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GENDER APPROACHES TO IMPROVISATION IN GEORGIAN POLYPHONIC SINGING

As often argued in ethnomusicology, improvisation and variation in oral traditions involves as much structure, planning and disciplined study as composed music (Groesbeck, 1999). This is demonstrated in studies of the Persian and Indian classical repertoire (*gusheh* modes in Persian classical *destgâh*. Nooshin, 2003) as well as Jazz.

There are not many studies on the link between gender and improvisation in ethnomusicology. Improvisation is among those cognitive aspects of learning, which often seem associated with technical and self-contained musical processes. Therefore, gender aspects of improvisation are often disguised and implicit, which is, they are not much spoken about (for the discussion of the implicit practices of the relationship between gender and singing see Shugarman, 1997).

In this paper I will attempt to demonstrate expressions of the different approaches to improvisation and spontaneity in the musical performances of Georgian polyphonic songs by men and women. This paper is based on my fieldwork recordings and interviews, the analysis carried out in my doctoral dissertation as well as broader observations of this form of creativity among the Georgian singers in the different dialect areas. Variation, spontaneity and improvisation are characteristic for both men's and women's music making in Georgia; however, technical mastery embodied in the ability to use one's accumulated knowledge of musical formulas and based on this knowledge, to improvise is often ascribed to and emphasised in men's musical practices. One of the reasons is the higher value placed on men in the Georgian culture, which is revealed in Georgia's religious beliefs and ritual practices (Surguladze, 2005), including the polyphonic singing tradition. Another reason as well as the reflection of the notions of the men's higher social value is the degree of musical-polyphonic complexity of the men's polyphonic repertoire compared to that of the women.

Men and Learning Improvisation. Both men and women in the Georgian polyphonic singing tradition learn songs early as children, from their parents, grandparents, and fellow community members at various family and community gatherings. While today improvisation is endangered, there are still singers whom I have interviewed, observed and heard singing improvisation. The Gurian singers Vazha Gogoladze and Anzor Erkomaishvili provided the most invaluable information and insights into the practices and understanding of improvisation in the men's polyphonic singing.

The social environment of feasts where men take leadership in proposing toasts-speeches, drinking alcohol and singing is crucial in developing men's improvisation in the polyphonic song performances. Apart from feasts, men in the 19th and 20th centuries Guria often met to practice and develop new variants of songs. However, in the community discourses the different opportunities for men and women to master

polyphonic songs are taken at face value. For example, most male and female singers attach decisive role to one's talent in developing his or her musical skills. Talent is viewed as the God's gift. As one of the outstanding Gurian singers (Vazha Gogoladze) said to me, "no one can take away musical talent from you once you are given it" (interview 26.6.1999). Similarly, when I asked the Gurian male singers from Ozurgeti (the central town of Guria) why the women didn't sing as complex songs as the men did, one of them answered: "Who holds them back, they can sing if they want to" (September 2002). Conversations with the musicians, observations of musical practices and historical reality show, however, that musical talent in Guria was nurtured and stretched to limits in convenient social environment of *supra* feasts and men's gatherings. As many male singers reveal, skills of improvisation and variation during the performance of the same song developed in the atmosphere of convivial yet competitive singing and feasting.

Several aspects were important in the men's improvisation:

- 1) To create the new variants of the existing songs, or even to create new songs.
- 2) To compete with other outstanding singers in order to prove one's excellence and mastery. Thus, Vazha referred to one such fellow singer as a "trouble-maker", who "...would deliberately break into your part and kick you out, bump into you and go back to his part and then laugh at you when you were left out of the tune" (interview 27.6.1999).
- 3) To emphasize the musical-technical aspect of the song, by means of using many vocables apart from the text of a song, as well as extending vowels for melodic embellishments. Thus, men often use vocables instead of text in complex polyphonic songs. The singing of meaningless syllables allow singers to focus on the musical side of the song and improvise while not having to think about the verbal content of the song, and such a method is quite common in Gurian choral polyphonic singing.
- 4) Via these means the men achieved a transcendence of everyday concerns and a condition of the highest inspiration in music making (Ex.1).

Unlike men, I have not encountered in my practice any woman who would be acknowledged as a master of improvisation. One important reason for this was that women did not learn improvisation in a socially structured way like men did, nor were they expected to pass time in a carefree transcendence of mundane life at *supra* feasts or gatherings for practicing songs. During the conversations with Vazha Gogoladze, Avto Makharadze, Anzor Erkomaishvili and other accomplished Gurian singers, it came across clearly that there have been few female singers who, despite their talent, do not develop professional skills matching those of men and do not receive public acknowledgment as mastersingers. One of such female singers was Vazha's mother who, despite her exceptional musical gift, is remembered as a musician only by her son, to whom she passed her talent and knowledge of songs. As one of the male singers in Chokhatauri *supra* spoke affectionately of his ten-year-old daughter "she has a phenomenal musical ear. As soon as you sing her a tune she already remembers it" (26.6.1999). His son he said, was not as talented as his daughter, yet he was pushing him, rather than his daughter, to become a singer. Such social differen-

tiation between the musically gifted females and males is also clearly apparent in the description of the nineteenth-century Gurian concept of a good bride and a groom: “A man who could sing well was highly appreciated in Guria. When a woman was getting married, people would ask if the groom could sing and if he did, his authority would grow considerably in the eyes of the bride’s family. Gurian [male] singers tried to marry a woman from good singers’ family, so that the heir could inherit a musical talent from her” (Erkomaishvili, 1988: 11-2). Below is the comparison of the men’s and the women’s versions of the Nanina sung at the same supra feast in Guria (Ex. 2).

In the men’s version the parts tended to be more individualized, independent from each other rhythmically and melodically, taking turns in weaving their vocal lines. In bar 15 the middle and bass parts held one note for a short time while the upper part weaved his melody, and then all the three parts developed independent melodic lines simultaneously. The women’s version on the other hand was engendered by a more collective, coherent approach to part-singing with the parts moving in melodic and rhythmic blocks, allowing none of the parts to stand out. If we compare bars 1-3 of the women’s and men’s versions we can see how the women repeated the same melodic pattern three times, while the singer of the middle part in the men’s version provided different patterns all the three times. The type of polyphony in the women’s version was based on a greater degree of parallel movement and a rhythmic-melodic similarity between the parts. Such different approaches to choral polyphonic singing determined the difference between the chords occurring in the women’s and men’s versions, with the men creating more diverse harmonic combinations than the women (Ex. 3).

During the improvisation men achieved a care-free transcending experience. This was demonstrated by the difference in dynamic. For example, the women’s singing was more reserved. It adopted a steady tempo increased slightly towards the middle section of the song. In contrast, there was more emotional elevation in the men’s version, with the tempo and volume increasing significantly throughout the song, toppled with the lead singer – Vazha’s loud exclamations at the end of each phrase. Difference between the dynamic aspect of men’s and women’s versions was also apparent in the gradual rise of pitch of the entire song. Thus, although both men and women started the song at the same pitch, men ended the song at a higher pitch – approximately 50 cents higher than D compared to the women’s ending at approximately 50 cents higher than C# (not indicated in the notation).

Women and Improvisation.

Women do not meet specifically to practice improvisation and do not reveal an explicit ambition to create their own variants of songs and excel in the technical aspect of musicianship or to compete with each other in achieving the most unusual and innovative versions of a familiar song. As many women said in conversation, the main incentive for them to meet for singing was friendship, sharing problems and feelings of loss and the love of music making.

The women’s transcendence of the mundane in song performances occurs in the circumstances different from those of men - in the women’s genres of laments and

songs-glorifications and song-prayers (Zumbadze, 1999; Araqishvili, 1948; Javakishvili, 1938). While only men were allowed to take part in the institutionalized service to gods¹ (Tolbert, 1990). A good visual example of this is Hugo Zemp's 1998 film about the Lasharoba festival in Pshavi. In the song-glorifications women past their reproductive age were the mediators between earth and the gods in their separate female space of the ritual. Female lament is another musical medium through which the women mediate between life and death, the living and the dead. While at supra feasts and other official community gatherings men have dominated the public space, in laments and song-prayers the women are the only mediators and are able to transcend the earthly concerns and express powerful emotions within the dominant patriarchal order. In the village communities married women commonly are not expected to behave in a "light-minded" way: sing, feast, and pass time (Fieldwork in Racha, Khevi and Kartli). Many women also hold back from singing if their close relatives have died. In such cases, laments and song-prayers/glorifications can be the only genres in which women are allowed to express feelings in an unreserved way (Ex. 4).

The spontaneous improvisation that occurred in "Zruni" was not a result of a disciplined practice. It emerged amidst the expression of grief when the women addressed their loved ones or the young members of the community who died untimely. Each version of the Zruni has a standard opening phrase in each soloist's part: "deda" (mother) and "o ooo-i" (vocables often used in laments). Between these standard phrases the two soloists varied the text. While in the men's improvisation in "Chven Mshvidoba" words were secondary and vocables or extended vowels were used to emphasize the musical-technical aspect of the song, in the women's lament spontaneously inserted words towards the dead loved ones were central in facilitating spontaneity and improvisation. Small melodic-rhythmic variations occurred by means of spontaneous variation of the words and they were not directed towards achieving musical excellence. The verbal extemporizing caused the length and form of the song to vary.

Conclusions: the Attempt to Interpret Improvisation in the Context of Patriarchy

In the social context of traditional patriarchal communities in Georgia the emotion of men's improvisation is associated with achieving technical excellence and through this, with showing their physical and creative potency. Thus, men's improvisation is linked with and derives from the men's role and experiences in the public space – to emulate, and compete in the public realm. As such, it is often based on long hours of practice and disciplined learning. Because of the lack of long hours of practicing, the women's improvisation is associated with spontaneity, which is formed each time they bring into play the memories of the loved ones, the frustration with the reality of loss or the elation of being connected with gods.

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მაგალითი 1. მარცვლების გაგრძელებისა და ტექსტის შენიღბვის მომენტი სიმღერაში “ჩვენ მშვიდობა”.

Example 1. Extending vowels in the song “Chven Mshvidoba”.

Slow Section 1

Tenor I
Modzakhlili
mshvi - do - - - - -

Tenor II
Tsqeba
Chven mshvi do i - o-i - o - ba ga - i - i -

Bass
Bari
Do - - - - -

Section 2

TI
ba de - - - lo re ro

TII
a mar jo - - - ba o re ra ra ni no de lo a ba de lo

B
ba o o

მაგალითი 2. ქალების და კაცების „ნანინა“.

Example 2. The women’s and men’s versions of “Nanina”.

A

Women's
three-part
chorus
Nai ni na ne ni na ne ni na nai ni na

A

Men's
three-part
chorus

Na ni na ni na ni ne o

Na ni na ni na ni ne o

Women

5

di la vo di la vo di la o de la da a ba de lo de la o de la

de li da de li da a ba de la de la o de la

Men

4

na ni na di la vo di la vo di la o re ra da di lo de la

na ni na a vo di la o re ra da di lo de la

na ni na a o he a di lo de la

Women

B accel.

8
na ni na na ni na na ni na na ni na

Men

7
de lo vo re ra na ni na o nei ni na

de lo vo re ra da [not clear] nei ni na

nei ni na o nei ni nei da

Women

13
a ba de lo o de la da di la vo di le vo di la

de li da de

Men

11 *accel*

nei ni na nei na na da o re ra da

nei ni na nei ni na a a ba re ro re ro o re ra da

na a ba de lo o re ra da

15

di la vo di la vo di la o re ra da si vo re re re re o re re

o vo de la a ba de lo re ro ni ro de la da

he he he vo re ra he o re ra

მაგალითი 3. აკორდები ქალთა და კაცთა ვარიანტებში სიმღერაში “ნანინა”.

Example 3. Chords used in women's and men's versions of “Nanina”.

Chords in the women's version

Chords in the men's version

მაგალითი 4. „ზრუნის“ ორი ვარიანტი, სოფელი ღები (1999).
Example 4. Transcriptions of the women's lament "Zruni" from Ghebi, Mountain Racha (1999).

I ვარიანტი
I version

first soloist



drone de da ma na na shu a shi ga tsqda shvi lo gvirg vi ni ma na na de da o

3 second soloist



o a ro ar ge ghir sa gvir gvi ni shvi lo

4 first soloist



de da ma na na de da ver na kha shen ma ded ma mam she ni gvirg vi ni de de o

II ვარიანტი
II version

the first soloist



de da zvi a di de da o che mo' nor chu ka shvi lo mo gi kvdes de da zvi a di o

3 drone o io zvi a di de da da shvi lo de da o

6 the second soloist



o o i did tva le ba zvi a di o