THE GURIAN TRIO SONG:
MEMORY, MEDIA, AND IMPROVISATION
IN A GEORGIAN FOLK GENRE

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3. “Me Rustveli,” performed by Tristan Sikharulidze (damts'qebi), Polikarpe Khubulava (modzakhili), and Merab Kalandadze (bani). From Unique Recordings, Georgian Chanting Foundation, 2013.


Note on Transliteration of Georgian

The modern Georgian mkhedruli alphabet, present-day descendent of the writing systems used for the Georgian language at least since the fifth century CE, has thirty-three letters, each representing a different phoneme. The table below shows these letters, the Latin-alphabet transliteration I use in this work, and their IPA equivalents. In general, my system resembles the one employed in the Georgian national system of romanization.

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In the case of proper names, whether personal, political or geographical, I employ a simplified transcription, which does not distinguish between ejective (p’) and aspirated (p) consonants, and is more in line with the way Georgians spell their names when writing or having their work published in other languages. Thus, “Tristan,” not “T’rist’an.”
Acknowledgments

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of many individuals and families in Georgia, Europe, and North America. Since 2012, my home in Georgia has been the household of Mamuka Jorbenadze and Tea Salukvadze in Kobuleti. They were my host family during my first trip to Georgia, and have continued to amaze me with their generosity and hospitality on each subsequent visit. In the summer of 2016, during the major fieldwork portion of this work, they found room for me in their home, despite the demands of a busy tourist season, and helped me make arrangements with singers in Guria, often driving me to bus and train stations or calling in favors with taxi drivers. During the writing of this thesis, the family’s grandfather, Geno Jorbenadze, a wise, witty man of Guria with whom I shared midday meals for six months, passed away. This work is dedicated to his memory.

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I have been treated like family by his wife, Rusudan (Kuka) Maminashvili, and daughter-in-law Lela Ghlonti. Tristan’s grandsons, Ila and Levan Sikharulidze, intellectually curious and mature beyond their years, helped me greatly as translators and informal research partners. I met Anzor Erkomaishvili in 2016, having admired his work for years, and he kindly agreed to an interview, despite his busy schedule. I am grateful, too, for his gift of audio and video recordings of the Rustavi ensemble and of his grandfather Artem. Lali Seturidze, Anzor’s wife and a noted journalist, invited me on her radio program “Chakrulo,” a humbling show of support and a choice I hope she did not regret, given my still-improving Georgian-language ability.

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The family of John Graham and Ekaterine Diasamidze, with their irresistibly endearing children, provided much-needed rest and entertainment during my fieldwork in 2016. John, in addition to serving on my thesis committee, has been my constant guide to the world of Georgian music, and, as leader of a Georgian chant study group at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music in 2015-16, gave me the chance to experience the music of Artem Erkomaishvili first-hand. Eka served as a peerless
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It would be hard to find someone who has introduced more foreigners to Georgian music than Carl Linich. From introducing me to Tristan Sikharulidze in 2012 to offering comments on early drafts of this writing, Carl’s willingness to share the fruits of his deep knowledge and experience is awe-inspiring. I count myself honored to be part of the small community of North American graduate students conducting research in Georgia, all of whom I got to know or know better during my fieldwork. I look forward to future collaborations with Ben Wheeler, Matthew Knight, and Marina Kaganova, and eagerly anticipate their further contributions to this growing literature. I am grateful as well to Caroline Bithell and Lauren Ninoshvili, whose writings I have consulted for several years, and who were kind enough to offer comments on an early draft of Chapter Five, presented at a panel discussion organized by Marina Kaganova at Columbia University in January 2016. Marina deserves special mention, along with Nathan Shane, for letting me stay in their apartment for my first weeks of fieldwork in Tbilisi. My thanks go as well to Victor Sirelson, of the Dancing Crane Georgian Cultural Center in New York, for connecting me with Ekaterine Kantaria, who helped translate portions of my interview with Anzor Erkomaishvili and the YouTube video of Guri Sikharulidze.

At Wesleyan University, I had the unusual privilege of having three renowned scholars, in succession, as M.A. thesis advisors: Mark Slobin, Sumarsam, and Eric Charry. I was lucky to have Mark Slobin as advisor in the last semester of his
illustrious career of teaching at Wesleyan. He helped me to shape some of the central research questions in this thesis, and, after his retirement, made himself available for further discussion over coffee and email. His gift of David McAllester’s copy of Robert Lach’s 1928 Georgische Gesänge is a treasured object. Despite the distance of Java from Georgia, Pak Sumarsam was an attentive listener, helping me to shape the outline of this writing and offering valuable references for earlier attempts to apply theories of oral composition to gamelan music. Eric Charry’s advising was critical in the last stages of writing, helping me to recognize areas for reorganization and clarifying many passages of strained prose. His graduate seminar on improvisation in cross-cultural perspective was the perfect complement to my research, and he gave me many opportunities in class to develop my ideas on Gurian improvisation.

I have felt great support from the entire faculty of music at Wesleyan, particularly Su Zheng, director of graduate studies and chair of my thesis defense, Ronald Kuivila, whose proseminar on world music studies planted the seeds for much of this thesis, and Roger Mathew Grant, whose graduate seminar honed my approach to theory and working with historical sources. My time at Wesleyan has been enriched beyond measure by the opportunity to maintain musical practices outside of my area of study, and I wish to thank my teachers in South Indian, Javanese, and Western musics: B. Balasubrahmaniyan, David Nelson, I. M. Harjito, Nadya Potemkina, and Jane Alden. A seminar on the anthropology of religion with Justine Buck Quijada gave me access to new areas of research that informed the writing in Chapter Two, and offered an inspiring model of pedagogical engagement. I also wish
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Anything of value in this work owes in great part to the upbringing and nourishing environment provided by my family, especially my mother, my grandmother, my siblings, siblings-in-law, and nieces and nephews. I am truly blessed to be part of this growing gang of smart, funny, stubborn, sensitive, selfless individuals, who never bat an eye at the strange turns my career has taken thus far, and never fail to put up with my absences and absent-mindedness with grace and
forgiveness. My wife Elissa is the source of a special kind of joy, which simultaneously inspires me to do my very best, and makes the time spent away in the field or library carrel all the more poignant. More than anyone else, the words on these pages, and the thoughts they attempt to express, owe their existence to her. As the anonymous Gurian poet wrote:

    To be with you and at play
    is worth the pillar of light in heaven ...

    ორგული იხილებზე და თავშეა —
    ოლითირით სიღნაღია ობჰჰეტ...¹

¹ Tuite (1994:103).
Abstract of Thesis

This thesis explores a genre of Georgian traditional vocal music, the Gurian trio song, through a combination of ethnographic description, musical analysis of improvisational formulas, and close listening to early-twentieth-century recordings and their return to circulation in the embodied practice of present-day folk ensembles. Two prominent Gurian singers, Tristan Sikharulidze and Anzor Erkomaishvili, serve as touchstones for these strands of analysis, each representing approaches to transmitting the memory of their tradition that intertwine the oral and technologically mediated. After an introduction to Guria, a region of Georgia on the Black Sea coast, the first chapter reviews scholarly writing on Gurian music since the early twentieth century, and interrogates concepts of “polyphony” which influence research on Georgian music to this day. The second chapter draws on interviews with Tristan Sikharulidze and other Gurian singers to develop the idea of trio singing as a social activity with a moral dimension and complex processes of musical reference and intertextuality. Chapters Three and Four take a single Gurian trio song, “Me Rustveli,” and, based on comparative study of several recordings, propose a formulaic system of improvisation, while placing this practice within the context of Soviet-era attitudes toward improvisation. The final chapter explores the role of early-twentieth-century recordings of Gurian music, and the way that idiosyncracies and accidents in the original recordings may have tangible effects on the way these songs are performed today. The outsize influence of Anzor Erkomaishvili as a performer,
publisher, and all-around keeper of the archive, is augmented and colored by his familial connections to singers on the hundred-year-old records. A brief conclusion proposes areas for further research, particularly how to place musical, improvisatory practice within various models of cultural memory, including those built from the perspectives of textual, anthropological, or performance studies.
Introduction

Scenes from a Film

Midway through the 1970 Georgian film *Iqo shashvi mgalobeli* (There Once was a Singing Blackbird), the main character, a timpanist and would-be composer, finds himself in a brightly lit room in the Tbilisi Conservatoire, where eight men gather around a piano, singing a Georgian Orthodox chant. In its hushed tone and nearly-uninterrupted flow of singing, the scene stands out in a film marked by overlapping soundscapes of bustling urban life and eclectic, fragmented musical underscoring. The only interruption comes partway through the scene, when the group’s leader, sitting at the piano and conducting the choir with subtle hand gestures, stops the singing to correct a note in the middle voice. The main character, Gia, helps out by singing the correct note, then giving pitches for the other voices to continue. The chant picks up again, and the rest of the scene happens without dialogue: one of the singers is called out of the room, signaling with one finger for Gia to take his place on the “first” voice; Gia joins in, tilting his head to hear better; later, summoned by a young woman entering the room, Gia himself finally leaves, waving good-bye to the singers. As he closes the door and walks down the corridor, the chanting voices are overtaken by sounds from other practice rooms—vocal exercises, a violin sonata, piano scales. A bust of Beethoven glowers in a corner.

I describe this scene as an introduction to one of the main figures of this thesis: Anzor Erkomaishvili, the man sitting at the piano (fig. 0.1). He and the other
singers were all members, in real life, of the Rustavi Ensemble, a folk choir founded in 1968, two years before the film’s release. The film credits, however, do not give their names, nor is there any identification of what they are singing, which is the Georgian Orthodox Trisagion hymn “Ts’mindao Ghmerto” (O Holy God). The scene in the conservatory prompted several questions for me: Why is traditional Georgian music being sung in a conservatory, alongside Western classical music? Was Anzor involved in the choice of music for this film?¹ And, in a Soviet environment in which

¹ Because many of the figures I discuss in this thesis have the same surnames, I make use at times of given names, particularly for members of the Erkomaishvili and Sikharulidze families. I hope the reader will not interpret this as being overly familiar. In Georgian, respectful forms of address use someone’s given name, with the title bat’ono or kalbat’ono (for women). In this text, whenever first names appear without surnames, one may assume that such an address is intended.
religious music was suppressed or at least discouraged, what was this chant doing in a film at all?

Before I could interview Anzor and ask him any of these questions, I wanted to be sure that I had correctly identified him and the other Rustavi singers. For this, I got help from Tristan Sikharulidze, the other central figure in this study. Sitting on the veranda of his home in Makvaneti, a village close to Ozurgeti, the administrative center of the Georgian province of Guria, I played several clips from There Once Was a Singing Blackbird on my laptop computer. For the conservatory scene, Tristan confirmed my identification of Anzor and other famous Rustavi members like Hamlet Gonashvili and Badri Toidze, and gave the names of several singers I had not recognized. I went on to show him some other scenes from the film, which included snippets of Georgian folk music in the soundtrack. I especially wanted him to see a clip featuring a Gurian naduri (work song). In this scene, Gia, the main character, is smoking in the basement of the national library with a group of men, when the sound of an explosion on the street startles them. Gia runs out to the street, only to find a film crew working on a historical film with actors in soldiers’ uniforms, setting off explosions and trying to wrangle the crowd of onlookers pressing them from every side. While Gia moves among the chaos, sneaking the opportunity to look through the cinematographer’s viewfinder, we hear the naduri placed rather low in the sound mix, drowned out by crowd noises and explosions. The song begins with a solo voice, intoning a call on open syllables. As soon as this voice emerged from my computer speakers, Tristan pointed and said, ai, mamachemis khma, “That’s my father’s voice.”
His father’s voice: Ilarion Sikharulidze (1902-1985), Tristan’s father, was a famous singer in Guria and had led a folk choir called Ensemble Dila. I had not expected this revelation, and struggled to account for the appearance of the song, and this voice, in the film. Unlike the calm, reverent setting for the chant scene in the conservatory—we see the singers, and the main action of the scene is the singing itself—Tristan’s father’s voice emerges as one layer in a montage. Indeed, it is a self-reflexively cinematic moment. We see the chaos and artifice of filmmaking spilling onto the street, while the recurring image of Gia looking through a viewfinder (other times it is a microscope, telescope, or x-ray device), perhaps represents an attempt to find focus in a way not permitted by his dissolute, ambulant lifestyle. But why, of all places, would a Gurian folk song appear here? Some answers may be drawn from two interrelated concepts: *voice* and *work*.

In terms of the latter, the musical genre of the *naduri* is associated with the pre-Soviet rural tradition of forming work-gangs (*nadi*) during harvest times. At the end of a day of work, so the tradition goes (Erkomaishvili 2005), there would be a large feast for the workers, provided by the landlord, at which songs would be sung. The musical form of the *naduri*, with alternating, antiphonal choirs, solo calls, and the piercing, high-pitched yodel called *k'rimanchuli*, suggests techniques well-suited to

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2 I later learned that this same song, “Shemokmedura Naduri,” performed by Ensemble Dila, appears in Iosseliani’s 1969 film *Starinnaya Gruzinskaya pesnya* (Ancient Georgian Song). Indeed, this appears to be the source of the audio used in *Singing Blackbird*, as I have yet to locate a commercial recording of the piece by Ensemble Dila, and the two performances sound, to my ears, identical. *Ancient Georgian Song* was not widely released, and I have only been able to locate a full version on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MerzDKrDRSI).
outdoor performance and communication across great distances. Changes brought on by industrialization and the Soviet collectivization of agriculture in the 1920s-30s meant the end of the naduri’s traditional context, through it survived as a popular concert genre for folk choirs. The song could thus serve as an emblem of collective, complementary labor, as well as a demonstration of “folk creativity”—the ability of the common people to develop sophisticated, large-scale artistic forms—which featured prominently in Soviet folkloristics from the 1930s onward (Howell 1992).

In the film, the question of work is ever-present. Gia seems constitutionally opposed to work, never on time for his job in the ballet orchestra (he always arrives just before the cue for his tympani part), unable to make headway with an opera he is composing, and wandering around all day, interfering with family members and friends trying to do their own work. In the Soviet system, cultural labor was inherently suspect, tinged with bourgeois associations. Despite the Khrushchev-era “thaw,” which permitted directors like Iosseliani to experiment with genres besides socialist realism, the audiovisual juxtaposition of the naduri with this scene appears to set up an ironic tension between, on the one hand, the shiftless, disorganized creative laborers—Gia, the film crew, perhaps Iosseliani himself—and the hard-working peasants, on the other, banding together to achieve common goals and lustily singing all the while.
The second concept—the voice—leads us into the main concerns of this thesis. The voices of Ilarion Sikharulidze and the other members of his choir do not sound like the blended, balanced wash of sound produced by the Rustavi Ensemble at the conservatory. Instead, there is a bright, almost nasal quality to the village singers. Individual voices are foregrounded, the strident, high-pitched vocal techniques called *gamqvani* and *krimanchuli* cut through the texture, while the ringing, untempered harmonies would fall between the keys of the conservatory piano. In all, these voices present a village practice, which may be held in opposition to the learned, cultivated, Westernized style of the conservatory. The village tradition, here voiced by Ilarion Sikharulidze (fig. 0.2), continues to this day to be associated with his son, Tristan, while the choirs led by Anzor Erkomaishvili—Rustavi above all—bear the mark, justly or not, of an “academic” style.

![Figure 0.2 Ilarion Sikharulidze (left), with a member of Ensemble Dila; film still from *Ancient Georgian Songs* (Otar Ioseliani, 1969)](image-url)
We will not be content, however, with these easy contrasts or dichotomies. Even in the context of the *Singing Blackbird* film, the voice presented as more authentic, i.e., the folk choir singing the *naduri*, is the most mediated, subjected to editing and unmoored from its embodied source. The cultivated voices in the conservatory, on the other hand, are synchronized with their originators and presented uninterrupted—a self-effacing method of mediation. In their own self-appointed ways, Anzor Erkomaishvili as public evangelist for traditional Georgian music, Tristan Sikharulidze as keeper of the oral tradition, both men have cultivated strategies for storing, transmitting, adapting, and administering—in other words, mediating—the individual and collective memory of Georgian folk music. Close attention to Gurian trio songs—a practice in which Tristan and Anzor, born three years apart and both raised in the village of Makvaneti, were trained from early childhood—will allow for a fine-grained analysis of these memory techniques as they intersect with considerations of authorship, improvisation, and fidelity to the past as constitutive of a post-Soviet Georgian identity.

**Background to Fieldwork**

One choir is visible, bodies in a room; the other is invisible, voices inhabiting an aural space. The same live/mediated dynamic identified above in Iosseliani’s film characterizes my own entry into the world of Georgian folk music. In 2007, while working as the music director and dramaturg for Double Edge Theatre, a small
ensemble based in western Massachusetts, my colleague John Peitso gave me a recording which included the song “Shavlego,” recorded by a large Georgian choir. I knew almost nothing about Georgian music at the time, though I was immediately enthralled by the power of the voices and what I can only describe as a visceral reaction to the unusual harmonic structures—open fifths, parallel sevenths, a bassline that did not resolve the way I expected it to. The theatre at the time was working on a performance based on the Arthurian legends, and as dramaturg I had been researching some parallels between the King Arthur myths and the Nart sagas of the North Caucasus. The near-propinquity of this South Caucasian Georgian song was too good to pass up, so we used “Shavlego” in the performance, replacing the words (which we did not know or understand) with meaningless, open vowels, and making it an anthem for the knights of the Round Table.³

I have not been able to locate the precise recording we used, though my own recollection, and that of my friends, suggest it was the version recorded by the Rustavi Ensemble, under Anzor Erkomaishvili’s direction, in 1989.⁴ The ubiquity of Rustavi Ensemble recordings, in the West as well as in Georgia, may develop as a leitmotiv in the pages that follow.⁵ For many listeners in North America, the compilation CD released by Nonesuch Records in 1990, Georgian Voices, served as a

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³ This was, in fact, a fortuitous choice, as the text of “Shavlego” is addressed to a knight (Shalva Akhaltsikheli) going into battle.

⁴ The song appears on Asi kartuli khalkhuri simghera (100 Georgian Folk Songs). See Discography for more details.

⁵ Rustavi’s “Jvarsa shensa” (We venerate thy cross) even appears in the Coen brothers film The Big Lebowski (1998).
first exposure to Georgian vocal music. Thus, my own introduction, by way of an
Anzor Erkomaishvili production, is far from unique. Like so many other listeners,
however, my colleagues and I were not content to remain passive, but felt the need to
sing this music ourselves, to add another node to the network of influence and
inspiration, no matter how naive or incomplete our theatrical adaptation may have been.

Four years after this first encounter, in the same small town, Ashfield, where
Double Edge Theatre is based, I met Tristan Sikharulidze. On his first—to date,
only—tour of the United States with his trio Shalva Chemo, Tristan gave a singing
workshop, with translation by Carl Linich. He taught us “Mok’le Khelkhvavi,” a
short piece with text connected to agricultural rituals, typically sung at a supra
(traditional feast). This was the first Gurian trio song I learned. Up to this point, I had
been more familiar with other styles of Georgian singing, particularly those with
sustained, drone-like parts in the bass, as in the Kartl-Kakhetian style, or the
homophonic rhythm of chants in the Orthodox liturgical tradition. In “Mok’le
Khelkhvavi,” the voices seemed much more independent, with contrary motion,
staggered entrances, and different texts in all three voice parts. Singing the middle
voice with other workshop participants, I found it difficult at times to sing certain
intervals precisely the way Tristan demonstrated, especially as the three voices
clustered together in the moments before a unison cadence note.

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This was at the home of Ricki Carroll, who regularly produces house concerts of vocal
music, often in connection with the Village Harmony organization.
I attended Shalva Chemo’s concert that night, still tempering my expectations for the full, robust sound of the Rustavi Ensemble, and beginning to become familiar with the characteristic features of Gurian folk songs. Only later, after spending time in Georgia and hearing the way other musicians speak of Tristan and his trio, do I realize what an unusual privilege it is to have heard them perform live. Especially now that the advanced age of Guri Sikharulidze, the trio’s first-voice singer, has prevented future performances with this original lineup, I find myself wishing to be able to hear this 2011 concert again, with ears more experienced and discerning.\(^7\)

When, in 2012, I moved to Georgia for six months to teach English in a public school in Kobuleti,\(^8\) I asked Carl Linich for Tristan’s contact information. With assistance on the telephone from a Georgian teacher of English, I set up a first visit. Despite my limited knowledge of Georgian at that time, Tristan taught me five songs over two days. In one-on-one sessions, he would sing each voice part alone, while I recorded his voice with a digital recorder and notated the melodic motion in my notebook, a process marked by much trial and error. After I had learned each section of a song, Tristan would have me sing it back to him while he sang one of the other two voice parts in counterpoint. This process would be repeated until I had learned all three parts to the song. I made four such visits to Tristan between February and June

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\(^7\) Apart from a furtive cell-phone recording I made of one unknown song, since lost, I do not know of a recording of the event.

\(^8\) I was employed through a Georgian government program called Teach and Learn with Georgia, which placed fluent English speakers as teaching assistants throughout the country, providing them with housing and a small stipend.
2012 (fig. 0.3), as well as a brief follow-up in March 2013, when a tour with Double Edge Theatre brought me to Moscow. Of all my interlocutors, my relationship with Tristan is the most developed, and my lengthy interviews and casual conversations with him comprise a large part of the ethnographic detail in this thesis. During the summer of 2016, when my visits to his house in Makvaneti took on the added focus of my academic study, I still tried to find time for lessons with him, and finally had the nerve to tackle “Chven Mshvidoba,” a centerpiece of the repertoire.

Major fieldwork took place from July to September 2016, primarily in Georgia’s capital, Tbilisi, and various locations in Guria (discussed in Chapter One). I conducted interviews with singers and ensembles who specialize in Gurian folk song, with an emphasis on singers from Tristan’s generation, especially those with familial connections to the early-twentieth-century singing groups that produced many singers whose names are well-known today. I was able to interview Anzor Erkomaishvili at

![Figure 0.3 Tristan Sikharulidze, left, with grandson Levan, June 2012. Photo by the author.](image-url)
length at his apartment in Tbilisi, where he also houses a personal archive, discussed in Chapter Five (fig. 0.4). I also attended concerts, music festivals, a recording session, and several supras at which Gurian songs were performed or discussed. Research conducted at the National Library in Tbilisi provided access to out-of-print ethnographies by Georgian authors, musical transcriptions, and limited-release volumes published in the past decade by Anzor Erkomaishvili’s International Center for Georgian Folk Song and the Georgian Chant Foundation. The active, friendly community of folk singers in Tbilisi provided much-needed context for my research, especially concerning recent developments in performance practice.

FIGURE 0.4 Anzor Erkomaishvili, center, with (from left) John Graham and the author, August 2016. Photo by Lali Seturidze.
Chapter Overview

Following this introductory chapter, Chapters One and Two present an introduction to Gurian trio singing, placing it within the discourse and practice of Georgian folk music more broadly. Chapter One serves as a general introduction to the region and its history, as well as a literature review. The region of Guria has long had a distinct identity within the Georgian nation, evident in popular stories of outlaws, tricksters, and revolutionaries, and in the short-lived Gurian Republic, a peasant insurrection connected to the revolutions that rocked the Russian Empire in 1905. Georgian folk music has been a subject of study since the early twentieth century, by scholars in Georgia and beyond, especially after wax-cylinder recordings of Georgian prisoners’ songs were made in Germany and Austria in World War I. Writings on Georgian music to this day retain some of the underlying concerns of these early comparative musicologists, particularly the interest in placing Georgian singing within speculative histories of Western polyphony, or constructing polyphony as indicative of a unique Georgian national character. In this chapter, I furnish a brief genealogy of polyphony’s use and abuse in Georgian musical discourse. I also draw comparisons with the sizable body of ethnomusicological work on traditional music in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, as well as the once-socialist states of Eastern Europe. Although arguably thinner in ethnographic detail and theoretical rigor, the literature on Georgia suggests common concerns across this geographic swath of Soviet influence: the legacy of nationalism, the effects of Soviet education
and westernization on traditional music practices, and the interaction of ethnic, regional, and religious identities within the state.

In Chapter Two, I delve into Gurian trio singing as a genre and living practice, identifying the salient formal features which set trio songs apart from other Gurian folk songs and developing a picture of the social conditions in which they are sung. A consideration of intertextuality in singing practice, inspired by the web of variants and turns of phrase associated with different songs and singers, will help to define the genre of trio songs, while foregrounding the individual’s relation to tradition. Other features of trio singing, highlighted by my interlocutors in interviews, such as competition among singers, key songs as markers of skill, and the relationship with sacred chant traditions, round out the picture of the repertoire and community under examination. Biographical sketches of Tristan Sikharulidze and Anzor Erkomaishvili, with brief discussion of the careers and performance lineages of my other interlocutors, provide context for the opinions and perspectives elicited in interviews.

A close reading of one Gurian trio song, with a proposal of underlying structures and performance procedures, constitutes the bulk of Chapter Three. My analysis of the song “Me Rustveli” draws from audio recordings made from 1909 to 2014, with a focus on Tristan Sikharulidze’s many recorded versions, which often feature his cousin Guri. Through isolating and transcribing the first-voice (damts'qebi) part from all of these recordings, what emerges is a common stock of melodic formulas, widely distributed across the recorded corpus and forming the building blocks of a singer’s improvisation in performance. At the same time, the
movement of the other two voice parts clearly impinges on the improvisatory freedom of the first-voice singer. In addition, then, to the common stock of formulas, there is also a matrix of procedural rules for improvisation, which, I argue, becomes evident in moments of doubt or near-breakdown in performance.

In Chapter Four, I unite a formulaic analysis of “Me Rustveli”—identifying points of contact with the Parry-Lord theory of spontaneous composition in performance—with Tristan Sikharulidze’s own conception of the “frame” of a song. In so doing, I attempt a more precise explication of the mechanics of Gurian vocal improvisation than has hitherto been made. The very idea of improvisation, though problematic in the context of Soviet folklore performance, is increasingly ascribed to Georgian music as a whole in the post-Soviet period, no more so than in the public celebration of figures like Tristan.

Chapter Five investigates the complicated afterlife of early-twentieth-century Georgian gramophone records, and the technological interventions made by Anzor Erkomaishvili and prior generations of his family in the preservation and dissemination of Gurian singing. As a kind of origin point, these recordings have been instrumental in the post-Soviet revival of Georgian folk music, mobilized through CD reissues, books of transcriptions, and precise recreation of the records by professional singing groups. Fidelity to the voices of the past, an increasingly important value for present-day scholars and singers, represents a repudiation, in some ways, of the “academic” style of choral singing performed by Anzor Erkomaishvili’s Rustavi Ensemble, particularly in the period from the 1970s-1990s.
Insights from the field of media archaeology allow us to interpret these sound documents as something other than chronological points in musico-social history or stages in technological progress. These documents force us to be attentive to the materiality of gramophone records, with their unintended sound artifacts, their claims to authenticity, and their re-insertion in the discourse networks of the twenty-first century.

A short concluding chapter offers further avenues for the lines of thought introduced in Chapters Three through Five, by placing the improvisational practice of Tristan Sikharulidze, and the inscriptive techniques of Anzor Erkomaishvili inside larger frameworks of cultural memory. Studies of cultural memory—including the useful concepts of **canon** and **archive** developed by Aleida Assmann (2010)—tend to emphasize the document, whether textual or audiovisual. On the other hand, if oral tradition is considered, the emphasis tends to be on individual memory and transgenerational transmission. The radically ahistorical nature of mediated sound, as noted by Wolfgang Ernst (2015:101), complicates this picture of cultural memory, especially, I argue, when placed in dialogue with living practices of sound-making. In the case of Gurian trio songs, present-day singers have the co-existing resources of archival documentation—the old recordings and their transcriptions, often curated by Anzor Erkomaishvili—as well as the model, if not the direct pedagogy of living master singers known for improvisation, like Tristan Sikharulidze. While young folk singers trade MP3s of wax-cylinder field recordings from the 1930s, and foreign singing groups huddle around the table in Tristan’s sitting room, learning trio songs
by ear, a composite picture of Gurian trio singing comes into focus, characterized by a tension between the longing to re-consummate and repossess the past, and the imperative to improvise a new reality.
Chapter One
Guria and Its Place in Georgian Music Scholarship

Geography and History of Guria

Of the twelve regions and autonomous republics that make up the country of Georgia, the smallest in area—not counting the capital, Tbilisi—is Guria, at just over 2,000 square kilometers. Its western border is the Black Sea coast, between the mouths of the Rioni and Choloki rivers. To the east, its green, hilly terrain reaches the outskirts of the Lesser Caucasus mountain range, where the resort towns of Bakhmaro and Nabeghlavi, famous for their mineral springs, are nestled (fig. 1.1).1 Tea and

![Map of Georgia](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/file:Georgia_location_map.svg)

FIGURE 1.1 Map of Georgia, with the capital city Tbilisi and the region of Guria highlighted. Map adapted from Wikimedia Commons, file Georgia_location_map.svg, user NordNordWest. Used under license CC-BY-SA-3.0.

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1 This map does not reflect the de facto independence of the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which, at time of writing, are considered by the United Nations and many other nations and organizations as part of the Republic of Georgia.
citrus are grown in the subtropical climate along the Black Sea coast, though after years of subsidies as the main provider of these agricultural goods for the Soviet Union (over 90% of consumption), cultivation of these crops has declined since Georgian independence in 1991 (Bondyrev et al. 2015:5). The capital city of the region is Ozurgeti (population 14,785), which was known as Makharadze during the Soviet period, in honor of the revolutionary leader Pilipe Makharadze. Along with Ozurgeti, the major population centers in this mostly rural region are the cities of Lanchkhuti (6,395) and Chokhatauri (1,815). Fieldwork for this thesis took place in all three cities, as well as the villages of Makvaneti, Mamati, and Mtispiri (fig. 1.2).  

\[\text{FIGURE 1.2 Field sites in Guria. Map adapted from Wikimedia Commons, file Guria.svg, user David1010. Used under license CC-BY-SA-3.0.}\]

2 Population figures from the National Statistics Office of Georgia, based on descriptions of urban population from the 2014 census (http://census.ge/en/results/census).

3 This map also shows the coastal town of Kobuleti, where I was based for much of this fieldwork, making daytrips or short overnight stays in other sites. Today part of the region/autonomous republic of Adjara, Kobuleti had historically been part of Guria, and its folk ensemble has many Gurian songs in their repertoire (3.viii.16). See Appendix A for details on interview locations.
The traditional division of Georgia into eastern and western halves—enacted geologically by the Likhi Range, which runs across the country north-to-south, connecting the Greater and Lesser Caucasus mountain ranges—has linguistic, agricultural, religious, and musical consequences. Along with Georgian, the Kartvelian language family has three additional members—Svan, Megrelian, and Laz—all of which were historically spoken in West Georgia. The regions of Svaneti, Samegrelo, and Lazeti still bear the names of these ethno-linguistic groups, though the historical region of Lazeti is today mostly in modern-day Turkey. Whereas the East Georgian heartlands of Kartli and Kakheti were relatively monolingual (despite the presence of occupying foreign powers), West Georgia was a site of constant linguistic interaction and negotiation. Citing the prominent Georgian historian Ivane Javakhishvili, Vano Shilakadze, in his musical ethnography of Guria, places the arrival of Georgian speakers in present-day Guria as the result of migrations from East Georgia in the fifth or sixth century (Shilakadze 1961:6). At that time, Javakhishvili argues, the Megrelian and Laz languages were still unified, and the intrusion of Georgian speakers formed a wedge that ultimately divided the northern and southern groups into the resulting language communities. Without proposing a direct link between ethnicity and linguistic migration—an historically dangerous enterprise—it is worth noting Javakhishvili’s suggestion that we consider Gurians as

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4 Unlike these heartland regions, the mountainous areas of eastern Georgia, it should be noted, are home to several divergent, often mutually unintelligible dialects of Georgian, such as Khevsur and Tush, as well as populations speaking unrelated Northeast Caucasian languages. My thanks to John Graham (pers. comm.) for drawing my attention to this fact and to the work of Thomas Wier (2011).
Megrelians or Laz who have been *gakartebuli*, that is, “Georganized” (ibid.). That is to say, the establishment of Georgian as the dominant language did not accompany a wholesale replacement of the population. One consequence of the linguistic environment of West Georgia may be the prevalence and complexity of non-lexical syllables in Gurian vocal music, a trait shared with Megrelian songs, though less developed in eastern Georgia (Tuite 2015).  

In the centuries between the dissolution of a unified Georgian kingdom and the beginning of Russian rule (roughly 1400-1800), the princes of Guria were typically vassals of the rulers of Samegrelo or Imereti to the north, while these kings and princes in turn were subject to the Ottoman Empire. The 1555 Peace of Amasya divided the South Caucasus between Ottoman Turkish and Safavid Persian spheres of influence. After accepting Russian sovereignty in 1811 (Suny 1994:64), Guria, for the remainder of the nineteenth century, was a front in several conflicts between the Russian and the Ottoman empires, as well as the site for organized uprisings against Russian rule. Gurian revolts in 1819 and 1841 had to do, respectively, with Russian attempts to control the clergy and impose taxes, and were broadly supported by nobles and peasants (Suny 1994:85). Guria’s “tradition of protest and resistance”

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5 These nonsense syllables, also known as vocables or the Georgian term *samgherisi*, are discussed further in Chapter Four.

(Jones 2005:140) appears to have been forged in these years, and would persist in popular images of Gurians as outlaws and bandits reminiscent of the American Wild West. 7

An Italian correspondent for Milan’s Corriere della Sera offers a sketch of the Gurian character sure to inspire regional pride: “The Gurians are the bravest and most warlike, most chivalrous, most handsome, most hospitable, most educated, although not the most unpractical of the Georgians” (Villari 1906:84). The occasion for his visit was the establishment of the short-lived “Gurian Republic” or “Gurian Peasant Republic” (guriis mkhveli-mtesvelta resp'ublik'a). This was the culmination of a movement uniting peasant demands for tax relief and an accountable police force with the ambitions of Georgian Social Democrats, who sought to establish a society built on Marxist ideals. From early 1905, the association of local committees that made up the republic, under the guidance of the Social Democrats, resisted the tsarist authorities before finally being crushed by the Russian military in February 1906. Uprisings elsewhere in the Russian Empire during these years met similar fates, though scholars have recognized in the Gurian Republic’s comparative success “the first prototype” of a “peasant-based national liberationist movement,” and an influence on Lenin’s later anticolonial politics (Jones 2005:158).

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7 Makharadze (2008) offers biographies of such “Gurian outlaws” from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, the link with the Wild West runs rather deeper than may be expected: horseback riders from Guria, called “Russian Cossacks,” were an integral feature of “Buffalo Bill” Cody’s touring show, and, as prototypical cowboys, had an immense influence on American popular culture (Makharadze 2015).
Along with his admiration of the Gurian character, Luigi Villari offers, as evidence of his claim that they are “the most educated” of Georgians, that, in Guria, “every village has its own library, and even those furthest from the Government post stations provide their own mail service so as to receive the daily papers from Tiflis, Batum, and Russia” (1906:84). Indeed, within the Kutaisi guberniia, schools in Guria had the best pupil-to-teacher ratio, and the population overall had a high rate of literacy (Jones 2005:139). Nevertheless, Guria was—and continues to be—a rural region, and there is no reason to doubt Anzor Erkomaishvili when he calls the singers in his great-grandfather Gigo’s choir “real peasants” (30.viii.16). Nevertheless, the general population in Guria appears to have been attuned not merely to the political debates that helped spark the 1905 revolution, but also to the larger discourse of romantic nationalism and Georgian cultural revival being carried out in print culture beginning in the 1860s. Writers like Ilia Chavchavadze and Akaki Tsereteli advocated for self-determination in journal articles, and expressed through poetry their love of the Georgian people and countryside: many of their lyrics were set to music and remain popular as folk-style songs. Even if there was the lingering perception, among the literati of eastern Georgia, of West Georgia as “a hotbed of backwardness and superstition compared to the enlightened city-dwellers of Tbilisi”

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8 In-text references to interviews by the author follow the format used by Marc Perlman (2004:xix): day (Arabic numeral), month (Roman numeral), year (Arabic), thus 30 August 2016.

9 Suny (1994:152) quotes Russian viceroy Vorontsov-Dashkov, who declared that “Gurians and Mingrelians make up the main contingent of every type of worker in all the Black Sea ports.” Exchange of ideas between these urban areas and the rural interior seems eminently plausible.
(Manning 2012a:18), the stereotyped image of a peasantry untouched by modernity and literary culture cannot be sustained. The music of this peasantry, in turn, which makes its sudden appearance in the recorded archive as apparently unvarnished documents of autochthonous practice, emerged from a society very much in tune with the political climate of the early twentieth century.

**Early Writing on Georgian Music**

The earliest surviving aural documents of Gurian folk music, which will be treated in depth in Chapter Five, were made within a year of the violent repression of the Gurian uprising. In the spring of 1907, Gigo Erkomaishvili’s choir traveled from the village of Makvaneti to Tbilisi to make recordings for the Gramophone Company of London, which had a sales office in the capital city. The attempt to capture Georgian traditional music does not, however, begin with audio recording technology. A major project had begun in the 1870s to preserve the corpus of Georgian Orthodox liturgical chant by transcribing the oral tradition into Western staff notation (Graham 2015:153). Transcriptions of folk songs also began to appear in early works by prominent Georgian comparative musicologists (Arakchiev 1908) and composers (Paliashvili 1910). Some of these early folk-song transcriptions included added piano accompaniment (Ippolitov-Ivanov 1895; Koridze 1900), while others presented the songs and chants in their traditional, unaccompanied form (Benashvili 1885).
A review of a volume by Dimitri Arakishvili in a German periodical demonstrates the burgeoning interest in music of the Caucasus in the wider world of European scholarship. The various ethnic groups of the Russian Empire, the reviewer states, are of “tremendous interest to ethnographers,” because, he claims, those groups retain their national characteristics in “unadulterated purity,” especially at the periphery of the empire (Riesemann 1907:62). The reviewer also points to the use of recording technology (in this case, wax-cylinder recordings made by Arakishvili which do not, to my knowledge, survive) as a means of being faithful to the true character of the songs. Scholarly interest in Georgian music, outside the Russian sphere, was concentrated in the German-speaking circles for the next few decades. Adolf Dirr, one of the few to make the journey to Georgia, conducted research in Tbilisi and published collections of song transcriptions in German journals (1910, 1914). In an introductory note, Dirr (1910:484) offers the “nobility” of melody and the “beauty of the modulations” as defining features of Gurian songs, whereas Megrelian songs are “more lyrical.” Such regional distinctions, highlighting the variety of Georgian traditional music, have been a prominent feature of the literature from its beginning.

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10 Arakishvili published in Russian as Dimitri Ignatievich Arakchiev. His early work was released in several stages, as part of the proceedings of Russian Musical-Ethnographic Commission. Riesemann (1907) reviews a book published in 1906 that bears a title similar—albeit translated into German—to the work I have consulted and cited as Arakchiev (1908).

11 See Brady (1999) for an account of the “mechanical presence” of the phonograph and its influence on the practices of folklore and ethnography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
A landmark event in the study of Georgian music (and comparative musicology more generally) was the recording and documentation of prisoners of war in camps in Germany and Austria during the First World War. Soldiers from Georgia, captured while fighting in the Russian army, became part of comprehensive collection programs which focused, to varying degrees, on both the languages and musical cultures of the various ethnicities present in those camps (Scheer 2010:287). Speech and songs, representing hundreds of languages and ethnicities in the Allied armies, were transcribed by hand and recorded on thousands of wax cylinders, which became the cornerstone of archives in Vienna and Berlin (the famous Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv, led for many years by E. M. von Hornbostel). Visual documentation included photographic portraits of individual soldiers by Otto Stiehl, intended to demonstrate

![Figure 1.3 Viktor Megrelishvili, a Georgian soldier from the Kutaisi gubernia, photographed by Otto Stiehl (1916:80)](image-url)
ethnic traits and racial physiognomy (fig. 2.3). Robert Lach, the director of the Austrian project from 1916, published his findings over the course of several decades.

His first Preliminary Report (Vorläufiger Bericht; 1917) included musical

EXAMPLE 1.1 Transcription of Gurian prisoners’ songs (Lach 1917:58)

12 The book of photographs published by Stiehl (1916), which also includes soldiers from French and British colonies in Africa and South Asia, exhibits the period’s predilection for ethnic generalization and racist essentialism (Scheer 2010:289).
transcriptions of fourteen ethnic or linguistic groups represented by the prisoner population, “Gurian” among them (ex. 1.1).

Like all the transcriptions in this first report, the Gurian music is presented without any lyrics, song titles, or contextual information. A comparison, however, with Lach’s later volume of Georgian songs (1928), reveals the identity at least of the first portion of the 1917 transcription: it is “Chven Mshvidoba,” the quintessential trio song (ex. 1.2). Lach’s later work is based on the same wax cylinders as his first volume, though now enriched with song texts and translations by Adolf Dirr, as well

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**EXAMPLE 1.2 Transcription of “Chven Mshvidoba” (Lach 1928:92)**

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13 In Chapter Two, I discuss the special status of “Chven Mshvidoba” for Gurian singers.
as identification of performers. The second half of the 1917 transcription (ex. 1.1) does not turn up in the later volume, though its melodic contours and rhythmic structure resemble the first-voice part of the trio song “Ts’amok’ruli” (ex. 1.3).

Many of the early transcriptions of Gurian song, and Georgian music more generally, present only one melodic line at a time, a serious drawback given that the majority of these pieces are known to be three-part songs. Although “Chven Mshvidoba” was recorded by Lach with all three voices, it appears that for the purposes of transcription he also had each singer try to sing his part by himself (Lechleitner, Lechleitner and Lomidze 2014:437). This privileging of the single voice may simply have been a methodological choice, comparable to the recordings made for linguistic analysis in the same camps, or it may reflect a response to the limitations of the recording medium itself, in which higher voices or those closest to

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At the time of writing, I did not have access to audio files from the Vienna Phonogrammarchiv recordings to test this hypothesis.
the phonograph horn tended to be most audible. A recent study of the Lach recordings of “Chven Mshvidoba” suggests that the isolation of each singer from his trio partners led to mistakes in performance, such as “switching between the first and second voices” (Lechleitner, Lechleitner and Lomidze 2014:438). Setting aside the fact that the conditions of recording had a demonstrable effect on the recorded content, it seems that the researchers were unaware of basic formal structures in these songs. Take, for example, the transcriptions numbered 224 and 236 in Lach’s second collection (1928:87,92). These both appear to be first-voice parts for “Chven Mshvidoba” (236 appears as ex. 1.2 above). They are thus cross-referenced in Lach’s text. Another setting of “Chven Mshvidoba,” number 256 (Lach 1928:96-97), is clearly an attempt to sing the bani, or bass part, to the same song. It is not, however, indexed with the other two first-voice examples. A footnote, likely the work of Dirr, further muddies the waters. 15 The note purports to explain the Georgian word dabali (low), which must have been mentioned in the context of this recording, by translating it in terms of dynamic level, i.e., “soft,” as opposed to pitch level. Dirr suggests that the song should be sung with a “soft” (leiser) voice, without any indication that dabali could also indicate the lowest voice (presumably “tiefer”) in a multi-part song (Lach 1928:247).

Lach was taken to task for his single-voice transcriptions by Siegfried Nadel, who asserted that polyphony was “the most essential characteristic” of Georgian

15 “Die Bemerkung dabali (=niedrig) will vielleicht sagen, daß mit leiser Stimme zu singen ist” (Lach 1928:247).
music (1933:5). *Polyphony* is a keyword here, and I interrogate its usefulness below. Not only did Nadel object to Lach’s presentation of the material, he also critiqued him for being more interested in general questions of musical development and psychology, rather than the ethnographic study of music in the Caucasus. Nadel had not yet received his doctorate when he published his monograph on Georgian songs, and would become more widely known in subsequent years as an anthropologist and an important figure in the British school of structural-functionalism, writing frequently about religion and social structure in West Africa. Although *Georgische Gesänge* would be “the first comprehensive study of Georgian songs in a Western language” (Ziegler 2010:111), Nadel himself never went to Georgia, relying instead on wax cylinders from the Berlin Lautarchiv and a Georgian informant named David Ghambashidse.¹⁶ Nadel’s interest in Georgian music, however, was not limited to writing a bounded ethnography of a musical practice he would never see in person. Georgia is important, he says at the beginning of his work, for its significance to the history of European music: in short, it is the “homeland of our polyphony” (1933:3; der Heimat unserer Mehrstimmigkeit).

¹⁶ Although a document from 1933 requesting the loan of a phonograph may suggest an intention on Nadel’s part to undertake fieldwork in Georgia (Ziegler 2010), he left Germany for Great Britain before he could do so, perhaps in response to the rise of the Nazi party and the persecution of scholars of Jewish descent.
Excursus: “Inventing” Georgian Polyphony

In a provocative article, Kofi Agawu argues that the notion that African music is distinguished above all by its rhythmic structure and complexity has been “so persistently thematized in writings about African music that it has by now assumed the status of a commonplace, a topos” (1995:380). On a much smaller and, no doubt, less epistemically or politically violent scale, I would argue that the association of Georgian vocal music with Western discourse on polyphony has similarly predetermined the methods and conclusions of scholarship, while foreclosing other areas of research. Whereas, for Agawu, “African rhythm” in Western discourse becomes “emblematic of otherness” and expresses an “essential difference” between the European scholar and the African subject (1995:388), the value and status ascribed to polyphony has invested Georgian folk music with added significance and continue to be mobilized in the creation and sustenance of a Georgian identity as fundamentally “European” (i.e., not Asian)—as a bulwark against otherness. Although the terms of Agawu’s critique are perhaps limited to a specific audience and scholarly lineage, I would like to follow his lead by introducing a critical element—by way of a genealogy—to the discussion around “polyphony” in Georgian music, and thereby justifying the term’s presence or absence in the musical analysis to follow.

Implicit in the attempts by early comparative musicologists to trace global histories of music, through morphological and diffusionist methodologies (A. Schneider 2006), is a teleology placing Western art music as the natural endpoint of
musical development. Thus, formal features deemed proper to Western music—harmony, imitation, linear motivic development—were sought out among non-Western musical cultures either as evidence of progression on an evolutionary ladder, or as traces of stylistic diffusion in the near or distant past. Whether or not Nadel was the first to propose the theory that Western vocal polyphony of the Middle Ages originated in the folk practice of the Caucasus, before being diffused throughout Europe, it featured prominently in scholarly writings from the early 1930s onward. In one of the earliest articles on Georgian folk music appearing in an English language journal, the prominent Russian scholar Viktor Beliaev asserts that the long-standing idea that musical polyphony originated in Europe is “radically wrong” (Belaiev 1933:426). He concludes the article thus:

A comparison of the facts to be ascertained from an investigation of the Georgian and other early folk-polyphonies with the theoretical data of relatively early forms of the so-called art-polyphony of Europe will certainly lead us to conclude that the latter was evolved from the traditional folk-polyphony. (1933:433)

Beliaev’s position is complicated somewhat by the Soviet imperative to develop “proletarian” as opposed to “bourgeois” theories of history and cultural change. Finding evidence to undermine the primacy of European art music, with its ecclesiastical and bourgeois underpinnings, would suit such a project. The theory was

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17 Walter Wiora’s description of Western classical music is representative of this view: “Its achievements and its fruits are unique in the history of the world; it has no counterpart” (1965:125).

18 The historical linguistic theory of Nikolai Marr, whose mother was Gurian, was one such “proletarian” system, and dominated official linguistics in the Soviet Union until the early 1950s (Cherchi and Manning 2002).
popular even outside of this milieu, however, with Marius Schneider, who succeeded Hornbostel as director of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv, drawing parallels between medieval European polyphony and songs from the Caucasus (1940). Schneider’s magnum opus, *Geschichte der Mehrstimmigkeit* (1969; History of Polyphony), first published in 1934 and later expanded, includes musical examples from throughout Georgia, which, much like those in Lach’s reports, are shorn of lyrical or contextual data. An abiding effect of these historical narratives is to make polyphony’s presumed early appearance in Georgia a marker of sophistication, bringing the folk tradition into a relational nexus with the canonical foundation of Western musicology (Emsheimer 1967).

The anthropologist Talal Asad, deconstructing Clifford Geertz’s much-cited definition of religion, comes to the conclusion that “there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes” (1993:29). The relevance here for polyphony is in the effort by many ethnomusicologists to construct universal—or at least broadly applicable—definitions and typologies of polyphony that properly account for music-making in non-Western contexts (Arom 1991:38; cf. Malm’s (1972) “disphony”). In the way that anthropologists in the Geertzian mode seek out the essential features of a transhistorical, transcultural phenomenon called “religion”—belief, for instance, or a perspective on fundamental truth distinct from science or aesthetics—one may identify a scholarly tendency to view noteworthy formal characteristics of music like
polyphony as enduring, abstract categories, available for discovery across different cultural contexts and different historical periods. Even when reframing or redefining the terms of analysis, which were created to solve questions of Western historical musicology, the scholar looking for polyphony across time and space is attempting, essentially, a symbolic reading of sound. As Asad says, in regard to the practice of reading religious symbols as straightforward vehicles of meaning, “can such meanings be established independently of the form of life in which they are used?” (1993:53). Much as Timothy Rice (1977) gestures toward an understanding of polyphony that places it within the cognitive domain of an individual’s perception of timbral and textural difference, I opt for unpacking musical practice in a situated manner, while resisting universal categories and the pressures of authorizing discourse. The discourse on polyphony that has arisen in Georgia, to be sure, has implications that are at least as much political as musical.

It is a commonplace to refer to Georgia as a “polyphonic island” (Grimaud 1970:121), often with the added topographic metaphor of a sea of monophony surrounding it (Bithell 2014a:573). The “sea,” in this case, could refer to the musical traditions of Turkey, Iran, and Azerbaijan, which are broadly construed, even stereotyped, as lacking harmony, despite a wide variety of heterophonic and overlapping techniques. Bithell rightly adds that the “island” metaphor is applied to religion as well, with Georgia and its southern neighbor Armenia—both having state

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19 A popular world-music textbook puts it thus: “Fundamentally, and in its older traditions, Middle Eastern music is almost always monophonic... [with] no system of harmony to guide or accompany the melody” (Nettl 2016:62).
sponsorship of Christianity since the fourth century CE—as islands of Christianity in a sea of Islam: outposts, so to speak, *in partibus infidelium*. Polyphony thus helps to inscribe Georgian identity as both consonant with European civilization and dissonant with the surrounding non-Christian, predominantly Islamic nations, who may have conquered the Georgian people at different times throughout history, yet never erased this core identity.

The elevated status of polyphonic music was operative during the Soviet period, as the music performed by folk ensembles in Georgia did not undergo the same “harmonization” program imposed in, for example, Armenia (Nercessian 2000:84) or the republics of Central Asia (Frolova-Walker 1998; Slobin 1971). In many ways, this was a continuation of Georgians’ status within the Russian Empire as favored nation, who, like the Poles and in distinction to the “nomads” of Central Asia, had “living traditions of statehood and an ancient Christian high culture” (Kappeler 2013:230). Meanwhile, Georgian Soviet scholars made efforts to push back the date of the appearance of polyphony in Georgian history, with Shalva Aslanishvili ([1954] 2004) reading polyphonic practice into a laconic description of marching songs from Xenophon’s fourth-century BCE *Anabasis*, and many scholars pointing to the musical metaphors in twelfth-century CE philosopher Ioane Petritsi’s commentary on the Trinity as evidence of a fully-polyphonic chant tradition during Georgia’s Golden Age (Pirtskhalava 2003). Aslanishvili devoted a large study to the different types of

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20 Graham (2015:85) locates this (mis)reading in divergent translations of Xenophon’s Greek original.
multi-part singing that may be seen throughout Georgia, later distilled by Jordania (2000a) into four “polyphonic styles”: drone, ostinato, parallel, and free polyphony. The Georgian calque *mravalkhmianoba* (many-voiced-ness), formed along the lines of the German *Mehrstimmigkeit*, was put to work by these scholars, and applied to traditional music from all regions of Georgia, not merely those that might more tightly fit a Western musicological dictionary of polyphony.\(^{21}\)

The epistemic pressure placed on “polyphony” only increased with the establishment of Georgian independence in 1991. The “return of history” (Remnick 1994:36), which characterized the tumultuous years of *perestroika* and the ultimate breakup of the Soviet Union, included, for citizens of many nationalities within the Union, the rediscovery of a pre-Soviet ethnic or religious identity, and the attempt to trace continuities of that cultural practice against a narrative of loss or disruption. In an ethnography of the Turkish-Georgian border, Mathijs Pelkmans describes the missionary activities of the Georgian Orthodox Church to convert Muslims in the region of Adjara, just to the south of Guria, beginning in the 1980s, a time when “Georgian nationality was tightly reconnected to Christianity” (2006:164), and Georgian and Muslim identities became incompatible. The ongoing conversion of Adjara, which had remained under Ottoman control the longest of any Georgian region, was consistently presented not, indeed, as a conversion, but as a “return” to Christianity:

\(^{21}\) Music of Abkhazia, today a de facto independent state within the internationally-recognized borders of Georgia, where a non-Kartvelian language is spoken, also received the badge of polyphony from Georgian scholars.
According to this myth, Ajarians had never really been Muslim but rather had always, if only subconsciously, perceived themselves as Georgians and thus, implicitly, as Christians. (2006:95)

In Georgian musical circles, there is an analogous narrative, stating that monophonic or solo songs are really polyphonic, and simply lost their other voice parts during the centuries of Ottoman or Persian dominance. The website for the International Center for Traditional Polyphony, which is housed in the Tbilisi State Conservatoire, cites “derangement of the three-voiced singing” in the Meskhetian musical dialect as a result of “foreign influence,” while saying that “one-voiced” songs among the Laz ethnic group “suffered Turkish influence.”22 While receiving a tour at the State Museum of Georgian Folk Songs and Musical Instruments in Tbilisi, in July 2016, I was told an anecdote about Georgian musicologists traveling to these “Turkish-influenced” regions and “finding” the “lost” voice parts to these songs. When I asked whether my guide meant that they had “composed” the other voice parts, she gently insisted on “find,” her initial choice of words.23 Victoria Samsonadze (2014:360), however, in her article on Meskhetian songs, describes the


23 In this museum, the increased prioritization of polyphonic vocal music is quite evident. The museum was founded as a comprehensive collection of the different musical instruments that were played in Tbilisi in nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time when cosmopolitan Tiflis (as the city was then known) was profoundly multiethnic and multilingual, with musicians representing Azerbaijani, Persian, Armenian, and various hybrid genres (Prentice 2002). On the wall are fine examples of tar, kemanche, duduki, saz, and other instruments collectively referred to as “Asian,” as well as European instruments like harmoniums and various self-playing music boxes. In recent years, however, the museum has added “Folk Songs” to its title, and included photographs and gramophone records of early folk-singing ensembles, a nod to the celebration of indigenous Georgian musical forms over material viewed as hybrid or imported.
work of Valerian Maghradze and Shota Altunashvili not merely as recording songs in the field, but also turning some of these monophonic songs into “polyphonic versions.” This polyphonization is not limited to the southern border regions, as Florian Mühlfried (2014:50) relates an anecdote of a choir director adding harmony lines to a solo song from Tusheti, a mountainous region in Georgia’s northeast.²⁴

All of this could be chalked up to matters of musicological debate or aesthetic choice, were there not real-world consequences, so to speak, for the primacy of polyphony in Georgian musical discourse. As Nino Tsitsishvili has observed, the UNESCO proclamation of Georgian polyphonic singing as a “masterpiece” of the “oral and intangible heritage of humanity,” has helped to buttress a nationalist ideology and cultural policies that de-emphasize the multiethnic character of Georgia’s population (2009:3). Musical traditions that do not conform to the polyphonic model are neglected in terms of funding, state sponsorship, and scholarly attention (one example Tsitsishvili offers is ethnically Armenian duduk players from southern Georgia).²⁵ More than simply asserting an ethnically Georgian identity, the

²⁴ Kae Hisaoka (2015:63) has also described recently composed and recorded folk-pop songs from this same region of Tusheti, performed by female singers, as a “countercultural reaction” to the dominant polyphonic style. Absent from my discussion of monophonic songs from Tusheti is the matter of instrumental accompaniment, for instance on the panduri, in which harmonic lines may arguably be “implied” (John Graham, pers. comm.), and from which other voice parts may be extracted.

²⁵ The album Mountains of Tongues: Musical Dialects of the Caucasus (2013), made up of field recordings by Benjamin Wheeler and Stefan Williamson Fa, features songs and instrumental pieces by members of ethnic and linguistic minorities in Georgia, as well as other regions of the South Caucasus.
celebration of polyphony mobilizes a number of different key identity markers, as Lauren Ninoshvili summarizes:

Polyphony as a musical texture and an expressive mode represents certain dialect regions of Georgia and a locally salient ideal of fiercely independent, yet fundamentally social, masculinity at the expense of other regional styles and gender subjectivities. (2010a:235)

Nino Tsitsishvili finds ample evidence for the commonly-held view that “a man can sing better than a woman” in her study of gender and singing at the Georgian supra feast (2006:469). In particular, she demonstrates how the belief that the “best part of Georgian polyphonic song-culture ‘naturally’ belongs to men” (488)—a belief held by men and women alike—may help to sustain and assert traditional gender roles in the ritualized setting of the supra, where “table songs,” typically sung by men and generally the most difficult material from each regional repertoire, are especially prized. The label of “polyphonic” also has economic consequences for performing groups attempting to break into the world music market. Caroline Bithell, in her study of Corsican musicians making such a breakthrough, notes that, even when experimenting with different musical forms, traditional singers “remain concerned that their music should qualify as polyphonic” (2007:197).

The International Center for Traditional Polyphony, which was established in 2003, on the heels of the UNESCO proclamation (Tsitsishvili 2009), exerts a powerful influence on scholarly writing in Georgia today. Although the institution’s

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26 Bithell also describes the semantic drift involved with polyphony, as the word becomes applied to the output of Corsican groups in general: “a transference of the polyphonic part of a group’s repertoire to their entire œuvre” (2007:197).
name does not include a reference to Georgia, the proceedings of the biannual Symposium on Traditional Polyphony—which are published in English and Georgian—show an overwhelming tendency to treat Georgian subjects, with short papers by Georgian scholars at various stages of their careers, and by non-Georgians. Periodic contributions from distinguished scholars of other musical traditions—Simha Arom, Michael Tenzer, and Timothy Rice, among others—help to position these symposia, and Georgian musicology in general, as part of a global network of research, united by an interest in polyphony as a transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon. Two papers from the inaugural meeting point to a certain essentialism at the heart of the international polyphonic enterprise, perhaps evident in their titles: Izaly Zemtsovsky’s “Polyphony as a Way of Creating and Thinking: The Musical Identity of Homo Polyphonicus” (2003) and Rusudan Tsurtsumia’s “Polyphony—A Category of Georgian Traditional Musical Thinking” (2003).

This vein of scholarship embraces polyphony not only as a description of musical form or as an organizing principle for performance. By supposing certain groups to be predisposed to polyphony—either at the cognitive level of “thinking polyphonically” (Zemtsovsky 2003) or at the cultural level, in which polyphony embodies “the specific character of the Georgians’ perception of the universe” (Tsurtsumia 2003:97)—this line of reasoning can lead to essentializing discourses of self and other. The embedded associations of polyphony with cultural identity, if left

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27 These proceedings, several of which I cite in this work, are available online at http://symposium.polyphony.ge/en/proceedings/
unexamined, open the door to such off-hand comments as Kuzmich’s definition of Georgian polyphony as “a multi-part musical form that curiously ceases at Georgia’s borders” (2010:149). The “curiously” is key, creating a sense of mystification as to the origin or uniqueness of Georgian music. At the same time, this definition reifies—no doubt unintentionally—the notion of a mono-ethnic Georgian identity coterminous with political boundaries.28

What, then, is to be done with a technical term whose broad application and dubious extramusical associations make its use problematic? One could easily argue that the relatively small niche of Georgian music which is the focus of my study—Gurian folk music generally and the trio song in particular—is the most unambiguously polyphonic of all the various regional styles. The voices of the three singers in a trio tend not to move homorhythmically (as they do, for instance, in Svaneti), except for brief passages of poetic text embedded within freer passages of nonsense syllables. Rhythmic variety among the voices and the possibility of syncopation are the norm (see Chapter Three for transcription and analysis). Movement in parallel intervals, which is common across Georgian traditional music, generally in thirds or fifths, is often encountered in Gurian trio singing, though it is far from obligatory, with a clear tendency for contrary and oblique melodic motion

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28 Joseph Jordania’s article on the music of North Caucasian cultures in the *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* (2000b), it should be noted, discusses of music he terms polyphonic (primarily drone-based), and draws comparisons with Georgian practices.
between the two upper voices.\textsuperscript{29} As I demonstrate in Chapter Three, Gurian trio singing can also be considered one of those “relatively rare instances of polyphonic improvisation” described by Nettl (1974:12), which pose problems in terms of identifying the “model” employed by the improvisation musicians. Nevertheless, after having identified my subject as polyphonic, I will not lean further on the term, neither as justification for the uniqueness of a musical practice, nor, most crucially, as a trope or metaphor for social structure, the transcendence of the group over the individual, or a way of being-in-the-world standing in opposition to the practitioners of musical traditions conceived as non-polyphonic.\textsuperscript{30}

Methodological Parallels in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

An English-language monograph on Georgian music has yet to be written, though recent dissertations have addressed the poetics of non-referential language in Georgian song (Ninoshvili 2010a), the circulation of popular music in Tbilisi (Sebald 2013), and the transmission and transcription of Georgian Orthodox liturgical chant (Graham 2015). Long-term, situated fieldwork is central to each of their

\textsuperscript{29} Imitation and canon do not appear to be salient features in Georgian vocal music. Jordania makes extensive use of “contrastive” to indicate non-imitative (Zhordania 1984, Jordania 2006, etc.), though the term does not seem widespread.

\textsuperscript{30} In a paper presented at the Seventh International Symposium on Traditional Polyphony, Caroline Bithell traces the application of polyphony as a “tool and trope” (2015). The subject also features prominently in her study of the “natural voice” movement and the transnational circulation of vocal music through “world song” choirs (2014b).
methodologies. Master’s theses by scholars in North America have explored the practices of traditional-music ensembles in Tbilisi and their attitudes toward preservationism (Kuzmich 2007), as well as the broader discourse on “ancientness” in Georgia, in which music plays a significant role (Foutz 2010). Kuzmich includes a case study of a specific Gurian song, though her general focus is on the Georgian repertoire as a whole, as is Foutz’s. A thesis on cadential-phrase variations in Gurian song (Giritlioğlu 2011), largely based on the transcriptions published by Veshapidze (2006) and Erkomaishvili (2005), will be discussed at more length in Chapter Three.

For Georgian scholars, expeditions from Tbilisi to village communities to make recordings and transcriptions has been part of the research process at least since the days of Arakishvili in the early twentieth century. In the 1980s, performer/scholars like Edisher Garakanidze (2007, 2011) and the founding members of the Anchiskhati Church Choir showed renewed interest in village traditions and the attempt to track down living proponents of an oral tradition, a movement perhaps inspired by the example of Russian folklore revivalist Dmitri Pokrovsky (Levin 1996b).\footnote{Bithell (2014a) discusses the main figures and motivation in the revival of Georgian folk music, and provides a chronology of ensembles and stylistic trends.} Even so, writing on Georgian music in the post-Soviet era engaging with situated ethnography does not approach the amount of English-language literature on Eastern Europe and Central Asia, formerly Soviet or socialist spaces, between which Georgia is sandwiched geographically. Although the tendency in area studies has
been to group Georgia conceptually and politically with Eastern Europe, there are many points of contact with the experience in the Central Asian republics.\footnote{A recent volume of essays on Central Asian music (Levin, Daukeyeva, and Köchümkulova 2016) includes chapters on Azerbaijani \textit{mugham}, illustrating a general tendency to group some cultures of the Caucasus, primarily Islamic, within a broader Central Asian rubric.}

The traditional music of Bulgaria has received dedicated attention from several English-language scholars, notably Timothy Rice and Donna Buchanan, who trace decisive moments of transition in Bulgaria’s recent history—from the establishment of socialist governance in the 1940s through the end of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria in 1990 and subsequent democratic reforms—by following the paths of musicians as they negotiate competing claims of tradition and modernity. Rice (1994) addresses the question of “why musical traditions change”—and how an outsider can come to understand these traditions in the first place—while filtering larger social and political narratives through the personal experience of Kostadin Varimezov, a prominent \textit{gaida} player, and his wife Todora.

In my own work, I draw parallels to Rice’s approach to the individual creative artist and his choice of a subject whose career spans many decades, especially in my focus on Tristan Sikharulidze and Anzor Erkomaishvili, who have maintained their different practices both in an environment of Soviet subsidization and in the uncertain years of independence. The parallels are not exact, however: Varimezov was already an adult when the Bulgarian Communist party took control, as opposed to Anzor and Tristan, who grew up in a socialist system. Moreover, in Georgia there was a tradition of organized folk choirs in the pre-Revolutionary period, which were more or less
modified to create the Soviet state ensembles, whereas in Bulgaria the state-sponsored choirs and orchestras of folk instruments were created more or less *ex nihilo*, and their directors had perhaps more power to transform an inchoate folk practice, in line with the state’s “appropriation of village music for nation building” (Rice 1994:180). The effect of musical literacy—demanded of Bulgarian performers who, like Kostadin Varimezov, worked in state ensembles—was also less pronounced in Georgia, certainly among singers, given that Georgian folk songs, already in multiple voice parts, did not get treated to the same kind of complex arrangements as Philip Kutev or Nikolai Kaufman did with Bulgarian vocal music (Rice 1994:270). Above all, the way Rice interweaves first-person accounts from Kostadin and Todora, with fine-grained accounts of historical process, offers an ethnographic model I hope to explore in further extensions of this work, with the benefit of greater time immersed in the field.

Buchanan (2006) focuses on the period of democratic reform from 1988 to 1996, elucidating the way the performance of music can embody political debate, and, indeed, move that debate in different directions. By incorporating genres of popular music in her analysis and closely observing transnational phenomena like the New Age adoption of sounds from the *Mystère des Voix Bulgares* albums, Buchanan reveals the overlapping networks of symbols that inform Bulgarian notions of identity and the role of market pressures in producing knowledge about Bulgarian music in the wider world. Her focus on regional nuances within the repertoires and techniques
of different musical groups and the internal politics of folklore ensembles is also instructive.

Although ostensibly part of the same polity as Georgia (the Soviet Union), the republics of Central Asia contained populations, and, consequently, musical traditions, that differed from Georgia’s in significant ways. Unlike a satellite state like Bulgaria, whose dominant culture included an Orthodox Christian heritage, in common with Russia or Georgia, the prevalence of Islamic practice in Central Asia helped to define a relationship between the indigenous population and the influx of Russian communities, who often held roles of political and social power. In musical terms, highly developed court traditions like the Uzbek-Tajik *Shash maqâm* underwent processes of standardization or “freezing” (Levin 1996a), which included arrangement for large ensembles and the use of Western notation. At the same time, the aesthetics of concert performance were also applied to musical practices of mobile pastoralists living on the steppe. Theodore Levin, whose intensive fieldwork began in the 1970s—a time when scholars from the West were limited in their access to Soviet republics—has also examined the role of Marxist ideology in shaping the aesthetics of these folk ensembles (1980), while also locating the motivations for the migration of many traditional musicians to the United States (1996a). Recent articles by David Fossum (2015) on Turkmenistan and Megan Rancier (2014) on Kazakhstan bring to bear concepts of canon formation and archival imagination, to which I return in my concluding chapter.
As Mark Slobin points out in his introduction to *Retuning Culture* (1996), a collection of essays addressing musical ramifications of the social changes of the early 1990s, there was a common framework for music-making across the so-called Eastern Bloc, based on bureaucratic rules, standardized venues for performance, and the development of “official repertoires” to create the sense of a “shared experience of daily life” (1996:2-3). This framework is absolutely relevant to an understanding of Georgian musical life in the Soviet period and beyond, as is the discourse of music revival, with its entanglements of authenticity and selectivity, and which has been applied to the case of Georgia by Bithell (2014a). Determining exactly how deep the parallels with Eastern Europe and Central Asia—or indeed with other revival movements—may go, however, will require further ethnographic investment in Georgian musical life than has heretofore been attempted. In the present work, I hope to demonstrate how the continuity of improvisatory practice and the implications of mediated voices from the past—both prominently on display in the Gurian trio song tradition—present new wrinkles in the matter of music in the post-Soviet world.
Chapter Two
Gurian Trio Singing as Genre and Community

Identifying Genre

I begin with a piece of paper, on which Tristan Sikharulidze has written down a comprehensive list of the Gurian songs for which he knows all three voices (fig. 2.1). The list contains 111 songs, divided into three columns with the headings “Trio songs,” “Songs for two-part groups,” and “Songs with chonguri.” The “two-part group” songs refer to pieces in which a larger group is divided into two: for instance, a trio of three singers coupled with an ensemble of four to five other singers performing a kind of response or refrain. The third genre grouping indicates songs accompanied by the chonguri, a long-necked lute common in West Georgia. Our chief interest here is the first category, trio songs, which I employ, in the general manner suggested by this list, to cover any song in the Gurian folk repertoire traditionally performed by three singers only (one to a part), and not accompanied by any instrument. Even this simplest of distinctions, however, breaks down somewhat under scrutiny. As we will see, many famous songs in the trio column have at least

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1 A transliterated transcription of Tristan’s song list appears as Appendix B.
2 Famous songs of this type include “Khasanbegura,” as well the various work songs known as “naduri.” The “Shemokmedura Naduri” features in the Introduction, above, while recordings the “Sajavakhura Naduri” is discussed in Chapter Five.
the possibility of more than three singers: “Me Rustveli,” for instance, has a short gadadzakhili part, essentially a refrain, which may be performed by a member of the trio, or, if other singers are around, by a group singing in unison. Thus, further precision is necessary. Without proposing a systematic classification of the trio song repertoire, I will sift through some of the formal affinities that bind the members of

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**FIGURE 2.1** Tristan Sikharulidze's hand-written song list, in Makwaneti. Photograph by the author, July 2016. Tristan wrote this list, it appears, at some point in the early 2010s.
this group with each other, with an eye toward the techniques of formulaic improvisation analyzed in Chapters Three and Four.

It seems far from arbitrary that the first two songs listed by Tristan under the “trio” heading are “Masp’indzelsa Mkhiarulsa” (The joyful host) and “Chven Mshvidoba” (Peace to us). In my experience, these are the alpha and omega of the core repertoire: the first is a comparatively simple song and one of the earliest taught to beginners; the second is a testing-ground for the experienced singer, with more variants and celebrated renditions than any other trio song. My first lesson with Tristan, in April 2012, was dedicated to learning “Masp’indzelsa.” In my interview with him some years later, Tristan could not remember which song his father taught him first, though he did recall an early singing experience. At the age of four—in 1941 or thereabouts—he was brought by his father, Ilarion Sikharulidze, to meet the famous singer Varlam Simonishvili. With Varlam and his father, the young Tristan sang “Map’indzelsa Mkhiarulsa,” after which Varlam mussed the boy’s hair and told his father he would be a good singer (25.vii.16). A similar story appears in Anzor Erkomaishvili’s memoir, when he recalls his first memory of his great-grandfather, Gigo Erkomaishvili. Gigo, then over a hundred years old, asks the five-year-old Anzor to sing. Anzor begins “Masp’indzelsa,” and his pleased great-grandfather and father join in (Erkomaishvili 2006:14).

While initially attempting an inductive approach to identifying common traits across the corpus of songs in Tristan’s list, I also encountered several other classification systems, based on varying parameters. A two-volume collection of
Gurian songs in staff notation, published under the auspices of the official Georgian S.S.R.’s “House of Folk Creativity” (Chumburidze 1973), offers, in its table of contents, a number of categories: work songs (shromis simgherebi), traveling songs (mgzavruli), historical songs (ist'oriuli), ritual songs (sats'eso), humorous songs (sakhumaro), table songs (supruli), domestic or everyday songs (saqopiero), love songs (sat'rpialo), and round-dance songs (saperkhulo). This is a broad collection of Gurian folk music, and songs from Tristan’s “trio” list may be found in practically all of these categories. The practice of grouping songs by textual subject matter—for instance love songs, humorous songs, or historical ballads—is perhaps the oldest form of folk-song classification (Bohlman 1988:35). Apart from the fact that textual classification ignores many sonic features of musical practice, it is especially ill-suited to Gurian songs. Many Gurian songs make use of samgherisi, the non-lexical syllables especially used in improvisational formulas. “Ts'amok'ruli,” a trio song made up entirely of such vocables, is grouped by Chumburidze among the “domestic” songs. Why? One answer may be that such songs with limited words were often called ghighini, a word which can also mean “humming to oneself.” Perhaps humming to oneself indicates a domestic setting. On the other hand, “Ts'amok'ruli” has also been linked to the table-song and traveling-song repertoires (Shugliashvili and Erkvanidze 2004:205). Other songs show changes in text over time, such as “Khasanbegura” and “Alipasha,” two songs which today have lyrics related to figures from the Crimean War and the Russo-Turkish wars of the 1870s. According to Levan Veshapidze (16.vii.16), however, “Khasanbegura” was originally a maqruli, or
wedding song, and none of the recordings from the early twentieth century feature the now-common historical text. There is a similar situation with “Alipasha,” whose musical form was originally drawn from a version of “K’alos Khelkhvavi” (Shugliashvili and Erkvanidze 2004:210), a song which itself is grouped sometimes with work songs and sometimes with ritual or table songs.

If grouping by textual content appears likely to be fruitless for Gurian folk song, classifying by performance context may offer an alternative method. Heather Sparling’s (2008) study of Cape Breton Gaelic songs, however, demonstrates how the social context of certain genres has a kind of magnetic attraction, drawing in a heterogeneous variety of songs with few other significant traits in common. Sparling’s example in Cape Breton is “milling songs,” which traditionally accompanied waulking, the rhythmic beating of newly-woven tweed. Over time, “milling frolics,” as these waulking gatherings were called, reflected changes in the participation and purpose of the communal work, and songs outside the traditional repertoire became incorporated into the milling context (2008:411). The Georgian analogy to the milling table would be the supra table, the traditional feast involving wine drinking, thematic toasts, and, more often than not, folk-singing. The range of songs which may be sung at a supra would thwart any attempt at strict categorization. Indeed, I would argue that practically all of the trio songs on Tristan’s list could be

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3 The supra has been the subject of much recent study, with articles on its literary origins (Ram 2014) and gender dynamics (Linderman 2011), a chapter in Paul Manning’s *Semiotics of Drink and Drinking* (2012b), and a monograph on the post-Soviet economic and social context of the supra (Mühlfried 2006),
appropriate for performance at a supra, with the likely exception of “Bat’onebo” (number 27 in the “trio” column).

I learned about the special status of a song like “Bat’onebo” the hard—or at least embarrassing—way. Two months into my first stay in Georgia, in February 2012, I attended a supra in Kakhati, a village in Samegrelo. My hosts were two brothers who were singers, and they had been filling the room with gorgeous Megrelian songs for several hours. Eager to join in, I began singing a piece called “Ia P’at’onepi.” My repertoire as a singer was then quite small, and this was a piece I had learned from notation and had used in a theatre performance the previous year. I had convinced myself, moreover, that since this song, I had learned, was from the region of Samegrelo, it would be appreciated by my hosts. I had sung one line of the song when the tamada (toastmaster) gestured for me to stop, and warmly reached out to shake my hand. His niece, who was translating for him, explained that this was not a good song for a supra. “Ia P’at’onepi,” it was explained to me, is a healing song, meant to be sung at the bedside of a child ill with fever, in an attempt to ask the spirits or “lords” (bat’onebi in Georgian, p’at’onepi in Megrelian) who are making the child ill to withdraw the sickness. Although a fixture of concert-stage performances by folklore groups, such a song was not right for a supra. Among the various “functions” ascribed to songs from the folk repertoire, healing was apparently incompatible with the supra setting. Of course, this is not the case for songs that come from other contexts, such as work songs and even church chants, which, with the increasing
prominence of Orthodox practice in the post-Soviet years, have found their place at the banquet table as well.

One of the songs listed in Tristan’s trio column, in fact, is one of these church chants, “Shen Khar Venakhi” (You are a vineyard). The text is one of the most beloved sacred hymns in the Georgian Orthodox church, and was written in the twelfth century by King Demetre I. The verses celebrate Mary the Mother of God by comparing her to a vineyard, “newly blossomed.” “Shen Khar Venakhi” was one of the very few pieces of sacred music that escaped suppression during the Soviet years, perhaps owing to the deeply ingrained practice of singing the hymn at weddings and other solemn occasions, as well as the fact that its text is not heavily theological, only mentioning God in the often-omitted fourth verse and not naming Mary at all.4 Given the clear ecclesiastical origin of “Shen Khar Venakhi,” then, it would perhaps be easy to excise it from the list of trio songs, which otherwise do not contain texts appropriate to a liturgical setting. Closer examination, however, shows that other songs in Tristan’s trio list have similar features as this chant.5 For example, the songs “Manana” (a Georgian woman’s name), “Gakhsovs, T’urpav” (Do you remember, beautiful one?), and “Sjobs Siqvaruli” (Love is better), all exhibit chant-like qualities: parallel movement in the three voices, homophonic text rhythm, syllables extended

4 See Graham (2009) for a discussion of this hymn, in its East Georgian setting, in contemporary performance contexts.

5 “Mertskhalo Mshveniero” (O radiant swallow) may be a borderline case, as its text alludes to the ancestors of Christ, and it was included by Artem Erkomaishvili, Dimitri Patarava, and Varlam Simonishvili, in their recording of eleven chants in 1949.
with melismata, and limited, if any, use of non-lexical *samgherisi* syllables. Whether we are dealing here with *contrafacta*—substitutions of secular text for sacred ones without change to the musical structure—or with a generally fluid interchange between sacred and secular repertoires, would require historical investigation beyond our present scope. Nevertheless, analogous musical processes appearing in strikingly different textual and performance situations point to decidedly porous genre boundaries.

Other songs in the trio list, too, exhibit the features of chant identified above. Several songs are variations on the idea of the *mravalzhamieri*, a toast wishing “many years” of life. Every region of Georgia, it seems, has its own forms of *mravalzhamieri*, which find their natural place at the supra feast. From Tristan’s list, “Mravalzhamieri,” “Mok’le Mravalzhamieri,” “Mrevalo,” and “Breievalo,” are all settings of the words *mraval zhamiero*, or their Gurian-dialect forms. The words are usually repeated several times, with long extensions of the syllables. There generally does not appear to be a regular metrical structure to the phrases, further bringing it in line with chant practice, in which model melodies are made to fit liturgical texts of uneven length. “Sadghegrdzelo” (Toast) and “Madlobeli” (I am thankful) are also songs of this type. These songs are central to the repertoires of Gurian trios, yet they do not sound much like “Masp’indzelsa Mkhiarula” or “Chven Mshvidoba,” which I posit above as chief exemplars of the trio song. These two songs have a consistently duple metrical structure, and are generally performed with a steady beat, on the whole at a brisker tempo than songs of the chant or *mravalzhamieri* type. Furthermore, they
both contain passages of samgherisi, non-lexical syllables strung together in phrases like dilavo or naninav da. During these stretches of samgherisi, the three voice parts are also rhythmically disjunct, with a dense texture of syncopation and rhythmic stratification. While a pan-Gurian harmonic vocabulary seems to unite all of these songs, as well as the other two non-trio categories on Tristan’s sheet of paper, isolating the differences within the trio repertoire will help to ground the discussion of improvisational technique to follow.

We may thus propose a rough division of the trio song repertoire in two parts: those which rely heavily on passages of samgherisi syllables, and those which do not. This latter group I have identified above as sharing features with Orthodox chanting in the West Georgian style, though I do not wish to press this point, lest I seem to be advocating an ecclesiastical genesis for these songs. Turning to the first group, which includes “Masp’indzelsa,” “Chven Mshvidoba,” “Me Rustveli,” and other well-known songs, I further propose that this sub-genre is the main site for the display of improvisational ability. Also shared among these songs is a common stock of short melodic formulas, built from samgherisi syllables. In Chapter Three (ex. 3.6), I present a table of some of the formulas which appear in the song “Me Rustveli,” as performed by dozens of different singers throughout the twentieth century. These same formulas reappear in many other trio songs. All of the songs on Tristan’s list, trio and otherwise, exist in several different versions, yet, with my analysis of “Me Rustveli,” I am arguing for a specialized improvisational technique which goes

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6 In Appendix B, I have indicated songs in this proposed sub-genre with an asterisk.
beyond the tendency or obligation to vary, which, as Robert Labaree suggests, may, for many folksingers, be “folded into their definition of musicianship” (2013:7). Within the community of Gurian folk singers, these formulas operate not only as tools for generating exciting musical events: they also create links with singers of prior generations, whose characteristic turns of phrase have become embedded in the fabric of their own vocal lives. I address below this relationship with the voices of singers not physically present, in the brief discussion of intertextuality which concludes this chapter.

This preliminary delineation of the core trio-song repertoire cannot yet account for all the idiosyncracies of trio song practice, nor does it propose a historical narrative of change over time or introduction from other genres. As Philip Bohlman writes, “attempts to classify folk music face some confounding paradoxes” (1988:34). The “seductiveness” (ibid.) of fixing canons and drawing discursive boundaries is an ever-present danger for the scholar, especially one—who, while drawing on emic distinctions offered by my interlocutors, was not trained within the tradition. Ana María Ochoa Gautier is even more pointed in noting the power of genre-making in a politics of knowledge and control, which has deep historical roots:

As heirs to [the] philological tradition, folklorists in the early twentieth century copied this model of decomposition and recomposition: select a tradition’s ideal form, define the boundaries of the genre through comparison of samples, and fix a proper form to represent a people through a description of its traits. (2014:188-9)

One method, however provisional or incomplete, for resisting the totalizing power of folkloric description, is to involve local voices in the definition and delineation of
musical practice. In the remainder of this chapter, after a brief biographical sketch of major figures and ensembles, I will largely rely on my meetings with Gurian trio singers and the thoughts they expressed in interviews, to provide an ethnographic flank in my investigation of this genre.

**Cradle of Singers**

Tristan Sikharulidze (b. 1937) and Anzor Erkomaishvili (b. 1940) both hail from the village of Makvaneti, though Anzor himself was born in Batumi, the Black Sea port city where his grandfather Artem led a folk music ensemble. Anzor’s family returned to Makvaneti when he was young, and Anzor and Tristan often sang together growing up. Tristan’s first memory of a public concert includes Anzor. It was a performance with a children’s choir in Tbilisi in 1947, the choir’s director was Anzor’s great-uncle, Vladimer Erkomaishvili, and Tristan and Anzor were part of the featured trio in the song “Shvid’atsa.” As Tristan remembers it, the sound of applause was so startling to the young singers that they ran off the stage, thinking they had done something wrong, only to be reassured that the applause was for them (25.vii.16).\(^7\) Tristan and Anzor both come from distinguished families of singers, part of the tradition that has led Makvaneti to be called—in a pun on the word *ak’vani*—

\(^7\) Tristan has told this story elsewhere (Erkomaishvili 2013:9), and never forgets to include the fact that he received a watch as a prize for singing that day. Similarly, Anzor Erkomaishvili describes a *churchkhela* (a kind of candy) given to him by his great-grandfather as “my first prize for singing” (2006:14).
the “cradle” of Gurian singing. Many of the singers I spoke with, when explaining their family lineage, would note that their father or grandfather sang in one or another of the prominent local choirs from the first half of the twentieth century. These choirs were led by well-respected singers like Varlam Simonishvili, Artem Erkomaishvili, Vladimer Erkomaishvili, Vladimir Berdzenishvili, Vasil Makharadze, and Giorgi Salukvadze.

Tristan’s father Ilarion Sikharulidze (1902-1985) was a member of Varlam Simonishvili’s Ethnographic Choir, based in Ozurgeti, from 1934 until Simonishvili’s death in 1950 (Chokhonelidze and Rodonaia 2004c:78). Ilarion’s main teachers were his mother, Elisabed Maminashvili, and Artem Erkomaishvili, who was fifteen years his elder. Ilarion worked as a lot’bati or choir-master for village ensembles throughout Guria, including Likhauri, Chanieti, Gurianti, and many others (ibid.:79). Along with other former members of Varlam Simonishvili’s group, Ilarion helped found Ensemble Dila, in 1963. This was an “old man’s group” (ukhuteshta ansambli), which met to rehearse every Wednesday, and became renowned for their incomparable mastery of the traditional repertoire. Their performance of the “Shemokmedura Naduri” is captured on film in Otar Iosseliani’s lyrical documentary Ancient Georgian Song (1969). Ilarion taught Gurian songs both to his son Tristan

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8 In conversation, Tristan has told me two popular explanations for the village’s name: that it was at one point a center for carpentry and people who made cradles (ak’vani), or that the village is geographically “cradled” by the juncture of the Agidaqva and Achistsqali rivers.

9 A three-volume series in Georgian, published by Anzor Erkomaishvili’s International Center for Georgian Folk Song, provides biographies of these early figures (Chokhonelidze and Rodonaia 2004a,b,c).
and his nephew Guri, whose father, Ipolite, Ilarion’s brother, had been killed in action in 1941. Ipolite had also been a singer in Varlam Simonishvili’s group (Erkomaishvili 2013:6).

Tristan Sikharulidze provides a brief autobiographical statement in the opening pages of a joint biography of Guri and himself by Anzor Erkomaishvili (2013:8-10). His concert career began early, and by age twenty he had toured much of the Soviet Union as part of the Ozurgeti House of Culture ensemble led by Vladimer Erkomaishvili. This was followed by a brief stint in the State Ensemble of Folk Song and Dance, under the direction of Grigol Chkhikvadze, from 1965 to 1967. City life in Tbilisi, however, does not appear to have agreed with Tristan, and he embraced an invitation to return to Ozurgeti and join “Shvidkatsa,” the group led by renowned leader and k’rimanch’uli singer Mikheil Shavishvili. Tristan has remained associated with this group, and is today its leader (khelmdzghvaneli). Tristan has always maintained an active career as a teacher and choirmaster, though this activity seems to have increased in the early 2000s. With support from UNESCO, which had proclaimed Georgian polyphony a masterpiece of “intangible cultural heritage” in 2001, Anzor Erkomaishvili established a school for choirmasters (lot’bari) in Ozurgeti, and appointed Tristan at its head. Tristan formed the trio Shalva Chemo with his cousin Guri Sikharulidze and the younger singer Merab Kalandadze, in 2004, while another institution for teaching Gurian songs to young children, called Krimanchuli, was founded in 2006. Along with concert tours to over a dozen foreign

\[10\] See Chapter Six for a discussion of the unusual typesetting of this statement.
countries, Tristan’s international reputation has grown in recent years thanks to his involvement in various singing camps for foreigners interested in Georgian music, especially those led by Carl Linich and the Village Harmony organization.\textsuperscript{11}

Anzor Erkomaishvili’s career is discussed further in Chapter Five, though some comparison with Tristan’s may be in order. The Erkomaishvili family are one of the most famous singing families in Georgia, and the subject of their own volume in the \textit{Georgian Folk Song Masters} series (Chokhonelidze and Rodonaia 2004b). Anzor’s great-grandfather Gigo Erkomaishvili (1849-1947) was born in the village of Aketi and moved to Makvaneti when still young. His chief musical collaborators were Giorgi Babilodze and Giorgi Iobishvili, with whom he often sang in trio, and who are part of the choir recorded on gramophone in 1907. Gigo’s three sons, Artem, Anania, Vladimer, all became accomplished singers. Artem (1887-1967), Anzor’s grandfather, was a hugely influential choir leader and teacher. He studied liturgical chant in the oral tradition with Melkisedek Nakashidze at the Shemokmedi monastery in the first decade of the twentieth century, and became the last recognized \textit{sruli mgalobeli}, who knew the entire chant system (Graham 2015:281). Anzor’s father Davit (Datiko), was also a singer, a soloist in Artem’s ensemble in Makvaneti. A car

\textsuperscript{11} Carl Linich’s work as a record producer is discussed at greater length in Chapter Five, and his career in general as a singer and teacher of Georgian song is reviewed by Caroline Bithell (2014a:585-86). Village Harmony is an organization based in Vermont, which runs several world-music choirs and singing camps in several countries, including Georgia. The organization is discussed at length in Caroline Bithell’s volume on the natural voice and world song (2014b).
accident in 1954, however, took Davit’s life at the age of 32, which left the teenage Anzor in Artem’s care.

An important turning point for Anzor came when he moved to Tbilisi to study at the Vano Sarajishvili State Conservatoire. While still a student, he helped to found Ensemble Gordela in 1961, a folk-singing group. In later years, the members of Gordela would become recognized for their study of church chants, which at the time were only slowly becoming acceptable to the Soviet authorities. During this time, he also began transcribing his grandfather Artem’s song and chant repertoire into Western notation, which he later published as a large score collection (Erkomaishvili 2005). Anzor’s formal musical education and access to institutional support helped enhance his reputation as a leading figure in folk music. The Rustavi Ensemble, founded in 1968, became arguably the most celebrated folk choir in Georgia, and attained international fame. One of the ensemble’s soloists, Hamlet Gonashvili, became famous in his own right for his soulful, hushed sound and masterful command of Kakhetian table songs.

The collapse of the Soviet Union meant the end of the successful partnership between the Rustavi Ensemble and the state-run Melodiya record label. Anzor told me recently, “the Russians took all the records with them. It’s not called Melodiya anymore, but even now they’re producing discs and selling them. But we don’t get any money from it” (30.viii.16). As with Tristan, the UNESCO declaration in the early 2000s led to a flurry of activity for Anzor, specifically the establishment of the International Centre for Georgian Folk Song (ICGFS). In the past fifteen years, he has
published memoirs, released archival records on CD, and helped spearhead an effort to promote regional folk ensembles, by providing songbooks, CDs and other materials for choirs. Since the 1970s, Anzor has been a frequent presence on Georgian television, at times hosting his own shows, and he is regularly called upon to speak at festivals and awards ceremonies. It would not be a stretch to say, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, that the single most influential figure in Georgian folk music has been Anzor Erkomaishvili.

Although Anzor and Tristan figure most prominently in this thesis, the other singers whom I interviewed in 2016 have helped to fill out my picture of Gurian folk singing. Many of them, too, come from distinguished singing lineages. Bidzina Mzhavia (b. 1941), whom I interviewed in Mamati (1.viii.16), is the leader of two ensembles, one called Khelkhvavi, in Mamati, and the other, Iadoni, in Ozurgeti. His father, Razhden Mzhavia, was a singer in Varlam Simonishvili’s group, though, like Guri’s father, he died in World War II. After army service in the 1960s, Bidzina studied with Giorgi Salukvadze in Ozurgeti, and also learned from Domenti Karchava, another alumnus of Simonishvili’s group, and Vladimer Erkomaishvili.

In Chokhatauri, I had the pleasure of meeting and interviewing an entire trio (fig. 2.2): Jemal Nakashidze, Avto Makharadze and Gizo Makharadze (9.viii.16). Jemal (b. 1942), is a descendent of Melkisedek Nakashidze, the famous chanter, and was a member of the State Ensemble of Song and Dance in the mid-1960s, at the same time as Tristan Sikharulidze. Avto Makharadze (b. 1955) is the director of the Guria Ensemble in Chokhatauri. His grandfather’s cousin, Vasil Makharadze was a
prominent singer, who had established schools in Tbilisi. After Avto’s grandfather’s death, Vasil Makharadze brought Avto to Tbilisi to train him in “the whole repertoire,” as Avto says. Avto also shared with me his memory of Yvette Grimaud, a French musicologist who had stayed with his family in 1966 while making field recordings in Georgia. These recordings were later released on CD as Géorgie: Chants de travail / Chants religieux (1989). Gizo (b. 1957) is Avto’s cousin, and likewise comes from a singing family, recalling at the age of five or six that his father and uncles would sing “Chven Mshvidoba” together.

**Singing as Moral Community**

In my interviews, I would often ask, “What qualities are necessary to be a good Gurian singer?” Perhaps the most succinct answer I encountered, however,
came not from my interview, but from a YouTube video featuring Guri Sikharulidze. In the video, Guri quotes Artem Erkomaishvili, saying, “You need to be a man first, then you need to sing.” The qualities necessary to be a good singer appear to be intertwined with other qualities of a moral and even biological nature: what does it mean to “be a man”? Nino Tsitsishvili’s (2006) study of the supra feast as a prime location for the exercise of patriarchy remains the most detailed discussion of gender and Georgian traditional song. Trio songs fall squarely into the broad category that Tsitsishvili terms “complex” songs, which tend to be the exclusive domain of male singers. Tsitsishvili contrasts aspects of male vocal performance—competitiveness, emotional exuberance—with the more reserved performance style of female singers in her ethnographic observation. The traditional female repertoire, in Guria as elsewhere in Georgia, includes lullabies, laments, healing songs and other ritual songs (Tsitishvili 2006:458), though strict gender division in terms of repertoire was “partly broken down by official Soviet policies of gender equality” (2006:460). Although accomplished female singers make a point of showing their knowledge of the male repertoire, with its higher social status, female singers of trio songs continue to be the exception to the male norm.

Although certain features of a good singer are presented as inbred (as in concepts like “talent” or “having a good ear”), other aspects seem to require careful

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12 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezeog6sQOqc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezeog6sQOqc). Although the video cited was posted in 2015, internal clues in the video suggest it was recorded sometime in 2012, specifically Tristan Sikharulidze’s reference to “when we were in America last year.” To the best of my knowledge, Tristan’s only concert tour to the United States took place in the spring of 2011.
disciplinary cultivation. Bidzina Mzhavia, while offering a slightly different “first,” also emphasizes the moral dimension: “First of all, a person shouldn’t be thinking of any evil things; one must be thinking about the song” (I.viii.16). After adding that a singer must have an inner musical sense (literally “an internal musical arrangement of the ear”), Bidzina goes on to say, “Now, there are many people who love singing, but who can’t subdue their voice.” Imorchilebs, the verb translated as “subdue,” has the additional sense of “tame,” “order,” or “control.” What he is describing is a discipline, not merely in the typical “practice makes perfect” sense common to many musics, but one that ideally reaches into the mind to create good habits (“not thinking of any evil things”) while placing the unruly corporeality of the voice in a relationship of rational control (“subduing the voice”).

Saba Mahmood (2001), in her study of piety practices among Egyptian women, coins the term “rehearsed spontaneity” to help understand processes of self-discipline that aim for the spontaneous expression of correct behavior. She employs Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, as the accumulated, learned practices of social beings, while critiquing Bourdieu for a lack of attention paid to “pedagogical moments and practices in the process of acquiring a habitus” (2001: 838). In the case of the Egyptian women, they hope to have the spontaneous desire to act in accordance with “pious Islamic conventions” (833), while for Gurian singers the hope is to respond in the moment to the singing of others with appropriate improvisations, maintaining variety in one’s own singing from verse to verse. In much the same way that ritual practices for Mahmood can serve as a kind of positive feedback loop, with
each repetition representing a process of cumulative training leading toward genuine emotion, and not merely a static ritual space of “conventionality,” so too the development of a Gurian singer depends on repeated exposure to the conventions and expectations of the genre, along with an idiosyncratic process of self-discipline.

All of my interview subjects credited their teachers, yet none of them spent much time discussing the actual process of learning songs. With some frequently, however, they discussed the act of listening. Gizo Makharadze, for instance, explained that, when listening to his father and uncles sing “Chven Mshvidoba,” he thought they were making a mistake when one of the voices crossed below the others (9.viii.16). Through eventually learning that, no, it was not a mistake, Gizo came to understand an important feature of voice-leading techniques. Likewise, Tristan explained that he was formally taught “only twenty or thirty songs” (25.vii.16). The rest of his repertoire of over 120 songs came from listening to other singers and eventually understanding the ways that Gurian songs “resemble” one another. Even so, we must presume a great deal of individual practice to bridge the gap between simply “hearing” a song, and being able to sing that song in public with other singers.

Guri Sikharulidze, in the same interview on YouTube, offers an image of what that solo practicing might look like:

GURI. I was in the army in 1951 and used to be a guard at night. I used to carry a weapon and sing to myself all the songs that I knew with every tone of my voice.
TRISTAN, interjecting with a question. Were you allowed to sing by then in the army?
GURI. Who would listen at two o’clock in the morning?
TRISTAN. What if the enemy heard you and shot you?
There was no enemy back then! They were all dead.

Tristan Sikharulidze, sitting at the table with Guri, now adds a memory, “We were in America last year, and I heard him singing to himself at night,” to which Guri responds, “What else are you supposed to do when you can’t sleep, guys?” Everyday activities, as Mahmood notes (2001:828), are a space in which habits of mind and voice can be consciously cultivated and rehearsed, in Guri’s case in preparation for the highly structured, ritual moment of singing in trio.

But how is this different from just “practicing,” in the sense understood by piano students the world over? What we have is a highly-articulated sense of a corporeal and spiritual self which must be accounted for. Although I did not ask Tristan the same question about the qualities needed to be a good Gurian singer, he did offer some opinion about why the voices of today’s Gurian singers don’t sound as sweet as those of earlier generations. A crucial link is in what today’s singers eat and drink. “Our nature has changed,” he says, citing increased use of chemicals, and the fact that grapes for wine are now harvested in September, rather than the middle of November, when they would be sweet and ripe. Today’s singers do not drink “natural wine,” and thus their voices are “different.” Also, he says, today’s singers drink too much, and like to sing only when they’re drunk. Once again, the matter of bodily self-discipline, enacted not merely in the unconscious, economically-determined form proposed by Bourdieu, but through the process of conscious choices and pedagogical interventions, impinges on musical practice. As Jane Sugarman’s (1997) landmark study of Albanian Prespa communities shows, the social act of singing together can
be instrumental in the formation of subjectivity, and in the maintenance of self-image and reputation in a tight-knit society.

“Peaceful” Competition

One aspect of the ethos of trio singing was expressed to me by Tristan in our first interview, namely that one way for a singer to display his skill was to sing such a complicated or unknown variant that his fellow-singers would lose their place in the song. Levan Veshapidze, a noted folk singer and scholar, told me a personal anecdote that touched on this very idea. When he was still a conservatory student, he went with his teacher, Otar Berdzenishvili, to a village in Guria, where a man asked to sing with them. This other man, apparently trying to show up the young student from the capital, sang especially complicated variants, trying to get him to break. Although Levan was nervous, as he told me, he was helped by Otar Berdzenishvili, a renowned singer, who sang a very simple bani part so that Levan, singing one of the two upper voice parts, would not lose his place. After they finished the song, Otar chided the other man, saying that he shouldn’t have been trying to confuse an inexperienced singer (16.vii.16). Even so, competition, whether approved by others or not, appears to be a value continually enacted and cultivated by this singing practice. Describing his art in specifically combative terms, the singer Tristan Sikharulidze stated, about “Chven Mshvidoba” that, because he knows all the possible variants, “nobody can defeat me when I’m singing” (6.viii.2016). Victor Belaiev, a Soviet-era musicologist,
went so far as to speculate that Georgian polyphony itself emerged from competition, when one singer couldn’t wait for another to finish, and had to jump in over his rival (Belaiev 1933:429). The discourse on musical competition in Georgia is deep-rooted, to be sure, and perhaps augmented or redirected during the Soviet period through the institution of Olympiads and prizes for cultural performance.\textsuperscript{13}

Among Gurian singers, the song “Chven Mshvidoba” serves as an especially powerful symbol of status and accomplishment. Interviews I conducted often involved asking singers to sing selections from their repertoire. Although some songs tended to be represented more than others, without fail, if there were enough knowledgeable singers, they would sing “Chven Mshvidoba.”\textsuperscript{14} In one village, the \textit{khelmdzghvaneli} (conductor or leader) of a folklore choir had arranged for his singers to meet me at the town hall. After some songs that included the whole group, he instructed three older men to sing “Chven Mshvidoba.” In most versions of the song, the voices enter in sequence, with the bass (\textit{bani}) joining in last. The man singing \textit{bani} seemed to struggle to find his first note, leading to four false starts before the song could get under way. Eventually, they made it to the end of the song. Less than a minute later, two younger members of the choir sat down with one of the older singers (the one who had sung the first part, \textit{damts'gibi}), and began “Chven

\textsuperscript{13}\textit{See LaPasha (2004) for a discussion of Olympiads in the 1930s in Russia. In his memoir, Anzor Erkomaishvili (2006:10) discusses his fruitless search for film footage of his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather singing together at the First Transcaucasian Olympiad in Tbilisi in 1934.}

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Even if there were only two knowledgeable singers, a novice would perhaps be encouraged to join in. This was the case when Merab Turkia, when I told him I had just learned “Chven Mshvidoba” from Tristan, insisted on singing it with me and his nephew Avto (29.vii.16).}
Mshvidoba” all over again. They did not have the same struggles with the beginning, and indeed the older man seemed, from my perspective, to have more energy in his singing. As they reached the end of the first mukhli or verse of the song, they sang a chord that indicated they were about to continue into a second turn, but the director of the choir stopped them. He said he wanted the man singing the top part to rest his voice. At the time, though, it seemed equally plausible that the director didn’t want the younger singers to show up the older men. We can see, in any event, how this song becomes a site for competition and assertion of skill, perhaps an ironic state of affairs given the lyric’s invocation of “peace.”

**Intertextuality and the Voices of Others**

The end of the quotation which begins, “You need to be a man first, then you need to sing,” reinforces the fact that trio singing is fundamentally collaborative and social. As Guri Sikharulidze concluded in the YouTube video, quoting Artem Erkomaishvili, “it’s important to know who you’re singing with!” A straightforward reading of this statement, then, would encourage the closer examination of interpersonal dynamics among the singers in a trio. In the following chapter, I use recorded performances of “Me Rustveli” to elucidate some of the hierarchies of decision-making and interaction that can occur in a trio song. Here, however, I would like to examine the way that, for trio singers, the act of singing involves participation not only in a dialogue with one’s trio partners, but, through the intertextual
interpolation of particular melodic formulas and variants, in a dialogue with singers who are not physically present.

The corpus of melodic formulas I distill in Chapter Three may be conceived as the common property of all singers in the trio tradition. Even so, over time, certain turns of phrase have become associated with specific singers. A famous example is short, syncopated phrase sung by the lowest voice in a trio, the *bani*, which is linked to Varlam Simonishvili (ex. 2.1). It is most frequently heard in the trio portions of the large-ensemble song “Khasanbegura,” yet it crops up across the repertoire (Anzor Erkomaishvili often uses it in his performance of “Chven Mshvidoba”). Sometimes, these turns of phrase are rather lengthy, as in another *bani* part from “Khasanbegura,” this time linked to Besarion Khukhunaishvili, member of a famous family ensemble from the Lanchkhuti region. Besarion’s variant, built around a repeating eight-note
phrase, takes up the full length of a trio verse in “Khasanbegura” (ex. 2.2). Too long to be a single formula—indeed, containing shorter formulas within itself—this variant proclaims itself as a single unit. The use of it in performance, thus, is a kind of intertextuality—a quotation or homage meant to initiate a dynamic relationship between the performer and a listener equipped to recognize the maneuver.

Intertextuality in Gurian song need not be exclusively musical, by which I mean, the materials used to create a web of association and quotation may involve apparently extra-musical elements. One striking example from my fieldwork in 2016 stands out. While attending a supra in the village of Mtispiri with members of Ensemble Adilei, a young singing group, a performance of “Khasanbegura” broke out. This song is a favorite for Adilei, and they carried on for six or seven minutes with verse after verse, taking turns with the various trio parts while everyone else joined in heartily with the gadadzakhili refrain. At one point, Lasha Bedenashvili, their talented k’rimanch’uli specialist, let out a burst of high-pitched laughter in the middle of a phrase. I turned to my friend who was sitting next to me, with eyes wide in surprise. As if reading my mind, my friend, who knows these singers well, confirmed that, yes, Lasha was intentionally quoting the Khukhunaishvilis’ “Khasanbegura.” On this recording, from 1914, Almaskhan Khukhunaishvili, singing
"k'rimanch'uli," breaks into a cackling laugh on two separate occasions, before rejoining the song a measure later (Levan Veshapidze's valiant attempt to transcribe the laugh appears in ex. 2.3). Especially remarkable about Lasha’s interpolation of the laugh is the fact that, by all appearances, he is truly laughing—the imitation induces the reality, and creates an affective response in his listeners, whether or not they know what he is doing.\(^{15}\)

EXAMPLE 2.3 Kotsia Khukhunaishvili’s laugh, top line (Veshapidze 2006:319)

If Lasha’s laughing quotation represents one explicitly conscious end of the intertextual spectrum, the other end may be occupied by the unconscious transmission of personal variants. Another moment from my fieldwork may help to illustrate this. In my listening to recordings of Guri and Tristan Sikharulidze, I had come to associate a particular phrase, a quick descending motive, with Guri’s singing style (ex. 2.4). I tested this association with some young folk singers in Tbilisi, when I

\(^{15}\) I observed this again at Wesleyan University in February 2017: Ensemble Adilei sang “Khasanbegura” for attendants of a master class, and Lasha’s apparently impromptu laugh induced ripples of laughter through the audience, none of whom, I am confident, would have been familiar with the 1914 gramophone recording.
heard one them use this phrase in a performance of “Chven Mshvidoba.” When I mentioned that what they sang reminded me of Guri, they nodded in agreement, explaining that they were very familiar with the Sikharulidzes’ style. Some weeks later, I met the Chkhaidze family in Lanchkhuti (1.viii.16). The father and his two young sons perform as a trio, with musical direction from the mother, a pianist and pedagogue. I recorded them singing several songs, and after hearing the “Guri phrase” in their performance of “Nanina,” I asked them about it—whether they had learned the song from Guri or from his recordings. I may not have phrased my question well, because at first they didn’t seem to know what to say. Then the mother picked up a book from the stack of music atop the piano and showed it to me. This, I later realized, was a copy of Let Us Study Georgian Folk Song (Shugliashvili and Erkvanidze 2004). The version of “Nanina” presented there in staff notation—and performed quite precisely by the Chkhaidze family trio—does indeed include the “Guri phrase” (ex. 2.5). For these singers, it seems, the association with Guri Sikharulidze, if recognized, was secondary, the authority of the transcription primary. Even here, however, there is some ambiguity, for this particular volume does not present ideal or hypothetical arrangements of Gurian songs, but rather meticulous

\[ \text{Example 2.4 Short melodic formula associated with Guri Sikharulidze} \]

\[ \text{di - la - vo de - lav da} \]

\[ \text{ex. 2.5} \]

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16 Both Tristan and his grandson, Ila Sikharulidze, provided affectionate imitations of the “Guri phrase” when I asked them about it later.
transcriptions based on high-quality audio recordings of prominent singers. In this case, the “Guri phrase,” although transmitted via the printed page, is still derived, in mediated form, from the singer on the original recording, who, as it turns out, is none other than Guri Sikharulidze.

EXAMPLE 2.5 The “Guri phrase” in “Nanina,” top line, second bar (Shugliashvili and Erkvanidze 2004:104)

The idea here is not merely to reveal the intertextual aspect of Gurian trio singing, but to begin to demonstrate that intertextual practices, in music as in speech, intersect with social, cultural and ideological facets of everyday life (Briggs and Bauman 1992:160). A singer’s ability to incorporate and manipulate discrete segments of musical material—the formulas and variants authorized through their use by master singers—indexes their status as a musician. Developing that ability and demonstrating it in competitive settings, in turn, produces prestige social capital. For a bounded practice like Gurian trio songs, in which new songs rarely appear and a canon of material has gradually become fixed in place, the creative artist must demonstrate excellence and originality, while remaining within the limits of a commonly-recognized, if occasionally contested, folk tradition.
Tristan Sikharulidze himself seems to have meditated on the interplay of individual creation and the force of folk tradition. During our second interview, I played old recordings of “Chven Mshvidoba” from my computer, asking him to stop at any point in the playback if a particular phrase struck him. Near the end of the 1909 recording of “Chven Mshvidoba” by Samuel Chavleishvili’s trio, Tristan waved with his hand, and I stopped the track. He then told a story about Samuel Chavleishvili, embedded within a story of his own. It was 1966 or ’67, and Tristan, in his early 30s, met for the first time Vladimer Berdzenishvili, a towering figure in Gurian song who was then about eighty years old. Another great singer, Garsevan Sikharulidze (no relation to Tristan), was also present, and after a wink from Vladimer, the two of them started singing “Lat’aria,” a notoriously difficult trio song. Tristan recalls thanking God that he knew the song, and apparently sang well enough to impress the old man. Then Tristan asked Vladimer a question: “Everyone calls this ‘folklore,’ because people [i.e., folk] made this music. How does this happen? Do people just sit together and make the music?”

In response, the old master described a visit he once made to Samuel Chavleishvili at his home in the small village of Okroskedi. From a distance, he saw Samuel sitting under a tree. As Vladimer approached the gate, Samuel waved for him to stop. Some minutes later, Samuel gestured for him to come through. As it turned out, Samuel had been listening to a small bird (a thrush, chkharta) singing in a tree, and did not want his friend to scare it away with the creaking sound of the gate. Samuel had figured out how to imitate the bird’s song, and devised several short
musical phrases in his high tenor voice. He and Vladimer now sang together, inserting these phrases into various songs. This was the reason Tristan had stopped me in the middle of “Chven Mshvidoba”: he had heard on the recording one of these “bird” phrases. His conclusion: “This is what we mean when we say khalkhuri, folklore. Not some crowd all making music together.” In the Soviet era, “folk creativity” was a heavily employed phrase, meant to indicate the collective achievement of the masses. Here, by contrast, Tristan ascribes “folk” music not only to the invention of individuals—here, Samuel Chavleishvili and Vladimer Berdzenishvili—but even invokes non-human animals as vehicles of music, as equal participants in the creation of culture.

With the introduction of birdsong, we have perhaps reached a certain height of polyphony—understood not only in the musical sense but in the Bakhtinian sense of heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981), of the presence of many voices within an utterance, and the layers of sedimentation that accrue within a speech-act, prompting the question: Whose voice is this? In an interview, Anzor Erkomaishvili asked me this rhetorical question, “Why would you want someone else’s voice?” (30.viii.16) He said this in response to a line of inquiry about the present-day imitation of old recordings by young singers (discussed at length in Chapter Five). For him, there was no contradiction in saying that you could sing with “your own voice,” even within a folk practice as richly allusive and steeped in tradition as Gurian trio songs. Unanswered, and unasked by me at the time, was the crucial question: How does a voice become your own? Some clues emerge in the words and reflections offered by these singers,
which hint at deep, embodied processes of training, listening, and interpersonal interaction, with the goal of creating performative excellence in a highly ritualized sphere of musical activity.
Chapter Three
Forms and Formulas in “Me Rustveli”

In this chapter, I listen closely to a single Gurian trio song, “Me Rustveli,” coupling my experience learning the song directly from Tristan Sikharulidze with a comparison of fifteen recorded versions from throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Within the bounds of a single song, we may observe techniques of formulaic recombination and improvisation, along with practices of interpersonal interaction, that are broadly applicable to Gurian trio singing as a whole. In Chapter Four, I place the results of this analysis within two larger contexts: the study of oral-formulaic techniques of improvisation and composition, which draws from the seminal work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord; and the social and ideological status of improvisation within Georgia, both in the Soviet and post-independence periods. Tristan Sikharulidze’s singing and teaching practice sits at the center of this examination. For many in Georgian folk-singing circles, he has come to represent, along with his cousin Guri, a particularly pure expression of Gurian musical identity, rooted in oral pedagogical methods and ubiquitous improvisation. In the revival of Georgian folk song in the past several decades, Tristan’s prodigious memory and knowledge of the unwritten rules of improvisational conduct have been celebrated as a kind of living national archive, and perhaps even idealized as a vestige of a lost, pre-Soviet musical practice.
“Me Rustveli”

In March, 2013, while on a short trip to Georgia, I paid Tristan a visit. After bringing me to a rehearsal of his ensemble Shvidkatsa, in Ozurgeti, we returned to his house in the village of Makvaneti. I was eager to review the songs I had learned from him the previous year, and see if he was willing to teach me a new one. He was, and the song we settled on was “Me Rustveli.” Before getting into the song itself and Tristan’s teaching method, a few words about the names and roles of the various voice parts in a trio song may be in order, to help ground the discussion to follow.

The names I will use for the three voices in the trio are damts'qebi, modzakhili, and bani. For “Me Rustveli,” this order generally corresponds to the relative pitch-level of the three voices, from high to low. Of the three, the bani, the lowest, is in a category by itself, while the roles of damts'qebi and modzakhili occupy similar, overlapping vocal ranges. The word damts'qebi literally means “the one who starts.” Most trio songs begin with a single voice, subsequently joined by the other two, either staggered or simultaneous. In “Me Rustveli,” the damts'qebi tends to be the highest voice in the ensemble, and at times, for the sake of clarity in discussing musical texture, I may also call it the “first voice.” This, indeed, is how Tristan himself often referred to this part, using the Georgian word p'irveli. However, voice-crossing between the two upper (non-bani) parts is such a common feature in trio songs, as I discuss below, that I have chosen to use the more descriptive Georgian terms. Modzakhili, the name of the upper voice which enters after the damts'qebi, has the sense of “the one who follows,” related to the verb modzakheba. At various times,
the *modzakhili* has been theorized as carrying “the principal melody” of a song (Aslanishvili 2004:141), though this seems more relevant to East Georgian song styles, which employ less contrary motion and counterpoint in the upper voices.¹

Tristan’s method, in the lessons I have had with him, involves working part-by-part. If the song’s verses were relatively short, he would teach, say, the entire *damts'qebi* part for a verse, before moving on to the *modzakhili*. In songs with very large strophic structures, like “Chven Mshvidoba,” he would break up the verse at various cadence points. Tristan taught the voice parts without the use of notation, singing a phrase, having it sung back to him, and correcting as needed. As the student became more comfortable with the part, he would sing one of the other two voices as a counterpoint. I kept a digital recorder running through the lessons, while also notating the text and melodic movements in a notebook. At the end of the sessions, Tristan would often offer to sing each voice part in isolation for the recorder. In example 3.1, I have transcribed the first two verses of “Me Rustveli,” based on my audio recordings and notation. I will use this transcription as a jumping-off point to

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¹ Anzor Erkomaishvili (2005:25) largely confirms my usage. In his taxonomy of voice names, reportedly drawn from his grandfather Artem’s usage, he distinguishes different terminology in chants, songs which include *gamqivani* (high-pitched techniques including the *k'rimanch'uli* yodel), and songs without *gamqivani*. The trio songs I examine here are in the last group, for which Erkomaishvili proposes *damts'qebi*, *modzakhili*, and *bani*, noting that the *damts'qebi* may be the uppermost or middle voice, depending solely on the role in starting the song.
EXAMPLE 3.1 First two verses of “Me Rustveli,” as taught by Tristan Sikharulidze, 22 March 2013.
address: a) the strophic structure of the song; b) text-setting; c) the use of *samgherisi* or “nonsense” syllables; and d) general difficulty in transcribing Georgian music in Western staff notation, including the unconventional key signature used here. These preliminary discussions will help set the stage for understanding the musical grammar in which the improvisational formulas operate.

**Strophic Structure**

In example 3.1 above, I have used brackets and boxed text to identify the main formal divisions in “Me Rustveli.” A verse in Georgian folk song is called a *mukhli*, which literally means “knee,” and can also refer to poetic stanzas or prose paragraphs. At the core of each *mukhli* in “Me Rustveli” is the setting of a line of poetry (mm. 7-11 and 25-28 in ex. 3.1). The poetic text is framed by passages of *samgherisi*, non-lexical syllables also known as vocables (discussed further below). I have further labeled the two passages of *samgherisi* within each verse as Samgherisi A and Samgherisi B. Linking the verses is a short refrain (mm. 15-16), known as *gadadzakhili*. Apart from the first verse of the song, in which the Samgherisi A passage is shortened by two measures, the lengths of these passages is consistent: Samgherisi A (eight measures); Text-setting (four measures); Samgherisi B (four measures); Gadadzakhili (two measures). The number of verses in any performance is determined by the singers, generally between three and six. The song concludes at the
end of the Samgherisi B section of the final verse. Figure 3.1 provides a schematic drawing of the cyclical nature of the piece.

![Diagram of “Me Rustveli” song structure](image)

**FIGURE 3.1 Diagram of “Me Rustveli” song structure**

The *gadadzakhili* part deserves elaboration. The word itself denotes communication, along the lines of “calling out” or “shouting to one another,” with the Georgian verbal prefix *gada-* often indicating movement “across” or “back and forth.” In its use in Gurian music, *gadadzakhili* can refer to a kind of refrain or antiphonal response. The exact nature of a *gadadzakhili* varies from song to song. In “Khasanbegura,” for instance, the *gadadzakhili* consists of a lengthy phrase in two-part harmony, which incorporates narrative text and alternates with a trio singing more intricate material. In “Me Rustveli,” the *gadadzakhili* is a short, monophonic phrase. The version I have transcribed in example 3.1 presumes that there are only three singers present. In that case, the *bani*, or occasionally the *modzakhili*, will sing
the gadadzakhili part before resuming his trio part. If, on the other hand, there are other singers present, they may sing the gadadzakhili part, giving the trio singers a break for a moment. In that case, they are likely to sing a four-measure phrase (ex. 3.2), which would then overlap with the re-entry of the trio voices. We see here the slipperiness of some of the genre-definitions I discuss in Chapter Two. If trio singing is fundamentally about the interplay of three individuals, these extra singers complicate matters somewhat. In truth, it is perhaps only a difference in degree, rather than kind, which separates a trio song like “Me Rustveli”—with its short gadadzakhili part, easily delegated to other singers—from a “two-group” song like “Khasanbegura,” with its longer, elaborate gadadzakhili.²

Apart from changes in textual content or singing personnel, the constituent parts of the song are delineated by cadence points, a term I use to describe the synchronized arrival of the three voices on either a unison note or a specific interval relationship. My use of “cadential” and other related terms should not be construed as an analogy with harmonic functions in the Western tradition. The overwhelming

² The 1909 recording of “Me Rustveli” by Samuel Chavleishvili’s trio—the earliest of this song—is unique in beginning with the gadadzakhili part. The timing of the overlap between the gadadzakhili and trio (the trio re-enters after three measure rather than two) is also divergent from the rest of the recorded corpus.
preference, across Georgian sacred and secular vocal music, is for cadences either on a unison or an open fifth, with some medial arrivals on triads³. “Me Rustveli” has a comparatively straightforward cadential structure, with a two-beat-long unison on G (in our standardized transcription) concluding both sections of samgherisi. Other songs may have more elaborate or uneven cadential structures. “Chven Mshvidoba,” for example, has within each strophe several intermediate cadence points, delineating phrases of six, seven, or eight measures, only arriving at the final note at the very end of the piece. Cadential figures are perhaps the most constrained feature in Gurian voice-leading. In the case of the unison cadences of “Me Rustveli,” they must be approached from the upper and lower neighbor notes, with two voices on the lower neighbor (one of them invariably the bani voice) and the other voice on the upper neighbor. The idea of cadence notes as targets for improvisational figures will factor into our later discussion of formulas.

Buğla Giritlioğlu’s (2011) study of cadential-phase variation draws on transcriptions by Veshapidze (2006) and Erkomaishvili (2005)—the latter of which, it should be noted, does not offer transcriptions of live performance, but rather is based on teaching sessions with Artem Erkomaishvili. Among his conclusions is the idea

³ Within these rules, there is some regional and genre-specific variation. In Svaneti, for example, the unison, and never the fifth, is the obligatory conclusion for songs. Kalakuri, or “city songs” make extensive use of triadic harmony, including cadences, deriving from the influence of Italian music during the first century of Russian rule. This demonstrable influence, however, may suggest the need to set kalakuri songs to one side. As for Gurian traditional song, I only know of one song that does not end on a unison or fifth, which is “Indi-Mindi” (also known as “Perad Shindi”), a humorous love song, which ends, strikingly, on a I-IV-V chord.
that variations in cadences increase in complexity over the course of a performance, and that there is some kind of turn-taking occurring among the singers, with one singer at a time being given more leeway to improvise. Although a methodology based primarily on published transcription—and not on multiple recordings of the same song by the same singers—may have limited utility in the identification of improvisation, we will see below, in an analysis of three cadences from one recording, how cadential maneuvers may indeed be determined by what has occurred in previous cadences, and perhaps by deference and turn-taking among the singers.

**Text-Setting**

“Me Rustveli” gets its name from a line of poetic text featured, here, in the first verse of the song. It is the beginning of a famous stanza from Shota Rustaveli’s *Vepkhist'qaosani* (The Knight in the Panther’s Skin), a twelfth-century epic poem. The cornerstone of Georgian national literature and still taught in schools after nearly a millennium, Rustaveli’s work “penetrated into society’s collective memory at every level from prince to peasant” (Rayfield 2000:82-83). The two lines most commonly included come from the poem’s eighth stanza:

```
me, rustveli, khelobita vikm sakmesa ama dari
vis morchilos jari sp’ata, mistvis vkelob, mistvis mk’vdari.4
```

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4 In my musical transcriptions, I follow the singers’ pronunciation of these words, which may at times differ from the printed editions of Rustaveli’s text. Venera Urushadze’s (1986) English translation, which I consulted, presents the poem in unrhymed verse lines.
I, Rustaveli, maddened by love, have composed these lines. She who commands vast armies—for her I am mad, for her I die.

It is a famous passage, featuring, as a kind of signature, the name Rustaveli, meaning “from Rustavi,” which is the only authorial self-identification contained in the poem.

I allude to the verses’ fame because being readily available to mind would appear to be a chief advantage for the poetry used in Gurian trio singing, since, as Anzor Erkomaishvili suggests, “the text does not reflect the genre or character of the song” (2005:28).

Texts from epic poems like *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin*, despite being “inappropriate to the song genre” (Erkomaishvili 2005:28), frequently appear in trio songs. The *shairi* meter perfected by Rustaveli became the “standard folk-verse” throughout Georgia (Rayfield 2000:82), and its sixteen-syllable lines appear regularly in the predominantly duple meter of Gurian songs. Poetic fragments from various sources, anonymous or otherwise, appear throughout the trio repertoire, often in multiple songs. For example, the line “masp’indzelsa mkhiarulsa hqavs st’umrebi saqvarlebi” (The joyous host has beloved guests), reliably appears in three frequently-performed songs: the eponymous “Masp’indzelsa Mkhiarulsa,” as well as “Chven Mshvidoba” and “Supris Khelkhvavi.” In Anzor Erkomaishvili’s view (2005:28), a Gurian singer will “pay less attention to texts, and is more likely to sing the text however he happens to remember it.” We see this in the extant recordings of

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5 Samuel Chavleishvili is credited with inserting this text into “Supris Khelkhvavi” (Shugliashvili and Erkvanidze 2004:209). See Tristan’s anecdote at the end of Chapter Two for a further example of Samuel Chavleishvili’s legendary reputation for individual creativity and innovation.
“Me Rustveli,” in which verses are occasionally re-arranged or repeated, or when two singers seem to start different lines of text before coming to an agreement. It is also commonplace to incorporate poetry from other sources into “Me Rustveli,” particularly if the trio is performing more than four verses. Samuel Chavleishvili’s trio does not even begin with me rustveli khelobita, but rather with a line of anonymous poetry in a different meter and rhyme scheme. After four subsequent verses from Rustaveli, they conclude, incongruously, with two lines from Giorgi Chaladideli’s popular 1870 poem “Patskha”: “miqvars patskha me megruli...” (I love a Megrelian hut).

If the texted portions of “Me Rustveli” and other trio songs are treated with some disregard, at least in terms of consistency of poetic diction and style, the musical setting of these texts is quite consistent, perhaps even staid, compared to the rhythmic dynamism in the passages of samgherisi. In example 3.1, note the straight eighth-note rhythms and homophonic alignment of the two verses of poetry: the text is sung in all three voices, with the modzakhili and bani establishing a stable frame of a fifth (mm. 7-11) or octave (mm. 25-28), within which the damts'qebi, having crossed below the modzakhili, has some limited melodic movement. Here we may perhaps glimpse a link between Gurian trio singing and practices associated with Georgian sacred music.

John Graham, in his study of the transmission of Georgian liturgical chant, identifies an “unwritten convention” that texted passages must be sung “in synchronous homophony” (2015:429). One possible explanation for this convention
lies in the sanctity of liturgical texts: even when sung they are considered “a form of prayer, rather than performance” (2015:89). Although the texts used in trio songs are not at all sacred, it is worth remembering that many of the early-twentieth-century singers who helped define the Gurian folk repertoire were also known as master chanter. Homophonic setting of poetic text is also broadly attested, though not universal, across the trio song repertoire, sometimes with identical harmonic structures. Without claiming direct influence from a sacred music-making realm to a secular, I will continue to highlight apparent parallels such as this between chant and folk song in Guria, particularly in the technique of voice crossing, and the notion, developed in Graham’s study, that chanters in the oral tradition were able to improvise their parts based on a knowledge of cadence points and beat structures.

“Nonsense” Words

*Samgherisi* is a technical term coined by Shukia Apridonidze and employed by Anzor Erkomaishvili to refer to the non-lexical vocalizations (or vocables) in Georgian singing (Erkomaishvili 2005:25). The word takes the Georgian root for

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6 As taught by Tristan, the songs “Mok’le Khelkhvavi” and “Chven Mshvidoba” have texted passages with identical intervals in the outer voices and inner melodic movement in the *damts’qebi* part. On recordings, however, singers of “Chven Mshvidoba” are much more likely to abandon the text in these passages and replace them with more virtuosic *samgherisi* formulas.

7 See Ninoshvili (2010a:16-17) for a discussion of this term in Georgian academic circles, and its use in comparison to *glossolalia*. Ninoshvili uses the more “neutral” *vocable* as an umbrella term for all non-lexical vocalizations throughout her dissertation.
“singing,” -mgher-, and adds a prefix/suffix combination suggesting something “for the purpose of singing.” Such vocables may be found throughout Georgian traditional and popular music, though it is by no means a stretch to say that Gurian songs “rely on vocables more than any other dialect” of Georgian music (Ninoshvili 2010a:145). Some trio songs, such as “Ts'amok'ruli,” may be constructed entirely out of samgherisi. In practice, short combinations like, abadele, dilavo delavda, or naninav da, become closely allied with melodic or rhythmic cells. Although individual singers—and transcribers—differ in terms of the precise consonants used to articulate these phrases (ranina versus nani-na, dilavodelav versus t'iaorerav), certain phrases become fused with melodic contours. To take three examples from “Me Rustveli,” dilavo delavda is a descending phrase that appears frequently in the upper voice (damts'qebi), abadele is an ascending phrase that appears in both the modzakhili and bani parts, while rim t'i-ri rim is a phrase that sustains a single pitch-level, exclusively in the upper voice (ex. 3.3). Note that there is a fractal quality to some of these formulas. That is to say, they preserve their shape at different levels of rhythmic density: dilavo delavda in either sixteenth notes or thirty-seconds, abadele in either quarter notes or eighths. These phrases of syllables are affixed to specific melodic and

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8 Ninoshvili argues convincingly for the role of vocables in making Gurian song an especially successful “export commodity” (2010a:156), citing pedagogical advantages for singing students who don’t speak Georgian, and more generally exploring the privileging of vocables as a means of making “the Georgian language-music gestalt globally accessible so that world music listeners will buy it” (2).

9 A popular legend has it that Samuel Chavleishvili once sang forty verses of “Ts'amok'ruli” in succession at a feast, without repeating himself once, a feat hard to imagine if more lexical or poetic content were demanded of each verse.
rhythmic shapes, one example of the constraints that help define the bounds of improvisational practice in this genre.

Additionally, phrases associated with each voice part have particular characteristics. The repertoire of bani phrases, for example, makes greater use of aspirated h sounds and longer note values on open vowels than the other two voices, perhaps reflecting an aesthetic preference for continuous sound in the lower register. The damts'qebi, by contrast, has many phrases involving articulation with the tongue near the front of the mouth—d’s, l’s, r’s—permitting rapid movement and rhythmic punctuation in the upper register. Such rhythmic accentuation and precision may perhaps also allow for greater differentiation between the two upper voices, in their shared tessitura. In Gurian trio singing, with its de-emphasis of verbal art, these samgherisi phrases become the primary building blocks for vocal expression and individual creativity.

EXAMPLE 3.3 Samgherisi phrases for damts'qebi (1, 2, 5), modzakhili (3) and bani (5) voice parts. Transcribed by the author from commercial recordings of “Me Rustveli” sung by Tristan Sikharulidze with various trio partners.
Transcription and Temperament

From the earliest attempts in the nineteenth century, transcribing Georgian folk and sacred music into Western staff notation has been beset with difficulties. The earliest sound recordings testify to the presence of melodic and harmonic intervals which are not easily resolved into twelve-tone equal temperament. In recent years, several scholars have attempted to formulate an authentic Georgian scale which would account for these performances. At the First International Symposium on Traditional Polyphony, held in Tbilisi in 2002, two scale theories were presented, one by Stuart Gelzer (2003), a member of Kavkasia, a North American trio devoted to Georgian music, the other by Malkhaz Erkvanidze (2003), a leading singer and scholar of Georgian chant. More recently, Zaal Tsereteli and Levan Veshapidze (2015), two more scholar-practitioners, have developed a theoretical scale based on a study of Artem Erkomaishvili’s 1966 chant recordings, as well as descriptions of panduri (short-necked lute) tunings in the writings of the eighteenth century lexicographer Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani. Tsereteli and Veshapidze have also employed

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10 John Graham’s recent dissertation (2015) details the campaign by Pilimon Koridze and others to transcribe the vast corpus of Georgian Orthodox chant into three-part Western staff notation.

11 Graham (2015:285-92) reviews these and earlier theories, arguing for more attention to regional and repertoire-specific distinctions, while encouraging further analysis, particularly as more precise techniques of spectral analysis become available.
computer software, sampling their own voices and adjusting frequencies, to test their hypothesis.¹²

What these competing theories all have in common is the premise that the seven scale degrees per octave, in the Georgian traditional tuning system scale, do not undergo chromatic alteration. A distinction between major and minor thirds, for instance, is likely to be viewed as a reflection of Western musical practice, which came into Georgia via the establishment of an opera house in Tbilisi and the nineteenth-century popularity of Neapolitan and guitar-accompanied songs. Nevertheless, within a single recording, the same apparent scale-degree may vary quite widely in frequency. In his early transcriptions, Siegfried Nadel (1933) attempted to address the challenge posed by this microtonal variation with a fastidious proliferation of accidentals and small arrows. At the heart of the question—both of how to talk about Georgian tuning and how to represent it in a transcription—is the fact that we are dealing with a polyphonic practice, based on the sounding of two or more pitches at once. The tuning of harmonic intervals—a perfect fifth, for instance, ubiquitous in Georgian singing—may at times take precedence over the accurate performance of melodic intervals. The absence of fixed-pitch accompanying instruments for much of this music also leads to the possibility that apparent modulations are nothing more than evidence of an ensemble’s drifting pitch center.

¹² Levan Veshapidze has produced versions of many Georgian chants and folk songs in this equidistant scale, singing all three parts himself and Adobe Audition software to adjust the frequencies. Several of these have been posted on his YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/user/veshapo).
The relative skill levels of the singers represented on the recording should also be taken into consideration: one singer, after all, may adjust his part to accommodate his partner’s.

Within the history of Georgian musical transcriptions, it is important to distinguish between descriptive and pedagogical intentions. Nadel (1933) and others like Dimitri Arakishvili (Arakchiev 1908) and Robert Lach (1917, 1928), offer descriptive transcriptions, meant to illustrate scholarly arguments. Many recent transcriptions, on the other hand, are meant for teaching, as indicated by the title of Shugliashvili and Erkvanidze’s *Let Us Study Georgian Folk Song* (2004). Their transcription of “Me Rustveli,” based on a recording featuring Tristan and Guri Sikharulidze with Otar Berdzenishvili, does not include microtonal indications or very many accidentals, sticking to one key signature from beginning to end. Levan Veshapidze’s (2006) book of Gurian folk song transcriptions includes two different versions of “Me Rustveli,” and falls somewhere between the scholarly and pedagogical: his transcriptions of historical recordings are meant for both “specialists and performers” (2006:10). Anzor Erkomaishvili expresses a common resignation: “Transcribing Georgian folk song to Western notation is an approximation at best” (2005:32). The solution, he proposes, is always to include audio recordings as an accompaniment to transcriptions, to better convey the nuances of intonation.

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13 In a foreword to Veshapidze’s collection (2006:9), Kukuri Chokhonelidze suggests that the transcriptions will employ small arrows to indicate microtonal adjustments, though, in the main body of the collection, these arrows do not appear.
All of the transcriptions in this chapter—whether my own, made from recordings of song lessons or performances, or the work of other scholars—have been transposed to appear in the same key, for ease of comparison. Thus, the opening pitch of the *damts'qebi* part will universally appear as an E above middle C, and the cadence note as the G below middle C. I also employ an admittedly non-committal key signature, with B-flat and E-flat in parentheses. These indicate scale degrees which, to my ears, exhibit the most variation. Although the upper voices tend to sound a B-flat, and the *bani* voice tends to sound something like an E-natural, whenever a fifth must be made between these two notes, there is some mutual adjustment to ensure a near-perfect fifth, rather than a non-idiomatic tritone. The irregular placement of accidentals in the key signature (B-flat above E-flat) is meant to create some distance from the notion of Western tonality, as well as indicate a registral preference: for the upper voices, the E above middle C tends to be natural, while the E below is more likely to be flattened. Although I am inclined to believe that there is indeed a single scale that governs all trio songs, with variations in cadence and song-final tones, and temporary modulations that recapitulate the same scalar structure over a different bass, it is beyond the scope of this work to conduct the broad comparison which would be needed for such a claim. Within “Me Rustveli,” however, I contend that the admittedly imperfect method of transcription I employ here is sufficient for revealing the motivic variation and contrapuntal interaction that constitutes expert performance.
Variant One

Having addressed some of the preliminary conditions for understanding the forms and features of trio songs, let us return to Tristan’s singing lesson. Zeroing in on the Samgherisi A section (mm. 17-24 in ex. 3.1), we see, in the damts’qebi part, two measures that appear to repeat the opening of the song, with an oscillation between E and F, followed by three measures of active movement built around a repeating figure on the syllables dilavo, then one measure in which the voice descends to the lower E, finally ending with a quick turn and an arrival on G, in unison with the other two voices. On the accompanying CD, I have provided a recording of Tristan singing this passage in my lesson with him (accompanying CD, Track 2). In example 3.4, I reprint these measures of the damts’qebi part, with the addition of names identifying further subdivisions. Although I have not encountered such subdivisions, let alone the names I give them, being used in conversation by Gurian musicians, I believe they are operative units in the construction of improvisatory variants. The names INTRO, DESCENDING, and CADENCE should be relatively self-explanatory, with SPIRALING perhaps requiring some poetic license, as a way of conveying the twisting, repetitive figures that characterize the way many singers realize these passages.
Let us now compare the way Tristan first taught me this passage with the way Tristan sings it in performance. Example 3.5 has three different versions of the Samgherisi A section, beginning with the same realization taught in example 3.4. In example 3.5b, Tristan sings almost exactly the same way as he taught me, only diverging in the last measure of the SPIRALING section, returning to a very similar DESCENDING pattern, and then varying the CADENCE figure. Example 3.5c, however, demonstrates the relative porousness of the divisions I have proposed: Tristan extends the INTRO’s oscillating E-F gesture into the first two measures of the SPIRALING section. He then moves to a one-measure spiraling dilavo figure that brings him back to the same DESCENDING-CADENCE combination used in example 3.5b. Taken together, the version Tristan taught in our lesson, along with modifications to that model, serve as something I will call Variant One in Tristan’s practice. There are two more variants for this passage of “Me Rustveli,” which will be encountered in due
course. First, however, I wish to step back from the practice of one individual, to see how Tristan’s Variant One is common to the wider community of Gurian trio singers.

To place Tristan’s performances of “Me Rustveli” in context, I have consulted fifteen recordings of the song, made between 1909 and 2013. Table 3.1 provides details of date, location, and personnel, when known. Focusing on the Samgherisi A section of each verse, I transcribed in a notebook the various phrases which each singer used to fill in the different sections—INTRO, SPIRALING, DESCENDING, CADENCE—which I delineate above. Gradually, I came to view these phrases as formulas, and to view the singers’ art as a form of formulaic improvisation, a process I will describe in more detail in Chapter Three. I recognize, nonetheless, the difficulty in using audio recordings as primary evidence for improvisation. Indeed, recognizing whether or not improvisation is happening is a methodological question of long standing. As R. Anderson Sutton has argued,

Reference merely to sound structures is inadequate—whether heard live, heard from the playback of recordings, or read from transcriptions. For if we perceive significant differences between two or more performances of a piece, or variation between repetitions within a single performance, how can we know that these differences are the result of spontaneous decision making by the performers? We need to pay heed both to the sound structures and to what musicians who have produced these structures have to say about the process whereby they produced them. One without the other is insufficient in a quest to identify and understand improvisation. (Sutton 1998:73-74)

Although I have not consulted Tristan about these recordings of “Me Rustveli” in particular, he has spoken with me about improvisation in general, and his conceptualization of the “frame” of a song will serve as a major source for understanding Gurian improvisation. Bearing in mind Sutton’s warning about
drawing too many conclusions from sound structures, in what follows I will nonetheless attempt to identify some moments of “spontaneous decision making” in the corpus of recordings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year recorded (location, recordist)</th>
<th>Trio personnel</th>
<th>Other notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1909 (Kutaisi, Franz Hampe)</td>
<td>Samuel Chavleishvili, Besarion Intskirveli, Varlam Simonishvili or Apolon Chavleishvili</td>
<td>Transcribed by Levan Veshapidze (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931 (Lanchkhuti, Shalva Mshvelidze,)</td>
<td>Unknown, possibly Iliko Morchiladze, Noe Sarjveladze, Besarion Khukhunaishvili</td>
<td>Recorded on wax cylinder; re-released on Echoes from the Past (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s?</td>
<td>Vladimir Berdzenishvili, Garsevan Sikharulidze, Otar Berdzenishvili, Ramin Mikaberidze (voice parts not identified)</td>
<td>Released on LP (1989) as part of Archivnie Zapisi (Archival Recordings)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964 (Moscow)</td>
<td>Garsevan Sikharulidze, Mikheil Koroshinadze, Vladimir Berdzenishvili</td>
<td>Recorded for television; transcribed in Veshapidze 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965 (Vani, Otar Chijavadze)</td>
<td>Unidentified village singers</td>
<td>Recorded on wax cylinder as part of expedition for Tbilisi Conservatoire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968?</td>
<td>Vladimir Berdzenishvili, Garsevan Sikharulidze, Otar Berdzenishvili</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Unidentified trio</td>
<td>Elesa choir from Guria, led by Vladimir Erkomaishvili</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985 (Tbilisi, Mikheil Kilosanidze)</td>
<td>Ramin Mikaberidze, Badri Toidze, Anzor Erkomaishvili</td>
<td>Members of Rustavi Ensemble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985 (Lanchkhuti)</td>
<td>Ilia Apshilava, Leo Apshilava, Amiran Apshilava</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using the recordings in Table 3.1 as raw material, in example 3.6 I have extracted a kind of flowchart for the *damts'qebi* (upper voice) in the Samgherisi A section. The short melodic formulas are all attested in the recordings, and they fit most closely with the kinds of phrases I have identified as Tristan’s Variant One. There is very little variation in the INTRO section—the pattern of sustained E with repeated oscillation to F, appears to be a kind of marker of “Me Rustveli,” not common in other trio songs. The INTRO, as noted above, may be extended into a four-measure phrase (the first example comes from Tristan in 2008, the second from Ramin Mikaberidze in 1985), which would then be followed by one measure from the SPIRALING formulas.
EXAMPLE 3.6 First-voice formulas in Samgherisi A section, which resemble Tristan Sikharulidze’s Variant One.

INTRO (2 measures)

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  vo \ di-\-lo \- i \ o \ di-\-lo \\
\end{music}
```

Extended INTRO (4 measures)

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  vo \ di-\-lo \- i \ o \ di-\-lo \- i \ vo \ di-\-lo \- i \ o \ di-\-lo \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  vo \ di-\-lo \- i \ vo-i \ di-la \ a-di-lo-i \ vo \ di-\-lo \- i \ vo \\
\end{music}
```

SPIRALING (3 measures total)

Measure 1

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  di-\-la-\-vo \ di-\-la-\-vo \ di-\-la-\-vo \\
\end{music}
```

Measure 2

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  vo \ di-\-la-\-vo \ di-\-la \\
\end{music}
```

Measure 3

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  vo \ di-\-la-\-vo \ di-\-la-\-vo \ de-la \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  vo \ di-\-la-\-vo \ di-\-la-\-vo \ de-la \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  vo \ di-\-la-\-vo \ di-\-la-\-vo \ de-la \\
\end{music}
```

DESCENDING (1 measure)

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  vo \ vo \ de-la \ a-di-lo \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  vo \ vo \ de-la \ a-di-lo \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  vo \ vo \ de-la \ a-di-lo \\
\end{music}
```

CADENCE (2 measures)

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```

```
\begin{music}
  \relative {c'6} \\
  na-te-vo \ de-da \\
\end{music}
```
The SPIRALING section shows the most combinatory possibilities, with three measures built around active sixteenth-note motives, and the ubiquitous dilavo figure. The formulas for the SPIRALING and DESCENDING sections are closely linked. The final note for the third-measure SPIRALING formulas is always either E, C or A, which would then serve as neighbors for the starting notes of the DESCENDING formulas: F, D, or B. Although only one measure long, the DESCENDING formulas serve the important purpose of helping to approach the cadence properly. As evidenced by the distribution of CADENCE formulas in example 3.6, the first-voice, damts'qebi, has a tendency to approach the cadence note, G, from its lower neighbor, F. Executing this maneuver requires that the damts'qebi voice descend below the second voice, the modzakhili.

Voice crossing is a widespread feature in Gurian trio songs, and, again, there appears to be a link with sacred music practice. In Georgian liturgical chant, the analogous voice-crossing technique is known as gadajvaredineba, or “crossing the cross” (Graham 2013). When the upper voice in the chant departs from its “referent melody” and descends below the middle voice, the middle voice generally responds by moving up in its range, sustaining tones above the upper voice until the next cadence. In the text-setting section of “Me Rustveli,” the modzakhili operates in this manner, sustaining a C while the damts'qebi moves below (mm. 7-10 in Tristan’s teaching version, ex. 3.1). Voice crossing in the oral chant tradition, Graham argues (2013:169), was an improvisatory technique, initiated by the upper-voice singer.
leading the chant, and necessitating appropriate responses from the middle voice and
bani, who would perhaps have to descend in order to make space for the upper voice.

It is important to note that voice crossing in chant, when it happens in a
present-day liturgical setting, is no longer an improvisational technique. The last
master chanter of the oral tradition, Artem Erkomaishvili (Anzor’s grandfather), died
in 1967. Chanters in the church today often use scores, which are based on the
transcriptions from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and, even if these
singers do not read music, they may learn their parts by rote, either from a teacher or
from recordings. Improvisation in folk singing, to be sure, is also less prevalent than
it once was, though in the case of Guri and Tristan Sikharulidze, it seems possible
that voice crossings may still be initiated on the spur of the moment. As evidence of
this, there is Anzor Erkomaishvili’s impressionistic description of singing “Chven
Mshvidoba” with the Sikharulidzes (Erkomaishvili 2013:16-18). In his writing, Anzor
describes a feeling of surprise when Guri suddenly crosses below Tristan’s voice,
with the result that Anzor, singing bani, is so “taken with excitement,” that “for a
moment I found myself higher than the dams’gеби and modzakhili” (17). Voice
crossing is thus one of the major procedures—whether spontaneous or pre-planned—
which will help point us toward what is meant when it is said that Gurian singers
“improvise.”

In the flowchart in example 3.6, the section with the most options for the first-
voice singer to choose from is the first measure of cadence. Even so, the template
for the cadence is quite pre-determined. The invariable cadence note, G, is arrived at
in a strong metrical position and sustained. Immediately before that, a full quarter-note beat is occupied by an upper or lower neighbor. In general, the damts'qebi approaches the cadence from the lower neighbor, while the modzakhili approaches from the upper neighbor. Occasionally, this is reversed, as evidenced by the last two formulas in example 3.6. This may be evidence that a voice crossing may not have occurred, as is the case with several of the recordings. In the case of Tristan Sikharulidze, however, I have only found one case where, when singing first voice, he approaches the cadence from above. A closer examination of this singular moment will help remind us that these formulas are made manifest in real time, and do not always proceed as expected.

Three Cadences

On a 2013 CD released by the Georgian Chant Foundation, entitled Unique Recordings, Tristan Sikharulidze sings “Me Rustveli” with, Merab Kalandadze—who frequently sings bani with Tristan—and the late Polikarpe Khubulava, who at the time of recording was 90 years old. Khubulava was a renowned master of Mingrelian folk songs—that is, songs from Samegrelo, the region immediately north of Guria, where a different Kartvelian language is spoken in addition to Georgian. Many Gurian songs were also in his repertoire, though “Me Rustveli” appears to have been
a favorite. Despite Khubulava’s seniority, Tristan sings the first-voice part, perhaps in recognition of his greater knowledge of Gurian songs, or in the interest of not overly taxing Khubulava’s voice. In any event, Khubulava sings a modzakhili part that differs in some regards from the template taught to me by Tristan, though employing many typical second-voice formulas. Khubulava’s enthusiasm for improvisation was well-known (Kalandadze-Makharadze 2015), and in several points of the song, I argue, one can perceive both Tristan and Khubulava making in-the-moment decisions to preserve certain conventions of style or genre.

**Example 3.7** Cadence in the second verse of “Me Rustveli” (2013 recording; accompanying CD Track 3, 0:36)

In example 3.7, I transcribe the ending of the Samgherisi A section of the second verse from this recording (Track 3 on the accompanying CD). Tristan’s first-voice line is made up of formulas that should be recognizable from example 3.6, as he finishes the SPIRALING section and descends to an E, before initiating a cadential

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14 On this album, it is the only Gurian trio song featuring Khubulava. Moreover, a YouTube video posted in 2015, featuring the same trio of Sikharulidze, Khubulava, and Kalandadze, begins with an endearing dialogue between Tristan and Polikarpe, in which Tristan asks “What song do you want to sing?” to which Polikarpe says, “Whichever you want! ‘Me Rustveli?’” After some further back-and-forth, Polikarpe begins the damts’qebi (first-voice) part (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ut0OKi7agzc).

15 As indicated by the YouTube clip in the note above, Khubulava was certainly capable of singing the first-voice part for “Me Rustveli.”
figure from below. As he leaves the C, however, Khubulava briefly sings in unison with Tristan on his descent. Perhaps recognizing that the typical voice-crossing has not taken place, or wishing to prevent more accidental unison, Khubulava immediately leaps up to A, the upper neighbor to the cadence note. The moment of doubt, if indeed there had been such a moment, has been averted by a clear gesture toward the cadence.

EXAMPLE 3.8 Cadence in the third verse of “Me Rustveli” (2013 recording, accompanying CD Track 4, 1:04)

In the next verse (ex. 3.8), Tristan again concludes the SPIRALING section with the familiar twisting dilavo phrase (albeit with a slight rhythmic lilt, a stylistic trait I have not represented in my schematic presentation of formulas). In the second bar, however rather than continuing with the same DESCENDING phrase as in ex. 3.7, Tristan reaches up to an E before initiating a descending scale, ultimately landing on G. This time, there is no accidental unison, as Khubulava’s phrase in the second bar is now in parallel thirds below Tristan’s. As soon as he finishes the descent, Khubulava leaps up to the A, crossing above the G in the damts'qebi, presumably preparing to cadence from the upper neighbor. Tristan, however, begins a different CADENCE formula (second-to-last bar, indicated with a box in ex. 3.8). This is the only time in the recordings that I have heard Tristan, or Guri Sikharulidze, for that matter,
cadencing from the upper-neighbor note when singing *damts'qebi*. The cadence from A is more typically a *modzakhili* figure. Why, then, does Tristan do this here? Perhaps, realizing that his voice had remained above Khubulava’s through the end of his *descending* phrase—and perhaps aware that there had been a moment of doubt in the previous verse—Tristan elects not to create a voice-crossing, but to remain above the *modzakhili*. Whatever the reason for Tristan’s move to this *cadence* formula, it takes Khubulava a moment to adjust: on the penultimate quarter note before the cadence, he briefly sounds an A (indicated with a grace note in ex. 3.8), before shifting down to the F. In this way, he ensures that the two upper voices approach the cadence from opposite directions, a feature we may confidently identify as one of the constraints on improvisation.

EXAMPLE 3.9 Cadence in the fourth verse of “Me Rustveli”
(2013 recording, accompanying CD Track 4, 1:39)

Finally, in the fourth verse, we see a further variation on this cadential negotiation (ex. 3.9). Once again, in the first verse, Tristan sings the spiraling *dilavo*

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16 Tristan’s *damts'qebi* part here resembles the recording by the Apsilavas in 1985. Unique in the recording corpus, this performance does not feature voice crossing by the upper voices, and the *damts'qebi* consistently cadences from the upper neighbor.

17 Arom and Vallejo (2010) identify this as “Cadence A” in their syntax of Georgian harmony.
pattern, before using the same DESCENDING formula as in ex. 3.8. At first, Khubulava responds in the same manner as before, creating parallel thirds below Tristan’s line. Rather than continuing to descend in this manner, however, he makes a turn and ends up with some pitches in unison with Tristan (indicated in bar 2 of ex. 3.9). It would be impossible to pinpoint a cause for this change in phrasing—perhaps, by not descending as far as he did in the previous verse, Khubulava is attempting to help accomplish a voice-crossing. In any event, Tristan begins his CADENCE formula on A, which may suggest to Khubulava that he will once again approach the cadence from the upper neighbor. Instead, Tristan continues downward, A-G-F, to approach the cadence from below, returning to his normal procedure. The result is that the two singers sing a descending G-F in unison, before Khubulava makes a quick jump up to the A, just in time (the last eighth note) before the unison arrival on G.

In the preceding paragraphs, I have tried to be careful not to presume too much about the singers’ inner thought process. More than that, I want to be clear that I have no intention of criticizing or proposing faulty technique as the cause of these bumpy (though ultimately successful) cadential moments. Indeed, these examples suggest a remarkable capacity for rapid response and coordination in the moment of performance. They also instantiate Marc Perlman’s hypothesis that “points of conflict between musical constraints are points of greater variability” (1982:25), a formulation extracted from Becker and Becker’s (1979) influential, if disputed, grammar of the Javanese genre srepegan. I would argue that constraints of three orders—sonic content, procedural expectations, and interpersonal hierarchy—are evident here.
By “sonic content” I mean sounded pitches and their intervalic/rhythmic
correlations. Here, as is demonstrated by all the recorded examples, not to mention
the overwhelming evidence from other songs in the trio repertoire and formal
analyses like Arom and Vallejo’s (2010), the cadence note must be approached from
an upper and lower neighbor. This constraint appears to operate independently of
which of the two upper voices, *damts'qebi* or *modzakhili*, occupy which neighboring
note. To determine, in practice, who sings which note, the other two orders of
constraint must be applied. “Procedural expectations,” in this case, would include
voice-crossing, which would put the *damts'qebi* voice in a position to approach the
cadence from below. Nearly all of the recordings surveyed feature voice-crossing in
this passage, thus, when it does not occur, it appears to leave more open the question
of who shall sing which pre-cadential note. Finally, “interpersonal hierarchy” refers
to decisions made based either on the vocal part or particular identity of one’s fellow
singers. Among these three orders of constraint, a ranking may be dimly perceived:
the sonic content of the cadence formula seems to be inviolable, an absolutely
limiting constraint. The procedural expectation of a voice-crossing, on the other hand,
is just that—an expectation, not an unbreakable rule. The ambiguity created by the
absence of this procedure, however, must be resolved by recourse to this third
constraint, the interpersonal hierarchy.

In each of these cases, Khubulava is the one making the awkward move to
ensure that the cadence note is approached from both sides—a move, I want to
reiterate, which demands a knowledge and mastery of the genre at hand. In so doing,
he appears to defer to Tristan, who does not seem to hesitate in his cadential formulas. This may be a reflection of the relative hierarchy of *damts'qebi*, with the privileged position of “starting” a song, outranking *modzakhili*. Or it could be, on Khubulava’s part, a deference—perhaps unconscious—to Tristan’s status as the trio-song expert, or even, simply, as a Gurian, to whom these songs, arguably, belong.

The interpersonal hierarchy, nonetheless, need not work in one direction only: a singer with higher status may still be constrained by his singing partners. Listening again to the recordings of my 2013 lesson with Tristan, in which I learned “Me Rustveli,” I hear Tristan taking pains to ensure the proper sound of a cadence. As I fumbled my way through one of the upper parts, Tristan would sing the other in counterpoint. When I faltered at the cadence points, for instance dropping down too low, Tristan would be the one making a leap or adjustment to move his voice to the upper neighbor. As the novice, I couldn’t be expected to recognize my mistake and adjust immediately, whereas a master is able to rescue the cadence, even at the expense of his own melodic line.
Variants Two and Three

Before concluding this chapter’s close reading of Tristan’s performances of “Me Rustveli” and turning our attention to broader questions of oral formulaics and the conception of improvisation in Gurian music, I wish to expand slightly the repertoire of formulas which Tristan employs in “Me Rustveli.” After teaching to me his basic model version of “Me Rustveli” (ex. 3.1), which I termed Variant One, Tristan showed me a further variant of the first-voice part, which I have transcribed in example 3.10. This two-bar phrase would fill in the first two measures of the SPIRALING section, preceded by the standard two-bar INTRO. Unlike the SPIRALING formulas in example 3.6, this variant is not based on the descending dilavo figure, instead spiraling in reverse, emphasizing the notes C, D, and E. I call this Tristan’s Variant Two, and it is a standard part of his performances as damts'qebi. Although not, apparently, part of Guri Sikharulidze’s standard repertoire, Variant Two appears in several archival recordings, including Samuel Chavleishvili’s 1909 performance. Tristan’s use of Variant Two does not seem to depend explicitly on the actions of the other singers, given that, for instance, on the 2013 CD, Polikarpe Khubulava performs essentially the same modzakhili part for most of his verses, with Tristan alternating

EXAMPLE 3.10 Tristan's Variant Two (accompanying CD, track 5; appears several times on accompanying CD, Track 4)
verse-to-verse between versions of Variants One and Two. The Variant Two phrase may easily be plugged into the flow chart in example 3.6: its final note of E can lead smoothly into any of the third-measure formulas that conclude the SPIRALING section. Nonetheless, Tristan considered it sufficiently distinct and noteworthy as to teach it to me in our lesson, something he did not do for many other songs, for which he would teach me a single model version and then merely indicate that other variations were possible.

Limitations of space impel me to focus on a single part of this song, and on the musical material belonging to only one third of the singers involved in any performance. The particular identities of one’s trio partners, however, have consequences that go beyond the level of in-performance negotiation, as we saw with Tristan and Polikarpe Khubulava, and may determine the musical material to be sung. The longevity and depth of Guri and Tristan Sikharulidze’s singing partnership allow not only for instances of micro-coordination that strike listeners as nearly telepathic, but also for the presentation of variants or formulas that rely on particular knowledge. Example 3.11 shows a particular Samgherisi A variant for the first and second voices that differs markedly from the other formulas I have linked to Variants One and Two. It is characterized by extensive, repeated use of the samgherisi phrase nanina, sung with sustained notes and less rhythmic density than other formula combinations. In addition, this variant has voice crossing from the very beginning, with the modzhakhili sustaining notes above the damageqebi up through the CADENCE section. Tristan and Guri Sikharulidze seem to have an affinity for this variant, employing it whenever
they sing together regardless of who is singing bani. In all of these recordings, Guri sings damts'qebi and Tristan sings modzakhili, a typical arrangement for the pair, perhaps indicating Guri’s status as the respected older cousin. In the recordings of Tristan as damts'qebi, without Guri, this variant does not appear.

Variant Three, to be sure, is not the exclusive property of the Sikharulidzes: it appears in Erkomaishvili’s book of transcriptions (2005:474), which contains the repertoire of Artem Erkomaishvili, whom Tristan also identifies as one of his teachers (25.vii.16).¹⁸ Is this, perhaps, a formula that requires participation from both damts'qebi and modzakhili? The 1980 recording by the Elesa choir would seem to suggest otherwise, as the damts'qebi sings a version of Variant Three while the modzakhili continues with contrasting formulas that do not run in parallel. Whatever the precise reasons for Tristan’s performance choices in regard to this variant, it is clear that any consideration of the storehouse of formulas for a given singer, or the various constraints on selection and combination of these formulas, must take into

¹⁸ A 2016 YouTube video by the Amaghleba ensemble from Chokhatauri (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjgWx1zQzMA) also includes this variant. Their performance on the whole indicates familiarity with the recording of Guri and Tristan Sikharulidze transcribed in Shugliashvili and Erkvanidze (2004:46-54).
account the identities of the individual trio singers that make up a specific manifestation of singing.

**Conclusion**

I have attempted, in this chapter, to open a point of access to the intricacies of a classic Gurian trio song. Working within strict boundaries of phrase structure and under pressure to correctly execute maneuvers like cadence arrivals and voice crossings, the experienced singer nonetheless has at his disposal a wealth of formulas that may be combined in flexible yet grammatically logical sequences to produce verse-to-verse variety. In the following chapter, we will zoom out from the syntactical level of Gurian trio singing to consider how the formulas in “Me Rustveli” may be considered part of a genre-wide improvisational practice.
Chapter Four
Approaching Gurian Improvisation

Conceiving Improvisation

In the introduction to a collection of Gurian song transcriptions, Georgian musicologist David Shugliashvili writes that the ability to improvise and create variants (imp’rovizatsuloba and variant’uloba), while common in folk music, is a “special characteristic feature” of the music of Guria (2004:5). He goes on to say that, for the special case of the trio, “the performers of all three voices have an equal chance to embroider the fabric of the song according to their free will and ability” (ibid.).¹ When trying to define what sets Tristan and Guri Sikharulidze apart as singers, Anzor Erkomaishvili mentions, right at the beginning of his dual biography of the cousins, “their breathtaking ability at improvisation” (2013:11). Writing from an outside perspective, Siegfried Nadel, the early comparative musicologist, asserts the importance of improvisation for performers of k’rimanch’uli and modzakhili (1933:11).² In the only partial translation of Nadel’s text to appear in English, published in a collection of essays on Georgian polyphony (Tsurtsumia and Jordania 2009), the translator appears to modify Nadel’s statement about improvisation in

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¹ Shugliashvili’s text is published in Georgian with facing English translation.
² Nadel’s use of the terminology for voice parts is somewhat confused, though he appears to mean, by modzakhili, the middle voice part in a song that includes the k’rimanch’uli yodel, and which is comparable either to modzakhili or damts’qebi as I consistently apply these terms in discussing trio songs.
West Georgian (Gurian) singing, in order to apply it to the whole of Georgia. In my interviews with Gurian singers, I also encountered the word *imp'rovizatsia* with some frequency, especially when I asked what qualities were important for a Gurian singer to possess. Thus, whether applied to a genre or region as a whole, or to individual singers, it becomes clear that “improvisation” has a positive value in the discourse on Gurian singing.

But what is this improvisation? What are the markers of a singer’s “ability”? The limits to his “free will”? Invoking the “I-word,” as Robert Labaree remarks wryly, can invite more trouble than perhaps seems worth it: “In recent years, there is the growing sense among a much wider circle of observers … that the I-word obscures more about what musicians do and listeners experience than it illuminates” (2013:1). Two volumes co-edited by Bruno Nettl in the past twenty years (Nettl and Russell 1998; Solis and Nettl 2009) feature valiant efforts from a wide range of scholars to say something significant about improvisation while respecting the bewildering variety of worldwide musical practices which, at one time or another, have been dubbed “improvisational.” Though some writers in these volumes concern themselves with the mechanics or cognitive underpinnings of improvisation—

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3 Nadel (1933:11) reads thus: “Der bedeutende Anteil der persönlichen Interpretation und Improvisation zeigt sich überall, z.B. schon im Vergleich unserer Lieder mit anderen Fassungen (Arakišvili, Paliašvili …).” The translator renders this sentence as “Individual improvisation can be easily found almost everywhere in Georgia, including the transcriptions made by us and by Araqishvili and Paliashvili…” (Tsurtsumia and Jordania 2009:4). The translator has added “in Georgia” to “everywhere” (“überall”), changing a statement about how different transcriptions may display “personal interpretation,” into a statement about the broad distribution of improvisational practice. My thanks to Peter McMurray for assistance with the German.
Pressing (1998) will prove especially useful in our analysis below—several address questions of how to define improvisation in the first place, or whether what is happening should rightly be called improvisation (e.g., Sutton 1998).

Making a distinction between *improvisation* and *formulaic performance*, Turino (2009) cites the work of Judith Becker and R. Anderson Sutton on the music of Java before addressing certain “participatory” spheres of music that feature formulaic variation as a spontaneous musical practice. I do not wish to engage too much with Turino’s categories of *participatory* and *presentational* (see Turino 2008), except to note that, as encountered in my fieldwork and through the recordings considered in this chapter, Gurian trio singing exhibits many features characteristic of presentational music, for instance the recognition of individual skill or virtuosity and a clear distinction between performers and audience. At the same time, I would argue that the improvisational process in trio singing, like the participatory music analyzed by Turino, tends to be intensive, which is to say “within or subtly layered on top of the short repetitive forms,” rather than extensive, “expanding or altering the form itself” (Turino 2009:111). Certain aspects of form—particularly matters of phrase length and beat structure—are not available for expansion or alteration in Gurian trio songs, and in these features the songs show remarkable consistency over a hundred years of recorded testimony.

Turino identifies another key feature of formulaic improvisation, namely the interplay of stable underlying structure with variable surface realization: “In the formulaic approach, one’s collection of formulas, plus the basic model actually
constitute the piece, so that with time and a sizable repertoire of paradigmatic moves, the basic piece will vary substantially from one performance to the next” (2009:105). Turino’s chief examples come from the participatory music of Aymara panpipe ensembles in Peru, as well as North American old-time string band music meant to accompany dance. Both of these genres are much more open-ended in terms of structure, responsive to performance context (dancers, participants, etc.) to a different degree than trio singing. Nevertheless, for the most experienced Gurian trio singers, the same song may exhibit a similarly striking variability in performance.

Appealing to a similar sense of variability, Jordania (2000a:830) sums up Georgian music-making thus: “The guiding principle of Georgian aesthetics is the avoidance of repetition.” Taking appropriate issue with such a grand statement is well beyond the scope of the present work; nevertheless, some confirmation of this principle may be found in the words of Guri Sikharulidze, Tristan Sikharulidze’s cousin and a renowned trio singer. In an interview posted on YouTube, Guri and Tristan sit at an outdoor table with Merab Kalandadze, the third member of their trio called “Shalva Chemo.” Guri answers questions from an unseen interviewer:

In Gurian songs, you always have the right to improvise, in every situation. If you don’t have a real talent for improvisation, and you sing a Gurian song like a standard song (st'andart'ulad), it’s nothing. So, if you sing one part of a song, and then sing it a second time the same exact way, it’s not a Gurian song.4

4 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezeog6sQOqo. A different portion of this same interview is discussed in Chapter Three.
In the same interview, Guri laments the fact that foreigners—apparently a group that he saw perform on TV—are not properly learning these songs, that not only do they not sing properly (“they open their mouth too far”), but they appear to break this rule of his: for every verse of a trio song, each singer must sing something different.

Virginia Danielson, in her study of Umm Kulthūm, demonstrates how powerful such an idea of originality and non-repetition can be. “She never sang a line the same way twice” becomes a kind of leitmotiv in audience descriptions of Kulthūm’s singing (1998:146), and this phrase exerts a powerful influence on the discourse surrounding her, as a kind of explanation or justification for her listeners’ admiration. Whether or not this assertion holds up under the close scrutiny of audio recordings, Danielson suggests, is beside the point. Transcription and analysis may show that even a singer of Guri Sikharulidze’s stature repeats himself now and then, even in the same song. Nevertheless, in articulating non-repetition as a core principle of Gurian singing, Guri reinforces the prestige attached to improvisation and to the idea that a master singer will always have a “different variant” close at hand (or mind), ready to be inserted where needed.

In the remainder of this chapter, I build on Chapter Three’s analysis of “Me Rustveli,” in which phrase lengths and cadence notes help constitute an underlying structure. Bringing into play Tristan’s own conceptualization of the “frame” of a song, I address the legacy of oral formulaic theory in the Parry-Lord tradition, and argue for Gurian improvisation as a legitimate application of this theory to a musical, non-poetic context. Finally, by placing trio songs within the larger discursive network
of folklore performance, I demonstrate how improvisation, while generally ill-suited to the aesthetics of large ensemble presentation and antithetical to the dogma of folk creativity in the Soviet period, has become a token of independent Georgian identity.

The “Frame” of a Song

An important line of questioning in my 2016 interviews with Tristan involved a particular term, “frame” (*charcho*), which he introduced as a way of explaining both the teaching of a song, and a means of improvisation (25.vii.16). He initially said, “If someone sings a Gurian song the exact same way he learned it, he cannot be called a singer,” another appearance of the “avoidance of repetition” discourse (Jordania 2000a:830). Tristan went on to say that, while there is no “dogma” in the teaching, “there is a frame” (*charcho kho aris*). A singer is someone, then, who can “do whatever he wants inside the frame.” I pressed Tristan further, to get more clarity on this concept of “frame.” First I asked if it was dependent on the notes, by which I meant to ask whether certain pitches (cadences, specific intervals) provided the framework for the song. The Georgian word for “notes,” used by me—and Tristan’s grandson, Ila, who helped me with translation—was *not’ebi*, which has the added connotation of notation or sheet music. This prompted a quick response from Tristan: “The frame does not depend on notes. Nobody knew about notes at this time [i.e., the

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5 In Georgian, *guruli simghera visats akvs nasts’avlis zust’ad iset tu imgheri, imas momgherali ar tkvi*. 

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singers of earlier periods did not read music].” Ila, Tristan’s grandson, then ventured an explanation of his own, saying that the frame is the “simple version” of a song, such as a child or beginner might learn. After suggesting this to me, he checked with his grandfather, in rapid Georgian, and received a different answer. Tristan spoke for a while, then excused himself to make a phone call.

While we waited for him to return, Ila translated what Tristan had said. He explained that, when you learn a Gurian song, you learn only a little piece of it, and must “improve” upon it (here I believe the association between “improve” and “improvise” is intentional). The only limit to improvisation, then, is not to “go from”—that is, to go beyond or outside of—the “frame.” When a singer goes outside the frame, the song “breaks” or “disintegrates” (dashla is the word used by Tristan and Ila). When a song breaks, not even a great singer with a mastery of improvisation can “save it.” Tristan later added that each song has its own frame, and that these frames were consistent throughout Guria: apparent differences, from village to village, for example, were on account of “improvisation” (imp'rovizatsia). In a later interview, Tristan put it even more succinctly: “You can do anything, but don’t go outside the frame” (6.viii.16).

“Frame” as a term has not been explicitly theorized in Georgian music. Indeed, when I discussed the idea with Carl Linich, a Georgian-music expert, fluent

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6 He clarified that genres like the Christmas “Alilo” songs, and others like the wedding song called maqruli, will vary widely across different regions (Guria, Imereti, Samegrelo), even if they have the same text.
in the language and personally familiar with a wide range of teachers and scholars in Georgia, he said he couldn’t recall hearing the term used to describe song structure or improvisation, either from Tristan or others (pers. comm.). Improvisation in folk music, particularly its cognitive underpinnings, has not, to my knowledge, been treated systematically in Georgian musicology. Anzor Erkomaishvili makes some effort to determine what improvisation meant for singers of an earlier generation, presenting what he says are the views or sayings of his grandfather Artem:

The experienced singer could predict the final tone of each phrase, section, or the entire song, which each singer approached in his own way.

This is what Grandfather Artem meant when he said, “If you know where you’re going [the final tone of the song—A.E.], you will certainly be able to find a more beautiful way of getting there, bringing pleasure to you and your singing companions.” (Erkomaishvili 2005:28; brackets in original)

The editorial addition by Erkomaishvili, in which he glosses “knowing where you’re going” as “the final tone of the song,” illustrates an effort to map his grandfather’s language onto a recognizably music-theoretical discourse. It is important to remember that Anzor began the project of interviewing his grandfather and transcribing his repertoire while still a student at the Tbilisi Conservatoire (2005:23), and that the volume resulting from his transcriptions would be intended for those literate in Western staff notation. Tristan did not receive formal musical training, and moreover

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7 A friend of mine, who sings Georgian music in a trio with other Americans, did relate an anecdote in which, during a 2011 masterclass, Tristan pointed out moments in the American trio’s performance of “Chven Mshvidoba” where a note or phrase went outside the “frame,” according to Tristan’s translator. This is especially interesting to note, since the trio was apparently performing a version of “Chven Mshvidoba” learned from notation published by the Anchiskhati choir.
asserts that “you can’t teach Gurian songs from notes” (25.vii.16). Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to position his concept of “frame” as a solely indigenous theory, completely removed from scholarly or pedagogical discourse. Throughout his career, beginning as a child in the late 1940s, Tristan has been associated with official folklore ensembles—whether at the municipal, regional, or national level—and would have had ample opportunity to interact with professional folklorists and ethnomusicologists. Moreover, as a song teacher in Ozurgeti, Tristan would likely have had students with training in Western classical music, an important part of Soviet musical pedagogy (Olkhovsky 1975; Schwarz 1983; LaPasha 2004), and would have had even more once he became involved in singing camps and master classes with foreign visitors, starting in the 1990s. It very well may be that his use of “frame” to help explain song structure and improvisation arose through an interaction with professional musical culture, and in the pressures to explain or create analogies for students who were not raised in the tradition as he had been.⁸

Let us take at face value, for a moment, Erkomaishvili’s assertion about the “final tone of a song” (simgheris damaboloebeli bgera), and see if it can help us understand the frame concept as applied to improvisation. As we have seen in our analysis of “Me Rustveli,” the final tone—the cadence note—is indeed important, and the approach to that note activates a number of conventional techniques and genre constraints. Knowledge of cadence notes for particular songs (i.e., where they are in a

⁸ Marc Perlman (2000) convincingly shows how concepts of music theory may arise, in part, through analogies developed to meet pedagogical needs.
scale relative to other notes) and the ability to maintain these notes in one’s head or ear (depending on one’s choice of cognitive metaphor), are certainly indispensable for successful performance of Gurian songs, but such pitch knowledge is insufficient without rhythmic considerations. For some songs, for instance, the distance between cadences may vary, with uneven numbers of measures alternating with even (see above for “Chven Mshvidoba”). Rhythmic or metrical awareness, thus, must also factor into the singer’s conception of the frame.

Once again, the work done by Graham (2015) on Georgian liturgical chant offers the prospect of an analogous improvisational practice in a parallel domain. Chant melodies in the various liturgical modes had to be fitted to texts of varying lengths, necessitating the extension of syllables by means of melismas or inserted semi-vowels. Furthermore, of the three voice parts in chant, only the top voice’s music—the “model melody” pertaining to mode and liturgical office—appears to have been transmitted consistently, whereas the two lower voices would have improvised their parts, at times following the model melody in parallel motion (thirds and fifths below, for instance, or fifths and ninths, a uniquely Gurian flavor), or responding in conventional ways to upper-voice techniques like voice crossing (gadajvaredineba). As in trio songs, cadences are also treated with stereotyped movements, resolving either in an open fifth or a unison. All of this points to a conceptual model of music-making that includes improvisation within a variable beat structure, punctuated by cadence points. Graham describes an experiment he conducted with a group of college students, in which a model chant melody, with its
harmonization, could be learned initially as an abstract series of counted syllables, into which—once mastered—texts of various lengths could be inserted (2015:457-61). Though not at all suggesting that such an abstraction was in any way part of a chant singer’s training in the period of oral transmission, Graham uses this experiment to bolster his argument for how a chant student, in the pre-Soviet era, would have faced the daily task of singing unfamiliar liturgical texts of varying syllable counts, all while responding in the moment to the singing of his fellows on the other voice parts.

**Formulas in Perspective**

Many of the great Gurian trio singers of the early twentieth century went through some kind of chant training, whether at one of the monastery schools, or informally in a parish church. Through a process of explicit learning and the extrapolation of rules and procedures based on analogy and generalization, thousands of chant melodies could be learned not “as a series of discrete pitches, but rather as phrase-length melodic archetypes” (Graham 2015:452). The training and formation of a traditional singer—albeit in a completely different geographic and stylistic context—is also the subject of this famous passage by Albert B. Lord:

Even in pre-singing years rhythm and thought are one, and the singer's concept of the formula is shaped though not explicit. He is aware of the successive beats and the varying lengths of repeated thoughts, and these might be said to be his formulas. Basic patterns of meter, word boundary, melody
have become his possession, and in him the tradition begins to reproduce itself. (Lord [1960] 2000:32).

Lord’s emphasis on meter and phrase length, on beats counted unconsciously by the singer as he builds his song, invites parallels with the improvisational method I argue is present in trio songs. Anzor Erkomaishvili told me that he used to ask his grandfather, Artem, “how many beats in advance should you know where to finish a phrase?” Artem, reportedly, replied that great singers used to know where they were going “sixteen to twenty beats in advance” (30.viii.16).

I invoke Lord, and the oral-formulaic theory he adapted and developed from his teacher Milman Parry, with caution. The influence of Lord’s The Singer of Tales ([1960] 2000) was so profound in classical studies and the emergent field of oral literature that his methods and conclusions were frequently applied, in succeeding decades, to regions, genres, and time periods quite distant from his initial area of focus: early-twentieth-century Serbo-Croatian sung epic narrative verse (and, by retrospection, the ancient Greek poems attributed to Homer). Central to Lord’s work is the idea of the “formula,” defined by Parry as “a group of words which is regularly employed, under the same metrical conditions, to express a given essential idea” (Parry 1930:80). Fieldwork in the 1930s by Parry and Lord in then-Yugoslavia introduced them to epic singers, whose extemporaneous recombination and invention of short phrases to form ten-syllable verse lines was the key technique allowing them to weave together tales many thousands of lines long. Features of these performances that could be identified as “musical,” for instance the melodies sung by these bards, accompanying themselves on the gusle, do not figure prominently in Lord’s analysis.
(though several were transcribed by Béla Bartók). Nevertheless, several music scholars have made attempts to apply the technique of oral-formulaic theory, as it became to be called, to varying musical domains. Jeff Pressing sums up the situation in the late 1980s: “The application of Parry-Lord theory to musical improvisation is thus a clear contemporary trend. The limits of its validity and usefulness are still open questions, and are probably linked to whether a satisfactory agreement can be reached on the principles to be used to define musical ‘formulas’” (1988:147).

For vocal music, such as American blues singing (Barnie 1978; Evans 2007; Titon 1994; Taft 2006), the application of formulaic theory has the advantage, at least, of lyrical content that can be analyzed on prosodic terms similar to Lord’s. More trouble appears to arise when a Lordian concept of formula is extended to purely instrumental music. In his ethnomusicologically informed study of Gregorian chant, Peter Jeffery suggests that Lord’s concept of formula, based on the Parry definition, “is scarcely applicable to music at all” (1992:90), primarily because melodies are not the same as “groups of words,” nor do they unambiguously express ideas. Nevertheless, melodic formulas without lyrical content have been analyzed in the context of individual jazz artists (Gushee 1991; G. Smith 1983) and extemporaneous keyboard cadenzas and fantasias in an eighteenth-century style (Berkowitz 2010). Although the Parry-Lord definition continues to be policed in fine

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9 Ward (1985), in an *Ethnomusicology* review of a festschrift for Lord, argues for the primacy of music in oral epic, saying that scholars should “refer to singer-composers and not to poets,” and that “literary scholars and musicologists” should “join forces” in this research—a suggestion and call-to-arms largely left unanswered.
detail by music scholars objecting to each others’ perceived departures from orthodox
formulaic theory (Taft 2009; Evans 2010), it should be noted that the field
inaugurated by Lord has moved on somewhat in the decades since *The Singer of
Tales*, with noted scholar of Indo-European poetics Calvert Watkins (1995:16-17)
characterizing the Parry definition of formula as “outdated” more than twenty years
ago. As alternative definitions, Watkins offers Paul Kiparsky’s succinct “ready-made
surface structure,” as well as his own description of formulas as “set phrases which
are the vehicles of themes” (1995:9), which have a relationship with the theme akin to
surface and deep structure. The advantage of these alternative definitions lies, in part,
in the loosening of Parry’s requirements of the “same metrical structure” (Watkins
himself offers many examples of formulaic expression in ancient prose texts), and “a
group of words,” with the recognition that even a single word may exhibit an
“inherited tendency” to operate in various formulaic structures (Watkins 1995:18).
Nevertheless, any adaptation of the formulaic theory which posits a formula lacking
in lexical, semantic features (such as a saxophone lick, a chord progression, or a
melodic contour) risks ignoring the deep, semantic layer of the *theme*, Parry’s
“essential idea,” which, as one student of Lord’s put it, is “the key to all the other
levels of fixity in oral poetry—including both the formulaic and the metrical levels”
(Nagy 1990:25).¹⁰

¹⁰ In a moment of logocentric excess, Watkins wagers that “the totality of themes may be
thought of as the culture of [a] given society” (1995:9).
Although “Me Rustveli” is of course vocal music, my use of the term *formula* for the musical building-blocks of improvisation has perhaps more in common with prior applications to instrumental music, given that I do not address any underlying or overarching *themes* to which the formulas might refer—indeed, the words in the formulas have been identified as non-referential. My use of formula is thus closer to the one employed by Aaron Berkowitz, who defines formulas, for his purposes, as “musical materials equally useful for possible insertion into an improvisation and for transmission of fundamental aspects of the musical language in a distilled or simplified fashion” (2010:28). So far, we have not spent much time on the matter of “transmission of fundamental aspects of the musical language,” as, for instance, Treitler (1974) does in his Lord-influenced theory of the oral transmission of plainchant. A broader survey of Gurian folk music would attest to the ubiquity of the formulas in ex. 3.6, not merely in the trio song repertoire but throughout the other two categories of songs on Tristan’s handwritten song list: large ensemble (double-choir) songs as well as lyric *chonguri* songs. Thanks to the overlap of formulas, mastery of a song like “Me Rustveli” may allow a singer to learn new repertoire more easily, in the sense Tristan Sikharulidze meant when he said Gurian songs “resemble each other” (25.vii.16).

The short formulas distilled in Chapter Three may also be likened to the “musical-motor patterns and processes” which Berkowitz identifies as key to improvisation:
Improvisation demands not only instant access to musical-motor patterns and processes for varying them, but also the ability to combine those patterns. This combination is necessarily not only linearly (i.e., the stringing together of ideas in an improvisation), but also at a more "micro" level, combining and recombining smaller elements to form new musical entities. (2010:56).

The "micro level" is evident, for instance, in the ubiquity of the descending *dilavo* motive, which appears in most of the *spiral*ing formulas in example 3.6. The manipulation of this short motive, creating rhythmic displacement and syncopation, is a key feature of the *damts'qebi* part. As an extreme example of the power of this melodic motive to create "new musical entities," I have transcribed one entire Samgherisi A section from a performance of "Me Rustveli," sung by Garsevan Sikharulidze (no relation to Tristan and Guri), in a trio that includes the great *bani* Vladimer Berdzenishvili (ex. 4.1). Simply by looping the three-note *dilavo* figure without pause, Garsevan Sikharulidze creates a striking variation, taking up the entirety of the *intro* and *spiral*ing sections, before employing more typical *descending* and cadence formulas.11

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11 Recordings featuring Vladimer Berdzenishvili and frequent collaborators like Garsevan Sikharulidze and Mikheil Kiloshanidze are prized for their unusual variants and improvisational virtuosity. Berdzenishvili’s highly mobile *bani* singing was especially renowned, referred to by one of my interlocutors as having the ability to go “from the floor to the ceiling” (9.viii.16).
For Berkowitz, two terms drawn from the work of Jeff Pressing help to conceptualize the cognitive process of improvisation: referent and knowledge base. The referent is “a set of cognitive, perceptual, or emotional structures (constraints) that guide and aid in the production of musical materials” (Pressing 1998:52). In an earlier essay, Pressing gives a shorter definition of referent, as well: “an underlying formal scheme or guiding image specific to a given piece” (Pressing 1984:346). In the intervening years between the two definitions, Pressing appears to have opted for a more abstract formulation, swapping out the idea of a bounded musical “piece” for the more open “musical materials.” In any event, both definitions seem to fit well what Tristan Sikharulidze dubbed the “frame” of a song. This is the “formal scheme” which is held in the mind and to which the musician refers while improvising. It is akin, as Berkowitz notes, to Bruno Nettl’s “model” (1974:11). And what is the frame made out of? For “Me Rustveli,” it consists in the particular beat-structure that separates the cadence points, as well as subdivisions in that structure, such as the SPIRALING or DESCENDING sections, each of which seem to occur in precisely consistent durations.
One could also include, as Tristan Sikharulidze’s “model” for improvisation, the version of the song that he teaches students like me. Whether or not he ever performs “Me Rustveli” exactly this way, the pedagogical version may represent for him the conventional structure of the piece, available for both intensive variation (substituting a measure here or there) and extensive variation (replacing a whole passage, for instance with Variant One or Two).\(^\text{12}\) In addition to the frame of the song and any standardized versions in the singer’s mind, the referent should also be understood to include those constraints that more fundamentally define the trio genre. These constraints include the required number of singers, pitch ranges, and scale-interval properties, as well as matters related to performance context, such as the relative experience of singers and their acquaintance with each other, as well as the familiar or unfamiliar nature of the surroundings. All of these constrain and channel the musical event in such a way to maximize the processing efficiency of the performer, granting him or her an articulated schema upon or into which improvisation may be realized.

The *knowledge base*, on the other hand, is a “cauldron of devices,” which includes “musical materials and excerpts, repertoire, subskills, perceptual strategies, problem-solving routines, hierarchical memory structures and schemas, generalized motor programs, and more” (Pressing 1998:53). Again, Nettl has anticipated this concept, albeit with less specificity and explanatory power, in his notion of “building-blocks” (1974:13). The knowledge base is the home of formulas, along with some of

\(^{12}\) Description of these variants appears in Chapter Four.
the maneuvers I have identified in “Me Rustveli,” such as voice crossing and the problem-solving leaps taken by Polikarpe Khubulava to preserve proper cadence formulas. The flowchart of formulas I presented in example 3.6 should not be considered, however, as a depersonalized databank, with the master trio singer likened to a computer algorithm, plugging in different musical strings to fit the appropriate environment. Rather, as Pressing notes, the knowledge base “encodes the history of compositional choices and predilections defining an individual’s personal style” (1998:54).

The Gurian trio song, I argue, represents a remarkably rich system of formulas, which undergo complex, if predictable combinatory transformations in order to create spontaneous performance. Having established some of the parameters of the art and technique of an improvising Gurian trio singer, we will see in the next section what exactly is at stake when this improvisational practice becomes embedded in folkloristic performance, both in Soviet and in Georgian nationalist contexts.

**Improvisation in Soviet Musical Folklore**

“For ages, musicians have thought that improvisation was on the way out.” So writes Bruno Nettl (2009:x), making reference to the loss of improvisational practice in Western classical music since at least the nineteenth century, and no doubt voicing the concerns of preservationists the world over, who identify, among the most
pervasive and pernicious changes wrought by modernity, an inexorable shift in
musical performance toward the scripted, rigid, or through-composed, and away from
the spontaneous, lively, flexible, or unplanned—in a word, the loss of
improvisation. Even if there is something of a Chicken Little situation at play (the
sky may not really be falling, as it were), several authors have carefully documented
the suppression and transformation of improvisational music in the context of state-
controlled folklore in the former Soviet Union and allied socialist states of Eastern
Europe. Describing the large ensembles performing the classical *shash maqâm*
repertoire of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Theodore Levin coined the phrase “frozen
music” (1996a:45). Although *shash maqâm*, as Levin explains, was already a
somewhat fixed repertoire by the time the Soviet folk ensembles were formed, the
process by which certain variants of pieces were chosen as canon—to be notated and
reproduced exactly—was directly in line with one of the ideological goals of Soviet
nationalities policy: the consolidation of a “national consciousness” (49).

It would be a mistake to try to define a monolithic “Soviet attitude” toward
improvisation, given a time frame of seven decades, changing ideological currents
over that time, and the vagaries of local application of cultural policy. Furthermore,
the different musical cultures encountered by the Soviet authorities—and absorbed to
varying degrees in folklore ensembles—did not necessarily have a local conception of
improvisation or variation. Nevertheless, some indication of the regime’s opposition

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13 Some pages later, Nettl acknowledges that only in the study of jazz have analytical
procedures been developed for exploring the creative process in improvisational music
may be gleaned in Christina Jaremko’s (1983) description of new folk-song groups in Latvia, which, beginning in the late 1970s, attempted to counter an “official” understanding of folklore with a more “private” one, centered around the notion of maintaining a “constant climate of improvisation” (1983:62). In Bulgaria, a village tradition of dance music based on instrumental improvisation—the stringing together of melodic formulas to accompany dances of indeterminate length—was transformed in the post-WWII period into a repertoire of fixed, arranged dance suites to be performed by folk orchestras modeled on Soviet ensembles (Rice 1994:106-9). Rice explains that this arranged music functioned “as an icon of the Communists’ passion for command and control, a value transposed from the village patriarchal family on to the national level” (184).

The emphasis on “control” in opposition to improvisation may also be observed closer to Georgia, as a recent study of music in twentieth-century Azerbaijan proposes a general Soviet goal of “gaining control over oral forms of music, particularly those based on improvisation” (Huseynova 2016:54). Huseynova theorizes thus: “Improvisation, an activity reflecting and stimulating spiritual freedom, always has frightened totalitarian regimes” (ibid.). The notation of *mugham*, the vocal genre of Azerbaijan that traditionally includes sections of vocal and instrumental improvisation, is cited as one such manifestation of control, along with the creation of “mugham operas,” and the institutionalization of musical education on
a Western, fixed-score basis.\textsuperscript{14} In Georgia’s other neighbor in the South Caucasus, Armenia, the establishment of Soviet folk ensembles is also linked to a “suppression of the improvisatory instinct” (Nercessian 2000:84). Orchestras made up of traditional folk instruments, which were established in many of the Soviet republics, were prime sites for the modification of instruments on the basis of European classical models (Slobin 1971), and for the development of a “conductor/arranger culture” (Nercessian 2004:159), based on the top-down hierarchy of Western symphony orchestras. While there were orchestras of folk instruments in Georgia, with such oddities as five ch'uniri (a horsehair fiddle from Svaneti) playing in unison and an oversized panduri (the short-necked lute from eastern Georgia) plucking bass lines, the most prominent folk ensembles in Georgia emphasized the vocal side of their musical heritage through choral performance.

Choral music was an especially powerful symbol and tool for the creation of Soviet ideology. As early as 1918, Boris Krasin, speaking at the “First All-Russian Conference of the Organizations of Proletarian Cultural Enlightenment,” cited choral singing as “the best and shortest path” toward the goal of reviving folk song, defined in turn as “the mighty collective creative work that capitalism tried to take away from the people, and which should, by right, be restored to its creators” (Krasin 2012:16). The Piatnitskii choir, which was founded in 1911—that is, before the Russian

\textsuperscript{14} Inna Naroditskaya offers a profile of mugham that suggests many points of contact with the Gurian trio song tradition: “Mugham is characterized by the interplay of formulae and improvisation, a dichotomy between poetry and music, the combination of artistic individuality and tradition, performance and perception” (2002:45).
Revolution—was often held up as a model of such a collective expression of “folk creativity.”\textsuperscript{15} Initially made up of peasants with no formal musical training, the choir underwent a transformation in the mid-1930s, performing newly composed pieces with texts on Soviet themes, with other significant changes in practice. In 1935, for example, the members of the large choir were assigned to different voice parts, which had not been done previously, while, by 1938, “the right to improvise harmonies, previously a hallmark of the choir’s peasant-style performance, was limited to a few designated singers” (S. Smith 2002:421). This transformation, which Smith places within the aesthetic movement of socialist realism, emphasized, in terms made visible on the concert stage, the sublimation of the individual into the collective, in a period when such collectivization was a brutally concrete reality for agricultural workers throughout the Soviet republics, including Georgia.

Even so, the shift in cultural policy during the 1930s did not translate into the complete rejection of individual creativity. As Dana Howell writes for the field of Soviet folklore studies, an emphasis on celebrating individual storytellers and singers for their “capacity for improvisation and innovation, rather than upon traditionality or collectivity of the artistic compositions,” was maintained, albeit in modified form:

In this way [i.e., by analyzing the work of individual performers], focus upon individuality of creation in popular traditional work was retained in folkloristic work. At the same time, the notion of the collectivity, of the “popular” aspect of oral traditions, was being reasserted. This was asserted, however, not so much through the individual performers but rather through

\textsuperscript{15} The Piatnitskii choir, by the 1940s an official state ensemble, in turn inspired the creation of the famous Philip Kutev ensemble in Bulgaria, where they had toured in 1949 (Buchanan 1995:388).
the development of the ideologically-centered definition of cultural productions, including the folkloric. (Howell 1992:396)

Similarly, the Georgian ethnographer Vano Shilakadze, while devoting many pages to individual “guardians” (moamageni) of Georgian folk song, including master singers and members of the nobility who acted as patrons or protectors, he is also careful to assert that

It would be wrong for us to think that the preservation of folk song owes only to famous singers, and not to consider the role of the masses [masebi] in this matter. On the contrary, the true protectors of folk song have always been the hard-working people, the masses. (1961:10)

Famous singers, in turn, “emerge from the bosom of the people” (11), “greedily” absorbing the musical materials that have been made available to them through the creativity of the people at large. The musicologist Victor Belaiev (1933), writing in the period just before the strong consolidation of the “folklore of Stalin,” goes so far as to propose an origin for Georgian polyphony (at least in some manifestations) in the separation of two solo singers from a choral mass singing in unison, and their subsequent antiphonal competition. Such dialectical tension between individual performers and a depersonalized “folk creativity” characterizes musicological and folklore studies throughout the Soviet era.

The transformation of Georgian folk singing into massed choral performance, however, did not originate with the Soviet regime. Rather, the establishment of large choirs singing “traditional” Georgian songs began with the “Kartuli Khoro” (Georgian Choir), an ensemble founded by Lado Aghniashvili, whose first performance took place in 1886 (Shilakadze 1961:8). The activities of this choir
should be understood in the larger context of the Georgian nationalist movement of the late nineteenth century, championed by the writer Ilia Chavchavadze (Suny 1994:133), and in the application of Herderian concepts of Volkslied as representative of a nation’s individual character and striving for unity. The choir, though established in Tbilisi, embarked on several tours through various regions of Georgia. The effects of these tours were manifold. The group’s emphasis on material from the Kartl-Kakhetian (East Georgian) tradition helped magnify these songs’ popularity, even in the western part of the country, where, according to Shilakadze (1961:12), they helped to displace Imeretian and Gurian folk songs. The choir’s concert presentation was certainly influenced by the example of opera and classical singing in Tbilisi (the choirmaster, indeed, was a Czech conductor named Josef Navrátil), and appears to have included adding singers to each voice part, which traditionally would have been sung solo, and replacing Georgian intonation with equal-tempered thirds (Arakishvili 1925:45, quoted in Shilakadze 1961:9). In the years after the appearance of the Kartuli Khoro, “singing groups sprouted like mushrooms throughout Georgia” (Shilakadze 1961:10), including many whose performances captured on gramophone or wax cylinder would form the earliest records of folk performance.16

State ensembles in the Soviet era continued the trend toward the spectacular, massive, and Western, in terms of ensemble balance—multiple singers, for example, on upper voice parts—and tuning, including the introduction of equal temperament,

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16 Kuzmich (2010) contends that these ensembles reflect the continuity of older village traditions, and not the influence of the Kartuli Khoro, though documentary evidence of the existence of organized performing groups prior to the 1880s is scanty.
assisted by the creation of modified instruments like the chromatically-tuned *panduri* (Bithell 2014a:579). Nevertheless, throughout the history of these ensembles, trio songs appear to have avoided some of these modifications, particularly the addition of singers on the vocal lines. I have yet to discover, in my examination of commercial or field recordings of Georgian folk ensembles, any performances of trio songs with more than one singer to a part. Indeed, Gurian trio songs on the whole are not well-represented on Melodiya LP releases prior to 1990 (except for cases like the Elesa choir, led by Anzor Erkomaishvili’s great-uncle Vladimer until his death in 1982, which exclusively performed Gurian folk song). When a trio song does appear on albums offering a survey of music from different regions, almost invariably it is “Chven Mshvidoba,” perhaps the most famous trio song, which appears. Resistant to rearrangement for large choirs, perhaps because of intricacy of the vocal lines or the indeterminacy of possible variants, the trio song remained a site for individual improvisation, even as other Gurian songs which feature many of the same melodic formulas and structures of counterpoint, like the two-choir “Khasanbegura,” were presented in enlarged arrangements.¹⁷

Thus, within the context of Soviet folk ensemble performance, the trio song seems to have retained an individual, improvisational character, as a rare bracketing

¹⁷ By invoking trio songs’ “resistance” to processes of reification for the concert stage, I do not intend a facile equation with a political stance or identity, a peril identified by Gavin Steingo (2016:8) as endemic in the critical attempt to “unearth a hidden political project or impulse beneath the words and practices” of musicians. It should also be noted that nearly all of the trio singers whose recordings are examined in this chapter were salaried members of organized folk ensembles—there was no place for professional trio singing outside of such groups.
of virtuosity within the ideological celebration of collective creativity. Nercessian observes a similar survival in Armenia, where, despite the overall acknowledgement that the folk ensemble approach has deprived the songs of the “seminal” element of improvisation, “when one player is given the opportunity to demonstrate his technique at certain points in the piece, improvisation is still occasionally allowed in folk ensemble performances” (2004:158). There was a clear historical connection, in Guria, between folk singing and church chanting—the common term was mgalobel-momgherali (chanter-singer), and many singers recorded by the Gramophone Company in 1902-1914 were well-known as chanters, some of them having been trained in the Shemokmedi Monastery style of Anton Dumbadze and Melkisedek Nakashidze (Graham 2015).\footnote{One of my interlocutors, Jemal Nakashidze, is a descendent of Melkisedek (9.viii.16).} Even so, the condemnation of religious music by the Soviet authorities spared the trio songs, which, despite the élite, almost priestly ability required to sing them, proved slippery enough to evade censure and simplification.
Chapter Five
Blackbirds in the Archive:
Recording Technology and Genealogies of Voice

Recording Technology and Ethnomusicology

The seminal influence of early audio recording technology on what would become ethnomusicology has often been noted by scholars, with Charles Keil asserting that

Recordings may have been the single most important factor in getting the discipline of ethnomusicology started; freezing musical processes from the oral-aural traditions as objects of study was a precondition and remains an essential, if largely taken for granted, frame of reference. (1994:247)

The ability to capture musical performance by means of a wax-cylinder phonograph or disc-writing gramophone—as opposed to the time-intensive technique of written transcription—provided a broad array of tools and methodologies for the comparative musicologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As noted in Chapter One, early writing on Georgian folk music was directly tied to examples of the nascent technology, whether wax cylinders recorded in the field by Dimitri Arakishvili or those made in prisoner-of-war camps by Georg Schünemann and others. In this chapter, we will focus primarily on recordings of Gurian songs made in Georgia by the Gramophone Company between 1902 and 1914, which were re-released—first on LP, later on CD—beginning in the 1980s. As the main force behind these releases, Anzor Erkomaishvili has shaped, in large part, the reception and
understanding of these audio artifacts. Producing archival records, however, is only one of the many strategies of inscription employed by Anzor Erkomaishvili as a mediator or guardian of Georgian musical memory. Books, television programs, folklore festivals, and gatherings of international scholars, under Anzor’s aegis, have all helped to establish a coherent identity for Georgian folk music in national and international contexts. Nevertheless, far from merely asserting Anzor’s hegemony in the public sphere, I argue in this chapter that the re-emergence of the early recordings and the application of archival knowledge have the potential to subvert genealogies of performance. The history and present-day practice of recorded music in Georgian folk music represent what Ana María Ochoa Gautier (2014:23) has termed an “acoustic assemblage,” which she defines, in part, as the “mutually constitutive and transformative relation” generated between listening entities and the entities that produce sound. The key for this study is the blurring of boundaries between transmission via human entities or technological ones, and the notion that the production of sound is always dependent on historically contingent listening practices.

While in later periods, the distinction between recordings made in the field and recordings commercially released by record companies became important, particularly for music scholars, “during the phonograph era, the recording activity of early ethnomusicologists could not be easily differentiated from that of the commercial record industry by either the technologies used or by musical content” (Shelemay 1991:280). Shelemay goes on to suggest that the travels of Frederick W.
Gaisberg in 1901 to make recordings in India for the Gramophone Company of London (discussed in Gronow 1981), could just as well be considered pioneering field trips, in the mode of a musical ethnographer. Gaisberg’s career intersects with the story of Georgian recordings in several interesting ways. Nearly as consequential as his trip to India was his recording of prominent opera singers in St. Petersburg and Moscow, particularly Fyodor Shaliapin. His further journeys through the Russian Empire brought him through the Caucasus region, and, according to Anzor Erkomaishvili (2007b:9), he produced a recording of Ia Kargareteli’s choir in Tbilisi in 1902. The recordings of Gurian folk music—trio songs and other material—were made in subsequent years by recording engineers who were Gaisberg’s close collaborators, among them Franz Hampe (1903, 1909), Max Hampe (1907), and Edmund Pearse (1910-1914).

The human voices incorporated in the gramophone records of Gurian folk song offer rich material for analysis, as demonstrated by their increased prominence in the work of Georgian music scholars seeking to understand changes in musical practice over time. In what follows, however, I will not limit myself to musicological analysis, which, since the days of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv, has employed sound recordings primarily in order to discern abstracted musical features: notes, rhythms, tuning systems, unusual song forms, and so on. Rather, by attending to the noise of the archive—what media theorist Wolfgang Ernst Ernst terms the “index [of]...

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1 His recordings of Enrico Caruso made the Italian singer’s voice perhaps the most famous in the world.
the physically real within and outside the recorded voice” (2013:64)—I hope to demonstrate how accidents, inconsistencies, and technical limitations, captured in the moment of recording, become part of the embodied practice of Georgian folk singers today. If the analysis of “Me Rustveli” in Chapters Three and Four introduced the possibility of tracing an improvisational tradition across a broad expanse of time—in part through the use of archival recordings—the archival voices at play in this chapter portend the possibility of historical rupture as much as continuity.

The Gramophone in the Pre-Revolutionary Caucasus

In the early years of the twentieth century, the Russian Empire was a growing market for new record companies. Among the first to set up in Russia was the Gramophone Company of London, which had licensed the patent for Emile Berliner’s invention in 1898 (Jones 1985). In the words of Frederick Gaisberg, Russia was “that El Dorado of traders” (1942:26), and for the Gramophone Company the economic promise of the Russian market was no myth. By the outbreak of the first World War, twenty-two per cent of the company’s business came from Russia, an income stream that was promptly interrupted by the conflict, as were joint ventures in Germany and Austria-Hungary (Jones 1985:89). Until 1914, the branch office in Tiflis, then-capital of Russia’s Caucasus Viceroyalty, was responsible for recordings from a wide range of ethnic and linguistic groups in the North and South Caucasus: Georgian, Armenian, Ossetian, Azerbaijani, Chechen, Cherkess, among others. Music from
Central Asia and Iran was also handled by the Tiflis office (Gronow 1981). Approximately 170 of these records were devoted to Georgian folk music in the polyphonic vocal tradition (Erkomaishvili and Rodonaia 2006), including Gigo Erkomaishvili’s choir. There were no recordings made between 1903 and 1907, perhaps owing to social unrest stemming from the 1905 revolution (Erkomaishvili 2007b).

Exact sales numbers are difficult to ascertain, though anecdotes persist about the importance of gramophone records on the outskirts of Russia. As one early engineer put it in an article for *The Talking Machine World*:

> In the Caucasus mountains the talker can be heard in every one of the multitudinous villages; the records are played unceasingly and are therefore soon worn out, causing a result which is not particularly pleasing to other than the Cossacks themselves who will never buy another record of the same title until one is actually broken. Even then they retain the pieces and in some cases decorate their huts with them. (Noble 1913: 64-65)

T. J. Noble, the recording engineer quoted here, inadvertently hits on an important feature of listening in these pre-radio, pre-mass-media days, namely its *intensive* quality. As Gitelman points out (2008:63), the tendency in media history has been to emphasize the *extensive* nature of media consumption—the availability of a wide range of material from disparate sources, the creation of hybrid genres thanks to the elision of geographical or cultural difference made possible by the circulation of media products. Intensive practices, on the other hand, such as reading and rereading the same book (the Bible, for instance), or listening to the same record until it literally wears out, represent a mode of media engagement which continued to be common even after the consolidation of a record industry and the modernizing influence of
international capitalism. Anzor Erkomaishvili, who was born in 1940, explained to me that, in the days before radio came to Makvaneti, the village in Guria where he grew up, “every single family in town” possessed gramophone records, and if they didn’t own a gramophone themselves (or a “Pathéphone,” the version manufactured by the French Pathé company), they would go listen at the home of someone who did (30.viii.16).

Anzor’s account is, of course, from several decades after the release of the original Gramophone Company records, and it would be difficult to project backward to determine the social status of records in pre-Revolutionary Georgia. Nevertheless, Anna Fishzon’s (2011) study of recordings of opera singers in Russia in the early twentieth century may offer contextual clues. She makes the point that

Russian record manufacturers sold the notion that consumers acquired sophistication and status through the purchase of native ‘greatness’—the experience of beautiful voices and exemplary personalities in their own language. But important too was the idea that the gramophone owner was a citizen of the world, so to speak, bringing the talent of European opera houses into his drawing room. (2011:807)

The idea of “native greatness” could certainly apply to the status of recordings of Georgian folk choirs, a notion especially in line with the promotion of folk music by writers in the Georgian nationalist movement (Suny 1994:133). Also in the catalog of the Gramophone Company were recordings of operatic and light classical repertoire, as sung by prominent singers like Ia Kargareteli and Vano Sarajishvili (Erkomaishvili 2007b:71), the latter of whom is the namesake of the Tbilisi State Conservatoire, attesting to the variety of musical genres available to the Georgian consumer.
Acquiring gramophone records in these early years of the medium would no doubt have been a means of asserting social status and accumulating cultural capital. Beyond that, however, Fishzon, drawing on the work of Theodor Adorno, argues for the sounds of “excess”—understood not only as excess of emotion, as in Shaliapin’s bravura performances, but also as the incidental noises and imperfections of a gramophone record or wax cylinder—as an index of humanness or authenticity, akin to the “warmth” of vinyl records’ sound attested by enthusiasts. Moreover, the social mood of pre-Revolutionary Russia made the matter of authenticity especially urgent:

Authenticity, after all, is a moral as well as an aesthetic category. The revolutions of 1905 and 1917 constituted an unstable epistemological moment in which long-held views about ethics, selfhood, and knowledge were violently challenged, and operatic utterances, on record and in everyday life, at once performed this moment and transcended it, fixing once again morality, truth, and meaning. (Fishzon 2011:818)

We may not be able to rediscover the listening practices of earlier generations, yet when we listen to old recordings—however much they have been cleaned up with digital software, attempting to separate the signal from the noise—we are still hearing the materiality of the medium in its scratches, wavering pitch, and limited frequency bandwidth. This materiality is what allows a “Cossack” peasant to incorporate broken pieces of shellac, shiny and durable, into his home. Even after the records have ceased to be functional—dead media that no longer operate—they still have a phenomenological “voice,” they still speak to the owner and engage the auditory imagination (Ihde 2007:49-51), even if the message contained in that voice is not identical to the one intended by the record’s creator.
Gurian Recordings, 1907-1914

Recordings for the Gramophone company were done initially at the Hotel “Oriental” in Tiflis (Gaisberg 1942:75), and a permanent Gramophone Company office was soon established at the same location on Tbilisi’s main street (figs. 5.1-2). According to Anzor Erkomaishvili, who reprints the text of several Gramophone Company catalogs in his book (2007b), the 1902 catalog from the Tiflis office includes recordings of duduk and zurna players, as well as popular songs and “urban folklore”—the term for nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century choral songs influenced by European harmony —performed by Ia Kargareteli’s choir (2007b:65). In the 1904 catalog, a choir from Tbilisi led by Apolon Tsamtsishvili makes its appearance, singing folk songs in the Kartl-Kakhetian (East Georgian) style, as well as some urban songs. Only in 1907, apparently, was a group from Guria recorded for the company. This was the choir from Makvaneti—the village outside Ozurgeti where Tristan Sikharulidze lives today—whose leader was Gigo Erkomaishvili, great-
grandfather of Anzor Erkomaishvili. In Anzor’s telling, a friend of Gigo’s named Vasil Salukvadze, from the nearby village of Likhauri, encouraged Gigo to bring his choir to Tbilisi to make a record, and appears to have bankrolled the recording sessions (30.viii.16). In all, Gigo Erkomaishvili’s choir recorded forty-nine songs for the Gramophone Company, including such cornerstones of the trio song repertoire as “Chven Mshvidoba,” “Adila,” “Madlobeli,” “P’at’ara Saqvarelo,” and “Piruzi.”

Two more Gurian ensembles were recorded before the outbreak of the First World War: a group led by Samuel Chavleishvili, recorded in Kutaisi in 1909, and the Khukhunaishvili family ensemble, recorded in 1914.

Of the ninety-nine surviving Gramophone Company recordings of Georgian folk singing, compiled by Anzor Erkomaishvili as a four-CD set in 2006, forty-four belong to these three Gurian groups. Thus, despite Guria’s comparatively small population, its traditional music represents nearly half of the archival record of Georgian traditional music from this early period. In his annotated catalog of early Georgian recordings, Anzor Erkomaishvili laments the fact that groups from other regions of Georgia—Samegrelo, Svaneti, Racha, or the eastern mountain regions, for instance—were not recorded by the Gramophone Company, despite there being

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2 The trios performing these songs were made up of various singers from Gigo Erkomaishvili’s group, including his son Artem Erkomaishvili (Anzor’s grandfather), Ermile Molarishvili, Ivliane Kechaqmadze, and Giorgi Iobishvili.

3 Space does not permit a consideration of the recordings by Samuel Chavleishvili’s group and the Khukhunaishvilis, all of which are held in high esteem by present-day singers. Tristan Sikharulidze asserted that Chavleishvili’s recording of “Chven Mshvidoba” is “the best. No one can stand next to him” (6.viii.16). Ensemble Adilei, a new group founded in 2012, whose concerts I helped produce in 2016, features singers descended from both the Chavleishvili and Khukhunaishvili families.
several noteworthy choirs, like Dzuku Lolua’s from Samegrelo, who were active at the time (Erkomaishvili 2007b:77). Whether or not this geographical and stylistic imbalance would have been rectified in subsequent years, had the World War not intervened, is of course impossible to know. As it happened, the Russian record industry, which had averaged annual sales of nearly fifteen million records after 1910 (Gronow and Saunio 1998:19), was decimated by the war and the subsequent Bolshevik revolution in 1917.

Although the operations of the various Russian record companies were nationalized following the revolution, economic turmoil in the 1920s and the impact of collectivization policies effectively halted production for two decades, during which time, the industry had “to make do mainly with pressing reissues of old recordings by Shalyapin and his ilk,” with total production in 1926 only 900,000 discs (Gronow and Saunio 1998:127). Georgian folk songs begin to reappear in Soviet catalogs in 1935, with records by Kirile Pachkoria, who specialized in Mingrelian songs, and, for Gurian songs, the folk choir led by Varlam Simonishvili, who had sung bani with Samuel Chavleishvili in 1909. Until the mid-1980s, however, the voices of Samuel Chavleishvili, Gigo Erkomaishvili, and others, would remain out of circulation, present only on original copies of the Gramophone Company releases, held in private home collections or in silent archives.

4 Precise discographical data for early Soviet records can be difficult to obtain. Bennett (1981) limits his discography to recordings of Western classical music released by Melodiya, the label which consolidated all Soviet recording activity in 1964. A comprehensive online catalog is maintained at http://records.su, including disc numbers and dates, though the names of Georgian performers are often Russianized or mis-transliterated.
The Recordings Re-circulate

In a published memoir, Anzor Erkomaishvili (2006:12) describes his experience, at age five, visiting his great-grandfather Gigo Erkomaishvili, who was then over a hundred years old. On the same occasion, young Anzor saw and heard a gramophone for the first time. The brown box of the gramophone seems to have a mysterious, talismanic quality, and the small child initially believes there must be a demon or tiny person inside the box producing the sound. Indeed, that same gramophone is still in Anzor’s possession, a centerpiece of his private archive on the top floor of his apartment in Tbilisi. When I visited him in 2016, he used it to play one of the original Gramophone Company records for me: “Guruli Satsek’vari” (Gurian Dance Song), sung by Gigo Erkomaishvili’s choir. By the time of our meeting, Anzor had already spent the better part of fifty years searching for and promoting the oldest recordings of Georgian folk song, yet he seemed happy to re-tell the story of that search, and to recreate for me the experience of listening to the music on coeval technology.5

In an essay first published in 1980, later translated as “Tracing Old Phonorecords” (in Erkomaishvili 2007b), Anzor describes his search for old recordings of Georgian music, an odyssey through the bewildering maze of Soviet

5 Ernst (2015:100) deftly connects the Benjaminian “aura” of unique aesthetic phenomena with the “aural” experience of phonographic sound, which is simultaneously ahistorical, in its time-invariant reproducibility, yet also, being sound, transient.
bureaucracy, with stops at archives in Leningrad, Kiev, Riga, and Krasnogorsk, before finally hitting the jackpot, as it were, at the Moscow Central Phono Archives. There he found matrices of many of the Gramophone Company recordings, copper or brass discs analogous to a photonegative, from which new nickel discs could be pressed and played back. By cross-checking with the published catalogs—or, in some cases, by recognizing the song on an unlabeled matrix as one he had a copy of at home—Anzor was able to identify the majority of the discs he found. As founder and director of the internationally-known Rustavi Ensemble, Anzor had a working relationship with Melodiya, the state-controlled record company, and he was able to use this connection to fund the restoration of the matrices, the pressing of new discs, and their conversion to tape. In the late 1980s, his work began to appear on LP, with several single-disc Melodiya releases dedicated to specific masters from the past (including recordings from the 1930s and later), as well as a five-LP set specifically devoted to the Gramophone Company records (Ziegler 1989).6

Still on the lookout for records which were listed in the Gramophone Company catalogs yet had not turned up in Moscow, Anzor became aware of the possibility that Georgian records may have been stored in London, headquarters of the Gramophone Company.7 With assistance from Alan Lomax, the influential

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6 The single-disc series was called Arkhivnye zapisy (Archival recordings) in Russian, and Unikaluri chahats`erebi (Unique recordings) in Georgian.

7 This tip apparently came in the course of collaborating with the director Soso Chkhaidze on the unfinished film Shvidk`atsa (Song for Seven Men), another example, as mentioned in the Introduction, of the intersection of Anzor`s work with that of prominent Georgian filmmakers.
scholar and record producer, and ethnomusicologist Theodore Levin, Anzor found his way to the British Institute of Recorded Sound (today the Sound Archive of the British Library) in 1991 (Erkomaishvili 2007b:60). There Erkomaishvili discovered complete record catalogues from the Tiflis office beginning in 1902, with detailed, if occasionally erroneous, information about performers, along with discs in good condition representing many songs not found in any other archives.

In the years following the London discovery, the break-up of the Soviet Union, constitutional crises, separatist conflicts, and regional ethnic tension, all contributed to a period of intense political and economic instability in Georgia. It is perhaps not surprising that a plan to release all the restored recordings on CD stalled out sometime in the 1990s. According to Carl Linich, who helped produce the CD release, the records had been transferred to DAT tapes yet were “sitting in a box on a shelf in [Ted Levin’s] office” (pers. comm.). At Levin’s prompting, Linich took on the task of “doing something,” as he says, with the recordings. Having journeyed from Tbilisi to Moscow, London, and now Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, the voices of singers long-departed were now entrusted to an American who, working with Erkomaishvili, ushered them into a new, digital currency. Making

8 It was thanks to Lomax’s suggestion that the Kakhetian table song “Chak’rulo” was included on the famous Golden Record that accompanied the Voyager spacecraft in 1977 (http://www.culturalequity.org/features/Voyager/). This song’s interstellar journey is a source of great pride for Georgians, and appears frequently in general discussions of Georgian music.

9 In London, Anzor also became aware, via archive curator Lucy Durán, of an abortive attempt from the early 1980s to restore the Georgian recordings, with a prospectus written by Pekka Gronow, a Finnish ethnomusicologist who has specialized in the history of the recording industry (Erkomaishvili 2007b:61).
a selection of twenty-five songs, Linich put together *Drinking Horns & Gramophones*, a CD released by Traditional Crossroads in 2001. The relative success of this record, in Linich’s terms, led to a further collaboration with Erkomaishvili, who wanted to make an anthology of all extant recordings, accompanied by a text useful for either scholars or the general public. The result, a coffee table-style book in Georgian and English, with notes and translations for each song and a handsomely-illustrated if minimally-referenced overview of Georgian history and culture, was released in 2006, with funding assistance from the United States Ambassador’s Fund for Cultural Preservation (Erkomaishvili and Rodonaia 2006).

Erkomaishvili and Linich were helped in this work by a contingency of global culture policy: the 2001 proclamation (and later inscription) of Georgian polyphonic singing on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. As Caroline Bithell points out, “UNESCO recognition prompted a surge of reviveralist activity, including the preparation of new publications, audiovisual materials, and websites” (2013:581). The historical recordings project played directly into a global preservation narrative, with elements of repatriation, transnational collaboration, and post-imperialist identity politics. With increased government funding for traditional arts and Mikheil Saakashvili’s pro-West administration in power after 2003, there was a healthy market for products—books, CDs, concert tours—which would promote national pride at home while raising the cultural status of Georgia in the wider world.
Keeper of the Archive

Jacques Derrida (1996:1) reminds us of the dual principles at work in the Greek word *arkhē*, at the root of “archive.” *Arkhē* relates both to “beginning,” or “origin,” in a historical or mythological sense, as in “archaic” or “archaeological,” as well as “rule,” as we still have in “patriarchy” or “hierarchy.” In the latter case, the *arkheion* was the house of the rulers of Athens, the *arkhons*, where important documents were housed, an official archive. The “archontic dimension” (22) of the archive, then, relates to the fact that there is always a person or group with a privileged relation to the messages contained in those documents. Anzor Erkomaishvili clearly embodies this principle, as the primary disseminator and interpreter of these early recordings. Not only has he published several books on the subject and appeared on Georgian television to discuss it, but he claims extra authority thanks to his familial connections to the singers on the recordings. Indeed, in many cases, the best copy or only of a Gramophone Company record came from his personal collection, and was used for transfer (2007b:31). Much present-day research in this area, especially on matters related to Artem or Gigo Erkomaishvili, Anzor’s grandfather and great-grandfather, seems to rely on personal connections with Anzor Erkomaishvili, in the role of the gatekeeper.

One could argue that Erkomaishvili recontextualized these sounds in often explicitly political ways, in a process akin to the one Ana María Ochoa Gautier terms “epistemologies of purification” (2006:809). Will Prentice’s 2002 compilation CD, *Before the Revolution*, which also consists of pre-1917 Gramophone Company
recordings, demonstrates clearly the ethnic and linguistic mixing of the regions that would become independent Georgia. Tbilisi, in particular, was a site where Armenian, Azeri, and Persian influences could all be felt, and several artists recorded in multiple languages and musical styles. As Prentice points out in his liner notes, such “ambiguities of cultural identity seem awkward” now in the post-Soviet Caucasus. The records produced by Linich and Erkomaishvili are explicit in their focus on Georgian traditional music, even to the point of excluding “city songs” that included piano or guitar accompaniment, although many of these were included on earlier LP releases including the singers Bagrat Bagramov and Ia Kargareteli, among others.\(^{10}\)

In addition to his work as a producer of archival recordings, Anzor’s inscriptive strategies extend to other realms, including publishing. His arrangements of Georgian folk songs began appearing in print in the early 1970s (Erkomaishvili 1972), and focused, initially, on the Gurian repertoire he had learned from his grandfather and other family members. Two volumes of memoir and personal essays (Erkomaishvili 1988, 2006), whose contents overlap somewhat, appeared, first, when the Rustavi Ensemble was at their height of popularity and influence, in the late 1980s, and, later, when publishing on Georgian folk music surged in the wake of the

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\(^{10}\) In a conference paper, Lauren Ninoshvili notes Prentice’s observation that limitations in early recording technology favored loud vocal sounds, as opposed to instruments, and suggests that this may provide “a partial explanation for the hegemony of vocal polyphony in accounts of Georgian musical heritage from the Soviet period through the present day” (2010b:3). This notion deserves more consideration, in order to account for the popularity of instrumental recordings in these early years, especially in many cultures that also had vocal music.
UNESCO declaration. In his writings, Erkomaishvili is unfailingly gracious, honoring his teachers and assiduously giving credit to colleagues and public figures who have helped him at various points in his career. At the same time, he deftly melds personal and family history with the larger narrative of the preservation and development of Georgian folk music in the twentieth century.

Indeed, there is often something of the personal drama tied up in Anzor’s archival searches, as well, with his desire to trace certain family artifacts lending a poignancy to his memoir. For example, the first Transcaucasian Olympiad in 1934, which was held in Tbilisi, featured three generations of Erkomaishvili men—Gigo, Artem, and Anzor’s father Davit (Datiko), then twelve years old—singing the trio song “Adila.” Having discovered an audio recording of this performance in the Moscow phonograph archives, Anzor begins a search for other audiovisual traces of the event. Most tantalizingly, the director Shalva Khomeriki, whom he runs into in France on a Rustavi Ensemble tour, tells him that he had discovered a film of this performance in Moscow. Upon returning from the tour, Anzor tries to follow up with Khomeriki, but is told that the director has died suddenly. Subsequent searches in archives fail to turn up the rumored film clip (Erkomaishvili 2006:7-9). An eerily parallel story concerns another archivist, Simon Bolkvadze, who also dies suddenly while trying to help Anzor with his search. In this case, however, before his sudden death he had already left an envelope on his desk, addressed to Anzor, which contained a photo of the three Erkomaishvilis in 1934 (fig. 6.3). These two stories, with their tinge of mystery, lead, a page later, to the great loss that colored Anzor’s
childhood: his father’s death, in a car accident, at the age of thirty-two. Even here, the presence of music heightens the drama: before leaving the house, the day of the accident, Davit promises his son Anzor that he will teach him a certain good song, not identified, when he gets home. Of course, the promise cannot be kept.

Anzor has also been instrumental in the celebration of Tristan and Guri Sikharulidze as Gurian master singers, authoring a dual biography of the cousins (Erkomaishvili 2013), released under the auspices of the Georgian Chant Foundation (Pondi kartuli galoba), in conjunction with a compilation CD and a public celebration of the Sikharulidzhes at the theatre in Ozurgeti’s city center on November 15, 2013.\footnote{Photos and video of this event, along with Soundcloud links to the CD tracks, may be found at the foundation’s website: http://chanting.ge/}

While acknowledging the masterly skill of Guri and Tristan, and, in a first-person narrative, describing how challenging and exciting it is to sing with such improvisers (2013:15-18), Anzor is also embedding these singers’ voices within his own
authoritative discourse. In a striking layout choice, he includes autobiographical statements from Tristan and Guri as scans of handwritten documents (fig. 5.4), not as typeset text on the same perceptual level as the remainder of the book. The association of handwriting with authenticity has deep roots in Western culture, even or especially in an age of digital media (Dijck and Neef 2006). Without suggesting that the Sikharulidzes are not capable of writing their own story, this framing move sets them somehow apart from the scholarly or biographical discourse in the rest of the book, as representatives of an authentic practice.

Another strategy of inscription is the formation of organized groups, something Anzor has done several times, first with the Rustavi Ensemble in 1968. Martve, a children’s choir founded by Anzor in 1976, may be his most enduring achievement in this regard, given the large number of members who went on to form

FIGURE 5.4 Tristan Sikharulidze's autobiographical statement
(Erkomaishvili 2013:8-9)
their own singing groups or pursue further musical study. As Anzor told me in an interview, the goal of Martve was to make young people “fall in love with the songs,” since, as he tells it, young people in the 1960s and 1970s were “embarrassed to sing folk songs” (30.viii.16). It was also reportedly at Anzor’s suggestion that the Shalva Chemo was founded in 2004. This group only performs Gurian trio and chonguri songs, and features Guri Sikharulidze, Tristan Sikharulidze, and Merab Kalandadze, a bani singer who was taught by Tristan. According to Tristan, he had never before had a free-standing trio, with its own name, as opposed to ad hoc trios within larger folk ensembles or impromptu partners at banquets and social gatherings (25.vii.16).

The formation of Shalva Chemo followed the recording of “Chven Mshvidoba” in 2003, an album of twenty-six trio sings, one of the few albums devoted exclusively to that repertoire, which features Anzor in a trio with Guri and Tristan. The recording of the title track, a masterpiece of intricate Gurian trio singing, becomes a set piece in Anzor’s biography of Guri and Tristan (Erkomaishvili 2013:15-18), in which Anzor narrates, moment-by-moment, how they sang the song. Tristan and Guri’s unpredictable melodic moves and changes of register become moments of drama and suspense, with Anzor holding steady despite the swirl of invention around him. In Anzor’s telling, the dramaturgical structure of the performance was somewhat preordained: they decided ahead of time that they would

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12 In recent years, with Guri’s advanced age and declining health, Serguna Urushadze, grandson of Karlo Urushadze—himself a grandson of Giorgi Iobishvili and frequent singing partner with Tristan and Guri—has joined Tristan and Merab as part of Shalva Chemo.
sing three *mukhli* (verses or strophes) of “Chven Mshvidoba,” beginning with a comparatively simple variant, gradually getting more complicated, until the last *mukhli* is “maximally ornamented” or “worked-out” (*maksimalurad gagvevarjishebina*; Erkomaishvili 2013:16). This would indicate a break from typical practice, at least for the Sikharulidzes. When I asked him if he ever made a plan with other singers before singing, or discussed what variant they would sing, he said, “No. I don’t plan anything. Sometimes I don’t even know what voice I will sing … Once we start, then we’ll understand each other” (6.viii.16).

One index of Anzor Erkomaishvili’s reach as an artist and representative of Gurian folk music involves the song “Mival Guriashi, Mara” (I’m on my way to Guria, and yet...). The text for this song, in a sixteen-beat meter similar to the verses of “Me Rustveli,” is of anonymous origin, and has been used in many different folk settings, including a version for trio (recorded by Samuel Chavleishvili’s trio in 1909) as well as within songs that today are sung with different texts, such as “Shvidkatsa” and “Adila-Alipasha,” the latter in the 1934 version performed by the Erkomaishvilis. One of the most popular settings of the text is for a vocal trio accompanied by

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13 It is typical practice only to perform two strophes of “Chven Mshvidoba,” with the addition of a third *mukhli* apparently indicative of true mastery of the song. Other recorded versions with three *mukhli* include Samuel Chavleishvili’s in 1909 and Vladimer Berdzenishvili’s in 1968.

14 *Varjishi* (ornamented or “exercised”) is also used to refer to Georgian chant in its more complex settings, as opposed to *sada k’ilo* (simple style; Graham 2015:446).

15 Along the same lines, when I asked Tristan if he remembered how many studio takes it took him to record another version of “Chven Mshvidoba,” he simply held up a single finger (6.viii.16).
chonguri. The music for this setting was written by Anzor Erkomaishvili 1978 as part of the score for a theatrical adaptation of Nodar Dumbadze’s novel *Granny, Iliko, Ilarion, and I*, directed by Anzor Kutateladze. Despite not considering himself a composer, Anzor Erkomaishvili wrote the arrangement and recorded it with his mother and sister as the upper two voices, and the recording was then used throughout the play as a kind of *leitmotiv* for the memories of Zurikela, the main character (30.viii.16).

This setting of “Mival Guriashi, Mara” has become a staple repertory item for many folk ensembles, and circulates broadly in Georgian popular culture (a YouTube search for the lyrics produces many versions of this arrangement, though other versions involving electronic beats have appeared in recent years). In my searches online and throughout CD liner notes, I have yet to see Anzor Erkomaishvili identified as the composer of the song. Anzor himself told me why that might be:

> Since then [i.e., since the song first appeared in 1978], I’ve never mentioned to anybody that this music was mine, as it become very popular. Like my grandfather, if people start to listen to my music, I never say out loud that it’s by me. I’m just happy to know that they listen to it, which means that they like it. (30.viii.16)

A brief mention in a published interview (Erkomaishvili 2007a:30), where he refers to “Mival Guriashi, Mara” as “his own variant” is one of the only places I have located, thus far, where he takes some credit for the song: it seems clear that he is

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16 Anzor’s grandfather Artem was a prolific composer of songs in the Gurian folk style. One of his most popular, “Didi Khnidan Gagitsani” (I have known you for a long time), has entered the Gurian trio song repertoire, yet Artem is often given credit as the writer (Shugliashvili and Erkanidze 2004:208).
content for the song to be considered an anonymous part of the folk canon.17 This self-effacement reinforces the perception of a unified body of folk practice, a collective expression of Georgian identity. Taken together, Anzor’s efforts in a wide range of media to identify, classify, unify, and disseminate Georgia’s rich musical traditions are a classic example of Derrida’s “archontic power,” which, Derrida argues, is always paired with the power of “consignation,” or the “gathering together [of] signs” (1996:3). In this framework, a keeper of the archive like Anzor Erkomaishvili “aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration” (ibid.).

Voices of Revival

Of course, the “ideal configuration” of Georgian folk singing is still a dynamic entity, continually re-enacted by living singers and dependent on embodied practices of the voice in individual and cooperative settings. As a vehicle for varying approaches to the proper way to sing folk songs, and as a site for the negotiation of an independent, post-Soviet Georgian identity, the voices of these singers have the potential either to maintain or upend genealogies of performance practice. In particular, the return to circulation of the early gramophone recordings—in large part

17 Joseph Jordania’s use of “Mival Guriashi” to make an argument about improvisation in Gurian polyphony attests to the broadly-held conception of this setting as traditional (2006:88-90). No mention is made of the song’s composer, even though Anzor Erkomaishvili himself is quoted in this passage, and his singing of the bani is transcribed as a demonstration of traditional improvisational techniques.
thanks to the efforts of Anzor Erkomaishvili—has been instrumental in the
development of a revivelist vocal style which stands in stark contrast to the polished
concert presentation with which Anzor and his ensembles made famous. The
idiosyncratic, embodied ways that the concept of fidelity to the past and the tension
between imitation and re-creation are played out in the field of Georgian traditional
singing point to the truth of the observation that “the physical grain of the voice has a
fundamentally social life” (Feld et al. 2004:341).

To understand the impact of the archival recordings, it is necessary to briefly
review the history of Georgian folk singing practice in the twentieth century. For this,
I draw from Bithell’s overview of the revival and global spread of Georgian
polyphony (2014a), as well as personal communication and interviews with Georgian
and American singers and scholars. As mentioned in Chapter Five, the earliest
organized choir dedicated to Georgian folk music was the Kartuli Khoro, founded by
Lado Aghniashvili in 1885 and led by the Czech composer and conductor Josef
Navrátil (known in Georgia as Ratili). The singing groups captured on record from
1901 to 1914 may have been formed in the wake of the Kartuli Khoro’s popular tours
throughout Georgia (one such tour to the North Caucasus city of Armavir in 1890 was
the inspiration for the young Dimitri Arakishvili’s lifelong study of Georgian folk
music). The first World War, the 1917 Russian Revolution, a brief period of
independence as the Democratic Republic of Georgia, and the imposition of Soviet
rule in 1921, all contributed to social and political instability, and the transformation
or dissolution of many organized singing groups. There were massive “people’s
choirs” made up of amateur singers, which participated in Olympiads (LaPasha 2004) and featured prominently in Soviet ideology as an “organizing and unifying force” for the proletariat (Krasin 2012:16). The repertoire of these choirs would have included newly-composed songs, perhaps in a folk style, celebrating the achievements and heroic figures of the communist regime, and the performance style would have represented a break from prior practice, particularly by adding singers to the top two vocal lines, which traditionally would have been sung by soloists. The 1930s showed the consolidation of a “folklore of Stalin” (Howell 1992:xv) in which performers and scholars collaborated in creating a politicized vision of folk creativity. The attendant professionalization of folk performance, exemplified by the Russian models of the Igor Moiseyev Dance Ensemble (Shay 2016) and the Piatnitskii Choir (S. Smith 2002), led to the creation of the Georgian State Ensemble of Song and Dance in 1936 (Bithell 2014a:579).

In the post-Stalin years of cultural “thaw” in the late 1950s and 1960s, several groups appeared which reintroduced the idea of smaller ensembles and regional specialization. Prominent among these was Shvidkatsa, an ensemble founded by the conductor Jansug Kakhidze in 1957 for the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students, held in Moscow that year. This group, as a national entity, was short-lived, though after its breakup in 1959 it was re-established as a regional choir in Ozurgeti, under the direction of Mikheil Shavishvili. Shvidkatsa specializes in Gurian songs—Shavishvili was a famous k’rimanch’uli singer—and, since the late 1990s, has been led by Tristan Sikharulidze. Another influential group was Gordela, founded in 1961.
This group was made up of students at the Tbilisi Conservatory, and was among the first to begin performing sacred music from the Orthodox chant tradition, which had been suppressed under Soviet religious policies.\(^{18}\) Their main teacher in this enterprise was Artem Erkomaishvili, the last living representative of the West Georgian oral tradition of chanting, whose grandson Anzor was a student at the conservatory and a member of Gordela. Among the hallmarks of Gordela’s singing style were a balance between upper and lower registers and the careful modulation of dynamics from a hushed *sotto voce* to a ringing *Heldentenor* exuberance. I consciously use terms from the Western classical tradition in acknowledgment of the conservatory training of Gordela, and what appears to be the conscious emulation of models from the world of art music (the group even performed in tuxedos at times, rather than colorful “ethnographic” costumes).

Anzor Erkomaishvili founded the Rustavi Ensemble in 1968, featuring former members of Gordela, like Badri Toidze, who helped lead the ensemble for many years, as well as Hamlet Gonashvili, one of the most famous Georgian singers of the late twentieth century. While building a huge repertoire of songs and chants from throughout Georgia’s regions—and carefully studying available transcriptions and field recordings—Rustavi represented, in many ways, a continuation of Gordela’s

\(^{18}\) Even in the relaxed climate of the 1960s and later, performers still had to be careful about how they presented religious music. As Anzor explained to me, sometimes they would identify a chant as a “chorale” (Russian *khoral*), which, to censors unfamiliar with Georgian chant, was enough to make it escape their notice (30.viii.16).
classically-inflected practice. Theodore Levin’s liner notes for the 1989 Nonesuch release *Georgian Voices* succinctly describe their approach:

The Rustavi's performance style synthesizes the powerful, rough-hewn sound characteristic of the traditional regional folk choirs with a newer, cleaner, more finely-honed aesthetic whose orientation is towards concert presentation - nowadays on an increasingly international scale. While striving to preserve, and in some cases recreate, authentic voicings and vocal timbres, the Rustavi singers have simplified the complex scales used by the earlier choirs in order to create firmer, more brilliant harmonies. (Levin 1989)

Rustavi’s manner of performance became known as the “academic” style, and by the time of Levin’s writing it was already being challenged by a new generation of singers. Mtiebi, a group whose name means “mountains,” was started in the early 1980s by Edisher Garakanidze, who advocated for experiencing and presenting folk music in an environment as close to village practice as possible (Bithell 2014a:579-80). Garakanidze was also instrumental in the popularization of Georgian vocal music abroad, leading workshops in Great Britain and inspiring the creation of Georgian choirs in France, the United States, and Australia. Although a highly-regarded scholar whose posthumous works are still being published (Garakanidze 2007, 2011), Edisher Garakanidze in many ways represents the valorization of the amateur over the professional, a turn away from Rustavi’s “finely-honed aesthetic” to one closer to that of the early audio recordings. The men whose voices appear on those recordings, as

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19 The relationship between Garakanidze’s work and the predominantly UK-based “natural voice” movement, which seeks to democratize singing and encourage community music-making is discussed by Caroline Bithell (2014b:191-96)
Anzor himself likes to emphasize in person and in print, were not trained singers, but “real peasants” (30.viii.16).

The Anchiskhati Church Choir, which remains the resident vocal ensemble at the oldest church in Tbilisi, was another major player in the revival movement. Counting among its ranks preeminent scholars of Georgian church chant—especially founding director Malkhaz Erkvanidze and founding members Davit Shugliashvili and Zaal Tsereteli—the group made its name through a combination of careful archival research and the restoration of liturgical chant as a daily practice. The Anchiskhati choir left behind the expanded ensemble size and modulated, expressive dynamics of Rustavi-style chant, instead favoring the traditional arrangement of solo voices on the upper two voice parts and only two or three bass singers. As a whole, the choir’s vocal timbre, too, is bright, with an edginess and a hint of nasality that would not be acceptable in a Western-style classical choir, and again, seems to draw inspiration from the early-twentieth-century recordings. Among professional folk singers, the members of Anchiskhati are held in high esteem, although, as Graham notes (2015:477), “the neo-traditional performance aesthetic has not been embraced by the secular mainstream.” He goes on to observe that, on Georgian television, whenever recordings of liturgical chant provide accompaniment for programs about medieval history, civil strife, or tourist destinations, it is invariably a performance in the classical, Rustavi-influenced style (if not a Rustavi recording itself) which is used.

Without the broad international appeal and marketability of the Rustavi Ensemble product in the waning years of the Cold War, the current dialogue with
scholars and amateur practitioners of Georgian song would arguably not have been
possible. In published interviews, Anzor Erkomaishvili appears to bristle at criticisms
of Rustavi’s style, explaining that it was precisely Rustavi’s “academic manner of
performance” that led to the UNESCO declaration of Georgian polyphony as
“Intangible Cultural Heritage.” He adds, with some bravado, that “not many people
might know better than me how a folk song should be sung” (2007a:30).
Nevertheless, in the rejection of Rustavi-style performance in favor of gramophone
and wax-cylinder examples, there is a kind of genealogical slippage occurring, in that
singers in the post-Soviet generation, rather than following in the footsteps of Anzor
Erkomaishvili, can choose instead to be pupils of his great-grandfather, Gigo.

Fidelity to the (Sonic) Past

The authority of an old phonogram record could be seen a kind of “frozen
media knowledge,” which is “waiting to be unfrozen, liquefied” (Ernst 2013:60). In
the case of the Gramophone Company recordings, the process of liquefying includes
the efforts by folklore groups to re-create and perform songs directly based on
recordings. This is another feature of the archive’s “archontic principle”: because
something is attested in the archive, it is therefore possible; it may be referenced and
brought back into practice as something legitimate or authentic. At times, however,
the testimony of the recording is, perhaps, untrustworthy.
Carl Linich drew my attention to one recording in particular, the “Sajavakhura Naduri,” a Gurian work song featuring two antiphonal choirs, performed by Gigo Erkomaishvili’s ensemble in 1907. The longest song in the archives, it initially took up two sides of a gramophone record (the technology for double-sided records having arrived at some point between the 1902 and 1909 Tbilisi catalogs). At the beginning of the recording, a solo voice, after a three-note motive, is joined for a brief moment by one or more upper voices in sustained notes. After a moment, the upper voices stop and the solo voice continues to the end of a phrase, before a second choir takes over (ex. 5.1, accompanying CD, Track 4). Linich believes that the overlap of voices was a mistake, perhaps the result of a miscommunication between the two antiphonal groups. In any event, the singers do not stop: the cost of blank gramophone discs would have made multiple takes expensive, though in truth we do not know how often discs were discarded or re-tried owing to mistakes. The song forge ahead, with the singers never again showing hesitation, even in the quickly-alternating, stretto-like give-and-take that concludes the record. Linich was obviously very familiar with Gigo Erkomaishvili’s gramophone record, having produced the 2001 CD reissue. He

EXAMPLE 5.1 “Sajavakhura Naduri” opening, performed by Gigo Erkomaishvili’s choir, 1907
(small staves for unidentified interjecting voices)
was surprised, therefore, to hear, some years later, a recording of “Sajavakhura Naduri” by the folk ensemble Basiani, in which they appeared to reproduce Gigo Erkomaishvili’s record, complete with the “mistake” in the opening moments. In search of this curious simulacrum, I came across a video on YouTube of that very group singing this song.²⁰

The Basiani video is from a live concert presentation in Tbilisi, and it is introduced by none other than Anzor Erkomaishvili. He states that the group will sing “the exact same variant as recorded by Gigo Erkomaishvili,” his great-grandfather, in 1907. The word I’ve translated as “exact,” sts’ored, is crucial, as what follows Anzor’s short speech is a remarkably close, note-for-note imitation of the 1907 recording, complete with the initial clash of voices—one soloist jumping in and overlapping the call of a first soloist—which Linich had identified as a mistake.²¹

The performance is virtuosic.²² They start the song at the same pitch level as the original (between a D and an E-flat above middle C), which, as the song progresses, demands a particularly high k’rimanch’uli yodel. Even more impressive is the way the singers tune their intervals to match the old recording, with non-tempered (essentially

²⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0O89ChVAk4s

²¹ It appears from the YouTube video that this performance took place at an event celebrating the publication of book and CD anthology of the Gramophone Company recordings (Erkomaishvili and Rodonaia 2006). Although this may offer a proximate cause for the close imitation of the old record—perhaps even on Anzor’s behalf or at his request—it should be noted that, in a CD released in 2012 on the Ocora label, Ensemble Basiani perform “Sajavakhura” with the same “mistake,” if anything even more precisely like Gigo Erkomaishvili’s choir.

²² On the accompanying CD, Track 5, I include a commercial recording of this song by Basiani, from a 2013 Ocora compact disc.
neutral) thirds and other harmonic relationships wholly distinct from even temperament.

By contrast, when Anzor’s Rustavi Ensemble perform the song, their version closely resembles a published transcription (Erkomaishvili 2005:120), which appears as part of the repertoire of songs dictated by Anzor’s grandfather Artem Erkomaishvili, and notated by Anzor in the 1960s (ex. 5.2). As Gigo’s son, and a member of the choir in 1907, Artem stands in a particularly authoritative position with regard to this song. In the transcription, the first soloist’s three-note motive is immediately echoed by a singer from the second choir, something which does not happen in the 1907 recording (though perhaps some singers in 1907 were attempting to do just that, leading to the clash of voices). Moreover, when Rustavi perform “Sajavakhura Naduri,” at least in recent years,23 their intonation sounds much closer, to my ears, to Western equal temperament (accompanying CD, Track 6). This can be observed, for instance, in measure 10 in example 5.2, where the upper voice has an F-natural, against a D in the lower voice, before they cadence on a unison E. The corresponding cadential moment in the 1907 recording, and Basiani’s recreation, features something much closer to a major third between the two voices, before they land on a unison note approximately equidistant between them.24

23 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4csjUVesdw (Recorded in Tbilisi, 12 October 2014; uploaded by user “EnsembleRustavi”).

24 On the accompanying CD, these cadential moments may be heard at 00:20 of Track 4 (Gigo Erkomaishvili, 1907) and at 00:28 of Track 6 (Rustavi Ensemble, 2014).
When I asked Anzor in 2016 about “Sajavkhura Naduri,” he was reluctant to call the clash of voices on the original recording a mistake, once again using the phrase “real peasants” (namdvili glekhebi) which I recognized from his book, to explain that his great-grandfather’s choir was made up of men who would not have been comfortable on the concert stage, and who therefore couldn’t be judged on the same terms as a professional choir (30.viii.16). At an earlier point in the interview,
Anzor elaborated on the question of why the Rustavi Ensemble didn’t sound like singers of an earlier generation:

The thing is, Rustavi could never sing like Giorgi Babilodze [a well-known singer] or Gigo Erkomaishvili. A hundred years had passed and there was a new generation. Singers’ voices had lost a tone and a half. Nobody could reach the high notes anymore, and the timbre was very different. (30.viii.16)

What, then, are we to make of Ensemble Basiani and their attempt to recreate, with uncanny precision, the voices of a lost generation? In his landmark study of the cultural origins of sound reproduction, Jonathan Sterne discusses at length the notion of “sound fidelity” (2003:215-86). The idea that an audio recording could be “faithful” to an original sound event presumes not only an ontological category of “copy” but also the category of “original” in the first place:

“Original” sounds are as much a product of the medium as are copies—reproduced sounds are not simply mediated versions of unmediated original sounds … The possibility of reproduction precedes the fact. (2003:219)

The technical difficulties that accompanied early recording technologies, which necessitated extensive soundproofing and reduction of outside noise, ensured that “making sounds for the machines was always different than performing for a live audience” (235). Nevertheless, the concept of sound fidelity, which arose in tandem with the marketing of phonographs and gramophones, helped to enshrine the notion that there had been, at some time in the past, a “live” event which the mediating presence of a recording microphone preserved for the future with greater or lesser fidelity.

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25 See Chapter Two, above, for Tristan Sikharulidze’s own theory about why singer’s voices have changed, which involves the idea that wine is no longer natural.
transparency. Sound fidelity, in Sterne’s telling, points not to a clear-cut mediation between original and copy, but rather to a *network*, an assemblage of interactions among humans and machines, shot through with social relations. Moreover, other means of sound reproduction—not merely audio recording via acoustic or electronic technology—involves these same social dynamics. When the reproducing body is not the diaphragm of a microphone or loudspeaker, but rather the analogous components of the human voice—in other words, when a group like Basiani use their own voices to reproduce a 1907 gramophone record—a further node is added to the network that came into being when Gigo Erkomaishvili’s choir set foot in the studio on Golovinsky Prospect.

When Ernst insists that sound is “radically ahistorical” (2015:101), he gestures toward the temporal and spatial ambiguity of listening: its ability to create *presence* out of *absence* (the absence of long-dead singers) and *presents* out of *pasts*. Artifacts of audio recording resist assimilation into historical narratives by virtue of being inscriptions of the “acoustically real,” however imperfect, as opposed to symbolic inscriptions like writing and musical notation. When Basiani sing their rendition of “Sajavakhura Naduri,” mistake and all, they offer the experience of archaeological discovery, akin to stepping inside an ancient, untouched tomb, eliding in a moment the span of a century:

This instant does not belong to the laborious deciphering of the archive. It is the nearly ecstatic instant Freud dreams of, when the very success of the [archaeological] dig must sign the effacement of the archivist: *the origin then speaks by itself*. The *arkhē* appears in the nude, without archive. It presents
itself and comments on itself by itself. “Stones talk!” In the present. (Derrida 1996:92-93)

The return of century-old techniques and tunings to present-day embodied practice does not truly mark the effacement of the archivist—in this case, Anzor Erkomaishvili—however much it represents a break with singing practices he himself had made popular. Arguably, it stands as the ultimate validation of his archival process. He is certainly proud that versions of songs from the past have been rediscovered and are being performed and taught, even if he is somewhat suspicious about overly fastidious imitations. As he explained to me, it made no sense for young men to contort their voices in imitation of men whose voices, when recorded a century earlier, may have been hoarse from age or hard work:

In the past they didn’t have the material [i.e., the old recordings], but after I brought back the recordings from abroad, filled the archives and radio stations, young people had access to the original recordings. So now, if you listen to young people singing, you’ll notice that they’re copying the older version of recordings, but I don’t think that’s wrong. Of course, you should sing the correct variant, but you shouldn’t make your voice—whatever voice you have—sound like someone else ... You shouldn’t be singing like hundred-year-old senior citizen. You should be singing with your own voice. (30.viii.16)

The word fidelity, perhaps obviously, opens up the possibility of “keeping faith” in an ethical as well as technological sense. Although he never saw fit to comment on or try to fix the mistake at the beginning of “Sajavakhura Nadura,” when was preparing the new nickel matrix of the song for transfer to LP, Anzor did make use editing techniques to make subtle modifications. Because the two sides of the “Sajavakhura Naduri” were recorded on different days in 1907, Gigo Erkomaishvili did not remember on what note he had begun the song the previous day, thus the
second half of the record is approximately a whole step lower than the first. Rather than leave this imperfection—the acoustically “real” record of the event—Anzor discreetly adjusted the second half of the song to match the first, by speeding up the recording (30.viii.16). In his position as archivist, he is able to determine when a mistake would interfere with a holistic appreciation of these singers’ artistry, and silently erase it from the record. Thus, his role in bringing the songs from the material reality of the gramophone disc to the mathematical sublimity of the digital file is not that of a passive conduit. As phenomenologist Don Ihde has pointed out, “No system attains perfect transparency and each produces a different selectivity of sound qualities. There is no *neutrality* to recording technology” (Ihde 2007:259, emphasis original). This is true as much for the specific frequency bands favored by the construction of the gramophone horn and the acoustics in the recording studio, as for the choices made by the authoritative archivist, his hands upon the control knobs and his ears attuned to the voice of his great-grandfather.

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26 The split between the two sides happens around 2:04 in the recording of “Sajavakhura Naduri” released on Erkomaishvili and Rodonaia (2006, disc one).

27 This is not to say that he is somehow hiding the fact of the pitch adjustment, as he readily offered the information to me in an interview, and briefly mentions it in print, merely that he does not appear to have any doubt about the propriety of this editorial decision.
Epilogue: Babua’s Voice

It took nearly eighty years for the recordings of Gigo Erkomaishvili to reappear on LP, yet, in the interim, one encounter with recording technology bears special mention: the collection of chants recorded by Artem Erkomaishvili at the Tbilisi conservatory in 1966. Artem Erkomaishvili, Anzor’s grandfather, was a major figure in his young life, especially after his father Datiko’s death. Artem, who was born in 1887, studied chant with Melkisedek Nakashidze at the Shemokmedi monastery, and was known as a srulimgalobeli, that is, someone who knew the complete chant system in all three voices (Graham 2015:281). In 1949, Artem recorded eleven chants with Varlam Simonishvili and Dimitri Patarava, two other master chanters from the Shemokmedi school. These recordings are known today as the “Eleven Pearls,” and, despite their poor sound quality, they stand as a rare example of chant performance by singers who received their training before the Bolshevik suppression of religious practice.28 By the 1960s, Artem was the only chanter still living who knew the corpus of chants and their traditional harmonizations (as noted in Chapter Four, whereas the upper voice in the chant, the tkma, would have been transmitted precisely, with the occasional use of neume notation, the singers on the lower two voice parts would have improvised their harmonizations). In post-Stalin years, there was increased interest in the Orthodox chant tradition, and Artem, who

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28 The recordings were released on CD in 2004, with accompanying essays and a musical transcription by David Shugliashvili (see Discography).
led a folk ensemble in Ozurgeti (then known as Makharadze), had often come to Tbilisi to teach chants to members of the Gordela ensemble. In 1966, however, Artem’s advanced age and failing health led the musicologist Kakhi Rosebashvili to undertake a more ambitious project: recording Artem singing all three voices to as many chants as possible.

The technology used is significant. Recording via electromagnetic tape permitted instantaneous playback and greater flexibility for multiple takes than had been possible using wax cylinders phonographs or gramophone discs. A reel-to-reel tape recorder was set up at the Tbilisi conservatory, and Artem sang all three voice parts in succession, beginning with the upper voice, which contained the “model melody” of the chant. Then, while the recording of the first voice was played back, Artem would sing the middle part into the microphone, harmonizing with himself on a separate track. The process would repeat again for the third, lowest voice part. The recording engineers did not use headphones, for instance, to isolate the playback, so the previously-recorded parts were played back into the room and can be heard in the background of each subsequent part, at times contributing to the audible distortion on the recordings. In all, 107 chants were recorded, including some different variants of the same chant. Beyond the extraordinary focus and stamina—not to mention

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29 Further research would be required to determine precisely what equipment was used for the recordings. In what follows, I am relying on information from my interview with Anzor Erkomaishvili and the David Shugliashvili’s introduction to his transcriptions of the recordings (Shugliashvili 2014).
memory—that this project required of Artem, it marks a decisive shift in the methods available for the preservation of Georgian traditional music.

There is, in fact, a rather long-standing tradition of trying to capture Georgian polyphonic music by means of multiple microphones or recording devices. The earliest may have been in the Austrian prisoner-of-war camps, when the trio song “Chven Mshvidoba” was recorded, first as a group and then with each singer performing his part by himself. A recent project involving Anzor Erkomaishvili attempted to show how these separate voice-part recordings (which were not captured simultaneously) could be combined in performance (Lechleitner, Lechleitner, and Lomidze 2014). The first attempt to record multiple parts simultaneously was done by the Russian scholar Yevgeniy Gippius in Leningrad (Ziegler 1993:30). Gippius employed three phonographs—one for each singer—and, between 1930 and 1935, recorded forty-seven songs, over eighty wax cylinders in total (Erkomaishvili 2007b:236-41). Among the singers recorded by Gippius was Artem Erkomaishvili, which suggests that, when Artem stepped in front of the microphone in 1966, he was in no way ignorant of the potential of recording technology. A published collection of Gurian song transcriptions (Shugliashvili and Erkvanidze 2004), which was distributed to folk singers and ensembles throughout Georgia, was similarly based on simultaneous multitrack recording. The accompanying CD features individual tracks

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30 Many of Gippius’s recordings were released on CD as part of the Tbilisi State Conservatoire’s Echoes from the Past series (see Discography).
for each voice part, intended as a pedagogical tool to help students who would otherwise have difficulty picking out the individual parts.\textsuperscript{31}

Media theorists have at times proposed discrete historical periods demarcated by changes in recording technology, for instance the shift from mechanical to electronic means of reproduction (Mowitt 1987:190-91), or, later, the replacement of analog technologies with digital (Rothenbuhler and Peters 1997:245).\textsuperscript{32} Without proposing a deep ontological divide between the mechanical engraving of the 1907 Gramophone Company discs and the electromagnetic capture of these 1966 chants, there are nonetheless spectral elements in the latter that invite examination. In particular, there are several orders of displacement occurring, primarily vocal and temporal. The vocal displacement allows Artem’s voice to exist independently of his body and, with the innovation of playback techniques, creates the possibility for dialogue with his own voice, essentially a re-writing of one recording through the addition of other voices.\textsuperscript{33} The temporal displacement, in which musical processes typically enacted simultaneously become, instead, sequential, has implications for the idea that Artem is in fact improvising the second- and third-voice parts. As Graham argues persuasively (2013:169-72), the upper voice in Shemokmedi-school chant may

\textsuperscript{31} This method has since been adopted by other teachers and folklore groups, for instance Ensemble Adilei, from whom I received a digital download of vocal teaching tracks and a PDF of song lyrics in exchange for a donation to help fund their 2016 concert and workshop tour of the U.S.

\textsuperscript{32} A special issue of Twentieth-Century Music makes the case for more scholarly attention to tape, as a means of “rewinding the phonographic regime” (Bohlman and McMurray 2017:3).

\textsuperscript{33} The 1963 album by jazz pianist Bill Evans, Conversations with Myself, which makes use of three overdubbed piano tracks, offers a curious and nearly contemporary parallel.
take unexpected turns away from the model melody—for instance descending below its typical range—which force the lower two voices to adjust spontaneously with conventional maneuvers. When adding a second- or third-voice part to his initial recording of the first voice, Artem has the advantage of already knowing what the first-voice singer (i.e., himself) is going to do. A final displacement—almost a haunting—may be recognized in the fact that, since Artem was the last of the recognized master chanters, his voice(s) stand in the place of the dead, of singers worthy enough to form a trio with him, who are all absent.\(^3\) In this way, Artem’s recordings are the incarnation of an imagined, or remembered, community.

Like the Gramophone Company records, Artem’s “conservatory chant” recordings have a prominent afterlife in the post-Soviet revival of folk singing and church chant. David Shugliashvili has published transcriptions of the recordings (2014), and a CD was released in 2013 by the Georgian Chant Foundation. This CD, titled *Pearls of Georgian Chant,* combines the three voices, which Artem had recorded sequentially, in a simultaneous three-voice mix. According to Ilia Jgharkava, the recording technician, Adobe Audition software was used to clean and edit the recordings (pers. comm.). The voices are clearly panned stereo left, center, and right, and Artem’s voices come through clearly. Listening to them now, aware of the poignancy and drama of the moment—the last chanter, doing the work of three men at once, in order to save his cultural treasure—the temptation is strong to try to

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\(^3\) His brothers Vladimer and Anania, who were still living at the time, were gifted folk singers and knew some chants as well, though they had not received Artem’s comprehensive monastery training.
divine or intuit Artem’s inner thoughts and motivations. As Sterne reminds us, however, the idea of a “pure interiority” in the hearing, speaking, or singing subject is more theological than empirical (2003:15). With recordings, we are dealing fundamentally with “a form of exteriority”:

[Recording] does not preserve a preexisting sonic event as it happens so much as it creates and organizes sonic events for the possibility of preservation and repetition. Recording is, therefore, discontinuous with the “live” events that it is sometimes said to represent. … Like the body embalmed, recorded sound continues to have a social presence or significance precisely because its interior composition is transformed in the very process of recording. (2003:332-33)

Both of Anzor Erkomaishvili’s published memoirs include a chapter titled “Babua” (Grandfather), devoted to Artem (1988, 2006). In his writing, he often likens his father to a blackbird (shavi shashvi), for whom song is as natural as breathing. In its opening lyric, the song which gives his first memoir its title, “Shavi Shashvi” (The Blackbird), neatly schematizes the dynamic between listener and singer:

shavi shashvi chioda / net’av rasa chioda
The blackbird sang / I wonder what she said?

This song, a staple of the trio repertoire, features imitations of animal sounds: barks from the bani as a hunting dog, a long, melismatic introduction for the damts’qebi, unusual in Gurian folk song and perhaps meant to represent birdsong. Recall, from Chapter Three, Tristan’s second-hand story about Samuel Chavleishvili, who sat in his yard, transfixed by the song of a thrush until he could transmute it into song. The history of music recording in Georgia seems filled with such thrushes and blackbirds: solitary voices captured in a moment of lavish display, whose internal meanings and
motivations may be lost, yet whose exterior manifestations may be revived in the
voices of others.
Conclusion

Canon and Archive

In this thesis, I have isolated for analysis specific areas within the musical practice of two great Gurian trio singers: the improvisational technique and pedagogy of Tristan Sikharulidze, and the archival excavations and widespread stylistic influence of Anzor Erkomaishvili. Apart from their family roots in the village of Makvaneti—which, in a pun on the word ak'vani, has been called the “cradle” of Gurian singing—upon what grounds may we conduct a fruitful comparison of their disparate activities? By way of a conclusion to this study, and as a gesture toward future avenues of research, I offer a provisional framework for this comparison, derived from cultural memory studies.

Aleida Assmann, a literary and cultural theorist, begins with the fundamental dichotomy of remembering and forgetting, in terms of a society’s relationship with cultural messages and traces from its past. Assmann further distinguishes between active and passive modes, both for remembering and forgetting. I reproduce her schematic table below (fig. 6.1):
Canon and archive, the terms in bold, represent these two modalities, active and passive, of remembering.

Items in a society’s canon are readily accessible by all members of that society, however delineated. As an analogy with individual cognition, Assmann describes “canon” as belonging to a society’s “working memory.” These are bits of cultural material in regular use, which require no extra effort to summon to mind: the name, for instance, of *Hamlet*’s author, and maybe several lines from the play. The archive, on the other hand, which need not refer to physical archives or depositories, concerns cultural material not in common circulation, yet not fully lost or forgotten. The cognitive analogy here is with an individual’s “reference memory,” which does indeed require special effort to access. To extend my Shakespearean model, the names of the other plays produced in London at the same time as *Hamlet* are not part of common knowledge, though, thanks to documents preserved in libraries and museums, they may be known. The passivity, in this case, does not apply to the
activities of the archivist, which necessitate a great deal of effort. The passivity refers more to the archival information itself, which, after having been set aside for preservation, lies in wait until needed. Although comparatively difficult to access, archival information is not forgotten, like, say, the Ur-Hamlet, the lost play Shakespeare may have used as a model. Such a forgotten item would require a true archaeological surprise to re-enter cultural memory.

Although Assmann’s model has been challenged as inadequate to account for the rapid pace of change brought on by the twentieth-century revolution in communication (Zierold 2010:401), I believe its utility lies primarily in helping to track the movement of objects, materials, processes, or technologies from an active canonical status to a passive archival mode, and back again. “The two realms of cultural memory are not sealed against each other,” and elements of the canon can “recede into the archive, while elements of the archive may be recovered and reclaimed for the canon” (Assmann 2010:104). Again, the reference here is not to the act of archiving or the role of the archivist, for whom rare, unknown objects may indeed become commonplace. Rather, the dichotomy of canon and archive is a metaphor for the status of objects of memory within a culture at large. A terminology based around the idea of “circulation” would perhaps work similarly, with canonical objects regularly circumscribing the bounds of a culture, while archival objects spin in smaller, confined epicycles.¹

¹ Sebald (2013) uses various understandings of circulation, both formal and informal to trace the sharing and dissemination of popular music in Tbilisi, primarily through the internet and mass media.
Viewed from one angle, Anzor’s work with the Rustavi Ensemble constitutes the very essence of Georgian folk music’s canon, while Tristan stands for a kind of living archive, a repository of knowledge and techniques which have passed out of common use. Viewed in a different light, however, Tristan’s elevated status and influence in recent years may represent an incursion into the canon, while Anzor’s work with the old recording foregrounds the archival trace: the unintended accidents and imperfections captured by the recording apparatus. Indeed, as I suggest in the previous chapter, the archival voice has begun to unseat the canonical Rustavi sound, at least for the portion of Georgian society touched by the folk revival movement.

Unlike the canon, which is shaped by the deliberate selection of material and polished, as it were, of rough edges, the archive, in its distance from a society’s working memory, can preserve the accidents, inconsistencies, and paradoxes that insert themselves in the process of inscription. The “mistakes” in Gigo Erkomaishvili’s 1907 recording of “Sjavakhura Naduri” are one example. The frequency limitations of the recording medium, and the resulting tone quality, are another. The very scratches and wobbles acquire cultural value, as indices of authenticity or affective triggers of nostalgia. Audio recordings “contain—and thus memorize—a world of signals that operate beyond and below the cultural symbolism intended by the humans involved” (Ernst 2013:59). The “subconscious qualities of technical media” (ibid.) may become conscious choices—as, for instance, when singers modify their vocal timbre and tuning to match the old recordings—and thereby re-enter the canon of authorized practice.
Within ethnomusicological discourse, the terms *canon* and *archive* tend to occupy rather concrete, non-conceptual spaces. Most often encountered in Western-classical, jazz, folk-music contexts, canon tends to imply a corpus of essential or high-status works, though Philip Bohlman has offered a more expansive definition, as “repertories and forms of musical behavior constantly shaped by a community to express its cultural particularity and the characteristics that distinguish it as a social entity” (Bohlman 1988:104). Archive, in turn, tends to imply a physical or digital repository of sonic, textual, or multimedia documentation—a tool, in other words, for historical research or preservation activities. Recent work on music in Central Asia, however, has begun to push against these literal applications, with David Fossum (2015) challenging the typical association of canon-formation with Westernizing or colonial influence, and Megan Rancier (2014) developing the thesis that a musical instrument, the Kazakh qyl-qobuz, may serve as an “interactive archive” for the accumulation of national history and cultural narrative (2014:380).

Assmann’s model of cultural memory has a clear textual bias, with writing as a dominant metaphor for the capture and transmission of cultural material: while noting the supercession of the age of print by digital media, she characterizes this paradigm shift as “the concept of a lasting written record…being replaced by the principle of continuous rewritings” (2011:11). In opposition to the tendency among scholars in cultural studies to “turn everything they view into a text or narrative” (Taylor 2003:27), Diana Taylor proposes a performance-studies-oriented approach to
memory, based on the concepts of archive and repertoire. Repertoire, in her schema, refers to embodied practices which, although conventionally viewed as ephemeral or impermanent—as opposed to the enduring materials in an archive—are themselves carriers of knowledge. “The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning” (2003:20). While acknowledging that the contents of the archive and repertoire are both mediated, to varying extents, Taylor participates in the reification of “live” performance, which, as Jonathan Sterne suggests, is best understood as arising in tandem with the possibility of reproduction, not as having an a priori existence (Sterne 2003:21). The repertoire, for Taylor, must be experienced and transmitted in person, and while this focus on an embodied epistemology is crucial for understanding the “traditional” context for Gurian trio singing—e.g., learning from a master, observing other trio singers at a supra—I am most interested in the differential operation of memory as it plays out across scenarios which involve both interpersonal exchange and the presence of technologies of recording and transcription.

Within the study of cultural memory, the place of musical improvisation—at once fixed and free, conventional and individual—is especially difficult to pin down. As practiced by Tristan and Guri Sikharulidze, formulaic improvisation in the Gurian trio style does not rely on any written prosthesis: it resides completely in the individual memories of singers and in their spontaneous interaction. Is it possible to archive an improvisational practice—to somehow record and save the necessary

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2 I am grateful to Lauren Ninoshvili for bringing Taylor’s work to my attention.
procedures for use at a later date—or is it doomed to pass from the “working memory” of a few individuals into absolute forgetting? In the absence of an explicit model for variation—such as a lead sheet of a Broadway standard may serve for a jazz musician—understanding an individual’s departures from that model is a methodological challenge. Even direct tutelage with a master like Tristan may not be enough to acquire improvisational technique. As Tristan himself admitted, he was only explicitly taught a small number of songs; the rest, it seems, were mastered through careful listening to other singers in his community, accompanied by cognitive processes of analogy and extrapolation. Absent that singing community, it seems unlikely that a technique like his could be developed.

Thanks to the many recordings of Tristan and other aging singers that have been made in the past decades—a consequence of the availability and affordability of equipment for recording and data storage—different versions of the same song, with different singers and in different social settings, can be compared with each other, and with the way Tristan teaches the song to students. In my chapter on “Me Rustveli,” I have attempted to do just that. To what extent the early gramophone and wax cylinder recordings similarly testify to an improvisatory practice is nearly impossible to say, though I have employed a limited diachronic analysis to demonstrate the stability of some formulas over time. Lacking, for instance, multiple takes of Samuel Chavleishvili’s “Me Rustveli,” the present-day Georgian folk singer may feel forced to choose between the verbatim imitation of a recording or transcription, and an
improvisational approach which may depart from the “valorized variants” (Fossum 2015:213) of the past.

Understanding that valorized past, and ensuring its continuing relevance, remain central to the project of Georgian folk singing. Hegel’s famous image of the owl of Minerva, which only takes flight at dusk, becomes for Rothenbuhler and Peters (1997:242) a metaphor for the idea that cultural formations may only be properly understood in attenuation: “death,” they gloss, “is the price of intelligibility.” Improvisation as a living practice in Gurian music may be on its way out, with perhaps no living singers who can claim as much knowledge as Tristan or Guri. Nevertheless, the apparatus of cultural preservation has already been mobilized to celebrate the Sikharulidzes and preserve their music through recordings and transcriptions, in large part thanks to the intercession of Anzor Erkomaishvili. The Hegelian metaphor, moreover, suggests the possibility of transcendental interpretation, in which a moment or process in history becomes fully intelligible. Anzor and Tristan both show, however, that interpretation—receiving a tradition and determining how to transmit its essential features to others—is a lifelong process, making use of resources and media that change over time. In their lifetimes, the patrimony they received from their parents and teachers, a specifically Gurian practice, has become the property, first, of a new, independent Georgia, and, increasingly, of an international community of listeners and singers. In ways that reflect the divergent geography of their careers—Anzor in the center, in Tbilisi, Tristan at the periphery, in Makvaneti—they each have left to their students, readers,
and future singers, the tools with which to interpret anew the practices of the past and to recognize themselves in the chain of memory.
Appendix A: Interview Details

- Levan Veshapidze (live translation by Ekaterina Diazamidze Graham)
  - July 16, 2016 (16.vii.16), Tbilisi
- Tristan Sikharulidze (live translation by Ila Sikharulidze)
  - July 25, 2016 (25.vii.16), Makvaneti
  - August 6, 2016 (6.viii.16), Makvaneti
- Merab Turkia and family
  - July 29, 2016 (29.vii.16), Lanchkhuti
- Bidzina Mzhavia
  - August 1, 2016 (1.viii.16), Mamati
- Giorgi Chkhaidze and family
  - August 1, 2016 (1.viii.16), Lanchkhuti (Nigoiti)
- Members of the Kobuleti Ensemble (live translation by Lamara Vasadze)
  - August 3, 2016 (3.viii.16), Kobuleti
- Vasil Tsetskhladze
  - August 5, 2016 (5.viii.16), Ozurgeti
- Jemal Nakashidze, Avto Makharadze, Gizo Makharadze
  - August 9, 2016 (9.viii.16), Chokhatauri
- Malkhaz Erkvanidze
  - August 10, 2016 (10.viii.16), Chokhatauri
- Anzor Erkomaishvili (live translation by John A. Graham)
  - August 30, 2016 (30.viii.16), Tbilisi
Appendix B: Tristan’s Song List

T’rios Simgherebi

(Trio songs)
1. Masp’indzelsa Mkhiarulsa*
2. Chven Mshvidoba*
3. Pat’ara Saqvarello*
4. Ts’amok’ruli*
5. Sadghegrdzelo
6. Mravalzhamieri
7. Mrevalo
8. Breievalo
9. Indi-mindi*
10. Shavi Shashvi*
11. Mival Guriashi*
12. Saqvarelo Sheni Javri
13. Qaran
14. Manana
15. Piruzi
16. Ai Odelia
17. Lat’aria*
18. Mts’vanesa da Ukudosa*
19. Mertskhalo Mshveniero
20. Dilis Mertskhali*
21. Sjobs Sqivaruli
22. Alaverdi*
23. Khelovneba*
24. Didi Khnidan Gagitsani
25. Saldatis Simghera
26. Adilei Da
27. Bat’onebo
28. Gakhsovs Turpav
29. K’alos Khelkhvavi*
30. Supris Khelkhvavi*
31. Mok’le Khelkhvavi*
32. Iaraghebis Shejibri
33. Datvis Ts’veuleba*
34. Mushis Simghera*
35. Shen Khar Venaki
36. Nanina*
37. Ak’vnis Nana
38. Me Rustveli*
39. Ovraido
40. Madlobeli
41. Mok’le Mravalzhamieri

Orp’iri Simgherebi

(Two-group songs)
1. Khasanbegura
2. Shvild’atsa (akhali)
3. Shvild’atsa (dzveli)
4. Nanavda (udzvelesi)
5. Burtis Gamarjveba
6. Dzveli Abadelia
7. Elesa
8. Orira (dzveli)
9. Orira (akhali)
10. Maqruli (Guruli)
11. Maqruli (Ach’aruli)
12. Khints’k’ala
13. Adila
14. Alipasha
15. Naduri (Shemokmedura)
16. Ch’anuri
17. Mdevaris Simghera
18. Mgazuruli
19. Sazeimo
20. Perkhuli
21. Iaramasha
22. K’almakhoba
23. Alilo
24. Bebia
25. Dila (vok’aluri)
26. Chemo Natlidedao
27. Mesazgyreebis Simghera
28. Modi, Modi, Gazakhculo
29. Mgazuruli – Eida Eida
30. Sak’olmeurneo
31. Naninavda
32. Kartvel Mts’erlebze
33. Skhvadaskhvagvari Sqivaruli
34. Chemi Bedi da Ighbali
35. Mari’ela Jashis Kali
36. Otshi Nana
37. Sami Dzmai Lek’ianshi
38. Shishi Ikhsnis Sqivaruls
39. Voisa-voisa
40. Lamazno
41. Shermanduli

Sachongure Simgherebi

(Songs with chonguri)
1. Dila
2. Baghia Chveni Kveqana
3. Nat’vra
4. Sisona Darchia
5. Gakhsovs Turpav
6. Aha Sat’ropov
7. Vizvar Mart’o
8. Akhla Vkhedav
9. Saqvarello
10. Buqhara Mamaladze
11. Nik’oloz Mekhuzla
12. Uts’naires Mas Vadiab
13. Generali Chantchibadze
14. Shalva Chemo Sikharulo
15. Chongurs Simebi Gavubi
16. Mival Guriashi
17. Aba Darijan
18. Simona Dolidze
19. Saqvarelo Sheni Javri
20. Me Pat’ara Kartveli Var
21. Es Dovlati Sasi’eto
22. Gordela
23. Pikris Simghera
24. Grdzeli Gighini
25. Lek’ebma Rom
26. Damich’ires
27. Ts’utis Soplis St’mrebi
28. Vart
29. Kalta Shagigordebi
30. Kalma Stkva Kmari
31. Ar Minda
32. Soplad Modis
33. Shemodgoma
34. Vakh’anguri
35. Bakhamros Mtebi
36. Dautovia

(* Trio songs categorized in Chapter Three as part of the formulaic improvisatory repertoire)

Transcription assistance from Ila Sikharulidze
Annotated Discography

This discography cannot claim to be authoritative or complete, though it attempts to present a picture of the published recordings, primarily of Gurian songs, both archival and contemporary. Given the informal nature of CD publishing by Georgian folk ensembles, and the rarity of Georgian music appearing on international record company releases, many of these discs may be difficult to find. See Graham (2015) for a detailed list of recordings of Georgian chant. Recordings under each subheading are listed in chronological order of release.

Archival Recordings

_Akvsenti Megrelidze (Arkhivnye zapisi)_ , Melodiya (M30 46285 006), notes by Anzor Erkomaishvili (1985). Part of the series of LPs, edited by Anzor Erkomaishvili, featuring archival recordings by Georgian folk singers. Akvsenti Megrelidze was one of the most popular and influential ensemble leaders in the 1930s and 1940s. Gurian songs were a central part of his ensembles’ repertoire (Moistsrapishvili 2005).

_Varlam Simonishvili (Arkhivnye zapisi)_ , Melodiya (M30 45997 98), notes by Anzor Erkomaishvili (1986). Another release in the _Arkhivnye zapisi_ LP series. Varlam Simonishvili was a renowned _bani_ singer and choir leader; this record includes his recordings with Samuel Chavleishvili’s choir for the Gramophone.
Company, as well as nine songs recorded in Moscow by his Gurian choir in the mid-1930s.

*The First Records in Georgia, 1907-1914*, Melodiya (M30 46903 009, M30 46905 003, M30 46907 008, M30 46909 002, M30 46911 000), notes by Anzor Erkomaishvili (1986). Five-LP set featuring Gramophone Company recordings made in Tbilisi. Most of these recordings were reissued on CD (see below, *Georgian Folk Song: The First Sound Recordings*). This set, however, includes popular songs and light classical pieces recorded by Bagrat Bagramov, Vano Sarajishvili, and others, which are not included on the later release. Reviewed by Susanne Ziegler (1989).

*Artem Erkomaishvili (Arkhivnye zapisi)*, Melodiya (M30 48079 007), notes by Anzor Erkomaishvili (1988). Archival recordings of choirs led by or featuring Artem Erkomaishvili. Includes Gramophone Company recordings from 1907, and as well as tracks from the 1930s-1960s featuring Artem-led ensembles from Batumi and Ozurgeti, and the trio featuring the three Erkomaishvili brothers, Artem, Vladimer, and Anania.

*Vladimer Berdzenishvili (Arkhivnye zapisi)*, Melodiya (M30 48511 008), notes by Anzor Erkomaishvili (1989). LP featuring recordings of ensembles led by the famous *bani* singer Vladimer Berdzenishvili, made between the 1930s and 1960s. The recording of “Me Rustveli” from this LP is briefly discussed in Chapter Four.
Géorgie: Chants de travail / Chants religieux (Georgia: Work songs / Religious songs), Ocora (C559062), text by Yvette Grimaud (1989). CD re-release of field recordings made by French ethnomusicologist Yvette Grimaud in 1967 and 1969. Includes several Gurian songs, among them recordings of a folk group from the Gurian village of Vani, led by Shalva Makharadze, to whom my informants Avto and Gizo Makharadze are related.

Drinking Horns and Gramophones, 1902-1914: The First Recordings in the Georgian Republic, Traditional Crossroads (CD 4307), edited by Carl Linich with historical note by Anzor Erkomaishvili (2001). Includes twenty-five selections from the Gramophone Company recordings. This was the first CD release of these recordings, many of which had appeared on LP previously.


*Georgian Folk Song: The First Sound Recordings, 1901-1914*, International Centre for Georgian Folk Song, edited with notes by Anzor Erkomaishvili and Vakhtang Rodonaia (2006). This four-CD set accompanies the book of the same title (Erkomaishvili and Rodonaia 2006), and includes ninety-nine tracks from Gramophone Company records. The groups represented include choirs led by Sandro Kavsadze, Gigo Erkomaishvili, Levan Asabashvili, Apolon Tsamtsishvili, Samuel Chavleishvili, and Kotsia Khukhunaishvili.


*Echoes from the Past: Georgian Folk Music from Phonograph Wax Cylinders*, Georgian State Museum of Theatre, Film, Music and Choreography et al., edited by Rusudan Tsurtsumia (3 vol., 2006, 2007, 2008). This sixteen-CD set, released over three years, is the coproduction of several institutions in Georgia, including the Tbilisi State Conservatoire, the Ministry of Culture, Monuments Protection and Sport, and the National Museum. The digitized wax-cylinder recordings are drawn from fieldwork expeditions by Georgian scholars from 1923 to 1953, as well as collections of cylinders in various
archives in Georgia and Russia, including those made by Yevgeniy Gippius in the 1930s, discussed in Chapter Five.

*Echoes from the Past: Georgian Prisoners’ Songs Recorded on Wax Cylinders in Germany 1916-1918*, Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv and Tbilisi State Conservatoire (BPhA-WA 10), edited by Rusudan Tsurtsumia and Susanne Ziegler (2014). Two-CD set, the second a data disc with scans of prisoner records and song-text transcriptions. The first disc includes sixty-five wax-cylinder recordings, between thirty seconds and two minutes in length, recorded in German prisoner-of-war camps in Münster, Mannheim, Puchheim, Ohrdruf, and Sagan (today in Poland). The collection of wax cylinders from the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv was consulted by Siegfried Nadel (1933) in his book. The editors connect some of these digitized recordings with transcriptions by Nadel, though the cylinder numbers do not always correspond, and some attributions may be dubious.

*Mart'odtkmuli margalit'ebi (Pearls of Georgian Chant): Artem Erkomaishvili*, Georgian Chanting Foundation, with notes by David Shugliashvili (2016). Contains thirty-seven chants (out of 107) recorded by Artem Erkomaishvili in 1966. The original tape recordings, on which Artem Erkomaishvili sang one voice part at a time, are edited and mixed together by producer Ilia Jgharkava.

*Brothers Artem, Anania and Ladiko Erkomaishvili*, privately produced (n.d.). A DVD containing video clips of the Erkomaishvili brothers (Artem, Anania, and Vladimer) singing four trio songs (“Shavi Shashvi,” “Grdzeli Ghighini,” “Didi
Khnidan Gagitsani,” “Madlobeli,”) and one chant ("Siqvarulma Mogiqvana Upalo"). Recorded, apparently for television, in 1965.

**Traditional Singers and Ensembles Recorded since 1970**

_Guruli simgherebi: Vazhta gundi “Elesa” (Gurian Songs: Men’s choir “Elesa”),_  
Melodiya (C30 15409 10), with notes by B. Guluashvili (1981). The Elesa ensemble was led by Vladimer Erkomaishvili, Artem’s brother and Anzor’s great-uncle. Both Tristan Sikharulidze and Guri Sikharulidze were in the ensemble at the time of this recording. The tracks from this LP have not, to my knowledge, been released on CD.

_60 kartuli khalkhuri simghera (60 Georgian folk songs), Melodiya (С30 15877 86),_  
with booklet (1981). Five-LP set of recordings by the Rustavi Ensemble under Anzor Erkomaishvili’s direction. The set includes songs from throughout Georgia, sixteen of them from Guria, seven of them from the trio song repertoire.

_Guruli simgherebi (Gurian songs), Melodiya (C32 23435 008), 1986._ Seven-inch EP recorded by members of the Rustavi Ensemble: Anzor Erkomaishvili, Badri Toidze, and Ramin Mikaberidze. One of the few releases dedicated exclusively to the Gurian trio song repertoire.

_Asī kartuli khalkhuri simghera (One hundred Georgian folk songs), Melodiya (C30 28561 002, C30 28563 007, C30 28565 001, C30 28567 006, C30 28569 000, 205_

Features Tristan Sikharulidze as a guest soloist on twelve Gurian songs.

*Georgian Voices*, Electra Nonesuch (CD 79224-2), notes by Ted Levin (1989). U.S. re-release of material from the earlier Melodiya LPs. Does not include any Gurian trio songs, though features Tristan Sikharulidze on large-group songs including “Shemokmedura Naduri.”

*Ozurgetis polk’loruli ansambl “Elesa”* (*Ozurgeti’s folklore ensemble “Elesa”), Melodiya (C30 30447 005), 1990. A second LP by the Elesa ensemble, now under the direction of Amiran Toidze. Guri Sikharulidze is a featured soloist on several songs.

*Chokhat’auris polk’loruli ansambli “Guria”* (*Chokhatauri’s folklore ensemble “Guria”), Melodiya (C30 30305 005), 1990. LP featuring folklore ensemble from Chokhatauri. This record features Avtandil (Avto) Makharadze, one of my interlocutors, and the current director of the Guria ensemble.

*Chven Mshvidoba: 26 Gurian Songs*, International Centre for Georgian Folk Song (2003). A comprehensive recording of the Gurian trio song repertoire, performed by Guri Sikharulidze, Tristan Sikharulidze, and Anzor Erkomaishvili. Anzor discusses the process of making this record in his biography of the Sikharulidzes (Erkomaishvili 2013:14-19).

Sebastian Pank and Marika Lapauri-Burk (2004). Two-CD set featuring the Anchiskhati Church Choir and Tsinandali Choir. Includes seven trio songs recorded by Guri and Tristan Sikharulidze, with Karlo Urushadze, though they are identified only as “three old singers from Guria.” Positive identification of singers provided to author by Levan Veshapidze.

*Let Us Study Georgian Folk Song: Gurian Songs*, International Centre of Georgian Folk Song, edited by David Shugliashvili and Malkhaz Erkvanidze (2004). Four-CD set, which accompanies book of transcriptions (Shugliashvili and Erkvanidze 2004). Includes thirty Gurian songs, for trios or larger ensembles. These recordings were made using three microphones, one for each voice part, and the CDs includes, for each song, a mix of all three voices, as well as individual tracks for each part, as a pedagogical aid. Precise dates of recording are not given. Singers recorded include Guri and Tristan Sikharulidze, Otar Berdzenishvili, Anzor Erkomaishvili, Gedevan Mzhavanadze, Kote Papava, and Levan Goliadze.


*Ozurgetis sakhalkho ansambli shvidkatsa* (Ozurgeti’s folk ensemble Shvidkatsa), Sano Studio (2008). CD recorded by municipal folk ensemble Shvidkatsa
from Guria’s capital city of Ozurgeti, under the direction by Tristan Sikharulidze. Includes one of the recordings of “Me Rustveli” discussed in Chapter Three.

*Géorgie: Polyphonies vocales profanes et sacrées* (Georgia: Sacred and secular vocal polyphony), Ocora Radio France (C 560240), text by Simha Arom and Polo Vallejo (2012). Recording of chants and folk songs by the Basiani ensemble. Includes “Sajavakhura Naduri,” the work song discussed in Chapter Five.

*Unik'aluri chanats'erebi* (Unique recordings), Georgian Chanting Foundation, notes by Gia Bagashvili (2013). The CD features collaborations by the members of Shalva Chemo (Guri and Tristan Sikharulidze, Merab Kalandadze) with Anzor Erkomaishvili, Polikarpe Khubulava, and members of the folk ensemble Basiani. Includes one of the recordings of “Me Rustveli” discussed at length in Chapter Three.

*Nadi*, Anchiskhati Choir, notes by David Shugliashvili (2013). Live concert recording by the Anchiskhati Church Choir. Includes several Gurian *naduri* (large-scale work songs), and performances based on archival recordings.

Websites

Practitioners and aficionados of Georgian music have made extensive use of online resources in disseminating and sharing sound files and discographic information. The following is a short list of some sites I consulted in writing this thesis, listed in relative order of importance for my research.

alazani.ge: Website created by Giorgi Berikelashvili in 2006, featuring hundreds of mp3s of Georgian folk song, as well as images and blog posts. The audio files are organized by region and ensemble, and include many archival recordings. Although a notice is posted on the “About Us” page instructing rights-holders to contact the administrators with any questions, this site makes a great deal of apparently copyrighted material available for free download.

records.su: Online catalog of records released by Melodiya, the Soviet record label. Searchable by keyword, master number, and geographical region.

soundcloud.com/georgianchanting: Soundcloud page for the Georgian Chanting Foundation, featuring many of their releases, including the Artem Erkomaishvili *Pearls of Georgian Chant* album.

soundcloud.com/irctp: Soundcloud page for the International Research Center for Traditional Polyphony. At time of writing, their page included many of the tracks from the *Echoes of the Past* series of wax cylinder recordings, and the Georgian prisoner-of-war set co-produced with the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv.
**soundcloud.com/studio-mravaljamieri:** Soundcloud page for Studio Mravaljamieri, a recording studio in Tbilisi, which includes many live recordings of events and festivals throughout Georgia.

**dspace.nplg.gov.ge:** “Iverieli,” the online database operated by the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, includes many digitized books, scores, and mp3 files of audio recordings in the library’s collection. Searchable in English and Georgian.

**youtube.com/user/veshapo:** Youtube channel by Levan Veshapidze, scholar and singer at the Anchiskhati Church Choir. His page includes many videos demonstrating his theories on traditional Georgian tuning.
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