

## **The Poetry of the Trans-Rational in Menshevik-era Tbilisi**

**OR**

### **Georgian Modernism in Sound**

The turn of the twentieth century coincided with a kind of paradigm shift in European ways of thinking about language and its functional and expressive boundaries. In this heyday of Western European imperialism and disciplines like comparative linguistics, folkloristics, and philology, and in the context of revolutionary advances in communication and sound reproduction, intellectual interest in the non-symbolic and material dimensions of words began to unsettle the long-established assumption that the chief purpose of language is the communication of propositional meaning. At the same time, increasingly available telegraphs and telephones, phonographs and gramophones allowed people to “harness, modify, and shape their powers of auditory perception in the service of rationality” (Sterne 2005:2), and rendered “noise” and “nonsense” ubiquitous in the experience of everyday life (cf. Sterne 2005; Weidman 2003). The limits of early fidelity, the hypersensitivity of instruments, and the frequently imperfect technique of their users led to a situation in which apparently meaningless static, “hiss,” and “babble” were inscribed on recorded media and circulated widely. In order to “clarify and isolate the meaning” of a given transmission to render it interpretable, listeners were forced to attend to its “noisy,” “nonsensical,” intrusive other (Novak 2008:23). Intellectuals and avant-garde artists quickly jumped on this newly obviated availability of the semiotically unmoored, revealing the porousness of boundaries between sense and nonsense in their art and its associated ideologies. In this paper I locate Georgian Futurists poets and artists in this genealogy of experimentation

with language's materiality in the culturally cosmopolitan, socially liberal context of Menshevik-era Tbilisi.

The Menshevik brand of revolutionary social democracy which took root in Georgia at the end of the nineteenth century was particularly adamant about the defense of Georgian cultural rights. Members of Georgia's political avant-garde disseminated the prescription for socialist revolution almost exclusively in the Georgian language. Russian never attained the status of prestige language in colonial-era Georgia; even in the Soviet period when bilingualism was nearly universal, Russian failed to displace Georgian as the primary language in ethnically Georgian families.<sup>1</sup> Under the leadership of Noe Zhordania (1868-1953), the Georgian social democrats defended a fundamentally cultural nationalist agenda alongside a program for economic advancement driven by the working class until the Bolshevik occupation forced them into exile in France in 1921.

By the turn of the twentieth century early recording technology was shaping conceptions of Georgian national identity in important ways. The appearance of the first gramophones in Tbilisi enabled the mechanical reproduction and circulation of voices representing various constituent dialects of the Georgian nation. The British Gramophone Company, the European partner of Emile Berliner's United States Gramophone Company, opened a studio-shop in Moscow in 1899 and in Tbilisi in 1901. The Tbilisi branch served as the company's headquarters for the entire Caucasus region, Central Asia and northern Iran until after the First World War. With the establishment of the Tbilisi gramophone shop it became more common for local ensembles to travel to Tbilisi to record than for ethnographers or musicologists to attempt to transcribe their performances on site in real time (Erkomaishvili 2001:5). Surviving catalogs

---

<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that Russian administrators in Georgia were expected to learn the native language of their subjects. On the contrary, it was extremely rare for any Russian employed as a state servant in the Caucasus to learn the local language.

indicate that 170 recordings of Georgian song were issued between 1901 and the start of World War I (Erkomaishvili and Rodonaia 2006:58).<sup>2</sup>

The British Gramophone Company closed its office in Tbilisi in May of 1918 (Prentice 2000:4), unfortunately just prior to the city's emergence as an intellectual and artistic hub in the period of Menshevik independence. Given that Georgian song would be radically transformed in the ensuing decades to accommodate socialist-realist directives, these few early recordings are today considered an invaluable resource for "recovering" the sounds of pre-Soviet Georgian polyphony. The recordings made at the turn of the twentieth century not only reveal what traditional polyphony sounded like at that moment, but also provide insight into Georgian song practice as far back as the late eighteenth century.

When the unexpected news of Bolshevik victory in Petrograd arrived in Tbilisi in 1917 and Russia withdrew from World War I, Georgia's national-socialist-revolutionary cause received an extraordinary boost. During the brief period of Menshevik Georgian independence (1918-21), a deliberate policy of "Georgianization" was introduced, as demonstrated by important accomplishments in the sphere of cultural and educational institution-building. Under Noe Zhordania's leadership, the new administration established the Tbilisi State Conservatory and the Institute of Caucasian Archaeology and History in 1917. They designated Georgian the

---

<sup>2</sup> The Gramophone Company's venture in the region was driven by a desire for market expansion rather than preservationist instinct, so it focused on the genres that were most popular and therefore lucrative. In the Caucasus the Company recorded and sold European classical music (opera in particular), and Armenian and Azeri songs, in addition to traditional Georgian repertoire.

Will Prentice, a specialist in the history of the British Gramophone Company in Tbilisi and sound engineer for the British Library National Sound Archive, writes, "The recordists were aware that the acoustic technology of the time could pick up and reproduce strong voices much more effectively than it could most musical instruments, and so relatively few instrumental titles were recorded" (2000:6). Given the fundamental role of these first recordings in the modern history of Georgian music, it is possible to read in his observation a partial explanation for the hegemony of vocal polyphony in accounts of Georgian musical heritage from the Soviet period through the present day.

official language of the republic and founded Tbilisi State University, declaring it a Georgian-language institute of higher education.

Peace and relative prosperity turned Tbilisi in this period into a hub of literary and artistic experiment for intellectuals from across the Russian Empire. Fleeing the chaos, civil war, and material privations in the Russian north, artists and intellectuals flocked to Tbilisi, which prospered in the brief period of Menshevik independence as a multicultural “literary and artistic oasis” (Markov 1968:336-7; cf. Nikol’skaia 1980, Ram 2004:367). Beginning with the Georgian Symbolist *Tsisperq’ants’elebi* (Blue Horns) in Kutaisi in 1916, a prolific literary avant-garde supported the radical intelligentsia in its aspirations for national liberation. In 1919 Symbolist poet Shalva Apkhaidze wrote, “Georgia has finally found itself and, along with the political revival, has launched a Georgian cultural renaissance” (Jaliashvili 2007:5).<sup>3</sup> Unlike in Russia, where modernism in the arts continued to face formidable opposition from the bourgeois public and the newly empowered Bolshevik party, in Georgia the cultural avant-garde found the public and Menshevik government tolerant—even welcoming—of their experiments (Elizbarashvili 1981:208; 1989:10-15).

The Futurist poets strove to develop a new lexicon based on combinations of sounds alone, embracing the aesthetic possibilities of the word as *phone* and *image* rather than *sign*. Their fascination with the potential for a poetics of the sound-based nonsensical emerged concomitantly with the Russian Formalist school of literary criticism, as though “forcing interpretation to rearrange its techniques” (Kittler 1990:270). It was around this time that St. Petersburg-based literary critic Viktor Shklovsky, inspired in part by the proto-structuralist writings of Ferdinand de Saussure, developed his groundbreaking concept of *ostranenie*, or defamiliarization—the notion that the purpose of art is to restore a sense of strangeness, newness,

---

<sup>3</sup> *Sakartvelo nakha tavisi tavi da p’olit’ik’ur aghordzinebastan ertad dait’s’q’o kartuli khelovnebis renesansi.*

or unfamiliarity, to the quotidian, to deliver the object “from the sphere of automatized perception” (Shklovsky 1990 [1917]:6).<sup>4</sup> In his 1917 essay *Iskusstvo kak priëm* (Art as device) Shklovsky famously established theoretical grounds for differentiating prose from poetry, calling the latter “the language of *impeded, distorted* speech” (ibid. 13)—that is, highly structured, redundant, difficult to discern, and characterized by a burying of sense. Shklovsky identified the Futurists as the vanguard of the new poetic language, recognizing in their work an emancipation of the artist from “historical bondage to extra-literary forces” (Sher 1990: xvii).

The Futurists’ iconoclastic art of *zaum*’, a kind of poetry of the indeterminate which flourished in Tbilisi during the period of Menshevik independence, overturned the bourgeois paradigm in which poetic language figured primarily as an instrument of referential meaning, and only secondarily as a vehicle for experimentation with material sound. *Zaum*’, literally (in Russian) “trans-rational,” “trans-sense,” “beyond the mind,” or “metalogical” poetry, developed the phonetic resources of language *as such*.<sup>5</sup> The Futurists drew inspiration from the uses of unintelligible language in archaic Russian magic and folk customs, and in the uses of glossolalia in the worship practices of certain Old Believers’ sects (p.c. Boris Gasparov September 9, 2009). (The Old Believers are a sect which broke off from the Russian Orthodox Church in the seventeenth century.) While Russian writer Andrei Bely (1880-1934) is associated more with the Symbolist than the Futurist movement, his early novels *The Silver Dove* [Serebrianyĭ golub’] (1909) and the widely translated *Petersburg* (1916) exemplify his generation’s avant-garde literary interest in sound play (especially with unusual consonant clusters!) as a means of storytelling and verbal expression (p.c. Boris Gasparov September 9, 2009; cf. Maguire and

---

<sup>4</sup> Shklovsky first introduced this concept in print in 1914, in the essay *Voskreshenie slova* (The resurrection of the word), published in St. Petersburg.

<sup>5</sup> See Markov for more on Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchënykh’s 1913 declaration *The Word as Such* (1968:129-131).

Malmstad 1978. See also Bely's "sound poem" *Glossolalia* [1917]). Notably, Bely visited Georgia three times, in 1927, 1928, and 1929. His friendship with members of the Georgian avant-garde *literati* (T'itsian T'abidze, P'aolo Iashvili, and Grigol Robakidze in particular), as documented in his letters from this period, suggest that he had an intense emotional and intellectual attachment to Georgia and planned to return there and write a novel on the theme of "production" which would be based there (Magarotto 1985). Bely died in 1934 due to complications following brain hemorrhage, however, before he had a chance to realize his intentions.

As accounts of this period suggest, some zaum' poets (*zaumniki*) found the language in Georgian song particularly suitable to this kind of linguistic experimentation. Hence, while Aleksandr Pushkin, recounting his eleven-day visit to Tbilisi in 1829, wrote, "The sound of Georgian song is pleasant. They translated one song for me word-for-word; it is apparently of relatively recent origin; in it can be heard a kind of eastern nonsense [*vostochnaia bessmyslitsa*] which has its own poetic value" (Pushkin 1975:364), by 1916 Muscovite zaum' founder and leading theoretician Aleksei Kruchënykh (1886-1968) and his colleagues were flocking to Tbilisi for the inspiration and suitable social atmosphere to realize their radical aesthetic.

Among the leading *zaumniki* was Ilia Zdanevich (1894-1975), known in Europe after 1921 by the pseudonym Iliazd (a contraction of his first and last name). Iliazd was born in Tbilisi to Mikhail Zdanevich, a French teacher of Polish-Russian origin, and Valentina Gamq'relidze, a native Georgian pianist who had studied with Tchaikovsky (p.c. Dennis Ioffe February 28, 2009). He and his brother K'irile, a visual artist, shared a fascination with language and poetry as both sight and sound; according to one source, "day and night music and singing could be heard coming from their parents' [Tbilisi] apartment" (Dzutsova 1989:20). Ilia and K'irile Zdanevich

received their higher education in St. Petersburg, where they first became acquainted with the Futurist movement and befriended leading exponents of the Russian avant-garde.

Upon his return to Tbilisi in 1917 Iliazd founded the Futurist publishing and pedagogical association 41° in cooperation with Aleksei Kruchënykh (who had dodged the Russian war draft by fleeing to the Caucasus, arriving in Tbilisi in 1916) (Kruchënykh 1995 [1932]:15) and Russian zaumnik Igor Terentiev. In 1920 he received authorization from the Georgian Republic's Committee on the Arts to continue his education in Paris. While he was waiting for his visa, the Bolshevik invasion of Tbilisi put an end to the first independent Georgian Republic. Iliazd's colleagues scattered and Futurist activity in Tbilisi ground to a halt (Elizbarashvili 1989:14). Iliazd would finally arrive in Paris in November of 1921 and remain based there for the rest of his life.

While the extent to which the traditional music of his native Georgia served as inspiration is unclear, Iliazd's "orchestral poems" attempted to translate vocal polyphony to the printed page as a kind of textural intervention in the multi-sensory "poetry of the future". As he described it:

The orchestral poem, which I created in 1913, carries forward the task of liberating poetic language in a new direction. We call orchestral poetry that poetry written for several voices simultaneously, each voice having its particular theme. Voices are heard, simultaneously, declaiming either in unison (in chorus) or each a different part. In orchestral poetry, poetic language is wrenched out of its individual framework and finally set free. (cited in Le Gris-Bergmann 1987:27)

Iliazd's "orchestral poems" translated non-referential language of formal rather than semantic import and polyphonic texture to the visual plane. In Tbilisi's crowded cafés and cabarets, performers would vocalize his "scores" in a small ensemble format, thereby achieving a close

approximation of traditional Georgian polyphony—which is rich in vocables, or non-referential sung words—which lacked only the element of definite pitch. [SLIDE 1]

Zaum' expert Gerald Janecek has used the one-act “drama-piece” *lidantJU fAram* (“Le-Dantiu as Beacon”)<sup>6</sup> (1923) to investigate possible Russian- and Georgian-language influences on Iliazd's approach to zaum'. He suggests that the high incidence of the phoneme [x] in this piece “may reflect the influence of Georgian, where that consonant is quite prominent” (Janecek and Riggs 1987:224) and systematically lists word-initial consonant clusters in *lidantJU* which are attested in Georgian, but not in Russian—for example, *bž*, *gz*, *lt*, *mž*, and *mz* (ibid. 234). He also draws attention to the graphemes *h*, *ψ*, and *ç* [SLIDE 2], remarking that they “happen also to represent Georgian phonemes” (ibid.) While the phonemes /h/ and /ts'/ are indeed phonemes which exist in Georgian but not in Russian, it is unclear what phoneme he intends the grapheme /ψ/ to represent. Most commonly, the grapheme *ψ* represents the Greek or early Cyrillic *phoneme sequence* /ps/—a sequence indeed common in Georgian but not in Russian. Presumably the author mistook this grapheme for a single Georgian letter or phoneme.

After Georgia's annexation by the Bolsheviks and the flight of most Russian zaumniki, Georgian Futurists developed an even more radical orientation to the word as non-interpretable “object” under the leadership of Simon Chikovani (1902-66). Iliazd's brother, the artist K'irile Zdanevich, wrote in his diary in 1963, “In literature the poet Simon Chikovani was my godfather” (Dzutsova 1989:24). Following the lead of the zaumniki and inspired by innovations in cinema and typographical experimentation, Chikovani and the Georgian Futurists sought a new, untranslatable yet universally accessible language “to replace the subjectivism of traditional literary discourse” (Ram 2004:381). The first “stanza” of Chikovani's *Tsira* [Georgian female

---

<sup>6</sup> Mikhail Le-Dantiu (1891-1917) was a Russian avant-garde artist whom Iliazd befriended in Petersburg in 1911; he died young on a World War I battlefield.

name], written in 1925, incorporates the common western Georgian sung vocable *odelio(do)*. Along with the “refrain” (“ude bude...”), it unfolds morpho-syntactically in patterns of partial reduplication like a typical sung vocable sequence. **[SLIDES 3 and 4]**

In brief conclusion, my outline of the mutually cooperative Russian and Georgian avant-garde poets’ vibrant activity in World War I- and Menshevik-era Tbilisi, and the art of trans-rational sound poetry they espoused, has staked a claim for the importance of the poetic resources of the Georgian language and, in particular, the resources of idiosyncratically Georgian *sung language* in the Tbilisi-based Futurist expressive milieu.

## References Cited

- Dzutsova, Irine  
1989 K'. Zdanevich. Shemokmedebiti biografiis purtslebi. *In* k'irile zdanevichi, ilia zdanevichi. gamopenis k'at'alogi. T. Sanik'idze, ed. Pp. 20-24. Tbilisi: Ministry of Culture of the Georgian SSR.
- Elizbarashvili, Nonna  
1981 Zhivye stranitsy letopisi. *Literaturnaia Gruzii* 8:202-215.
- Elizbarashvili, N.  
1989 Tbilisis mxat'ruli tskhovreba XX sauk'unis p'irvel ataul ts'lebshi. *In* K'irile zdanevichi, ilia zdanevichi. Gamopenis k'at'alogi. T. Sanik'idze, ed. Pp. 10-15. Tbilisi: Ministry of Culture of the Georgian SSR.
- Erkomaishvili, Anzor  
2001 Introduction. *In* Drinking Horns and Gramophones 1902-1914: The First Recordings in the Georgian Republic. New York: Traditional Crossroads.
- Erkomaishvili, Anzor and Vakhtang Rodonaia  
2006 Georgian Folk Song: The First Sound Recordings (1901-1914). Tbilisi: International Centre for Georgian Folk Song.
- Jaliashvili, Maia  
2007 Ts'minda p'oeziis ordenis raindebi. *In* Tsisperq'ants'elebi: 100 leksi. M. Jaliashvili, ed. Pp. 3-27. Tbilisi: Int'elekt'i.
- Kittler, Friedrich A.  
1990 Discourse Networks 1800/1900. Michael Metteer with Chris Cullens, transl. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- Kruchenykh, Alexei  
1995 [1932] Our Arrival: From the History of Russian Futurism. Moscow: RA.
- Janecek, Gerald J. and Garrett H. Riggs  
1987 Il'ja Zdanevich's *zaum'*. *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics* XXXV-XXXVI:217-237.
- Le Gris-Bergmann, Françoise  
1987 Iliazd and the Constellation of his Oeuvre. *In* Iliazd and the Illustrated Book. A. Isselbacher, ed. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.
- Magarotto, Luigi  
1985 Andrey Bely in Georgia: Seven Letters from A. Bely to T. Tabidze. *Slavonic and East European Review* 63(3):388-416.

- Maguire, Robert A. and John E. Malmstad  
1978 Translators' Introduction. *In* Andrei Bely: Petersburg. Robert A. Maguire and John E. Malmstad, transl. and ed. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- Markov, Vladimir  
1968 Russian Futurism: A History. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Nikol'skaia, T.  
1980 Russian Writers in Georgia in 1917-1921. *In* The Ardis Anthology of Russian Futurism. Ellendea Proffer and Carl R. Proffer, ed. Pp. 295-326. Ann Arbor: Ardis.
- Novak, David  
2008 2.5 x 6 Metres of Space: Japanese Music Coffeehouses and Experimental Practices of Listening. *Popular Music* 27(1):15-34.
- Prentice, Will  
2000 The Gramophone Goes East. *Playback: The Bulletin of the National Sound Archive (UK)* 23:4-6.
- Pushkin, Aleksandr S.  
1975 Puteshestvie v Arzrum (1829). *In* Sobranie sochineniĭ. Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura.
- Ram, Harsha  
2004 Modernism on the Periphery: Literary Life in Postrevolutionary Tbilisi. *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 5(2):367-82.
- Sher, Benjamin  
1990 Translator's Introduction: Shklovsky and the Revolution. *In* Theory of Prose. Pp. xv-xxi. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press.
- Shklovsky, Viktor  
1990 Theory of Prose. B. Sher, transl. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press.
- Sterne, Jonathan  
2005[2003] The Audible Past: The Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Weidman, Amanda J.  
2003 Guru and Gramophone: Fantasies of Fidelity and Modern Technologies of the Real. *Public Culture* 15(3):453-576.