

THE TRADITION OF POLYPHONIC SINGING OF THE ADYGHES*

he living environment of any people is remarkably reflected in the formation of its culture, affecting indelible characteristic features of singularity and inimitability. The Adyghes (a name which the present-day Kabardinians, Adygheians, Circassians and Shapsugs label themselves) are the indigenous peoples of the Caucasus, who prior to the 20th century were called *Circassians* all over the world. During the course of their entire history they lived in the surroundings of high mountains, wooded foothills, stormy rivers and waterfalls, which originated from the snowy heights of Mount Elbrus (Oshkhamakho), the highest mountain in Europe, and subsequently dissipated into the colorful valleys and black-earth fields. Such a picture of a habitation has impacted in an original way the singularities of the indigenous people's worldviews, having determined the contours of their ethnic distinctive characters and value-related notions.

Thus, in the traditional culture of the Adyghes the greatest significance has been held by the correlation of the Summit and the Base (the vertical), which defines the content and character of the ethnic culture, in which people's behavior, based on their sex and age, was conducive to shaping mutual relationships of ceremony and etiquette. At that, an important organizing component has been formed by the cult of seniority. Regardless of social status, a person's advanced years, life experience and wisdom have provided him with indisputable social authority, love and respect.

Reflecting the geo-landscape peculiarities of the Caucasus, the folk architecture of most of its peoples likewise possessed a cone shape of its turret, imitating the silhouettes of its mountains, whereas the typical female clothing, starting with the cuspidate hat, freely fell in a downward direction, as if depicting a mountain waterfall. Up to the present time in the everyday speech of the Adyghes the question of a person's health, how things were

going, or what was new in life and in the family, was expressed by the word combination of "*daué fyshyt*," which is literally translated as "*how are you standing*." And when the Adyghes part with each other with good wishes, their essence is expressed in a similarly generalized way in the phrase "*uzynsheu fyshyt*" (literally: "*you stand healthy*").

The specificity of the national self-consciousness and self-expression of the Adyghes, the cultural norms crystallized throughout many centuries and in many ways predetermined by the picture of their native land, also have exerted an impact on their folk musical art. First of all, a comparative reflection may be discerned in the structure of the solo-and-group singing, which presents the basis of the polyphonic musical thinking of the Adyghes. The standard texture of the collective singing is comprised of two lines – the improvisational solo melody of the soloist, in which the verbal text of the song is pronounced, and the choral accompaniment, either in unison or doubled in octaves (more rarely – in perfect fifths), based on sturdy refrain-like word-formations, such as *oira*, *oirada*, etc. These two strata, present in vertical connection with each other, create a volumetric domain of sound and timbre, in which the high- and low-register sounds of male voices are harmoniously combined.

The sturdy character of this kind of singing performance is preserved at all the stages of the folk musical activities of the Adyghes, determining the characteristic stylistic form of self-expression in the music pertaining to oral tradition. Therefore the combined (solo-and-group) music-making, presenting the manifestation of the specificity of the Adyghes' folk musical thinking, is most frequently found in important multi-stage genres: ancient ritual-mythological songs (addressing the patrons of the forest, hunting, water and lightning – *pschymezytkh'e*, *daüschdzherdzhiiy*, *h'entseguasché*, *schyblé*, *udzh*, *psyheg'é*), wedding songs (*nysasché uéred*), epic (*nart pshynal'é*), historical-heroic

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(*l'ykh'uzh uéred*) and lyrical-epic (*tkh'éüsykhafé uéred, g'ybzé*) songs.

The ritual calendar-agricultural and family-household genres generally are characterized by the form of antiphonal performance, and only a few of them are performed in the texture of bourdon polyphony (such as the round song-dance performed while dancing around a person struck by lightning (*schybléüdzh*), or the vocal-instrumental song-procession along a river during a search for the body of a drowned person (*psyheg'é*).

In the wedding ritual, with the exception of the solo songs of magnification of the bride and bridegroom, all the other songs have either an antiphonal or a bourdon statement of the solo-and-group singing. Traditionally during weddings festive songs of magnification were sung prior to the arrival of the bride into the house of the bridegroom, during the entire trip of the wedding procession and during the bride's entry into the house of the bridegroom; but also humorous "accusatory" songs about the skills and proficiency of the bride, endowed with an ambivalent semantic message, were also sung then.

The epic songs (songs about the Narts or the Nartian *pshinatli*), which appeared during the 2nd century BC, narrate about the early stages of formation of ethnic communities on the Caucasus mountains, while the main characters of the songs (the forefathers of the Adyghe) by demonstrating their fortitude, bravery and energy express the ethical and aesthetical foundations of the etiquette forms of behavior in mutual relations of people, who would later provide sturdy support for the traditional culture of the Adyghe. Having traversed a lengthy historical path of development, the Nartian *pshinatli* have survived until the present day, and some of them have been broadly circulated (such as the songs about Sysoruko, Badynoko, Lashin, etc.). They are for the most part performed in the manner of solo-and-group singing in a bourdon texture. In some cases, when the coherent ensemble of the music-making group is joined by an experienced performer on the *shikapshin* (a bowed string instrument), there is an addition of an instrumental accompaniment, which considerably enriches the texture of the song in terms of rhythm and intonation.

The most productive genre of Adyghe folk music is the historical-heroic song of the time period from the 15th to the 19th centuries, which recounts in a broad and diverse manner the most important events of the history of the people, their struggle against outside forces, and the complex relations within the

society itself. In correspondence with the dramatic character of the period of time described and the psychological aspect of the content of the subject, the solo-and-group singing is complexified by means of expansion of the line of the bass voice, demonstrating the different varieties of the bourdon texture.



Photo 1. Ensemble of the Adyghe Song "Badynoko" – a Winner of the International Competition-Festival "Voices of the Golden Steppe" (Astrakhan, Russia). Beslan Ashkhotov, Artistic Director

The title "lyrical-epic" in the classification of Adyghe songs is perceived to be quite approximate, since, on the one hand, the content of the song may be of a historical character (frequently devoted to real people and concrete events). On the other hand, it contains female motives, with their extreme emotionality (incidentally, similarly to male motives), dramatic collisions and tragic events, and they call for a more dramatic type of performance. In both versions, the lyrical-epic songs, carrying the functions of lament, purification (the recovery of one's status-quo) and mourning of one's fate, are performed in the manner of solo-and-group singing.

Up until the late 19th century, most of the folk song genres of the Adyghe were sung by men. Exceptions were made only by songs of the family-household type, which were sung by women. Such allocation of folk song genres by sex and age corresponded to the ethnic traditions which were established throughout the ages. The given social factor predetermined the domination of the male element in the Adyghe musical folklore, and in general this folk music was of a reserved and harsh character, corresponding to the mountaineers' etiquette norms of social behavior.

For a fuller perception of the solo-and-group singing of the Adyghe, let us cite a fragment of the memoirs of the participant of the Caucasus War, Englishman James Bell, who visited the land of the

Adyghes in 1837–1830. The author describes how a man “started singing in a falsetto voice in a very fast recitative,” then the solo singing was joined by four adult men, who “added a few beautiful voices of the tenor or the bass, resembling the surging or falling sounds of an organ... I found this music full of novelty, romanticism, and exceedingly melodic” [6]. This description bears witness to the sensual-emotional impact exerted on a foreign visitor by this exotic music of the mountaineers.

The collective singing of the Adyghes pertains to the bourdon type of polyphony. The lower stratum in the texture of Adyghes songs, literally coinciding with the meaning of the French term of bourdon (*thick bass*), always provides a steady foundation for a freely descending recitative part of the soloist. The bass part, depending on the differences of timbre in the voices of the chorus members, may be stated either in unison or in octaves (more rarely in perfect fifths)¹.

However the bass stratum in the Adyghes polyphonic songs does not fit into the framework of the stereotypically perceived form of the bourdon as a continuous line of choral texture, not changing in its pitch. The bourdon in Adyghes songs, in correspondence with the cascade of melodic phrases of descending direction of motion in the solo voice, gradually becomes displaced in a downward motion, broadening its sound structure of rhythmically consistent tones. Therefore, the bass line in Adyghes music of the oral tradition may be labeled as *movable bourdon*.

In the multiple-path correlation of strata in the solo-and-group singing of the Adyghes a contrasting juxtaposition of timbre and tessitura intonations occurs, whereas their noticeably withdrawn connection produces an echo-like, sound-reflecting effect. At that, the combination of the contrasting registers of the solo part (which, as a rule, is performed by a tenor or high baritone) with the line of the choral accompaniment (in the folk terminology – *yezsh'u*) endows the song with a declamatory-pathetic character.

The Adyghes type of the solo-and-group form of performance of songs differs noticeably from the analogous types pertaining to the other peoples of the Caucasus. This exceptional quality is stipulated by the strengthening of the role of the bourdon-sounding voice part (*yezsh'u*) in the overall song of the Adyghes. The gradual shifts of the pitches in the lower stratum and, what is important, the absence of a verbal text in the bass part, leads to

rhythmic stability, acquiring an individual character. At that, the changes of rhythm and intonation take place most frequently in the concluding phrase of the *yezsh'u*. Such a changeable bass line is present mainly in the historical-heroic songs.

In most instances the song strophe, comprised of two to four phrases flexible in their melodicism and equivalent in their size, is built on variant repetition of separate constructions. An exception in this case too is presented by the historical-heroic songs. In them the melo-strophe consists more frequently of different-sized melodic constructions in the solo part in the concluding phrase of the choral accompaniment. This is connected with the special logic of narration in these songs. As a rule, the solo initial tune features the statement of the opening tune – a stable thematic unit, which is followed by the entry of the male chorus, intoning a continuous tone of one of the typical bourdon formulas. Later on, against the background of the unfolding bass bourdon development the soloist sings new melodic constructions elaborating the initial thematic unit. In conclusion of the song strophe, the male chorus performs a rhythmically and intonationally developed tune of a conclusive character.

In such a way the peculiarity of the texture of the Adyghes historical-heroic song is expressed in a coordinated connection of all the events – the beginning, the development and the conclusion, – which produces the integrity and completion of the narration. This kind of inner structure of the song's melody comes closer to through form. The polyphonic texture itself is based on contrasting juxtaposition between the solo and the choral parts through their harmonious combination.

The examined structure of the music of oral tradition is determined by the roles and meanings of the song genres in the lives of the Adyghes. Since they did not possess their own writing until the late 19th centuries, one of the forms of transmission of their historical past, heroic deeds, and the mental moral-ethical qualities of the best representatives of the people was entrusted to folksong. Therefore an extremely respectful attitude and overall love for the folk music legacy and for the storytellers and songmakers were of an undoubted nature.

The people had a firm conviction that the musical text of a folksong could not contain any corrupted information. This thesis may be vindicated by the special mission in the greatest part of the majority of the historical-heroic and lyrical-epic songs, which

possess the functional meaning of clearing the protagonists of the songs from underserved social slander, calumny and various accusations, which are incompatible with the rules of traditional etiquette. In other words, in his clearing songs the status quo of a worthy person in society was restored. For a fuller perception of the role of the folksong in the fate not only all of society, but also of any individual member of it let us cite the words of N. F. Dubrovin. In the late 19th century, possessing a certain amount of experience of close communication with the Adyghe, he wrote that “in many instances a Circassian took to arms, scorning danger, ... for the sake of becoming a protagonist of a song, a subject for ballads and lengthy narratives by the hearth...” [8, p. 47]. Further on, the author explains the aims aspired towards by a valiant hero, which are undoubtedly placed on record by the folklore memory, his glorious deeds will become a model for emulation for future generations.

In the folksong tradition of the Adyghe there exists yet another discerning feature, explicitly having direct relation to the complex structure of the tune and a more emotional perception of the content of the song created through the influence of an exclusive connection between the part of the first singer and the line of the male chorus, which overcomes to a considerable degree the utilitarian function of the modal-harmonic basis. Unlike the characteristic narrative tone of the exposition in the genre of the historical song, the Adyghe song tradition formed a special successive order of performance. Prior to beginning his performance, a singer had to expound the narrative story, where he provided a short historical reference about the time of the appearance of the song, a short synopsis and a characterization of the protagonists. Even in such a situation the speech of the narrator may be accompanied by commentaries by those present in the audience. Additions of people who are elders in their age, various sorts of exclamations and retorts expressing a greater completeness of the narrated story of the song in a strictly bar form were perceived by everybody in favorable light. Approximately this kind of setting was created by the conditions of artistic manifestations in the folk music practice of the Adyghe, impacting the integrity and the artistic perception of the transmitted information.

The specificity of the norms of living functioning of folklore established throughout the centuries conveyed its own special meaning. The mental foundations of traditional culture

presumed that each person must be well-versed in the historical events of the past and, moreover, must know and be able to perform the songs which are favorites among the people. In all likelihood, for this reason also in the song’s verbal text itself, as a rule, there was an absence of factual information. For the performers the most important thing was the emotional appreciation of the described events and actions of the protagonists of the song, chiefly from the positions of ethical norms of etiquette behavior. In that vein it must be noted that the performing versions of the same song in their evidential content may present different variants, in which each performer is at liberty to accentuate a certain episode of his choice in the plot. In this context, when in the narration of the plot by the singer there is a intensification of the emotional-psychological interpretation, the participants of the male chorus (*yezhu*), following the soloists, are drawn more actively into the creative process, which results in a transfiguration of the rhythmic and intonational line of the lower stratum of the song’s texture, presenting a different character of structural interaction.

The Adyghe songwriters who enjoyed great renown and popularity, as well as the entire folksong performance school, were conducive to the formation in the folk musical legacy with a special type of correlation of the collective and individual elements. The personalized consciousness of the active bearers of folklore, the singers, dancers and performers on folk instruments noticeably extend and broaden the subjective world of creative self-expression, enriching the descriptive-expressive and structural-formative sides of folksong.



Photo 2. Performers of Traditional Adyghe Music. Kabardino-Balkaria, Zayukovo village, 1935

A vivid confirmation of the role of the individual element in the replication of the folklore consciousness is demonstrated by its active bearers, who are colloquially called *dzheguaklué* (in the legal translation from Kabardinian: *igrei*). These were

legendary personalities, characterized by a prudent self-consciousness and adequate perception of words. Possessing a variety of creative inclinations, the *dzheguaklué* to an equal degree could be a master of the art of the word, sing and play musical instruments. Not infrequently they were organizers of ritual performances, as genuine priests they had knowledge of magic acts and engaged in doctoring.

An exceedingly high social position was enjoyed by storytellers and songmakers, whose music-making was a manifestation of the value-conscious qualities of the people's culture, who were greatly respected and had merited authority. Being true guardians of the musical-poetic folklore and the tradition of the solo-and-group singing tradition, the *dzheguaklué* received its social commission of preserving the memories of the glorious sons of the nation who died in various battles or for other reasons. Thus, along with the fact that the basic living abilities of the traditional culture were connected with the mission of being located in the center of all the events of traditional culture, their duties included those of creating songs glorifying the heroic feats, a special place among them was taken by the memorial songs-dances.

Thereby, the artistic activities of the versemakers, songmakers, artful performers on musical instruments and brilliant interpreters of the song legacy presented one of the important channels of inner-generation transmission, providing unconditional preservation for the folk music traditions. The personality of the *dzheguaklué* preserved its relevance up until the mid-20th century. In our days their songs and instrumental tunes, presenting the best specimens of the musical-poetical art, bear witness to the importance of individual self-expression in the folk art of the Adyghes.

Traditionally the performance of socially significant and ethnically definitive song genres (epical, historical-heroic and lyrical-epical) took

place at various social gatherings, festivities, weddings, and during the periods of Islamic rule, funerals. An important venue where the art of eloquence, the mastery of vocal-instrumental and dance space as demonstrated, was the *kunak* house (the house for guests). Taking into account the ceremonial-etiquette character of this culture in general, the accountability for the performers' self-expression went up measurably in such instances when such an action took place in the surroundings of high guests, including people pertaining to other ethnical groups, authoritative elder and well-known storytellers and songmakers.

Such an acuteness of the moment was undoubtedly connected with one characteristic form of solo-and-group singing common for all the peoples of the Caucasus, having direct connection to the question of the correlation between the collective and individual elements in the functioning of folk music artistry. Usually a song sung in the solo-and-group manner of performance was begun by the soloist, and after a few minutes he was joined by the bourdon chorus, against the background of which in a declamatory-improvisational manner the leading singer continued to perform the tune. Having sung a few melo-strophes, the soloist, saying the words "it is coming to you" was able to pass the prerogative of the performance to any of the people present. The second singer, after having sung two or three couplets, then passed it onto a third singer, or addressed it to the first one with the words "I return it to you."

This type of order of transmission of folklore information was initiated by the mental capabilities stimulated by the immersion of each member of society into the ethnical culture in general, and particularly the ability to participate actively in a traditional form of music-making. In such a peculiar way a person was obligated to confirm his social positions in order not to lose his social position and the respectful attitude people held towards him.

NOTES

¹ A monographic research work about the phenomenon of the Adyghe folk polyphony has been written for the first time by Beslan Ashkhotov, where in his polemics with the conclusions of Marius Schneider (Germany) and Anna Czekanowska (Poland) that the bourdon polyphony prevalent throughout the Caucasus is distinct by special static qualities of the bass line

("pedal bourdon"), vindicates the mobile character of the bourdon texture ("movable bourdon"), carrying out a complex dramaturgical role in the song. Applying a comparative method of analysis in the context of the song performance throughout the Caucasus, it brings out a hypothesis about the autochthony of the solo-and-group form of the Adyghe folksong tradition (see: [1]).

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The Tradition of Polyphonic Singing of the Adyghe

The material for this longstanding research was provided by the rich folk song legacy of the Adyghe, which covers the various stages of development of ethnic musical genres, from archaic genres of mythological content to the heroic-historical and lyrical songs of the late 19th century. The originality of the performance of most of the genres examined in the context of multilevel connections of the soloist and the chorus contains mutually directed vectors between the musical information itself, the genre, the epochs, the performers and the audiences. All of this is projected onto the musical form of collective singing, which becomes a basic model of the relationships of the correlates of the song texture. Therefore the main accent of the phenomenon of Adyghe polyphonic musical thinking is expressed in dialogueness in the broadest meaning of this concept. The alternating textures of solo and ensemble singing in the Adyghe songs contain two types of localizations – the vertical and the horizontal. The first one determines the concrete type of polyphony – heterophonic, stretto, bourdon or the contrasting (polyphonicized). The second one discloses the compositional forms of interaction in their dispersion, where the functional and dramaturgical exponents of each stratum of the single texture are differentiated.

Keywords: the music of the Adyghe, polyphony, flexible bourdon, creativity of ethnofares, djeguakue in song writing.

Традиция многоголосного пения адыгов

Материалом многолетнего исследования автору послужило богатейшее народно-песенное наследие адыгов, охватывающее этапы развития этнической музыкальной культуры от архаических жанров мифологического содержания до историко-героических и лирических песен конца XIX века. Самобытность исполнения большинства жанров, рассматриваемая в контексте многоуровневых связей солиста и хора, имеет взаимонаправленные векторы между самой информацией, жанром, эпохами, исполнителями и слушательской аудиторией. Всё это проецируется на музыкальную форму коллективного пения, становясь базовой моделью отношений коррелятов песенной фактуры, вследствие чего главным акцентом феномена адыгского многоголосного мышления становится диалогичность в самом широком смысле данного понятия. Сольно-групповая фактура в адыгских песнях содержит два типа локализации: вертикальный и горизонтальный. Первый определяет конкретный тип многоголосия – гетерофонный, стретный, бурдонный, контрастный (полифонизированный). Второй раскрывает композиционные формы взаимодействия в их рассредоточенности, где дифференцируются функциональные и драматургические показатели каждого пласта единой фактуры.

Ключевые слова: музыка адыгов, многоголосие, подвижный бурдон, креативность этнофоров, джэгуаклуэ в песнетворчестве.

Beslan G. Ashkhotov

ORCID: 0000-0003-0525-8898

Pro-rector of studies,

Dr. Sci. (Arts), Professor at the Music History and Music Theory Department

E-mail: bashkhotov@mail.ru

Severo-Kavkazskiy gosudarstvennyy institut iskusstv

Northern Caucasus State Institute of Arts
Nalchik, 360030 Russian Federation

Ашхотов Беслан Галимович

ORCID: 0000-0003-0525-8898

проректор по учебной работе,

доктор искусствоведения, профессор кафедры истории и теории музыки

E-mail: bashkhotov@mail.ru

Северо-Кавказский государственный институт искусств

Нальчик, 360030 Российская Федерация