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JOHN A. GRAHAM

**“YOU ARE THE VINEYARD,
NEWLY BLOSSOMED”:**

CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE AESTHETICS IN
GEORGIAN ORTHODOX CHANT

The discovery of thousands of early 20th century chant transcriptions in the early 1990s in the Kekelidze Institute of Manuscripts in Tbilisi, Georgia, helped energize the revival of traditional Orthodox Christian liturgical singing following the collapse of Soviet censorship on the Church. These transcriptions remain relatively unknown outside of Georgia and may raise considerable speculation among international scholars concerning the early liturgical music practices on the outer fringes of the medieval Byzantine Empire. The introduction of a pre-Soviet ‘found’ sacred repertoire to the sacred music already available in the Georgian church challenged notions of authenticity, and sparked counter claims for the legitimacy of Georgian polyphonic chant.¹

The popularization of traditional chant has coincided with a revolution in performance practice aesthetics in which the refined classical style of most mainstream church choirs has been abandoned in favor of a ‘neo-traditional’ style miming the aesthetics of Georgian folk singers. Yet these new ideas about performance practice from within the neo-traditional music community neglect the emotional attachment of congregations to their former repertoires, alienating older community members and clergy. In addition, the neo-traditional performance aesthetic has not been embraced by the secular mainstream. This may be because the nostalgia for the idealized sound of Georgian chant that typically accompanies scenes of national struggle, loss, or endurance in mainstream television media, is associated with the western classical performance aesthetic.² In order to better understand the difference I am attempting to point out, it will be helpful to take a look at the current situation in Georgia.

1 The author wishes to acknowledge the collaborative nature of this research, which is based on conversations with esteemed colleagues included Davit Shugliashvili, Malkhaz Erkvanidze, Luarsab Togonidze, and Carl Linich.

2 For example, the chant *Shen Khar Venakhi* and similar chants may be heard at least a dozen times on any given day as the background music for shows on television concerning past civil strife in South Ossetia or Abkhazia, reproductions of historical battles, Orthodox Christian programs, or commercials aimed at tourists highlighting the many medieval churches scattered throughout Georgia’s rural highland regions.

On a crisp Sunday morning in Tbilisi, Georgia, throngs of the newly religious crowd into downtown churches, some of which were until recently used as storerooms, museums, stables, or even public baths. Among the church choirs that serve the growing demand for daily services, one may observe a remarkable diversity in age, gender, and number of singers. A quick tour of four downtown churches reveals some startling differences: beginning at the popular and crowded Kashweti Church on Rustaveli Prospect, two mixed gender, mixed-generation amateur choirs sing a combination of classical and traditional repertoire in an unrefined, classical style. In the Anchiskhati Church,³ a nondescript brick and stone basilica recessed several meters below street level, a trio of men with reedy, unadorned voices sing complex polyphony while the congregation stands in restful, patient attention, men on the right and women on the left. The music is startlingly different from the Kashweti Church, as is the congregation.

Just a few hundred yards away, the young and old mass outside the large cross-and-dome Sioni Cathedral, seat of the Georgian patriarch since the 14th century. Inside, three mixed choirs of a dozen singers each take turns singing three and four voiced repertoire from the late Communist period, mixed with chant arrangements from the early 20th century and a few samples of recently published medieval chant. In contrast, the massive new Sameba Cathedral⁴ across the river, a professional sixty-man choir sings from an invisible balcony where their voices are amplified throughout the booming space. This choir sings a combination of ornate arrangements of medieval chant interspersed with new compositions by Ilia II, Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

In the early 1990s, as the cultural and political arena in the Caucasus collapsed into a period of civil unrest,⁵ radical changes in the performance of chant were not always welcome amongst the Orthodox laity. But it was into this climate that the Anchiskhati Church Choir staged a quiet revolution in chant performance practice. With a conservatory background in which members of the Anchiskhati Church Choir had been influenced by the pioneering work of ethnomusicologist Edisher Garakanidze and his Mtiebi ensemble, the members of the Anchiskhati Church Choir turned to early 20th century wax cylinder and Gramophone recordings housed in the Conservatory archives to discover the nuances of traditional tuning, timbre, and ornamentation. They produced several chant recordings in the mid-1990s, and eventually began researching and publishing some of the vast stores of liturgical chant transcriptions housed in the Kekelidze Institute of Handwriting in Tbilisi.

3 The Anchiskhati Church was built in the 6th century and is famous for once housing the miracle-working icon from Anchi (a town in current NW Turkey) that is now housed in the National Gallery.

4 Sameba [Trinity] Cathedral was officially opened and dedicated on November 23rd, 2004.

5 Georgia fought two civil wars with separatist regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 1991 and 1993 respectively.

The neo-traditional manner of singing chant was not embraced by the entire chant community, as many people found the unrefined, nasal quality of the Anchiskhati Church Choir's chanting unappealing and too folksy for the aesthetics of the liturgy. To this way of thinking, the supposed authenticity of the archival chant melodies did not legitimize a complete difference in performance aesthetic. Perhaps for this reason, conservative choirs such as the Kashweti Church choir were at first resistant to the new repertoire, while neo-traditionalist students of the Anchiskhati Church Choir delighted in singing the new style and new repertoire.

The debate about performance practice was sharpened in the late-1990s by the emergence of a Byzantine chant movement, which polarized those already involved in the revival of traditional chant. Proponents of the Byzantine movement argued that Orthodox Christian chant had originally and properly been sung to monophonic melodies and advocated adapting the entire Georgian liturgy to borrowed Greek Orthodox melodies. Basing their credentials on the dubious scholarly claim that all Christian chant traditions should be supplanted by modern Greek monophonic melodies (which have themselves sketched an extraordinarily complex development), the Byzantine chant movement in Georgia was short lived, and ultimately fell victim to a strong backlash from the Georgian liturgical music community.

On the other side of the debate, scholars and chant revivalists galvanized around the need to publicize and promote the history of traditional chanters such as the Karbelashvili brothers, who had received little if any public attention since the first decade of the 20th century. As a result, recordings, articles, and public lectures generated a wide degree of public support and culminated in a Patriarchal decree in 2000 advocating for the integration of traditional Georgian chant into all parish choir repertoires. This decree not only signaled the failure of the Byzantine movement, but also gave a strong boost to the neo-traditional chanters led by the Anchiskhati Church Choir, who were put in charge of a commission to oversee the editing and publishing of new chant-books, and assigned with monitoring the progress of parish and monastic choirs across the nation.

PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

Two of the first recordings of church chant to emerge after the demise of Communist censorship on religious music illustrate the dichotomy between the classical and neo-traditional performance styles:

1. "Sacred Music and Chorales," released by the Rustavi Ensemble in 1996, highlights the dynamic control and blend for which the choir had become internationally famous throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The repertoire of chant and para-liturgical hymns on this album represents four distinct sources: three-voiced adaptations of mixed SATB choral arrangements by the early 20th century composer Zakaria Paliashvili, sung in classical style; chants inherited by Anzor Erkomaishvili (Rustavi director) from his family in Guria,

also sung in classical style; modern compositions, sung in classical style; and finally a selection of para-liturgical folk hymns, sung in a folk style.

2. "Celebration Hymns," released by the Anchiskhati Church Choir in 1995 is a stellar example of the neo-traditional performance style promoted by the Mtiebi Ensemble in the 1970s, here applied to sacred music. The diction is clean, tempos normalized to be more speech-like, and individual voices stand out from the choir in the upper voice parts, which are sung by soloists for a free range of ornamentation. The repertoire is entirely composed of chants recovered from the archival transcriptions of 19th and early 20th century chant-masters.

Both choirs sing in the style of their own performance aesthetic, and it is curious that there is very little overlap in the selection of repertoire for the two albums. The correlation of repertoire and performance practice for both the classical and neo-traditional models begs examination.

One of the only chants that appears on both albums, *Shen Khar Venakhi* [You are a Vineyard] (a widely popular hymn whose performances over the last five decades has been at the center of both the renewed awareness of Georgian sacred music), may serve as an interesting case study for these questions. The Rustavi ensemble performance of the hymn is deliberately slow, sweet, and delicate, while the straightforward, unornamented rendition by the Anchiskhati Church Choir is performed at the tempo of most liturgy chants; that is to say, at the speed in which it is natural to sing and understand a text. The secular mainstream society associates this chant with weddings and celebrations as well as moments of deep cultural pathos, such as the death of a dignitary or the loss of a battle.⁶

Meanwhile, the newly religious have reclaimed the 12th century *Shen Khar Venakhi* text by King Demetre II as a hymn dedicated not to wedding brides, but to the Holy Theotokos.⁷ Besides the subtle but not insignificant differences in arrangement (discussed in Examples 1 and 2), the fundamental signifier of this reclamation by the neo-traditionalists is through performance practice. A curious phenomenon occurs when for example, the Patriarch's Choir performs in a western classical style in public, but in a neo-traditional manner in for church services. In the performance of *Shen Khar Venakhi* (and other chants like it), therefore, this hymn is actively appropriated to serve both a secular nationalist and conservative religious function.

6 During the Russia-Georgia conflict in August, 2009, *Shen Khar Venakhi* was performed by the Basiani Ensemble and televised live by CNN and local networks, carrying the local signification of 'We Shall Overcome.'

7 In a bizarre twist, a Russian arrangement of *Shen Khar Venakhi* substituted the text for the Cherubic Hymn, which has since become very popular in the Orthodox Church of America in an English translation. Georgians are baffled at this substitution of text, and point to the many examples of the Cherubic Hymn that have survived since the transcription of the traditional chant at the end of the 19th century as viable Cherubic hymns.

N. 46 Shen Khar Venakhi... Ghvtis Mshobelisa

Vasili Karbelashvili, 1898

1. Shen khar ve - na - khi a-khlad agh - qva ve - bu - li
2. Nor - chi k'e - ti - li e-dems shi - na ner - gu - li
3. Al - va su - ne - li sa - mo-tkhes agh - mo - sru - li
4. Ghmert - man she - gam - ko ver vi - na-gjobs ke - bu - li
5. da ta - vit tvi - sit mze kha-r da gan-brts'qi-nve-bu - li

* original published in the key of F, transposed for purposes of comparison

Example 1

Shen Khar Venakhi (Ex. 1), shows the variant that the Anchiskhati Church Choir sings, as transcribed by the master chanter Vasil Karbelashvili at the turn of the 20th century. *Shen Khar Venakhi* (Ex. 2), diagrams the four-part men's arrangement sung by the Rustavi ensemble.⁸ At a quick glance, the two variants appear to contain only superficial differences, such as the middle voice ornaments, doubled bass, and alternate ending in Ex. 2, bb. 1-4, but in reality these subtle differences hint at their distinct transmission through the 20th century.

8 The Rustavi variant was likely adapted from a concert version of *Shen Khar Venakhi* sung by the large academic state choirs in the 1950s.

John A. Graham: "You Are the Vineyard, Newly Blossomed"

Shen Khar Venakhi

Rustavi Ensemble arrangement, circa 1965
transcribed from "Alilo: Ancient Georgian Chorales," 1996

1. Shen khar ve - na - khi _____ akh - lad a - kva -
2. Nor - chi ke - bu - li _____ e - dems shi - na

3. Al - va _____ su - ne - li _____ sa - mo - tkhes agh -
4. Ghmert - man _____ she - gam - k'o _____ ver - vi - na gjobs

ve - bu - li _____ 5. da ta - vit tvi - sit _____
ner - gu - li _____

- mor - su - li _____ 5. da ta - vit tvi - sit _____
ke - bu li _____

mze khar da _____ ga - brts'qin - ve - bu - li
mze khar da _____ ga - brts'qin - ve - bu - li
mze khar da _____ ga - brts'qin - ve - bu - li

Example 2

A chant arrangement from 1909 by Zakaria Paliashvili,⁹ a Georgian composer better known for his nationalist operas, provides an important intermediary witness to the evolution of chant repertoire in Georgia (Ex. 3). Close comparison between the Paliashvili six-voiced mixed arrangement for SATTBB and the Rustavi ensemble arrangement for TTBB reveal striking correspondences. For example, the seemingly small differences between the middle voice in Ex-

9 Zakaria Paliashvili (1873-1933), a contemporary of Rachmaninoff, studied at the Moscow Conservatory for three years with Sergei Taneyev from 1900-1903 and achieved widespread fame through the composition of folk operas *Absealom da Eteri* (1919) and *Daisi* (1923).

John A. Graham: "You Are the Vineyard, Newly Blossomed"

amples 1 and 2 are seen to be identical in Examples 2 and 3, indicating that the Rustavi ensemble variant was likely reconstructed from a Paliashvili score (arrows on Ex. 3 mark the second voice reconstruction by the Rustavi ensemble). For example, in bar 10, Ex. 2 and 3, the Rustavi arrangement is clearly derived from the soprano, alto, and bass parts of the Paliashvili arrangement, and not the original Karbelashvili original (small note heads in Examples 2 and 3 indicate the pitches that *do not occur* in the Karbelashvili original). The significance of this observation is not especially ground-breaking given the inaccessibility of the Karbelashvili Archives during most of the 20th century, but is an indication of a link between early 20th century efforts to arrange chant for western consumption and the lingering classical performance practice aesthetic that has accompanied the Paliashvili arrangements.

No. 18. Shen Khar Venakhi

Zakaria Paliashvili
publ. in *Liturgia*, Tbilisi, 1909

♩ = 50
pp dolce

SOPRANO
1. Shen khar ve - na - khi akh-lad a - kva -
2. Nor - chi ke - bu - li e - dems shi - na

ALTO
3. Al - va su - ne - li sa - mo - tkhe - /sa -
4. Ghmert - man she - gam - k'o ver - vi - na gjobs

TENOR 1

TENOR 2

BASS 1/2

pp *cresc.*

5

S.
ve - bu - li 5. da ta vit tvi - sit
ner - gu - li

A.
mor - su - li
ke - bu - li

T.
T.
B.

p

John A. Graham: "You Are the Vineyard, Newly Blossomed"

2

10 *mf* *p rall. et dim.*

S. *mf* *p*

A. *mf* *p*

T. *mf* *p*

T. *mf* *p*

B. *mf* *p rall. et dim.*

mze khar da ga-brts'qin ve - bu - li

Example 3

Zakaria Paliashvili (1873-1933), a contemporary of Rachmaninoff and student at the Moscow Conservatory for three years with Sergei Taneyev (1900-1903), became a major music figure in Georgia during the first three decades of the 20th century. Inspired by the vibrant compositional atmosphere in Moscow, where figures such as Alexander Kastalsky and Stepan Smolensky were actively arranging *znamenny* chant for contemporary performance, Paliashvili returned to Georgia in 1903 with a vision of collecting and arranging Georgian folk and sacred music for large chorus. He was one of the first ethnomusicologists to travel into the remote mountain regions of Georgia, recording and transcribing folk songs with the use of an early Gramophone. In 1909, many of these folksongs were published, and in 1911 he published the *Liturgia*, a selection of traditional eastern Georgian chant melodies arranged for six-part mixed chorus.

The publication of Paliashvili's *Liturgia*¹⁰ provoked accusations of plagiarism from members of the oral chant community. Vasil Karbelashvili, one of the leading advocates for the preservation of eastern Georgian chant, wrote in a letter to Paliashvili, "Somehow you've changed the soul of our chant. How have you done this, how is it even possible?"¹¹ Paliashvili defended himself in a forward to the *Liturgia* publication, pointing out that most of the traditional chant melodies in his arrangements remained intact:

10 Zakaria Paliashvili, "Liturgical church-chant for the liturgy of John Chrysostom, 22 chants adapted for men's and women's chorus in Kartl-Kakhuri mode," Tbilisi, 1911

11 Luarsab Togonidze, Personal Interview, April 2005. I have not been able to check this source, though the letter from Vasil Karbelashvili is apparently in the Karbelashvili Archive, housed at the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate, Tbilisi, Georgia.

"I left the first voice reasonably untouched except for several chants, such as Romelni Kerubimta (Cherubic Hymn) and Shen Gigalobt (We Praise Thee), in which I lengthened or shortened the melody, and re-harmonized the second and third voices. In the preparation of these arrangements, I have to confess that I have been thinking mostly of performances for large mixed chorus, which is why most of the chants are arranged for five, six, or seven voices. I hope that these chant compositions will not only be famous in Georgia, but in Russia as well, where there are many mixed choirs. To that end I have included the Russian text as well as the Georgian text."¹²

In a comparison of Examples 2 and 3, it is clear that Paliashvili indeed left the first voice melody intact, but took creative liberties in weaving the traditional middle voice between the alto, tenor 1, and tenor 2 parts, and filling out a three octave range through simple devices such as doubling and parallel-third motion in the tenor voices. The bass is also doubled at the octave wherever possible, in the preferred manner of Russian chant choirs of the period.

The nature of the argument between Paliashvili and Karbelashvili boiled down to a debate on the inviolability of the oral tradition. Paliashvili argued that his six-voice arrangements of traditional three-voiced chant would popularize chant beyond the borders of Georgia, presumably in Russia, Europe, and America, where choirs were more accustomed to singing SATB arrangements. The Karbelashvili brothers, who were literally in a race against time to preserve and notate the eastern Georgian oral chant tradition before all of the masters died, welcomed the concept of widespread popularization and support. But sacrificing the integrity of the musical structure, melody, and system of harmonization passed down through oral transmission was obviously unacceptable. Therefore, as someone with entirely different aims, Karbelashvili rebuked the altruistic undertones of Paliashvili's argument, noting that changing or removing portions of the chant melodies or harmonies fundamentally changed the internal harmonic structure of the chant (often compared to the tripartite structure of the Holy Trinity¹³), and ultimately lead to the degradation of the music itself.

Paliashvili's chant arrangements continued to have an impact on sacred music performance throughout the 20th century, while the transcriptions of the Karbelashvili brothers and others were locked in inaccessible Soviet archives for the rest of the century. In the 1960s, the small ensembles Gordelo and Shvidkatsa ushered in a new era in performance style by abandoning the large choir format of the 1940-1950s, refining their western classical vocal technique, and adding classical composed music to their repertoires. In 1968, several

12 Zakaria Paliashvili, from the introduction to Georgian Sacred Chants of St. John Chrysostom Liturgy, 'Kartl-Kakhuri Mode' 1911

13 Ioane Petritsi, 11th century philosopher and theologian, named the three voices of Georgian chant: *mzakhr*, meaning 'to call', first voice; *zhir*, meaning 'second' (in Mingrelian dialect), second voice; *bam*, possible ancestor to current 'ban' which means bass, third voice (*ertbamad* in Mingrelian dialect means to collect, to blend, to remain together), and likened the three voices to the Holy Trinity.

members of the disbanded Gordelo ensemble founded the Rustavi State ensemble, which became the most well-known Georgian ensemble domestically and internationally. Renowned for their incredible dynamic control, superb blend, and virtuosity in unique vocal techniques such as Georgian yodeling, the Rustavi ensemble went on to record dozens of albums, and commanded enormous influence over performance aesthetics in popular culture throughout the 70s, 80s, and 90s.

The performance style made famous by the Rustavi ensemble has come to be associated with the traveling Soviet ensembles, however, and in recent years, a young generation of neo-traditionalist chanters has begun to openly question the classical aesthetic. For example, in a recent flurry of posts on an online forum dedicated to the popularization of Georgian traditional folk and sacred music, anonymous posters accused the Rustavi ensemble of deliberately tailoring Georgian folk and sacred music to international audiences through an over-emphasis on dynamics, head voice, and gimmickry.¹⁴

Anzor Erkomaishvili, a folklorist and longtime director of the Rustavi Ensemble, has himself been a tireless advocate of Georgian traditional music, researching and publishing catalogs of Gramophone recordings from the beginning of the 20th century, and directing the International Centre for Georgian Folklore.¹⁵ To distinguish these activities from the performance style cultivated by the Rustavi ensemble over the last four decades of his directorship, he had this response to the critiques:

Besides, when a large state ensemble comes on stage, it is hard to speak about authenticity. It was exactly this academic manner of singing that roused the interest of young people to our national treasury [of folk music]. It is not fair to blame Rustavi for its singing manner; it cannot sing differently. An academic manner of singing is one thing, and scenic performance is quite another. Thanks to Rustavi's academic singing, UNESCO named Georgian polyphonic singing, "A Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity."¹⁶

Erkomaishvili defends the performance aesthetic of the Rustavi ensemble partly on the grounds of its international appeal (to UNESCO), an argument oddly reminiscent of Paliashvili's argument to Karbelashvili in 1911, and demonstrating the currency of the debate. It is true that Paliashvili's arrangements have helped to popularize Georgian chant internationally throughout the 20th century, and also that the recordings and performances of the Rustavi ensemble have contributed to world recognition through organizations such as UNESCO. For these reasons, many members of the online forum were loath to criticize the current Rustavi ensemble, however, hardly anyone was willing to defend the ensemble on aesthetic grounds either. At least for this group of

14 The debate occurred in June, 2009 on www.forum.ge (Georgian language)

15 Anzor Erkomaishvili, Vakhtang Rodonaia, *Georgian Folk Song; the First Recordings 1902-1914*, Tbilisi 2006.

16 Interview by ethnomusicologist Tamaz Gabasonia for the International Research Center for Traditional Polyphony, Tbilisi Ivane Javakhishvili State Conservatory, Summer 2009.

commentators,¹⁷ the 'academic' style of performance is no longer representative of traditional folk and sacred music.

Georgian religious chant is at the heart of the Orthodox resurgence in Georgia, and at the same time, intimately bound up with institutions secular culture (for example, the public performance of *Shen Khar Venakhi* during the August, 2009 conflict). The issue of performance aesthetics and the cultural meaning it represents will remain a vital issue for as long as Georgians continue to sing the Orthodox liturgy. *Shen Khar Venakhi* is a salient example of how one chant can come to have many cultural associations for different segments of society. As a result, the average singer learns to sing not only several variants of the hymn, depending on the context, but also several *mannerisms* of performance. As the hegemonic state culture of former decades is slowly dismantled, perhaps the acceptance of these multiple signifiers is an important marker of a growing pluralism in Georgia.

17 The forum has a fluctuating membership of about 450 individuals, many of whom are probably urban and under 30 years of age due to the familiarity with the internet and access to internet resources.

CONTENTS

PREFACE.....	5
CONFERENCE PROGRAMME.....	7
OPENING ADDRESSES.....	11
Teuvo Pohjolainen.....	13
HE Archbishop Leo of Karelia and all Finland.....	14
Hilkka Seppälä.....	15
Ivan Moody.....	16
CONFERENCE PAPERS.....	17
Hilkka Seppälä	
<i>Singing into flames of fire. A remembrance from the Martyr Church.....</i>	18
Svetlana Poliakova	
<i>Sin 319 and Voskr 27 as a Triodion set. Questions concerning the composition and disposition of daily hymnography.....</i>	32
Albina Kruchinina	
<i>О двух типах служб русским преподобным святым.....</i>	44
<i>Concerning the two types of offices for ascetic saints.....</i>	50
Melitina Makarovskaya	
<i>Знаменный распев как система певческого мышления.....</i>	56
<i>Znamenny Chant as a system of singing shilosophy.....</i>	60
Nicolae Gheorgiță	
<i>Byzantine Chant in the Romanian Principalities during the Phanariot Period (1711-1821).....</i>	65
Ardian Ahmedaja	
<i>Music in the churches Arbëreshë in Southern Italy and Sicily.....</i>	98
Gabriela Ocneanu	
<i>Evstatie's Cherubic Hymn compositions - his Cherubic Hymn in Mode III.....</i>	115
Jaakko Olkinuora	
<i>The adaptation of Byzantine Chant into Finnish.....</i>	142
Wilhelmiina Virolainen	
<i>Introducing Leonid Bashmakov: A Finnish composer.....</i>	153

Timo Ruottinen	
	<i>Finnish Orthodox church music: Three generations of contemporary composers - Our musical iconography</i>158
Nikita Simmons	
	<i>"Po Ustavu" - According to the Typicon: The rituals and singing of the Russian Old Believers</i>175
Bogdan Djakovic	
	<i>The Modern traditionalist Milivoje M. Cročanin (1892-1978): A portrait of a priest, diplomat and composer</i>191
Stefan Harkov	
	<i>Breitkopf's influence: A Balkan way of musical publishing</i>199
Sara Peno	
	<i>The Liturgical Typikon as a Source for Medieval Chanting Practice</i>203
James Chater	
	<i>Between Babylon and Pentecost: Why the absence of a common translation should not be allowed to impede compositional creativity</i>213
Oleksandr Kozarenko	
	<i>Сакральная монодия в современном композиторском творчестве Украины</i>220
	<i>Sacred monody in the contemporary art of composing in Ukraine</i>224
Jopi Harri	
	<i>Principles of traditional harmonization in Eastern Slavic chant</i>228
John A. Graham	
	<i>"You Are the Vineyard, Newly Blossomed": Contemporary performance aesthetics in Georgian Orthodox Chant</i>256
Achilleus G. Chaldaeakes	
	<i>The figures of composer and chanter in Greek Psaltic Art</i>267
Jeffers Engelhardt	
	<i>"Every Bird Has Its Own Song": Congregational singing and the making of Estonian Orthodoxy, 1840s - 1930s</i>303
Ivan Moody	
	<i>The idea of canonicity in Orthodox liturgical art</i>337