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## The Issue of Folklore in Contemporary Author's Songs<sup>1</sup> in Georgian Folk Music

### ABSTRACT

In today's Georgia most of the songs by contemporary authors referred to as 'folk' have little to do with traditional musical regularities; the examples, disseminated as specific, established variants, are also called 'folk'. Modernized instruments created in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are also regarded as folk. It is strange that their consideration as folk examples is often acceptable to their authors. The article aims to study contemporary author's songs and to reveal their connection with the regularities of folk musical language.

In the modern era author's songs on folk motives have not yet been given scientific name. Georgian researchers refer to such examples as 'para-folklore', 'modernized folklore' and 'pop-folk'. In all three definitions they are called folklore. The difference between them is shown only by the prefix.

This article poses specific problems and shows possible solutions to them, for example: what brings the contemporary author's songs closer to folk tradition? Why are they considered folk? What are their characteristic musical features? What factor contributes to the popularity of these examples? Also, based on the musical analysis and personal interviews, the folk character of the repertoire of contemporary author's song performers (trio Mandili, Gogochuri sisters, group Bani, Davit Kenchiashvili) is discussed.

### KEYWORDS

Author's songs

Folklore

Traditional

<sup>1</sup> The term 'author's song' was very popular in Soviet musicology. An author's song is an example created based on folk motives by a specific author.

## **Introduction**

The safeguarding of and research into traditional heritage is vital for the preservation of national and cultural identity in the modern era. The issue of the relation between tradition and novelty is relevant in Georgian ethnomusicology as well; certainly there are works dedicated to this topic. Nevertheless, current processes in the ethno-musical space have not been subjected to special research until recently.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of rapid technical progress. The increasing role of the media (radio, television) accelerated natural processes already on-going in folk culture and often made them artificial. In the Soviet era, this was also facilitated by socialist ideology, which used folklore for its own interests. In the post-Soviet period, folk music was freed from ideological pressure; however, it was subject to processes of globalization. Today in Georgia there are many musical styles and genres that show certain connection with folk music. Such musical directions are ethno-jazz, folk fusion, etc. Along with them we can mention the so-called “contemporary author’s songs”.

## **The History of Author’s Songs in Georgia**

An author’s song is an example created based on folk motives by a specific author. In certain musical parameters, an author’s song shows a connection with folk-musical thinking. It should be noted that ‘author’s songs’ were created in Georgia even before the Soviet period. The authors of such songs were famous choirmasters: Varlam Simonishvili, Levan Mughalashvili, Piruz Makhatelashvili, Mariam Arjevnishvili, Ketevan Ghogheridze, Valerian Sadradze, Avksenti Megrelidze, Vano Mchedlishvili and others. They themselves were the bearers of tradition and represented musical traditions of the regions they worked in. Choirmasters of this generation mostly had no special musical education; consequently, their songs were created entirely according to the parameters of traditional music. Probably this is why their compositions were regarded as ‘folk’. For example, the famous song *Tsintskaro* was composed by Vano Mchedlishvili, *Dila* by Varlam Simonishvili, etc.

An interesting tendency can be traced in the works of choirmasters in the following period, who received special musical education: Anzor Erkomaishvili, Temur Kevkhishvili, Gomar Sikharulidze and others. The musical language of some of their creations is embedded in the particularities of one particular dialect; in some, it goes

beyond one dialect. For example, Anzor Erkomaishvili's song *Mival guriashi mara* is based on the general principles of West Georgian musical language, whilst his *Khareba da gogia* is a typical Kakhetian song.

It is noteworthy that both old and newly created author's songs are still regarded as folk. Considering them as folk music is often acceptable even to the authors themselves. The processes that began in Georgia at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (stage performance of folk music, the origin and development of folk studies as science, etc.) made corrections in the traditional definition of folk music and posed the problem of defining some terms (including *folk* and *author's*).

### **For the Definition of the Terms 'Folk' and 'Author's'**

In the *Encyclopedia Britannica* we find the following definition of folk music: "Folk Music, type of traditional and generally rural music that originally was passed down through families and other small social groups. Typically, folk music, like folk literature, lives in oral tradition; it is learned through hearing rather than reading. It is functional in the sense that it is associated with other activities, and it is primarily rural in origin" (Nettl, 2022).

In today's Georgia most of contemporary author's songs disseminated as being 'folk' have little proximity to traditional musical regularities; the examples disseminated as specific, established variants are also called 'folk'. Modernized instruments created in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are regarded as folk as well. In the opinion of the author of the present paper, at the present stage it is necessary to identify clearly examples with the definition 'folk music'. It is important to distinguish between what we call 'folk' and what we call 'author's'. These two terms are opposed to each other.

Ethnomusicologist Tamaz Gabisonia has a different position. In his view, the terms 'folk' and 'author's' are not opposites of each other. For the researcher it is acceptable to understand the concept of 'author' in such a way that it implies not only the individual creator of the song, but also the importer of each new component. Based on such an approach, Gabisonia proposes uniting a person with many functions – author-composer, author-ethnophore, author-reconstructor – under the concept of 'author' (Gabisonia, 2015: 158).

When discussing the folk nature of this or that example, first of all, we must specify what is meant by 'folk', and why these people are considered the 'Creators of Wisdom'. In discussing these issues, I will refer to renowned Georgian folklorist Zurab Kiknadze: "People imply a multitude of humans, united by the combination of certain features. Be it language, territory, common past ... People are an organic, reared group of humans, which has a middle, heart, centre, even expressed differently. Folk can be not only a nation, but also one dynasty or one family, which is gathered around one hearth and preserves the memory of ancestors." (Kiknadze, 2008: 15-16). However, the definition of 'people' alone is not enough to consider these people as creators of wisdom. Folk art is characterized by features such as: anonymity, variance, oral forms of dissemination, syncretism, etc.

According to Izaly Zemtsovsky, syncretism is regarded as a natural and constantly accompanying process of oral tradition. Syncretism is constant and inseparable from oral tradition at all stages of its existence and perception. In other words, syncretism is as eternal as folklore. (Zemtsovski, 2004: 8-9). Syncretism can be understood in a new way in relation to contemporary author's songs.

At the present stage it is impossible to talk about the anonymity of the author. Today, when great attention is paid to copyright protection, the creator of an author's song on folk motives cannot remain unknown. However, anonymity can also be understood differently: when the creator of a song is no longer the sole author. Sometimes it is much easier for modern songwriters to attribute their works to artistically valuable folk music, than to present them as their own compositions. This may explain one of the trends in the Internet space, where modern author's examples are referred to as folk music. The opinions of the performers on this matter are presented in detail below; however, it is no less important to consider how this kind of music is referred to by listeners.

Interesting is Bruno Nettle's approach to determining music as folk: "In the long history of folk music research, there is a close relationship between the definition of folklore as aurally transmitted and of folk song as anonymously composed. There is a difference, both in the process and as the subject of research, between a song composed without the mediation of writing. But in both cases, one of the early questions for scholars has been whether folk songs (and, by implication, other music in "oral" tradition) are created by individuals or by the 'folk'" (Nettl, 2015: 297).

Regarding oral forms of dissemination, the opinion of Tamaz Gabisonia is of value: “Under modern communications, oral dissemination may also imply learning via audio-video-TV channels, and not the knowledge obtained voluntarily from direct, multiple observations on the tradition” (Gabisonia, 2014: 26).

Variance is another main feature of folklore. Certainly it takes time to create a variant of this or that song. Foklorist Vakhushti Kotetishvili writes about variance: “variance implies ‘editorial’ changes made by the repeaters and interpreters of the original text, who, in many cases, even appear as ‘co-authors’. The existence of variants is often so important that, according to the prevailing viewpoint in science, if a text does not have a variant, it will not be considered folklore” (Kotetishvili, 2007: 381). What is the case with author’s songs? At first glance, author’s songs are not characterized by any of the main features of folklore: anonymity of the author, or variance. Nevertheless, there is a practice in ethnomusicology when some author’s songs are considered folk. What leads scholars to say this? In this case, musical parameters are their main determinant.

Interesting is Zemtsovsky’s approach to defining a song as folk. In his opinion, when considering this or that piece as folklore, the main thing is not who created it, but what regulations it operates under, how organically and fully it is folklorized. In solving this difficult problem, the scholar offers two main methodological preconditions: 1. Given the syncretic nature of folk art and its coexistence with folk life, it is clear that no single view of folklore essence explains it fully. There is a need for an integrated approach that combines historical, sociological, aesthetic (in the broadest sense of art history), ethnogeographic, as well as semiotic and structural methods. 2. A complex approach should be used with the organic unity of different methods (and not with their mechanical combination). Folklore is a hierarchically complex dynamic system, the definition of which requires both a complex and systemic approach. In the latter, one leading aspect must be distinguished – a feature which can generalize and clarify the entire system; in relation to which all the others will occupy their hierarchically subordinate place. As such, Zemtsovsky offers tradition – one of the main characteristics of folklore (Zemtsovski, 1977: 36-37).

According to Evsevi Chokhnelidze, “the concepts of folklore and tradition are inseparable, since everything is traditional in folklore; the problem is that folklore and

modernity deal with the relation between the traditional and the modern” (Chokhonelidze, 1995-1996: 1-2).

According to Zemtsovsky, for folklore any connection with modernity, with people’s modern interests, is historically predetermined - it is embedded in the nature of folklore. Modern is everything that functions in specifically considered modernity, as for re-created folklore; according to Soviet musicology, modernity in art is determined either by a formally accepted chronology, or by the novelty of the expressive means, or else the novelty of the subject – in-depth compliance with the tasks of the modern era is necessary. Modern folklore can belong only to the folklore characteristic of the more or less important definite stage in the recent history of mankind (Zemtsovsky, 1977: 30-31).

### **The Popularity Issue of the Performers’ Viewpoint**

Contemporary author’s songs are created on of folk motives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and connected with various stylistic directions. Such examples are often performed with the accompaniment of modernized *panduri*<sup>2</sup> or a small number of instrumental bands (chromatic *panduri*, accordion, bass guitar, drums, etc.). These types of bands and individual singers have a repertoire of mostly patriotic and lyrical content.

When researching the folk nature of contemporary author’s songs, it is important to answer the following questions: 1. What peculiarities are characteristic of author’s songs created at the present stage? 2. Do these peculiarities determine the fact that these examples are called folk? While working on these issues, I myself talked with some performers of contemporary author’s songs. When selecting the performers, I considered two main factors: 1. They are the most popular and requested by listeners in today’s Georgia and 2. The performers I discuss below are distinguished by their repertoire or performance style. As examples, an instrumental band, a family ensemble, a trio and an individual performer are discussed.

The *Bani Group* was created in 2011. Its members are not professional musicians. They are united by love of music. The group has no leader. The opinion of all its members is equally important. Their repertoire comprises modern compositions based on folk

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<sup>2</sup> During the Soviet period, the folk *panduri* was reconstructed. The so-called ‘modernized’ *panduri* is similar to the ‘folk’ one in shape, but it has more frets, and its tuning is also different from that of the folk one. From the 20<sup>th</sup> century, folk *panduri* was gradually replaced by the classical one.

motives. Both the lyrics and the music have specific authors. In this way, they make their own Bani versions. They do not call themselves a folk ensemble, and the instruments used are chromatic *panduri*, bass guitar and drums.<sup>3</sup> They consider that the folk *panduri* is 'undeveloped' and only a few simple East Georgian songs can be performed on it; this is why they prefer chromatic instruments. This is their subjective opinion, which is explained by incomplete knowledge of the artistic and technical parameters of folk instruments and is far from reality. They have a clear answer to the question as to which musical direction do they belong – folklore, however, they also admit their proximity to ethno-jazz band Egari (Giorgi Nikoladze, personal communication, 20 January 2019).

*The Gogochuri sisters* clearly distinguish between old, traditional examples and new songs created by them. Researcher Malkhaz Razmadze recorded a special interview with one of the members of the ensemble, Ketevan Gogochuri, who conveys the general position of the group: "Ketevan Gogochuri confirms that they do not like it when they are referred to as a folk ensemble; however, they do not specify what they call themselves in the light of the fact that they perform authentic folklore as well as music "having a claim to folklore". They note that authentic folklore is more important for them" (Razmadze, 2016-2017: 611). She adds that, "it is desirable for specialists to name the direction they represent in the near future" (Razmadze, 2016-2017: 612).

Recently, videos of the *Trio Mandili* have been especially popular on the Georgian Internet. The trio's official website reads: "In 2014, three charming girls from Georgia "blew up" the World Wide Web and became stars. This "fairy tale" began on the day when three friends, during a walk in the village, decided to sing a song. Tatuli made a self-video and uploaded it to the Internet. This video dramatically changed the girls' lives. Within two weeks the video was watched by a multi-million audience" (Trio Mandili, n.d.).

Even though the members of trio Mandili travel to many countries of the world and perform at folk festivals, traditional music does not occupy a major place in their repertoire. The trio members are young ladies, one of whom plays a chromatic *panduri*.

Trio Mandili mainly performs contemporary author's songs. Their repertoire also includes pop songs, soundtracks of Georgian films, potpourris... Mandili also sing Kazakh

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<sup>3</sup> See Nikoladze, 2014.

and Hungarian folk music. Their repertoire comprises compositions called *Guruli*, *Svanuri* (regions in West Georgia), although their intonational material has nothing to do with the musical characteristics of these regions. The closest to traditional musical regularities is a composition based on Acharan songs.<sup>4</sup>

Davit Kenchiashvili is one of the most popular individual performers of modern author's songs in Georgia. He has no special musical education. As a child he sang in folk ensembles. He comes from the family with musical traditions; therefore, he has had an interest in music since childhood.

Kenchiashvili's repertoire mainly comprises pop-style modern author's songs. He uses chromatic *panduri*, folk percussion and electronic instruments. The compositions are mostly by him. There is no clear answer to my question as to which musical direction he considers himself to belong. He believes that he has created his own, original musical direction and cannot name other groups or individual performers as followers of the direction (Davit Kenchiashvili, personal communication, 21 February 2019).

The audience mostly regards Kenchiashvili's compositions as folklore. He himself has a negative attitude to this. Kenchiashvili explains that he does not perform folklore, although his original songs are based on folk harmony. Musical analysis of these songs reveals that they deviate from the principles of folk musical thinking and resemble folk examples only in general parameters of musical language.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Issue of Folklore in Contemporary Author's Songs from the Choirmasters' Viewpoint (Results of a Sociological Survey)**

I was also interested in what contemporary choirmasters thought about the terms 'folk' and 'author's'. For this, I conducted an anonymous Internet survey. 67 choirmasters from all over Georgia took part in it. The age of the participants ranged between 18 - 75 years: 18-25 – 5.1%; 25-35– 35.6%; 35-50 – 35.6% and 50-75 – 23.7%. The majority of the participants (35.6%) received education at various higher education institutions; 28.8% studied at Giorgi Mtatsmindeli High School for Ecclesiastical Chanting; 25.4% at Tbilisi State Conservatoire; and the smallest number – 10.2% – at the Church Choir Conducting

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<sup>4</sup> See Trio Mandili, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> See Kenchiashvili Official, 2016.

Department of Theatre and Film of Georgia State University. The participants had to explain what the term 'author's song' meant to them. I also asked them to indicate whether they themselves created songs in the folk style or performed original works created by other choirmasters. In both cases they were asked to name examples.

When asked whether they have composed author's songs in folk style, the majority (83.3%) answered negatively. Among the variants of those who gave a positive answer, one can name *Naduri* songs, *Alilo*, *Simghera Tskaltuboze* and Megrelian songs: *Vardis do Chucheles*, *Chkimi qorofili chkim kholos*, *Miorkini si koichku*, etc. One of the applicants even named his own piano work as being an author's songs. In the list of author's songs, I also came across arrangements of Laz examples: *Ele mele kismeti*, *Mzogha ucha*, *Kulanishi destane* and others.

When asked if they performed songs composed by other choirmasters, the majority (68.9%) answered in the affirmative. Most of the named examples are author's songs composed by choirmasters: Varlam Simonishvili's *Dila* and *Baghia chveni kveqana*; Giorgi Iobishvili's *Natvra*; Artem Erkomaishvili's *Skhivadaskhvagvari siqvaruli* and *Khelovneba*; Anzor Erkomaishvili's *Khareba da gogia*, *Tu ase turpa iqavi*, *Mival guriashi mara* and others. In addition, the list of author's songs also included different choirmasters' variants of a number of traditional songs, for example: the Sikharulidzes' *Chven mshvidoba*; the Berdzenishvilis' *Perad shindi*; Vepkhia Antia's *Ia patnepi*, etc. The list also included the songs of composers Revaz Laghidze, Iakob Bobokhidze and Nana Belkania.

As far as the present author is aware, a definition of the term 'author's song' has not yet received due attention in Georgian ethnomusicology. Consequently, the choirmasters' definitions of this term were particularly interesting to me. Most choirmasters define 'author's song' as "a song that has a specific author." Here are a few different definitions: "A song composed not by a collective, but by one person or a small group of people", a "non-folk song", "primary piece", "song created by a composer", "A piece created by a person, or a folk piece transformed to a level in which the elements introduced by this person predominate over those of the folk original", etc. Of many definitions, only two could be considered truly convincing: "a folk-style song that has an author, even a non-professional" and "a melody based on a folk motif, on someone's own or a folk poem."

Thus, it can be said that a small part of today's choirmasters do create author's songs in 'folk style', however, they realize that these are not folk, but their own author's works.

### **The Issue of the Definition of Contemporary Author's Songs in Scientific Literature**

It is clear that the process of creating modern examples based on folk motives takes place all over the world. Corsica provides an example. Ethnomusicologist Caroline Bithell distinguishes four directions in her attitude towards Corsican polyphony:

1. Polyphonic arrangements of original monodic songs;
2. Revival of half-forgotten polyphonic repertoire;
3. New polyphonic songs;
4. Experiments in cultural fusion (collaboration with jazz musicians, etc.)  
(Bithell, 2000: 43-44).

Of these four directions we consider the so-called 'new polyphonic songs' as relatives of contemporary Georgian author's songs.

Let us return to the main subject of the present research.

In the modern era, several Georgian ethnomusicologists have attempted to give a name to author's songs based on folk motives:

Ethnomusicologist Tamaz Gabisonia suggests the term "parafolklore" to describe author's compositions created today: "The previously mentioned non-academic music with ethnic colouring, nourished by folk or pseudo-folk motives and accessories, is predominantly characterized by oral transmission and enjoys popularity among a certain segment of listeners, and is referred to as "folk". For these features, as well as the fact that this phenomenon has almost no connection with the traditional direction and develops in parallel with it, we call it "parafolklore" (Gabisonia, 2015: 146-147).

Malkhaz Razmadze has a different position: he refers to the music of this style and direction as "modernized folklore". In his opinion, "certainly, a similar style with a claim to folklore can today only conditionally be called folklore, since the share of folklore is very small in it" (Razmadze, 2016-2017: 613). According to the researcher, "this is the

direction that has originated in the vicinity of folklore, grown from it, has been arranged, transformed, and adapted to modern requirements... It is characterized by modernized (including electronic) instruments, sound, even style of dress, etc” (Razmadze, 2016-2017: 613). For these and other objective reasons, Malkhaz Razmadze refers to this musical direction as “modernized folklore”.

In terms of performance, Razmadze distinguishes two types: the first group includes performers close to folklore; they are characterized by natural sound, polyphony, tertiary parallelism of upper voices against the background of a bass drone, singing in a duet without bass, live accompaniment. Among such performers the researcher names family ensembles, such as the Gogochuris, the Nakeuris, the Tsiklauris, the Zviadauris and the group TSU Gordela. The second group includes performers distanced from folklore. They are mainly characterized by solo performance, singing to a recording, emphasizing vocal performance... Among such performers the scholar names Davit Kenchiashvili, Ana Malazonia, Mariam Elieshvili, Ana Chincharauli and others (Razmadze, 2016-2017: 609).

Ethnomusicologist Teona Lomsadze suggests the term “popfolk” for contemporary author’s songs: “in modern day Georgia “popfolk” (previously known in folk circles as “pseudo-folklore”) is a very popular musical direction with a folk nuance. Its democracy and wide dissemination, standardized lyrics and some elements of rethought folk music mean that this music is presented as a kind of symbiosis of folk and pop music styles; therefore, we consider naming it with the term “popfolk” to be logical especially since the latter well reflects the musical diversity of this phenomenon (Lomsadze, 2021: 14-15).

As we have seen, Georgian authors refer to modern author’s songs as “para folklore”, “modernized folklore” and “pop folk”. In all three definitions they are still referred to as folklore. The difference is only in the prefix. As for the performers themselves, some call their work “folk”, some “author’s”, others find it difficult to give definition. The main problem, however, is that such examples are disseminated as folk music on the Internet and, therefore, are perceived by the public as folklore.

In my opinion, it is preferable to call this style of music ‘contemporary author’s songs’, because they are the heirs of author’s examples on folk motives created in the Soviet period. This will make it easier to distinguish them from ‘true folk’ examples.

## Conclusions

- Music of many styles and genres is heard in Georgia today; it shows certain connections with folk music. An important place among these styles and genres is occupied by so-called 'contemporary author's songs'. Such examples are encountered on the Internet as folk music and, therefore, are perceived as folklore by the audience. Naming the musical examples of this style 'contemporary author's songs' will also facilitate distinguishing them from 'true folk' examples.
- Of the main characteristics of folklore, neither anonymity nor variant nature is characteristic of author's examples. In such cases, the main determinants are their musical parameters. Contemporary author's songs are distinguished by the simplicity of their musical language and are mostly based on the musical and intonational sources of the East Georgian mountains. These examples often show connections with North Caucasian motives. They are characterized by simple, repetitive, sequential phrases, couplet structure and two- or three-sound bass. In my opinion, all these features contribute to their easy memorization and popularity.
- Some of the contemporary song performers interviewed by me think that they perform folk music, some categorically distance themselves from what the audience calls folklore, yet others believe that naming of the direction which they perform is the competence of researchers.
- Choirmasters interpret the term 'author's song' differently from each other. A few of them also create their own works in folk style, although they are well aware that these are not folk music.
- The term 'folklore' ('para folklore', 'modernized folklore', 'pop folk') is encountered in the works of Georgian ethnomusicologists when attempting to describe contemporary author's songs. In the opinion of this author, their authorship should be emphasized when naming such examples.
- The study of the folklore aspect of author's songs, as well as of folklore and contemporaneity in general, of the relationship between the traditional and the contemporary is a dynamic and lengthy (almost constant) process, which depends

on the essence and nature of folklore itself, on the constant variability of folk life, the vitality and stability/development of tradition. And, if we consider tradition as the main aspect in determining the essence of folklore, then it would seem premature to regard contemporary authors' songs as purely folk music. Time is the main factor in their folklorization.

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