

DEPARTMENT OF
MUSIC
AT PRINCETON

To: Faculty
From: Gregory D. Smith, Administrative Assistant
Date: July 21, 2015
Subject: John Graham's Dissertation

The abstract for John Graham's dissertation is attached. The reader's reports of Rob Wegman and Peter Jeffery are also attached. One copy of John's dissertation will remain in my office (Room 312 Woolworth) for you to review. (The other copy will be placed in the Cone Graduate Seminar Room) John's essay is entitled "*The Transcription and Transmission of Georgian Liturgical Chant*."

John's Final Public Oral defense is tentatively scheduled on Tuesday, August 18, 2015 in the Edward T. Cone Graduate Seminar Room, 226 Woolworth Center at **2:00 p.m.**

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GEORGIAN LITURGICAL CHANT

John A. Graham

A DISSERTATION

PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY

OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE

BY THE DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

Adviser: Rob C. Wegman

September 2015

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PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
The Graduate School

Clear Form

Date 7/20/2015

REPORT ON THE DISSERTATION PRESENTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY TO THE DEPARTMENT OF Music

Author: John A. Graham

Title: The Transcription and Transmission of Georgian Liturgical Chant

Supervisor: Prof. Rob Wegman

A. Having read this dissertation and found it acceptable in scope and quality. I recommend it in fulfillment of the dissertation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy:

Rob Wegman

(Reader's Name in Type)

(Reader's Signature)

B. Having read this dissertation and found it unacceptable in scope and quality. I do not recommend it in fulfillment of the dissertation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy:

(Reader's Name in Type)

(Reader's Signature)

Please assess (**on this or on an attached sheet**) the contribution of the dissertation to the field, commenting on major strengths as well as any weaknesses. If the dissertation is acceptable, please suggest any revisions that might be of help in making the dissertation publishable. If the dissertation is unacceptable please indicate its shortcomings in full detail.

NOTE: Under the provisions of the Family education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, this Report becomes part of the student's record as soon as it is submitted to the department or to the Graduate School and therefore may be examined by the student upon request.

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John A. Graham

The Transcription and Transmission of Georgian Liturgical Chant

Report by Rob C. Wegman

This is one of the most outstanding dissertations in musicology it has been my pleasure to be involved with in my twenty years at Princeton. It is the first extensive English-language study and analysis of the polyphonic traditions of (what is now) the Republic of Georgia. The study is written by, arguably, a world-expert on the subject, a scholar who combines rigorous academic training in the musicology program at Princeton with thorough immersion in the musical practice, language, and culture of Georgia. It is hard to think of a more felicitous combination, and the result speaks volumes.

The Georgian polyphonic tradition is one of extraordinary robustness, having been passed on for at least a millennium (or so we are led to infer from the earliest documentary references to its existence), and having survived a sustained, politically instituted policy in the early twentieth century aimed at its suppression and eradication. The damage done by this latter campaign can never be fully assessed. There is no question that the thread of continuity has been severed, so that musicians and scholars on this side of the rupture can no longer work with the assurance and confidence that oral traditions typically afford. Instead they must turn to material evidence to reconstitute and reconstruct the tradition. There are early interviews with and recordings by cantors, were were the living repositories of the chant repertory, and more importantly there has been an underground movement, starting in the late nineteenth century, aimed at the preservation of the chant tradition in writing. This is the famed transcription movement that is the central focus of Graham's dissertation.

The surviving transcriptions of Georgian polyphony, books and books full of them, are rightly regarded as a national treasure. Yet they also raise innumerable problems of historical interpretation—and one reason why Graham's dissertation is such a stupendous achievement is its exceptionally deft and thoughtful handling of those problems. The only way to preserve Georgian polyphony in writing was to convert it into Western staff notation, a process fraught with difficulties if one only considers how intricately that notation is bound up with a system of tuning that is foreign to traditional Georgian musical sensibilities. More troublingly, the conversion involved a mental transposition from the activity of singing to the objectified trace of that activity—a thing never before conceptualized as such by Georgian singers. The transcriptions as we have them contain numerous revisions, second thoughts, reinterpretations, based on the obvious problem that any one realization on paper will exclude a host of performative options that are equally valid in everyday practice. At the end of the day, then, the transcriptions raise the perennial issue of what can be said to be a musical “work” (to put it in the terms we are familiar with). It is inherent in Western notation that it presupposes far greater specificity to the identity of the musical work than is common in other musical traditions. Yet there is an equal danger of shooting in the opposite direction, and end up celebrating such fluidity and performative multiplicity that the problem is solved by abandoning the concept of the work altogether. However, the very robustness of the Georgian

polyphonic tradition suggests that there is core of stability beyond the day-to-day variations in musical practice that made the act of transcription such a problematic one. Besides, there is such a thing as a repertory that could at least be memorized even if it resisted transcription. The last surviving cantors knew thousands upon thousands of chants by heart, being able to summon them in performance at an instant's notice. How they memorized them has been one of the driving questions in Graham's research.

And it is in precisely this respect that he has made his most significant contributions. Graham's principal aim was not to define the musical identity of any single transcribed piece in a reductive sense—that is, by treating variations as somehow less essential, and retaining only that which doesn't change—but to identify the engine of variation, the performative principle that can be realized only by means of variation but is otherwise non-existent. This is the principle of the so-called “referent melodies,” a term that unfortunately still carries reductive overtones, but whose full musical significance, as analysed and elucidated by Graham, is of particular interest to our understanding not only of Georgian musical culture but that of other polyphonic traditions as well. The principle is one of such theoretical complexity, however, that one dissertation could scarcely suffice to illustrate its workings in all its implications. Even as I am writing this report I am conscious of a host of related issues discussed by Graham that must necessarily be foreshortened here. A similar awareness has affected the writing of his dissertation as well, in that it seemed no issue could be profitably discussed or some other, connected issue needed to be addressed as well. Demarcation has been a constant concern in the writing of this dissertation, and numerous decisions needed to be made that were, to someone with Graham's vast knowledge and expertise in Georgian polyphonic traditions, as painful as amputating a limb. Of course we all face issues of demarcation in our research, but I would argue they have indeed been especially thorny in Graham's case, and his success in surmounting them is worthy of special mention.

It would not be an exaggeration, therefore, to say that this dissertation is really multiple dissertations in pursuit of one. In terms of the research Graham has done, in terms of the ideas he has developed on the subject, in terms of the inquiries that are still under way, this could easily have become a five-volume set. A tremendous amount of cutting was necessary to fit his work into the mould of the average Princeton dissertation—in itself an excellent exercise, indeed one of the reasons why we make people write dissertations in the first place. There is no question in my mind that the result represents an exceptional effort, one that fully deserves to be published. My only real worry is that once the self-discipline imposed by the process of dissertation writing is lifted, the temptation to expand will prove too strong, and that the book will remain a perpetual work in progress. The perfect is the enemy of the good, as they say, and I have seen few people as reluctant as Graham to accept that what he had to submit for defense was not quite as perfect, as comprehensive and definitive, as fully researched and perfectly reasoned, as he felt it ought to have been. But his is easily the best dissertation in historical musicology that I have seen in this department over the last ten years. I have nothing but praise for Graham's achievement, and I cannot recommend his effort too highly. It has been a privilege to be working with him on a topic of such uncommon intrinsic interest, and it

will be a joy to see him continue and develop on his intellectual trajectory in years to come.

Bravo.