

**The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations**  
Music Chatroom Transcript – November 21, 2006

Moderator: *John Graham*

Chat room topic: **Chant of the Georgian Orthodox Church**

*John Graham*

Welcome to a chat session on Georgian chant!

The Georgian State adopted Christianity in 337 AD, yet while the neighboring Armenians disagreed with the Council of Nicaea, instead agreeing with the Monophysites, Georgia stayed with mainstream Orthodoxy and continues to do so until this day.

At the moment, I'm listening to the Troparion of St. George, as sung by the Anchiskhati Church Choir based in Tbilisi, Georgia. November 23rd is called 'Giorgoba' in Georgia, for the feast day of St. George. Anchiskhati means the "Icon from Anchi" which is a small town in present day Turkey, part of the ancient kingdom of Georgia.

*Question:*

So how did a cathedral in Tbilisi get named after a town in Turkey?

The icon, a beautiful tryptich, six feet wide and four feet tall, is gold plated and studded with jewels, and is now in the Treasury of Georgia room in the State Museum. When there were troubled times in that part of ancient Georgia (that is now NE Turkey), the icon was secreted to safety in King Vakhtang Gorgasali's new capital city of Tbilisi (in current eastern Georgia). It was housed in the royal chapel, which took on the name, "Icon from Anchi" or "Anchiskhati."

The current revival of Georgian sacred music has largely been centered around this most ancient of Tbilisi churches, the 6th century Anchiskhati basilica, and the choir that sings there is called the Anchiskhati choir.

This is very appropriate, because throughout the centuries the royal court would have had a strong church choir with students, and this 'School of Chant' would have been centered in the Anchiskhati Church. We have records naming the Anchiskhati Church as an important center of Eastern Georgian chant in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Today I gave a presentation in my Russian music class (I'm a musicology graduate student at Princeton) where I discussed how Georgian chant has survived and how it has been adapted, as a result of the cultural influence from Russia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

*Question:*

I am wondering, why were chants sung by professional ensembles? What was the role of the congregation?

*Answer:*

According to modern chant scholars in Georgia, every church-going person knew the basic liturgical chants. As Davit Machabeli said in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (in the romantic fashion of that era) "not only do we hear our wondrous chants in the churches, we hear them on every cart road, meadow field, and shepherd's trail..." (I paraphrase)

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But you get the idea.... Chant was pervasive and not only a part of the liturgical services but also part of people's personal lives.

*Question:*

How does the Georgian church relate to the Russian church?

*Answer:*

The Georgians became Christians before Russia did. In 988, the year that Greek missionaries arrived in Russia, a Georgian hymnographer named Michael Modrekili produced a masterfully handwritten manuscript full of illustrated chant texts with neumatic music notation. He and other hymnographers were working in the region called Tao-Klarjeti, what is in present day Northeast Turkey.

*Question:*

So what was the role of knowing these basic liturgical chants? Did they participate by singing in the service?

*Answer:*

Good question – one that has been raised by Mark Bailey several times: What was the role of the congregation?

It is difficult to say how the congregation participated in Orthodox worship singing. In churches today, one can observe congregation members singing or humming along to the chant melodies. I imagine that it has always been this way.

In the earliest Christian churches in Jerusalem, chanting probably was far more responsorial as the congregation responded to the priests and deacons. I think that choirs were formed in these early churches to take on the role of officially responding to the priests and deacons in place of the entire congregation. Who knows why this happened though?

*Question:*

I was wondering about the standardization of Georgian chants. I understood there was an improvisatory element to them. What was the purpose of that? And how does the practice today reconcile this?

*Answer:*

Good question. Not one that is answered quickly!

Over time, the services became codified so it was natural that chant also needed codification. However, it is clear to see that Georgian chant evolved and developed over the centuries. It is interesting to note that modern Georgian Orthodox chant scholars tend to want to downplay the extent to which chant developed or 'changed' in Georgia, while western trained ethnomusicologists tend to want to focus on this development as an indicator of social events. It seems to be a matter of perspective.

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Certainly, the liturgical texts have been codified for centuries now. As an oral tradition, Georgian chant was continually evolving, though perhaps in very subtle ways. The liturgical texts, order of services, etc were being codified about the same time as the Georgians were doing their first translations from the original Greek, in the 4th-6th centuries. Later, there was a flurry of activity in the 10<sup>th</sup> century in about the time that the Byzantine service was undergoing a process of transformation.

Peter Jeffery has pointed out that the Georgians were using a Jerusalem Liturgy up until the 10th century. At that time, they adopted the Byzantine Liturgy, which had subtly evolved from the Jerusalem Liturgy. At the same time, the Georgian translators on Mount Athos were composing new chants and sending them back to the western Georgian kingdom of Tao-Klarjeti. Here, new translations were inspected and given a stamp of approval by a special board of clergy chosen for the task at Tbeti Monastery.

Hymnographers such as Grigol of Khandzta, Ioane Minchkhi, and Michael Modrekili composed new Georgian chant. We don't know exactly if it was monophonic like the Greek Byzantine chant or polyphonic like 17<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> century Georgian chant, but other sources seem to indicate that it existed in three-part harmony from the 11th century (see Ioane Petritsi's treatise on the three-part nature of Georgian music reflecting the concept of the Holy Trinity -11<sup>th</sup> century).

Now, on the question of improvisation, this is very interesting. I believe that there is a relationship between the received tradition of music, and the performer of this tradition. Likewise there is a relationship between the performer, the music, and the function of the music in a liturgical setting which has to do with providing a prayerful environment for the congregation, answering the call of the priests and deacons, and praising the Lord through sacred words. What is the appropriate manner in which to fulfill these tasks as a singer of sacred music? This is the age-old question for church musicians and has been interpreted in many ways by singers from different cultures and time periods.

In the Orthodox tradition, I believe that the words are essential. Humility is essential. Respecting tradition, and minimizing one's own feelings or personal interpretation of the music is the goal of a church musician. That being said, no artist can fulfill their art without being moved in their own soul to convey the medium through their hands, their pens, or their breath. Therefore, I believe that the Georgian master-singers of old, the *Sruligalobelni*, were true church musicians. They were able to fulfill the functions of their liturgical art by singing beautifully humble and moving music that respects the importance of text, while at the same time finding ways to bring their personalities into the sung music.

Malkhaz Erkvanidze, of the Anchiskhati Church Choir, has noted the development of church chant as follows: *sada kilo* (plain mode) chant began in three voices in the 10<sup>th</sup> century or earlier, *namdvilo kilo* (simple-true mode) chant developed from this form as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century and continues to be the basis of traditional polyphonic chant in Georgia to this day. *Gamshvenebuli kilo* (colorful mode) chant is the name of the ornamentation technique that the master-singers developed from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to ornament and embellish simple-true mode chant. I talk about this development in the paper forthcoming in the PSALM publication of the August 2006 Sacred Music Conference (due Spring 2007 I believe).

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All singers learned simple-true mode chant first, and as they developed as singers, they learned to ornament in specific styles. So, in answer to the initial question, I am hesitant to say that there is an improvisatory nature to Georgian chant, but rather a set of strictly controlled ways in which master chanters were able to embellish the strict basic chants of the Georgian liturgical repertoire.

In terms of the standardization of chant, it is important to note that from the earliest times until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, church singing in Georgia was an oral tradition. This varies considerably from other traditions such as in Russia or the west, where written notation figured much more prominently in standardizing repertoire for successive generations of singers.

But in Georgian literature, especially the epic bard tradition, we find that Georgians were endowed with those special qualities of imagination and memory that one associates with the great singers of the Homeric epic poems, the Iliad and Odyssey. Georgian literature has its own epic poem, dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the *Vepkhistqaosani* (The Knight in the Panther's Skin) which in printed form is a scant 260 pages of rhyming verse. Reportedly, there are still people in Georgia who can recite the entire epic, and in the past, there were many more.

Taking this point into account, one can understand the value place on cultural memory, and begin to understand the capacity of master-chanters to remember up to 3500 liturgical chants. This was a full time job! Small neumatic music notations above liturgical texts helped the master-chanters, but for the most part these melodies and their harmonizations were imbedded in memory and passed from one generation to the next.

Chant evolved in subtle ways, and can most easily be observed in the differences between eastern and western Georgian chant, which evolved in politically separated kingdoms for nearly five hundred years. However, what is more remarkable than the differences are the similarities. Even being relatively separated for five hundred years, or twenty generations of master-chanters, one can see how closely related these two schools of chant are.

Today, as chant books are being published, the potential for standardization is more intense than ever before. However, at the core of the movement for the rebirth of Georgian chant, scholars appreciate the great diversity of Georgian chant, and seek to educate church singers on the great wealth of their inherited tradition. /'

Well, thank you for having me, I have to go now, but please be in touch with further questions. I am still only a student of Georgian sacred music, and welcome others to the classroom with me, let's study together! Email is the best contact: [jagraham@princeton.edu](mailto:jagraham@princeton.edu)

*On behalf of Professor Drillock:*

John, thank you very much for a great session and we hope everyone will join us for the next chat in two weeks: Tuesday, December 5, 2006 at 8:30pm EST, when Dr. Joseph McLellan will lead the discussion on The Structure of Vespers.

Goodnight everyone!