another unique aspect of music culture in Georgia. 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 throughout Georgian history. Philosophically, the Georgian Church, as a branch of Orthodox Christianity, is a more contemplative (and arguably more tolerant) religion than Roman Catholicism or Protestantism (Ware, 1993: 1-17). It is thus not surprising that an intricate link between secular and sacred music formed. As described in the words of Archbishop Grigol in the programme notes for the Second International Festival of Khobi ‘Song of Megrelia’,

Folk music grants peace of mind ... peace is a natural spiritual condition of a human being. Where there is no peace, there is no God. Folk music ensures such peace to establish and preserve. (“Second International Festival of Khobi” 2005, 28)

There is a saying in Georgia that the best chanters were the best folk singers. That the two could share such a relationship paved an interesting path for the development of folk songs in Georgia, one where highly skilled singers who were also deeply spiritual individuals would foster the development of the folk heritage.

III. Further Directions in Understanding the Non-Change of Georgian Folk Songs

This relationship with Orthodox Christianity may be a key to understanding the stable characteristic of Georgian folk music. Even today, the best chanters are the best folk singers. The Anchiskhati church choir is the prime example, and most of the younger folk choirs in Tbilisi and the surrounding districts are also involved in chanting. Today, a renaissance of traditional music, similar to the Hungarian revival movement, could describe the current musical practices of the Tbilisi ensembles. But the context of the Georgian renaissance is not only for entertainment as in the Hungarian dance houses; it is deeply connected with a religious revival – a movement that Georgian ancestry has tirelessly faced in many shapes and forms over a thousand years of foreign occupation. And today’s religious revival is pervasive.

Unfortunately, I do not have time in this paper to expand the discussion on revival movements (musical or otherwise), which involve a number of interesting issues around authenticity, conservatism, and reaction against a liberalizing hegemony (Livingston, 1999). Nor do I have time to draw the parallels between the Hungarian dance house revival movement and the current musical practices in Tbilisi, of which there are many. I will, however, mention one significant comparison of the former. Judit Frigyesi noted that many of the musicians involved in the Hungarian revival movement see the movement itself as deeply moving in the short-term, but nothing significant in the long-term (1996:56). In comparison, Georgian ensemble members consider their musical activities in Tbilisi very significant for the current and future course of musical and cultural development.

Notes

¹ I must express my gratefulness to the numerous ensemble leaders and other individuals who shared their private archived collections with me.

² Transcribe! is shareware software published in England by Seventh String Software, copyright © 1998.

³ The more stable characteristic of Anchiskhati's "Aghdgomis Simghera" could be a result of its structural use within a medley of three other celebratory Easter songs.

⁴ The dynamic interchange of Lashari's performance results from the tension that exists when ornaments are not sung homorhythmically. In comparison to other contemporary performances of "Mravalzhamier", the top voices of Lashari actually execute the ornaments together less often, but when they do perform them together, they do not adhere to the parallelism and homorhythmic quality which is more common, as can be heard in Basiani's 2001 performance.

⁵ It should be noted that there are occasions when contemporary ensembles do produce a sympathetic vibration. These instances are not as convincing as Simonishvili's or Artem's performances either because they are not maintained/reproduced, or they are accompanied by a section where the tuning between the parts appears unstable.

⁶ For an example consider Buchanan's ethnographic account of the transformations of Bulgarian ensembles, which traces the traditional music practices from pre-socialist times to present-day Bulgaria (2005).

⁷ An ethnographic ensemble may be understood as a folkloric ensemble.

⁸ For example, see Araqishvili (2005: 30).

⁹ RCTP website: <http://www.polyphony.ge/en/natpolyphony/history.php> (1 February 2007).

¹⁰ Ositashvili offers some insightful quotes from a historical account of Georgian Orthodox priests which reaffirms this contemplative position of Georgian Orthodoxy (Karelin in Ositashvili, 2003: 479).

¹¹ For further elaborations on this last paragraph consult the last chapter in my thesis (Kuzmich, 2007).

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ცხრილი 1-5. ინტერვალების სიდიდეები (ცენტებში)
Table 1 to Table 5. Measurements for the Trio's Resolving Tone (all measurements in cents).

Table 1 Resolving Tone in Anchiskhati's 2001 Recording

trio-chorus	Tintro-C1	T1-C2	T2-C3	T3-C4	T4-C5	T5-C6	T6-C7	T7
leading note	-36	-46	-48	-48	-30	-52	-79	-85
resolution note	-151	-169	-169	-160	-195	-186	-191	-206
interval	115	123	121	112	165	134	112	121
greatest spread between intervals				53	Median	121	Average	125

Table 2 Resolving Tone in Simonishvili's 1930s Recording

trio-chorus	Tintro-C1	T1-C2	T2-C3	T3-C4	T4-C5	T5-C6	T6-C7	T7
leading note	16	-5	-26	-150	-163	-192	-221	-283
resolution note	-122	-158	-228	-281	-332	-373	-416	-426
interval	138	153	202	131	169	181	195	143
greatest spread between intervals				71	Median	161	Average	164

Table 3 Resolving Tone in Kirile's 1930s Recording

trio-chorus	Tintro-C1	T1-C2	T2-C3	T3-C4	T4-C5	T5-C6	T6-C7	
leading note	46	34	-11	-34	-28	-92	-126	
resolution note	-112	-134	-166	-178	-192	-211	-265	
interval	160	168	155	144	164	119	139	
greatest spread between intervals				49	Median	155	Average	150

Table 4 Resolving Tone in Lashari's 2004 Recording

trio-chorus	Tintro-C1	T1-C2	T2-C3	T3-C4	T4-C5	T5-C6	T6-C7	
leading note	46	-46	-99	-40	-107	-119	-64	
resolution note	-105	-174	-189	-189	-212	-234	-244	
interval	151	128	90	149	105	115	180	
greatest spread between intervals				90	Median	129.5	Average	131

Table 5 Resolving Tone in Unsourced Archive

trio-chorus	Tintro-C1	T1-C2	T2-C3	T3-C4	T4-C5	T5-C6	T6-C7	T7
leading note	135	52	19	16	8	-42	-46	-79
resolution note	-45	-79	-108	-119	-148	-178	-208	-235
interval	180	131	127	135	156	136	162	156
greatest spread between interval				53	Median	146	Average	150

წარწერები და შენიშვნები 1-5 ცხრილისათვის

T – აღნიშნავს ტრიოს, C – გუნდს. ამგვარად, Tintro აღნიშნავს შესავალი ტრიოს მონაკვეთს, რომელიც წინ უძღვის პირველ გუნდს (C1). შემდგომი, მომდევნო ტრიოები და გუნდები, შესაბამისად, თანმიმდევრული ნუმერაციითაა აღნიშნული.

შენიშვნელოვანია ის ინტერვალი, რომელიც იქმნება ტრიოს ბოლო ბგერასა და გუნდის პირველ ბგერას შორის – იგი იძლევა სიმღერის დაბოლოებას კონსონანსში. ყურადღება გავამახვილე მხოლოდ ბანზე და შევავსე ამ ინტერვალის სიდიდეები, რაც აისახა ცხრილებში 1-5. თითოეული ცხრილი შეიცავს ზედა მწკრივში გადასვლის მონაკვეთს; მაგალითად, ტრიო T1 გუნდში C2 აღნიშნულია T1 – C2.

ინტერვალის სიდიდის მისაღებად მე გავზომე თითოეულის სიმაღლე – როგორც ტრიოს წამყვანი ბგერისა, ისე გუნდში გადანყვეტის ბგერა – A440-თან დაკავშირებით. განსხვავება ამ ორ განზომილებას შორის ცენტრებში გამოთვლის გადასვლის ინტერვალს. თვალის ერთი გადავლებით ცხრილი გვიჩვენებს, რომ აღნიშნული ინტერვალის ნახევარი ტონიდან ერთ ტონს შორის მერყეობს.

წყობის ცენტრებში ჩემს მიერ შემოთავაზებული სიდიდეები არ უნდა იქნას გაგებული ზუსტად. კომპიუტერული პროგრამა Transcribe! მნიშვნელოვნად დამეხმარა, მაგრამ ტექნიკა (და მისი მომხმარებელი) სრულყოფილი არაა. ამის ნაცვლად, სიდიდეები უნდა აღიქმებოდეს, როგორც ორიენტირი, მიახლოებული შეფასება. ვვარაუდობ, რომ წყობის ჩემს მიერ შემოთავაზებულ გაზომვას დაახლოებით 10-ცენტისანი ცდომილება აქვთ. საკუთარი გამოცდილებიდან გამომდინარე დავძენ, რომ ინტერვალის 10 ცენტში არის ის, რაც სმენით აღიქმება; ამიტომ, ვფიქრობ, ამ ცდომილებას უნდა დავუმატო კიდევ 10 ცენტი. ამგვარად, ვვარაუდობ, რომ წყობების ჩემს მიერ შემოთავაზებულ ანალიზებში მნიშვნელოვანია ის შედეგები, სადაც განსხვავება, სულ ცოტა, 20 ცენტია.

Legend and Notes on Tables 1-5

T – refers to trio and C to chorus. Thus Tintro refers to and introductory trio section preceding the first Chorus (C1). Subsequent trios and chorus are labeled sequentially.

The interval leading from the last note of the trio section into the first note of the chorus is a significant interval as it defines the song's final resolution. Focusing only on the bass, I have collected measurements for these intervals in Tables 1 to Table 5. Each table lists the transition section in the header row; for example, trio T1 into chorus C2 is labelled T1-C2. To measure the interval, I measured each pitch – both the leading note of the trio and the resolution note of the chorus – in relation to A440. The difference between these two measurements calculates the transition interval in cents. A quick glance at the tables shows that the interval in question is somewhere between a semitone and a whole tone.

My measurements of tuning in cents should not be read strictly. A computer program, Transcribe!, helped me considerably but the technology (and the user) are not perfect. Instead the measurements should act as a guide, a rough estimate. I would guess that my tuning measurements have an error of about 10 cents. Given that from my own experiences I can safely say an interval of 10 cents is one that is just audible, I would add another 10 cents to my error. I am thus suggesting that significant results in my analysis of these tunings are those of at least 20 cents.