The Sense of a Feast

capturing the georgian *supra*

By Brian Fairley (New York University)

As a site for the negotiation and rehearsal of traditional values, the Georgian traditional feast, or *supra*, offers a profoundly multisensory experience, activating auditory, gustatory, olfactory, and kinesthetic responses, as well as the perceptual blending brought about by intoxication. In this article, I argue for a commensurably multisensory approach to depicting and documenting this social practice. The importance of the supra for Georgian folk song is marked by the presence of the adjective *supruli* (of or related to the supra) in the conventional titles of many songs. As a foundational context, then, for a genre of music increasingly audible in transnational circulation (Bithell 2014b), the supra warrants robust representation, anchored in subjective sense-perception, in any ethnographic engagement with Georgian music.

At its most schematic, the supra consists of a sequence of toasts—with wine or other spirits—on subjects chosen and elaborated upon by a toastmaster (*tamada*), accompanied by food and, depending on the setting and participants, the singing of Georgian folk or religious music. In ethnomusicology, the supra has received close scrutiny from Nino Tsitsishvili (2006) as a setting for the inscription of patriarchal attitudes toward male and female singing practices, though Linderman (2012) problematizes a simplistic reading of these gender roles. Linguistic anthropologists, in turn, have focused on the supra, with its formalized speech and delineated roles, as a semiotic field for the analysis of culture (Kotthoff 1995; Manning 2012; Tuite 2010), while others have traced public debate over the supra to competing claims for a post-Soviet Georgian identity (Mühlfried 2005, 2006; see Scott 2017 on the "edible ethnicity" of Georgian cultural performance within the Soviet Union). The bulk of an issue of *Ab Imperio* centered around an article by literary theorist Harsha Ram (2014) proposing a nineteenth-century, cosmopolitan, literary origin to the present-day form of the supra, with some respondents asking whether a postcolonial critique could apply to the supra as an intersection with Russian imperial discourse. Of all these studies, only Tsitsishvili pays attention to the songs which play such a prominent role in the supra. Absent from the literature thus far is a phenomenology of the supra: an attempt to communicate, through writing or other means, the lived experience of tasting, ingesting, hearing, voicing, dancing, translating—and, to be sure, becoming drunk—at a Georgian banquet.

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For me, a holistic sensory reckoning is crucial to representing the supra, especially given the its prominence as a point of entry to Georgian culture. For tourists and other visitors, a common theme is how to "survive" a supra, with tips for observing proper etiquette during and in between toasts (Holisky 1989), eating enough food to compliment your host without having to loosen your belt, and politely declining a drink if you abstain from alcohol or have reached your limit. As an English teacher funded by a Georgian government program in 2012, I had to attend an information session devoted to this topic, and materials from Peace Corps volunteer training similarly address strategies for supra attendance. The "excess" at the heart of the supra (Fumey 2006) can indeed be overwhelming, especially if one's host has trouble taking no for an answer. For those drawn to Georgia for its musical culture, however, attending a supra with Georgian folk singers can create indelible memories (Figure 1).

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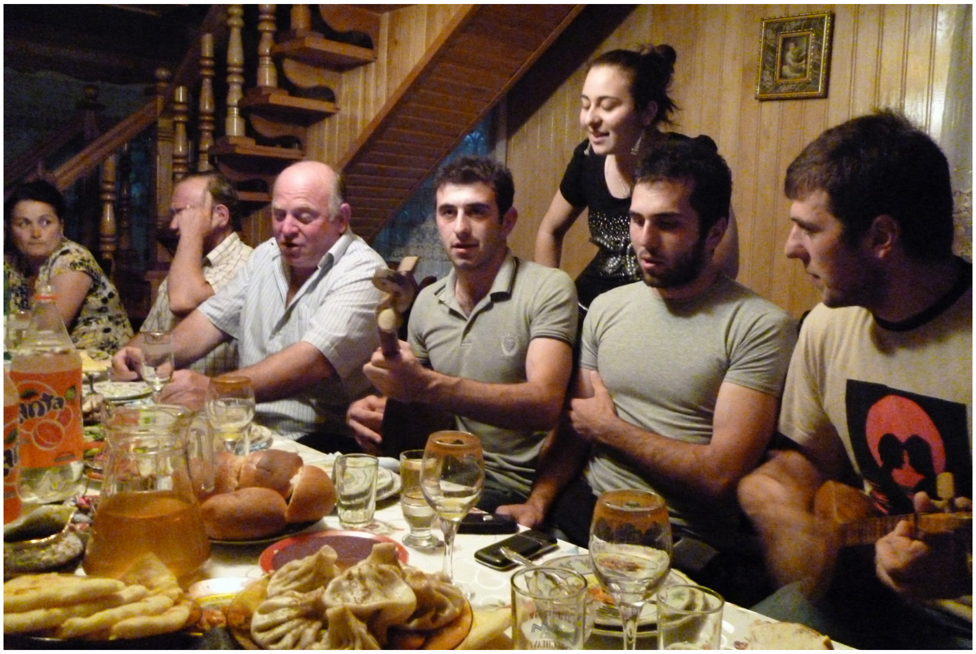

Figure 1. A supra in a family home in Zugdidi, June 2012. ***Photo by Brian Fairley ©***

Caroline Bithell (2014a, 286) captures the utopian feeling of community experienced as part of a Village Harmony singing tour:

> Each night we drank to God and to Georgia; to our ancestors and children; to poetry and music; to our new friendship and to understanding between our countries; to love and to peace in the world. The heightened conviviality that prevailed at these times—the combination of sentiment, song, and copious amounts of good food and wine often giving rise to feelings of blissful transportation—was also, for many participants, a profoundly affective experience that left them with an enduring sense of gratitude and enrichment.

More so than bottles of wine, embroidered wall hangings, or Soviet paraphernalia purchased in Tbilisi's Dry Bridge open-air markets, the memory of the supra experience may be the most prized souvenir one can bring back from Georgia.

But how can one share this experience with others? Apart from recreating supras at home—a practice common to choirs with experience in Georgia (Bithell 2014a, 231) and something I've done myself with friends at Double Edge Theatre in Ashfield, Massachusetts—prospects for sensory capture are limited. Having tuned my ear, before my first visit, to studio recordings of Georgian choirs like the Rustavi Ensemble and Mtiebi, along with some published field recordings by Sylvie Bolle-Zemp and others, I was struck by how different the experience of listening is when seated at a table. Georgian song is rarely a solo affair, with multiple voice parts following independent but coordinated paths. As a listener, it makes a big difference whether a loud, first-voice singer is sitting right next to you when he or she sings, or whether two singers are engaging in dialogue from distant ends of the table. Being surrounded by several men all intoning the *bani*, a bass part that operates like a moveable drone in songs from Kakheti in eastern Georgia, induces, for me, a strong affective response. The desire to add my voice to these surrounding vibrations was an urge I eventually felt comfortable enough to satisfy, even if I balked at singing upper-voice parts by myself.

When I returned to Georgia in the summer of 2016 to conduct fieldwork, I made some first attempts at documenting the supra more immersively. By using binaural microphones, I hoped to capture some of the precise spatialization of sound that comes from being in close proximity to speakers and singers. At first, I wore these microphones in my ears, since the shape of the ear's pinnae helps to create a stereo picture. I also had a GoPro camera, whose small size and wide-angle lens, I imagined, would permit me to capture the embedded

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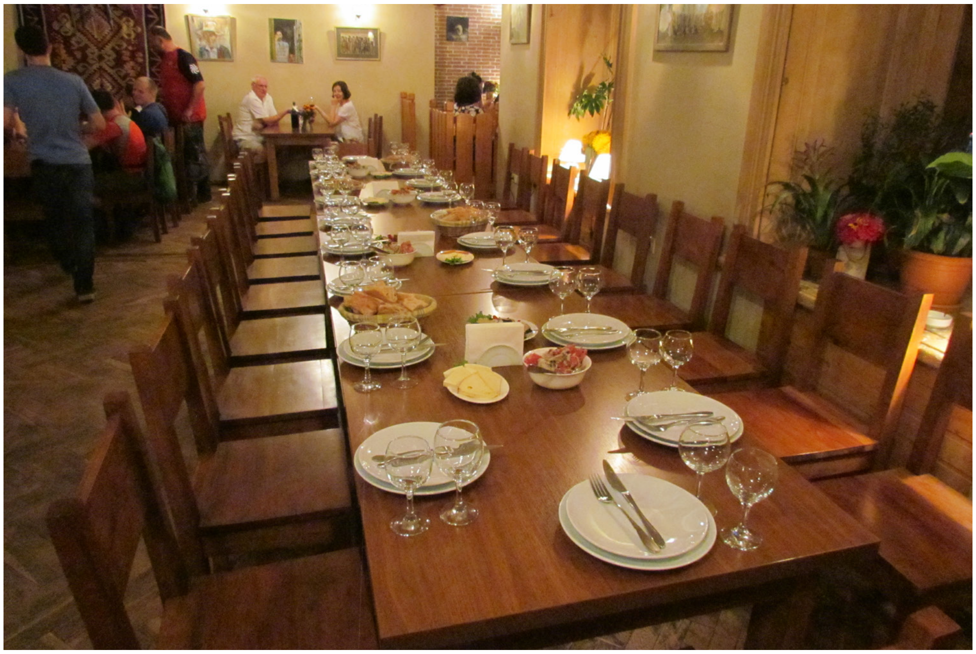

Figure 2. The supra table before the arrival of guests. August 2016. ***Photo by Brian Fairley ©***

perspective of someone sitting at the table. Results were mixed. Wearing the GoPro on my forehead looked too ridiculous by half, so I was forced to hold it in my hand and subtly point it where I was looking, while having the microphones in my ears prompted bemused responses from fellow guests. Even so, I was glad to have this setup available when the dynamic young singing group Adilei sang a ten-minute version of the epic song "Khasanbegura" at a supra in Mtispiri, a performance that featured a striking moment of laughter and inside joking that I ended up writing about in my thesis (Fairley 2017, 74–75). A preliminary attempt at syncing the audio and video from this night's supra may be viewed here, with members of Adilei singing "Bindisperia Sopeli" (It is twilight in the village), in a version from the region of Racha.

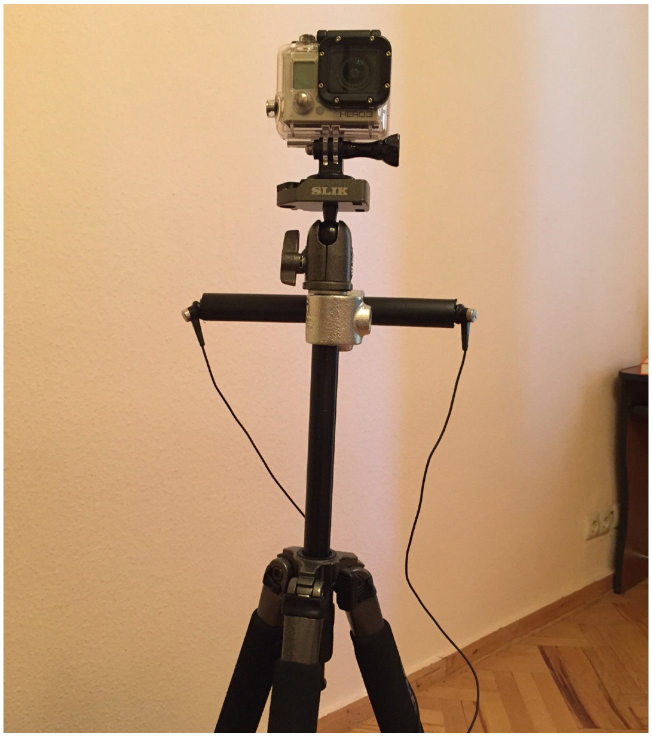

Figure 3. One version of the recording rig. ***Photo by Brian Fairley ©***

Determined to have some control over the conditions of my documentation, I decided to host a supra for my birthday at a restaurant in Tbilisi and invited several excellent singers who had become friends and interlocutors (Figure 2). I set up the microphones and GoPro on a special rig on a tripod and placed it right next to me at the table, so I would not have to wear either microphone or camera (Figure 3). It was a splendid night, and David Shugliashvili, a member of the Anchiskhati Choir, was a charming, funny, and generous tamada. My footage, however, was generally useless. I quickly realized, that night, that frequently checking, adjusting, and repositioning the camera rig would have removed me too much from the proceedings. My own sensory immersion—my attention, in other words—was more important than the residual trace of a recording. I was the host, after all, and bore a responsibility for my guests. To neglect them would have compromised the event I had thought so important to share with the wider world.

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Despite the shortcomings of these initial attempts, I believe there is great potential in using immersive documentation to communicate certain aspects of the supra. Perhaps a table-mounted 360-degree camera, later paired with a virtual-reality headset would work better, at least for the visual aspect of the supra, as it would allow the viewer to choose a point of focus, though we would lose the directionality of the binaural audio. Video installations, perhaps interactive ones accompanied by food, in the style of the artist Liz Phillips, could be another outlet for these efforts. Simultaneous translation, subtitles, or commentary could add another layer. In all, the supra offers a challenging arena for Steven Feld's still-relevant call to take sound and video seriously as vehicles for ethnographic inquiry (Feld and Brenneis 2004; cf. Samuels et al. 2010), even if the sensory excess of the supra ineluctably defies capture. ☐

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