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**“THERE IS NO DOGMA, BUT THERE IS A FRAME”:
FORMULAIC IMPROVISATION IN THE GURIAN TRIO SONG**

In its first eighteen years, this symposium has seen a number of attempts to represent Georgian traditional music through different diagrams, charts, and other schematic figures, all of which intend to visually demonstrate the operation of underlying systems. Among these are charts of non-tempered scale intervals (Gelzer, 2003; Erkvaniidze, 2003), graphs of frequency distributions (Mzhavanadze, 2018), and the visual representations of a “chord syntax” proposed by Simha Arom and Polo Vallejo (Arom and Vallejo, 2010). In a recent essay, Dr. Arom (Arom, 2017) extends this research to make a comparison between Georgian chant and West European polyphony of the Middle Ages, along the way arguing that performers hold aspects of this chord syntax in their heads – an itinerary of cadences of greater or lesser weight through which they navigate for each particular chant. In a similar vein, what I present today is a schematic representation of a performance process that is both *internal* – that is, cognitive – and *external* – that is, relational. Through formulaic analysis of a single Gurian trio song, I focus on a subject thus far under-represented in studies of Georgian folk music, namely improvisation. In so doing, I also suggest an alternative or supplement to schemas like Arom’s and others, one less reliant upon given categories of chords and intervals and more grounded in ethnographic observation and individual experience.

The Gurian trio song, it must be said, requires less introduction for this audience than perhaps any other in the world. Long renowned for the intricacy and independence of its three vocal parts, the trio song repertoire is also known for the wide range of variants that exist for each song. In recent years, perhaps the most celebrated traditional trio singers were two cousins from Makvaneti, Guri Sikharulidze, who passed away in 2019, and Tristan Sikharulidze. My research today is based on a number of private lessons with Tristan, beginning in 2012, and a corpus of recent recordings by both Tristan and Guri with various trio partners (see Discography). In the interest of time, my discussion today will focus on a single song in this large repertoire, “Me Rustveli.”

The song’s text, as will be familiar to many, comes from the Georgian national epic, “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin,” by Shota Rustaveli. But even this basic description is lacking, since less than half of the song as performed features words with dictionary definitions. The majority of the song is made up of vocables, so-called “nonsense” syllables in different configurations. These vocables, which have been studied in depth by Lauren Ninoshvili (Ninoshvili, 2010), are sometimes referred to as *samgherisi* by Georgian scholars (Erkomaishvili, 2005: 25), and I will use that term to delineate the passages not containing lexically meaningful words. “Me Rustveli” is strophic, each verse containing a core of one line of Rustaveli’s poem, surrounded on either side by two passages of *samgherisi* (A and B in fig. 1). Cadences on a unison pitch occur in the middle and at the end of each verse. Though comparatively short and performed at a brisk tempo, this song allows an experienced singer a great deal of room for variation, making it a beloved item in any Gurian singer’s repertoire.

Allow me now to focus even closer, on the part of each verse that precedes the recitation of

Rustaveli's poetry, which I have referred to here as Samgherisi A. In my transcription into staff notation, this corresponds to eight measures in 2/4 meter. Here is how Tristan taught me the first-voice part for this passage (ex. 1). After learning this version and listening to Tristan's different recordings, I began to recognize that these eight measures had a certain shape to them that was consistent across nearly every recording of "Me Rustveli" that I could find, from 1907 to today. Specifically, it seemed that these eight measures could be subdivided into four smaller sections, with lengths of two, three, one, and two measures each. For the sake of this discussion, I have given them the nicknames INTRO, FLOATING, DESCENDING, and CADENCE. By comparing Tristan's other performances, we see how he seems to plug in different material while still maintaining this general shape (ex. 2). We might think of these eight measures, then, as a series of formulas – a term I will elaborate below – which can range in length from a half-measure to several strung together. Zooming out for a moment, one may begin to imagine a collection of all possible formulas in the form of a "storehouse" or, in Jeff Pressing's term, a "knowledge base." Each singer would thus have access to a different, though related storehouse, which "encodes the history of compositional choices and predilections defining an individual's personal style" (Pressing, 1998: 54) In figure 2, for example, I have grouped all of the first-voice formulas for this passage of "Me Rustveli" that appear in recordings featuring either Tristan or Guri Sikharulidze as first voice. I have also structured the diagram as a kind of flow-chart or decision tree, in which each measure – apart from the last – can be realized a number of different ways, each option in turn determining a new set of possibilities (cf. Stock, 1996: 110-111). With further analysis, such storehouses, I believe, could be constructed for the second-voice and *bani* parts as well, not only for this passage of this one song, but indeed for the genre as a whole.

But how do we move from a collection of formulas to a unique, coherent musical performance? To help make this leap, I turn now to one of the major discoveries of twentieth-century literary theory, the oral transmission of epic poetry. Scholars working on musical improvisation have often had recourse to the term "formula," including Chloe Zadeh (Zadeh, 2012) on Hindustani *thumrī*, Gregory Smith (Smith, 1983) on the pianist Bill Evans, and, one of the earliest, Leo Treitler (Treitler, 1974) on Gregorian chant. Though drawing on different theoretical bases, there is a common citation in all of this work: the oral formulaic theory of Milman Parry and Albert Lord. I, too, will draw upon this resource, and though there are areas of incompatibility, the overall fit with the Gurian case, I believe, is compelling.

The fullest statement of oral formulaic theory for a general readership comes from Albert Lord's (Lord, 2000) *The Singer of Tales* (first published in 1960). In it, Lord elaborates a theory, crediting his late teacher Milman Parry, on the possible connection between the Homeric poems of ancient Greece and the South Slavic tradition of epic singers whom Parry and Lord recorded in then-Yugoslavia in the 1930s. In simplified form, the idea is that epic bards relied on a storehouse of formulas, as short as a single word or as long as a full verse-line, as scaffolding for creating a song in real time. For instance, one could imagine a Homer-like figure using one of the famous epithets like "swift-footed Achilles" or a formulaic expression like "when rosy-fingered dawn appeared early-born," in part as a way to fill time while devising what should come next. Metrical position is crucial: some formulas fit into the last two feet of a line, while others help prepare a caesura in the middle of a verse. The same idea could be expressed or the same person named in four syllables or six, depending on one's metrical needs. Here is Lord describing an epic singer's mental training:

Even in pre-singing years rhythm and thought are one, and the singer's concept of the formula

is shaped though not explicit. He is aware of the successive beats and the varying lengths of repeated thoughts, and these might be said to be his formulas. Basic patterns of meter, word boundary, melody have become his possession, and in him the tradition begins to reproduce itself. (Lord, 2000: 32).

Although Lord cautions against equating oral composition with “improvisation in a broad sense” (5), music scholars have long recognized parallels between the process described by Lord and the way that improvising musicians acquire and implement their knowledge of genre and style (see Berliner [1994] for insightful first-hand accounts from jazz musicians).

The subsections of Samgherisi A defined above may serve for the trio singer much like the metrical feet of a Homeric or South Slavic epic – as slots to be filled with appropriate content, for which a master can select from a wide range of possibilities. Anzor Erkomaishvili (Erkomaishvili, 2005) suggests as much in the introduction to transcriptions of his grandfather Artem’s repertoire: “The experienced singer could predict the final tone of each phrase, section, or the entire song, which each singer approached in his own way” (Erkomaishvili, 2005: 28). Unlike the uniform meters of epic, however, the different songs in the Gurian repertoire have varying phrase lengths, usually punctuated by a cadence on a unison or a fifth. This contributes to the sense that each song has a macro-structure, or frame, a point I will return to below.

Another important feature of an oral formula is its “theme,” that is, the semantic meaning of the words contained within it. This is one of the challenges of applying oral formulaics to music: instrumental motifs or non-lexical series of vocables, as in Gurian samgherisi, have no referential “meaning” to speak of. Nevertheless, the vocable formulas I’ve identified in “Me Rustveli” do more than provide rhythmic interest or euphonious consonant sounds. Most of them are linked to specific pitch levels within the modal scale of a song. For instance, not only are the syllables “di-la-vo” unique to a circling figure in the first voice part, they are linked, it seems, to specific scale degrees, as a kind of mnemonic or solfege. “Di-la-vo” can only begin, in my standardized transposition, at the high F, or for brief moments at G, which in modal terms is the highest note of any Gurian trio song, apart from *k’rimanch’uli* or *gamqivani*. Likewise, for the second voice, a typical figure “a-ba-de-lo,” which ascends stepwise, can only begin on A or the lower G, as part of the second voice’s occupation of the middle range (ex. 3). Because the vocables encode pitch levels and melodic sequences, they end up reinforcing spatial relationships among the different voices and ensuring permitted harmonic intervals. Though not the semantic or narrative “theme” envisioned by Parry and Lord’s theory, these relationships, in effect, become the message of the trio song, carried through the generations via oral and practical transmission.

Thinking about Gurian counterpoint in these terms may also offer an alternative to the dominant strain of musical analysis in Georgian musicology, which tends to focus on chord structure and intervallic relationships. A recent example would be Joseph Jordania’s (2006, p. 86) description of West Georgian polyphony as the interaction of melodic or horizontal coordination (in which each voice part can more or less exchange its pitch levels by thirds or fifths) and harmonic or vertical coordination (in which the voices relate to each other at dissonant intervals of seconds, fourths, or sevenths). Although an insightful and generative description of musical phenomena, it is perhaps too abstract as an explanation: these stylistically permissible intervals and their resulting chordal harmonies, I would argue, are not the result of an innate or trained awareness of intervals or chord syntax, but rather are ensured by the verbal-melodic formulas themselves, which restrict each voice-part to certain melodic lanes and guarantee their proper separation. Whether the formu-

las developed historically within a pre-existing context of permissible and forbidden intervals, or whether such intervals acquired their valence due to the independent elaboration of these formulas, is something of a chicken-and-egg situation that would be hard to prove conclusively. By centering a theory of polyphony on the practice of individual musicians, however, rather than on a bird's-eye view of chords and harmonies – a view, it must be said, which is inextricably linked to colonial and imperial epistemologies of Western European classical music – I hope to enrich the resources available to ethnographers of music, polyphonic or otherwise.

This ethnographic orientation informs my use of another analytic term, one introduced by my teacher Tristan Sikharulidze in an interview. Answering my questions about improvisation, Tristan had said that, in a Gurian song, “you can do anything, but don’t go outside the frame” (pers. comm., 6 August 2016). As he put it another time, “There is no dogma, but there is a frame” (25 July 2016). “Frame,” *charcho* in Georgian, does not seem to be a widely used term, either among singers or scholars, but it clearly has meaning for Tristan, who has spent a great deal of time thinking about how to teach Gurian songs, whether to fellow Georgians or to dozens of international students. To go outside the frame, Tristan went on, is to make it break or disintegrate (*dashla* in Georgian). What then is this frame? It may correspond to what other theorists of improvisation have termed a “model” (Nettl, 1974) or “referent” (Pressing, 1998), namely the overarching structure into which material from a knowledge base or storehouse of formulas is inserted in the moment of performance. It would be a mistake, however, to limit our understanding of this frame to strictly “musical” elements like pitch, rhythm, or chord structure. Rather, the frame of any Gurian song must be understood to include not only its text and typical formulas but also the interplay of individual singers and the expectations placed on the three different voice parts.

I will conclude, then, by observing this frame in action, through close listening to a recording of that same *Samgherisi A* section of “Me Rustveli.” Looking again at my transcription (fig. 1), the first-voice DESCENDING phrase usually reaches the low E, before approaching the cadential G from below. In the vast majority of recordings I’ve heard, this DESCENDING phrase brings the first voice below the second (a technique known as *gadajvaredineba*). The second voice, then, typically approaches the cadence from the step above, here the note A. In a recording from 2013, however, these cadences go slightly off track. Tristan is here singing the first voice or *dams’qebi*. Singing the second voice or *modzakhili* is the late Polikarpe Khubulava, then ninety years old, a revered musician from Samegrelo and the subject of recent scholarship presented at this symposium (Kalandadze-Makharadze, 2015). Polikarpe knew many Gurian songs, and “Me Rustveli” seems to have been a favorite, though his knowledge of the genre was not quite at Tristan’s level. On this recording, in three consecutive verses, Tristan and Polikarpe must make split-second decisions to ensure that the song does not “break.”

In the second verse, when Tristan executes a typical Descending phrase, Polikarpe, rather than the typical second-voice move of sustaining a higher note to allow the first voice to cross below, descends from a C and ends up singing in unison with Tristan for a moment. He seems, in effect, to be inserting a first-voice formula into a second-voice part. Perhaps aware of things going awry, Polikarpe jumps up to an A so he can approach the cadence from above (ex. 4a).

In the next two verses, both Polikarpe and Tristan again deviate from expected patterns right as they approach the cadence. First, Polikarpe again executes a descending phrase, which does not allow Tristan to cross below. Tristan responds in the moment by remaining above Polikarpe, descending only to a G and then approaching the cadence note from A, the upper neighbor usually

sung by the second voice. Polikarpe reacts quickly in the last beat before the cadence, abandoning the A to approaching the cadence from below (ex. 4b). Finally, in the fourth verse, Tristan and Polikarpe again find themselves descending in unison, now to a G. In the second-to-last measure, Tristan confidently descends to the cadence-note's lower neighbor while Polikarpe once again ensures a proper cadence by jumping at the last moment to the upper neighbor (ex. 4c). None of these moves are standard formulas; they are all true improvisations, evidence of both musicians' ability to adapt in the moment. In these negotiations, they reinforce certain aesthetic priorities, constitutive elements of the song's frame. The cadence form, with one voice approaching from above and the other two approaching from below, is clearly chief among these priorities, while other features like voice-crossing, though desirable, are not obligatory. Polikarpe also appears to recognize the relatively higher status of the *damts'qebi*, allowing Tristan to choose a pre-cadence note and then adjusting his own accordingly. What Albert Lord termed "the art of adjustment" is perhaps most evident in these moments, when constraints of genre must be navigated through the choices of individual musicians.

In the interest of space, I have had to leave out much that would help clarify my portrait of Gurian trio performance. In particular, the changing status of improvisation throughout the Soviet period has exerted a powerful influence on Georgian music, even if the trio form managed to preserve and elevate the improvisational talent of individual performers amidst a predominant ideology that instead promoted "mass song" (see Smith, 2002; Necessian, 2004). Another area of fruitful investigation would engage with scholarship on the role of memory in the performance and development of polyphony in the medieval European church, which relied on improvisation to a largely unrecognized degree (see especially Busse Berger, 2005). Here, however, caution must be applied. Attempts to link Georgian music with medieval Europe in a historical or evolutionary sense are at the root of speculative theories (Schneider, 1940; Nadel, 1933) that continue to influence Georgian-music scholarship, yet offer little more than enlistment in an outdated, exclusionary narrative of music history placing European polyphony and harmony as the top rungs of an evolutionary ladder. While medieval music scholarship may help illuminate the relationship between polyphony and improvisation or the co-existence of oral and literary transmission, we must always guard against employing living musicians as exemplars of an earlier or supposedly less developed age. This is part of the problem with studies that use the reported experience of professional Georgian folk singers to speculate on medieval musical practice (e.g., Arom, 2017) – a problem, I should add, not solely limited to Georgia. While the work I have presented here attempts in a similar fashion to schematically visualize the otherwise invisible mental processes at work in Gurian improvisation, I have deliberately avoided an analysis based around harmonic structures, especially those of the root-chord variety. I believe that this apparently linear approach to formulas – when combined with an awareness of other constraints imposed by cadential expectations and interpersonal interaction – has much to offer the study of simultaneous multipart improvisation.

Discography

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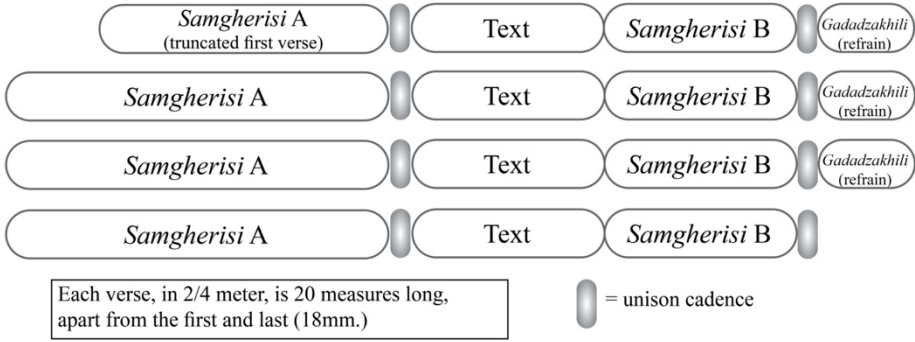
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სურათი 1. გურული ტრიო სიმღერის „მე რუსთველი“ ტიპური ოთხსტროფული სტრუქტურა.

Figure 1. Typical four-verse structure of the Gurian trio song “Me Rustveli.”



სურათი 2. ფორმულების „სანყობი“ პირველი ხმის (დამწყები) პარტია სიმღერაში „მე რუსთველი“.

Figure 2. A “storehouse” of formulas for the first-voice (*dams'qebi*) part in “Me Rustveli.”

INTRO		FLOATING			DESCENDING	CADENCE	
m. 1	m. 2	m. 3	m. 4	m. 5	m. 6	m. 7	m. 8

These two measures together make a formula used by Tristan:

In these two variants, material typically associated with the INTRO section can be prolonged into the FLOATING section (above), or an extended FLOATING section can replace the INTRO (below).

Notes:

- This diagram does not account for slight rhythmic variation in performance. (Guri Sikharulidze, for instance, comonly employs a lilting, dotted rhythm in the “di-la-vo” formulas).
- The exact syllables used for the *samgherisi* (e.g., “ra-ni-na” vs. “na-ni-na,” “rim t’iri” vs. “dim t’iri,” etc.) also vary by performer and transcriber.
- The symbol // denotes obligatory connection between measures.
- Not all formulas can be linked together in sequence. A more complex diagram would show which formulas typically connect to each other.

მაგალითი 1. პირველი ხმის (დამწყები) პარტია ტრისტან სიხარულიძის მიხედვით, 2013 წ.
Example 1. First-voice (*dams'qebi*) part as taught by Tristan Sikharulidze, 2013.

მაგალითი 2. ტრისტან სიხარულიძის მიერ შესრულებული სამღერისის A მონაკვეთის შედარება.

Example 2. Comparison of *Samgherisi* A sections as sung by featuring Tristan Sikharulidze.

a. As taught by Tristan Sikharulidze (2013)

b. As sung by Tristan with Ensemble Shvidkatsa (2008, 3rd verse)

c. As sung by Tristan with Ensemble Shvidkatsa (2008, 2nd verse)

მაგალითი 3. პირველი და მეორე ხმების ფორმულების შესაბამისი სიმაღლის დონეებით.
Example 3. First- and second-voice formulas with associated pitch levels.

a. First voice (*dams'qebi*)

b. Second voice (*modzakhili*)

მაგალითი 4a-c. ტრისტან სიხარულიძისა და პოლიკარპე ხუბულავას 2013 წლის ჩანაწერებიდან სამი კადანის შედარება.

Example 4a-c. Comparison of three cadences from 2013 recording featuring Tristan Sikharulidze and Polikarpe Khubulava.

a. Second verse, *Samgherisi A* (0:36ff.)

Damt'sqebi
(T. Sikharulidze)

Modzakhili
(P. Khubulava)

di - la - vo di - la - vo di - la - vo - o de - la a - di - lo da da

a - ba - de - lo de - la a - di - lo da da

b. Third verse, *Samgherisi A* (1:07ff.)

T.

P.

di - la - vo di - la - vo di - la - vo di - la - vo de - la da na ni nav da

vo vo - di - lo de - lo de - la de - lo di la da da

c. Fourth verse, *Samgherisi A* (1:39ff.)

T.

P.

di - la - vo di - la - vo di - la - vo di - la - vo de - la da de - lav da da

vo de - la a - di - la a - di - lav da da