Lecture Demonstration Program 2
Anchiskhati Choir (Tbilisi, Georgia)

Program List

1. ◊ *Krialeso*, para-liturgical Easter song (possibly originally a round-dance). The initial text of this song is a vernacularized form of the Greek, *Kyrie eleison* [Lord have mercy]. The rest of the text comprises only non-semantic vocables for ease of improvisation and dance accompaniment. The song is usually sung by two antiphonal choirs, features a peculiar form of yodeling native to the region of Imereti, and was learned by Anchiskhati from the songmaster Benie Mikadze.

2. ◊† *Aghdgomisa dghe ars* [The Day of Resurrection], first heirmos of the Paschal mass, Gelati monastery school. This highly ornamented chant was transcribed by opera-star Pilimon Koridze from a group of master chanters in West Georgia in 1885, and published in 1901. The first heirmos is one of the first chants of the most important celebrations of the Orthodox rite, thus the chant is a triumphant expose of classic harmony in the Gelati monastery idiom, featuring pre-cadential voice crossings between the upper voices, complex chords, improvisational elements in all three voices, syncopated harmonic rhythm, and a striking melody in the upper voice. Text: “*The Day of Resurrection! Let us be illumined, O ye people! The Passover, the Passover of the Lord! From death unto life, and from earth unto heaven hath Christ our God brought us over, singing a song of victory.*”

3. § *Bedneri Do Ubedursu* [Happy and Unhappy People], Mengrelian philosophical song. Sung in the Megrelian language and accompanied by the *chonguri*—a four-string West Georgian lute—the text of this song explores the optimistic perspective on living life well in the present moment, and is an excellent example of Megrelian folk poetry. While the middle voice declames the text, the bass voice is allowed freedom to improvise within the particular harmonic framework of Megrelian folk music (second, fifth, seventh intervals). Text: “*All, happy and unhappy people, have the same way to go. No one will live for too long, so let's live conscious life…*”

4. § *Chven Mshvidoba* [Peace To Us], Gurian table song. This trio song, featuring advanced improvisation and polyphonic voice-leading sung mostly to non-semantic vocables, served as an initiation for young singers wishing to sit at the 'big boys table' at the feasting contexts in which singing served as the main form of entertainment. The Anchiskhati Choir sings several variants of this song: this one was revived from a wax cylinder recorded by the Salukvadze brothers in 1931 in the West Georgian region of Guria.

5. § *Evrida Maspindzelsa* [Hail the host], Acharian feast song. In the feasting tradition in Georgia, guests routinely toasted and sang texts especially dedicated to their hosts. This historic variant of such a table song is accompanied by the *chiboni*, the goatskin bagpipe from the region of Achara. Text: “*Our host is happy, as there are lots of lovely guests around his table. Let there always be such glorious feasts in his house…*”
6. § Mravalzhamiere [Many years], Kakhetian folk tradition. The text, Many years (Gk. eis pollá etē) originated as a special hymn that commemorated a king or emperor, and is now sung as the polychronion at the end of the Eastern Orthodox mass to honor parish and clergy. In Georgia, the text is also sung in more elaborate forms within secular society. This ornamental version originates from the East Georgian folk tradition.

7. Avtandilis simghera [Song of Avtandil], Imeretian epic song. This song, accompanied by the four-stringed lute, chonguri, recounts the hunting exploits of a figure named Avtandil. Such epic songs were common in the folk poetry of rural Georgia, and this text appears in a compilation of such poetry from the 1880s. Text: "Over the mountains Avtandil went hunting without any success. Later, when he found what he sought, he found a valley to cook his meal by the fire..."

8. Bimurzela, Svanetian ballad. This moralistic tale is sung in the Svan language, and recounts the folly of one Bimurzela who was killed after stealing his friend's wife. Svaneti is a closed region in the High Caucasus mountains where a unique culture, language, and music has survived for millenia. Such song texts are common in Svaneti, but often end with a dance-off between the most agile boys, signalled by the cessation of song text and the commencement of clapping with the vocables shaida rero rerora.

9. * Gazapkhuli [Spring], 19th century urban song. Listen for the influence of European harmony in this arrangement of the famous poem "Spring" by nineteenth century lyricist Akaki Tsereteli. Text: "Here comes spring so beautiful, bringing lots of colors with it like diamonds sparkle. When nature starts to flourish, my heart soars in happiness, my soul in bliss..."

10. Khasanbegura, historical song from Guria. The province of Guria witnessed many battles in the Russo-Turkish wars of the nineteenth century, a history reflected in their folk music. This song narrates the treachery and death of Khasanbegura, a Georgian turncoat, but is more famous today as an extraordinary exemplar of Gurian improvisational polyphony. You won't miss the unique yodel called krimanchuli. The Anchiskhati Choir has created their own variant of this song, basing their improvisations on numerous historical recordings. Text: "Khasanbeg Tavadgitide leads troops against us. Let's wait until he comes to Lanchkhuti and then we'll give him a real fight... there he is!... I saw him beheaded. But as he was Georgian, I buried him anyway."

Discography Key:
† - Requiem (purple all-chant album)
◊ - Orthodox Paschal Chants (burgundy all-chant album)
# - Georgian Church Hymns - Shemokmedi School (white all-chant album)
§ - Nadi (green folksongs album)
* - Folksongs from Anchiskhati Repertory (green disc and notation compilation)
Contextual Information: Georgian Liturgical Chant

For hundreds of years, Georgian folk and sacred polyphony has proved to be a musical anomaly in a region of the world—Central Eurasia, Anatolia, the Middle East—known for its vibrant monody. Its melodies date back, perhaps, to the period of hagiopolite expansion in the 4th-6th centuries, though it is unclear when and how these melodies transformed into the three-voiced form received through oral tradition in the 18th-19th centuries. Neume notation and hymnographic commentaries from the 10th-11th century period suggest that polyphony may have originated from this medieval period, or even earlier. As the country modernized under Tsarist Russian colonial rule (1801-1917), the Georgian chant tradition came under severe neglect and finally collapsed in the later decades of the nineteenth century. Pilimon Koridze (1829-1911), a Georgian opera singer trained in Italy, returned to Georgia in 1880 and began traveling around the country to find the last of the master chanters. With the sponsorship of local parishes, patriotic publishers, and aristocratic donors, Koridze spent thirty years transcribing several thousand chants into European notation, a collection that represents the repertory of the Gelati monastery chant school in central Georgia. It is these transcriptions, complemented by Karbelashvili-family transcriptions representing the Svetitskhoveli cathedral chant school in East Georgia, that make up the bulk of the surviving corpus of Georgian polyphonic liturgical chant. This album represents just a handful of recordings from among these thousands of notated transcriptions.

After Koridze's death in 1911—which closely followed the untimely deaths of other critical players in the transcription movement including master chanter Anton Dumbadze, publisher Maxime Sharadze, and intellectual supporter Ilia Chavchavadze—the effort to transcribe and publish the oral tradition of chant staggered to a halt. A man named Ekvtime Kereselidze (1865-1944), tasked for many years with preparing the chant manuscripts for publication in the Sharadze press, now faced the daunting prospect of safeguarding thousands of hand-written transcriptions and half-published chantbooks through the chaotic years to come. Between 1910-1936 he was in sole possession of these national and ecclesiastical musical treasures, transferring dozens of boxes of chant notation from one monastery to another to avoid marauding thieves and anti-religious hit squads. When Kereselidze was forced to flee the Gelati monastery in 1923, the chant manuscripts were stored in a friend's basement for more than a year. Later, they were buried in large tin containers in the churchyard of the remote mountaintop Zedazeni Monastery, where Kereselidze died in 1944. During this harrowing period of political violence towards the Orthodox Church, Kereselidze not only preserved the fragile manuscript collection, but hand-copied all of the Koridze rough-drafts into large good-copy volumes arranged according to the liturgical calendrical year. In the post-Soviet era, Kereselidze—together with the Karbelashvili chanters, Pilimon Koridze, and Ilia Chavchavadze—was canonized a saint in the Orthodox Church of Georgia.

After Kereselidze donated his treasure trove of manuscripts to the University Museum in 1936, they were hardly viewed or studied until 1988, when members of the future Anchiskhati Church Choir first began to rediscover this repertory. Preparing in secret for a Paschal service at the remote Betania Monastery, the singers described the experience of becoming overwhelmed with the beauty and complexity of the repertory of their ancestors that they felt they were singing for the first time in generations. Less than three years later, the Choir recorded and released a debut LP recording (1991, Melodia Studios, recorded by Mikheil Kilosanidze), the first
recording to include exclusively Georgian traditional three-voiced ecclesiastical polyphony. These recordings have been reproduced in digital format on a compact disk release especially for the 2016 US Tour (tracks 1-12), together with an additional twelve Paschal chants and para-liturgical songs recorded between 2001-2006 (tracks 13-24).

The notated transcriptions remain our closest access to the oral repertory of the master chanters, but audio recordings enhance our understanding of its performative nuances. Several chants on this album are reconstructions from a unique audio collection housed in the Tbilisi Conservatory. These files, recorded in 1966 by Artem Erkomaishvili (1887-1967), the last master of the Shemokmedi monastery chant tradition, serve as direct witness for performer-scholars interested in the unique Georgian tuning and improvisational systems of the oral tradition.

This concert begins with the Paschal troparion, kris t e a gh d g a [Christ is Risen], a joyous refrain that musically marks the liturgical Resurrection: the moment when Christ 'tramples down death,' and 'bestows eternal life upon those in the tombs.' In Georgia, celebratory liturgies for Saints days, Nativity, Pascha, and other Great Feasts were followed by a traditional feast—the trapeza—which was the site of further performances of para-liturgical songs and dances. In many cases, these songs are lost to history, but the Anchiskhati Choir has spent considerable time locating and resurrecting samples preserved in turn of the century transcriptions and on old recordings, making a name for themselves as masters not only of the liturgical tradition, but indeed the folk tradition as well.

Contextual Information: Georgian Folk Music

It is said that the country of Georgia is small in size, but grand in culture. According to the Greeks, who first called the land Giorgios (farmer) because of its rich agricultural lands (giving the exonym "Georgia"), Prometheus was chained to a high crag in the Caucasus, and Jason and the Argonauts stole the golden fleece from the king of Colchis. Geographically, the country is bordered to the south and east by Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, and to the north by Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, and other Russian-controlled Caucasus nations. Because of its strategic position at the crossroads between Asia and Europe, the Middle East and Russia, Georgia has been a nexus of large-scale conflicts between Great Powers including Urartu, Parthia, Sassavid Persia, Abbasid Arabia, Seljuk Turkey, Byzantium, the Golden Horde, Qajar Persia, Ottoman Turkey, and Russia. Today, Georgia is keen on being included in Europe-Atlantic cultural and economic relations as it seeks independence from two centuries of Russian domination. As a result of their struggle to survive through centuries of invasion and occupation, Georgians have developed a strong national identity, yielding such rich traditions as folk dancing and polyphonic singing.

The Anchiskhati Choir repertory includes songs and chants that originate in different regions of Georgia. Each region expresses their three-voiced polyphony in a unique harmonic and melodic manner, with variations in timbre, dissonant harmony, and sonority marking independent regional cultural aesthetics. In some cases, specific vocal styles act as markers these regional differences: for example, the krimanchuli yodel is specific to the regions of Guria and Imereti. Some songs are accompanied by the chonguri, a four-stringed lute, or the chiboni, a goatskin bagpipe. These are two of several regional instruments native to Georgia. The choir is pleased to present several compact disk recordings of their work. For this tour, their first LP recording (1991) "Orthodox Paschal Cycle" has been digitally remastered and is offered for the
first time as a compact disk. A notated folksong book with accompanying recording will be of particular interest to singers. This book complements recent publications of church chants, and older recordings of folk and sacred music. All proceeds will benefit the tour and the preservation of traditional music in Georgia. Larger donations to the choir will be generously received, all checks to be made out to “Village Harmony,” the choir’s sponsoring organization in the United States. An Anchiskhati Choir performance offers a sonic reminder of a former Georgia, one where music accompanied all aspects of daily life: the home, the plowfield, and in the churches. This music was developed in the medieval period and passed on through generations of chant masters in the rural mountain monasteries and urban cathedrals of Georgia. Lifestyles have changed, but through the music we gain a clearer picture of that life in that time.

The Anchiskhati Choir

The Anchiskhati Choir is the world’s leading exponent of Georgian polyphonic choral music. The choir members specialize in singing ancient Georgian sacred and secular songs, with authentic instrumental accompaniment, described by the U.S. magazine, The World & I, as "diamonds polished by time." The revival of traditional polyphonic chant, in particular, is synonymous with the work of the Anchiskhati Choir. In the past 25 years, they have published more than two-dozen recordings and chantbooks. Hundreds of young chanters around the country model their own study of ecclesiastical singing on the Anchiskhati performance style, which many agree most closely resembles the style of singers in the 19th century oral tradition. Their performance of chant is informed by intense study of original recordings and archival transcriptions. Several members of the group grew up in rural contexts where they absorbed the unique folk singing traditions of their parents and grandparents. This clearly assisted them in the reconstruction of a performative practice for liturgical chant, as they bring the nuances of tuning, timbre, and improvisatory dexterity of the folk tradition into their performances of chant. In addition to singing weekly services in the historic 6th-century Anchiskhati basilica on the riverfront of downtown Tbilisi, group members collaborate on multi-media publishing projects, teach courses in the Tbilisi Conservatory and the College for Chant Studies, and maintain an ambitious international tour portfolio. The Anchiskhati Choir is honored to have the opportunity to share Georgian songs with you and we hope you enjoy the concert.

- Program notes by:
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