

THE NOTION OF *POLYPHONY* ON THE EXAMPLE OF GEORGIAN FOLK MUSIC

In musicology the notion of *polyphony* belongs to the group of such paradoxical notions about which there is allegedly a well-formulated but still intuitive idea. Quite often in this country mixing up this notion (*mravalkhmianoba* in Georgian, lit. “[singing in] many voices”) with the idea of “polyphony” often acquires a trivial aspect.

In the past, quite often, representatives of the Georgian school of folkloristics, under the influence of the theory of Russian professional music, viewed “polyphony” as the subgroup which means “an ensemble” of the independent melodies. This trend still emerges from time to time (Berhadaskaia, 1984:12; Grigoriev, Muller, 1969:16; Kholopova, 1979:6). Western ethnomusicology identifies “polyphony” with “multipart” singing (at least in the “wide” use of this term).

However late it may be I think it very important to argue the correctness of the attitude, that in regards to the oral tradition ethnomusicologists should avoid identifying the term “polyphony” in a “narrow sense” of this term (implying only the music with “fully independent parts”). This “narrow” use of the term polyphony was usual for classical European musicology, where it was used as the antonym of the term “homophony” (music where the one leading melody is supported by other parts, usually in a chordal progression).

Neither should we oppose the term “polyphony” (as “multi-part singing”) to the notion of “harmony”, as the opposition of the linear development of each voice to the vertical co-ordination of different parts (like the opposition of the dynamics to the statics). In the oral tradition the multipart texture may be extremely static (Kurt, 1931:69).

At such an intersection of “the interest spheres” we should go beyond the pure musical-textual dimension of this phenomenon searching for the essence of polyphony in the latter.

If we take into account that in the oral tradition music is a means and not an aim, we must follow the findings of Boris Asafiev, Izaly Zemtsvevsky and Joseph Jordania and admit that the essence (and not the result) of multipart singing lies in its socializing function. (Asafiev, 1987:85; Zemtsovsky, 2003:43; Jordania; 2005:33)

It is of great importance which parameters should the notion of “multipart singing” possess and what separates it from “homophonic” singing. It is clear that only the musical dimension, separated from other components, will not yield convincing results, as, to some extent, the musical result proper is conditioned by non-musical factors. In such a case on every stage of the creative cycle: **performer – method – process – product** it is possible to observe different manifestations of multipart singing. I shall try to look at the phenomenon of multipart singing from a differentiated viewpoint of non-musical and musical factors, and only after that formulate the most acceptable definition of the notion “polyphony”.

When enumerating the above-mentioned factors I shall resort to the specimens of music of the oral tradition, mainly due to two reasons: 1) We are comparatively well aware of this material; 2) In spite of the fact that Georgian polyphony is characterized by a stylistic unity, it also manifests a great diversity of polyphonic forms. Of course, on the basis of one culture it is impossible to come to global conclusions, but when adjusting my conjectures to other cultures cardinal differences are less expectable.

Of the **non-musical factors** I shall dwell on the **social, psychological and communicative** ones.

Social Factor

This factor refers to the conditions in which polyphony is realized. According to it, it is possible to select the material on the basis of existing regulations, before it starts sounding, i.e. before it is performed. In every social group these regulations have been established historically and have taken the shape of a tradition (Volkova, Djavakhishvili, 1982:180). Such groups are types of moulds in which diverse versions of one and the same material are joined in various group. There are four such groups:

1) A group of dialectal regulations: specimens of Khevsurian multipart singing, Pshavian, Tushian and others. In this group the propensity for polyphony entirely depends on the historical factor.

2) A group of the social status regulations: peasant (rural) multipart specimens, urban (traditionally, further differentiation within this group was impossible); military, ecclesiastic, of professional oral tradition and others. This group has some pre-conditions for collective music-making and accordingly for multipart singing.

3) A group of genre regulations: specimens of ritual multipart singing, labour, ecclesiastic, lyrical, drinking and other songs. Here the stylistic features, which also determine the type of polyphony, are strongly pronounced.

4) A group of gender-age regulations: specimens of men's multipart singing, of women, children, men and women, children and women and so on. In most cases these regulations present a vivid picture of the development of polyphony in the Georgian musical tradition.

Psychological Factor

I should like to associate this factor with the readiness of the performer for collective music-making and his/her inclination towards multipart singing. According to the Georgian tradition in this case tradition plays the most important role. This tradition may have a physiological basis as well, if we take into account Jordania's hypothesis of the genetic propensity of various human populations for polyphony and monophony.

But in the given case the psychological factor most likely views the global model of the performer from the following viewpoint: how great is her/his desire to accept one common melodic model (in unison), or, on the contrary, to bring his own original model in accordance with his/her partner (Zemtsovsky, 1975:21). In both cases the performer fully comprehends that he/she is a member of a single creative body and it is his/her vocation to achieve a harmonious result when music-making, which in general is an obligatory factor in collective music-making.

In this connection a special interest attaches to the phenomenon of a collective bass part, traditional for Georgian polyphony. Each performer of the collective bass part complies with both creative methods mentioned above: he/she accepts the common model (quite often very highly developed melodiously) combining the part of a different voice (of the soloist) with it. It is common knowledge that in Georgia a very weak tradition of unison performance exists. Even such an imperative institution as the Orthodox Church, although having gained power in Georgia, failed to retain the initial canonical manner of unison singing. All the above gives us grounds to infer that unison singing, physiologically present in every person's potential, is overwhelmed by the rule of polyphonic thinking in the creative potential of Georgians, and this is unlikely to depend on tradition only.

Communicative Factor

This factor is connected with the norms of the communication of the performers. In my opinion there are two stages of such communication: the "tolerating" co-ordination and the target-oriented (deliberate) co-ordination. By the first I mean such a concordance of two persons or two groups of performers, in which each of them has his/her creative freedom, though their music-making takes place within the limits of a common ritual. In this case it will be right to speak about the "multiplane" (or "multilevel") performance. The common collective music-making is represented only in a nominal aspect. In the Georgian tradition a specimen of such a performance is the Svan mourning ritual, when women wail against the background of the ritual dirge performed by men.

As for target-oriented co-ordination the performers strive to fulfil a common musical creative musical task. Here we can speak about a real collective music-making.

In multipart singing the communicative factor also determines the number of the voices. As an example I will refer to the three-part structure, which is characteristic of the Georgian tradition; this is corroborated by the three-part singing tradition, which has become canonical in Georgian traditional chanting. Also traditional is the phenomenon of two soloists and a collective bass in Georgian three-part singing. Such a distribution divides the performers according to their musical abilities into two groups, thus guaranteeing that not only the distinguished singers, but anyone willing to sing could participate in the musical activity (joining in a bass part).

Of the musical factors I should underline the technological, functional and procedural factors.

Technological Factor

This factor means the method of sound production during multipart singing. Here it is the musical instrument that prompts the conditions. Namely, the technique of sound formation may be expressed in the instrumental or vocal performance. But it should also be kept in mind that performing without a musical instrument does not necessarily mean vocal performance alone. There are a number of activities expressing the rhythm – clapping, feet stomping, non-musical sounds which are not considered within vocal performances, but quite often (and in my opinion quite wrongly) are

discussed within the limits of instrumental performance. There is a difference of kind between producing sounds by the human body and using a musical instrument for this purpose. The latter is connected not only with the wish to achieve original sounding, but with the striving for an abstract musical creation, not associated with everyday life. It must have been the use of a musical instrument that caused the greatest “mutation” in the development of man’s musical thinking.

It follows therefore that a strict line should be drawn between the sounds produced by man without a musical instrument and those accompanied by it – for instance between clapping hands and striking two stones against each other. Accordingly, in general, musical art may be divided not into vocal and instrumental but into **bodily** and **instrumental**. It would be even more correct to separate the forms of **vocal**, **bodily** and **instrumental** performance. Particular mention should be made of the cases when man imitates not only the sounds of some instruments but non-vocal sounds as well (Asafiev, 1987:160); this is a sort of role-performing (to some degree this phenomenon should not be excluded when playing musical instruments either). And if we look at the music-making process from the viewpoint of the challenge facing the performer (and this must be so from the point of view of ethnomusicology), such a performance exceeds the boundaries of the vocal performance. I shall only add that in Georgian tradition such cases fail to reach the level of an established tradition. The only song to come to mind is *Shavi Shashvi* (“Black Thrush”), where the soloist (in some versions two soloists) imitate a dog’s barking. But apart from the imitation, mention should be made of the use of original, specific methods of producing various sounds by folk singers, which in the Georgian tradition is characteristic of exceptionally good performers – soloists. These methods are: producing the highest possible, tessitural sound; producing the sound by means of the so-called “grace note”, using *krimanchuli*, a yodel-type falsetto; ornamenting the basic sound with a melismatic “twist”. It should be noted that the first three features characterize the most “polyphonic” province of Georgia – Guria. Melisma is most popular in Kakheti, the province of a highly developed drone polyphonic culture.

Functional Factor

This factor lays emphasis on the functional position of the voices of those participating in collective music-making. In this process the functions of the voices are characterized by two main dimensions: a) striving for the individualization or unification of the voices; and b) orientation towards equality of voices, or their mutual subordination. Individualization of voices is the vector oriented from a collective monophony to polyphony (Aslanishvili; 1954:73; Skrebkova-Filatova, 1985:254). According to this vector of several possible directions of polyphony formation the following two can be emphasized: unison – heterophony – free voice-leading and unison – parallelism – synchronising-free voice leading. Here special importance is attached to sharing one melodic model by different voices, or creating a new model from it.

The most interesting is the transitional stage leading from unison into heterophony, also from unison into parallel voice leading, as a transitional stage from collective

monophony to collective polyphony. Here there is a rudiment of individual development of separate voices, which, in the first case works out a new model of horizontal sound combinations, offering a new model of vertical sound co-ordinations on the other hand.

Generally, from the functional viewpoint, the border between collective monophony and polyphony is rather relative. If with the help of a kind of musical “prism” we succeed in dividing these two phenomena into a spectrum of musical components, we will see that polyphony may differ from monophony only by the interval position of voices (on the example of parallel voice leading).

For its part collective unison acquires a trait of collective polyphony if the timbre component is taken into account. Namely, performing one and the same melody in different timbres can be assigned to monophony singing, though a fact of different-timbre voice functions is strongly pronounced. This is a kind of “multi-timbre” unison. An example of such a “multi-timbre” phenomenon on the one hand is octave performance by men, and on the other hand performance by women or children. I consider this performing method belongs to unison singing as well (Kholopov, 1988:21). Specimens of such performing can be found in Laz singing, which is under a strong Turkish influence.

The “unsuccessful”, “frustrated” performing unison by different voices has some relation with the voice-individualizing vector (Jordania, 1989:279-280). Of course this accidental form of performance cannot be traditional either for the Georgian or for folk singing in general. But recitation against the background of singing or instrumental music can be perceived as a nominal manifestation of part-singing; rarely, cases of such performances occur in the Georgian tradition as well.

A few words should be said about the term “polyphonic melody” (kholopiva, 1979:6). If melody is considered a regulated system of linear connections of sounds, given the polyphonic texture it would be more correct to speak about “a multilayer melody”. It will mean the unity of melodious fragments as a single layer present on different levels, or in different voices. In the Georgian tradition such a texture occurs in the polyphony of a free-contrasting form.

It should be mentioned that in some separate cases it is possible for the melodious combinations present in different voices of the polyphonic texture to be projected in a single dimension; it is best revealed when an individual performer is trying to sing a polyphonic song (Nadel, 1933:8) (I call this form “meant, implied polyphony”). I think that such a projection, on some assumptions, can be called “a polyphonic melody”; the same term could be applied to the polyphonic structure of a parallel type, but never to the melody in a homophonic texture, or to one, “leading” voice, dominating over “the background” voices.

As for the functional aspect of the equality of voices the most important is the right of a separate voice to take up the initiative of leading the musical idea, which makes it “a leading voice” (Rovenko, 1976:142). When all the voices sound simultaneously, such an emphasis on the initiative is a sort of test of “being homophonic”. Such a homophonic texture must have two indispensable components: the leader and the background. In most cases it is the leading voice of the melody that is the leader (most often of the higher register), the background, in the Georgian reality, is the

collective drone or the continuous basso ostinato.

Apart from the homophonic structure, the leader voice is strongly pronounced during the responsorium of “the coryphaeus-choir” type. Such a manner is called “the question-answer” form (Jordania, 2005:35), though, in my opinion, “call and response” would be more suitable.

An undulating distribution of such an initiative occurs quite frequently. During “the implied polyphony”, mentioned above, when a person tries to project the polyphonic structure in one voice, he/she chooses those “undulating” fragments, which are expressed at the initiative of the leader of the musical idea.

It should be noted that vocal, instrumental and bodily performances are phenomena belonging to different strata, both technologically and functionally. It should be expedient to apply the notion “a musical stratum” to these three components. The vocal or instrumental polyphonic structure can be considered one polyphonic layer; the simultaneous music-making of the vocal and the instrument could be viewed as multilayered (Bershadskaia, 1984:25; Kholopova, 1979:7). In this case, whether it is polyphonic or not, both the vocal and the instrumental parts are perceived as a layer.

The corporal or kinetic accompaniments of the musical process (clapping, stamping feet, non-musical exclamations) should also be considered a separate layer, as they make an original contribution to the musical content; though such activities cannot be considered to be a separate voice of the polyphonic structure. The voice may be a subgroup of the layer, though for its part the layer cannot be a voice.

Procedural Factor

By the procedural factor of traditional polyphony I mean the temporal co-ordinate of polyphonic music-making, or the temporal dimension in which the fact of polyphony, or any of its forms must be attested according to the co-ordination of the projected voices.

The co-ordination projected in time means the simultaneous or alternating consonance of two functionally independent voices. It is obvious that simultaneous consonance is generally considered to be a polyphonic structure. But the approach to alternating performance is not so unanimous; though, in this case too, there clearly are two independent voices.

Accordingly, one sounding is called “real polyphony”, whereas alternating sounding is referred to as “nominal polyphony”. These two phenomena in a way are “kinetic” and “potential” forms of polyphony. In the Georgian tradition nominal polyphony is mainly represented as an antiphone of the ostinato-type “call and response” singing.

The notion of nominal polyphony should not be applied to such phenomena when two performers communicate not only for the sake of partnership, but because of the principle of regulated or accidental alternation. For instance the alternating competition of two singers is quite far from polyphony, in this case each singer performs a fragment of a complete musical idea. On the contrary, in the performance of the type of “call and response” singing, the striving of different performers for partnership in achieving the creative musical target is obvious.

As can be seen the passage with a complete musical idea is the time co-ordinate of

establishing the nominal polyphony – the minimum of functional polyphony. It is this part of the process, and not the whole traditional musical activity, as a separate specimen, that must be the procedural criterion for establishing both the fact of polyphony and its various forms as well.

But in traditional music alongside the self-sufficient, complete activities there are cases of insufficient, incomplete development, such as ostinato polyphony. If this is the case, the repetition of the ostinato formula three or four times must be considered an equivalent of the passage with a complete musical idea; during such a repetition the creative method of the ostinato development will be completely revealed.

The procedural factor also includes the performance of one common creative model in different voices and at different times, which on the level of fragments is an imitation, but when repeated completely, is a canon. As opposed to other cultures, in the Georgian tradition such a use of the common model, when it is shifted in time, is revealed only in the fragmentary cases of imitation (Nadel, 1933:40).

It is interesting to note that in the Georgian polyphonic tradition the folk terms denoting the voices and the manner of performing can be grouped according to the above-mentioned factors of polyphony, which refer to the diversity of the performer's attitude.

1. According to the position (communicative factor); the first, the second, the top, the lower, the middle voices; *tsvrili* ("thin"), *krini* ("falsetto"), *maghali bani* ("high bass").

2. According to the sound engendering mechanism (technological factor): *krimanchuli* (a sort of yodelling), *gamqivani* (falsetto technique), *ghighini* ("humming", recitation), *dvrini* (low bass), *bokhi* (low-pitched, deep bass).

3. According to the function (functional factor): *mtkveli* (leader), *modzakhili* (middle voice), *bani* (bass), *shemkhmobari*, *shelaparakeba*, *chartuli*.

4. According to the distribution in time (procedural factor): *pirveli* (first), *meore* (second), *damsqebi* (beginner), *modzakhili* ("who follows", the second voice), *shemgherneba* ("who follows in singing"), *amqoli* ("who follows").

Proceeding from the above and on the basis of the example of Georgian tradition, to the main conditions of the fact of polyphony belong:

1. The performers' target-oriented initiative to co-music-making.
2. At the minimum the fact of two functionally independent voices.
3. The limits of a musically complete phrase.
4. Only vocal or instrumental performance (in the case of using the notion "multilayered").

Taking into account all the above conditions I will suggest my version of the definition of traditional polyphony.

Polyphony is a kind of target-oriented vocal or instrumental co-music-making, in which at the minimum two functionally independent voices create a structure of a complete musical idea.

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