

An Articulation Phenomenon in Svan Singing Repertoire

“... 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 high mountainous region in the west of Georgia with a pronounced ethnical identity and sub-culture. Geographically, Svaneti is divided into two - Upper and Lower Svaneti. Similarly, the Svan musical repertoire can also be divided into two branches –Upper and Lower. The Svan language is one of the four Kartvelian languages, namely Georgian, Megrelian, Laz, and Svan. For historical and geopolitical reasons, the Svans have, over the centuries, maintained their unique identity through their traditions and customs.

In spite of the fact that most Svan songs are in the Svan language, some Georgian language songs also exist in Svaneti. Due to different factors, including chiefly the performing style of Svan songs of certain types, as well as peculiarities of the musical language, it is worthwhile to raise the question of the bi-musicality of Svans.¹

In this regard, the following questions present themselves:

- * What is the character of the Svan musical repertoire?
- * Does a perceptible Svan musical sub-culture exist and if so, what is its nature?
- * Are there special peculiarities which distinguish Svan singing?
- * What are the characteristic features of Svan music, with special reference to the correlation between the music and lyrics (verbal texts) of Svan songs, etc.?

¹ The concept of bi-musicality was introduced by Mental Hood. His work, in turn, also influences Bruno Nettle, who talks about the Native American Blackfoot tribe as one of the examples of bi-musicality. Blackfoot people consider themselves bilingual as they acquire the musical language of both the “whites and the Indians” [Nettle 2005:71-72].

The clear need to reconstruct the development of Svan singing within a national Georgian cultural and musical context shows that answers to these questions are of historical and anthropological importance.

However, the problem is complex and sophisticated and requires rigorous multi-dimensional and highly structured research. From our side, in order to proceed, we singled out two important aspects:

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

Since our restricted presentation format does not allow us to cover all the aspects of this phenomenon, this paper touches on one specific feature, namely the articulation features of Svan singing.

This we will discuss below.

Syllabication of consonants. When I first visited Svaneti one thing especially struck me. As soon as my hospitable Svan friends and hosts switched from Georgian into the Svan language, it sounded to me as though they were arguing. Based on my personal listening experience, it seemed that when they broke into Svan, their timbre and intonation changed, and they began to articulate some phonemes, especially consonants, which appeared to me to have an unusual special stress.

As we have noted, the phonetic repertoire of the Svan language is diverse and rich. It supports and actively employs additional phonemes and letters in addition to the ones which have been either forgotten or lost in Georgian.

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

One feature makes the Svan performing manner especially distinctive: as Svans sing, they actively and intensively articulate consonants. Strong articulation of consonants takes place in other singing dialects of Georgia, although with less frequency and intensity. Strong articulation of consonants is more characteristic of Georgian traditional church singing. In the preface to his book "Shemokmedi Chanting School of Georgian Chant", D. Shughliashvili notes that in verbal texts of chants from both Western and Eastern chanting schools, we often find consonant letters which have to be sung as a separate syllable and cites the explanation of this phenomenon given by P. Koridze:² "In notated copies of Georgian chants... you will find mute letters under small

² 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.

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]. Shughliashvili 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: (see example N3; p. 4). Chanters always take into account this articulation peculiarity as they chant (see audio example N3; for example “აღდგომისა დღე არს”) and thus, it is believed to be a performing marker of Georgian chanting.

The separation and syllabication of consonants occurs, although with less intensity, in the singing of folk songs from other parts of Georgia³ and therefore, cannot be seen as necessarily a dialect or idiolect. Such articulation of consonants is however especially characteristic of Svan singing. Indeed it is difficult to find a Svan song in which such a phenomenon does not exist. It is worth noting in addition, that this phenomenon occurs in Megrelian song. We suggest that this peculiarity of performing manner is mainly conditioned by one fundamental feature of the Svan (and partly the 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... 2007] and in the list of characteristic features of the Svan language, they mention long vowels and umlauts as the chief distinguishing phenomena from both Kartvelian and Chan-Megrelian languages [Chumburidze 2007:8]. The correlation of words with umlauts and long vowels with music is interesting in itself but our attention, first of all, has been drawn to the phenomenon which, we believe, reveals the complimentary influence of words and music, which is known as “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 ϱ , which is known as the neutral (interim) vowel...” [Chumburidze ... 2007:37].⁴ As the authors explain, the vowel ϱ stands against other vowels (a, u, i) and occurs anywhere in a word: beginning, middle and end [Chumburidze ... 2007:37].

³N. 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 2002:337].

⁴ The famous Georgian linguist A. Shanidze wrote: “Svan also contains the vowel ϱ 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. Scholio].

We 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 ɔ 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, we were naturally interested in Svan songs with Georgian texts.⁵ Unexpectedly, such articulation occurs much less in these songs. A version of the song “Iav Kalti” recorded by us 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 us to examine both texts. As it turned out, Svans almost never emphasize consonants in Georgian texts but they emphasize the consonants in Svan texts. When we heard the word “sopel” (which means ‘village’ in Georgian) in the Georgian text with an articulated ɔ interim vowel at the end of the word, we understood that in Svan the word “sopel” means the same as in Georgian. Ethnologist Madona Chamgeliani, who is ethnically Svan⁶, born and raised in Upper Svaneti, explained to us that pronunciation of the given word without the ɔ vowel would change the meaning of the phrase (“Sopel ɔ Kaltida shushparia“ means: in the village of *Kaltid* they dance, but “Sopel Kaltida shushparia” would mean - the village of *Kaltid* is a dance).

It is interesting that the ɔ vowel also occurs in the Megrelian language but only in its Zugdidi-Samurzaqano dialectal form [Chumburidze... 2007:37]. This fact strengthens our 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 (see the audio example “*Chkim Chonguri*”). 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 by ensembles who aim to preserve dialectic features and an authentic style of singing, 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 (for example the Rustavi and Basiani ensembles).

It should be noted that such articulation occurs first of all in words which contain organically the interim vowel. However, the singing of consonants augmented by vowels can happen in any word and with any consonant (see notated example N1 and audio example No. 1). The vowel ɔ depending on its position in a word can get close to other plain vowels such as: ‘u’ = lim-z ɔ (u)-ra;

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

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

‘a’=ilɔ(a)ri; ‘o’=lɔ(o)(iwa). We suggest on the one hand that if the language causes singing articulation, on the other hand musical demands force such features and create space for it in a text when the latter is free of music and there is no need for such a vowel. Thus the linguistic features which appear in singing have become a stylistic peculiarity as a result of the rhythmic and melodic demands of the 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... 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*”. We have often heard this song in Upper Svaneti and our 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 immortalizes the bravery and the name of the brothers *Murza* and *Bekzil*. Gurgen Gvichiani, 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.⁷ 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 meaning and led to a change in the title of the song. This seems to have been accomplished via the articulation stimulated by the Svan language, coupled with the musical and compositional demands of the melody.⁸

⁷ It should be noted that the name *Bekzil*, although we do not encounter it in Svaneti these days, existed in the past. According to M. Changeliani, 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 *Mulakhi* threw into a pit and covered with stones. Two weeks later *Murzabeg* managed to escape from the pit, kidnapped a child from *Muzhali* village, and went back home.

⁸ It should be noted that 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.

In the beginning of the song the vowel *ɔ*, 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 to the consonant “r”, it appears to have added by ‘i’ which in Svan stands for the particle “yes” (“da” in Georgian) and hence, within a small time span (in about 50-60 years), the title of the song “Murzabeg” has been turned into “Murza i Bekzil”. 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.

It is noteworthy that the phenomenon related to the influence of linguistic features on the articulation peculiarities turned out to take place in Slavic (Russian) music. Namely, in the chanting of Slavic “staroobriad” (old believers), which is based on an equal alteration of vowels and consonants which in sound flow creates “segregated speech”. However, such articulation in Slavic music is considered to be a feature of spiritual genres and therefore Uspenski calls it “liturgical utterance.” It is interesting that Uspenski considers such chanting, which is sometimes called “*khomovi*” (хомовым) and “*naonii*” (наонным), a guarantee for keeping melodic structure untouched. It is noteworthy that this phenomenon is related to the phonetic peculiarities of Russian, such as the reduction of half-vowels and their conversion into vowels [Червякова Опубликовано в сборнике: Старообрядчество: История. Культура. Современность: Материалы. – М., 2000. – С. 486-496].⁹

Lunt, in his research on old Slavic grammar, notes: “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].

However, although the majority of researchers assign this phenomenon to the liturgical practice of the church, according to J. Gardner, who studied Russian church music, the given phenomenon is observed in Russian folk singing as well. He also distinguishes between two types of vocalization: *khomonía* and *anenaika*. *Khomonía* is a result of the replacement of semi-vowels such as *ъ* 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 organizing instruments of Byzantine liturgical chanting [Gardner 2000:275-286]. Since there are no relevant terms in Georgian musicology, to make the point clearer, we will employ the Slavic and Byzantine terminology. The sixth (interim) vowel *ɔ* in Svan language operates in a similar way to the Slavic *ъ* and *ь* which, as

⁹ 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 *ъ* and *ь* became pronounced as *o* и *e* и...” [Прот. В. Металлов, Очерки истории Православного Церковного пения в России, ТСЛ, 1995, С. 54]

they undergo vocalization, 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 contain the ɔ interim vowel but syllabication still occurs, it becomes more like Slavic-Byzantine “anenaika” which is stimulated by the demands of the music.¹⁰

Apart from the sixth ɔ vowel, distinct vocalization of consonants, we 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 energized 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 scrutinized 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” [Zhghenti 1949:152-153]. 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, “...ɔ vowel in Svan (and Megrelian as well) stands out and must have come into being later than other simple vowels” [Chumburidze ... 2007:38]. It is hard to tell how the ɔ vowel can be a late addition if it has not only phonetic but also phonological function with distinct semantic meaning (for example: *esgh̄ɔri* entreat; *esghri* it goes; *ants̄ɔre* it squeezes; *antsre* it makes bitter; *aft̄ɔre* it drills; *afre* it exhausts, etc.). This phenomenon is likely to be of linguistic origin. However, we 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 legitimized by the 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:

- The Svan performing style, in comparison to other singing dialects, is particularly distinguished by the intense articulation of consonants stimulated by the linguistic

¹⁰ 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.

peculiarities of the Svan language itself. We argue, that the primary motivators of this phenomenon are phonetic (sometimes phonological) features of the Svan language, which, in turn, make it possible for the syllabication of any consonant according to the demands of musical “speech”;

- For example, the so-called secondary vowel ϱ as an interim sound among simple vowels such as - i, o, u, a – is not articulated openly, and serves the function of amplifying the consonant before it. In this way it creates the impression that the consonant is “sung”;
- This peculiarity of the vowel ϱ merged with a consonant becomes especially audible during the vocalization of text which is determined by the laws of music sound production (spread of a sound/syllable in time and space);
- The interim vowel ϱ is also part of the neighbouring Zugdidi-Samurzaqano dialect of Megrelian, which also explains the clear articulation of consonants in Megrelian singing (although with less intensity than in Svan music);
- Distinct singing articulation of consonants is also motivated by another of the peculiarities of Svan, namely the intensity of sonorous occlusives at the absolute end of words, which does not occur in other dialects except in some mountain regions;
- The vowel ϱ as well as sonorous consonants, which maintain sonority in the absolute ends of words, appears to have entered singing “speech” as well, which causes more intense articulation of the syllables containing this vowel. As a result of vocalization, this interim vowel moved into closer proximity with simple vowels. The given phenomenon is similar to the Slavic singing articulation known as *khomonja*.
- We assume that stressed application of the vowel ϱ inspired the habit of distinct articulation of consonants in general, which, in turn, subordinated musical demands. As a result, the practice of “expanding” consonants with vowels in the adaptation of new texts to existing tunes, as well as filling the rhythmical gaps has become a common practice. An example of this also appears in Slavic-Byzantine *anenaika*. Such a peculiarity of articulation is one of the factors that determines the metamorphosis of texts, and represents a musical phenomenon by its very nature (for example: “Murzabeg”, which over time turned into “M ϱ (u)r(i)za(r) i Bekzil.”

Despite these conclusions, there are still questions which remain the subject of future study. Among them, for example, is the practice of the syllabication of consonants and its ontogenesis in Georgian chanting. We assume that the roots of this phenomenon are in the peculiarities of church chanting (for example, *anenaika*, which, on the one hand, is a tool for construction of form, and on the other hand, an indicator of a melodic formula which itself determines the practice of adjusting new texts to existing tunes and rhythmical models. Therefore, the question of the interrelationship of verbal and musical languages is raised. The strictly regulated canonic of church chanting determines the

necessity of the protection of canonical voice (tune) and thus, adjustment of texts, which like in both Byzantine-Slavic and Georgian chanting, provokes melismatic vocalization (*anenaika*). This represents a purely vocal phenomenon. And therefore, vocalized articulation of consonants in Svan singing is related to the interim (irrational) vowel, which is, in turn, triggered by liturgical laws. Hence, if it is the case that in the Svan musical repertoire the practice of the stressed singing of consonants is related to the vocalization of an interim vowel and is thus determined and regulated by linguistic features, in Georgian chanting, on the contrary, consonant stress seems to be driven by musical demands.

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