

JOHN A. GRAHAM

**“YOU ARE THE VINEYARD,  
NEWLY BLOSSOMED”:**

CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE AESTHETICS IN  
GEORGIAN ORTHODOX CHANT

The discovery of thousands of early 20<sup>th</sup> century chant transcriptions in the early 1990s in the Kekelidze Institute of Manuscripts in Tbilisi, Georgia, helped energize the revival of traditional Orthodox Christian liturgical singing following the collapse of Soviet censorship on the Church. These transcriptions remain relatively unknown outside of Georgia and may raise considerable speculation among international scholars concerning the early liturgical music practices on the outer fringes of the medieval Byzantine Empire. The introduction of a pre-Soviet ‘found’ sacred repertoire to the sacred music already available in the Georgian church challenged notions of authenticity, and sparked counter claims for the legitimacy of Georgian polyphonic chant.<sup>1</sup>

The popularization of traditional chant has coincided with a revolution in performance practice aesthetics in which the refined classical style of most mainstream church choirs has been abandoned in favor of a ‘neo-traditional’ style miming the aesthetics of Georgian folk singers. Yet these new ideas about performance practice from within the neo-traditional music community neglect the emotional attachment of congregations to their former repertoires, alienating older community members and clergy. In addition, the neo-traditional performance aesthetic has not been embraced by the secular mainstream. This may be because the nostalgia for the idealized sound of Georgian chant that typically accompanies scenes of national struggle, loss, or endurance in mainstream television media, is associated with the western classical performance aesthetic.<sup>2</sup> In order to better understand the difference I am attempting to point out, it will be helpful to take a look at the current situation in Georgia.

---

1 The author wishes to acknowledge the collaborative nature of this research, which is based on conversations with esteemed colleagues included Davit Shugliashvili, Malkhaz Erkvanidze, Luarsab Togonidze, and Carl Linich.

2 For example, the chant *Shen Khar Venakhi* and similar chants may be heard at least a dozen times on any given day as the background music for shows on television concerning past civil strife in South Ossetia or Abkhazia, reproductions of historical battles, Orthodox Christian programs, or commercials aimed at tourists highlighting the many medieval churches scattered throughout Georgia’s rural highland regions.