

GEORGIAN CLASSICS

GEORGIA

The Land of Unique People and Songs

ANZOR ERKOMAISHVILI

NOVA

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**GEORGIA - THE LAND OF
UNIQUE PEOPLE AND SONGS
AS TOLD BY ANZOR ERKOMAISHVILI**

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AS TOLD BY ANZOR ERKOMAISHVILI**

ANZOR DAVID ERKOMAISHVILI



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Who, What, and How
Or the Birth of an Artist from the Soul of Music

FOREWORD

The author of this book is one of the most famous figures in Georgia, but this foreword is being written for an American publication and this is why it is necessary to introduce the author.

Anzor Erkomaishvili is an eminent musician - a singer and choirmaster, a creator and performer of songs, one who found and published unique recordings scattered throughout archives in various countries, the founder of the world-famous ensembles of Rustavi and Marte...

He is already known to intrigued American readers through the book *My Grandfather Artem Erkomaishvili* which he had dedicated to his own famed ancestor, also a well known singer and choirmaster.

The Rustavi Ensemble was founded by him when he was just a young man in 1968.

Over the course of 50 years, the ensemble has held up to 6,000 concerts in 80 countries, and recorded and released albums of over 900 songs on CDs...

The tour impressions however are not expressed in any of Anzor Erkomaishvili's books.

* * *

It was not only his grandfather, but almost all of Anzor Erkomaishvili's ancestors were distinguished singers.

Approximately 40 years ago when working in Moscow archives, he searched out a Pathéphone record dated to 1934 on which one of the oldest Georgian folk songs is recorded. The first voice is performed by Anzor's great-grandfather, the 94-year-old Gigo Erkomaishvili, the second voice or *gamkivani* is done by 12-year-old Davit Erkomaishvili (Anzor's father), and the bass is carried by 48-year-old Artem Erkomaishvili (Anzor's grandfather).

See from where Anzor Erkomaishvili originates!

* * *

The Erkomaishvili dynasty preserved one of Georgia's foremost treasures and riches - polyphonic Georgian folk singing. This is the phenomenon recognized as a masterpiece of humanity's oral and immaterial heritage by UNESCO.

“Georgian singing is immortal, my boy,” Artem Erkomaishvili told his most beloved grandson, with his grandson being left with the care and patronage of this most cherished pearl as a testament.

The grandson honorably fulfilled what was entrusted to him by his famous grandfather: not only was he a patron of Georgian folk singing, not only did he search out and publish unique recordings scattered about in archives abroad, but he also introduced them to the entire world.

These songs are applauded in world-famous concert halls.

Volumes of books would be filled with the impressions of audience members delighted in listening to them.

“The talent and mastery revealed by the singers, dancers, and instrumentalists of the Rustavi Ensemble are a cause of inspiration,” the *New York Times* wrote (April 7, 1990) following a concert held at the Beacon Theater on Broadway.

Having gone to Germany, the Rustavi Ensemble was introduced to the audience by a local musicologist with these words: “Georgians are people who talk with God through singing.”

* * *

Anzor Erkomaishvili looked after the national treasure of Georgian folk singing in Georgia and also beyond its borders. This is why he is compared to great Georgians representing previous generations.

“It won’t be an exaggeration to say that due to the service carried out for saving and popularizing the Georgian musical language, our polyphony, the name of Mr. Anzor Erkomaishvili will be worthily commemorated in the future alongside such great public figures as Ekvtime Takaishvili, Philimon Koridze, Ekvtime Kereselidze, the Karbelashvili brothers, Zakara Paliashvili, and Dimitri Arakishvili,” professional musicians Giorgi Donadze and Svimon Jangulashvili write.

* * *

Audiences from countless countries have been delighted by Georgian polyphony - the fruit of a small nation with great creative genes.

It was not happenstance that the greatest Georgian lyricist of the 20th century wrote, “Nowhere do they sing like they do here in this country...”

Perhaps it is not by chance that Galaktion Tabidze’s poem, from where this line was cited, was dedicated to Guria - Anzor Erkomaishvili’s native region.

* * *

If Freidrich Nietzsche had gotten to know the phenomenon of Georgian polyphony, he probably would have glanced at it with a glorious gaze like Aeschylus and express his delight as thus:

“But tell me that as well, foreigner, how much did these people have to suffer in order to become so beautiful?!”

Over the course of a 3,500 year history, the Georgian people have truly suffered much and created many beautiful things.

One of them is polyphonic Georgian folk singing.

* * *

When the Rustavi Ensemble was heard in France, it was written in the press regarding us Georgians:

“They are happy because a part of their homeland’s spirit is applauded by the audience.”

Even the author of this book is a part of the homeland’s spirit - an obvious confirmation that the birth of a great artist and public figure from the soul of music and singing is possible...

* * *

A few words about the book itself.

It is possible to say that this is a sort of “notebook” of Anzor Erkomaishvili’s writings. It consists of eight chapters.

The first chapter is titled as thus: “At the Origins.”

Here the author tells us about his ancestors and the search for Georgian recordings scattered about in foreign archives.

The second chapter is “On Tour.”

Here only two countries are singled out from a gigantic tour map - France and the United States of America.

“Unforgettable Encounters” is the third chapter.

This chapter tells about meetings with intriguing people.

The fourth chapter is “A Man’s Fate.”

Here you will read some essays permeated with special artistic expressions and emotions...

“Mysterious Voices” is the fifth chapter.

Here the reader will get acquainted with some impressionable portraits of unique performers of Georgian folk singing.

The sixth chapter is “Precious Silhouettes.”

Some interesting essays will be read here helping you get to know some distinguished Georgian composers and opera singers.

“To Save Singing” is the title of the seventh chapter.

The author’s credo is disclosed in this chapter: “If we want to save folk singing, we must teach it to children and make them fall in love with it.” It will be seen as to how this credo became embodied within the creation of the children’s ensemble Martve and its great success.

The last chapter is titled “Reflections.”

Gathered together here are some thoughts the richly creative biographer and perspicacious individual has jotted down at various times.

These are statements imbued with a humility characteristic of an Erkomaishvili expressed with the excellence and laconic forms that Jorje Luis Borges demanded from this genre.

* * *

When one great artist was queried as to what was most important in the arts - what or how - they got such an answer, "Who!"

We can confidently say that all three of these are equally important in this book.

Ioseb Chumburidze

Publicist, PhD in Journalism, Professor

ABOUT THE BOOK

The author of this book, Anzor Erkomaishvili, is one of the most well known, recognized individuals in Georgia - a singer and choirmaster; a composer and performer; one who seeks out and publishes unique recordings scattered in the archives of various countries; the founder of the world famous Rustavi Ensemble; and a steadfast director for half a century...

This ensemble has held up to 6,000 concerts in 80 countries and has recorded more than 900 folk songs and released them on CD.

These tour impressions have not been depicted in any of Anzor Erkomaishvili's books.

* * *

This ensemble receives ovations in world famous concert halls.

Volumes of books would be filled with the impressions of audience members enraptured by what they have heard.

"The talent and expertise revealed by the singers, dancers, and instrumentalists of the Rustavi Ensemble evoke delight," the *New York Times* wrote (April 7, 1991) following a concert at the Beacon Theater on Broadway.

It is possible to say that these writings by Anzor Erkomaishvili can be considered his "selected works."

The book consists of eight chapters.

The first chapter is titled as thus: "At the Origins."

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The last chapter is titled “Reflections.”

Gathered together here are some thoughts the richly creative biographer and perspicacious individual has jotted down at various times.

These are statements imbued with a humility characteristic of an Erkomaishvili and expressed with the excellence and laconic forms that Jorje Luis Borges demanded from this genre.

Chapter 1

AT THE ORIGINS

Singing is a flower of the human spirit...

MY FOREFATHER GIGO ERKOMAISHVILI

My grandfather Artem Erkomaishvili¹ told me many things about the old singers, relating to me about the ensemble created through the guidance of his father Gigo Erkomaishvili in the Gurian village of Makvaneti in the 1860s. This ensemble was one of the first choirs to record some songs on Gramophone records at the beginning of the 20th century. Now that one century has passed since the first Georgian Gramophone recordings were released, the path that Georgian folk singing traversed in the 20th century is very apparent.

In the first half of the 20th century, the foremost singers of the old generation were busy at work, using every means possible to save folk singing in a time of very complex political cataclysms.

During that period, ecclesiastical chant and almost all songs in which God was mentioned were generally forbidden. Beginning during the collectivization period, a lot of fake music got mixed into our folklore. Songs were created for the Party, collectives, leaders, etc. The verbal texts of many old songs were altered, singing changed places from real life to the stage.

Then when Georgian folk singing went beyond Georgia's borders, the musical world began talking about its uniqueness and it earned international acclaim. When Georgian polyphony was considered by the well-known German musicologist Siegfried Nadel as the origin of European polyphony, Gurian songs were highly appraised by Igor Stravinsky, Voyager was launched off into the galaxy by the Americans with "Chakrulo," and choirs singing in Georgian were formed in many countries, foreign musicians had no doubt concerning the pure, folk-like, and sacrosanct qualities of such highly regarded polyphonic songs.

There was the danger of our ancestral songs having their origins from ancient times being considered revamped in future centuries, which is why the songs recorded on the first

¹ A well known singer and choirmaster, to whom Anzor Erkomaishvili had dedicated a voluminous book - *My Grandfather, Artem Erkomaishvili*. It was published in English in the United States in 2018.

Gramophone records at the beginning of the 20th century are ascribed such great importance. These phonograph recordings are material proof of how our songs were approximately two centuries ago, that they are really untouchable and represent a manifestation of the Georgian people's genius.

In the 1970s we came upon a Gurian *naduri*² in four voices recorded in 1907 at the Moscow Phonograph Archive. We also found a Gramophone recording of this *naduri* at the EMI Archives in London. Four-voice polyphony in such a developed form is a unique phenomenon in world musical folklore and it is encountered nowhere else in the phonograph recordings of that period. This phonograph recording is also intriguing in that its performers were real peasants. That is why it gives us an idea of how a *naduri* was performed in the field in the 19th century until it was transferred to the concert stage.

This *naduri* was recorded by the Makvaneti Village Ensemble under the direction of my predecessor Gigo Erkomaishvili.

In the Tbilisi Catalog published in 1907 at the London EMI Archives, the titles of the 49 songs recorded by this ensemble and the surnames of the performers are printed. Some of these songs are unknown to us or are unfamiliar variants. I searched for the Gramophone records according to this catalog, but was unable to find some of them. For example the chants "Tsani Kovlad Ghirsebit"³, "Ganvitsmindot Satsnoblad"⁴, "Aghdgomisa Dghe Ars"⁵, and the songs "Shavi Shashvi Chioda"⁶, "Guruli Nana"⁷, "Aba Darujan"⁸, and others.

It is especially distressing to lose the chants, because very few of these rare treasures are to be found in the phonograph recordings of that period. We hope that even these lost songs might resurface over time.

While working at the Moscow Archives in the 1970s I came across quite an interesting Gramophone record dated to the year 1934. The song "Adila" was recorded on this record, with the first voice performed by 94-year-old Gigo Erkomaishvili, the *gamkivani* or second voice performed by Datiko Erkomaishvili (my father), and the bass by 48-year-old Artem Erkomaishvili (my grandfather). For the first time I listened to a song performed by three generations of Erkomaishvilis, which left quite a great impression on me.

In 1983 I would set off on a tour with Rustavi to France. Mr. Shalva Khomeriki, a documentary film specialist, met me at a film studio. "I have a surprise for you," he told me, "In Moscow I came across some film material of the first Transcaucasian Arts Festival I had filmed in 1934, where Gigo Erkomaishvili performs the song 'Adila' along with his son and grandson."

I asked Mr. Khomeriki to tell me where this exclusive film stock was being kept. "What do you want it for, I'm going to Moscow in a week, I'll make a copy of that film and bring it back for you," the director told me.

One month later I got back from France and right then went to go see Mr. Khomeriki at the film studio. I was told that he had unexpectedly passed away two weeks prior.

² A harvesting song.

³ "The Heavens With All Honor."

⁴ "Let Us Be Purified To See."

⁵ "It Is the Day of Resurrection."

⁶ "A Blackbird Lamented."

⁷ "Gurian Lullaby."

⁸ "Well, Darujan" (Darujan is a woman's name).

After this, I went to the Krasnogorsk Archive in Moscow a number of times and searched for that film footage, but I was in no way able to find it. I was keenly interested in seeing my ancestors on screen, I hope it might perhaps turn up somewhere.

One remarkable individual, Mr. Simon Bolkvadze, worked at the S. Janashia Art History Museum in Tbilisi. I frequently went to see him and he always provided me with the material I needed. Once when we were looking for some old photographs for Soso Chkhaidze's film "Shvidkatsa," Mr. Bolkvadze told us that he had found some photo negatives taken during the first Transcaucasian Arts Festival in 1934 on which the members of Gigo Erkomaishvili's choir were shown. "I remember it well when Gigo Erkomaishvili performed 'Adila' with his son and grandson, thus astonishing the audience. These three men are pictured directly on one of the photos," Mr. Bolkvadze told me and he promised he would print these photos and hand them over to me. When we returned from filming, Mr. Bolkvadze was no longer alive. A few days later his spouse Mrs. Bolkvadze called me and handed me a large envelope in which these photos were placed, the ones Mr. Bolkvadze had promised me. Mrs. Bolkvadze had apparently seen this envelope on Mr. Bolkvadze's work desk after his death. Written in his hand on the envelope was: "To Mr. Anzor Erkomaishvili."

Now I am listening to the phonograph recording uncovered in Moscow where my ancestors are singing "Adila" and the photographs given to me as a gift by Mr. Simon Bolkvadze are sitting on the table. In this picture, my father is younger than my son, wearing a *chakura*⁹ and having a woeful expression on his face.

I remember my father when he was a soloist in Grandfather Artem's choir, he was loved by the entire village. One morning when going to work, he woke me up from my slumber, caressed me, and told me, "When I return in the evening, I have to teach you a good song." Father no longer returned in the evening, he had perished in a car crash. At that time he was 32 years old. The entire village mourned my father. No one in the village turned on a radio for 40 days as a sign of mourning.

Even his last photo is sitting on my desk, precisely how I remember him, young and presentable. Time marches on, my father however does not age, I'm now older than him. The phonograph recordings of only two of his songs have survived, one of them is "Adila," where he sings the second voice part along with his father and grandfather. The second one is "Khasanbegura"¹⁰ recorded in 1951, in which he performs the bass part.

My grandfather Artem Erkomaishvili was a glorious choirmaster, singer, and church chanter. He turned out to be a real "bridge" between the old and new generations. At the initiative of Mr. Grigol Chkhikvadze, the last representative of the chanting school, he recorded each of the voices of a chant at Tbilisi Conservatoire. This is an invaluable treasure for folklore scholars.

Along with his brothers Ladiko and Anania, an entire epoch was created by him in the art of Georgian singing. The Erkomaishvili brothers carried out a tremendous role in searching out, saving, and restoring old Gurian songs and in the task of raising up new generations during that extremely hard period. It was really because of this that all three brothers were bestowed with honorary titles of "Distinguished Figure in the Arts."

⁹ A short tunic, narrow silk-striped trousers, and leather belt that were commonly worn in Guria at that time.

¹⁰ This is a song about a renegade Georgian Khasan-beg Tavdgiridze who fought for the Turks during the Crimean War (1853-1856) and fell on the battlefield. It was widespread in Guria and Achara.

Their father Gigo Erkomaishvili was one of the outstanding chanters, singers, and choirmasters of the 19th century. Graced with a long beard, his benevolent face gazes out at you from the photos gifted by Mr. Simon Bolkvadze. This is exactly how I remember him. He lived over a century and passed away at the age of 107.

Now when I look at the photos of my ancestors and listen to their songs, the years spent with them come to my mind. How I've missed them, how I want to sing and speak with them now. Many things have changed after them, but the main thing that would make them happy most of all is that Georgian folk singing has survived, earning international recognition. The great singers of the first half of the 20th century contributed much in this endeavor, with even my ancestors occupying an honorable place among them.

Our family name has a 300-year musical tradition. I am the seventh generation. As my grandfather told it, our musical recollection starts with Gigo Erkomaishvili. I remember him well, which is why I will attempt to resurrect everything and tell you everything I know about him and about that which I have heard from others.

When I saw Gigo Erkomaishvili for the first time, I was probably about five years old. At that time we were living in Batumi and I had been taken to Makvaneti Village. An old man with a long, white beard met us at the gate. He leaned on a stick almost as tall as him with one hand, whereas he held an amber rosary in the other. I memorized his beaming, kind face. Despite it being quite warm, he was all bundled up.

“What’s up, Grandpa Gigo, the country’s burning up and you’re still wearing a coat,” my father told him and gave him a kiss.

“Oh, my boy, you’re young and the blood boils, my blood however has dried up and that’s why I’m cold. It’s no joke that I’ve turned 105,” he said. At that time I did not know how many 105 years were, but upon seeing his withered and freckled face, I realized he would be older than Grandfather Artem. He came to me, bent down, and kissed me on the forehead. My entire face was covered by his beard, which was why I called him “White Grandfather.”

“Father,” Grandfather Artem told him when we went into the *oda*¹¹, “I’ve brought you some Gramophone records from Batumi, Samuel Chavleishvili and his group are singing. There are also the recorded songs of your ensemble, my singers brought them to me in Batumi.”

White Grandfather smiled and ran a hand down his beard, then he leaned on the stick, stood up, and went into his room. A brown box on which a gigantic funnel was attached was on the table. Grandfather Artem turned this “funnel” towards us, took out a black record from the paper envelope on which some winged angels were painted, and placed it on the brown box. He then cranked a small iron handle a few times and the record began to spin around. At first a rustling was heard, then someone’s voice, “Gigo Erkomaishvili, just do Melchisedek Makharadze’s ‘Khelkhavi’, Melchisedek Makharadze’s,” and the song rang out. I had not yet seen such a thing. At once I imagined that little people like little gremlins sat inside the brown box and were yowling. I got scared and clung to my father.

“Don’t be scared, this is a Gramophone, records on which the voices of Grandfather Gigo and his buddies have been recorded are played on this,” Father told me.

¹¹ A type of house common to western Georgia, Javakheti, and Trialeti with a cow shed, it is intended as a winter residence.

The song came to an end and while Grandfather Artem placed another record on the Gramophone, I looked at White Grandfather. Tears were streaming down his face, rolling down his white beard. We listened to a few more songs and emerged from the room. I had seen a Gramophone for the first time and was so certain that little men sat inside of it that I was scared and would no longer go into the room where the Gramophone stood.

In the meantime a table had been set out and we were invited to lunch. A small clay pitcher with a broken rim was placed down in front of White Grandfather, covered on top with a corn husk. This husk had been stained red by wine. He picked up a small, narrow-waisted glass, poured in some red wine, crossed himself, looked up, and said, “Cheers to peace.” Then he took a sip of wine, stroked a hand down his beard, quietly cleared his throat, and commenced with “Chven Mshvidoba”¹².

Many guests visited our family in Batumi and I had heard this song many times, but I realized that White Grandfather was singing it in a different way. I wasn’t able to distinguish how differently, but I figured out that he sang the first voice differently than everyone else.

When they finished the song, my father kissed White Grandfather and told him, “May God let us hear your sweet voice for ten more years.” Then he got proud and pointed me out, “Now let’s have this little guy sing.” “Come my boy, start with me and I’ll help you out,” White Grandfather calmly told me and he sat me on his knee. I gave no starting signal, loudly singing out “Maspindzelsa Mkhiarulsa”¹³. White Grandfather let me sing for a little bit, then he rushed to my aid with the second voice, my father sang the bass. Grandfather attentively listened to my singing, all the while providing me with a suitable second voice like a man is assisted over a narrow bridge. This was why I had felt no danger of getting off track with the other voices and I finished the song mightily.

“May you grow up to be my age, my boy,” White Grandfather told me, then he kissed me on the forehead, picked up some *janjukha*¹⁴ from the table, and gave it to me. This was my first reward for singing.

We stayed in the village for a few weeks. I did not leave White Grandfather’s side, he told me interesting stories that had befallen him or that he had heard. He told me some fairy tales, all the while not depriving me of fruit and *churchkhela* (candy was not to be found at that time). I became really accustomed to him. One day he taught me a song. “I met you long ago, may God not give you any troubles,” I screamed as loudly as possible. “This song needs to be sung quietly, my boy. The louder you sing it, you’ll be unable to hear the other voices and mess up the song. Calmly,” White Grandfather told me and he himself showed me how to sing it. He had a weak, but very pleasant voice. Half a century has passed after this and even now his quiet singing rings in my ears.

Then a peer, my cousin Irakli, came to the village, there were now three of us. White Grandfather taught us the alphabet. When we got tired out, he would sit at the base of a tree on a low, three-legged stool and have us sing. Then he would tell us some fairy tales while fingering the amber rosary. Sometimes he would even ask us riddles. One time he asked us, “Well if you know, who goes about in the morning on four legs, in the afternoon on two legs, and then in the evening on three legs?” We couldn’t solve it. White Grandfather smiled, ran a hand down his beard, and told us, “When a child is born, he goes about on all fours, when he

¹² “Peace to Us.”

¹³ “Our Joyful Host.”

¹⁴ A string of hazelnuts or almonds dipped in thickened grape juice and corn flour. It is similar to *churchkhela*, with *churchkhela* being made from walnuts.

grows up, he walks on two legs, whereas when he grows old, he uses a stick as a third leg like me.”

When I started first grade, I almost knew the alphabet. The teacher Margalita Salukvadze was surprised, “How do you learn it so easily?” I told her, “White Grandfather taught the letters to me.” When we had all learned the alphabet in school, White Grandfather told me, “Well, now I’ll dictate to you and you write down a poem.” I picked up a notebook and wielded a pen. He dictated to me, I slowly scrawled out the letters in the checkered notebook. The letters were spread out on the notebook page like a poorly planted field. I fit one strophe of the poem on one page, it probably took me one hour to write it. When I finished, White Grandfather told me, “Save this poem, my boy, when you grow up big, use it in a song and then you’ll realize what it means.” With my index finger, I searched for each letter and slowly read the poem, sounding it out:

“How good that it might let me pass through, this world so fleeting,
 Making whoever I love, fall in love with me,
 Letting whoever doesn’t love me, not draw near to me,
 So that it won’t let old age sneak in on me untimely.”

He had not specified from where he had learned this poem, the next day I knew it by heart and with a babble read it for Mrs. Salukvadze at the lesson. She patted me on the head and praised me.

One evening I came down with a fever. My family massaged me with vinegar, placed a turnip leaf poultice on my head, but my fever did not come down. When I was covered all over on my body with red splotches, I was diagnosed with the measles.

My bedroom was festooned with red pieces of cloth and colorful flowers, They lit some *bazma* (sugar-glazed walnuts and incense) for me which gives off a pleasant aroma when burned. A “sacrifice” - a red cockerel - was circled over my head, which was taken away by my father and released in the churchyard. Then my grandmother Mariam came to me, sprinkled me with some rose water, and lit a beeswax candle my height for me. Then she got on her knees by the head of my bed and muttered some prayers. I was bothered so much by the fever that I began to speak deliriously. There’s a memory of White Grandfather, Grandfather Artem, and my father coming to my side. Grandfather Artem held a chonguri with a red ribbon knotted at the top of it. They sat down on some low chairs at the head of the bed. Grandfather Artem strummed the chonguri strings and they started to sing:

“Give him relief, Masters, give him relief,
 They are beautiful masters, covered with violets and roses,
 The boys will come arrayed in white garments,
 They are beautiful masters, covered with violets and roses,
 They beseech the masters, beseech them,
 I’ll offer you violets and roses and light pure bazma for you,
 A white lamb and a herd of goats come running, a kid has jumped,
 The masters have become happy and suddenly turned away.”

The beeswax candle burned, the wondrous aroma of the *bazma* was all around, and the singers sang divinely. I don’t know if the song melody had an effect on me or something else,

but during the song I gradually calmed down, then my eyes grew heavy and I fell asleep. I saw an amazing dream while asleep: I stood in a meadow strewn with flowers wearing a long, white shirt and holding a lit beeswax candle. There were lambs all around me grazing on the grass. An old man with a white beard came down from the sky with a crown of lit candles on his head and a beeswax candle in his hand. I saw a semblance to White Grandfather in this old man. He languidly drove away the lambs around me, then made the sign of the cross on me three times and vanished.

I don't know how long I slept, but when I awoke, I no longer had a fever, even the rash soon went away.

Later on when I was a conservatoire student, Grandfather Artem told me about the traditions and customs connected to songs and of their preservation over the centuries. I then understood that singing in Guria was considered to be one of the means of healing and that it was relegated to a special place for curing infectious diseases such as smallpox, whooping-cough, measles, etc. The ritual that my ancestor Gigo Erkomaishvili conducted to heal me and that fantastic feeling that came over me at that time then came to my mind.

Some time afterwards, my instructor Mr. Shalva Aslanishvili told me, "The scholar Ivane Javakhishvili has established that there is a connection between an image of an amulet on Babylon's wall and the aforementioned ritual, thus it is possible to think that the "masters" were used even in ancient times to cure infectious diseases."

Besides old traditions, Grandfather Artem told me many things about our family name, telling me who our ancestors were and about the origins of Gigo Erkomaishvili.

It was passed down from Gigo's father that his forerunners were Giorgi and Toma Erkomashvili (they don't remember who came before them), that they lived in the village of Askana and were famous singers. Giorgi had passed away at an early age, leaving behind his son Toma along with his wife and little Ivane. Ivane had apparently inherited a special talent for singing. He had an extraordinary gamkivani (first voice) vocal timbre and listeners were astonished by his singing. There was once a wedding in Askana, Telemak Asatiani was giving his daughter away in marriage to Sophrom Mgeladze in Kvemo Aketi. It was then the custom for the best singers to be sent as the bridal consort in order to compete with those they met along the way. This was why it wasn't possible to celebrate without singing and if there were no good singers in a village, the host would invite them from another village.

The residents of Aketi traditionally had great singers, even those from Askana had a worthy encounter with them, but they were bested by the Asketi singers. The host Telemak Asatiani got angry and ordered, "Quickly find little Ivane Erkomaishvili for me and bring him here." It was past midnight when Ivane was brought to the wedding party. All those present were moved by his gamkivani voice. The groom was astounded, calling Ivane over to him and gave him a gift as it befit him. Those from Aketi were bested by the Askana singers. Being a little tipsy, the groom ventured to say to the father-in-law, "I have not heard a singer like him." "If you like him as such, let him be a gift to you," Asatiani told him and he gave the groom his young serf as a gift. Thus Ivane was separated from his parents and taken away to Aketi, to the home of Sophrom Mgeladze, where he was received with great honor. Ivane was brought up in Sophrom Mgeladze's home like his own son. He was taught reading and writing, handiwork, and entrusted to some experienced singers. With them Ivane became skilled and apparently not one celebration was held in Aketi and the nearby villages without him.

Ivane grew into a young man, taking Pinaishvili's daughter as his wife. Three sons were born to them: Beglari, Mikheil, and Gigo. He nurtured his sons as singers, but was not given the time to do so. First Beglari and Mikheil perished from typhus, then their parents soon joined them, leaving Gigo without anyone to look after him. His godfather Sophrom Mgeladze took custody of him, brought him into his own home, and supported him. Gigo had learned some songs from his father, but when he grew up a little more he improved his skills with Aketian singers and became a prominent singer throughout the village. Sophrom Mgeladze was happy that Gigo had inherited his father's talent for singing because Sophrom had been exceedingly pained by the tragedy of Ivane Erkomaishvili's family, his loyal serf. Gigo was not deprived of any motherly love by Sophrom's spouse, but he evidently didn't have any luck here as well. His adopted mother soon died and Gigo again remained without someone to care for him. Sophrom had a sister named Jajiki who was married to Naosa Iorashvili, a nobleman from Makvaneti Village. He asked his sister to raise Gigo.

Jajiki and Naosa received Gigo as their child. He became a full-fledged member of the family and was raised up alongside Jajiki's children.

Jajiki was an extremely learned and intelligent woman in the village. She was a great scribe and poet having an appropriate library for that time. This woman had a good knowledge of poetry and it was apparently quite pleasant to listen to her when she crooned out old Georgian poems on the chonguri. Jajiki also taught Gigo reading and writing along with her own children and read *The Man in the Panther Skin* to them.

Gigo was frequently taken by Jajiki to Aketi, where he stayed for months and sang with the Aketian singers. He learned harvesting songs especially well from them.

Gigo was fated to accidents from his childhood: once little Gigo was made to shepherd some goats in Aketi. A blizzard sprang up in the evening and it even rained. Gigo could no longer find his way and lost the goats. Then he heard the howling of some wolves, saw a cave amid the lightning, thunder, and blizzard and took refuge in it. Sophrom and his friends searched for him the entire night. In the morning they found gnawed-on goat bones. Sophrom beat his head, "What's happened to me, the wolves probably even tore up the boy." Upon hearing a man's voice, Gigo emerged from the cave and yelled out, "Don't be scared, I'm over here!"

Once when Naosa and Jajiki weren't at home, Kotsia Tsetskhladze came to Gigo and asked him, "A bear has ruined my corn in Zemo Gogieti, come along with me to spend the night in the field."

Kotsia had the reputation of a low-life in the village, no one trusted him because he was an untrustworthy man and had done many terrible things. He was even blamed for betrayal and selling kids off as prisoners. Gigo did not refuse him and followed Kotsia out to the field. When Naosa returned and checked up on Gigo, he was told that Kotsia had taken him away. Naosa got livid with anger, "That damned man is going to sell my kid!" he said. Then he gathered up a few armed men and went to the forest where Kotsia supposedly had his field. The Acharian mountains are close to the Gogieti Forest and from there it is easy to cross over into Turkey. Naosa hurried. They noticed a bonfire at the edge of the forest. The horses were left down below and they followed a path up. Kotsia and Gigo were sitting at the fire and roasting some fresh corn. Three Turks sat on the opposite side. Naosa avoided any conflict and scolded Gigo, "How did you leave the house when the livestock still hasn't returned from the forest. Come along with me now and show them to me!" When Kotsia saw a number of armed men, he could no longer dare to say anything. Naosa took Gigo along with him.

Thus Gigo survived being sold off as a slave in Turkey. As for Kotsia, even afterwards he committed many dastardly deeds, then apparently the sins aggrieved him and he lost his mind. He locked himself inside his house, poured kerosene over himself, and was burned into ashes along with the house. Apparently, he had acted the right way, because he knew that there was no one to bury him.

Once Gigo was in Aketi at a relative's place. When he was returning from there, night overtook him by the village of Shemokmedi. The road went through the forest and it was dangerous to traverse it because many predators lived there and a man was not insured against anything.

He had some close friends in Shemokmedi, but he no longer stopped there, having borrowed a flintlock gun and knife from Naosa. Gigo even had a good horse, clearly he had been goaded by a little drunkenness and continued on his way.

It was a moonlit night, the road could be made out well. He probably hadn't even reached the midpoint of the journey when he heard some wolves howling. The horse came to a halt. Like fireflies, the eyes of some animals flashed out nearby. It was clear that a pack of wolves had encountered him. It was necessary to act quickly, the horse was shaking all over. Gigo took out his gun and fired towards where the most eyes shone. The wolves were momentarily startled. In the meanwhile, Gigo dismounted, cut off a large dry branch called a *parchkhi* in Guria with his knife, and tied it to the horse's tail. Then he unsheathed the knife and made the horse gallop off. The *parchkhi* made such a racket that the wolves could no longer dare to attack from behind. He brandished the knife in front of him and even screamed from time to time. The horse gained courage and took Gigo away to safety with a gallop. They were chased a little ways by the wolves and then were left alone.

Gigo grew into a young man, he was probably around 20 years old when he met a young singer who sang the first voice in a remarkable way. This was Giorgi Babilodze. They became friends and remained so until death. A fellow villager of theirs was befriended by them and they created an exceptional trio that became the nucleus of a future ensemble.

Giorgi Babilodze had a sister named Egviti who was a great singer and remarkable chonguri player. Gigo married Egviti. Naosa and Jajiki set aside one hectare of their family land for him close to Giorgi Babilodze, then they even decided to build an oda, helping him to prepare the construction material and bringing it to the site. "Elesa" was heard in the Gormaghali Forest for a few days, adorned by Giorgi Iobishvili's *damtskebi* (second voice) and Giorgi Babilodze's *gamkivani* (first voice). Thus they hauled out construction material for Gigo Erkomaishvili ("Elesa" is sung when hauling wood out from a forest or when bringing out a wine press).

When they returned from the forest one evening, Egviti told them, "Gigo, Data was here, Iorashvili, he brought you a few chestnut trees and said to let Gigo have them as a gift from me." Data Iorashvili was Naosa's brother who lived all alone as a hermit. He was a strange man, having a house and domicile, but still he slept on some hay in a wine press. Data was an exceedingly compassionate person without malice, just, industrious, but he didn't come out in public. To this day no one knows why.

Gigo built the house and the hearth of the Erkomaishvili family was kindled in Makvaneti Village. Jajiki brought some domestic gifts for Gigo, Naosa gave him a good horse, and Sophrom Mgeladze sent him a yoke of oxen from Aketi. Egviti turned out to be a good mother and housewife and they lived well as befitting that time.

Gigo and Egviti had ten children: Kalmane, Pakhuma, Mariami, Iliko, Lisa, Artem, Aneta, Anania, Liziko, and Ladiko. Every one of them was gifted with extraordinary musical talent.

The children were taught songs by their father and uncle Giorgi Babilodze. When they got older, there was apparently nothing better than listening to Gigo's family choir.

At that time, the trio of Gigo, Giorgi Babilodze, and Giorgi Iobishvili was known all over Guria. Gigo taught singing in neighboring villages, from which some skilled singers joined him. There was Ivliane Kechakmadze from Kviriketi, Ermile Molarishvili from Bakhvi, and Naniko Burdzgla from Makvaneti and a regularly functioning ensemble of singers was created, facilitated by the kindred and neighborly relations of the ensemble members. A feast or any kind of celebration would not be held without them in Makvaneti or the neighboring villages. The ensemble became more popular by the day. They enriched their repertoire with songs and hymns and chanted at Makvaneti's church during the liturgy on ecclesiastical holidays. This was the 1870s.

Gigo Erkomaishvili's ensemble was rounded out with some peasants who pursued agricultural activities. Their singing was natural, truly rustic, and imbued with the aroma of the earth. This was an indigenous ensemble with its own signature and performance style differing timbrally from all others. Later on, a well known scholar Mr. Vano Shilakadze writes in his book: "There was a single ensemble in Guria that had not been influenced by anyone. This was Gigo Erkomaishvili's ensemble from Makvaneti. It was quite a popular ensemble for that time and it enhanced its repertoire with new songs brought from various villages, performing them with its own interpretation (V. Shilakadze, *Patrons of Folk Music*)."

Once Ivliane Kechakmadze brought some news, "A new song was sung in the Kobuleti district which no one in Guria yet knows." They decided to go to Achara and learn this song.

They found out that a large wedding was in Kakuti, the bride was being brought from Khutsubani. It was clear that the wedding wouldn't be without any singing and the new song would definitely be performed. A decision was made for Gigo, Giorgi Babilodze, and Giorgi Iobishvili to go and "steal" the song. Afterwards Giorgi Babilodze had joked, "We went to the wedding party uninvited, the hosts thought we were the bridal consort, whereas the bridal consort thought we were the hosts."

A traditional competition was held at the supra between the bridal consort and the hosts. These songs were in the Gurian-Acharian style and well known to those in Guria. In a little while it became ascertained that those from Kakuti were getting the better of the Khutsubani hosts. The residents of Khutsubani started out with the new song. Our singers pricked up their ears and everyone listened attentively to their own voice part. Giorgi Iobishvili listened to the *damtskebi* (the second voice) containing the verbal text, Giorgi Babilodze paid heed to the *gamkivani* (first voice), whereas Gigo Erkomaishvili took in the bass voice. The song was really quite lovely. It was no longer able to be repeated by the hosts. Around midnight, the bridal consort sang the strange song once again and for a third time per the people's request at dawn. Our singers already knew it by heart. This was "Alipasha."

Our guys no longer waited for the wedding party to end and came back home whether it was light or not. As soon as they emerged from the host's yard, they then began "Alipasha" and frequently repeated it until they got home (it is about 15-20km from Kakuti to Makvaneti). Their ensemble members were waiting for them in Makvaneti. That same

evening, this song was performed at Elise Antelidze's wedding party, which became quickly widespread throughout Guria.

Thus "Alipasha" was "stolen" from the Acharians by Gigo and his friends.

As expressed by the singers of that period, Gigo Erkomaishvili had been one of the best experts and teachers of Gurian songs, being nicknamed "The Gurian Nightingale." In Samuel Chavleishvili's opinion, "In the 1860-70s, Gigo Erkomaishvili searched out, restored, and collected Gurian songs, otherwise many songs would have been lost. He was a true patron of singing." This is why at that time there was almost no singer remaining who hadn't had a relationship with Gigo Erkomaishvili. He was also greatly respected by singers of the next generation. Many of them went to him for consultation or to learn a song from him, with singers of naduris (harvesting songs) being especially noted. Gigo knew all the Gurian harvesting songs with all their variants. At that time, many villages had their own naduri or their own different variant of one, for example: "Chochkhatura," "Nigoetura," "Askanura," "Guriantula," "Shemokmedura," "Sajavakhura," etc. A man knowing a naduri was greatly valued, because collective labor had turned into a tradition. If a family worked a field without any helping neighbors, they were considered to not have any food, whereas if they didn't have any naduri performers in their village, they had to invite some from other villages. People joyfully went to work together with the naduri singers, because the labor became more enthusiastic. Apart from this, a harvesting song made the work easier, it even had an entertainment factor. At the end of the 19th century, the naduri had become so popular that they were even performed in churchyards after the service. Many well known singers did not know any naduris, such singers were not called to a harvesting session, they were only invited to a meal following the harvest. While working in a field, nothing else was sung except for naduris.

Morning harvesting songs were performed in the morning. When noon approached, a stick would be planted in the ground directly in the sunlight and when the stick no longer cast a shadow, i.e., the sun had reached its zenith, noonday naduris were performed. Following this, *zarmeli* harvesting songs were sung (*zarmeli* is a meal between lunch and dinner). After these kinds of songs, they would start singing evening naduris, whereas after finishing the work, the second part of "Elesa" would be performed, which meant that a person reaping such a harvest would need "Elesa" to take it from the field. In short, all throughout the day naduris were heard one after the other. Harvesting songs were an indispensable part of a peasant man's life. This was why everyone attempted to learn naduris and a living line of naduri singers stood at Gigo Erkomaishvili's place.

In Guria, a singer was someone different from a naduri performer. "This guy is a good *shemkhambari*¹⁵ performer," is something said of a performer of one of the voice parts of a naduri. It was apparently said regarding Giorgi Babilodze, "When he calls out the gamkivani in a naduri, it's a blessing, we won't tire out if we work the entire day."

The tradition of performing naduris took shape over the course of centuries, which is why the significance of the naduri recorded in 1907 is invaluable.

Gigo and Giorgi Babilodze had some agricultural fields set up on the bank of the Choloki River. Apart from members of their own ensemble, they also helped others. Some fields belonging to Acharians were on the opposite bank of the river, who also worked with the

¹⁵ Most Georgian folk songs and chants usually have three voice parts, but some naduris are unique in the fact that they sometimes had four voice parts. A *shemkhambari* could be considered a high bass.

accompaniment of a naduri. A western Gurian naduri bore more of an affinity to an Acharian one. Experts in Gurian naduris sang freely with the Acharians. From time to time, the Gurians and Acharians would sing naduris antiphonally on the banks of the Choloki, this was a wonderful sight. The Acharians had many naduris and good singers, singers from the villages of Kakuti, Achkvi, and Leghva were especially outstanding.

Once Gigo had invited a harvesting party to Makvaneti, a large parcel of land gifted by Naosa Iorashvili had to be hoed. They had just started to work and hadn't even sung the morning naduri when some singing was heard from a distance. The sound gradually grew closer. "That resembles the Acharians' singing," Giorgi Iobishvili said. They momentarily stopped hoeing and focused on the singing performed harmoniously by the singers.

The singers soon appeared. Ali Takidze had found out that Gigo had a harvesting party and had brought up to 20 naduri singers along with him to Makvaneti. They made a circular pit around a standing dry tree a number of times using their hoes and began the naduri "Tetri Kori Chandarze"¹⁶. This was followed by "Kali Vikav Aznauri"¹⁷ and naduris performed antiphonally by more than 40 men began to boom out. The neighbors heard that Gigo had been visited by some Acharian naduri singers and they started preparations in order to properly host the guests. Gigo slaughtered a bull, the neighbor ladies helped Egviti, whereas the men and children went to the field to listen to the naduris. The Makvanetians had still not seen such a thing, almost the entire village arrived. Many people had left their own fields and joined in with the naduri singers. More than 100 people gathered together. It was said that, "They sang the naduris so mightily that the sound was heard for a few kilometers." Ivliane Kechakmadze pushed a large stick into the dirt directly in the sun and when the stick no longer cast a shadow, such a text was mixed into the naduri:

"The sparrow hawk loves the quail, the kite loves to hunt,
If the host loves the harvesters, now indeed is lunch."

And the women brought some lunch. The harvesting party took a break, gave their burning hearts a respite from the heat, then the noonday naduris continued. They finished up with Gigo's field before singing the *zarmeli* naduri and went over to work in some other fields. All the fields of that area were hoed by evening. They finished working in Okropir Abashmadze's field, then according to tradition they dug up the roots of a big alder tree with the hoes and knocked it over. At the end they sang "Elesa" and with this informed the entire village that work was finished.

A supra was set out at the base of a lime tree in Gigo Erkomaishvili's yard in the evening and there was a competition between the Gurian and Acharian singers. One group would begin a song, the second group would finish it and the competition would last until morning without a song being repeated. The Acharians were astonished by the peculiar interpretation of "Alipasha."

Much time passed after this story. I remember the great delight with which the old men of Makvaneti recalled those amazing naduris, having no longer heard anything like that afterwards.

¹⁶ "The White Hawk in the Plane Tree."

¹⁷ "I Was a Noblewoman."

The territory where the Zemo Makvaneti Cemetery is now, had earlier belonged to the Nakashidze family. This was their summer residence place. It is truly a beautiful location. Ermile Nakashidze had gotten an education abroad from whence he returned with a degree in agricultural science. He was one of the first ones to introduce the production of tea in Georgia. Tea was first planted on his own family lands, whereas later on he even built a tea factory in the village of Zvani. Besides tea, he ordered various types of evergreen trees from abroad and planted them at his own summer residence. That area resembled a true paradise.

The Nakashidze family had their summer vacation home there, with many entertaining activities and toys: a bowling alley, see-saw, etc. Many guests gathered in that yard during the summers, including foreign visitors and there was just a joyful atmosphere. Gigo Erkomaishvili frequently participated in these kinds of festivities, for which he was granted status as an emancipated serf and was freed from every kind of taxation.

Once a man from the Nakashidze family came to ask for Gigo, "Apparently he has some very respected guests from Paris and he asks you to give him a good reputation with your singers."

All the toastmaster's toasts were followed by the appropriate songs and when Giorgi Babilodze called out the gamkivani in "Shvidkatsa," there was no limit to the guests' amazement. The French guests turned out to be highly appreciative of singing, there was a professional female musician among them. She said, "I haven't heard anything like this," and she added, "France and all of Europe must get to know these songs." Then she picked up a sheet of paper, drew out a musical staff on it, and tried to notate Giorgi Babilodze's gamkivani voice part, but when she got no results, she said, "It is impossible to notate this song." It was the 1880s, the Gramophone had still not yet been invented. At the behest of the French, the singers repeated the songs many times. The next day the French guests told the host that this was the best musical impression they had ever experienced. A happy Nakashidze gifted Gigo with one hectare of land, a yoke of oxen in Burghana, a number of cattle and swine, as well as the best flintlock gun and revolver. Such a gift was a great acquisition for a family with many children and Gigo's family had some respite.

Gigo's children grew up, truly nothing was better than listening to their family choir, but even their happiness had a limit. First Pakhuma passed away, then Kalmane and Iliko. When they were digging Pakhuma's grave, they had also dug a second one, because Lisa had been given up for dead and it was thought she wouldn't make it through that night. When they returned home, they had apparently encountered Lisa sitting up in bed. She ecstatically told those at home what she had seen: Lisa had supposedly gone somewhere far away, she was traveling in a desert all alone. There was not the slightest trace of anyone around her. Then she came upon an oasis where beautiful trees were blooming and strange birds were singing sweetly. Winged angels of extraordinary beauty were flying around among the trees. Lisa entered this oasis and what did she see: there were people spread out in little yards, the yards were covered with flowerbeds. Everyone had feasts set out and singing was heard. Lisa went through these yards and looked for her brother Pakhuma. A winged angel flew over her and led her forth. Lisa came standing at a garden wondrously blooming, sirens sat in the trees and sweetly sang. There were a number of people sitting and feasting at a low table in the yard, one of them was Pakhuma. On seeing Lisa, Pakhuma stood up and came towards her, "What do you want here? Who invited you, there is no place for you here, go back right now." "I want to be with you," Lisa answered. "It is still early to be with me, you'll come here 72 years from now," Pakhuma responded, took a hold of her arm, and saw her off at the gate. Lisa

woke up and began searching for Pakhuma. “Pakhuma isn’t here,” her mother told her. “How so, we were together just this minute,” Lisa answered and began crying.

After that Lisa was known as someone in the village who had returned from the next world and children were frightened of her. Still, she was an extraordinarily kind and virtuous woman. There’s a memory of great aunt Lisa telling us this story as well. I loved her very much because she acted warmly towards us and always had churchkhela or some fruit as presents for kids. When I got older, I got intrigued about why Pakhuma told Lisa, “You’ll be with me 72 years from now.” I ascertained the date of Pakhuma’s death with Grandfather Artem. Lisa had passed away exactly 72 years later.

* * *

One day, Gigo was visited by Masiko Salukvadze. Masiko originated from the village of Likhauri. At that time he was living in Tbilisi, had some tailor shops, and was considered a well-to-do man. He was a great admirer of singing and he himself sang a little.

Giorgi Babilodze sent his own son Silovani scurrying off to Giorgi Iobishvili’s place with the news, “A man has visited Gigo from Tbilisi.” While a meal was being prepared, some singers also got together.

Giorgi Babilodze was the toastmaster of the supra, clearly every toast was followed by the appropriate song. When Giorgi Iobishvili started out with some strange variant of “Shvidkatsa” and Giorgi Babilodze sang out with the gamkivani, Masiko Salukvadze could no longer hide his delight. The feast went on until morning. In the morning Masiko called Gigo over beside him: “Gigo, some Englishmen have come to Tbilisi and are recording some songs on Gramophone records. These records are placed on a Gramophone and you listen to your very own voice.” “What can a man’s mind come up with,” Gigo was amazed. “I have decided,” Masiko continued, “To bring you down to Tbilisi and have you record some songs. I will take care of all expenses, you won’t have to worry about a thing. This was exactly why I came to Makvaneti,” Masiko concluded. The singers were quite happy about Masiko’s proposition.

January 1907 came along. In the beginning of February, the ensemble set off for Tbilisi via train. They were met at the station by Masiko Salukvadze and a number of other men and were put up in a small hotel. The song recording was scheduled for the next day. Gigo Erkomaishvili, Giorgi Babilodze, Giorgi Iobishvili, Ivliane Kechakmadze, Naniko Burdzgla, Artem Erkomaishvili, Ermile Molarishvili, and Luka Toidze were the ones to come to Tbilisi. Luka was a young singer, having gained mastery with Gigo and marrying his daughter Aneta. Artem Erkomaishvili was the youngest out of all the ensemble members, but he knew how to sing well and had an exemplary bass voice. The recording studio was set up at Hotel Orianti by the brothers Fred and Will Gaisberg. During that period, Tbilisi was considered to be the most important center of commerce all throughout the Caucasus, which was why the UK Gramophone Company decided to open a recording studio and some Gramophone shops in Tbilisi. It serviced the entire Caucasus.

The next day the Makvaneti Ensemble was brought to Orianti to record some songs. Giorgi Babilodze, Giorgi Iobishvili, and Gigo Erkomaishvili were the first ones to stand at the microphone. They expressed no surprise and loudly sang out “Adila” into the gigantic microphone. The sample variant came out well. Their trio was approved by the recording engineers and they prepped for recording, except they were asked to announce the title of a

song and the surnames of the performers before recording. Being the most eloquent and gleeful person, this duty was relegated to Ivliane Kechakmadze. He boldly went to the microphone and loudly announced, “Gigo Erkomaishvili, now do Melchisedek Makharadze’s *khelkhavi*¹⁸, the one by Melchisedek Makharadze!” (This song known as “Adila” was composed in Melchisedek Makharadze’s family to the intonations of “Kalos Khelkhavi” by Samuel Chavleishvili and his friends, which was why it was called Melchisedek Makharadze’s *khelkhavi*).

The recorded song came out well with the recording engineers praising the singers and requesting them to record the next one. “Adila” was followed by “Chven Mshvidoba,” then “Shvidkatsa” and five songs were recorded on the first day.

The Makvanetians spent almost an entire month in Tbilisi and recorded 49 songs on Gramophone records, including some songs and chants unknown to this day. It is interesting that they recorded the Acharian song “Voisa Rera.” This song had been lost and no one remembered it even in Achara. Thanks to the Makvaneti Ensemble, it adorns the repertoire of our choirs today. “Voisa Rera” survived!

A hitherto unknown variant of “Kuchkhi Bedineri” was saved in the same way. This song had been taught to Gigo Erkomaishvili by Dzuku Lolua in Poti. They were friends and Gigo learned a number of Megrelian songs from him. Dzuku’s repertoire was also enhanced by the Gurian songs he had learned from Gigo.

Dzuku Lolua’s work, talent, and self-sacrifice in the endeavor of finding and saving Megrelian songs were highly appraised by Gigo. As Grandfather Artem told it, when Gigo heard the story of Dzuku Lolua’s untimely death, Gigo was very distressed. “Dzuku was a remarkable individual,” he had told Artem, “He went from door to door searching out, learning, and gathering up songs from old people that had been lost earlier, then he refined, polished, and taught them to his choir and others.” Not one man has done as much for Megrelian singing as Dzuku Lolua did. If not for Dzuku, many rare examples of Megrelian songs would be lost today. It is also his merit that generations of young people were raised up by him; what alone are Rema Shelegia, Kitsi Gegechkori, and Kirile Pachkoria worth, if nothing is to be said about others! Megrelian singing was restored, popularized among the people, and practically immortalized by Dzuku Lolua.

Indeed! This variant of “Kuchkhi Bedineri” recorded by Gigo Erkomaishvili’s ensemble in Tbilisi had been lost and was no longer even remembered in Samegrelo. It was first performed by Rustavi, then by Martve and Georgika, and now it is in the repertoire of almost all leading ensembles.

While in Tbilisi, the Makvaneti Ensemble participated in many events through the means of Masiko Salukvadze, they even put on a few benefit concerts. They especially remembered a meeting with Akaki Tsereteli, who had attended one of their concerts. After the concert, a dinner was put on by Masiko Salukvadze, to which Akaki was invited. The Makvaneti Ensemble members remembered this evening to the end of their lives, they had charmed the venerable poet with their own artistry.

Masiko Salukvadze did a great deed. He had the ensemble record some songs on Gramophone records, all the while being a splendid host. When they were departing, he gave everyone some gifts, gave Gigo Erkomaishvili a Gramophone, and thus saw them off to Makvaneti.

¹⁸ A *khelkhavi* is a threshing song.

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Gigo Erkomaishvili was a frequent visitor to the village of Likhauri in the 1870s, he taught singing to the young people there. He drew close to Priest Nestor Kontridze, an outstanding singer and chanter. At that time, Nestor was an extremely popular individual all over Guria as a singer and as a public figure. He possessed a phenomenal bass voice and was considered to be an exceptional expert in Gurian singing and chant. Nestor Kontridze got close to Gigo and taught him many chants, which his ensemble performed in the church at Makvaneti, whereas some of them were recorded on Gramophone records in 1907.

“Nestor Kontridze was not only a good singer, he was also an extraordinary individual. In the old days, priests would charge two rubles per household in their parishes (this was a large sum). This was called *dramapuli*¹⁹, but Nestor Kontridze forever freed the Likhauri populace from this tax with the people expressing tremendous gratitude towards him. On the other hand, some priests from other villages reproached Nestor for this, ‘Now they’ll no longer pay us the tax.’ But Nestor thus responded to them, ‘This is my wish and you act however you want.’” (from Artem Erkomaishvili’s manuscripts).

During that period in Guria, there was a robust school teaching chant. This was a school of traditional ecclesiastical music having its origins beyond the centuries. Nestor Kontridze was one of the brilliant representatives of this school having such exquisite knowledge of chants that he was invited to Tbilisi along with Ivane Khavta and Melchisedek Nakashidze to notate the chants.

“Back in the years 1862-63 when Exarch Eusebius was around, an issue concerning the restoration of old church chants had been raised. A commission was even established, whose chairman, for a long time, was considered to be Bishop Aleksandre. At his initiative they started raising some money for this venture and all the parish churches were compelled to annually make their own contribution...

The commission was ideologically divided: through the persuasion of Archimandrites Makari and Grigol, some of them affirmed that the old chant had only remained in Guria and that seemingly in Georgia the eight tones are only chanted there. Neither will any worthwhile experts of chant be found in Kartl-Kakheti, which is why they must summon chanters from Guria and notate their chant.

The other side of the commission, those who agreed with Bishop Aleksandre, were more sympathetic to Kartl-Kakhetian chant by trying to restore and disseminate it among the people.

This disagreement ended with the victory of those supporting Archimandrites Makari and Grigol. For the time being, it was established that Gurian chant be revived. Some distinguished, local chanters were summoned and some musical experts were hired to notate these chants. They were appointed a salary and proceeded to notate the Gurian chants (*Zakaria Paliashvili’s Georgian (Kartl-Kakhetian) Church Chants #3*. The Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, pg. 2, Tbilisi. October 21, 1909).”

For this endeavor, a group consisting of three men under the leadership of Melchizedek Nakashidze was invited from Guria to Tbilisi by the old Georgian chant restoration commission. They recorded some more from them. Those in attendance concluded that this

¹⁹ Approximately meaning “silver money,” with “drama” in this instance probably meaning “drachma” - a form of silver currency in Greece.