

## THE STARTING VOICE IN GEORGIAN POLYPHONY

Georgian traditional music begins with either the playing of an instrument or an introduction performed by one of the singers. Since “a good beginning makes a good ending” and the beginning section of the song is granted to one singer, the latter never spares his or her talent and imagination to present the song and his or her aptitude for singing at their best. In the introduction to the song, before all three voices begin sounding we already know which song is to be performed. Therefore the introduction is a sort of symbol of the Georgian song, its “visitingcard”.

At the same time in notated collections and sound-recordings there are many cases when Georgian songs are begun by all the singers together, which must be explained by performers altering the song when taking it to a stage – in order to lend it a more “choral”, “civilized” character, and also by getting rid of the instrumental accompaniment.

Some exceptions to the general rule may also occur. In the collections there are songs which have a special “congratulating” function by starting the singing all together, though it cannot be said for sure whether they were performed according to the notated version that survived or not.

The beginning of separate Georgian songs is quite stable, though there may be a few exceptions: different variants of one and the same song are begun by one and the same voice, but as for the tune itself, there is a greater difference. There are also separate cases where the beginning is changeable. Generally, most extant Georgian songs have already acquired a strong individual character, which is demonstrated by working out the general compositional rules both for the leading singer’s part and the whole structure of the specimen.

In a Georgian song the voice that starts the song is the leader, the main voice, and the basic criterion is the recitation of the verbal text. It is widely known that for Georgian traditional singers the song is “recited”, “told” (“itkmeba”), hence the basic voice, who in most cases is the directing singer as well, and is called “mtkmeli” (one who says, recites). If the reciting voice joins in later, it is still referred to as the leading voice, directing singer as well, for it is he/she who “begins the recital” of the song. According to Mindia Jordania the “leader” means not only the start of the song but also leading it, it is the basic voice; he is still the leader, even if the *modzakhili* (lit. “the voice that follows”), the top voice, begins the song” (p. 123). The *modzakhili* of the *mtkmeli*, or the responding voice quite often begins the song just to provide the tone.

In Georgian musical tradition all three parts can play the function of leader and start a song. I will present them in order of reducing frequency: 1) the middle voice (in the majority of songs), 2) the upper voice (rarely), 3) the bass (very rarely). The vocal-instrumental performance is always begun by the instrument. Let us characterize all three directing voices briefly.

The middle voice, occurring in the three-part songs at present, successfully assumes the functions and names of *mtkmeli* (one, who recites), *damsqebi* (beginner), *pirveli khma* (top voice), *melekse* (reciting the lyrics). Earlier, with two-part songs it was this voice that directed, backed by the drone, the accompanying, responding voice.

Undoubtedly, the role of the leading voice is greater when the traditional regulations are stricter. A good example of this is Svan songs, where in most cases the middle voice begins the song, and the melodic lines

of these songs are usually highly formulaic. Generally, the more archaic the musical specimen, the more prominent the role of the leading, starting, directing voice – mtkmeli. In three-part songs it is the middle voice, in two-part ones the upper voice.

Beginning a song with the upper voice might be caused: a) by a later origin of the song, sometimes representing the urban style, where the melodic initiative is shifted to the upper voice, resulting in the functional leveling of the voices; b) by the equal distribution of the functional initiative between the two upper solo voices, which is more frequent in more advanced polyphonic textures; c) by the priority of the upper voice in the songs influenced by the Christian chanting tradition; d) by choosing the right pitch for the song and accordingly the range of the song, which is most important for the top part.

Beginning the song with the bass-part is caused by the “emancipation” of the bass part (Jordania, 1989: 142), which is most often observed in the Gurian “trio”-type songs. Besides, it is the bass part that provides the crucial harmony to the leading melody. But when the beginning of the upper voice is joined by the upper voice before the bass part, in most cases we deal with the “thickening” of the initial tune (e.g. with parallel movement) and not with the introduction of the alternate melodic material.

The leading singer may formulate the prelude to the song as a phrase with a completed structure, which, to some extent, expresses the compositional “ripeness” of the specimen: the more so if sometimes the directing singer alone and with other voices as well, creates such an original introducing phrase, which is never repeated in the song. Besides, the leader’s aiming at creating an original introduction, together with the tradition stemming from the early responsorium (I shall dwell on it later), is based on the dialectical interrelation between “the individual” and “collective” categories. It may be said that the introduction, as a rule, provides performers with a unique chance to reveal their individuality, sometimes even more than the ostinato or the drone background.

I have singled out various aspects of the **structural system** of the introductory phrase:

a) **starting with complete or incomplete phrases.** The introductory melody either directly grows into the joint sounding (ex. 1, 2) or includes a complete musical idea (ex. 3).

b) **The leader with one or more phrases.** The short prelude may be expressed either by the first word (words) of the text or nonsense syllables. Interestingly, it is the nonsense syllables that start most Gurian songs, and this emphasizes their tendency to improvisation (very often in a Gurian song the function of a leader is shared by a non-musical verbal *shedzakheba* [exclamation]).

If the introductory part of the leader consists of more than one phrase, it forms its material from three independent elements: 1) providing a tone; 2) presenting the verbal text mainly in a recitative manner; 3) indicating the melody – basically by means of nonsense syllables. Nonsense syllables may occur both before the text (ex. 4) or after the text (ex. 5).

c) **The leader, who does not change the structure throughout the whole song and the leader, who replaces the first phrase of the each reiterated stanza.** The replacing leader’s function is more “utilitarian” than that of the “reiterating” leader, who is more important functionally.

According to the **melodic structure** I have singled out the following characteristic aspects of the first singer’s part:

a) **The melody borrowed from the song per se.** The part of the first singer may be constructed: 1) on the initial tune of the reiterated stanza; 2) a characteristic phrase taken from the inner structure of the song (maybe from the part of the voice different from the first singer); 3) the phrase taken from the cadence or refrain;

b) **Original beginning.** There can be several versions of the independent beginning: 1) use of a single

tone (exclamation), quite often – by means of a short phrase around a key musical note (ex. 4). Such phrases occur in all three parts); 2) mainly based on the steps of the fourth-fifth range of the main mode; very often it is represented in the form of ascending and descending, or vice versa – descending and ascending (ex. 5). One of the typical phrases for the introduction is the ascending tetrachord phrase, and it must be set apart. It is very typical both of West Georgian Maqruli (Best Men's song), also some table, labour songs and a few other genres (ex. 6). Here great importance is attached to the intonation of the fourth complemented in an ascending manner; in my opinion, by its meaning it is related to the beginning on the fourth from the basic tone, or a jump to the fourth. Sometimes the fourth and fifth intonations are combined in one song, sometimes in two variants of one song. It should be noted that in the introduction the melody complementing the fourth by a descending movement is quite frequent. The fourth intonation of the introduction very often results in the beginning of the song by fourth-fifth or fourth-sixth chords; 3) Some lead singers (especially in the *Naduri* songs) indicate two basic, neighbouring, alternating tones (ex. 7); 4) The prelude built on a completely original melody, which is rather rare (ex. 8).

d) **Modulated Phrase.** The directing singer's part is very interesting. It is not satisfied only with "indicating" the mode at the beginning and continues sounding, offering the new, modulated step for the basic tone (ex. 9). This motion expresses the modulative movement, given in the song per se, in the prelude.

e) **The inner introduction** deserves a special note, it 1) fully supersedes the directing singer; 2) alternates with the first directing singer and as a matter of fact, becomes "an alternative" leader (ex. 9).

I will graphically present some characteristic melodies of the leader (ex. 10).

We should also dwell on similar intonations attested in the specimens of various provinces, which once more refer to their archaic provenance.

Let us look at the issue of the dependence of the directing singer's part on the polyphony type.

a) **Drone polyphony.** In most cases the role of the beginning is taken by the middle voice, which was earlier the only leading solo part (at the stage of two-part polyphony). Besides, here the introductory phrases are also distinguished by their rather lengthy melodies.

b) **Ostinato polyphony.** Even now in the responsorium the middle voice is the leading singer, which begins the song, in two-part songs it is the top voice.

In the refrain-based ostinato, built on the principle of the *call* and *response*, the beginner is always the voice which is performed solo. In continual ostinato, where the initiative always belongs to the bass part, sometimes the bass singer can also perform the function of the beginner.

c) **Parallel polyphony.** Here the beginner is mainly the upper voice, but it never remains alone for a long time, as it shares the melodic initiative with other voices as well.

d) **Polyphony of the free counterpoint.** Here it is difficult to determine clear-cut regulations, as almost all the voices are developed equally. Apart from that it is this type of polyphony that mainly allows the beginning of songs by the bass, particularly in "the trio" songs, where the bass is performed by an individual singer. It is noteworthy that in most cases the melodic phrase of the leader of Gurian songs is relatively short, which can also be accounted for by the mostly shared prominence of all voices.

e) **Synchronous polyphony.** Such a "chord-based-type" of polyphony is possibly the most characteristic for Georgian song, therefore it is here that the multifarious character of the starting voice is expressed most prominently. In songs of a synchronous structure the priority of any voice, as that of the leader, mostly depends on the dialect existing where the song comes from, and to a lesser extent depends on the polyphonic type per se. For instance Svan songs, being more archaic, always start with the middle, *leader* voice (in Svan language,

*mazogh*). So do Mokhebian, Mtiuluri songs. In Megrelian songs from western Georgia, distinguished by their tendency to melodic development, in most cases the top voice starts the song. The top part also often starts songs in specimens of urban and church-singing songs.

f) **Synthetic polyphony**, the forms comprising the same heterogeneous structure i.e. specific voices less strongly influence the choice of various norms of the beginning of the song. Though it should be noted that such specific parts as *krimanchuli* (a type of yodeling) and *shemkhmobari* traditionally never begin the song.

If we look at the leader of the song from the aspect of the structural development, in the first place we must deal with the initial form of Georgian polyphony – the responsive acknowledgement (Garaqanidze, 1997: 32). The role of the directing singer, as that of the leader in “the call-and-response” was noticed as early as by Xenophon (5<sup>th</sup> century BC). This mechanism is reflected in the dialogue between the leader (*momsodebeli-provder, coryphaeus*) and the bass part (*mopasukhe-one, who responds, chorus*). Eventually this interrelation took shape as the adjustment of the drone to the leader on the one hand (in Kakheti), and in the response of the ostinato short phrases – on the other (*Naduri* songs). After the choir part acquired melodic expressiveness and a formulaic character, it also took upon itself the function of the leading initiative. In some cases this role allowed the bass part to begin the song. In this respect West Georgian, mainly Gurian part *gadadzakhili* (the response, connecting part), which is mostly the refrain between the song phrases, is expressed by choral unison and sometimes is this part that begins the song (ex. 11).

The *responder's* relationship with the leader is expressed in a different manner as well. In the course of time, the choir part turned into a cadential structure, which, on its part, sometimes became the basis of the refrain.

Generally, the more archaic the genre is, the more strictly the regulation of the starting part is expressed (e.g., cult or labour songs). As for the dialectal parameters, such a distinction is less noticeable.

The instrumental beginning of traditional Georgian instrumental and vocal-instrumental specimens do not demonstrate such imagination as the directing singer does. Unlike the singing specimen the instrumental prelude does not exactly indicate which song we are supposed to hear. Generally, according to its content the instrumental beginning may be:

a) **Only providing the tone.** Here the instrument provides mostly a background to vocal parts;

b) **Having the original melodic intonation.** It is possible for this phrase to remain the only instrumental tune throughout the song, which, if the rhythm is regular (in Khevsureti the *panduri* tune often occurs without the latter), acquires the function of the ostinato, though that of the backing part. In other cases the original instrumental phrase manifests itself only in the solo passage. This time the function of the instrument is more active, a sort of *Gadadsakhili (response)*, comes to the foreground (ex. 12).

c) **The phrase built on the melodic motif of the song.** Quite often the instrumental prelude to the song “imitates” a whole singing sentence.

The traditional Georgian ecclesiastical chant, which is sometimes present in the people's everyday life as well, usually begins with the upper voice, as it is the voice which is considered to be canonical, leading and stable. Therefore in western Georgia it is often called *mtkmeli (narrator)*, (which, as we remember, is analogous to the *leader*), the middle voice is *mod-akhili*, as by its etymology it is a following voice, and it must have come to be used to denote the middle voice of the chant from popular practice.

Finally, we can conclude that the start of a song is a very important moment, expressed in the variety of the starting phrase. Due to the high level of individualization, today it is difficult to “squeeze” all the existing beginning phrases into common general stylistic norms. The voice that starts and leads the song is one of the

creators of the originality of the Georgian song and general singing style. Together with a cadential structure, it the starting voice that reflects the “magic formulae” of the *coryphaeus*'s. We may conclude that research of the starting melodic phrases of the songs might give us a worthy tool in researching the earlier stages of the development of the Georgian singing style, and the search for the origins of different songs and the relationship between the songs.

#### Notated Collections

Akhobadze, Vladimer. (1957). *Kartuli (svanuri) khalkhuri simgherebi* [Georgian (Svan) Folk Songs]. Tbilisi: Teknika da shroma (in Georgian)

Chokhonelidze, Evsevi (compiler). (2003). *Georgian Folk Music. Samegrelo. Vol. I*. Tbilisi: The International Centre for Georgian Folk Song. The International Reserach Centre for Traditional Polyphony of Tbilisi State Conservatoire

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Chokhonelidze, Evsevi, Valishvili, Nana. (2008). *Maro tarkhnishvili. 50 kartl-kakhuri khalkhuri simghera* (). Georgian State Folklore Centre. Ministry of Culture and Monuments Protection of Georgia. Tbilisi

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Garaqanidze, Edisher. (2004). *99 Georgian Songs. A Collection of Traditional Folk, Church and Urban Songs from Georgia*. Centre for Performance Research. Wales. UK: Black Mountain Press

Moistrapishvili, Nato (compiler). (2005). *Georgian Folk Music. From avksenti Megrelidze'a Archive*. The International Centre for Georgian Folk Song. Tbilisi: Sakartvelos Matsne

Veshapidze, Levan. (2006). *Guruli khalkhuri simgherebi (Gurian Folk Songs)*. Tbilisi (in Georgian)

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მაგალითი 1. გრძელი კახური შრავალკამიერი (თარხნიშვილი, 2008: 39)  
 Example 1. Grdzeli Kakhuri Mravaljamierti (Tarkhnishvili, 2008: 39)

$\downarrow = 76$

შრავალკამიერი  
 shra-val-kami-eri

მაგალითი 2. ალილო (ერკომაიშვილი, 2005: 86)  
 Example 2. Alilo (Erkomaishvili, 2005: 86)

$\downarrow = 76$

ალილო  
 a-li-lo

მაგალითი 3. კალის ხელხევაი (ერკომაიშვილი, 2005: 100)  
 Example 3. Kalos Khelkhvavi (Erkomaishvili, 2005: 100)

*ad libitum*  $\downarrow = 60$

კალის ხელხევაი  
 ka-lis khel-khvavi

მაგალითი 4. დალიე (გარაყანიძე, 2004: 16)  
 Example 4. Dalie (Garaqanidze, 2004: 16)

**Allegro, Moderato**

*I solo* *I coro*

დალიე, დალიე გ'ვი-ნო  
 da-li-e, da-li-e g'vi-no

მაგალითი 5. მიკორს ფაცხა (ჭოხონელიძე, 2003: 170)

Example 5. *Miqors Patskha* (Chokhonelidze, 2003: 170)

Moderato ♩ = 96  
trio

ჩა - კორსა ფა - ცხა მარ - გა - ღლი - ში და,  
mi - kors pa - cxa mar - ga - li - shi da,

ა - - - რა - ღლი - ღლი, მარ - გა - ღლი - ში,  
a - - - ra - la - li, mar - ga - li - shi,

დი - ღლი თ - დი - ღლი ვო - დი - ღლი, ჩა - ჩა, ჩა - ჩა - ჩა - თ, დე - ღლი თ რე - რი  
di - la o - di - la vo - di - la, na - ni, na - ni - na - o, de - li - o re - ri

ვო - დი - ღლი - უ, ჩა - ჩა, ჩა - ჩა - ჩა თ,  
vo - di - la - u, na - ni, na - ni - na - o,

ვო - დი - ღლი, ჩა - ჩა - ჩა თ,  
vo - di - la, na - ni - na o,

მაგალითი 6. სუპრის ხელხვავე (ერკომაიშვილი, 2005: 395)

Example 6. *Supris Khelkhvavi* (Erkomaishvili, 2005: 395)

♩ = 66

თ - დი ღლი დე - ღლი და ჩა - ჩა - ჩა - ვო ჩა - ჩა - ჩა  
o - di ho ho ho li - - - da de - - - lo

თ - ჰო ჰო - ჰო თ - - - ღლი  
o - ho ho - ho t - - - li

მაგალითი 7. გურბანულაი (მოისწრაფიშვილი, 2005: 33)

Example 7. Gurantulai (Moistrapishvili, 2005: 33)

I დაბი, II დაბი (მონაცვლეობით)  
I group, II group (alternately)

გუ - ი და ვო ჰო ჰო  
vo - i da vo ho ho

ჰე - ი და  
he - i da

ი - და ვო - ი ა - ბა დე - ლა  
i - da vo - i a - ba de - la

ჰე  
he

ჰე  
he

გუ ო - დე - ლი ვო დი - ლი ვო ჰო  
vo o - de - li vo di - lo vo ho

ჰე - რი - ო ჰე - რი - ო  
he - ri - o he - ri - o

დე - ლი ო - დე - ლი - ა - ლა - ო  
de - li o - de - li - a - la - o

მაგალითი 8. ხბოის ლექსი (მოისწრაფიშვილი, 2005: 163)

Example 8. Khbois leksi (Moistrapishvili, 2005: 163)

პა - რა - სკვი სიხ - მს - რე ვსა - სკ,  
pa - ra - skvi six - ms - re vsa - sk,

ლო - რე და ჩა - რი რა - მს  
lo - re da cha - ri ra - ms

ვი - თამ დამ - შე - ო - და ხრო - ლ,  
vi - tam dam - she - o - da xro - l,

ურ - შა - ბათ გო - ლო გა - თნი - გო,  
ur - sha - bat go - lo ga - tni - go,



**მაგალითი 9.** თამარ ქალო (ჭოხონელიძე, ვალიშვილი, 2008: 73)

**Example 9.** Tamar Kalo (Chokhonielidze, Valishvili, 2008: 73)

თ - მარ ქა - ლო ქე - ვის თე - - - - - ი - - - - - დო  
 Ta - mar ka - lo ke - vis te - - - - - i - - - - - do  
 ა - რი - ლო ა - რი - ლო - - - - - დო  
 a - ri - lo a - ri - lo - - - - - do

**მაგალითი 10.** მელოდირი ფორმულები – დალაგებულია გავრცელების სიხშირის მიხედვით. რომაული ციფრებით აღნიშნულია ხმის სიმაღლე. ქვემოთ აღნიშნულია პირველი ორი ბეტრის ალტერნატიული რიტმული ფიგურა

**Example 10.** Melodic formulas are grouped according to distribution frequency. Roman numerals denote pitch. Alternative rhythmic figure of the first two sounds is indicated below

მაგალითი 11. მე რუსხველი (ჭოხონელიძე, 2006: 100)  
Example 11. *Me Rustveli* (Chokhoniidze, 2006: 100)

The musical score for 'Me Rustveli' is presented in two systems. The first system features a vocal line with lyrics in Georgian and English: 'მე ვან-დი-ლა ვან-დი-ლა' / 'I van-di-la van-di-la'. The second system continues the vocal line with lyrics: 'ვან-დი-ლა ვან-დი-ლა ვან-დი-ლა' / 'van-di-la van-di-la van-di-la'. The score includes piano accompaniment for the right and left hands, and a choir part with the lyrics 'მე ვან-დი-ლა ვან-დი-ლა' / 'I van-di-la van-di-la'.

მაგალითი 12. სავერელი მკავს და მიკვარს (ერკომაიშვილი, 2005: 198)  
Example 12. *Saqvareli Mkavs da Mikvarts* (Erkomaishvili, 2005: 198)

The musical score for 'Saqvareli Mkavs da Mikvarts' begins with a scale exercise labeled 'Scale 1' and a tempo marking of '♩ = 76'. The main score is in 4/4 time and includes a vocal line with lyrics in Georgian and English: 'მარ-ყო ვარ-ვარ მო-ვეე-ნი-ლი' / 'mar-jo var-var mo-vee-ni-li' and 'მუ-ა ვინ-ცა ამ-ბავს მკ-ბავს' / 'mu-a vin-tsa am-bavs mk-bavs'. The score features piano accompaniment for the right and left hands, and a choir part.