

Funeral Chants of the Caucasus, produced and directed by Hugo Zemp. DVD (21 minutes), 2007 (filmed 1991). Distributed by Supor XAO, 36, rue du Moulin de la Planche- F-91140 – VILLEBON SUR YVETTE – FRANCE. Email: suporxao@free.fr

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Short YouTube link: <http://www.der.org/films/funeral-chants.html>

Funeral Chants from the Georgian Caucasus, a short film set in the mountainous province of Svaneti, documents the performance of polyphonic men's funerary laments –*zari*– common to the region. Well known for his ethnographic film-making and film scholarship, Hugo Zemp's *oeuvre* needs no introduction, yet it warrants mentioning that this film does not aspire to the scope of his previous, well-researched documentaries on music from the Cote d'Ivoire, Melanesia, and Switzerland. Rather, the film offers a brief glimpse into the musical sounds of a single funeral in one highland village and as such, adds to the collective body of sources available for study of the diverse cultures of the Caucasus.

The province of Svaneti has long intrigued European travelers. Lured by accounts of an ancient Christian culture infused with a syncretism of indigenous pantheistic traditions, set amidst the towering peaks of the Caucasus, one 19th observer marveled, "It is a land where every man's house is his castle. The meadows and the cultivated valleys are strewn with high white towers... in one spot a single tower stands isolated while in another they cluster in groups of fifty to eighty" (Freshfield, 1896). As a result of its remote location, elements of Svan culture have remained remarkably impervious to time: local 10th century Christian chapels retain original frescos, and the local museum boasts several of the oldest Bibles in the world (one survives from 897 and is scripted in the medieval *nuskha-khutsuri*

alphabet). Other strong impressions from the region include the iconic images of 19th century photographer Vittorio Sella and the unique recordings made by Yvette Grimaud in 1967.

Despite the long history of international interest in Svaneti, Hugo Zemp's brief portrait stands as one of only a few ethnographic films on the region.¹ Captured on a handheld camera, much of the film footage follows a group of older village men as they sing *zari* at the wake, in the funeral procession, and finally at the burial in the local cemetery. The film quality is adequate, editing unobtrusive, and sound quality excellent. Supplementary materials include subtitled translations of sung and spoken texts in English, two or three photographs, and the odd bit of contextual information presented in subtitles.

Typical of Zemp's previous cinematographic efforts, the scarcity of text underlines an attempt to allow unfiltered access to the film subjects. In itself a noble design, in this case the scarcity of information undermines the educational possibilities of the film. While footage that focuses primarily on close-ups of the choir will assist those interested in transcription and analysis, ethnographers and educators may be disappointed with the lack of personal interviews or other contextual information. An accompanying booklet, clearer packaging, or even a simple reference to other scholarship on the area could have helped in this regard. Instead, viewers are presented with a series of subtitled generalizations such as, "Without cries other than stylized ones and without any words, these male funeral

¹ Early Georgian films featuring Svaneti include the early social-realist silent film *Dzhim Shvante* (Salt for Svaneti) by Mikheil Kalatozishvili (1930), and raw footage collected by the filmmaker Sobol in the 1940-50s that specifically documents funerary rites in Svaneti (archived in the Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi).

choirs convey the helplessness of the inexpressible grief of Man faced with death,” or in another passage, “Individual laments are sublimated by these choirs in a unique vocal art which expresses deep emotions.” While these comments could be accurate, to hear these views from a local informant would have been far more convincing.

In the film, viewers may note several instances of authorship, following on a priority “to show the relationship between filmmaker and musician...” (Zemp, 1988). For example, in one sequence an older man speaking to a younger man, says, “they have taken many pictures, but... [the pictures] will remain with your children.” The younger man, perhaps a relative of the deceased, doesn’t look at the camera (pointed directly at him) or respond to the hesitantly worded consolation. The viewer is left to question whether all members of the bereaved family share the (assumed) verbal contract to film, or even if such permission exists (to Zemp’s credit, a copy was indeed returned to the family).

Svan polyphony is unique among the many varieties of multi-part singing in Georgia. The form of the *zari* in particular is characterized by a three-voiced texture of suspended thirds within a descending triad structure, sung as a series of prolonged responses to short solo calls. The use of untexted vocables and a free tempo distinguish Svan ritual songs from other types of local folk music, such as the strophic verse-forms of historical ballads or antiphonal dance songs, while instrumental music features the *chunir* (a three-stringed bowed viol) and the *changi* (a triangular harp). A unique tuning system is consistently found in upper Svaneti, and harmony rather than melody tends to predominate.

In the context of a global phenomenon of lamentation predominantly enacted by women, the men's ritual songs featured in this film hold deep interest. However, during much of the film, women's lamentations are heard in the background, though little footage or contextualization helps the viewer understand their significance. Granted that the gender separation at the funeral (and indeed, at many other highland rituals) probably imposed some restriction of access for the filmmaker, this type of female lament (*t'irilebi* -lit. 'crying') clearly forms an important aspect of Svan funerary services. Anthropologist Kevin Tuite has approached this subject in greater depth, commenting, "At wakes and funerary observances, women mourn more demonstratively and vocally than men are expected to do, and most traditional genres of lamentation for the dead are performed exclusively by women" (1994). In recent years traditional female funerary practices such as *t'irilebi* and cheek-gouging, as well as male *zari* singing, have become increasingly rare in Svaneti. This is likely due to a variety of factors including the reassertion of the Orthodox Church and the changing tastes of urbanized "lowland" family members who prefer non-Svan-specific funerary rites.

These are among some of the questions raised by the film, which offers an important lens into the traditions of the Caucasus, and more globally to issues of music in oral tradition, ritual, gender, and identity formation.

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Citations:

Douglas Freshfield, *The Exploration of the Caucasus*, Publ. Edward Arnold, London and New York, (1896), p. 208

Hugo Zemp, "Filming Music and Looking at Music Films," *Ethnomusicology* (this journal), Vol 32, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 393-427

Kevin Tuite, *The Violet and the Rose: A Georgian Lullaby as Song of Healing and Socio-Political Commentary*, in *Cultural Archetypes and Political Change in the Caucasus*. eds. Nino Tsitsishvili & Sergey Arutiunov, Nova Science Publishers (forthcoming 2009)

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