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THE EMBRYO OF CHANGE: HEAVY ROCK, GENDER RELATIONSHIPS AND TRADITIONAL MUSIC-CULTURE IN GEORGIA

Popular and rock music have been topics of ethnomusicological study for several decades now. The invasion of the socialist world by Western youth culture, Pop and rock and their impact on the local youth and intellectual musical communities have been described in relation to various eastern-European music-cultures, including Bulgaria across the Black Sea (Levy 1992), Russia (Troitsky 1987), Poland and Hungary (Pekacz 1992); broader studies of rock music in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have been carried out by Pekacz (1994), Ramet (1994) and Ryback (1990). However, musicology in Georgia and the eastern socialist bloc has been governed from its beginnings by a preoccupation with the canon of Western classical music and the national folk and sacred church music, which have been viewed as the only forms of “serious” or “worthy” music. Mainstream musical and musicological communities in Georgia and other socialist countries viewed rock as “degenerate”, as is also noted in Claire Levy’s work on the influence of British rock in socialist Bulgaria (Levy 1992); as a by-product of the West’s “immoral” social developments, rock could not qualify as the art of music.¹

The aim of my article is to explore some possible directions in the study of rock music scene in Georgia. Analysis of Soviet and Eastern European rock music must incorporate such aspects as class, gender and nationality, how these identities influenced the development of rock in different regions as well as the differences between Western and Eastern rock, as Gaut has suggested (Gaut 1990: 250-1). I intend to focus particularly on the gender aspect of the development of rock in Georgia, against the broader background of gender relationships in the mainstream form of Georgian traditional folk music-culture. I shall explore the ways in which rock – a Western import in Eastern Europe and The Caucasus – has served as a marker of political transition and transformation in the expression of sexuality and gender relationships in post-socialist Georgia.

While popular music in eastern Europe and most other countries in the world has been gender-equal at least in terms of representation, the rock genre has been relatively resistant to women’s forays. Rock music is a genre heavily dominated by men in Georgia as elsewhere in the world and one that projects powerful images of social protest, alternative culture, identity, independence and resistance to the authority. I shall approach the study in two ways. The first is by explaining possible social-historical contexts and prerequisites for the advance of young women in the field of rock music in post-Soviet Georgia. The second is by examining the social, stylistic and expressive aspects of the music of the female rock band Embryon and its lead singer, rock singer-songwriter-guitarist Nino Leshchenko, as well as the complexities of the ways in which Embryon and Nino have subverted the ideals of patriarchal morality and standard feminine behaviour derived from this morality.

Despite the fact that rock, as a cultural form of expression, is still dominated by male artists and images of masculine power, the presence of women in rock from its beginnings has demonstrated that there is a strong tendency for women to project a powerful voice through this musical medium. Most female rockers have consciously or sub-consciously challenged male domination of the genre and especially patriarchal morality and the

pressure on women to comply with the norms of conventional femininity. As rock artists, women have creatively expressed conventionally male-associated feelings such as rage, power, anger, and frustration with societal restrictions (see Auslander 2004; Gaar 1992; Gottlieb and Wald 1994).

Georgian society is a patriarchal one in which women's roles are marginal and subordinated to male authority. One of the most enduring and audible reflections of social patriarchy in Georgian culture is the polyphonic folk song, a mainstream form of traditional Georgian music. Polyphonic choral music is primarily associated with masculine identity and male competence. Men's domination in the genres of polyphonic singing is embedded in a system of gender difference in terms of repertoire, performance context and musical style. As such, musical performance reflects as well as reinforces the conventional division into the public (men's) and domestic (women's) fields (see Chkhikvadze 1980; Tsitsishvili 2004 and 2005).

However, when I attended The First International Symposium of Polyphonic Cultures in Tbilisi, Georgia, in the autumn of 2002, I witnessed the conventional image of a docile femininity that dominated national rhetoric, public discourse and polyphonic song-culture being drastically (and pleasantly) shaken as I watched for the first time some brief TV footage of the girl rock band "Embryon", who had just returned from the UK after being named as the most successful band at the rock festival "In The City". The English rock journalist John Robb wrote of Embryon, "The band's appearance at In The City oozed a confidence that belied their short existence and their raw power and top tunes spat 'move over Kittie' whilst proving that making great rock music is not just the preserve of the more traditional Anglo-American axis" (Robb 2002). The first question that occurred to me after seeing "Embryon" was this: how can girls from a patriarchal society like Georgia's play guitars and drums and project powerful lyrics with such vigour and aggressiveness?² Clearly the emergence of Embryon within the male-dominated cultural and social milieu signalled a shift in the nation's gender-related sensibilities and women's role in the musical and sexual expressiveness. In order to cast light on this shift, I shall discuss some aspects of the development of rock music in eastern Europe in general, and in Georgia in particular.

Rock, socialism, individual freedom (subjectivity) and the nation

From the 1960s, when the totalitarian regime started to decline in the socialist bloc and the USSR, the first recordings of Western rock'n'roll bands such as The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd appeared. Westernised forms of Pop and rock became an important emotional outlet for young people as well as providing contexts for fantasising about stardom, economic prosperity and the ideal of a "good life," as associated with the West and especially, with Great Britain and the USA. Here I shall distinguish between the two forms of rock that existed in the Soviet Union. The first was the official and state-sponsored estrada [Soviet Pop] and its main medium, the VIA [*Vocal'no-Instrumental'ny Ansamb'l*], which means "Vocal-Instrumental Ensemble". The second form was an underground culture of rock bands that were not accepted officially because their sound was too Western and radically rocky for official Soviet ideology.

Some rock analysts such as Wicke (1992: 81), Mitchell (1992: 187), and Ryback (1990: 233) have argued that the underground rock culture subverted the socialist state system and was instrumental in effecting the destruction of Berlin wall and the collapse of Communism. In contrast, Pekacz (1994) has argued that rock, after all, was not as detrimental for Communism as it seemed to many analysts. After the end of Stalin's totalitarian regime, official communist ideology deviated from its strict line of socialist

realism and anti-Western bias and became two-faced: while official communist discourse was still critical of the capitalist West, unofficial life or what Pekacz calls the “operative” ideology of Soviet officials tolerated and even incorporated rock (Pekacz 1994: 44).

Many unofficial rock bands and artists started experimenting and mixing elements of local musical styles with those of Western rock. A typical example of this in Georgia is the music of the solo rock guitarist-instrumentalist Kako Vashalomidze and the rock-band “Bermukha”. However, in their music the link to what the mainstream Soviet musical community viewed as “worthy”, “serious” music has been maintained. Such a link is apparent, for example, in Kako Vashalomidze’s borrowing of folk tunes, the melodic-harmonic features of jazz including a theme and elaborate improvisations based on this theme and sophisticated modulations. Homophonic textures where guitar plays single-note solos, virtuosic playing of elaborate scale passages and arpeggios with distortion is reminiscent of influences coming from Van Halen.

In Soviet Georgia, rock was unable (or did not aim at all) to claim or express a distinctive identity or a strong extra-musical message of protest and social disaffection. It was protest only in the sense that it became a symbol of breaking away from the Soviet Union’s limited economic-cultural and musical milieus and of the dream of a better life in the West. Moreover, in Georgia the theme of difference (protest is a too strong word for Georgian rock) against the established political regime was defined by patriotism and the struggle for independence from Russia and Communist Party³. The ample use of Georgian folk song tunes in the rock arrangements of “Bermukha” and Kako Vashalomidze can be interpreted as one of the expressions of nation-ness in Georgian rock. Thus, Georgian rock sound of the Soviet period expressed collective national identity rather than individualistic aspirations. Stylistically, the emphasis in Georgian rock was on the criteria of high artistic performance, sophistication of the musical structure, often progressive linear development rather than the circularity of the verse-chorus structure of a song in music and virtuosity, which were similar to those prevailing in the classical, jazz and serious art music communities. While refined and sophisticated in terms of sound and technique (playing “sophisticated stuff”), this music was mediocre in terms of conveying strong messages about identity, protest and outrage.

Rock, women and the nation: how did Georgian women get to rock?

One significant aspect that is particularly important for the gender aspect of my argument is that Western rock, and especially hard rock and punk rock, by virtue of its rebellious and anti-establishment tendencies, was more dangerous for pre-socialist cultural values and nationalist feelings than it was for socialism. In fact, socialism and Marxism-Leninism in their original intentions can be interpreted as being as anti-hegemonic as is rock itself. On the other hand, nationalists and traditionalists have viewed Western rock as a threat to the nation and its patriarchal morality because rock was, in their opinion (and perhaps in fact), potentially destructive of this morality. In contrast to nationalism’s emphasis on collective identity and ancestral heritage, rock music for nationalists was a sign of individual freedom and a break from collective psyche and traditional values. Therefore, despite their political and spiritual orientation towards the West, Georgia’s patriotic educated elite also feared that rock carried undesired elements of Western culture, and particularly the subversion of traditional morality. Similarly, in Russia, the chauvinists, nationalist and Russophile writers and organizations such as the extreme nationalist group Pamyat [Memory], were responsible for the biggest anti-rock backlash (Troitsky 1987: 131).

When nationalist revival tendencies intensified during the 1970s and especially the

1980s, patriotic discourses started stressing the role of Georgian traditional music and especially choral polyphony as an important source of national identity and connection with the ancestral heritage. Since Georgian traditional polyphony was associated with masculine identity and machismo values, and men have had the privilege (and responsibility) of maintaining the traditional forms of folk and professional musicianship, the burden of preserving the polyphonic song-culture fell on men. Many young men formed or joined polyphonic folklore choirs. For a Georgian musician to become a rocker and express his vulnerable internal world and rage on the other hand, went against the traditional masculine values and ideals of heroism, patriotism, chivalry, physical strength and composure incarnated in the texts of men's polyphonic songs, as well as against the refinement and alleged autonomy of classical music and jazz.

Georgian women's relationship with rock, in contrast, has different implications and significance. I am proposing several explanations for the female rock band Embryon's advance in the rock scene of post-socialist Georgia. Firstly, as the suppressed gender within a patriarchal society, one might say that women needed rock more than Georgian men did; women have had more authenticity in their expression of suppressed anger and dissatisfaction with societal values and the ways in which patriarchal society has treated them for centuries. Therefore, women's anti-traditional demeanour in rock and their channeling of anger into an expressive artistic form as in Embryon's music, designs a completely new performative scene for women. By making rock music, Georgian women of a new generation, including Embryon and Nino Leshchenko, are exploring new sensibilities and opportunities in the realm of self-expression not hitherto experienced within Georgian tradition, but only without (or beyond) it. In this sense, I shall argue that while rock may not have had a significant role in the political transition and the dissolution of Communism as Pekacz suggests (Pekacz 1994: 48), it has a significant role to play in subverting patriarchy and emphasizing individual freedom in Georgian culture and hence in exploring new dimensions of Self. The English journalist John Robb (2002) referred to Embryon in *Playlounder*, as the "teenage ambassadors of Georgian rock...". What a honourable label for three teenage girls from a patriarchal society!

Secondly, in the Georgian context, women have not had an overtly superior and dominant male rock culture against which to measure themselves; In this sense, women in Georgia have had an advantage of being on "terra incognita", which has made it easier for them to infiltrate the realm of rock.

A third explanation for the emergence of girl rock in Georgia is possibly that the cultural pressure on Georgian men to be macho and authoritarian in relation to women does not suit rock culture's discourse of authenticity and its expression of individual liberation and unique identity. In addition, however different modern Western masculine performances in the mainstream rock culture may seem from traditional Georgian masculine ideals, both invoke images of male hegemony in their own ways. Therefore, while rock destroys Georgian masculinity in the eyes of national revivalists, in the eyes of its youth audiences, who expect messages of social change from rock, Georgian male rock in fact aggravates rather than subverts conventional patriarchal values as articulated in traditional polyphony, national discourse and everyday life. Thus, Georgian male rockers' performances acquire ambivalent meanings, at once apparently subverting traditional patriarchal ideals (for conservatives) and implying the continuation of patriarchy (for modernists). Notwithstanding their contribution, virtuosity and creativity in rock music, Georgian men have nevertheless not been pioneers in terms of exploring new social, political and generational identities in the genre of rock during the period of political transition. This has allowed girls space in the rock scene.

Embryon – expressing self, expressing change

Despite the fact that the members of Embryon were pioneers of Georgian female rock, the three girls did not overtly emphasize the gender meanings of their music or the subversive feminist philosophy of the band when I interviewed them in 2002. When I brought up feminism as a contextual basis of their musical activity as a band, they dismissed it as irrelevant, claiming that the band was more concerned with expressing ideas and feelings through the musical medium than with conceptualizing and rationalizing gender philosophies.

There are several possible explanations for this. Firstly, Embryon may not have wanted to declare “war” either on the country’s dominant social order or on the sensibilities of patriotism and patriarchy. Nor did the musicians want to intellectualize gender while they were busy writing music and performing it successfully in Georgia and abroad. However, the fact that Embryon denied feminism as an explicit context for interpreting its music does not mean that the music they made cannot be said to embrace the ideology of female liberation in a male-dominated society. The covert expression of this ideology is observable in Nino Leshchenko’s cryptic song lyrics. One of the Embryon’s popular hits was “She was born in Asia”:

FIGURE 1:

What you need is power

To see who’s your lover.

Tender like a flower

Or insane like God.

She was born in orgy,

So tranquil and gorgeous.

Don’t you wanna watch us? No one is saint, oh lord!

Chorus: She was born in Asia.

She gives me much temptation, You see, I am under tension.

Mother, take away the children, don’t you see them yawning out there.

She’s a demon really, strangest heart is chilly,

Look out of her killing eyes,...will make you lost.

Don’t forget your nation.

She will seem an angel, but she keeps an anger.

Turn the secret pages of her soul, She was.

Chorus:

Mother’s breathing harder, She has met a murder

Someone tell the mother, Who’s her children’s dad?

She will always mention, Don’t forget your nation.

Who was born an Asian?

He will make you mad.

When I asked the girls whether the “she” who was born in Asia was an unhappy person because she was born in Asia (which was my subjective impression from a first hearing of the song), the girls replied that it is the other way around: Asia is unhappy because “she” is born there, as “she” does not fit Asian values and destroys Asia. Another reason for Embryon’s silence about feminism may be that for Georgians, talking

overtly about sexuality or challenging gender stereotypes and patriarchal values conjures a sensitive area involving political issues such as nation building and the preservation of a distinctive cultural-ethnic identity and political independence.

The lyrics of Embryon reflect this tension between the urge towards being a Georgian, to belong to the nation (“don’t forget your nation” in Figure 1) and the simultaneous desire to break free from the tradition. So, for example, Embryon (until 2003) and Nino Leshchenko (currently) wrote/write songs in English. Nino commented to me that the sound of Georgian language is incompatible with the music she writes, a style described by the band members as a kind of mixture of heavy metal, alternative and grunge. More than that, however, she said it was difficult for her to express herself in the Georgian language, a statement suggesting that the members of Embryon perceive Western and Georgian cultures as being two different worlds. Another reason could be more pragmatic, as the artists like Nino Leshchenko are willing to make international success and sign deals with Western record companies.

Apart from the explanations offered by Embryon, the preference for English also carries deeper social-cultural implications. Firstly, Georgian spoken language, as a culture of more restricted social and sexual relationships and values, does not allow, at least in the opinion of the culture bearers in this case, for the expression of extreme positions and concepts. English in this case acts as a facilitator of social change and transition into the world of more liberal ideas and actions. The lyrics of the song “Born” (Figure 2) articulate the tension of being born in a new milieu.

FIGURE 2. (an excerpt from “Born”):

*That’s my brotherhood, here we come together.
Wanna make it good, wanna make it better.
Make these chains torn, when you’re coming outa...
‘Cos you are born N O W!*

Embryon’s anti-conservative orientation is expressed through its intense, loud electric sound and musical style. It is not my aim to define strictly the style of Embryon’s and Nino Leshchenko’s music in this particular paper, especially because there is no agreement about definitions of all the ramifications of rock as a genre since the 1980s (see Fornas 1995). However, it is clear that Embryon’s and Nino’s music incorporates elements of hardcore, alternative rock, and punk. The girls used the words “heavy music” [*mdzime musika*] most often to characterize their music, and to describe the emotional intensity and powerful sound of its playing and singing. The influences (or rather inspirations) for Embryon were much broader, including such diverse artists and bands as The Beatles, Metallica, Janis Joplin, and especially Red Hot Chili Peppers and Guano Apes, the latter being a German band whose lead singer Sandra Nasic’s style was one of Nino’s many vocal inspirations.

The “heaviness” of the music is created by Nino’s vocal style, which alternates between singing and a specific roaring sound. This style in combination with the use of short single-line guitar motives in upward motion creates an impression of a non-lyrical, raw, impulsive and aggressive sound. The heaviness is also due to the frequent use of a distorted guitar timbre. The emotional atmosphere of the music is largely determined by the song-writing style of Nino, who often alternates between regular and irregular rhythms in her songs, an alternation deriving naturally from the flow of words when she is in the process of writing her word-tunes. She does not try to adjust the words to square, even-beat rhythmic structures; rather the rhythm and metre is adapted to the flow of words.

As more national-oriented Georgian scholars commented to me during the conference at which I presented an earlier version of this paper, there is nothing Georgian in Embryon and it does not qualify as a topic of ethnomusicological research into Georgian musical culture and especially, into Georgian polyphony. Nevertheless, we should remember that Georgian music is not only one polyphonic soundscape shared by all Georgians, but it is also a conglomerate of many different soundscapes. The study of rock music in Georgia would seem inevitable in the context of what Timothy Rice calls "subject-centered musical ethnography" (Rice 2003), in which musical experience is viewed not only as unified and shared by an undifferentiated ethnicity or nation, but also as varied significantly among smaller sub cultural groups and subjects in the same geographical and temporal space. As Rice suggests, "...the subject, self, or individual around whom musical ethnography might be centered is a thoroughly social and self-reflexive being. It is this idea that makes subject-centered (or self-centered!) musical ethnography productive" (Rice 2003: 157). Integrating this concept in my paper, I interpret Georgian musical culture not as a unified ethnic parameter, but as a conglomerate of many sub-cultures, subjective sociomusical experiences and creative processes which interact both with what we may call Georgian shared tradition and with musical experiences that are beyond this tradition. Expanding upon this, Embryon's music does not express or represent the collective memory of Georgian culture which is at the core of Georgian choral polyphony. Nevertheless, through their subjective experience and perceptions articulated in the music, Embryon and Nino Leshchenko represent, or at least tell us about Georgian nation and its diverse musical culture in the crucial moment of its political transition.

If we see Embryon as a part of the broader Georgian society, patriarchal morality and mainstream traditional polyphonic music-culture in which men take a leading role, its music seems to be a logical response. Indeed, Georgian rock in general and female rockers such as Embryon and Nino Leshchenko are reflexive of the entire Georgian society in transition. For Georgian women, and particularly for girls born during and after the Perestroika, with all its post-Soviet excesses of return to nationalistic ideologies and resurgence of religious sensibility, rock music has become a symbol of individual freedom from the restrictions imposed by traditional society on their social, sexual and artistic lives. It is not a surprise that Embryon and Nino Leshchenko have not written songs in Georgian, their native language, which imbues their lives with all the richness of Georgian culture on the one hand, and the bounty of traditional morality and its restrictions on the other.

Notes

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² The band broke up in 2003 and its lead-guitarist, vocalist and songwriter Nino Leshchenko, started a new career as lead guitarist-singer-song-writer in a new band, supported by a male drummer and a male bass guitarist.

³ A remote parallel can be drawn with the Polish rock of the 1970s, described by Pekacz as not being directed against the existing political or social reality, but as "focused upon broader 'existential' and 'all-human' universal issues in a post-hippie style" (1992: 205). In Georgia "existential hippie" ideology was replaced by patriotism and the unique national identity.

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