CAROLINE BITHELL
(UK)

INTERCULTURAL MUSICKING IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD: ONLINE GEORGIAN SINGING WORKSHOPS IN TIMES OF COVID

In 2020, the world changed dramatically. Extended lockdowns imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching impacts on our day-to-day lives and made social gatherings and travel impossible. At the same time, the rapid evolution of digital technologies opened up new possibilities for us to meet in the virtual world via web-based platforms such as Zoom. Lectures and conferences were not the only things to move online. Musical ensembles also experimented with new kinds of rehearsals and performances using the new technologies, and before long it was possible for members of the general public to participate in a range of interactive, leisure-time activities from the comfort (and isolation) of their own homes. These activities included singing workshops that were accessible to anyone with an internet connection. Among those offering such experiences were a number of Georgian singers whose annual schedule would normally include delivering workshops overseas or hosting groups of foreign singers in Georgia. In some cases, summer singing holidays were already at an advanced stage of planning, and finding a way of reshaping the event for online delivery was preferable to cancelling it completely. In other cases, moving to the online format allowed teachers to maintain their professional connections with specific groups of singers overseas.

My own attendance at a series of online Georgian singing workshops – mostly during evenings and weekends – provided a welcome respite from my ever more complex job as head of a university Music Department. More importantly, it enabled me to maintain contact with my current research area and observe significant new developments as they unfolded. Attending workshops led by several different teachers allowed me to compare and contrast the sessions with one another, as well as with my experience of attending similar events in person. Points of interest included teaching style, choice of repertoire, and the kind of resources that were provided before and after the workshop to reinforce individual learning and provide additional context. I was also curious about participant demographics. Who attended the sessions? Where were they based? What connections (if any) did they already have with Georgia, with the workshop leader, or with one another? In the first half of this paper, I offer brief descriptions of a selection of workshops led by different teachers. I then identify a range of advantages, rewards, and legacies from the perspective of both teachers and participants. Finally, I offer preliminary reflections on the significance of these trends in relation to topical themes and issues in ethnomusicology and intercultural studies.

Tamar Buadze was one of several teachers from different countries who were invited to give evening workshops using the Zoom platform as part of the project ChorOnline ("choir online"), hosted by Franziska Welti and colleagues in Winterthur, Switzerland. This project grew out of the weekly choir rehearsals of Singfrauen Winterthur and Singfrauen Berlin, both directed by Franziska, which switched to an online format following the March 2020 lockdown. Tamar's workshops were delivered through the medium of German (which she speaks fluently) but with team members offering to provide translation (into English and Italian) using Zoom's "chat" function. Tamar has longstanding connections with both Switzerland and Germany, so for the "local" participants the

online workshops were a continuation of the kind of work they had already undertaken in person. Many of the songs could be found in the collection *Songbook Georgia / Liederbuch Georgien*, compiled by Tamar Buadze and Imke McMurtrie, and copies of the lyrics, musical scores, and translations could be downloaded from ChorOnline's Dropbox space. Progress was aided greatly by the fact that participants had access to the scores, although not everyone could read musical notation. Participants had some choice in how they "used" the session. For example, when Tamar sang one line of a song, individual participants (with their own microphone switched off) could choose either to sing along with her or to try singing a different part in harmony. Tamar accompanied herself on panduri and was also joined for part of each session by one or two of her sons, so was able to demonstrate how the song should sound with two or three parts together. Each workshop began with a series of physical and vocal warm-ups, accompanied by comments about mood, intention, and inner disposition, as well as the quality of voice we should try to cultivate when singing Georgian folk songs. Tamar's view of singing as a means to fortify oneself accorded well with the sense of isolation and anxiety that we faced at the height of the pandemic. The repertoire itself was weighted towards women's songs, including Tamar's own arrangements of Laz songs, and we usually worked on two or three new songs in the main part of each 90-minute workshop.

The workshops led by Nino Naneishvili, which I attended over several months in 2020, took a different form. Nino offered a two-hour workshop every Saturday and Sunday and participants could choose to attend either one or both. The workshops were delivered in English but attracted singers from a range of countries, including the UK, Canada, the United States, France, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Finland, and Australia, with numbers varying from one session to the next: it was this group that later gave rise to the ensemble which featured in the concert of foreign choirs streamed during the 2020 International Symposium on Traditional Polyphony. Many of the participants had already attended workshops led by Nino in Georgia or their own countries, and some of us had already met one another in Georgia. Others had seen the workshops advertised on Facebook or heard about them through friends. To begin with, Nino focused on a different genre each week. We worked our way through Christmas and Easter songs, healing songs, lullabies, wedding songs, work songs, weather songs, city songs, and church songs. A few days in advance, Nino would send us a PowerPoint file packed with historical and contextual information and with links to audio and video recordings, and after each workshop, she would send audio recordings of each voice part of the song we had learned. She then moved on to a second set of workshops, this time focusing on a different geographical region each week. In this way, participants became more familiar with the musical repertoires and singing styles of Svaneti, Megrelia, Guria, Kakheti, Tusheti, and so on. The stories Nino told about the songs and their deeper meanings, the people who sang them, and associated rituals and customs helped bring to life the world in which the songs had their roots. Nino taught the songs aurally, without reference to a score. She would demonstrate a line and we would all repeat. Sometimes she indicated the direction of the melody with her hand; sometimes she used the fingers on one hand to help clarify the size of an interval or the order of notes in a particular motif. After a few repetitions, we would take turns to unmute ourselves and attempt to sing the line alone. This meant that progress was comparatively slow, especially on days when larger numbers of people attended, and most sessions were devoted to a detailed study of a single song. From my perspective, this way of working provided a welcome workout for the brain as well as the voice, challenging me to devise ways of conceptualizing and memorizing complex melodic lines and their ornamental or modal inflections.

Nino then had the inspired idea of taking us on a virtual tour of Georgia by visiting singers in different regions, who then acted as guest teachers for our roving Zoom meetings. For some of the older singers, this was their first experience of video conferencing: they were astounded by the notion that the people they could see and hear on screen were in such faraway corners of the world and they were delighted that we were able to visit them in this way. If there was no internet connection, Nino would make a video recording of her guest teacher demonstrating a song and play that back for us later using Zoom's "share screen" function. As participants, this was as close as we could get to being in Georgia and encountering the songs in their natural habitat. In the home of 87-year-old Maro Zhuzhunadze, for example, we were shown the carpets she was taught to weave by her mother, who had also taught her the lullaby she was now sharing with us while she rocked a wooden cradle. Nino's role had now changed to that of cultural go-between, curating and contextualizing the visits she had arranged for us, acting as interpreter, and guiding her guest teachers as to when they might need to slow down, repeat a line or break it up into smaller, more manageable units.

The workshops led by Zoé Perret combined aspects of those led by Tamar and Nino, as already described, with additional innovations. Of French origin but a long-time resident of Georgia, Zoé is now a respected performer of Georgian songs. The fact that she herself learned these songs as a non-Georgian added further nuance to the way in which she acted as a bridge between Georgian culture and the world of her foreign students. Her workshops were delivered in French, which was also the mother tongue of most participants. For each session, she was joined by either Koka Khijakadze or Damiane Gordeladze, and so was able to demonstrate two parts of the song against which participants could sing a third voice part. Zoé's focus was not simply teaching the songs but also developing vocal technique. Like Tamar, she began each session with warm-up exercises and she gave advice on how we might improve breath control, tone quality, and the way we shaped the melodic line. Individuals could, if they wished, try singing on their own with their microphone switched on and Zoé would then offer more specific stylistic and technical advice. The supporting materials she prepared included audio tracks featuring individual voices and also different combinations of voices, meaning that we could listen to any two voices together and practice adding the third voice ourselves.

Malkaz Erkvanidze tested the potential of the online format differently when he offered an intensive course in harmonization and improvisation, with a focus on traditional Georgian chant. Rather than learning repertoire, we were offered an initiation into music theory and performance practice that was informed by Malkhaz's own research into modal and harmonic systems, principles of improvisation, and other aspects of the musical grammar of the different chant schools. Spread over eight weeks, the course was designed for a small group of participants who consequently received a lot of individual attention but also needed to work hard: the bar was set high and the course demanded an advanced level of both vocal and mental agility. We were given exercises to work on during the weekly two-hour classes and we also needed to set aside a substantial amount of time for independent practice between classes. This might, for example, require us to record ourselves singing one voice part and then explore different ways of improvising a second part while remaining within the stylistic boundaries as they had been explained to us. The opportunity to replay the Zoom recording after each class was invaluable for consolidating our learning – something which would not have been possible for a workshop delivered in person unless it had been filmed specifically for this purpose.

My final example takes the form of another intensive program devised by the US-based association Village Harmony in partnership with the ensemble Zedashe. Village Harmony has a long

history of offering study-performance camps in Georgia. When the summer camp planned for 2020 had to be abandoned, a decision was made to reshape the event as a condensed week-long course to be delivered online using the platform Thinkific. This attracted a comparatively large number of participants, the majority based in the USA and a few others joining from Canada, the UK, Corsica, Iran, Australia, and New Zealand. While some of those who enrolled in the course had already met through other Village Harmony projects, a surprising number had no prior connection with either Village Harmony or Georgia. Several members of Zedashe were together in the same building in Sighnaghi for the entire week: this meant that they could teach in different combinations (with three voices present at all times) and could also include dance lessons with live music accompaniment. Over six consecutive days, we worked on ten songs drawn from different genres and regions. The range, quality, and sheer volume of supporting materials were astounding. Resources uploaded in advance included articles, films, and websites about Georgian history, culture, and language. Once the course was underway, new audio-visual materials were released every day as each new song was introduced during the live teaching sessions. These included additional teaching videos to be studied independently as a complement to the live workshops, recordings of single voice parts slowed down to 75% or 50% of the original speed to enable us to decipher the melismatic and microtonal passages more easily, and audio tracks accompanied by scrolling lyrics that allowed us to sing along directly with the recording. In the live sessions, Zedashe's streamlined teaching (led by Ketevan Mindorashvili) was punctuated by observations about the aesthetic and psycho-cultural dimensions of traditional singing practices, information about sources and variants, explanations of Zedashe's own research methods and artistic practice, and responses to questions posted via the "chat" function. We were encouraged to upload audio recordings of ourselves singing individual voice parts in between sessions and these were then mixed by the Village Harmony team to create trios. The week ended with participants zooming in to a high-spirited supra in Sighnaghi, in the course of which some of these virtual trios "performed" in between the many songs and dances offered by Zedashe. We raised our glasses to a series of toasts in celebration of our extraordinary time together: "Friendship has no borders" – "We exist in a magical world" – "We are far away but we are together".

These snapshots of five very different approaches to presenting workshops online point to some of the unexpected rewards that emerged from an enforced compromise – one which might have seemed to promise little more than an impoverished shadow of "the real thing". In polyphonic singing, the need for co-presence, as well as co-sounding, is fundamental and any attempt to replicate the experience under conditions of isolation would seem at best counterintuitive. It is true that we missed the opportunity to stand close together in the same space, to feel the vibrations of other voices, to weave our voices together at the moment, to spin out harmonies under the stars, side-by-side with our Georgian friends. Yet there were many other ways in which we could engage with the songs and with one another through the creative reimagining of the online format. These experiments also opened up new possibilities that could not so readily have been incorporated into an in-person workshop. In the process, teachers and participants acquired new skills and approaches which, rather than being set aside as life returns to normal, may now be taken forward to enrich future work.

The most obvious benefit for teachers was that the workshops provided a much-needed source of income at a time when the pandemic had brought much regular work to a standstill. Different workshop leaders and event organizers adopted different approaches to financial arrangements.

While some workshops had a set fee, others simply invited donations. In the case of ChorOnline, it was important to the organizers that the workshops should be accessible to anyone who wished to attend. Deciding that payment should be at the discretion of the participant took into account the unequal spending power of individuals in different parts of the world and also the unexpected financial difficulties faced by many people during the pandemic. This approach can be seen as part of a culture of care, underpinned by a recognition of the power of singing to support individual well-being, especially in times of crisis. It was deemed equally important that teachers should be paid well for their work and the ChorOnline team was able to secure additional support for the project from the city of Winterthur.

Through their experience in online delivery, teachers gained valuable new technical and pedagogical skills. They were also able to reach a larger and more international audience for their work, thereby expanding their professional networks. Lea Hagmann, in a paper about ChorOnline presented at a conference of the British Forum for Ethnomusicology in November 2020, highlighted a further benefit reported by some teachers, which she termed "freedom to transit one's own culture without 'ethnomusicological orthodoxy'" – that is, the freedom workshop leaders enjoyed to teach in their way using their material, without feeling constrained by the ethos of their usual working environment. Another unexpected reward emerges from the case of Nino Naneishvili – namely, the way in which the workshop group provided the inspiration and opportunity for her to undertake new explorations of her own, first through the work involved in the compilation of her weekly PowerPoint presentations and later through her visits to singers in different parts of the country. Nino spoke of this as resembling an archaeological expedition that allowed her not only to unearth new songs and rituals to share with us but also to discover new things for herself.

For workshop participants, too, there were advantages to these new ways of working. Some would have been prevented from attending workshops in Georgia or elsewhere due to a variety of logistical and financial constraints, including prohibitively expensive long-distance travel, the additional cost of residential workshops, and the impossibility of taking an extended leave of absence from family or work commitments. Removal of these obstacles made the workshops accessible to a more diverse audience. The combination of affordability and the feasibility of fitting short workshops into a domestic or home-working schedule also offered more frequent opportunities to learn directly from culture-bearers and opened up access to a larger choice of teachers. My own attendance at a wide range of workshops revealed a complex web made up of intersecting networks of singing enthusiasts from across the world who now came together in different combinations, moving with relative ease from one group or virtual location to another.

The online format itself offered certain practical advantages. Meetings on Zoom worked efficiently as multilingual spaces when simultaneous translation was provided using the "chat" function. The "chat" also served as a convenient place to post lyrics, share files and website links, or ask questions. Scores and videos could be displayed using the "share screen" option, without the need for additional equipment. Workshops could easily be recorded using Zoom's built-in software and then shared, enabling participants to review the teaching session as often as they wished. Supplementary resources for independent study could also be housed online.

Workshops of this kind played a vital role in enabling members of the international Georgian singing community to keep alive their social as well as musical connections with Georgia and with one another. At a time when social contact was reduced to the bare minimum, tools such as Zoom opened up potent new spaces for sociability, and regular meet-ups online quickly became part of

our new routines and rituals. We learned how to be different kinds of people who make music together, and we discovered that it was still possible (as suggested in my account of the supra with Zedashe) to experience powerful moments of ecstatic togetherness whose affect was made manifest through the emotive responses posted in the "chat". In singing "Together Apart", we kept alive our memories, our hopes, and our humanity.

The dimensions identified above resonate with some of the core concepts underpinning contemporary directions in ethnomusicology: connection and community, agency, and self-representation. Some also chime with ethical principles and strategic goals in the realm of human rights and environmental protection: mutual respect and empowerment, sustainability, and resilience. Others map on to drives for more equitable distribution of wealth and support for grassroots, community-focused micro-enterprises: creativity and reciprocity, entrepreneurship and innovation. The workshops themselves can be seen as highly effective examples of applied ethnomusicology. Workshop leaders, aided in some cases by a supportive team of facilitators, used novel means to transmit cultural understanding and musical competency to a diverse, non-academic audience. The musical experience they enabled provided psychological sustenance as well as equipping participants with tangible skills. The cultivation of a culture of care is further suggestive of what has been identified as a feminist approach to artistic and social practice. In this regard, it is also interesting to note that almost all the teachers and facilitators of the workshops I have discussed in this paper were female, with women also accounting for the majority of workshop participants: this is a significant finding that invites further reflection.

As a broader cultural phenomenon, the workshop is an important focus of investigation as an embodiment of music in its participatory mode – an activity designed to enable people to make music together, rather than a specialized presentation of a musical product for an audience to consume. Georgian singing workshops have always attracted participants from many different cultures but in its online manifestation, the potency of the workshop as a space for intercultural musicking becomes even more apparent. At a historical moment whose dominant tropes were fear and loss, restriction and confinement, the closure of physical borders paradoxically opened up a new order of intercultural possibilities – in this instance, with Georgia's polyphonic song heritage at its heart.

References

Buadze, T., & McMurtrie, I. (2018). *Songbook Georgia: Georgia's World Cultural Heritage – Liederbuch Georgien: Georgiens Weltkulturerbe*. Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag

Hagmann, L. (2020). ChorOnline: A Transnational Singing Project Fostering Applied Ethnomusicology. *BFE One Day Conference*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ftS1YQi4IE&t=3s

Workshops

Tamar Buadze's workshops were part of the workshop programme offered by ChorOnline (https://en.choronline.com/).

The workshops led by Nino Naneishvili, Zoé Perret and Malkhaz Erkvanidze were publicised via Facebook and email.

Zedashe's workshops were part of the programme of summer camps offered by Village Harmony (www.villageharmony.org).