

Folk Polyphony Goes Viral: Televised Singing Competitions and the Play of Authenticity in the Republic of Georgia

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Abstract: Televised talent competitions have become a global phenomenon, and Georgia is no exception. While such programs usually feature pop-rock repertoire that is often sung in English, numerous performances of traditional folk polyphony have been featured on shows like Georgia's Got Talent. I examine three diverse case studies, unpacking what each one reveals about the contested understandings of authenticity, heritage, tradition, and folk music in Georgia today, particularly in relation to gender. Debates over the definitions of these terms often mask struggles over power relations at varying scales.

Résumé : Les concours de talents télévisés sont devenus un phénomène mondial, et la Géorgie n'y fait pas exception. Mais tandis que ces programmes mettent en général à l'honneur un répertoire pop-rock qui est la plupart du temps chanté en anglais, des spectacles tels que « La Géorgie a un incroyable talent » ont souvent montré des performances de polyphonie traditionnelle. J'examine ici trois études de cas et ce que chacune révèle de contradictions quant aux conceptions de l'authenticité, du patrimoine, de la tradition et de la musique traditionnelle en Géorgie aujourd'hui, en particulier en relation avec le genre. Les débats qui portent sur la définition de ces termes dissimulent souvent des conflits au sujet de relations de pouvoir à diverses échelles.

The Datik'ashvili family trio took the stage with humble confidence, verbally informing the hosts of their love for folk song and polyphony before they began. The strong lead voice and fluid melismas of mid-adolescent Tiko were complemented by the upper harmony of her younger brother Davit and the bass vocal foundation of uncle Zura, who also accompanied with strummed chords on the *panduri* (a three-stringed chordophone slightly larger than a ukulele).

After a short homophonic introduction, Zura launched into the solo verse

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of the faster-paced “Nu giq’vars kalau” (Girl, don’t love),¹ which led to impressed eyebrow-raising at the judges’ table. Tiko’s re-entry at the bridge led audience members to rise to their feet while applauding thunderously, and the presenters backstage couldn’t resist singing along with the chorus. The performers had to hold back their smiles as they witnessed the rapturous response. The song’s end was greeted by a near-unanimous standing ovation from the audience and cries of “Bravo!” from the presenters.

The judges, slightly more measured, informed the trio that they were “very talented” and “sang together fantastically” (*Nich’ieri* 2011). Success! The Datik’ashvilis received unanimous approval. They would be returning to the next round of *Georgia’s Got Talent*.²

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Televised talent competitions where viewers call in to vote for their preferred performers have become a global phenomenon, and Georgia has its own licensed iterations of familiar brands — *Georgia’s Got Talent*, *X-Factor*, and *Georgian Idol* (*Chven Varsk’vlavebi Vart* “We Are Stars”³) — judged by an array of music and theatre professionals and entertainment journalists. Locally-inspired programs also exist: a new singing competition appeared on the TV channel Rustavi 2 in April 2018. Entitled *Mkholod Kartuli* (“Only Georgian”⁴), the program was evidently meant to counterbalance the predominance of English-language repertoire on other competitions. Despite Rustavi 2’s reputation for being relatively less conservative, nationalistic, and religious than other stations, appealing to national pride is evidently good business.

I first noticed the appearance of folk music styles regarded as broadly “traditional” on televised talent competitions with the Datik’ashvilis’ 2011 performance on *Georgia’s Got Talent*. The apparent incongruity struck me immediately. As a viewer, I’ve always associated such programs with pop-rock repertoire and, even in Georgia, they are usually won by singers performing international popular standards in English. Over the years, though, folk music keeps popping up in these competitions in various guises.

In this paper, I will examine three diverse case studies — viral stars Trio Mandili competing to perform on Eurovision, belter Mananik’o Tsent’eradze singing a folk lullaby on *Georgian Idol*, and Ensemble K’asletil’s performance of an ancient round dance on *Georgia’s Got Talent* — and will unpack what each one reveals about the contested understandings of authenticity, heritage, and folk music in Georgia today. Each of these cases features women performers, which is notable in a folk music scene where men are valorized and celebrated as the best singers and most important tradition bearers (Tsitsishvili 2006). Given the

patriarchal bent of Georgian society and the conservative cast of the folk music scene, women performers may find a certain freedom in reaching out to more cosmopolitan and youthful audiences through television and easily shareable social media clips. However, this also brings the risk of a greater backlash from the defenders of traditional culture. To successfully defy such expectations, women folk performers need to have a strong base of support independent of that scene, since pushing matters too far might result in their rejection from it.

One of the fundamental principles informing my analysis is that discourses of authenticity, purity, national pride, and tradition are inherently political since they always have implications for belonging, boundary maintenance, and authority claims (Barth 1969; Stokes 1994). Within this context, I see Georgian vocal polyphony as an immediately recognizable emblem of the nation. Whenever Georgians hear vocal polyphony, semantic snowballing leads them mentally back to their previous encounters with the style, and many of these indexical associations will inevitably be freighted with sentiments of patriotism, national pride, and cultural distinctiveness, along with more personal associations (Turino 1999). In terms employed by Randall Collins, Georgian polyphony can be seen as one of the “sacred symbols” featured in “interaction rituals” — events that, when successful, instill “emotional energy” in two or more individuals gathered around a common stimulus (2004: 107, 109). However, according to Collins, interaction rituals cannot occur without bodily co-presence since rhythmic entrainment is fundamental to their success, so a broader set of analytical tools is necessary in exploring what vocal polyphony means when mediated by a screen.

Broadcasts of any sort call “publics” into being, constituting a group of unknown others coalesced around simultaneous viewing (Warner 2002: 57). Through circulating texts (here the programs), they create an audience oriented around imagined others, who share a common fund of emotional experiences and bodily and mental practices (B. Dueck 2016: 395–400). In a way, this process is akin to the well-known establishment of national communities around the shared reading of newspapers in a standardized vernacular language (Anderson 2006), but more relevantly, perhaps, these programs contribute to an understanding of national belonging that is intimate, not official. As Martin Stokes has noted, the “cosmopolitanism from below” expressed in popular forms shapes an intimate sense of national identity that validates everyday life (2010: 20).

While simultaneity is not actually essential for these events to create publics, the excitement of “liveness” (including the suspenseful revelation of winners and losers) and the chance to participate through audience voting create together the potential for a more affective and personal viewing experience that edges it closer to an interaction ritual with imagined living others. Performances also gain viewers as individuals share YouTube videos through social media and participate

in discussion and debate with friends or strangers through comments. As these interactions occur, the abstract implied public of unknown others becomes an encountered community of individuals in a personal network. The initial viewing, even if it was solo, becomes the impetus for later live interaction rituals. Interactive moments of “groupness” like these are necessary to turn any abstract category of identity (being “Georgian”) into a lived, encountered experience of group belonging and identification (Brubaker 2004). Mass media programs have of course had this “water cooler talk” potential for a long time — one of the ways in which people develop their tastes and learn to value certain symbols is through low-stakes casual encounters like this.

In this article, however, I am less interested in the fandoms created around specific talent programs (each of which would qualify as a separate “public”) than I am in the way particular performances of folk music point to conflicting understandings and parameters of authenticity, and the different kinds of people who value each sort of authenticity. I will not outline a typology of authenticity here but argue simply that since authenticity is such a wide-ranging and multifarious rhetorical invocation, struggles over it can mask many other kinds of concerns that are ultimately more important to the actors involved. Georgian polyphony itself is a multivalent field of practice that becomes a site of contestation and debate. Encounters with folk music in the public sphere, and the debates over propriety and authenticity inspired by the supposedly incongruous marriage of treasured spiritual heritage and commodified mass-market media forms, inspire soul-searching. For those invested in folk music, they may build a sense of cultural intimacy, a rueful self-recognition that their country does not value its heritage in a way they would prefer (Herzfeld 2004; Stokes 2010). But for some musicians, practices beyond the bounds of “authenticity” may provide them with freedom and new opportunities.

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Georgian vocal polyphony (*mravalkhmianoba/polifonia*) is a UNESCO-recognized three-part musical style with a vast repertoire and significant regional variations (Jordania 2000). I carried out fieldwork in Georgia in 2015 and 2016, particularly focusing on the polyphony of the mountainous northwestern region of Svaneti, home of the Svans, a distinct Georgian-related ethnic minority with their own language. This area is regarded as the source of some of the country’s most well-preserved ethnographic customs and ancient musical repertoires, which are featured in two of the following case studies. While my research did not primarily focus on the concerns raised in this paper, the subject of authenticity in folk music came up constantly in conversation. Many of my interlocutors wanted to ensure

that I understood what “real” folk music was. I have chosen to examine folk music on the small screen because assessors, viewers, and audiences of competitions feel even more emboldened to share their opinions and judgements. These programs represent perhaps the most high-profile way in which traditional music comes before a mass audience in Georgia today, providing an excellent opportunity to take the pulse of public feeling about folk music and to understand who finds this threatening. The public comments and judgements examined in this paper, which respondents were willing to record for posterity through written public debate, only crystallize comments I heard informally on dozens of occasions.

In Georgia, there is a strong nationalist constituency that takes extreme pride in its national treasures and symbols, including vocal polyphony (Tsitsishvili 2009). Even Georgians who do not particularly like folk music will freely brag to foreigners that the song “Chakrulo” was one of only 27 musical selections chosen to travel into the cosmos on the 1977 Voyager spacecraft’s Golden Record.⁵ Many older Georgians will also feel a sense of moral duty to at least *pretend* that they appreciate folk music. However, “folk music” does not imply the same thing to all people in Georgia today. The parameters of authenticity are constantly debated, as the term “folk” is applied equally to older customary village practices, staged folkloric representations, and new pop-folk hybrids.

Andrea Kuzmich (2007), herself a scholar and performer of Georgian vocal polyphony, notes that for folk music to be authentic in nationalist and revivalist ideologies it must be oral and rural. This is authenticity in the “Romantic” sense, as Keir Keightley describes it — an authenticity defined by tradition and continuity with the past, a connection to roots, the use of natural sounds, liveness, and a sense of community (Keightley 2001: 136).⁶ While this sort of concern is indeed evident in the cases I discuss, I also argue that rurality and orality are really only part of the issue. As Allan Moore puts it, authenticity is not located in a particular combination of musical sounds; rather, it is a “matter of interpretation which is made and fought for from within a cultural and, thus, historicized position. It is ascribed, not inscribed” (2002: 210). Authenticity serves multiple purposes and depends on the position of the parties invoking it. As Donna A. Buchanan argues with respect to the related concept of tradition, “as a conceptual marker it is remarkably fluid and totally relative” (1995: 408), frequently serving present political needs more than defending the past. For the purposes of this paper, I put the focus on the “activities of various perceivers” and the “reasons they might have for finding, or failing to find, a particular performance authentic” (Moore 2002: 221).

The late Edisher Garaqanidze, the most influential Georgian ethnomusicologist of the last 50 years, proposed a basic distinction between “primary folklore,” which is practiced organically in village life and passed down

orally from generation to generation, and “secondary folklore,” which transfers reified peasant customs to a performance stage (Garaqanidze 2007).⁷ The cases we turn to now are all presentational displays of secondary folklore, but each one reveals something different about conceptions of authenticity and the tensions that surround folk music in Georgia today.

Case Study 1: Trio Mandili and “Real Folk Music”

In 2017, Georgia held a televised competition where viewers could vote via SMS to choose their country’s Eurovision contestant. A women’s group called Trio Mandili had some early hype and a high degree of name recognition due to a famous viral video. In the end, their performance was dreadfully out of tune,⁸ although many of their fans argued that the singers simply could not hear their own voices over the pre-recorded accompaniment track. Stylistically, while their performance did feature occasional harmonization, it was rather far afield from the usual folk-inspired, panduri-accompanied three-voice model that had proven so successful for the young trio. In fact, there was no panduri and choreography appeared to take precedence over the vocals, which were in unison more often than in three parts. The song “Me da Shen” (“Me and You”), sung in Georgian to music by a German composer, featured an almost Celtic-sounding hook and heavily synthesized backing track, and was evidently felt by many listeners to be a poor representation of Georgian folk music, and of Georgia in general. Mandili’s name recognition wasn’t enough to counteract the poor quality of their performance. They ended up placing 12th of 25.

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One of the most obvious divisions in Georgian folk music today falls between what some Georgian ethnomusicologists privately call “real folk” and “pseudo folk.” This last category, which has been termed more objectively by local ethnomusicologists as “parafolklore,” “modernized folklore,” or “transformed folklore” (Kotrikadze 2018), especially includes the kind of globalized hybrids of popular and local styles that today exist in many countries, known in Georgia under the names of “ethno fusion” (cf. Ninoshvili 2009) and “pop folk.” Any of these styles on either side of the real/fake division might be referred to locally by a set of interchangeable terms: *folkloruli*, *traditsiuli*, or *khalkhuri*. Many folklorists refuse to call pop-influenced forms “folk,” but the vast majority of the population is much less discerning.

One of the major brands of popular folk music existing in Georgia today is a style I call “panduri pop,” featuring newly-composed three-voice songs

accompanied by the chromatic panduri (locally referred to as the “classical” or *k'lasik'uri* panduri), and possibly a pop-rock rhythm section. Some consider this style inauthentic for several reasons.

Firstly, panduri pop eschews traditional intonation — the older “folk” (*kbalkhuri*) panduri is diatonic and non-tempered (see Fig. 1). In traditional intonation, thirds are largely neutral and it is difficult to classify triadic chords as major or minor. On many occasions, singers and scholars expressed to me their preference for the folk panduri over its modernized descendent.

Secondly, ethnomusicologist Teona Lomsadze told me (without dismissing the style as valueless) that panduri pop songs represent a simplified and standardized style that mixes musical elements from Georgia’s eastern mountain regions (the origin of the folk panduri) and the North Caucasus. While many songs originally sung with the folk panduri were transferred to the chromatic instrument during Soviet times (with intonation adjusted accordingly), they maintained their specific regional character. A common complaint is that newer panduri songs are generic and reuse stereotypical melodies and chord progressions (Lomsadze, email correspondence, July 9, 2018). One way in which the authenticity of a folk song is determined is by analyzing how well it reflects a specific regional musical style,¹⁰ but the chromatic panduri is found in all regions of the country.

Indeed, the chromatic panduri is probably the most widespread “folk-related” instrument in Georgia today. Other folk instruments tend to be much more regionally specific. The panduri (as well as the acoustic guitar) is a key instrument that appears when youth are hanging out together, and many of the songs performed



Fig. 1. Chromatic panduri (above) and folk panduri (below) — note fret spacing.

at school talent shows or learned from YouTube in the solitude of an adolescent's bedroom were written for it. I certainly met many teenagers in various far-flung locations who were quick to pick up the panduri and perform when they learned of my interest in folk music. From one perspective, the chromatic panduri is at the centre of a pan-Georgian, grassroots, amateur musical style with Georgian rather than international roots. This hybridized form actually extends the reach of folk idioms among the broader Georgian public (Tsitsishvili 2009: 16-18). However, the corresponding worry is that regionally distinctive traditions will be effaced.

Recently, the panduri pop of Trio Mandili unexpectedly struck an international chord. In September 2014, a group of young women made a "selfie video" as they walked down a rural road singing a tune called "Aparek'a."¹¹ At the time they were teenagers (some still in high school) from Khevsureti, one of Georgia's most remote highland provinces, who decided to record a song for fun. The informal and unaffected nature of the performance was one of its selling points — the lead singer in particular kept making silly faces, and one of the other performers held the hand of a (non-singing) little girl who might have been a younger sister or niece. The scenario implied that the young women were just singing in the course of their everyday activities. Two of the singers had recorded a few videos and performed live together before, but their audience was largely limited to people who knew them.

The performers admitted that they were hoping to gain some attention and had done several takes to appear as natural as possible, but the response was far greater than they could have expected. They quickly gained more than one million views on YouTube (up to 5.8 million as of November 2018), nearly two thousand



Fig. 2. A montage of stills from Trio Mandili's videos.

comments on Reddit,¹² and coverage in the *Huffington Post* (Barnes 2014), among other media outlets. The group, dubbed Trio Mandili,¹³ was taken on by a Ukrainian manager, has recorded two albums, and tours Europe and Russia; however, the group's membership has fluctuated somewhat, with only one original member (the lead singer) still remaining; the bass singer/panduri accompanist slot has been filled by four successive performers as of July 2018.¹⁴

Mandili's later output consists primarily of videos attempting to recreate the magic of their first viral hit. The formula includes the lead singer holding the cameraphone, the panduri player standing furthest away, and the three women walking slowly through a scenic locale as they sing, all the while mugging for the camera and often wearing some form of folk dress (see Fig. 2). The view count on newer videos is still substantial, but much lower than "Aparek'a." At best, videos recorded in the past year might gain 500,000 views. Judging by viewer responses, Mandili has a huge audience in Turkey and Russia, though English and Spanish comments are also common, many of them from men apparently smitten by the beauty of the singers. Their success has led to a certain number of copycats, like the group Samida ("Three Sisters"), young Turkish siblings with Georgian ancestry.

Trio Mandili's international success has been met with a fair amount of confusion among many Georgians. While the Trio (in its various iterations) harmonizes well, there are dozens or even hundreds of similar groups of young women, some of them far more skilled. The TV talk show *K'razana* (wasp/gadfly/pest) aired an episode that berated the Trio for presenting a simplistic view of Georgian culture to Russian audiences.¹⁵ As relayed by the host, Mandili's Ukrainian manager declined to be interviewed, stating, "I'm not interested in Georgia — our commercial base is elsewhere" (*K'razana* 2016). Teona Lomsadze informed me¹⁶ that the same manager, in conversation with her, asserted, "Georgians don't like us ... well, who cares about them? We're popular internationally" (personal communication, April 25, 2018).

This strategy of bypassing the local audience failed badly, though, when Trio Mandili put in their bid to represent Georgia in the 2017 Eurovision competition. When the respected young folk revival singer Givi Abesadze shared the botched Eurovision audition on Facebook, he included the terse comment, "The beginning of the end of their incomprehensible and inexplicable popularity!" Givi's public post, hashtagged "Thank you Eurovision," went viral with 350,000 views, 1,800 shares, and hundreds of concurring comments (Abesadze, January 20, 2017).

Dislike of Trio Mandili needs to be unpacked. It is not merely that they perform music which some consider to be hybrid and inauthentic: a major part of the backlash derives from an inability to police international understandings of Georgian traditions. Mandili is felt to pander to stereotypes about Georgians in their tours to Russia, and more broadly they now represent authentic Georgian

folk music to cosmopolitan millennials internationally. Overall, many Georgians are annoyed that these particular performers and this particular style should have been recognized internationally when there are so many other options. The overall suspicion is that Mandili's youth, looks, and understanding of social media are more crucial to their popularity than their voices or the songs they sing. Disdain for their inauthenticity relates to national boundary-marking and loyalty to folk performers who seem more committed to the local scene.

Case Study 2: Mananik'o Tsent'eradze and "Academic Folklore"

The last episode of *Georgian Idol* in December 2017 featured a showdown between the two finalists. Most of the performances on this program had been English pop-rock hits; Mananik'o Tsent'eradze, the eventual winner (and a contestant on *X-Factor* Georgia several years earlier), forged a reputation by emotionally belting out tunes by Sheryl Crow, Queen, and Kelly Price. But for the final, she performed a well-known lullaby, the soft "Svanetian Nana" (also called "Nanila"), from the Svaneti region where I did much of my fieldwork.¹⁷ Mananik'o was accompanied in her performance by members of the State Folk Song Ensemble, Basiani. The judges especially praised Mananik'o's precise intonation (she opened with a solo *a cappella* introduction, joined after 30 seconds by an accompanying instrument), stylistic range, and emotional delivery. As one put it, she had "grabbed our hands and taken us back through the centuries" (*Chven Varsk'vlavebi Vart* 2017).

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Another division in Georgian folk music falls within the category of secondary folklore revival groups who eschew popular fusion forms and perform only what is generally perceived as "real folk music" in the commonly understood sense articulated by Philip Tagg: collective property passed down orally from ancient, anonymous ancestors (1982: 42). Georgian secondary folklore revival groups could be analyzed as embodying a "third person authenticity" in Allan Moore's terms: an attempt to accurately represent the situation of absent others, whether living rural singers or departed ancestors (2002: 218). Such folk revivals have a long history in Georgia, although the current phase of revival dates back to the 1980s (Kuzmich 2010; Bithell 2014) and is strongly influenced by the aforementioned Edisher Garaqanidze.

The Tbilisi-based folk revivalists presenting older musical practices generally take one of two approaches: the "academic" and the "authentic." These are emic terms employed by Georgian ethnomusicologists and ensemble members alike

(Bithell 2018). Academic groups, in continuity with Soviet aesthetics, perform traditional repertoire according to the model of a professional European choir, with dynamic contrasts and balanced, blended voices. Authentic groups, following the advice of Edisher Garaqanidze, take their stylistic cues from village singers and ethnographic field recordings — the older the better. This means employing non-tempered intonation, using a harsher and nasal “peasant voice,” and allowing the two highest voice parts to improvise by having a single singer on each one.

While “academic secondary folklore” as performed by Georgia’s major song and dance groups like the Rustavi Ensemble (officially the Georgian State Academic Ensemble, though rarely referred to as such in everyday conversation) would be dismissed as “fakelore” by Richard Dorson (1950), I follow Richard Taruskin (1992), Laura Olson (2004), and others in arguing that even these performing traditions develop customs of proper conduct and become imbued with deep personal meaning. Thus, while their “objective authenticity” may be called into question, for those who participate in them they can be personally or “existentially authentic,” as Ning Wang puts it (1999: 358). From Wang’s perspective, participants may fully recognize that their activities are inauthentic, but value them for intangible aspects of process which they couldn’t gain easily through other means.

In the case of academic-style secondary folklore, the purpose of participation might not be to recreate an ancestral or rural performance idiom — it might be more about the human relationships that develop with friends while singing together, or even about expressing one’s national or family heritage in a way that is seen as more in line with contemporary aesthetic tastes (though secondary folklore might also lead some participants to seek out primary folklore and eventually to prefer it). As Thomas Turino (2003) has argued, cosmopolitan versions of local artforms become internalized and reflect deep-seated norms of propriety and taste; thus, they should not simply be seen as a pale imitation of traditional forms. Rather, they can reflect a “second person authenticity” that viewers perceive as true to their own experience of themselves as simultaneously national and cosmopolitan people (Moore 2002: 220).

However, one reason why some folk singers denigrate academic-style performance arises from perceived power inequalities. The official state ensembles with good salaries and frequent international tours are all academic and perform only canonized, well-known folk songs in fixed form. This is particularly true of the Erisoni, Rustavi, and Ach’ara State Ensembles. There is an unstated pressure to conform to this standard when groups gain sponsorship: Basiani first became the official folk music ensemble of the Georgian Orthodox Church and is now the State Folk Song Ensemble, while Shavnabada was recently named the State Performing Ensemble of Abkhazia.¹⁸ Both groups started out informally as friends singing in an “authentic” idiom, but they have become more academic (Bithell

2018). Making a claim to greater authenticity and reclaiming lost variants lends the relatively less advantaged “authentic” groups a measure of moral superiority.

To the general public, though, any kind of folk music carries a certain moral weight. This was exploited in the *Georgian Idol* finale that was eventually won by Mananik’o Tsent’eradze. The choice to include folk songs in the final episode was likely made by the producers, given that the runner-up, a rock tenor with a powerful voice, also performed his own piece with Basiani. Evidently, somebody thought that nodding toward Georgian traditional music would be wise: showcasing the musical versatility of the performers and their respect for tradition, making an appeal to national pride, expanding the program’s audience, and hopefully earning more votes.

This is a different sort of case than that of the Datik’ashvili family trio. The Datik’ashvilis’ act centred on folk music, even if in hybrid form. This distinguished them from the majority of their competitors who performed in contemporary styles. A folk group performing on a lowbrow entertainment show brings the moral weight of a musical style that is esteemed but not actually very widely understood anymore. In other words, they play off the prestige of a style that is valued more than it is liked. In a way, this is comparable to performers like Paul Potts or Jackie Evancho, who gained fame by performing opera on British and American televised competitions.¹⁹ Of course, the reasons for prestige are different in these cases, with opera associated with sophistication and elite aesthetic preferences, and folk music valued as the oral, vernacular voice of untutored ancestors. Nevertheless, at least in Britain, folk music gained an aesthetic value comparable to that of art music precisely with the advent of the music halls, since folk and art music were both free of commercial imperatives and influences, and thus considered more authentic (Pickering 1986: 205). The Datik’ashvili family, Potts, and Evancho all appealed much more to the general public, who did not expect to hear “prestige” styles in that context, than to experienced devotees of Georgian folk music or opera, most of whom considered these performers to be inauthentic crossover artists.

Conversely, neither Mananik’o nor her competitor were claiming to be folk music specialists, which shielded them from the harshest criticism of academics and folk performers. However, in attempting to valorize Georgian traditional music by having the top two contestants perform it, *Georgian Idol*’s producers sent an implicit message: that any good singer should be able to perform traditional music at a professional level after a bare minimum of rehearsal (likely less than a week). Or perhaps the message was meant to be that any Georgian singer can naturally sing folk music, since it is a part of their birthright — a common sentiment in a country where I have frequently heard pianists claim in passing that they are good at playing Bach because “polyphony is in the genes.”

Mananik'o's performance ultimately engendered controversy among members of the "real folk music" community — not so much for her outsider status as for the choice of repertoire. Madona Chamgeliani, one of my key interlocutors, has long asserted that the Svanetian lullaby was written by her grandmother in the 1930s.²⁰ The song has profound emotional meaning for the Chamgeliani family, as it expresses all of their grandmother's grief over the loss of her husband during Stalin's purges, and the death of her oldest daughter to illness only a few months later²¹ (see Fig. 3).

Shortly after the competition ended, Madona posted the video on Facebook with the caption, "My grandmother turned over in her grave" (Chamgeliani, December 30, 2017). Most of her friends' comments expressed dismay at the quality of the performance, but her post also attracted the attention of one of Mananik'o's own backup singers from the Basiani ensemble. He criticized Madona for expecting a 20-year-old contemporary singer to sound like her grandmother and asserted that this kind of performance could help popularize folk music (Tskrialashvili, December 31, 2017). Madona retorted that she had no problem with Mananik'o, who seemed like a "lovely girl," but that she expected much better of Basiani, who had in her mind "violated" her grandmother's song with out-of-tune playing of the *ch'uniri*,²² poor balance between the parts, and inauthentic vocal quality (Chamgeliani, December 31, 2017).

Compounding the insult that Madona perceived, the show's producers had chosen a popularized variant that another Svan musician argued was his own composition. My teacher Islam Pilpani, who was widely recognized as the most



Fig. 3. Sisters Ek'a, Ana (with *ch'uniri*), and Madona Chamgeliani (L-R) being recorded for a folk music archival project.

respected musician in Svaneti before his death in 2017 at the age of 82, claimed to have written and recorded the lullaby in the 1960s. According to Madona, the song became popular after her father's village ensemble recorded it at the end of a 1980s Melodiya recording session in Moscow. Her father felt that a stylistic contrast was needed to balance out the weighty hymns and round dances that comprised the bulk of the ensemble's repertoire, and he thought of his mother's gentle lullaby at the last minute. Madona told me that even Pilpani's family members agreed that the lullaby was written by her grandmother, but when I spoke to Pilpani's adult children, they both expressed their belief that it was their father's composition. They have even named their family ensemble "Nanila" after the lullaby, and the same name adorns the guesthouse run by Pilpani's son, turning "Nanila" into a Pilpani family brand. When I asked a Georgian ethnomusicologist for their insights on the question of authorship, they told me that doubtless many variants on a similar melodic theme emerged, and that each such variant may have been claimed as an independent composition by the originating musician (Anonymous #2, email correspondence, February 24, 2017). Indeed, the way the Pilpanis perform the song is slightly different from how the Chamgelians do, although the similarities are clear. Ultimately, there is no way to conclusively prove authorship one way or the other.

In short, Basiani's choice of Pilpani's variant implied that the prestigious state ensemble — the "public face of folk music for Georgians," as Madona called them (Chamgeliani, December 31, 2017) — endorsed a rival claim. Madona's sarcastic invocation of authenticity — the juxtaposition of this staged performance with her grandmother's manner — is not just about determining the proper venue for folk songs, but also about defending her grandmother's legacy. Hers is a moral claim, as is made clear by her characterization of the performance "violating" the Svanetian Nana. This is the only kind of claim available when legal authorship is impossible to establish, and cultural authorities might not even believe the claim of authorship anyway. Madona's claim that there is a "right" way to perform the song takes it out of the realm of collective property and puts it back within her family's reach, although successfully establishing its provenance would run the risk of voiding the very characteristics (unauthored, ancient) that define it as "authentic folk music" in the general understanding.

Case Study 3: Ensemble K'asletila and the Musical Lives of Rural Tradition Bearers

Ensemble K'asletila, a rural women's choir specializing in the music of the Svaneti region,²³ is locally appreciated but receives no funding or salary. Winning regional

competitions had not improved their financial situation, so the group chose to bring their act to *Georgia's Got Talent* in late 2015. For their debut, Ensemble K'asletila donned their folkloric stage garb to perform a round dance. While round dances have been frequently staged in "secondary folklore" due to their fancy footwork, rising intensity, and built-in musical contrasts, they are also highly repetitive and difficult to stage because the performers inevitably turn their backs to the audience (see Fig. 4). Despite the limited TV time slot, K'asletila sang a full five-minute round dance with many verses.²⁴ Unlike the Datik'ashvilis or Trio Mandili, K'asletila's performance represented a form recognizable to almost all viewers as *supta* ("pure") folk, the closest possible stage approximation to an ancient village practice.

The judges were effusive, waxing eloquent about Georgia's treasury of exceedingly ancient songs. One characterized the Svanetian harmonies as pleasantly rough or coarse (*khisti*) due to their unimaginable age, and even referred to the round dances as "primitive." Another judge, though, took issue with "primitive," instead calling the dances "treasures," "serious," "complex," "magical," and imbued with healing properties. A third judge claimed that the singers made him travel back 2000 years to the time of Agamemnon, as though he had found a golden treasure standing right in front of him on the stage. The judges particularly praised the unique quality of the women's voices, repeatedly saying "Nothing else sounds like this in Georgia," and they called their performance of repertoire usually sung by men "a new development in Georgian folklore" (*Nich'ieri* 2016).

* * *

In the realm of "secondary folklore," rural ensembles — who often receive a municipal salary — fall somewhere outside of the academic/authentic binary characteristic of urban revivalist performers. A 2016 publication entitled *Georgian Folk Ensembles* lists more than 40 such groups outside the country's main urban centres, spanning every region, and this is not an exhaustive account (Ushikishvili et al. 2016). Besides their participation in state-supported ensembles, as village musicians the members of these groups are held up as tradition bearers: actual participants in *primary* folklore too. In Allan Moore's terms, they embody a direct "first person authenticity" or an authenticity of expression, since there is no separation between their musical utterance and its point of origin (2002: 214). The very best of them might be described as a "songmaster" or *homo polyphonicus* (Tsurtsunia 2010), indicating a lifelong involvement in polyphonic music and an internalized, learned tendency to think in three parts (Zemtsovsky 2003: 47). However, their distance from the capital means that along with preserving venerated customs, they may be preserving ideas about folk music that some

scholars regard as antiquated, Soviet, and inauthentic (Valishvili 2010). For example, village musicians may still attach prestige to the modernized Soviet aesthetics of big choirs and fixed arrangements, which some purists despise. This mismatch between expectation and reality is well established — most rural folks display a stubborn favouritism for “trashy” pop music and Turkish soap operas over the traditional practices and repertoires they are supposed to safeguard (cf. Tsitsishvili 2009). Rural singers, then, are inherently authentic in their person, but may be less authentic in their performance than urban revivalists.²⁵

As I learned in an interview with the director of one rural ensemble, municipal groups have a double mission: to represent their region’s musical style to outsiders, and to entertain locals — many of whom prefer modernized folk fusion styles like *panduri* pop to “real folk music.” Some rural ensembles also seize the opportunity to perform for foreign tourists, which may involve further compromises with authenticity.²⁶ One Georgian ethnomusicologist told me in rather hushed tones, as though sharing sensitive information, that a particular ensemble whose members we both knew sometimes performed in a tourist-oriented restaurant with “chromatic instruments” (Anonymous #1, personal communication, November 17, 2015). These very musicians later told me that they would rather sing “real folk music” with old folk instruments, and only played the chromatic *panduri* and accordion-led folk-pop songs to please the audience (personal communication, July 23, 2016).



Fig. 4. Ensemble K’asletila rehearsing a round dance in their home village.

However, compromises like performing for tourists are quite understandable given that rural ensembles are not very well paid. For a prestigious rural ensemble that I observed closely during my fieldwork, the director's wage was 600 Georgian lari per month (about \$240 USD, a good salary for a rural area), while general choir members received 200 lari (\$80, a low to average rural salary, though this would not be their only income source). However, other groups might receive less than this, or nothing at all, depending on factors like the wealth of the municipality or the ensemble's reputation.

As noted, K'asletila falls into the category of unwaged ensembles, which precipitated their bid for greater fame. The *Georgia's Got Talent* judges' responses indicated that the ensemble was unusual — not only in its level of skill, but in its choice of repertoire and manner of performance. Unlike the lullabies and panduri songs featured in previous sections, women are not generally associated with Svanetian round dances, although they may join village dances in supporting roles. Svaneti lacks enough specifically female repertoire to sustain a women's choir, and the men in K'asletila's village do not sing together regularly, so the ensemble fills a specific niche. Performing men's repertoire with the vocal quality associated with hardy mountain peasant women is critical to their brand. The judges in this case praised K'asletila for the authenticity of their musical style, intonation, and choreography, which reflected the ancient and isolated nature of their region and its repertoire. But their comments also pointed implicitly to ways in which K'asletila breaks with tradition — or at least with the traditions of performance that have developed around authenticity-oriented secondary folklore.

I watched K'asletila's January 2016 performances live on television in the company of Svans who were quick to call in to vote for the ensemble. As finalists (though they did not win the grand prize), they were awarded a recording contract for the production and release of one album. A few months later, I went to visit K'asletila in their village, where they informed me that the recording session hadn't happened yet, and that they had signed a noncompetition agreement to ensure that they would appear only on the program's TV channel for one year. A follow-up message two years later revealed that they never did end up getting their recording session.

K'asletila still has few performance opportunities nearby, and still doesn't receive any municipal funding. The most that they have received is a one-time gift of medium-quality folk instruments from the Ministry of Culture. Their recourse to televised competitions to gain visibility and possibly even some kind of financial return is unorthodox, but not so different from other ensembles who reach out past the usual Georgian folk music audience to promote themselves.

However, it is also possible that this choice, or their public performance of

gender-atypical repertoire, affected K'asletila's standings in the National Folklore Festival of summer 2016, a nationwide competition for all folk ensembles, in which they were nominated for "Best Women's Ensemble" but failed to place. This was especially surprising given that male choirs from the Svaneti region dominated multiple categories, winning the gold and silver awards in both the categories of "Best Village Ensemble" and "Best Ensemble in Georgia." Ensembles who failed to meet the Ministry of Culture's standards of authenticity in the competition risked having their municipal support pulled — though of course this was only a threat for those groups who actually received state funding.

K'asletila's unusual style apparently won them fans among the judges of the TV competition, but fewer from the folk music authorities whose approval is necessary to receive performance invitations to national festivals and other prestigious venues. On the other hand, their nomination for the Folklore Festival final indicates that they must have had support from at least some of its judges, and in recent months K'asletila has even been promised a recording session by The Folklore State Centre of Georgia, although this too has not yet materialized.

Conclusion: Gender, Agency, and the Nation

In this paper, I have explored three cases that relate to larger issues of authenticity and the policing of boundaries. These virtual events call "publics" or national communities into being (Warner 2002; Anderson 2006), serving as a kind of interaction ritual (Collins 2004) that charges particular symbols with meaning and value, particularly as they are engaged with actively by viewers through voting or discussion. In this cultural hierarchy, while pop singers and TV shows appear to be elevated by folk music, folk music conversely seems to readily suffer degradation. If folk music is so easily besmirched and sullied, it suggests that it is either sacred or vulnerable, or perhaps both. In the context of a highly patriarchal society like Georgia where national symbols are gendered, this implicitly turns folk music into a feminized object in need of care and protection. And while Georgian polyphony is more often celebrated as a masculine artform (Tsitsishvili 2006), the women performing in the case studies here nudge the audience's interpretation in a different direction.

The gendering of the nation and key cultural symbols as female has a long history as a nationalizing trope (cf. Delaney 1995), and Georgia is no exception, with the Georgian language often referred to as *dedaena* ("mother tongue"). The nation at risk of foreign violation is also a common trope here. Frequent devastating invasions (by Arabs, Mongols, Persians, Ottomans, and Russians) and Georgia's existence as a small Christian state largely surrounded by Muslim

peoples are not merely historical facts but commonly employed rhetorical themes, as noted by numerous scholars (Kuzmich 2010; Mühlfried 2015).

The virtual communities arising and interacting around these examples are representative of larger social divisions: urban/rural, upper/working class, salaried/amateur, performer/tradition bearer. In these divisions we find distinct communities of value that place different kinds of meaning on the same symbols (cf. Diamond 2007: 136). Of course, the conflicts that arise here over proper performance and the definition of folk music are not the kinds that would lead to violence or expulsion from the nation. As Gerald Creed reminds us, “community” is more often characterized by division and gossip than by harmonious fellow feeling (2004: 57-58). Rather, here we observe a low-intensity sort of conflict which serves to differentiate closely related groups (J. Dueck 2011), a constant centrifugal tension between people who see themselves as part of the same national community.

Although disagreements over aesthetic propriety might seem low-stakes in the grand scheme of things, this is one of the venues for debate available to those with little institutional power. The defenders of a stricter interpretation of authenticity see themselves as a beleaguered minority holding on to spiritual treasures at a serious risk of being forgotten by the complacent mainstream. At the same time, those who bend the rules preferred by folklorists and purists may be making a strategic choice from a similar perceived place of marginalization, without necessarily being in full control of all aspects of the process. We see this in the cases of Trio Mandili, employing a stereotypical youthful flirtatiousness that allows them to escape rural highland life; Mananik’o Tsent’eradzé, showcasing her feminine side with a soft lullaby infused with emotion and ultimately defeating her flashy male opponent; and Ensemble K’asletila, rising from a hardscrabble dead-end town by singing and dancing with just as much vigour as any mountain man. By screening their acts in a highly public setting and performing their gender in a way that may ameliorate or increase the atypicality of the music, these singers open spaces for debate, inspire interaction rituals, and promote cultural intimacy. In doing so, they tap into publics that have already been built around singing competitions or folk music, but even more, they raise questions about the fate of women and the nation itself in a globalizing age. 🌱

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Notes

1. Songs like this, performed on a chromaticized folk instrument, are examples of a hybrid style I call “panduri pop.” While the style is generally regarded as lowbrow and eschewed by folk music traditionalists, this particular song has been recorded by highly-regarded Georgian folk ensembles like the Gogochuri Sisters and Basiani State Folk Song Ensemble.

2. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiK_nzt0kpc

3. The concept of “idol” does not appear to translate well into the Georgian language, purely meaning “object of pagan worship” without the connotation of a performing diva.

4. Kartuli refers to the Georgian language; there is a separate word for Georgian people (Kartveli). Thus, the title of the program does not imply an ethnic exclusivity but only a linguistic one.

5. This fact was trumpeted by the right-wing party Alliance of Patriots of Georgia in their platform leading up to the 2016 election, where they won 5% of the vote (see <http://patriots.ge/our-vision-program/>, “Georgian Culture and Traditions: Georgian Singing — One of the Wonders of the World”).

6. The “Modernist” sense of authenticity as defined by Keightley is built around experimentation, the avant-garde, radical and shocking change, and remaining true to the artist’s own vision. This sense of authenticity is very pronounced in discussions of popular music, although the “Romantic” form of authenticity is also relevant there.

7. Garaqanidze drew this distinction from Izaly Zemtsovsky, influential in Georgian ethnomusicology since late Soviet times. More than once I heard Georgian ethnomusicologists quote Zemtsovsky’s dictum, “Folklore goes, folklorism comes,” terms which basically capture the primary/secondary folklore distinction (see also Tsurtsunia 2010: 260). Though I have not found an English article where Zemtsovsky lays out this distinction explicitly, his article “Communism and Folklore” covers similar ground (Zemtsovsky and Kunanbaeva 1997).

8. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycFshhgudms>

9. Obvious comparisons in the ethnomusicological literature are Balkan genres like chalga, “Newly Composed Folk Music,” or turbo-folk (Rice 2002; Buchanan 2006, 2007; Živković 2012).

10. The classification of regional musical styles is called “dialectology” in Georgian ethnomusicology, and it identifies about a dozen main traditions.

11. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbsQJBxICN0>

12. Available at https://www.reddit.com/r/videos/comments/2fuzx1/georgian_girls_singing_awesome_voices/

13. The group’s name refers to an old Georgian ethnographic custom: a woman could stop two men from fighting by dropping her headscarf (*mandili*) between them. It thus evokes the chivalric traditions of the eastern mountain regions where the trio originated.

14. Three former members of Mandili (including two founding members featured

in the original viral video) have formed a competing group, Trio Lavdila. They have been far less successful than Mandili, however.

15. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwrUZxYVbiA>

16. Shared by permission.

17. Available at <https://youtu.be/3wrECSVPM-g?t=1865>

18. Although this issue is far too complex to fully unpack here, Abkhazia is a break-away republic recognized by most of the world as a part of Georgia. Only Russia and a few of its allies consider Abkhazia independent. While the Georgian government has no de facto presence in Abkhazia and indeed it is almost impossible for Georgian citizens to enter the territory, Georgians still consider it an integral part of their republic. Since Abkhazia still has a special official status as a semi-autonomous region within Georgia (a status it also held in the USSR), the Georgian government considers it worthy of its own state ensemble, which does not necessarily mean that any of Shavnabada's members have been to Abkhazia or have any familial connection with it.

19. My thanks to Queveen Arcedo for first making this comparison.

20. Besides being a singer, Madonna is highly regarded as an expert on the folklore and customs of her region. She has completed an MA in ethnology and co-authored scholarship on the vocables used in Svanetian songs (Mzhavanadze and Chamgeliani 2015).

21. While I have heard Madonna share this story in person on several occasions, a version has been included in an article published by Madge Bray (2011).

22. The *ch'uniri* is a three-stringed bowed chordophone. It is indeed very difficult to play in tune, since the instrument is unfretted and all three strings are always played simultaneously, with frequent use of double or triple stops. If even one finger is placed slightly incorrectly, the mistake is obvious. Even the instrument's most skillful players frequently produce noticeably out of tune chords.

23. Due to severe avalanches in the 1980s, numerous Svan families and even entire villages were resettled to distant lowland areas. *K'asletila* hails from Udabno, a majority Svan village that is 500 km from Svaneti, in the arid southeastern part of the country. Like many Georgian folk ensembles, the group's name comes from one of the songs in their repertoire.

24. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3BlqcfjI>

25. This can set up complex power dynamics when urban-trained professional folklorists (often young women) are hired to advise and direct existing rural ensembles (often made up of middle-aged men).

26. While common in urban areas, this option is only available in those rural parts of the country where the tourist trade is heavy. The town of Mest'ia in Svaneti (pop. 3,000), increasingly dominated by tourism, is home to multiple restaurants and cafes where folk musicians perform daily during summer and skiing season.

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