

**Svan song: Two French recordings of Georgian folk music.**

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*Géorgie. Polyphonies de Svanétie. / Georgia. Polyphony of Svaneti.* (Le chant du monde, Collection du Musée de l'homme, LDX 274 990. Recordings by Sylvie Bolle-Zemp. Length 54:20. Distributed by Harmonia Mundi, 1994.)

*Géorgie. Chants de travail — Chants religieux.* (Radio France, Ocora C559062. Recordings by Yvette Grimaud. Length 69:30. Distributed by Harmonia Mundi, 1989.)

Thanks in large measure to the popularizing efforts of the Rustavi Ensemble, a professional chorus which has performed around the world, a small but growing market has been cultivated for traditional Georgian music. The two CDs to be discussed here represent what I hope will be a new trend in this genre: recordings made in the field, rather than the concert hall or studio. Let me say at the outset that listeners who know only the Rustavi's renderings of Georgian folk song may be in for a bit of a shock, or at least some readjustment of expectations, when they encounter field recordings such as these, or others that will undoubtedly follow. Amateur or semi-professional Georgian singers may sound raw or even harsh to the unaccustomed consumer, especially when measured against classically-trained performers such as the late Hamlet Gonashvili, who could have made a career as a world-class opera singer had he chosen to do so. Sung in their original forms, Georgian polyphonic songs, especially those of Svaneti, employ intervals and chords which simply do not occur in the diatonic scales employed in familiar Western music (e.g. a "neutral" third which falls roughly between a minor and a major third). This is music for the adventurous ear.

In this review I will evaluate two compact disks, containing recordings made a quarter-century apart by two ethnomusicologists from France. By felicitous coincidence I was conducting fieldwork in Svaneti in the summer of 1991, while Dr. Sylvie Bolle-Zemp and her team were making the recordings that were later released as *Polyphonies de Svanétie*. I was present at several of the tapings, and subsequently provided Bolle-Zemp (henceforth BZ) with some assistance in matters of Svanetian ethnology and language. Though I cannot claim to be a totally unbiased reviewer, I cannot imagine how the reader (and listener) could disagree with my highly positive evaluation of the fruits of BZ's labors in the field.

First, a few words about the Georgian provinces and their musical idioms. The Transcaucasian republic of Georgia is inhabited by over five million people, two-thirds of whom identify themselves as having Georgian ethnicity. Among the principle markers of national identity are the Kartvelian or South Caucasian languages (Georgian proper, Laz-Mingrelian and Svan, with their dialects), and, for the majority, an autocephalous Orthodox church, though to the present day local religious practices retain many elements of pre-Christian provenance. Georgia is traditionally divided into over a dozen provinces, each of which has its distinctive regional character, speech, cuisine, dress, and music. The range of musical styles represented in a country as small as Georgia is remarkable, and while theoretical musicologists have argued that they all spring from a common source, even a sophisticated listener to the hundred songs performed on a recent six-record album by the Rustavi Ensemble [*Asi kartuli xalxuri simghera*, Melodija GOST 5289-88, 1989] would find that hard to imagine. Hence the need for recordings such as *Polyphonies de Svanétie*, in which the musical traditions of a single province are examined in depth. And what better place to begin than Svaneti, a northwestern province high in the Caucasus Mountains, noted as a repository of beliefs and practices long since abandoned in the frequently-invaded Transcaucasian lowlands?

But do not be misled into expecting yet another nostalgic safari to a remote corner of the globe in search of an Ancient Authentic Folk Tradition. BZ's Georgian hosts were often bewildered by her insistence on recording almost any musical sound that emerged from the throat of a Svan, even those not deemed "genuine" Svanetian folksong. But that was precisely her objective: to study the musical life of Svaneti today, and to collect a representative sampling of the songs the Svans themselves perform and listen to. Not all of this material made it onto the CD; nonetheless four of the twenty-one selections originated outside of Svaneti, and two are recent compositions. A full range of genres is represented: a-capella choral hymns, with the pungent dissonances and nontempered intervals that are the trademark of traditional Svan music; round-dance songs performed at a wedding; funeral laments; tunes accompanied by the *ch'unir*, a three-stringed viol. Among the performers we hear village and regional choirs, revelers at a church festival, parents and their children, mourners at a funeral. Some of the amateur singers — especially a somewhat tipsy picnicker straining after a high note on track 5 — might set a sensitive listener's teeth on edge, but this is a minor quibble alongside the raw beauty of the lullaby sung by a woman on the next track, or the same singer's rendering, joined by her two daughters, of the celebrated epic of Mirangula that follows it. All of the performances were recorded in Upper Svaneti in July and August, 1991, many of them in the open air. High-quality digital audio equipment was used, capturing not only the subtlest nuances of the singing, but also the

conversations and other noises in the background. None of this detracts from the pleasure of listening; if anything, it enhances the energy and excitement of a truly live performance. The most striking examples of this energy are the last four tracks, recorded live at a funeral in the village of Lat'ali. The slow-paced progression of harsh dissonances intoned by a male choir, punctuated by the unison shrieks of the female mourners around the coffin, is one of the most chilling auditory experiences to ever appear on a CD. Ethnologists, Caucasian specialists, and anyone who takes delight in the extraordinary variety of indigenous musical traditions will not be disappointed by this recording. I should mention that BZ was accompanied in the field by her husband Hugo Zemp, a well-known musicologist and ethnographic film-maker. Zemp did extensive filming in Svaneti — including several events represented on the CD — and in other regions of Georgia. I have seen much of this footage, and am very impressed by its quality. At least two hour-length documentaries are planned, but lack of funds has greatly slowed the work. One can only hope that the Zemps will somehow find the means to finish the preparation of these important visual documents.

The booklet accompanying *Polyphonies de Svanétie* deserves special comment. BZ has prepared a thirty-page essay discussing, in detail unusual for a jacket insert, the particulars of Svanetian traditional music, and of each track on the CD. The reader is treated to a sophisticated discussion of Svanetian polyphonic singing, illustrated by transcriptions of excerpts from some of the songs in staff notation, and even a spectrogram. BZ's essay is a fine, original piece of scholarship, making this CD even more of a must-have than it already is. Texts are given for four selections, in Svan with French translations. The essay, notes and song texts are also given in an accurate and smoothly-written English rendering.

The second CD under review comprises twenty-six songs from a half-dozen Georgian provinces (including Svaneti). The recordings were made in the field by Yvette Grimaud, in the late summer of 1967. The sound quality is as good as can be expected, given the technology and the conditions under which the tapings were undoubtedly made. The songs were evidently recorded indoors; in any event, the background sounds that enrich BZ's digital recordings are not audible in these older tapings. Most of the selections are sung by a-capella male choirs with rich, vigorous voices and are a pleasure to listen to. My favorites include the five West Georgian *naduri* (work songs; tracks 5-9); the Lechkhumian *Alilo* (track 18), and the weddings songs at the end (tracks 23-26). Some of the songs are not, as far as I know, available on other recordings; in any event, this CD would be an important complement to any collection of Georgian vocal music.

I must say that the accompanying booklet is a disappointment, the French text (and its regrettably faithful English translation) frequently lapsing into an irritating blend of misinformation and fuzzy verbiage. An example, from the notes to the Nativity hymn *Alilo*:

*“Facing the «translucent surface» beyond which is the world where music is entirely subtle and «enfolds the heart» as we are told, invocation becomes laudation, it reflects the expansion of the «seven vowels» iaeoðué [of which Georgian only possesses five — KT] set in motion by the impetus of the consonant l.”*

Let us hope that more collections of field recordings from the Caucasus make it onto the market in the near future. Earlier in this piece I expressed the desire to see more CDs devoted to individual Georgian provinces; we should not forget that other musical traditions from the region — Abkhazia, Ossetia and the North Caucasus as a whole — have been seriously underrepresented in the folk music catalogs. As the pleasure of listening to Bolle-Zemp’s and Grimaud’s recordings attests, not only ethnologists but music lovers as a whole will profit from more effort in this area.

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