

The Issue of Folklore in Modern Author's Songs

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Safeguarding and research of traditional heritage is vital for the preservation of national and cultural identity in the modern era. The issue of the relation between tradition and novelty is relevant in Georgian ethnomusicology as well, and of course there are certain works on this topic. Nevertheless, current processes in folklore have not yet become the subject of special research.

The 20th century was a time of rapid technical progress. The increased role of the media (radio, television) accelerated natural processes ongoing in folklore and made them artificial in many cases. In Soviet times, this was also facilitated by the socialist ideology, which used folklore in its own interests. In post-Soviet times, folk music was freed from ideological pressure; however, it was subject to the processes of globalization. Many styles or genres of music existing in Georgia today reveal certain connection with folk music. These include the so-called “author's songs” as well. Such examples are often accompanied by a modernized *panduri* or a small instrumental band (chromatic *panduri*, accordion, bass guitar, drums....). This type of bands and individual singers have a repertoire of mostly patriotic and lyrical content.

It should be noted that “author's songs” have been created in Georgia since the Soviet period. Their authors were well-known choirmasters: Varlam Simonishvili, Levan Mughalashvili, Piruz Makhatelashvili, Mariam Arjevnishvili, Ketevan Ghoghoberidze, Valerian Sadradze, Avksenti Megrelidze, Vano Mchedlishvili.... They themselves were tradition bearers and represented the musical traditions of the regions where they worked. The choirmasters of this generation had no special musical education; therefore their songs were composed entirely according to the regularities of traditional music. This is probably why these examples were almost always referred to as “folk”. For example, the well-known song “Tsintsqaro” is composed by Vano Mchedlishvili, “Dila” – by Varlam Simonishvili, etc.

An interesting tendency is observed in the works of the choirmasters of the following period, who received a special musical education: Anzor Erkomaishvili, Temur Kevkhashvili, Gomar Sikharulidze..... Musical language of some of their creations is fitted within the regularities of one particular dialect; but that of others goes beyond just one dialect. For example, Anzor

Erkomaishvili's song "Mival Guriashi mara" is based on the general principles of West Georgian musical language; whilst his "Khareba da Gogia" is a typical Kakhetian song with bass drone.

It is noteworthy that both old and newly created author's songs are still referred to as folk. Oddly enough, the fact that they are considered folk is often acceptable to their authors. The processes that started in Georgia at the end of the 19th century (performance of folk music on the stage, inception and development of folklore studies as a science, etc.) made corrections to the traditional definition of folk music and posed the problem of defining some terms (including "folk" and "author's").

According to the commonly accepted definition, folk music is characterized by variability, collectivity, improvisation, anonymity, etc. This definition is well known to ethnomusicologists and has long been recognized in science. Today, the songs composed by contemporary authors are being spread in Georgia as *folk*; most of them have little in common with traditional musical regularities; the examples distributed as specific, established variants are also referred to as *folk*; modernized musical instruments created in the 20th century are also considered folk. In my opinion, at the present stage it is necessary to clearly define the examples referred to as "folk music". It is important to distinguish between what we call "folk" and what we call "author's". For me, these two terms are opposite to each other.

Ethnomusicologist Tamaz Gabisonia has a different viewpoint. In his opinion, the terms "folk" and "author's" are not opposite of each other. The researcher accepts the understanding of the concept "author's" as implying not only an individual creator of the song, but also the introducer of a new component. Basing on such an approach, Gabisonia suggests implying author-composer, author-ethnophore, author-reconstructor, a multi-function person under the concept "author".¹

For me it was interesting what contemporary choirmasters thought about these terms (folk and author's). For this, I conducted an anonymous internet survey, with the participation of 67 choirmasters from all over Georgia. The age of the participants ranged between 18-75 years: 18-25 - 5.1%; 25-35 - 35.6%; 35-50 - 35.6% and 50-75 - 23.7%. Most of the participants (35.6%) received education at various higher educational institutions: 28.8% at Giorgi Mtatsmindeli Higher School for Chanting, 25.4% at Tbilisi State Conservatoire, and the smallest number – 10.2% at the Church-Choir Conducting Faculty of Theater University. The research participants were asked to explain

¹ Tamaz Gabisonia, 2015, p.158

what the term “author's song” meant to them and to answer the questions: did they themselves create folk-style songs? Or did they perform the examples created by other choirmasters? In both cases they were asked to name the examples.

When asked whether they compose songs in the folk style, the majority (83.3%) answered negatively. From the variants created by those who gave positive answers we can name work (*naduri*) songs, alilo, “Simghera Tskaltuboze”, Megrelian songs: “Vardis do chucheles”, “Chkimi qoropili, chkim kholos”, “Miorkini si koichku”, and others. One of the applicants also named his own piano works in author's songs. In the list of their own author's songs I also found the arranged versions of Laz examples: “Ele mele kismeti”, “Mzogha ucha”, Kulanishi destaneh”, etc.

When asked if they performed author's songs of other choirmasters the majority (68.9%) answered in the affirmative. Most of the named examples are original songs composed by the choirmasters: “Dila” and “Baghia chveni kvekana” by Varlam Simonishvili; “Natvra” by Giorgi Iobishvili; “Skhivadaskhvagvari sikvaruli” and “Khelovneba” by Artem Erkomaishvili; “Khareba da gogia”, “Tu ase turpa ikavi”, “Mival guriashi mara” by Anzor Erkomaishvili and others. The list of author's songs also included different choirmasters' variants of traditional songs, such as the Sikharulidzes' variant of “Chven mshvidoba”, the Berdzenishvilis' “Perad shindi”, Vepkhia Antia's “Ia patnepi”, and others. Works by composers Revaz Laghidze, Iakob Bobokhidze and Nana Belkania were also found in the same column.

I was especially interested in the definition of the term “author's song”. Most define it as follows: “A song that has a specific author”. Here are several different definitions: “A song created non-collectively, one person or a small group of people”, “Non-folk song”, “Primary example”, “Song created by a composer”, “An example composed by a person, or a folklore example arranged to the level when the elements introduced by that person exceed those of the folk example”, etc. given that the definition of “author's song” does not exist in Georgian ethnomusicology to this day, two explanations turned out to be the most acceptable to me: “The song created in folk style by an author, even a non-professional” and “the song created on a folk motive, on the author's or folk verse”.

Thus, it can be said that a small number of today's choirmasters still create songs in folk style, and they understand that these are not folk, but their own creations.

When researching folk issue in author's songs, it is important to answer the following questions: 1. what are characteristic features of contemporary author's songs? 2. Do these features determine which of these creations can be called folk? When working on these issues, I personally spoke with several performers of contemporary author's songs.

Group "Bani" was created in 2011. Its members are not professional musicians. They are united by love of music. They have no leader. The opinion of all members is equally important. Their repertoire comprises modern compositions on folk motifs. Both the lyrics and the music have authors. Thus, they create their own "Bani" versions. They do not call themselves a folk ensemble. The instruments they use are: chromatic *panduri*, bass guitar, drums...² They think that folk *panduri* is an "undeveloped" instrument and only a few simple East Georgian songs can be performed on it, so they prefer chromatic instruments. This, of course, is their subjective opinion, determined by the incomplete knowledge of the artistic and technical parameters of folk instrument and is far from reality. On the question to which musical trend they belong, they have an univocal answer - folklore, however, they also recognize the proximity to the ethno-jazz band *Egari*.³

The Gogochuri sisters make clear distinction between old, traditional examples and new songs, created by them. Ethnomusicologist Malkhaz Razmadze recorded an interview with one of the members – Ketevan Gogochuri, who conveys common position of the group: "Ketevan Gogochuri confirms that they do not like it when they are referred to as a folk ensemble, but they do not specify what they call themselves in the light of the fact that they perform authentic folklore as well as the examples "having a claim to folklore." They note that authentic folklore is more important to them.⁴ And adds that "it is desirable for specialists to name the direction they represent soon."⁵

Recently the videos of **the Mandili trio** have been especially popular on the Georgian Internet. On the Trio's official website, we read: "In 2014, three charming girls from Georgia "blew up" the World Wide Web and became stars. This "fairy tale" began on the day when three friends, during a walk in the village, decided to sing a song. Tatuli made a self-video and uploaded it to the

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5elwySJhgQ4>

³ Interview with Giorgi Nikoladze

⁴ Malkhaz Razmadze, 2016/2017, p.611

⁵ Malkhaz Razmadze, 2016/2017, p.612

internet. This video dramatically changed the girls' lives. Within two weeks the video was watched by a multi-million audience".⁶

Even though the members of trio Mandili travel to many countries around the world and perform at folk festivals, traditional music does not occupy a major place in their repertoire. One of the trio members plays the chromatic *panduri*. It often happens that in three-part songs two upper voices are doubled and the instrument has the function of a bass, which violation of traditional performance norms.

Trio Mandili mainly performs contemporary author's songs. Their repertoire also comprises pop songs, soundtracks of Georgian movies, potpourris... They also sing Kazakh and Hungarian folk examples. It is noteworthy that in their repertoire there are compositions "Guruli", "Svanuri" (regions in West Georgia), but, their intonation material has nothing to do with the musical characteristics of these regions. One composition based on Acharan songs is the closest to traditional musical regularities.⁷

One of the most popular individual performers of contemporary author's songs in Georgia is **Davit Kenchiashvili**. He has no special musical education. As a boy he sang in folk ensembles. He comes from a family with musical traditions; therefore he has had interest in music since childhood.

Kenchiashvili's repertoire comprises mainly pop-style contemporary author's songs. He uses chromatic *panduri*, folk percussion and electronic instruments. The compositions are mostly created by Kenchiashvili himself. There is no clear answer to my question as to which musical direction he attributes himself. He believes that he has created his own, original musical direction and cannot name other groups or individual performers of the same direction.⁸

Society perceives Davit Kenchiashvili's work as folklore. The singer himself has a negative attitude to this. As he explains he does not perform folklore, although his original songs are based on folk harmony. Musical analysis of these songs reveals that their musical language deviates from the modal and harmonic principles of folk musical thinking and only "at first glance" they look folk.⁹

Modern science has not yet provided definition for the contemporary author's songs based on folk motifs. Interesting is the position of some Georgian researchers on these issues: Ethnomusicologist Tamaz Gabisonia suggests the term "para folklore" to describe author's

⁶ <http://triomandili.com/>

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wBgYaktc69o>

⁸ Interview with Davit Kenchiashvili

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZCbXTtFIEM>

compositions created in modern times: “The afore-mentioned non-academic music with ethnic coloring nourished by folk or pseudo-folk motifs and accessories, is mainly characterized by oral transmission and is popular among a certain segment of listeners and is called “folklore”. For these features, as well as the fact that this phenomenon has almost no connection with traditional direction and develops in parallel, we call it “para-folklore”.¹⁰

Malkhaz Razmadze is of a different opinion: he refers to the music of this style and direction as “modernized folklore”. In his opinion, “a similar style with a claim to folklore can only conditionally be called folklore today, because there is a very small share of folklore in it.” According to the researcher, “this is the direction originated in the neighborhood of folklore, grown from it, processed, transformed, adapted to modern demand.... It is characterized by modernized (including electric) instruments, sound, even dressing style, etc”.¹¹ For these and other objective reasons, Malkhaz Razmadze refers to this musical direction as “modernized folklore”.

In performance Malkhaz Razmadze distinguishes two types: the first group unites the performers approximated to folklore, with natural sound, polyphony, third parallelism of upper voices against bass drone, singing in a duet without bass, live accompaniment. The researcher names the Gogochuri, Nakeuri, Tsiklauri, Zviadauri family ensembles and the group “TSU Gordela” as such performers. The second group unites the performers distanced from folklore. They are mostly characterized by solo performance, singing on a phonogram, emphasizing vocal performance... Among such performers the researcher names Davit Kenchiashvili, Ana Malazonia, Mariam Elieshvili, Ana Chincharauli and others.¹²

As we see, Georgian scholars refer to contemporary author’s songs as “para folklore” and “modernized folklore”. In both definitions they are still referred to as folklore. The difference between them is shown only by the preceding word. As for the performers: some call their creations folk, some – author’s, others find it difficult to find the definition; however, main problem is that such examples are spread as folk music on the Internet and, consequently, are perceived as folklore by the public.

It is interesting what makes them so popular. Most of contemporary author's songs are based on the intonation of East Georgian mountain music. Sociologists link this recent trend to the

¹⁰ Tamaz Gabisonia, 2015, pp.146-147

¹¹ Malkhaz Razmadze, 2016/2017, p.613

¹² Malkhaz Razmadze, 2016/2017, p.609

categories of identity and regard it as a kind of response to globalization. I think this assumption should be supported by the simplicity of the musical language of these samples and also by their North Caucasian origin. Their characteristic simple, repetitive, sequential phrases, couplet construction and two-three-tone bass undoubtedly contribute to the creation, performance and perception of these examples. Nevertheless, in my opinion time is the main factor for the folklorization of these examples.

In the 21st century, under festivalization and commercialization of culture, copyright protection is receiving considerable attention. The logical question is, how can we protect the “copyright” of old, traditional examples? Does anyone have the right to distribute his own creations as “folk?” Answering this question opens the perspective of future research and pushes us towards sharing international experience.

References:

1. Gabisonia, Tamaz. *Author in Georgian Ethnic Music. Problems of Secular and Sacred Music Performance*. Batumi: Art University Publishing, 2015
2. Razmadze, Malkhaz. *On Modernized Folklore (General overview of the phenomena accompanying Georgian authentic folk music)*. Proceedings of the Institute of History and Ethnology, XIV_XV, Tbilisi: I. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, 2016/2017
3. <http://triomandili.com/>

Interviews:

1. Giorgi Nikoladze, Tbilisi, 2019
2. Davit Kenchiashvili, Tbilisi, 2019

Video examples:

1. Group Bani, “Khevsuruli”. Footnote 2
2. Trio Mandili, “Acharuli”. Footnote 7
3. Davit Kenchiashvili, “Isev da isev”. Footnote 9