

## **An Articulation Phenomenon in Svan Singing Repertoire**

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“... The Svan spoken language is notable for its musicality. Accentuation and intonation in Svan speech is so rich that no other Kartvelian language can be compared to it. Many things which have been either concealed or diminished are presented powerfully in the Svan language”

(Zhghenti, 1949:96)]

### **Introduction.**

Svaneti is a highland region in western Georgia with a strong ethnic identity and subculture. Geographically, Svaneti is divided into two parts — Upper and Lower Svaneti. Similarly, the musical repertoire of Svaneti can be divided into two branches — Upper and Lower Svaneti. Svan language is one of the four Kartvelian languages, namely Georgian, Mingrelian, Laz and Svan. For historical and geopolitical reasons, Svans have preserved their unique identity over the centuries through their traditions and customs.

Despite the fact that most Svan songs are in Svan, some Georgian language songs also exist in Svaneti. Due to various factors, including, mainly, the performing style of Svan songs of certain types, as well as the peculiarities of the musical language, it is worth raising the question about the bi-musicality of Svans.<sup>1</sup>

The following questions arise in this regard:

- What is the nature of the Svan’s musical repertoire?

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of bi-musicality was introduced by M. Hood. His work, in turn, also influences B. Nettl, who talks about the Native American Blackfoot tribe as one of the examples of bi-musicality. “The Blackfoot people consider themselves bimusical” as they acquire the musical language of both the “whites and the Indians” (Nettl, 2005:58).

- Does a tangible musical subculture of Svans, and if so, what is its nature?
- Are there any special features which distinguish Svans' singing?
- What are the distinctive features of Svans' music, with special emphasis on the relationship between the music and lyrics (verbal texts) of Svan songs, etc.?

The obvious need to reconstruct the development of Svan singing in the national Georgian cultural and musical context shows that answers to these questions have historical and anthropological importance.

However, the problem is complex and requires careful multi-dimensional and highly structured research. From my part, in order to continue, I have highlighted two important aspects:

- Articulation peculiarities of Svan singing;
- Melos and/or Logos? Correlation between text and music.

Since the limited presentation format does not allow me to cover all the aspects of this phenomenon, this paper addresses on one feature, namely the articulation peculiarities of Svan singing, which I will discuss below.

**Syllabication of consonants.** When I first visited Svaneti, I was particularly struck by one thing. As soon as my hospitable Svan friends and hosts switched from Georgian into the Svan, it sounded to me as though they were arguing and it seemed to me that their timbre and intonation had changed, and they began to articulate some phonemes, especially consonants, with unusual for me special stress.

As I have already noted, the phonetic spectrum of the Svan language is diverse and rich. It actively employs those additional phonemes, which are either forgotten or lost in the Georgian language.

My goal is not to discuss the linguistic peculiarities of the Svan language but rather to examine the musical characteristics conditioned by its phonetics.

One peculiarity makes Svans' performing manner especially peculiar: when Svans sing, they actively and intensively articulate consonants. Strong articulation of consonants also occurs in other singing dialects of Georgia, although with less frequency and intensity. Strong articulation of consonants is more typical for Georgian traditional church singing. In the preface to his book "Shemokmedi School of Georgian Chant", D. Shughliashvili notes that in the verbal lyrics of both

Western and Eastern schools of singing there are often consonantal letters, which should be sung as a separate syllable, and provides an explanation of this phenomenon, quoting P. Koridze:<sup>2</sup> “In notated copies of Georgian chants... you will find mute letters under small notes: “d”, “n”, “t”, etc. which should be pronounced through having a tongue quickly (getting) flicking off the teeth. For example, in order to make ‘n’ sound, you should hit the teeth with the tongue and immediately remove it while continuing to sing. Thus you will produce an extended (spread) ‘n’ although it remains unrelated to any vowel and so on. This rule should be followed in Georgian chanting as its characteristic feature” (Shughliashvili, 2002:xiv). He suggests that this phenomenon is a general feature of Georgian chanting (ibid). This collection of the chants is rich in notated texts with sung consonants and singers always take into account this articulation peculiarity as they sing (see: “Aghdgomisa dghe ars” at [http://www.alazani.ge/base/Artemi/Artemi\\_-\\_Agdgomisa\\_Dge\\_Ars.mp3](http://www.alazani.ge/base/Artemi/Artemi_-_Agdgomisa_Dge_Ars.mp3)) and thus, it is believed to be a performing marker of Georgian chanting.

The division and syllabication of consonants occurs, albeit with less intensity, in the folk singing of other parts of Georgia<sup>3</sup> and therefore, they cannot be seen as necessarily a dialect or idiolect. Such articulation of consonants, however, is especially characteristic of Svan singing. Indeed, it is difficult to find a Svan song in which such a phenomenon does not exist. In addition, it should be noted that this phenomenon occurs in Megrelian singing. I suppose that this peculiarity of the performing manner is mainly due to one fundamental feature of Svan (and partly Megrelian) language, which distinguishes it from other parts of Georgia. We will discuss this feature below.

In the book “Svan Language”, the authors note that “the Svan language has preserved many linguistic features which have vanished in other Kartvelian languages...” (Chumburidze et al., 2007) and in the list of characteristic features of the Svan language, they mention long vowels and umlauts as the chief distinguishing phenomena between Svan and both Kartvelian and Chan-Megrelian languages (ibid,8). The connection of words with umlauts and long vowels to music is

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<sup>2</sup> At the end of the 19th century, P. Koridze travelled through the regions of Western Georgia to record church songs on the verge of extinction from old elderly chanters. He then transcribed thousands of the songs in the European notation system.

<sup>3</sup> N. Kalandadze-Makharadze notes that the vocalization of both sonic and mute consonants occurs in Georgian music and has no dialectic, genre or age restrictions. Therefore, the scholar considers such articulation a national Georgian feature. Although, it is interesting that to support this suggestion, she illustrates it only with a Svan song (Kalandadze-Makharadze, 2003:337).

interesting in itself, but my attention was primarily drawn to a phenomenon that I think reveals the complimentary influence of words and music and is known as the "intermediate vowel".

In the given study, we read that “among the six vowels which are shared by all dialects of the Svan language, five vowels are found in other Kartvelian languages and are present in all dialects. This demonstrates that they come from the national-Kartvelian root-language. We cannot say the same about the sixth vowel ჯ(ə), which is known as the neutral (interim) vowel...” (ibid, 37).<sup>4</sup> As the authors explain, the vowel ჯ(ə) stands against other vowels (a, u, i) and occurs anywhere in a word: beginning, middle and end (ibid, 37).

I suggest that the given interim vowel, which is widely employed in Svan, partly stimulates an articulation feature characterized by the syllabication of consonants, their ‘singing’ through the ჯ(ə) vowel. This is different from the practice of singing consonants in those dialects in which during such singing instead of the interim vowel, simple vowels, mainly the vowel ‘u’, are heard.

During observation of songs, I was naturally interested in Svan songs with Georgian texts.<sup>5</sup> Unexpectedly, such articulation occurs much less in these songs. A version of the song “Iav Kalti” recorded by me in Lakhushdi (Latali community in Upper Svaneti) is different from the variant in Lower Svaneti as the former is in both the Georgian and Svan languages whereas the latter is only in Georgian. This enabled me to examine both texts. As it turned out, Svans almost never emphasise consonants in Georgian texts but they stress the consonants in Svan texts. When I heard the word “sopel” (which means ‘village’ in Georgian) in the Georgian text with an articulated ჯ(ə) intermediate vowel at the end of the word, I understood that in Svan the word "sopel” means the same as in Georgian. Ethnologist M. Chamgeliani, who is ethnically Svan<sup>6</sup>, born and raised in Upper Svaneti, explained to me that pronunciation of the given word without the ჯ(ə) vowel would change the meaning of the phrase. So, “Sopel-ə Kaltida shushparia“ means: in the village of *Kaltid* they dance, whilst “Sopel Kaltida shushparia” would mean – the village of *Kaltid* is a dance.

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<sup>4</sup> A Georgian linguist A. Shanidze wrote: “Svan also contains the vowel ჯ(ə) but it is disputable whether it should be considered as basic. Through observation of a number of languages (Abkhazian, Armenian, and Svan itself) which also have this vowel, in many cases it is a result of the reduction of other vowels and is often employed as a secondary vowel introduced in order to facilitate easy pronunciation of several consonants standing together” (Shanidze, 1981:323).

<sup>5</sup> Songs with Georgian texts are rare in Upper Svaneti, whereas they are more often heard in Lower Svaneti.

<sup>6</sup> Note that the term “ethnically” I use here to denote assignation to a geographically and culturally bordered area and not to distinguish an ethnic (biological, anthropological) difference.

It is interesting that the  $\text{ɔ}(\text{ə})$  vowel also occurs in the Megrelian language but only in its Zugdidi-Samurzaqano dialectical form (Chumburidze et al., 2007:37). This fact strengthens my hypothesis that auxiliary emphasis lent by a vowel to a consonant during singing is stimulated, first of all, by the phonetic and phonological characteristics of the language, since apart from Svaneti, such articulation is mostly prevalent in Megrelian singing (audio example: *Chkim Chonguri* [http://www.alazani.ge/base/Megrulebi/Chkim\\_Chonguri.mp3](http://www.alazani.ge/base/Megrulebi/Chkim_Chonguri.mp3) ). The fact that this is indeed a Svan phenomenon is supported indirectly by a tendency which becomes obvious when comparing different versions of the same songs sung by ensembles who aim to preserve dialectic features and an authentic style of singing or Svan ensembles such as e.g. Lazhghwash by Riho choir: [http://www.alazani.ge/base/Riho/Riho - Lajgvash.mp3](http://www.alazani.ge/base/Riho/Riho_-_Lajgvash.mp3) and non-Svan choirs who give preference to a staged, academic performing style. The latter, while singing Svan songs, do not articulate in the manner of the Svans such as for example:

Lazhghwash by “Basiani” male choir

Lazhghwash by “Rustavi” male choir

It should be noted that such articulation is found primarily in words that organically contain an intermediate vowel. However, the singing of consonants, augmented by vowels, may appear in any word and with any consonant. The vowel  $\text{ɔ}(\text{ə})$ , depending on its position in a word, can get close to other plain vowels such as: ‘**u**’ = lim-zə(**u**)-ra; ‘**a**’=ilə(**a**)ri; ‘**o**’=lə(**o**)(iwa). I propose that, on the one hand, the language defines a special articulation of singing, on the other hand, musical requirements cause the need for special features and create space for their appearance, while there is no need to add additional vowels when the text is free from music. Thus, the linguistic peculiarities of singing became a stylistic feature as a result of rhythmic and melodic demands to music.

The absolute majority of Svan-language songs prove this statement. However, there are cases when this interim vowel, despite the differences, is closer to another plain vowel such as, for example ‘i’. In this respect, the round-dance song “*Murza i Bekzil*” can serve as a good example. We could not find the given song with this name in a collection of Svan poetry. Instead, the book contains a poem with the title “*Murzabeg*” (Shanidze et al., 1939:14-16), and it can also be found in the collection of notated Svan songs by V. Akhobadze (Akhobadze 1957:50). Since the content of the text of “*Murzabeg*” is similar to that of “*Murza i Bekzil*” and the context and the performing form are also

identical, we suggest that both poems now represent the same songs with different names. It is noteworthy that “*Murzabeg*” was documented in the 1940s but today we can no longer find a song with the same name. Nowadays the same round dance is known as “*Murza i Bekzil*”. I have often heard this song in Upper Svaneti and Svan informants always say that this is a historical ballad, the story of a battle of the Svans with northern Caucasian tribes and that the song immortalises the bravery of the brothers *Murza* and *Bekzil*. G. Gurchiani, a leader of the Shgarida choir from the Dmanisi eco-migrant village, also proved this explanation in the beginning with a small correction. *Bekzil* is not a Svan name as such and it must be a variant of “*Betkil*”, he said. However, after some thought, he said: this is a song about *Murzabeg* and not *Murza* and *Bekzil*.<sup>7</sup> Thus, he proved our hypothesis that “*Murza i Bekzil*” is actually the “*Murzabeg*” which has been included in the collection of *Svan Poetry*.

It is interesting that the name of the song telling the story of *Murzabeg* has mutated into a ballad about two brothers relatively recently in the last few decades. The word “*Murzabeg*” seems to have undergone a metamorphosis in which it has lost its original form (*Mərzabeg*) and meaning and led to a change in the title of the song (*Murza i Bekzil*). This seems to have been accomplished via the articulation stimulated by the Svan language, coupled with the musical and compositional demands of the melody.<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning of the song the vowel  $\mathfrak{z}(\mathfrak{ə})$ , which is a secondary vowel and which appears in Svan as a result of the oppression of plain vowels, reverts to a sound nearer to these plain vowels and sounds like “u”. As for the consonant “r”, it seems to have been added ‘i’ which in Svan means “yes” (“da” in Georgian) and hence, within a small time span (in about 50-60 years), the title of the song “*Mərzabeg*” has turned into “*Murza i Bekzil*”. In other words, the intermediate vowel ‘ə’ changed to ‘u’ and the appearance of prosodic ‘i’ in the middle of the word “*Mərza-i-beg*” to fill in the musical phrase led to the two-word title: “*Mərza i Bekzil*” which today is attributed to the

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that the name *Bekzil*, although we do not encounter it in Svaneti these days, existed in the past. According to M. Chamgeliani, one of her old ancestor’s name was *Bekz/Bekzil*. This could account for why *Murzabeg* turned into *Murza i Bekzil*. In fact, the song tells about a campaign of the northern Caucasian *Murzabeg*, who the Svans from *Mulakh* threw into a pit and covered with stones. Two weeks later *Murzabeg* managed to escape from the pit, kidnapped a child from *Muzhal* village, and went back home.

<sup>8</sup> The reason for such a metamorphosis is not limited to the given phenomenon. Observation of Svan repertoire reveals one tendency: existence of melodic, musical frame-models to which new verbal texts are adjusted. In addition, such a practice is common to many musical cultures. We continue to observe this phenomenon and intend to write a study on this issue.

names of two brothers. This phenomenon must be related to the above-mentioned melodic frame-models, although we believe it is in fact provoked by the secondary vowel characteristic of the Svan language.

In Slavonic (Russian) music there is a phenomenon connected with the influence of linguistic features on articulation features. The tradition of chanting of Slavonic "старообрядцев" (Old Believers) is based on the equal change of vowels and consonants, which in a sound stream creates "separate speech". (Separate speech). However, such articulation in Slavic music is considered to be a feature of spiritual genres and therefore B. Uspenski calls it "liturgical pronunciation" when applied during prayers.

Such articulation (so-called "khomovoe (хомовое)" and "Naonnoe" (наонное)) in church singing, according to the author, is a guarantee of preserving the melodic structure intact (Uspenskiy, 1968). This phenomenon, however, is related to the phonetic peculiarities of Russian, such as the reduction of half-vowels and their conversion into vowels.<sup>9</sup> According to H. Lunt, "The maintenance of a vowel even in a weak position was supported in some communities by the habit of singing or chanting many liturgical texts to old tunes which were composed to match the musical structure to the vowels (including jers) of archaic texts" (Lunt, 2001:36).

J. Gardner, in his study of Russian church music, observes this phenomenon not only Russian church but also folk singing. He distinguishes between two types of vocalisation *khomonía* and *anenaika* noting that *Khomonía* is a result of the replacement of semi-vowels such as *ѣ* and *ь* with *o* and *e* (however, there are exceptions, when other vowels such as 'e', for example, are also heard), which indicates its linguistic ontogenesis, whilst "anenaika" is a purely musical phenomenon which is one of the organising instruments of Byzantine liturgical chanting (Gardner 2000, 275-286). Similarly, The sixth (interim) vowel *ǰ(ə)* in Svan language operates in a similar way to the Slavic *ѣ* and *ь* which, as they undergo vocalisation, are replaced by 'o' and 'e' (in Russian) and in Svan. Depending on its position in a word, it can sound like 'u', 'a', and 'o'. And if a word does not

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<sup>9</sup> V. Metallov, in his study of Russian church chanting, reveals the following phenomenon: "... At the end of the XIV century half-vowel pronunciation of these letters in chants became difficult and in spoken and written language, it is completely lost. In the meantime the desire to preserve liturgical notated books in their original form without changing even the text itself, led to the need to give these semi-vowel letters the value of vowels. On this basis, the semi-vowels *ѣ* and *ь* became pronounced as *o* и *e* и..." (Metallov 1893, 43,44)

contain the ჳ(ჳ) intermediate vowel but syllabication still occurs, it becomes somewhat like Slavic-Byzantine “anenaika” which is stimulated by the demands of the music.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from the sixth ჳ(ჳ) vowel, distinct vocalisation of consonants, I believe, is also stimulated by one more peculiarity of articulation. As S. Zhghenti, a researcher in Svan phonetics, notes, Svan is characterized by “intense and energised articulation (pronunciation) of consonants which has created a basis for variations of vowels in the Svan language...” (Zhghenti 1949:195-196). The researcher offers a scrutinised description of different features of Svan phonetics including consonants and shares his noteworthy observation: in Svan, “sonorous occlusives, coming at the absolute end in upper Bal, lower Bal and Laskh dialects, maintain sonority. Such a phenomenon is alien to both Kartli and Megrelian-Ch’an (languages). On the contrary, these languages tend to make the sonorous occlusive, placed at the absolute end, mute during pronunciation” (ibid, 152-153). This feature of Svan is one more motivator for the distinct articulation and “syllabication” of consonants in Svan singing and one more argument as to why, in this respect, Svan singing stands out from other regions of Georgia.

At the same time, the fact that such articulation is characteristic of Georgian chanting still remains an academic subject of interest. It is perhaps too early to talk specifically about the directions of these influences at this stage, especially in a situation when supposedly, “...ჳ(ჳ) vowel in Svan (and Megrelian as well) stands out and must have come into being later than other simple vowels” (Chumburidze et al., 2007:38]. It is hard to tell how the ჳ(ჳ) vowel can be a late addition if it bears not only phonetic but also phonological function with distinct semantic meaning (for example: *esgh-ᄁ-ri* – entreat; *esghri* – it goes; or: *ants-ᄁ-re* – it squeezes; *ants’re* – it makes bitter; or: *aft-ᄁ-re* it drills; *after* – it exhausts, etc.). This phenomenon is likely to be of linguistic origin. However, I believe that its distinguished place and its being a distinct articulation marker in Svan singing makes it of special importance and raises the following question: could this phenomenon have been a shared feature of all the Kartvelian languages, gradually becoming obsolete in other Kartvelian languages and dialects? And further, could it have been preserved only in a few dialects fragmentally – partly in Samegrelo and fully – in Svaneti? This question is legitimised by the

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<sup>10</sup> This phenomenon, as in the case of “Murzabeg”, often leads to the distortion of a text, which can be explained by the domination of musical structure over the verbal text. We will discuss the problem of rhythmical accentuation of the verbal and musical text and the inter-adjustment of these two actors in the next chapter focusing on Melos and Logos and their correlation. Furthermore, the correct form of Murza is ‘Mzrza’ in both “Mərzabeg” and “Mərza i Bekzil” in which the interim (semi-) vowel ’ჳ’ has been replaced by the vowel “u”.



peculiarities of the Svan singing “language”, which are depicted with ancient features as well as the context of the songs preserved up to the present.

The above discourse enables us to draw some conclusions. Namely:

- Svans’ performing style, compared to other singing dialects, is particularly characterised by intensive articulation of consonants, stimulated by the linguistic features of the Svan language itself. I believe that the main motivators of this phenomenon are phonetic (sometimes phonological) peculiarities of Svan language, which, in turn, make it possible for the syllabication of any consonant according to the requirements of musical “speech”. For example, the so-called secondary vowel  $\mathfrak{z}(\mathfrak{a})$  as an intermediate sound among simple vowels such as – i, o, u, a – is not articulated openly, and serves to amplify the consonant before it. This gives the impression that the consonant is “sung”.
- This feature of the vowel  $\mathfrak{z}(\mathfrak{a})$ , merged with a consonant, becomes particularly audible during the vocalization of the text, which is determined by the laws of musical sound production (sound/weakness propagation in time and space).
- Distinct singing articulation of consonants is also motivated by another peculiarity of Svan language, namely the intensity of sonorous occlusives (sound occlusion) at the absolute end of words, which is not found in other dialects, except for some mountainous regions.
- The vowel  $\mathfrak{z}(\mathfrak{a})$  as well as sonic consonants, which retain sonority in the absolute ends of words, seem to have entered the singing “speech”, which causes more intense articulation of the syllables containing this vowel. As a result of vocalization, this intermediate vowel has moved into closer proximity with simple vowels. The phenomenon is similar to the Slavic singing articulation known as *khomonja*.
- We assume that stressed application of the vowel  $\mathfrak{z}(\mathfrak{a})$  inspired the habit of distinct articulation of consonants in general, which in turn subordinated musical requirements. As a result, the practice of “expanding” consonants with vowels in the adapting new texts to existing tunes, as well as filling the rhythmic gaps, became a commonplace. This peculiarity of articulation is one of the factors determining the metamorphosis of texts, and is a musical phenomenon by its very nature (for example: “Murzabeg”, which over time turned into “M $\mathfrak{a}$ (u)r(i)za(r) i Bekzil.”)

Despite these findings, there are still issues that will remain the subject of future research. Among them, for example, is the practice of the syllabication of consonants and its ontogenesis in Georgian chanting. For example, as shown above, it seems that the habit of the syllabication of consonants in the singing of Svans is related to the vocalisation of the intermediate vowel and thus is determined and regulated by linguistic features, in Georgian church singing, on the contrary, the articulation of consonant seems to be due to musical requirements.

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