

GEORGIAN TRADITIONAL MUSIC TODAY: REVIVAL AS PRESERVATION?¹

Rusudan Tsurtsunia

V. Sarajishvili Tbilisi State Conservatoire

Abstract:

The article discusses the new approaches, emerged in the 21st century Georgian ethnomusicology – the issue of the revival-preservation of traditional music in post-communist Georgia. Social and ideological developments during the 20th century played decisive role in the polarization of the approaches to traditional music in European cultures. Specific approach was elaborated in Eastern Europe – the ideological cultural policy doctrine of Communist regime – "Socialist realism." This ideology used folk music as a tool to protect the communist society from the "harmful influence of Bourgeois music". Like other communist countries in Georgia too the government did its best to popularize and at the same time to patronize and ideologically restrain traditional musical culture. Despite this process, authentic singing tradition was preserved in a number of Georgian villages in the late 1960s, this tradition has partly been kept alive in various regions of Georgia till today.

Traditional music is actively involved in the formation of Georgia's contemporary melosphere (Zemtsovsky) with the various extent of renewal and can be considered as one of the forms of preservation.

Keywords: *Georgian traditional music, revival, preservation, ideology, post-communist*

Main topic of the paper set in the title is more rhetorical - we should agree that preservation of traditional music in the 21st century (and not only) is impossible without its renewal at various degrees. The paper deals with the revival-preservation discourse of traditional music in post-communist Georgia. Research of Georgian traditional music counts over 100 years of history, but the study of its current state has began in 21st century, following the introduction of liberal values. These new approaches emerged in Georgian ethnomusicology not as separate precedents, but as certain tendencies, determined by the necessity to conceptualize live musical practice in Georgian reality. Thus this is the vision, brought to Georgian ethnomusicology by time.

Unlike Central Europe, where comparative musicology started with the study of foreign, exotic cultures, in many East European countries, including Georgia – a part of the Russian Empire – musical folkloristics, initially studied its own music. One of the main reasons for this was the understanding of native music's role in the ascertainment of the society's identity under the conditions of national-independent ideology at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries.

Thus, in the study of folk music, all attention was directed to the search of musical structure, especially its original, original features, which became the essential condition for the formation of Eastern European, including Georgian, national composer's musical language.

The study of Georgian folk music as a musical phenomenon lasted almost all century. On the basis of the enormous material collected since the turn of the 19th-20th centuries, Georgian scholars fundamentally processed theoretical issues of Georgian folk music. They were particularly interested in the stable elements of traditional music, thanks to which the music had

¹ The paper was delivered at the ESEM-2017, Tbilisi, 5-9- September.

maintained clearly expressed heritage throughout centuries, which is clearly manifested in the unity of all the dialects and expression parameters of Georgian folklore.

Their approach to traditional music, was essentially the same as in European comparative musicology, when ethnomusicologists focused not on the changes, but on the state of traditional music at the moment [1:287-290].

Social and ideological polarization of the approaches to traditional music determined elaboration of specific approach in Eastern Europe. Following the independence in 1918-1921 Georgia found itself again a part of Russian Empire, but this time under the totally violent Communist regime, more severe than the Tsarist one, which hid its hypocritical policy behind the idea of friendship among people. The ideological cultural policy doctrine of Communist regime – "Socialist realism" – used folk music as a tool to protect the communist society from the "harmful influence of Bourgeois music". Like other communist countries in Georgia too the government did its best to popularize and at the same time to patronize and ideologically restrain traditional musical culture. Such pressure significantly affected social structure and partly the content of Georgian traditional music, to say nothing of academic, static performance manner and visual presentation. This resulted in the creation of paradoxical situation in folk performance: on the one hand, folk music became a significant attribute in the cultural life of "wide masses" – thousands of people of various professions participated in regular inspections and Olympiads, folk music practice reached huge scales, on the other hand the existence of enormous collectives (100-120 members) and unusual forms for folklore became a norm.

Folklore turned into an official art, which, as a rule, comprised the songs about collective farms, Communist leaders and Party. Another paradox was that such folk ensembles were directed by the bearers and grand masters of traditional music (Sandro Kavsadze, Kirile Pachkoria, Dzuku Lolua, Kitsi Gegechkori and others), who managed to maintain the spirit of Georgian ensemble music making in large collectives, and to include complex examples of traditional songs alongside the contemporary ones in their repertoire.

Such state "care" about folk song, as well as numerous folkloristic expeditions contributed to the preservation of active performance practice by people, despite the ideological pressure. If to this we add the patriarchal lifestyle of Georgian villages in the 20th century, we will easily understand Yvette Grimaud (a French ethnomusicologist, who, despite the resistance of Security organs visited Georgia to record folk songs in 1967) who, following her visit to village singers, wrote: "These people live in the Old Testament" [2].

Later, other changes were added to those determined by social and ideological reasons: from the 1960s introduction of the so-called "improved" i.e. tempered musical instruments in practice and creation of non-traditional instrumental orchestras, from the 1970s - active invasion of "light" i.e. pop music genres by folk song, appearance of a diversity of the so-called "ethno-jazz", etc.

These changes reached the pinnacle from the 1990s: after the replacement of totalitarian politics by that of absolute liberalism we received an extremely diverse palette for the functioning of Georgian traditional music: live tradition bearers in the villages, large number of folk ensembles competing with each other in the so-called "authentic" performance manner in the regions and cities, there also are the so-called State ensembles some of which audaciously "wrap" traditional music and dance in modern manner, there are many children's ensembles and studios of song and dance. In addition, folk music won a foothold in the industry of Georgian show-business; very popular among the society are the so-called author's songs created in folk manner, mainly accompanied with tempered musical instruments.

Communist ideology particularly prohibited the research of traditional culture in socio-cultural context. For the official policy categorically unacceptable were people's cult-religious beliefs, it fought with fire and sword against the church, public rituals. Moreover in the 1960s in order to replace them and to distract people's attention they tried to create new 'Soviet holidays', with a great deal of folk dance and singing.

Due to this, traditional folk music turned into the art of pure academic performance with standard behaviors and costumes.

In the 1980s, folklorist Edisher Garakanidze decided to perform folk music on the stage in its usual environment as much as possible. For this he created ensemble Mtiebi, which performed the songs they had studied during long expeditions in villages. Since then the theme of changes was indirectly introduced in Georgian folkloristics. By the way, this happened at the same time when the Western “musicologists turned a sharp corner, becoming in a virtual sea change, almost a profession of scholars concentrating in one way or another on musical change, interested most in music that has undergone or is undergoing change in some sense” [1:287].

However, the case of Georgian ethnomusicologists was different. At this time the problem of authenticity was raised in Georgian folkloristics. Folk singers and chanters, choir masters and folklorists argued about the authenticity of song and chant performance implying its “initial genuineness”, which is undoubtedly linked with the problem of changes. Georgian ethnomusicologists themselves had negative attitude to the ongoing changes in folk music; they distanced from them and pretended not to notice real situation and thus expressed their attitude to them.² This is the time when many of them emphasized unacceptability of changes; this is still topical among specialists. The same cannot be said about the rest of Georgian society, which is fairly tolerant to modern forms of musical expression, including the renewed traditional music.

The theory of “Revivalist movement” created in Western ethnomusicology reveals various aspects for music revival in Oxford textbook “Music Revival” [4]. Caroline Bithell discusses the renewal impulses, innovations and other issues accompanying this process in her special article, dedicated to Georgian traditional polyphonic music. I am not going to discuss these issues now; all the more that Bithell’s article draws the real picture extensively and convincingly. I would like to just suggest revival or renewal, as the concept for the preservation of traditional music.

It is known, that, music is a process [5] and exists only when it sounds, but it cannot be accurately repeated in live performance. As George Liszt writes, all humanly produced music shares at some extent a particular characteristic: two performances of what is considered to be the same always differ in some manner [6]. Bruno Nettl claims the same; he refers to Heraclitus’ well-known phrase “no man ever steps in the same river twice” [1: 272]. New interpretation is a new articulation, which, in given moment, depends on the performer’s mood and psycho-emotional state, and so, as Nettl wittily writes, he can always tell you “Come back and see me next Thursday!” [1:156]

As far as constant changeability is one of the determinants of traditional music, and constant renewal the primary manifestation of its viability, renewal-revival of traditional music implies its preservation.

The attempts to preserve traditional music unchanged are futile, as well as in Bartok’s words “The attempt.... to revive old songs in the village” is utopia [7:78]. New forms of traditional music result from the disintegration of folklore’s genre-stylistic and intonational structure; they are based on different regularities, and, what is very important, in individualized human society, lose their anonymity, become author’s. This is why it is impossible to refer to this music as “traditional” in old sense. However, this is the only way for traditional music to survive under modern conditions, as well as the way for its participation in the formation of the society’s national identity.

It can definitely be said, that “the folk epoch” in traditional sense has passed by. I think we can describe the situation by the paraphrase of Izaly Zemtsovsky’ words: “Folklore is going away, folklorism³ is coming” [8:14]. Certainly, this is also conventionality: “folklorism” is the case, when folklore is received in ready-made form.

² In the 1970s the only precedent were the works of a Georgian thinker, public figure and musicologist Givi Orjonikidze, in which the author discussed the changes in folklore in new social environment and problems of Georgian pop music [3]

³ The term “folklorism” is used by West and Russian ethnomusicologists when the folklore is applied “outside a folk context” or when the folklore by performers “is excepted ready-made” i.e. the “secondary folklore” [9: 4-6;10: 4]

Great wealth of the 21st century Georgian traditional music is when alongside the large diversity of its new forms we can speak about the authentic performance of the surviving tradition bearers in the villages; however, this can conditionally be called “genuine” and “authentic” folklore, as these examples have lost their primary function and are performed even by tradition bearers basically for listeners (on the stage) or simply for fun.

The performance of peripheral juvenile ensembles cannot be called “authentic” in old sense, either, as they have learned traditional songs via formal learning. Today some Georgian folklorists and performers apply the term authentic to the examples, which imitate the performance manner of expedition recordings as accurately as possible; the number of such is quite large. However, in Georgia there are ensembles, striving to achieve more freedom and be more creative in interpretation within the frame of tradition.

And, as it is impossible to speak about exact imitation in oral performance, this process resembles the interpretation of professional music examples by musician-performers. In any cases, changes are inevitable.

So we can enumerate some ways for the preservation and transmission of traditional music inculcated in Georgian reality:

- Transmission of the songs under informal conditions by tradition bearers in the villages or in families;
- Imitations of songs and performance manner of field recordings as accurately as possible by folk ensembles;
- Interpretation of folk songs freely in the frame of the tradition;
- Creation of new forms by using the elements of traditional music (author's song, fusion forms).

Despite the quality of its changeability, the reproduced or transformed traditional music has already been renewed and both ways serve for the preservation of tradition. This meets the historically established paradigm of Georgian culture: respect of the tradition and at the same time, strive for its enrichment by other cultural achievements.

To this also testifies, the viewpoint of tradition bearers, according to which, as Nettle writes “Changes are part of defensive strategy, neither good nor bad, but necessary” [1:293].

References:

1. Bruno, N. *The Study of Ethnomusicology. Thirty-Three Discussions*. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015, 3rd ed.
2. Grimoud, Y. Interview. In: *Yvette Grimoud and Georgia. Essays on Georgian Traditional Music and Audio recordings from the Chkhikvadze-Grimoud Expedition (1967)* (in print, Georgian-English).
3. Ordjonikidze, G. *Tanamedrove kartuli musika estetika da sociologiis shukze (Contemporary Georgian Music in the Light of the Aesthetic and Sociology)*. Tbilisi: Khelovneba. 1984, pp.215-226 (in Georgian).
4. Bithell, C. & Hill, J. Editors and compilers. *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

5. Asafiev, B. *Muzikalnaia forma kak protses (Musical Form as Proces)*. Moscow:Muzika. 1971 (in Russian).
6. Liszt, G. Ethnomusicology: A Discipline Defined. *Ethnomusicology*. 1979, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Jan.), pp.1-4
7. Bartok, B. *Narodnaya muzika vengrii i sosednikh narodov.* (Folk Music of Hungary and Neighbouring Peoples). Moscow: Muzika.1966 (in Russian).
8. Zemtsovsky, I. From the Folk Song to the Folk Choir: Casuistry or Problem? In: *The Traditional Folklore and Contemporary Folk Choirs and Ensembles*. Leningrad: State Institute for the Theatre, Music and Cinematography of Leningrad. 1989 (in Russian).
9. De Caro, F. *Folklore Recycled: Old Traditions in New Contexts*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. 2013.<https://www.amazon.com/Folklore-Recycled-Old-Traditions-Contexts/dp/1617037648>
10. Viktor Japin. Ot Redaktora (From the editor).In:*Traditsionnyj folklore I sovremennye khory i ansambli.* (*Traditional Folklore and Modern Choirs and Ensembles*). Leningrad: State Institute for the Theatre, Music and Cinematography of Leningrad. 1989 (in Russian).

Article received: 2018-07-25