

UDC 78

REGIONAL, NATIONAL, GLOBAL? CAUCASIAN MUSIC IN WESTERN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

In late Soviet and early post-Soviet times, Caucasian music enjoyed huge success with Western audiences. Within the Caucasian republics, this music contributed to the growing of new cultural self-confidence; in the rest of the world, the works of Kancheli, Terteryan, Alizade and others were hailed for their unconventional elements and "Eastern" aesthetics (e.g. the different concept of time on an abstract scale, or the fascinating timbre of folk musical instruments in a more immediate sense). Thus, both from within and from outside, their music bore traits of a renewed cultural nationalism, partly to be understood as a cultural reaction against decades of Sovietization. Is this reaction going on in our globalist present as well, and if so: is contemporary Caucasian music perceived as orientated backward or forward?

Keywords: *National Identity, Multiculturalism, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan*

In 2018, Georgia was guest of honour at the Frankfurt book fair. All of a sudden Germany's cultural institutions showed interest in Georgian culture, literature, arts, music, dishes, even the German tourism industry experienced a quantity of travellers going to Georgia hitherto undreamt of, the prices for flights to Tbilisi exploded. Georgia and its culture stood for several months in the spotlight of cultural life: There took place a big music festival dedicated to Caucasian professional, jazz and folk music at the Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, a whole week of Georgian culture in Freiburg, and the 'Museumsuferfest' in Frankfurt featured Georgian jazz. But this picture of a blossoming contact with Caucasian or more specifically Georgian music might be deceptive.

Starting with my participation at the Khachaturyan centenary conference in Erevan in 2003 («Арам Хачатурян и музыка XX века», Ереван, 17-30 ноября 2003 г.), I myself have dealt from time to time with Caucasian music at conferences and in some printed articles [1], knowing that this topic stands at the margin of German musicology. Yet today, I feel uncertain about the real dimension of the awareness of Caucasian music among German and more generally Western audiences. It is hard to say if this has more to do with a lack of attention from my side, or with a simple lack of information, or actually with the real disappearance of Caucasian music from the screens of musicology and musical life in the Western hemisphere. In order to get a more precise picture, I talked to the director of the publishing house Sikorski in Hamburg, Hans-Ulrich Duffek, in April 2019. Sikorski had had a contract with the Ministry of Foreign Trade of the Soviet Union until 1990: Sikorski was one of the few Western music publishing houses which were promoting Soviet composers outside of the Soviet Union, including among others Ali-Zadeh, Artyomov, Denisov, Firsova, Frid, Gubaidulina, Harutyunyan, Kabalevsky, Kancheli, Khachaturyan, Knaifel, Mansuryan, Matchavariani, Pärt, Prokofiev, Raskatov, Schnittke, Shchedrin, Shostakovitch, Smirnov, Suslin, Tchemberdji, Terteryan, Ustvolskaya, Weinberg and Yekimovsky. Mr Duffek told me that from his point of view, the average amount of productions of ex-Soviet Caucasian music has not changed significantly in the last decades. Thus, if we focus on the generations which grew up after World War II, Giya Kancheli still is the towering figure, receiving as much attention with Western audiences as ever. Whereas most other Caucasian composers struggle to be perceived at all. Some exception might be made e.g. for Terteryan, whose Third and Fourth symphony have just

been recorded under Kirill Karabits for the label Chandos [2], or for Mansuryan who at least is present with some CD recordings [3]. But the general impression is less favourable. Sikorski still has the majority of ex-Soviet composers in its catalogue, yet after the end of the contract with the Soviet Union in 1990, the publishing house decided to broaden its scope, to get more global in their choice of composers. There was no more need to promote fresh talents according to their nationality.

It seems that the idea of 'national music' in itself has become outdated with regard to contemporary composing. It may still seem an attractive choice for festival committees to have colourful flags of nations on the sleeves of their programmes and promotional material, but the relevance of nationality for the artist himself and for his artwork has become dubious. Even before the breakdown of the Soviet Union, Caucasian composers had transformed the concept of nationality in music: Once being not much more than a *couleur locale* with the function of representing a nation according to simple expectations of folkloristic rhythms, melodies and instrumental colours, e.g. in many works of Khachaturyan, in late Soviet times national ideas had become less superficial and much more complex, undoubtedly because the balance between the Soviet system and its member states had become fragile and full of tensions. The change of attitudes took place little by little in music as well, and it was perceived by the composers themselves.

In 2000, Giya Kancheli was asked in an interview to explain his attitude towards his nationality:

"If people consider me a Georgian composer, I'm very happy with that. But I've never striven to demonstrate my national roots in my music. I grew up on Georgian soil and listened to Georgian folk music from an early age, and I absorbed into myself all the best and worst in my people. But the connections between my compositions and the music of my people are very indirect. That music lives inside me, as my native language does.

But everybody talks about the influences of Georgian folk music on your music...

If so, I'm very happy. I value Georgian polyphonic folk music too highly to use it in my compositions, because I've always considered this music professional. The drawing up from this source scoop by scoop, as some colleagues of mine do, is plagiarism in some sense. But if someone thinks my music resembles Georgian folk music in its spirit, then I feel happy." [4]

Thus, Kancheli acknowledges a national spirit, but he doesn't try to reflect it in his works by reverting to folk music. Well, that seems only partially true. His Sixth symphony from 1981, for example, displays right at the beginning the free unfolding of melodic lines in two solo violas (hidden behind the curtain), imitating the drone sound and the meditative improvisatory quality of *chianuri* playing. But there might be as much national elements in the idea of contrasting such fragile elements with brutal unisono clashes of the whole orchestra, as if this conflict of individual and collective would make for a political metaphor of Georgian identity and oppressive Soviet forces. When we think of the analogous collision of cembalo and orchestral tutti in Kancheli's Fifth symphony, it becomes clear that the symbolical layers of the composer's message are completely irrespective of folkloristic mimicry.

Avet Terteryan as well was proclaiming a national spirit, and for him it even formed the basis of his artistic creed:

"I think there can't be a non-national music, as there can't be an artist not connected to a specific nation. East or West, this or that country – it is life itself, the perception of the world that define your attitude to sound, time, space... [...] It seems to me that an artist is not only spiritually, but also 'physically' bound to his country, his Fatherland. [...] When I'm far from the Armenian mountains, some different mood is arising in me, and there is no need for self-expression. [...] When I'm thinking about the national in music, I'm speaking of its spirituality [*dukhovnosti*]. The spirit of the people, the spirit of the Fatherland – it cannot be substituted by a system of techniques and typical motives [*intonatsionnikh oborotov*]. This is what makes music near to your people, and, as a result, intelligible to all mankind. [...] If a composer is working in a late 20th century idiom, he

has to use the past as a symbol. [...] Folk instruments in a symphonic score – that means, for me, to refer to one of those symbols.” [5]

As we know, Terteryan made broad use of folk instruments in his symphonies, but he didn't use them in their traditional way or as a mere colour; instead, he was seeking symbolical layers beyond picturesque illustration. The use of the liturgical requisite *burvar* in the Fifth symphony, or the placement of a spotlighted tam-tam in the centre of the orchestra in the Sixth symphony, border on the ritualistic. Sometimes his music achieves a priestly attitude, but he gave up quoting or alluding at real liturgical singing which he did in his early symphonies, and instead opened sacred sound spaces of his own. Terteryan was seeking for the spiritual in music, and this spirituality was, for him, strictly connected to his homeland. Armenian folk instruments, mediaeval poetry, monodic structures were not ends in themselves, but symbols for the national spirit, such as the noise of splintering and cracking wood in his last, deeply tragic Eighth symphony, forecasting the catastrophe of the geological and the political earthquakes to come.

In post-Soviet times, it has become much less natural to include Azerbaijan when speaking about Transcaucasian music, once united by the common structure of the Soviet Union despite all cultural differences. Firangiz Ali-Zadeh, for late 20th century Western audiences the most famous composer of Azerbaijan (even if working in Turkey), has been asked as well about the idea of nationality in her music by a Baku newspaper in 2001. She responded:

“Art has no nationality, if a musician transcends the limits of local importance. If we talk about a work of art, then, in principle, it does not matter what nationality the person has who created it. If this work excites me, I do not care about anything else. But for the person who creates this work, it is very important which nation raised him, what culture he carries.” [6]

Contrary to their colleagues Kancheli and Terteryan, Ali-Zadeh gives little importance to the notion of national spirit in anyone's music. But all in all, she doesn't deny the concept completely: instead, she transfers it from the work of art to the creative individual, as if the cultural roots of a composer would not be visible any more in his works of art, or at least be irrelevant for the artistic product. Well, this is hard to believe if we think of her *Habil-Sajahy* for cello and prepared piano (1979) which is imitating the traditional ensemble of kemanche, ud, and tar, both in terms of timbre and in its mugam-like structure.

In all three cases, national identity is no longer transported with direct quotations or appropriations of folkloristic material. In all three cases, symphonic or Western music traditions – adopted directly or in their Russian variant – are the vessel for messages about cultural identity. In all three cases, pluralistic approaches as well as ambiguities of form and meaning are resulting in multiple identities, combining elements of East and West aesthetically and spiritually. This musical richness and diversity is surely one of the main reasons for the success their works did enjoy in late Soviet and early post-Soviet times. They were and still are perceived in Russian musicology as new voices within a unifying system of Soviet culture which could be measured against and compared to other Soviet music. In the West, they were seen much more as a musical symbol of striving for national independency and cultural autonomy, so that the still existing ties with Soviet and Russian music culture may have been partly overlooked. In any case, at the end of the last millennium, both of these two perspectives were reasonable standpoints, because both were relying ultimately on a clear-cut geopolitical situation.

In our days, the situation has become more diffuse. Everyone, especially the younger generation, is now part of a global culture, we are virtually linked to each other and exposed to cultural products of all parts of the world, available within seconds independent from where we live or work. The idea of national schools of composing has altogether gone. But what about the use of 'national markers' in contemporary music? Is it restricted to parodistic attitudes? If we exclude pieces written for official occasions and ceremonies of national interest, are symbols of national culture still reasonable choices for young composers in globalized times? Several years ago, I have interviewed young composers of Georgian and Azerbaijan origin studying in Germany; it turned out that for them, the equilibrium between high culture and popular culture (pop music etc.) was much

more essential than the question of writing in a national or international idiom. One of them, Koka Nikoladze, who is now living in Oslo, has recently developed electronic devices which allow for creating interactively a symphony together with the audience. So he seems to be a cosmopolitan composer with international experiences whose concepts of musical creation lie beyond any idea of nationality in music.

But this newly acquired freedom of joining the global music market has a high price: it means the loss of a distinguishing colour which had attracted some curiosity before, even if on a stereotypical and superficial level. Caucasian contemporary composers are facing the same problem as all present-day composers do: how to attract attention, how to be perceived at all.

Nana Sharikadze has written recently about the process of emancipation from Soviet influence which took place in Georgian music in the second half of the 20th century, and about the adaptation of new European models in search for a new identity which may be gained again by exploiting folk music, be that with quoting melodies, instruments, or by allusion to traditional music [7]. This is what the generation of Kancheli, Terteryan and Ali-Zadeh already has done. I wonder if recurring to elements of traditional culture in art music really can be the right choice. Will these elements be markers of a nation – or maybe rather of specific regional traditions, which are generally older than the boundaries, the concepts and the ideological subtexts of nations and states? In recent times, we witness a growing of political nationalism, of countries returning to 19th century ideologies of statehood and autonomy, directly opposed to the reality of globalization in every aspect of our daily lives. I would hope that young composers do not go in the trap of becoming mouthpieces for national ideologies. I would hope that young composers experience Jacques Derrida's 'différance' not as a threat, but as the inevitable nature of mankind, and as an inexhaustible resource for creativity, for artworks with a thousand meanings in every corner of our planet. As Marina Kavtaradze has pointed out [8], the old dichotomy of East and West is dissolving, we are living in a time of transculturalism, and such cultural openness has existed more than hundred years ago in the intercultural nature of Tbilisi's culture, where different cultures were at least coexisting, if not melting. So why shouldn't we hope to hear our own *multiple* identities in contemporary music – instead of only one?

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