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Neither East Nor West; In Between But Not a Bridge:  
A Riddle For a New Discipline, the Ethnogeomusicology.

“The purpose of models is not to fit the data,  
but to sharpen the question”  
Samuel Karlin

It was 1985 when I considered writing an open letter to the 32nd Congress of then Yugoslav Folklorists' Society which took place in Sombor, Vojvodina. The letter supposed to be dedicated to a musical cartography (or *melocartography*) as an important means of understanding the complex problems of Slavic ethnogenesis. I still keep a thick-set file with a draft text of that appeal-to-be. Unfortunately, my hectic life in Soviet Russia did not allow me to realize this project in the 1980s. The time is coming only today when, being far away from both Russia and Serbia, I perceive them in a new light, and the issue of musical cartography seems to me even more topical than ever. My work with Eurasian folklore conducted it especially strongly<sup>1</sup>. Currently, my two trips to Tbilisi, Georgia (in 2002 and 2004, at the two International Symposia on Traditional Polyphony) stimulated this geographical interest greatly, and I decided to begin my research project as if anew.

It goes without saying that I can offer here but a few basic suggestions keeping in mind a fundamental study to be conducted in the future. For the time being it seems more important to discuss certain principal directions of such an innovative investigation. This is why I consider the following as but another open letter addressed to all my colleagues

for whom the geographical approach to the Eurasian music of oral tradition steps evidently out into foreground. If we decide to take the testimony of music really seriously, we must re-examine a concept of melocartography and its significance for the current ethnomusicology.

### 1. Introducing a new discipline, ethnogeomusicology

For years we have considered the historical approach to be the height of ethnomusicology, because it is the place of last resort in our conception of modernity. Nowadays we have become tired of that approach so that geography now attracts us. I propose to call the geographical approach to music of the oral tradition by the compound noun *ethnogeomusicology*.

This project focuses my enduring professional and personal interests in the fields of human geography, choral singing and specifically Georgian culture. Although my ethnomusicological interest in sung polyphony began with Russian folklore<sup>2</sup>, soon I realized that only a broad ethnocultural horizon would help to define the phenomenon, and my ethnomusicological journey through Eurasia began<sup>3</sup>.

Part-singing was always one of the most important elements of the *genius loci* of Eurasia. I studied folk polyphony among different Slavic peoples and their geographical neighbors (from the Baltic Latvians and Lithuanians to the Volga Mordovians) whose part-singing traditions form a distinctive musical planet of sung polyphony<sup>4</sup>. Eventually I made a trip to Georgia (1980), and its vocal music appeared before my astounded gaze like the true kingdom of polyphony.

The more I visited Georgia the better I understood that the wealth of Georgian polyphony not only constitutes a unique contribution of Georgian people into the depository of world music, but also gives a matchless example of geographic coexistence of the immense variety of collective music-making within a relatively small territory. In fact, a curiosity ignited about the correlation between polyphonic forms in Georgia and in other areas of its world distribution.

The number of ethnic groups that practice part-singing is unevenly scattered over the globe and forms a striking geographical pattern. The apparently irregular geographic range of the choral music-making constitutes the most puzzling scholarly question, which I am going to pursue. From this perspective, the project has a far-reaching ambition: eventually to find out the principle behind this enigmatic mapping.

The preliminary world map of oral polyphony is difficult to make and much harder to explain. Dr. Joseph Jordania has presented the only general supposition, which connects part-singing with certain anthropological features of those who practice it<sup>5</sup>. His complex and innovative hypothesis has been elaborated within a paradigm that might be called *the paradigm of origin*.

However, I cannot follow such a global direction now: my project has not only that far-reaching target but first of all an immediate practical mission, which should ensure the realization of that larger goal in the future. Therefore I have to be restricted geographically (in this case by Georgia) and methodologically.

I propose a specific method: it avoids the paradigm of origin and concentrates on an examination of spatial patterns in the distribution of part-singing. I am going to put the unseen world of polyphony on display. Thus, the project unites the data and techniques of

two closely interrelated disciplines, geography and ethnomusicology, whose interconnections, however, have been highly underestimated. Their collaboration, as I see it, leads to an emergent sub-discipline, which I decided to name *ethnogeomusicology*<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. Creating the ethnogeomusical model.

Any scholar alone cannot complete the task of mapping polyphony globally. Another way of engaging with the mapping of part-singing distribution must be sought. I propose to base the research on an *ethnogeomusical model*. This model would integrate the typological approach to classifying musical data<sup>7</sup> with the geographical approach to analyzing a particular territory. Thus, the model sought in the study would join together music of the songs (represented by its basic structural types), the territory upon which it is sung, and its traditional singers, a community of *Homines Polyphonici*<sup>8</sup>, who occupy that territory and perform these types of polyphonic music.

Logistically, the project of creating the ethnogeomusical model entails three main steps. First of all, the taxonomy of all types of polyphonic music-making is needed. Second, the correlation between all these types should be revealed. Third, the convincing geographical selection must be proposed.

1. *Taxonomy*. Since the number of distinct part-singing forms is finite, so it is possible to make a tentative catalogue of their basic structural types. Among these types are (1) the antiphonal alternation of two separate ensembles, (2) the parallel movement of two or, at times, three voices in a certain interval, (3) the contrastive relation of different melodic lines (predominantly in three-part texture but also in two- and four-part, and

even more part forms), (4) the so-called drone polyphony (of different types, from two-part singing with a melodically active drone to a melody over a stable drone to the polyphonic dialogue with two high voices over a less movable drone bass), (5) the complex parallel polyphony, whereby all the voices follow the same rhythmic pattern, thus producing chordal progression in different intervals including those with parallel seconds, fifths and fourths, (6) the quasi-canon, and some other, more rare types. This inventory of polyphonic forms as well as the methodological basis for their relevance needs to be refined and expanded.

2. *Correlation.* These types of collective music-making should not be regarded and interpreted as a linear sequence, which a scholar usually organizes in the evolutionary succession from more simple to more complex types. What I propose, instead of the evolutionary series, can be metaphorically named a *constellation*<sup>9</sup>. According to my understanding of the oral tradition, a constellation is always primordially plural. It means, the types of part-singing are self-sufficient and independent: they are not necessarily derived from each other, are not reduced to each other; ontologically, as if they do not know about each other. This is the fundamental reason for the replacement, in the present project, of the paradigm of origin with the *paradigm of constellation*. In geographical dimension all types are equal: they are not inter-dependent but inter-arranged within a constellational pattern.

According to the paradigm of constellation, the part-singing in the oral tradition reveals itself in the complete set of all polyphonic types within a given territory. What is more, within that definite area, all these types can duplicate themselves in numerous of

variants and versions, and those concomitant forms enrich the constellational model. A way of taking into account and mapping those derivations will be proposed.

3. *Geographical selection.* The total constellation of polyphonic forms comprises an immense variety of territorial patterns in different geographical zones of the world, from East to West and from South to North.. However, in order to create an ethnomusical model, we have to select an optimal geographic location. Then applying it in various ethnogeographical situations must test the chosen model as a new way of mapping polyphony, of seeing its actual configuration and of asking innovative questions to its distribution. Thus, the success of the whole project depends on the right geographical choice for such a constellational model.

Choosing Georgia requires a number of arguments.

### 3. Selecting Georgia.

So, as such a geographical model I propose to take Georgia – not the Georgian Republic as a whole because it is a multi-ethnic state but those regions of the country which are inhabited by the vernacular variety of the Georgian people proper. This pertains to fourteen ethnographic sections of the country (in alphabetical order): Ajaria [or Adzharia], Guria, Imeretia, Kakhetia, Kartli, Khevi, Khevsureti, Megrelia, Meskhetia, Mtiuleti, Pshavi, Racha, Svanetia, and Tusheti.

I consider the self-contained miniature world of part-singing in Georgia as a model, i.e., an ethnomusical unity whose characteristics supposedly occur in different ethnogeographical areas over the globe.

There are four main reasons for this ethnogeomusical selection and its corresponding extrapolation<sup>10</sup>.

First, the Georgian people inhabit a land about the size of West Virginia or South Carolina (if one looks from the USA), in all 26,911 square miles. However, the regional musical traditions in Georgia are remarkably distinct for such a small country. This can be called the Treasure Island of Traditional Polyphony. Thanks to its unusual geographical concentration of different types of polyphony, Georgia is relatively easier to make observations and to investigate than other countries where traditional polyphony is scattered over vast territories (such as in Russia or in Mediterranean countries as a whole.) In regard to a critical premise for this project, the extraordinary richness of its polyphony allows me to believe that Georgia (and apparently only Georgia) possesses all basic types of world part-singing. This significant interpretation will be shown to be valid in the course of research.

Second, the Georgians lived compactly in their historic territory since early times and were largely a rural people (the peasantry with a dominant noble elite). Georgia is home to an ancient civilization, which includes the *civilization of part-singing*. The Georgians have a deep sense of being rooted in their traditional homeland, unique languages and their music. Moreover, Georgia has been a Christian country since the fourth century, and therefore its polyphony is known in two main forms – sacred and secular, i.e., in both liturgical and folkloric practices. All these factors are essential for maintaining an oral tradition with its immensely rich polyphony.

Third, the diversity of Georgian polyphony also has a geographical basis. Nowhere else in Eurasia are the patterns of nature and human culture so complex. It is no

accident that geographers call this territory *Eurasia in microcosm*. It is characterized by extreme diversity: "the region is a veritable ethnological museum -- a meeting-place, but not necessarily a melting-pot"<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, the Georgian nation covers a land with over a hundred different types of landscapes and twenty-three physically distinct geographic regions. The borders of Georgian dialects often follow geographic features. This is why ethnomusicologists should also study the spatial dimensions of part-singing and should learn to think in geographic terms.

Fourth, Georgia, between the Greater and Lesser Caucasus, is eighty percent mountainous. Because of this there are two dominant spatial vectors in the distribution of part-singing in Georgia, the horizontal and the vertical. It means, the phenomenon of oral polyphony exists there in a primordial plurality and diversity of forms and their contrastive geographic dissemination. This is another reason why Georgia can serve as the best model for studying part-singing traditions elsewhere found in various landscapes.

Thus, Georgian polyphony is remarkable and unique on several accounts but it is not this characteristically Georgian uniqueness that makes it an ideal model for the study of part-singing in the world. It is the very coexistence of all types of part-singing within such a small territory that imparts Georgia its modeling quality and heuristic power. The Georgian model suggests that forms, which are absent in Georgia, should not be counted as a definite type of part-singing.

The Georgian musical tradition may be assumed to represent the whole range of polyphonic types and therefore study of it should shed light on many puzzles that are linked with the phenomenon under investigation.

Although the proposed model should serve well as a working model, creation of such a model is not an end in itself. However, elaboration of the constellational model should provide a fundamental breakthrough in the perplexing study of part-singing in Eurasia and probably in the world.

#### 4. Neither East Nor West

The title being shaped as a riddle is more than a particular riddle. It reflects the nature of our discipline: we are always facing riddles of the object under investigation. This specific riddle, however, can tell us not only of its unique solution (although Georgia undeniably belongs neither to West nor to East and does not bridge them being geographically flanked by these continents) but of the general matter in question. Indeed, the *in-between-ness* constitutes the gist of all Eurasian areas, Georgia included.

Defining Eurasia musically, as I see it, means do not search for some encounters of East and West in music but to discover those specific features which apparently belong to all basic parts of that gigantic compound continent – the features which are neither Eastern nor Western but always *Eurasian*.

What does it mean to belong to Eurasia? I am inclined to believe that practically every corner of ethnogeographical Eurasia has that particular *Eurasian mark*, i.e., musically Eurasia is not a sum of European and Asian characteristics but the *Eurasianness* through and through. (The whole definition of the Eurasian musical features should be done in a special study).

I do not repeat here the well-known motto of Mikhail Bakhtin that every cultural act lives essentially on the boundaries. This is not a problem of boundaries – this is a problem of geographical indissolubility of the musical continent as a historical phenomenon. The essence of Eurasia looks to me as *being always in between* -- in particular, in between East and West, North and South. And among all in-between-areas there are several regions that claim their *in-between-ness* with a special strong reason. To my view, such places are (each in its own measure) -- Caucasus, Crimea, the Volga-Ural area, nomadic steppes of Central Asia (along with Altai mountain region), and, to a considerable extent, the Balkans. In these specific *chronotopical slots* of Eurasia the concentration of the *Eurasianness* in question attains its exceptional strength. I can also add to the list of such places the Hungarian music of peasant tradition.

The approach to all particular regions of Eurasia not in the light of the West-East dichotomy but from the point of view of the briefly described here Eurasian unity seems to be the most forward-looking and fruitful. The Georgian model is but one means to achieve that ambitious aim.

In the future, I believe, a set of such ethnogeomusical models should be created and elaborated. If the Georgian model will eventually help to examine the Eurasian world of traditional polyphony, some other ethnogeomusical models can be crucial for our understanding of the variety of Eurasian phenomena. Among them I foresee such hypothetically effective ethnogeomusical models as *the Central Asian* for the study of musical epics in Eurasia, *the Russian* for the explanation of Eurasian lyric sung forms, *the Serbian* to explore the set of collective dance genres, *the Bulgarian* for examining of

traditional calendric folklore, and the array of others for a multiplicity of diverse research purposes.

Of course, ethnomusicological investigation shall not be limited by creating ethnomusical models only -- there are many other ways to explore music of the oral tradition from ethnogeographical point of view. The ethnomusicology may indeed have a great future.

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<sup>1</sup> See such articles of mine as "An Ethnomusicological View of the Baltic-Slavic Dirge in an Indo-European Context," *Balto-Slavic Research* (Moscow: Nauka, 1987): 60--70; "Music and Ethnic History: An Attempt to Substantiate a Eurasian Hypothesis," *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, vol. 22 (1990): 20—28; "Gábor Lükő and the Ethnomusicology of Eurasia," introductory article to the volume *Our Musical Mother Tongue* by Gábor Lükő (Budapest: Táton, 2002: 23--32 in Hungarian, 477--488 in English); "Some Interethnic Musical Phenomena Along the Silk Road: Toward a History of "Drawn Out" Singing in Eurasia," *The Silk Road Project, Arts and Humanities Programs at Cal Performances*, University of California, Berkeley, 2003: 56—59. See also the article listed in the 3d reference below.

<sup>2</sup> Izaly Zemtsovsky. *The Examples of Folk Polyphony: An Anthology*. Moscow, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> My approach has been recently outlined in an article: Izaly Zemtsovsky. "The Sound Space of Eurasia," *The Eurasian Expanse: Sound, Word, Image*. Edited by Viacheslav Ivanov. Moscow, 2003: 397—408.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance: Izaly Zemtsovsky. "Polyphony: Russia and West-Central Asia," *The New Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Second edition, vol. 20 (2001): 80--83).

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Jordania. "Folk Polyphony, Ethno-genesis and Race-genesis" (*Soviet Ethnography*, Moscow, 1988, no. 2); *Georgian Traditional Part-Singing in the International Context of Polyphonic Cultures (Toward the Question of the Origin of Part-Singing)*. Tbilisi, 1989 (in

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Russian); “Ethnomusicology: Interdisciplinary Prospects,” *The Art of the Oral Tradition: Historical Morphology [I.I.Zemtsovsky Festschrift]*. St. Petersburg, 2002, p. 236-48.

<sup>6</sup> This approach differs from the so-called *geomusicology* that has been recently developed in the USA. See a general survey with a bibliography given by George O. Carney in his article “Music Geography,” *Journal of Cultural Geography*, vol. 18 (1999), Issue 2, and another article written by him together with Peter Hugh Nash, “The Seven Themes of Music Geography,” *The Canadian Geographer*, vol. 40 (1996), no. 1; see also three books by G.O.Carney: *Fast Food. Stock Cars, and Rock-n-Roll: Place and Space in American Pop Culture* (Lanham, MD, 1995), *Baseball, Barns, and Bluegrass: A Geography of American Folklife* (Lanham, MD, 1998) and *The Sounds of People and Places: A Geography of American Folk and Popular Music* (4th ed., Lanham, MD, 2003). Compare the collection of articles edited by Andrew Leyson, David Matless, and George Revill, *The Place of Music*. NY: Guilford Press, 1998. See also an overview “Landscapes in Music” by Martin H. Monkman (the internet version). All these publications belong to geographers, not to ethnomusicologists, and they offer a different perspective to music as an element of culture and landscape.

<sup>7</sup> Typological approach does not seek word for word and tone for tone correspondence. By ‘type’ we mean certain characteristics common to a number of songs that distinguish them as an identifiable class and allow them to be regarded as a group.

<sup>8</sup> I call (in Latin) *Homo Polyphonicus* those who practice polyphony. See: Izaly Zemtsovsky. “Polyphony as a Way of Creating and Thinking: The Musical Identity of *Homo Polyphonicus*,” *The Proceeding of the First International Symposium on Traditional Polyphony (2002)*, ed. by Joseph Jordania and Rusudan Tsurtsumia. Tbilisi, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> The term ‘constellation’ usually means a configuration of the stars or groups of fixed stars but also a definite arrangement of things, which have a characteristic pattern. Thus, all known types of traditional polyphony can be presented as an imaginary set of planets in the solar system, i.e., the typological system of traditional part-singing as a constellation.

<sup>10</sup> ‘To extrapolate’ means to project, to extend known data into an area not known so as to arrive at a usually conjectural knowledge of the unknown area.

<sup>11</sup> David Hooson. *The Soviet Union: People and Regions*. Belmont, CA, 1972, p. 265-66.