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DUAL IDENTITY OF TRADITIONAL MUSIC: NATIONAL IN FORM, AND SOCIALIST IN CONTENT

Introduction

At the XVI Congress of the Communist Party in 1930, after having talked about the economic achievements of Soviet Socialist Republics and criticized capitalism, Stalin touched upon the issue of national cultures. He declared that socialism, which aimed at establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat and fusing nations on the earth, had a long path ahead. But before merging into a common culture, it was necessary to develop national cultures and reveal their full potential. He emphasized that culture “national in form and bourgeois in content” served to poisoning the masses with the poison of nationalism, whilst the goal of the culture “national in form and socialist in content” should be to educate the masses in the spirit of socialism and internationalism (Stalin, 1930:https://www.marxists.org/russkij/stalin/t12/t12_21.htm).

In 1932, the creative method of “Socialist Realism” became mainstream in the Soviet Union. Its goal was to promote the cult of Stalin and propagate the Soviet way of life through various forms of art. It was characterized by liberation from metaphoric thinking, optimistic perception of reality, folk nature, mass character and simplicity (Levanidze, 2020: 20-21). These laws applied to all branches of art, including the seemingly less tamed and abstract - music.

Folklore as a Tool for Soviet Propaganda

Until the 1930s, that is, until Stalin started talking about building the culture “national in form and socialist in content,” folklore was not yet regarded as a propaganda tool. Moreover, in the 1920s, certain artistic groups and organizations considered it a harmful remnant of the past and an expression of bourgeois culture (Miller, 2006:11-12). From the 1930s, in the wake of new culture policy, the attitude towards folk creativity changed.

From the 1930s, folklore was assigned the same task as literature - to show the world of Soviet people imbued with socialist construction and new spirit. The government considered ideological education for the potential authors of this “new folklore” as one of its tasks. Radio stations were installed in their homes, supplied them with magazines and newspapers, invited to large cities, presented the achievements of Soviet art to them, and delivered lectures for improving their moral and political views (ibid.:18).

In 1934, at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, Gorky called on poets and musicians to collaborate, to adjust new texts to the tunes of Russian, Ukrainian or Georgian folk songs, to create easily- and quickly-to-learn examples (Gorky, 1934:679-680).

Ideological work became main impetus for the creation of the so-called “Soviet folklore” in Georgia as well. Both professional composers and directors of folk ensembles create examples inspired by the new way of life.¹ These songs were performed by the choirs in both capital city and regions. Soviet folkloristics consider them a part of folk creativity.² The growth of interest to folklore is accompanied by the creation of a number of organizations working in folk creativity.³

The 1930s are marked in large-scale folklore events. In 1934, Tbilisi hosted the Olympiad of Transcaucasia Peoples’ Art, with the participation of hundreds of ensembles and individual performers from all three republics of Transcaucasia. Republican Olympiads were held in 1936 and 1938. A great event was the Decade of Georgian culture and art in Moscow in 1937, where folk song and dance took an important place.

The press of that period regarded folklore Olympiads as “celebration of Lenin-Stalin national policy”, a proof of the success for the art “national in form and socialist in content,” and wrote: “The motives of folk art have changed, *salamuri* sounds in a new way, Ashug sings in a new way, victorious worker dances in a new way... New life is being formed; a new person is coming with a new song, new music, new folk art” (“Komunisti”, #125, 1934:1).

Interrelation between old and new

During the Soviet period, songs with socialist content based on folk motifs became, with rare exceptions, a qualitatively different phenomenon from traditional Georgian music. Due to ideological mandates, these works emphasized submission to the verbal text reflecting the new life, resulting in schematic melodies, uniform meter and rhythm, limited independence of the voices, and, most importantly, the suppression of improvisation - an essential feature of traditional music that allows the development of complex polyphony, variation, and creative freedom. These songs were usually performed by large choirs, with doubled voices, directed by a conductor, a leveled regional performance style, and a

¹ In addition to the choirmasters’ recollections, this fact is also confirmed by archival documents. For example, according to the minutes of the meeting of the People’s Commissariat for Education in 1934, choirmaster Kirile Pachkoria was given a directive to include “collective farm” songs in the repertoire of the ethnographic choir (Central Archive of Recent History of the National Archives of Georgia. Fund 181, Inscription 1, File #468); According to the minutes of the jury session of the 5th All-Georgian Republican Olympiad on Folk Song and Dance (1938), preserved in the archives of the Art Department, the jury recognizes the necessity of composing new epoch songs on folk song motifs. And assigns the responsibility for this to the Union of Composers (Central Archive of Recent History of the National Archives of Georgia. Fund 2, Inscription 2, File #292).

² Grigol Chkhikvadze, Dimitri Arakishvili, Tamar Mamaladze, Vazha Gvakharia devoted special works to this issue; the scholars regarded these songs as “contemporary folklore”.

³ In 1932, folklore department was formed at the National Museum of Georgia, on the basis of which the Shota Rustaveli Department and Archive of Folklore were created later at the Institute of Georgian Literature; In 1935, Cabinet of Folk Music was created at Tbilisi Conservatoire; in 1936, Cabinet of Folk Art was created at the Department of Art Affairs, which was soon transformed into the Republican House of Folk Art; in 1931 and 1936, the Caucasus Institute of History and Archaeology (currently Institute of History and Ethnology) underwent reorganization; research of folklore became one of the priorities of humanities faculties at Tbilisi State University and other higher educational institutions in other cities of Georgia.

deliberately ceremonial character. Regarding this new layer of folklore, ethnomusicologist Tamar Meskhi rightly notes that although it grew out of Georgian roots and shared a common ground, it stood in stark contrast to peasant creativity, rich in archaic traditions (Meskhi, 2003:493).

After the outbreak of World War II, in addition to songs about Soviet leaders and the achievements of socialist labor, a new patriotic theme emerged - songs about struggle and self-sacrifice for the homeland. In the 1950s, this repertoire occupied an important place in the concert programs of folklore ensembles both in Tbilisi and in the regions (audio ex. 1-3). Although these songs did not completely replace traditional Georgian music, the style and aesthetics of socialist realism also influenced older genres of traditional music. Stalin's slogan „National in form and socialist in content“ did not mean only creation of the new. He implied putting national culture in the service of socialism. A notable example of this policy is the interpretation of the 12th-century poet Shota Rustaveli as a “forerunner of socialist thought” (Rumyantsev, 2017: <https://ge.boell.org/ka/2017/05/05/sazeimo-gonisziebebi-xalxistvis-transnacionaluri-mexsiereba-samxret-kavkasiashi>), or the 19th-century leader of the national liberation movement, Ilia Chavchavadze, as a “preacher of socialist ideas” (Machavariani, 2010: <https://tabula.ge/ge/news/540507-ilias-identipikatsia>). In the 1930s, the choirmasters who had been trained in singing and chanting before the Soviet occupation, in some cases, managed to demonstrate their talent and skill on the stage, to preserve traditional forms, in ethnomusicologist Edisher Garakanidze's words to “radiate primary folklore” (Garakanidze, 2007:99). However, despite this, with inappropriately increased composition of choirs, neglect of individualism and improvisation, uniform performance manner and character, impoverished repertoire (which was determined by banning the genres with religious function, on the one hand, and the choice of more appropriate examples for relatively large ensembles, on the other hand), traditional folk songs presented on the stage gradually changed their identity and began to resemble Soviet-era compositions in performance ethos and form (audio ex. 4, 5).

After De-Stalinisation, in the wake of a new understanding of nationalism in Georgia,⁴ performance of traditional music underwent changes: during the leader's lifetime, a large number of examples created on folk themes lost their relevance, the ensembles that appeared on the scene in the 1960s brought previously banned hymns, songs with religious content and other forgotten genres back to the stage. However, it remained a difficult task to escape the tendencies that emerged in the 1930s and to understand the performance of Georgian traditional music as a free creative process.

⁴ A number of Soviet history researchers (such as Ronald Grigor Suni, Claire Kaizer, Giorgi Maisuradze, Zaal Andronikashvili and others) regard the protest aroused in Georgian society following the condemnation of Stalin's cult at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party, and the events of March 1956 as the counting point of new Georgian Soviet nationalism.

Afterword

Georgia met the 1921 occupation, with stylistically rich and varied traditional music, which occupied an important place in the life of the society. The audio recordings from that period assure of high performance skills of the singers and chanters of the early 20th century.⁵ Great popularity and dissemination of traditional music is evidenced by the songs performed by Georgian prisoners of the First World War,⁶ or the recollections on the cadets of the First Republic of Georgia, who sang folk songs during the February occupation when fighting the enemy (Matikashvili, 1991:14).

The Soviet government did take care of folklore; financed numerous ensembles, organized large-scale events, encouraged performers, but by turning traditional music into a tool of political ideology the same government contributed to its degradation, which became even more visible in the process of generation change. The generations born in the Soviet period were less interested in authentic forms of folk song and tradition bearers still found in the villages of Georgia. In 1969, in a report of one of the expeditions, Ethnomusicologist Tamar Mamaladze conveyed this reality as follows: “Promotion and preservation of folk music creativity has turned into a state affair, but the opposite is happening. We are about to lose our national treasure... Even in the countryside there is a sense of indifference to old songs. Young generation is into love songs. There is no attention to those knowledgeable people who still remember the songs of their region”.⁷

The history of independent Georgia is a history of recovering erased memories and searching for identity. In recent decades, Georgian traditional music has tried to distance itself from its Soviet past, but the echoes of Soviet ideology can still be heard in contemporary performance of folklore and the discussions on this issue.

Audio Examples

Lashkruli simghera beladze (song about the Leader). Female chonguri players’ ensemble directed by Aleksandre Potskhverashvili. Recorded in 1952. Archive of the Georgian Public Broadcaster. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5aQk5fCuPEM>

Dideba stalins (Glory to Stalin). Ensemble directed by Vasil Makharadze. unknown date of recording. Archive of the Georgian Public Broadcaster. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=da_NLIj-jSM&list=PLue6znsWBAfdUX4MSh1O4SH3xSo-2Brix&index=2

Kartvel mkhedrebs (to Georgian Riders). Performed by the choir of the Georgian Ra-

⁵ See Georgian folk song: The First Sound Recordings (1901-1914). Tbilisi: The International Centre for Georgian Folk Song, 2006.

⁶ See Echoes from the Past: Georgian Prisoners’ Songs Recorded on Wax Cylinders in Germany 1916-1918. Tbilisi: Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Tbilisi State Conservatoire, 2014.

⁷ The archives of Ivane Javakishvili Institute of History and Ethnology. Tamar Mamaladze’s Fund. Report of the 1969 expeditions to Racha and Lechkhumi, folder #14, notebook VI.

- dio Committee under the direction of Avksenti Megrelidze and Vladimir Babilua. Recorded in 1951. Archive of the Georgian Public Broadcaster. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhO8eExe14c&list=PLue6znsWBAfdUX4MSh1O4SH3xSo-2Brix&index=28>
- Vtokhnot Simindi* (Let's hoe the cornfield). Ethnographic Choir of Eastern Georgia (Tbilisi). Directed by Sandro Kavsadze. Recorded in 1937. <https://audiomack.com/folkcentre/song/vtokhnot-simindi-2>
- Naninavda*. Female *chonguri* players' ensemble directed by Avksenti Megrelidze. Unknown date of recording. <https://audiomack.com/folkcentre/song/naninavda>

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Archival documents

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Report on the 1969 business trip to Racha and Lechkhumi. In the Archives of Ivane Javakhishvili Institute of History and Ethnology. Tamar Mamaladze Fund, folder #14, notebook VI.