

## *"Orthodox Paschal Cycle: Georgian Liturgical Polyphony"*

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Anchiskhati Choir (cd liner notes)

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To introduce this album, allow me to discuss the provenance of the polyphonic chant of the Georgian Orthodox Church. For hundreds of years, Georgian folk and sacred polyphony has proved to be a musical anomaly in a region of the world—Central Eurasia, Anatolia, the Middle East—known for its vibrant monody. Its melodies date back, perhaps, to the period of hagiopolite expansion in the 4th-6th centuries, though it is unclear when and how these melodies transformed into the three-voiced form received through oral tradition in the 18th-19th centuries. Neume notation and hymnographic commentaries from the 10th-11th century period suggest that polyphony may have originated from this medieval period, or even earlier. As the country modernized under Tsarist Russian colonial rule (1801-1917), the Georgian chant tradition came under severe neglect and finally collapsed in the later decades of the nineteenth century. Pilimon Koridze (1829-1911), a Georgian opera singer trained in Italy, returned to Georgia in 1880 and began traveling around the country to find the last of the master chanters. With the sponsorship of local parishes, patriotic publishers, and aristocratic donors, Koridze spent thirty years transcribing several thousand chants into European notation, a collection that represents the repertory of the **Gelati** monastery chant school in central Georgia. It is these transcriptions, complemented by Karbelashvili-family transcriptions representing the **Svetitskhoveli** cathedral chant school in East Georgia, that make up the bulk of the surviving corpus of Georgian polyphonic liturgical chant. This album represents just a handful of recordings from among these thousands of notated transcriptions.

After Koridze's death in 1911—which closely followed the untimely deaths of other critical players in the transcription movement including master chanter Anton Dumbadze, publisher Maxime Sharadze, and intellectual supporter Ilia Chavchavadze—the effort to transcribe and publish the oral tradition of chant staggered to a halt. A man named Ekvtime Kereselidze (1865-1944), tasked for many years with preparing the chant manuscripts for publication in the Sharadze press, now faced the daunting prospect of safeguarding thousands of hand-written transcriptions and half-published chantbooks through the chaotic years to come. Between 1910-1936 he was in sole possession of these national and ecclesiastical musical treasures, transferring dozens of boxes of chant notation from one monastery to another to avoid marauding thieves and anti-religious hit squads. When Kereselidze was forced to flee the Gelati monastery in 1923, the chant manuscripts were stored in a friend's basement for more than a year. Later, they were buried in large tin containers in the churchyard of the remote mountaintop Zedazeni Monastery, where Kereselidze died in 1944. During this harrowing period of political violence towards the Orthodox Church, Kereselidze not only preserved the fragile manuscript collection, but hand-copied all of the Koridze rough-drafts into large good-copy volumes arranged according to the liturgical calendrical year. In the post-Soviet era,

Kereselidze— together with the Karbelashvili chanters, Pilimon Koridze, and Ilia Chavchavadze— was canonized a saint in the Orthodox Church of Georgia.

After Kereselidze donated his treasure trove of manuscripts to the University Museum in 1936, they were hardly viewed or studied until 1988, when members of the future Anchiskhati Church Choir first began to rediscover this repertory. Preparing in secret for a Paschal service at the remote Betania Monastery, the singers described the experience of becoming overwhelmed with the beauty and complexity of the repertory of their ancestors that they felt they were singing for the first time in generations. Less than three years later, the Choir recorded and released a debut LP recording (1991, Melodia Studios, recorded by Mikheil Kilosanidze), the first recording to include exclusively Georgian traditional three-voiced ecclesiastical polyphony. These recordings are reproduced here in digital format (tracks 1-12), and complemented by an additional twelve Paschal chants and para-liturgical songs recorded between 2001-2006 (tracks 13-24).

The notated transcriptions remain our closest access to the oral repertory of the master chanters, but audio recordings enhance our understanding of its performative nuances. Several chants on this album are reconstructions from a unique audio collection housed in the Tbilisi Conservatory. These files, recorded in 1966 by Artem Erkomaishvili (1887-1967), the last master of the **Shemokmedi** monastery chant tradition, serve as direct witness for performer-scholars interested in the unique Georgian tuning and improvisational systems of the oral tradition.

This album begins and ends with the Paschal troparion, *kriste aghdga* [Christ is Risen], a joyous refrain that musically marks the liturgical Resurrection: the moment when Christ 'tramples down death,' and 'bestows eternal life upon those in the tombs.' Many musical variations of this text survive in Georgian archival sources, a testament to the prominence of music in Orthodox liturgical celebrations and to the creativity of generations of master chanters. All of the other chants belong to the All-Night Paschal Vigil or to the services of Holy Week that directly precede it. The album concludes with three folk songs (tracks 21-23). In Georgia, celebratory liturgies for Saints days, Nativity, Pascha, and other Great Feasts were followed by a traditional feast—the trapeza—which was the site of further performances of para-liturgical songs and dances. In many cases, these songs are lost to history, but the Anchiskhati Choir has spent considerable time locating and resurrecting samples preserved in turn of the century transcriptions and on old recordings, making a name for themselves as masters not only of the liturgical tradition, but indeed the folk tradition as well.

### **The Anchiskhati Choir**

The Anchiskhati Choir is the world's leading exponent of Georgian polyphonic choral music. The choir members specialize in singing ancient Georgian sacred and secular songs, with authentic instrumental accompaniment, described by the U.S. magazine, *The World & I*, as "diamonds polished by time." The revival of traditional polyphonic chant, in particular, is synonymous with the work of the Anchiskhati Choir.

In the past 25 years, they have published more than two dozen recordings and chantbooks. Hundreds of young chanters around the country model their own study of ecclesiastical singing on the Anchiskhati performance style, which many agree most closely resembles the style of singers in the 19th century oral tradition. Their performance of chant is informed by intense study of original recordings and archival transcriptions.

Several members of the group grew up in rural contexts where they absorbed the unique folk singing traditions of their parents and grandparents. This clearly assisted them in the reconstruction of a performative practice for liturgical chant, as they bring the nuances of tuning, timbre, and improvisatory dexterity of the folk tradition into their performances of chant. In addition to singing weekly services in the historic 6th-century Anchiskhati basilica on the riverfront of downtown Tbilisi, group members collaborate on multi-media publishing projects, teach courses in the Tbilisi Conservatory and the College for Chant Studies, and maintain an ambitious international tour portfolio.

An Anchiskhati Choir performance offers a sonic reminder of a former Georgia, one where music accompanied all aspects of daily life: the home, the plowfield, and in the churches. This music was developed in the medieval period and passed on through generations of chant masters in the rural mountain monasteries and urban cathedrals of Georgia. Lifestyles have changed, but through the music we gain a clearer picture of that life in that time. Today, this music again serves the performance of the Orthodox liturgy in hundreds of resurrected churches around the country, where the precision of timbre, tuning, and other nuances of authentic practice yield an experience of balance between the canonic Orthodox prayer text, and the virtuosic complexity of Georgian polyphony.