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The Phenomenon of “Georgian Polyphony” in Axiological Aspect of Ethnic Music

Abstract: Georgian traditional music is the focus of foreign musicologists’ and amateur musicians’ clear interest. Which of its peculiarities attract such interest? Developed musical language or exotic character? This issue will lead us to the discussion what priorities we choose and what our mood is when listening to ethnic music. It is interesting to know what patterns of “ethnic sound ideal” developed by musical expressions indicate distinctive phenomenon in musical relativism.

In this regard “Georgian polyphony”, as the stylistic phenomenon of Georgian traditional music is distinguished as a clear three-part structure, diverse composition principles and highly organized forms of vocal polyphony, as well as ambivalent stylistic look of the song-chant musical language.

In relation to Georgian song-chant we often hear the notion “folk genius”, but it is necessary to clarify the share of personal-professional and collective-folk skills in this stylistically diverse phenomenon. In the formation of Georgian musical style more attention should be paid to the norms of ethnic and religious musical stylistic influences. From this standpoint the role of religious chant is a significant factor in the increase the size of folk song melody.

In the paper significant place is given to the discussion of the basic concepts of Georgian traditional music in semiotic sense – from the angle of meaning, content and function; and to the assessment of the evaluations of this phenomenon by Georgian and Western figures. Finally discussed is the possibility to search the place of

Georgian music on the multidimensional value scale of general ethnic music.

Keywords: Georgian Polyphony, Georgian Traditional Music, Three-part Structure, Composition Principles, Evaluation

In Georgia all agree that folk polyphony is the most original, unique phenomenon among the country's contributions to the world culture. It is interesting that from this standpoint Georgian sacred chant has been neglected. However, this layer is no less important for musicians and together with folk song it constitutes the same array – Georgian traditional music. Our goal is to discuss this phenomenon in axiological aspect – which artistic and social factors create such uniqueness.

Although axiological view as the method for estimating the values regards the subject of review from philosophical standpoint and does not promise exact results of research, the principle of the review itself requires scientific perspective – one of the directions of the structural-functional analysis, which is our primary interest. One of the theories of axiology, in the aspect of sociologism, in ethnic culture the value is measured from emic and etic standpoints. In this case, the latter approach is the focus of our interest.

In regard to this topic, we also consider the viewpoint of Alexius Meinong (*Über Annahmen* 45), John Dewey's (*Democracy and Education. Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* 235) and Tugarinov's (*On the Values of Life and Culture* 15) naturalist psychologism, in the sense that the functional and correspondingly, artistic values of ethnic music are formed according to the historically established needs of people.

Also close to us is the idea of axiological pluralism, characteristic of cultural-historical relativism (Wilhelm Dilthey) (*Introduction of the Science of the Spirit* 329), in compliance with which individual ethnic musical traditions, as well as their artistic values should be estimated in equal conditions of different components (melody, rhythm, timbre, harmony, etc.) and with the consideration of a large share of emic views (from a player's position in culture). In our opinion, this is the most adequate and effective principle for the perception of ethnic music.

When talking about the phenomenon of Georgian polyphony, we regard it not as the object of Husserl's phenomenological method (*Ideas for pure phenomenology and phenomenological philosophy* 9), but rather the culturological significance of the phenomenon, where most important is the

feature of *unicum, sui generis* or masterpiece. However, it should be noted that the attitude to this “phenomenon”, as to a “sacred subject” is quite productive, especially when it comes to adjusting the semiotic apparatus to it, but this time we are not going to enter into the depths of these philosophical categories.

What factors determine exaggerated or distorted arguments of the axiological status of traditional music when presenting the culture of separate ethnicities? On the one hand, music is an international language and, like visual art, is perceived more adequately by different observers. At the same time, it has a time-sized and accordingly more stable, impressive effect; On the other hand, unlike academic and modern popular music, and similar to ethnic tradition, ethnic music is clearly specific, which sharply reduces the segment of the fascinated.

When we talk about the phenomenon and the unique, it is obvious that these concepts should always be linked to personal initial. So why do we use these concepts in relation to collective creativity?

Of course, personal factor, manifested in a sort of “mutations”, is also characteristic of collective creativity. In this regard, clear cases of “reproductive theory” in Georgia’s singing practice should be excluded. But for the most part, personal initiative is always “cleaned in the filter” of people and again joins main stylistic flow (mainstream).

It is interesting that the uniqueness of the last two of the four most representable musical-cultural layers of Georgian song – Megrelian, Svanetian, Kakhetian and Gurian are based not on utterly folk creations, but those of “folk professionals”, E. Garaqanidze’s term (*Performance of Georgian Folk Music* 32). Members of Gurian trio were distinguished singers, as well as *mtkmeli* and *modzakhili* with their ornamentations in Kakhetian long song. From the standpoint of folklore and genius of Georgian folk songs Svan and Acharan examples are more surprising, because here the distance between an average performer and soloist is not so clear.

Here it is suitable to talk about the essence of personal and folk genius. Genius is primarily related to the ability of revealing a completely inaccessible skill perceived by an observer (even by the descendants). As for “folk genius”, this concept generally seems quite amorphous and it is lesser adjusted to scientific apparatus. Besides, it often involves the genius of a relatively narrower ethnic location, than that of the world. But the concept “folk genius” was also understood as the spirit of nation, the ability of nation. We can also imply distinctive creative compilation. But why do

we call this uniqueness genius? Main effect of genius is that it provokes enthusiasm, more specifically, amazement. When we look at the creativity of a genius, we wonder: “How did he do that?” And when perceiving a folk example we sometimes wonder: “how average representatives of this group (ethnic group, in this case) could do this?” This criterion determines our application of the notion “genius”.

Of course local-historical conditions form such collective ability of people as a unique layer. Also important in this process is timological, aspect i.e., human behavior to make choice, which does not always come from environmental conditions (Ludwig von Mises, *Theory and History. An Interpretation of Social and Economic Evolution* 25). We should take into account the role of chance. This is why this mechanism is not completely understood. This non-defined is another argument of folk or personal genius.

Therefore, personal and folk geniuses have common feature – to amaze the observer and make an inexplicable effect. And what is their distinguishing feature?

Folk exoticism contradicts high folk artistry and uniqueness; a proven approach to the collective contradicts personal perfectionism; nation’s personification contradicts generalization of personality; stable presence in daily routine contradicts confrontation of personal to the domestic; actuality contradicts outrun of time. It should also be emphasized that in traditional music creative products are somewhat manifested in “subjective values”, as the same norms, whilst personal creations are directed towards overcoming the norm.

How do personal genius and co-act with folk one in Georgian ethnic music? Evidently, such a developed folk layer may constitute a large share წილი of personal contribution. Is this volume determined by the authoritarianism of church?

Undoubtedly, Georgian song and church hymn reveal distinct stylistic diversity (which, is no longer observed, for instance, in the well-known musical tradition of Corsica). I often say that these two parallel directions of Georgian music represent one musical language, but in my opinion, this postulate requires additional arguments. What mechanisms might influence their interaction?

It may seem less arguable, but in my opinion, the chant based on clear and controllable ideological system would hardly accept the peculiarities of secular, earthly music than the song would accept that of the chant. As an

example of this we can imply the increase of the melody volume of song by ecclesiastical chant; Formation of two-part singing or of spontaneous polyphony as three-part texture; establishment of the parallelism principle. I would consider acceptance of the polyphony principle as the only clear influence of a song on a chant in general. But polyphony has been introduced in the West without secular influence too.

Indeed, why is Georgian traditional music mostly represented by song? Why is the dramaturgy of “phrase binding” visible in Georgian songs with most complex structure (Gurian trio, Svan Zari)? Why do the songs with «downright lie» plot have hymn structure? Why does the song «Mela misdevs lomsa» belong to the latter type? May church chant have contributed to the organized, developed Georgian three-part singing? I think this question should have a positive answer.

It is widely believed that small nations have no less violent messianic aspirations than big nations. It is difficult to categorically agree with this opinion, but we think, that similar tendency in Georgian culture was often observed in scientific circles as well. Some «myths» about Georgian song and chant still exist. According to them:

- No one else, except us, has polyphony in the world;
- Georgian “Chakrulo” was the only folk song launched into the space on board the Voyager (however it should be mentioned that only a few were selected out of the 14 examples as highly developed artistic (Raga, Mugham, Gamelan, Mariachis), which adds particular respect to “Chakrulo”;
- Polyphony implies development (however opposite idea dominates in Ethnomusicology);
- Confirmation of the influence of foreign culture harms the subject of ethnic pride (due to such position, the hybrid – urban and oriental branches of Georgian folklore are lesser respected);
- When listening to some Georgian songs some foreign scholars mistakenly think that the song has author (many author’s songs are indeed imprinted with the interference of a choir-master – a distinguished leading singer, some have been influenced by professional tradition – chant). It should be noted that some foreign observers did not remarkably highlight the developed Georgian song, but even regarded it as cacophony (Bakhtadze, *From the History of the Georgian Musical-Aesthetic Thought* 70-71);

- Georgian folk music developed slowly and retained ancient layers.

Following these myths, we should not turn a blind eye to the apologetic aspirations prevailing in Georgian ethnomusicology in the past (sometimes even today), expressed in the following hasty conclusions:

- “Strange singing” of Mossynoeci in Xenophon’s *Anabasis* implies polyphony, which can be considered as the earliest evidence of this phenomenon among us (b.5, H.IV P.17);
- The trace of polyphony in old Georgian neumes (above and below the line);
- Observing Georgian archaic songs (e.g. Swan), convinces us that polyphony may have existed before Christ;
- Polyphonic cult hymns had existed in Kartli before Byzantine chanting was introduced;
- Georgian song did not accept oriental intonation, expressed by augmented second.

Although the listed points are still viable, many of them are mistrusted and rejected in scientific circles.

In general, it should be noted that Georgian figures and scientists have repeatedly expressed their opinions about the phenomenal peculiarities of Georgian traditional music; yet Ilia Chavchavadze noted that Georgian music belongs to neither Western nor Eastern (nor Oriental) music, but is original (*Georgian Folk Music*). The Georgian musicians, inspired by Georgian chant tradition took the responsibility of their preservation by transcribing them. Malkhaz Erkhvanidze understands clear three-part singing as the manifestation of the Holy Trinity, i.e. love (*On Georgian Scale System* 174). Ioseb Zhordania speaks most distinctly about the phenomenological peculiarities of Georgian traditional music (*Georgian Traditional Polyphony in the Context of Polyphonic Cultures* 127). He believes that Georgian music has the following distinctive phenomenal features: developed plan of modulation, aspiration from the hesitant to difficult, mirror-like harmony. I agree with Mr. Jordania’s first point, but consider the second and third ones less relevant.

Appraisal of the Georgian song often implies that all components of the musical language of this phenomenon are highly developed. But this is not so. Georgian song lags behind the ethno-musical culture of many countries in melodic, rhythmic, timbre, artistic diversity; it has almost completely lost authenticity, rituality, and syncretism; there are many genre white spots

on our music map. Song lives basically on stage and mostly as canonized variants.

Thus, let's try to more objectively discuss what makes the impression of the phenomenon as of a unique occurrence on the observer of Georgian traditional music.

Since we are going to generalize specific peculiarities of the cultural phenomenon, it is best to use ideographical method of observation, which implies, to distinguish specific traits of the phenomenon in order to identify its unique character. In this case, we should consider historical, environmental and personal factors, as variables and correlation.

Moreover, when we want to explain unique features of the existing phenomenon, we must use a divergential approach – describe all possible mechanisms. In this case, we should consider historical, environmental and personal factors, presumable regularities of variables and correlation.

In general, we would like to highlight the following factors in the degree of representability of ethnic culture:

1. Artistic value (artistic form, structure and quality of performance of the sample itself);
2. Markers of uniqueness (features, representing entirely new information for the observer – originality of ritual, verbal text, content, ways of performance – bass, Gurian *krimanchuli* and polyphony, Kakhetian ornamentation, Svan sustained chord, etc);
3. Solid stylistic value associated with ethnic or religious status (effect of stable, time-tested stylistic originality);
4. Authenticity (syncretism and integrity of the ritual, vital and non-presentational motivation, etc.);
5. Auxiliary artistic entourage (the visual for music, verbal side, semantic-concept, music for visual, etc.);
6. Emotional intensity of the sample performance (Haka of the Maori, Kecak of Bali; Zulu and Laz-Pontian round dance, Flamenco and others);
7. Possibility of interaction (how possible it is to involve an observer into the ritual, reproduction of an example, communication with the performer);
8. Publicity.

When we adjust the afore-mentioned points with the features of Georgian traditional music we see that they mainly influence listeners by the first three channels. This indicates that main value for performers is a separate example, not its ritual or other context. Thus, the uniqueness of Georgian music tradition lies in the regularities of its distinguished musical language.

Each nation puts emphasis on its «ethnic ideal sound» – melody, polyphony, timbre, harmony, concentrated (economical) artistic expression. Georgian “ethnic ideal sound” (Zemtsovski, *Song as a Historical Phenomenon* 22) is created by main stylistic peculiarities, as well as by separate original examples and traits.

Obviously, **polyphony** is the basic phenomenal feature of Georgian traditional music, in which the following are considered as basic components:

- **Organized structure**, expressed in
 - o distinct three-part singing,
 - o clear vocal differentiation,
 - o established variation methods,
 - o complex contamination dramaturgy.
- **Variety**, expressed in
 - o Dialectal diversity of Georgian song, difference between the Schools of church chant;
 - o Multi'plicity of composition principles and inter'pene'tration;
 - o Hybrid modal-functional mode with frequent modulation movements;
 - o Different dialects and schools with rich methods of articulation and variation;
 - o Maintenance of different layers in various regional or social environments.

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