

NATALIA ZUMBADZE  
(GEORGIA)

## CONCERNING THE POLYPHONY OF KHEVSURIAN SINGING

Khevsurian music is one of the least studied out of all the Georgian regional traditions. At the very dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and starting with the first Khevsurian work being recorded by D. Arakishvili, Khevsurian singing was assessed as something primitive, as evidence of an approximative form of general Georgian singing in the distant past, a branch of which had stopped in its own embryonic state. This idea was based on four samples recorded on the spur of the moment from several Khevsurs in Tianeti at that time, was established for a prolonged period in Georgian musicology, and retained pertinence when recording new Khevsurian material.

Khevsurian music is distinguished from other dialects in the Georgian polyphonic culture by the prevailing role of monophony, the less specific share of drone polyphony, and the existence of a unison singing tradition in the men's vocal practice. It is only possible to explain this complex, heterogeneous phenomenon only based on recorded expedition material. The present study follows this path. This study's focus is some tremendously important recordings – published and unreleased (kept at the Tbilisi State Conservatoire Ethnomusicological Laboratory Archive. Hereafter: TSC ELA), directly from Khevsureti, as well as from other Georgian regions where there are compact communities of Khevsurs. The expeditions were led by S. Mshvelidze (1929), S. Aslanishvili (1948), G. Chkhikvadze (1953, 1967), M. Jordania (1959a – Tianeti District, 1959b – Kazbegi District), and K. Rosebashvili (1962). In this audio material, the features, and qualities of traditional Khevsurian singing and some new trends that later become permanent are reflected. Different forms of Khevsurian vocal practices are presented: drone polyphonic singing, solo singing with instrumental accompaniment, monophonic singing in voices with various functions, solo singing without any accompaniment, and unison singing. Sometimes many of these forms are within single songs as well.

### Drone Polyphonic Singing

In academic works, usually two examples of Khevsurian two-part polyphony are mentioned – *Khutshabat gateneba* and *Perkhisuli* – leaving an impression that the Khevsurs have no other two-part polyphonic songs<sup>1</sup>. This is not true at all: First, in 1939, 3 drone polyphonic songs were recorded in the Tianeti District by M. Mshvelidze: *Khevsuruli*, *Giravs da modgeba mutsal* and *khutshabat gateneba*. All three are examples of traditional Georgian drone polyphony with a two-step bass voice separated by a second. It is notable that two-part polyphonic songs were performed both by men and women at that time; it must not be an accident that the song title *Khevsuruli* had also been sung in two voices by the Pshavians (Tsalughelashvili and Mokverashvili are Pshavian surnames – N.Z.).

Only one of the mentioned drone polyphony works is notated, *Khutshabat gateneba*, and incorrectly at that with a single-step bass that only comes in at cadences. Based on this single exam-

<sup>1</sup> Some researchers think that only some exceedingly brief excerpts of *Perkhisas*, a drone polyphonic round dance song, were recorded in the 1930s (Jordania, 2006:198).

ple, Khevsurian drone polyphony is considered an early stage of the emergence of drone polyphony in Georgian folk music. Still, a two-step bass not just at cadences is heard in phonograph recordings of the same song despite the low fidelity. Therefore, the reasoning on which this idea rooted in Georgian ethnomusicology is based, is non-existent, it is founded on an objectively erroneous idea<sup>2</sup>.

Some examples of traditional Khevsurian drone polyphony, as well as some round dance songs were recorded in 1948, 1953<sup>3</sup>, and 1959 (the last one in the Kazbegi District)<sup>4</sup>.

### **Solo Singing with Instrumental Accompaniment**

The polyphonic singing tradition with two steps in the bass is perfectly reflected in solo singing with panduri accompaniment. Some examples of this are *Leksoba pandurze* (1929); as well as *Pandurze leksoba*, *Koba Tsiskaraulis leksi*, *Beghliskruli*, *Gvaris simghera*, *Beghliskruli* (1948); *Sakhumaro*, *Khevsuruli leksoba*, and *Dzveleburu simghera* (1959, Kazbegi District); *Khevsuruli simghera* (1962, Shrine celebration of Atengeni); and *Leks getkvist Itirishvili* (1967).

It is significant that the main function of an instrument in the Georgian way of life is to accompany singing, which implies “shebaneba” – providing a different underlying voice part, a term expressing polyphony. As S. Orbeliani explains it, “bani” means the harmonization of another voice. A polyphonic, as well as a monophonic song can be accompanied by an instrument, but the instrument has a special role in the second case when a person is alone and has no one else to sing the other polyphonic voice parts with them. The instrument takes their place, “sings” their parts. For solitary Georgians, an instrument is a type of means of performing a polyphonic song. This hypothesis of mine is supported by some information from M. Shilakadze, according to whom the panduri, chonguri, changi, chianuri, and gudastviri primarily accompany monophonic songs. This is also indicated by the fact of songs having two forms – polyphonic without accompaniment and monophonic with instrumental accompaniment.

Tushetian songs have also survived to the present day through basically monophonic forms with instrumental accompaniment. But according to some Tushetian narrators, the instrument and bass voice alternate with each other in a song. Therefore, N. Maisuradze’s hypothesis is logical that Tushetian songs were in two-part polyphony and the accordion accompaniment in monophonic songs must have taken the place of the bass part. The bass is replaced by instruments in Khevsurian songs as well. This is corroborated by some information from a Khevsur storyteller, “They sang with a panduri without any vocal harmonization”, i.e., when there was not any vocal harmonization, they then sang with a panduri.

It is also evident from Georgian folk poetry that instrumental accompaniment really means the polyphonic harmonization of a song. In Khevsurian poems, the panduri is directly mentioned as something that sings, follows, or provides the vocal harmonization, whereas the melody played on a panduri is called the “bani”, the vocal harmonization. According to the verbal text of a song recorded in 1967, the performer asks the instrument for “mkhris mitsema” (support, or literally “providing a shoulder”). It is a fact that here, the provision of vocal harmonization is implied by

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<sup>2</sup> One song is found in the Khevsurian expedition phonograph recordings in which there is a one-step bass, and it joins with the central tone only at the end of verses. This is *Khevsuruli* recorded by G. Chkhikvadze in 1953.

<sup>3</sup> This song was also recorded in a solo format from the same performer. In general, it is possible to sing a polyphonic song as a solo, but those who carry on the tradition usually refuse to do such performances.

<sup>4</sup> In comparison to the remaining works, this sample has a three-step bass line.

“mkhris mitsema” and that it was necessary to a Khevsur for a panduri to provide the bass or vocal harmonization, without which someone alone could not sing anything. As I. Javakhishvili observes, the panduri is sometimes called a “madzakhura” or “momdzakhneli” (modzakhili), with modzakhili being the same thing as a high bass.

Singing with instrumental accompaniment is polyphonic singing to a Georgian: the vocal melody here represents the top voice, whereas the instrumental melody performs the roles of the other voices. Therefore, the popularity of this type of singing in the vocal practices of some regions (including Khevsurian) is of no use as an argument for monophony. Instead, it must attest a forgotten tradition of drone polyphony.

It is true that the panduri has the function of providing vocal accompaniment and a singer must no longer be concerned about this in their own voice part, but sometimes this also happens: a vocal melody contains elements characteristic of a bass voice in a traditional Georgian polyphonic song (the lower tonic of the mode). Such songs are *Khevsuris leksi* (1959, Tianeti) and *Sulkhaneuri* (1967).

Accordions are also found as accompaniment for a song in the Khevsurian recordings, taking the place of the local instrument, the panduri<sup>5</sup>. The bass part of a traditional Georgian song is presented in the instrumental part of a song *Avai, lukhumiao* recorded in 1953. *Kalis simghera* recorded in 1948 is quite original. The vocal melody is a descending line characteristic of the Khevsurian men’s tradition starting from the highest pitch of the mode. The accordion accompaniment is in the European (major-minor) style, although the two steps separated by a second typical of Georgian singing accompaniments are distinct in the arpeggiated movement.<sup>6</sup> This example recorded at the end of the 1940s is clear proof of a melding of Georgian and European music rules in a seemingly quite conservative singing tradition such as the Khevsurian one.

### Monophonic Singing with Different Voice Parts

From the standpoint of polyphony, vocal lamentations are especially noteworthy. There are clearly two performers in a work recorded in 1948: the wailer and the mourner. Here, this might sound like real two-voice polyphony – the beginning of the wailer’s melody sometimes coincides with the ending of the mourner’s phrase, but due to the extremely low fidelity of the recording, it is difficult to ascertain this. If this is not the case, this monophonic melody still contains the melodies of two different voice parts. Such are the *Khmit tirilebi*, vocal lamentations performed solo and recorded in 1948, 1953, and 1959 (the last one being in Tianeti). In these examples, the mourner themselves sings the bass melody after finishing their own part, which can be explained by the recording being done in a non-traditional environment.

### Solo Singing

Solo songs performed without any accompaniment also contain some polyphonic features. Such examples are *Davnatri dabadebasa* and *Shamovkhe mtis arkhotisa* recorded in 1929. Those who perform them also take the lower tonic of the mode in the melody, which is usually done by the

<sup>5</sup> S. Makalatia also implies this when he writes: “In recent times the accordion has also been introduced here, which is played in the Khevsurian style as accompaniment.”

<sup>6</sup> According to M. Jordania, the adaptation of the accompaniment’s classic harmonic pairing (B-flat I-V43) to a melody based on an anhemitonic mode (C tonic) leaves a hilarious impression.

bass in a polyphonic Georgian song. The works *Kal-vazhis simghera* (1948)<sup>7</sup>, *Beghlis kruli* (1953), and *Tasshi shamgherneba* (1959, Kazbegi District). A bass like that of drone polyphony songs can also be harmonized to songs performed solo – *Tutil atirda tsiskvilsa* (1948, Chaura), *Pekhze simghera* (1953, Motsmao), *Shatil movida khokhobi* (1959a, Tianeti District).

There is evident potential for polyphony in a monophonic genre with a social purpose – children’s lullabies. Examples of these are nanas recorded in 1929 in the villages of Sachure, Chiaura, and Barisakho; as well as in 1959 in Tianeti and Kazbegi.<sup>8</sup>

### Singing in Unison

*Shavs ludsa, tsitel ghvinosa*<sup>9</sup>, a song recorded in 1929, is neither an example of drone polyphony, nor of unison singing – here the second performer clearly follows the lead without listening to him.<sup>10</sup> The same goes for the song *Usatauro* (during excessive feasting). *Tasshi mghera*, in which a unison takes the place of solo singing (1948) must be sung with an introduction, which is indicated by the repetition of the verbal text. After the conclusion of their own parts, the alternating soloists must sing the bass for each other.<sup>11</sup>

### Conclusion

It is made apparent by a fundamental study of expedition phonograph recordings from the 1920s to 1960s that the customary point of view established in Georgian musicology concerning Khevsurian singing is wrong.

#### It is incorrect that:

1. The existence of polyphony in Khevsureti only became known in the 1930-40s (Jordania, 1989:24). **This actually took place in the 1920s**

2. The Khevsurs primarily sing primitive monophonic songs in unison. Unison singing is a specific idiosyncrasy of Khevsurian music, implying the ancient qualities of the singing’s origins, and it represents an expression of the Khevsurian musical dialect’s archaism (Chkhilvadze (editor-compiler), 1960:XV; Garakanidze, 2011:28, 113). **On the contrary, this is the result of the drone polyphonic singing practice being forgotten;**

3. *Khutshabat gateneba* contains a germ of two-voice polyphony, whereas *Perkhisuli* is a shaped example of drone polyphony. **Actually, they are songs that have developed in precisely the same way.**

4. The bass of a Khevsurian song is based on a single harmonic function, whereas on the other hand a bass having two functions is found (Tsursumia (ed.), 2005:62).

#### It’s a fact that:

1. two-voice polyphony is not found in just two songs in Khevsureti: there are far more

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<sup>7</sup> The melody of this song recorded as a solo really represents the top voice of a drone polyphonic song.

<sup>8</sup> In M. Jordania’s opinion, the melodies of Khevsurian lullabies are based only on tonic harmony, but some features of dominant harmony are also found. The upward motion from the mode’s second step is considered by the scholar to be such a feature.

<sup>9</sup> G. Chkhikvadze had recorded a solo performance of “Shavs ludsa” in Khevsureti in 1953.

<sup>10</sup> In G. Chkhikvadze’s opinion, this is more a happenstance combination of two voices unrelated to each other than drone polyphony.

<sup>11</sup> The same song is recorded with solo performances in 1959 and 1962.

examples of this, they just have not been notated. The study of Khevsurian music was usually based on notated examples.

2. Songs are sung in two voices not by just men, but also by women, and not only do Khevsurs sing this way, but also Pshavians (known by *Khevsuruli simghera*).

3. The special place of solo songs with instrumental accompaniment in the Khevsurian repertoire is explained through the replacement of two-voice songs by such a performance.

4. Khevsurian *Khmit tirilebi*, vocal lamentations performed solo contain melodies in two voices having different functions. A necessary element of Georgian polyphony (the lower tonic of a mode) is manifested in solo songs, the potential of harmonizing with a bass is evident in a monophonic genre having a social purpose (in cradle lullabies).

5. Some works featuring a combination of Georgian and European music rules are already encountered in the 1940s in the Khevsurian singing tradition known for its conservatism.

The study of Khevsurian polyphony must continue in this direction. Intensive field work is necessary to find additional musical materials. While Khevsurs are still living in close-knit communities, this task is urgent.

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